

Memoirs frank and free of prejudice

Hemayetuddin Ahmed is happy reading the story of a life

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES are mostly written by people in powerful positions either to defend themselves from criticism or misconceptions about their work while in power, or to elucidate some good work not adequately appreciated or slurred over. Here, however, is an autobiography written by an astute, efficient and honest civil service officer, who at one time had been Principal Secretary in the powerful Prime Minister's Office (PMO), attached to two great slain Prime Ministers, Indira and her son Rajiv Gandhi.

First published in India in 2004 and having three impressions the same year, this thick beautifully-bound volume is written elegantly in a plain and simple style with a racy prose, and offers a rare opportunity to look at the maneuverings and behind-the-scenes happenings of Indian politics. Alexander enlivens the dead past and takes the reader on to the stage to see and feel the currents and crosscurrents underneath the tide of gripping events that pervade throughout the great democratic nation. At first look, it seems formidable, but once one starts reading it, one is easily overtaken by the turn of events -- sometimes amusing and fascinating, sometimes dramatic and shocking and at

times tragic and unwarranted.

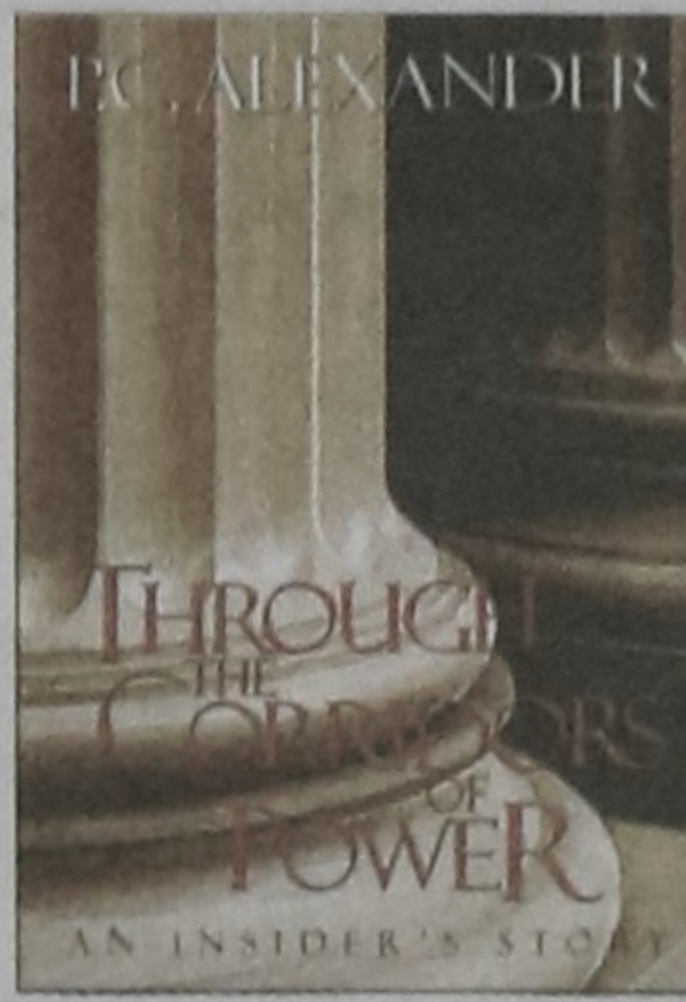
Instead of starting from the early years chronologically to the end of his career, as is the usual practice, Alexander's assignment to the political posts of a Governor in two major states of India, namely Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, is brought forth in his first chapter, "From Raj Bhavan to Rajya Sabha". This is to emphasise the perceived turning around of a long-serving Congressite to a Shiv Sena-Bharatiya Janata Party favourite. He forcefully argues SS-BJP recommendation for giving him an extension for a second term was on the basis of his hard work in the state that created misgivings in a section of the Congress High Command. This was further accentuated when in a book launching function for Alexander's new book, "India In the New Millennium", in 2001, Prime Minister Vajpayee declared, "Dr. Alexander was not only a Rajyapal, but also a Rajguru". This provoked a section of the Congress to start the "Off with Alexander" tirade.

Fifteen other chapters, from his early years to his appointment in the Indian Civil Service (now called Administrative Service), and getting into the central government's work, then follow. Working as principal secretary to Indira Gandhi takes two chapters in

which he recounts why she was compelled to call the army to carry out Operation Blue Star and how the top generals changed their plan and strategy halfway through the operation, leading to its tragic results. Working with Rajiv Gandhi takes another chapter.

Alexander describes his tenure in the PMO as "most memorable and satisfying" during his five-and-a-half-decade long public service career. Even though Indira Gandhi had not known him closely before he started work with her in 1981, he realised within a short period that the Prime Minister was dealing with him as an individual in whom she had reposed her trust. She had stated in unambiguous terms that she wanted Alexander to get involved not only in government matters, but in political and party matters as well as he had earlier retired from IAS and was not constrained by any service regulations. Alexander claims he found that Prime Minister Indira Gandhi not only welcomed his forthright views but also respected him because of his firm stand. He was thus a ringside witness to all the major events of this period and privy to all the relevant information, classified and non-classified.

Following Indira Gandhi's assassination, Rajiv Gandhi con-



Through the Corridors of Power
P.C. Alexander
HarperCollins

tinued the tradition set by his mother in playing great trust in Alexander and not treating him merely as a civil servant assisting him in government work. His relation with another Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao (1991-96) was equally close. Both of them developed mutual respect during the period when Rao was a minister in Indira's, and later, in Rajiv's cabinet.

Alexander had a singular unpleasant experience incurring

the wrath of Prime Minister Morarji Desai (1977-79) when he was secretary in the sensitive ministry of commerce. In one case, he was almost on the point of being fired for firmly opposing one of Desai's directives. His stand was supported by Cabinet Secretary Nirmal Mukharjee, another Christian IAS officer. Desai unfairly accused them of supporting each other raising the "Christian-Christian" factor.

The most surprising and depressing experience in Alexander's career was in mid-2002 when the Congress leadership vehemently opposed the proposal made by Prime Minister Vajpayee and other leaders of National Democratic Alliance (NDA), seeking its support for fielding Alexander as a candidate for the office of the President of India. What saddened him most was a personal vilification campaign raising again the Christian-Christian factor. If he were elected as the President being a Christian, this would bar Sonia Gandhi from being Prime Minister in future because of being a Christian.

The book sums up the story of Alexander's life, who held some very senior positions that are not within the reach of a civil servant. He mentioned in the end that he grew up in the colonial years and witnessed the transition from

foreign rule to freedom. Born and brought up in the former state of Travancore, he had "witnessed the obdurate resistance of the princely order to the winds of change sweeping across the country and its ultimate capitulation to people's power." He did not possess the advantages of birth, caste or community; nor did he seek political backing for reaching these positions. He admitted that luck played its role in everybody's life, and he had, perhaps, a larger share of it than many others.

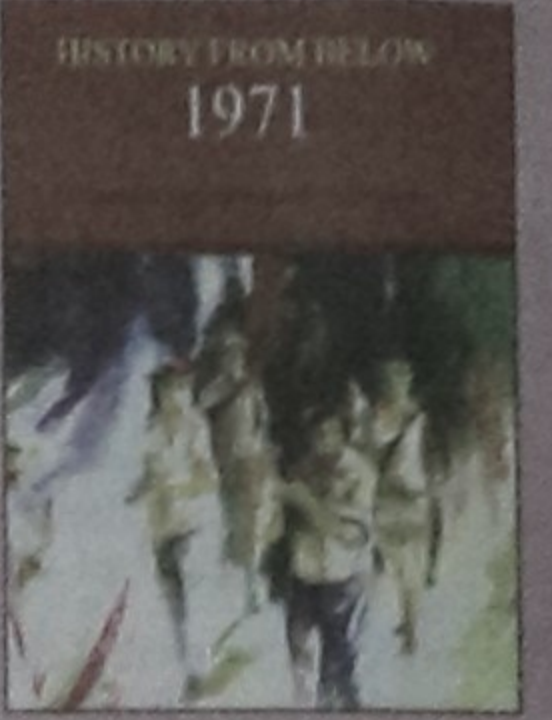
For the younger generations, he offers a lesson learnt in his lifetime: that if one is firmly committed to certain lofty values and remains determined not to compromise with one's self-respect, integrity and sense of duty to gain short term advantages, one will not have any cause for regret in the long run -- with an implicit caveat that a civil administrator, however brilliant he may be, undertakes great risk to his career when he is tempted to enter the world of politics, because an honest, straightforward person can be no match for beguiling, wily politicians. Alexander is silent on this lesson learnt at the fag end of his career.

Hemayetuddin Ahmed is former Director General of External Publicity and can be reached at hemayetuddin29@gmail.com

AT A GLANCE

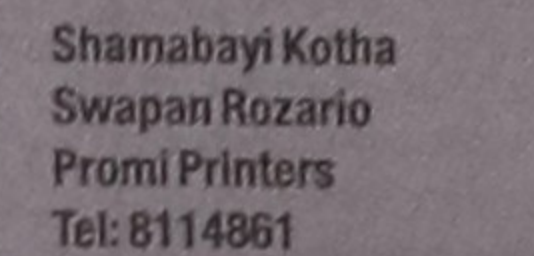
History From Below 1971
Ed. Sukumar Biswas
Muktijuddha Gabeshana Kendra
Tel: 9569076

The War of Liberation remains a powerful underlying theme. In this work, it is the tales of suffering, harrowing as they are, that come from simple men and women who fell under the wrath of the Pakistan occupation army. Women saw their husbands, fathers and sons killed. Men witnessed the pillaging of homes and villages. Sad but necessary reading.



Hridoye Palestine
Shafiq Hikmat
Palok
Tel: 0171 119149

Palestine can only move hearts, across the globe. In Shafiq Hikmat, it is something more. He identifies himself with the struggle, as it were, and comes forth with poetic outpourings on the subject. The poetry makes poignant reading, it does so because of the history that comes encompassed in the verse.



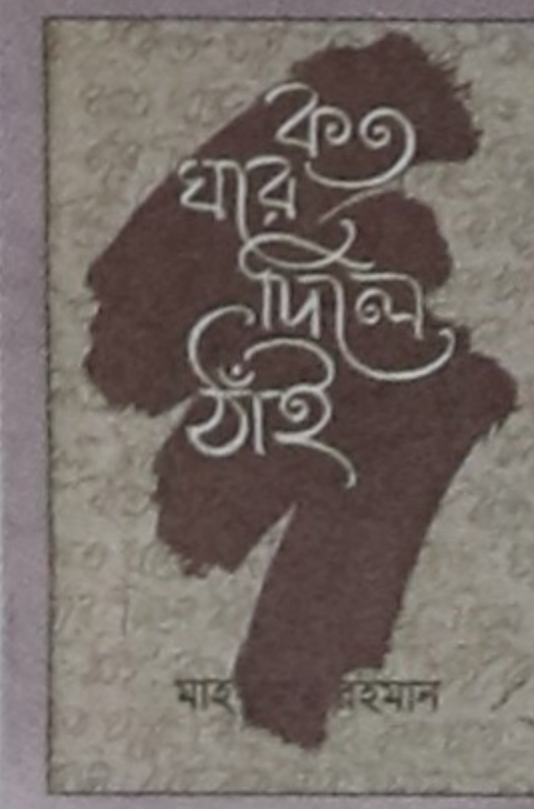
Shamabayi Kotha

Swapno Rozario

Promi Printers

Tel: 8114861

A sleek little book, this one comes packed with a lot of information on what cooperatives are. In other words, it is a work that anyone will appreciate, especially in circumstances where the cooperative enterprise has been a prominent feature of life. The writer has done a good job and clearly one would expect more from him in future.

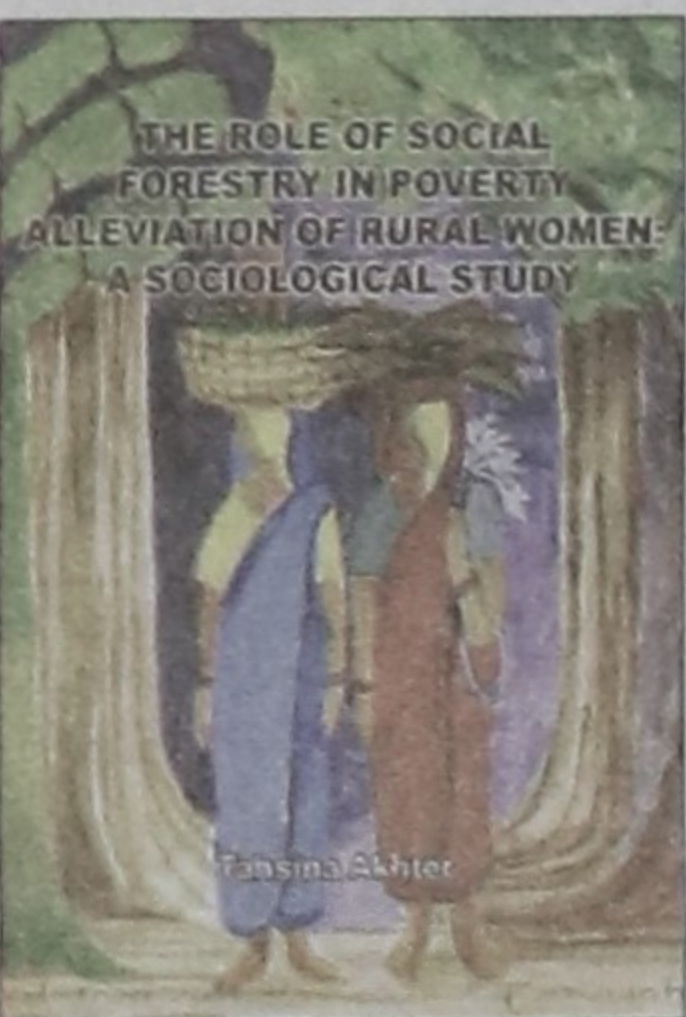


Koto Ghore Dile Thain
Mahfuzur Rahman
Adorn Publication
Tel: 9347577, 8313019

These are the very readable memoirs of an individual who has held responsible positions in Bangladesh and abroad. An economist, Rahman has been with the Planning Commission and has then served for a long time at the United Nations. The work is a story of his life. It is also a setting out of his perspectives.

The long, hard journey yet goes on

Tulip Chowdhury examines some serious social issues



The Role of Social Forestry in
Poverty Alleviation of Rural
Women
A Sociological Study
Tahsina Akther
Academic Press and Publishers
Library

OVERALL development of a country cannot take place without the participation of its female work force. At a time when climate change and the role of forestation are the top agenda for nations across the globe, we cannot overlook the role of women in social forestry. Tahsina Akther comprehends the dire need of national economic development by means of taking up the issue of poverty alleviation and the role of women in social forestry. This book delves

deep into the issue, examining the role of social forestry in reducing the poverty of women in the rural areas of the country.

The book connects women and social forestry as two most affected groups and explores thoroughly how they help each other struggle against poverty. It begins by reviewing, measuring and defining poverty. The book defines poverty as being denied access to a package of resources. The resource package includes both technical resources and social networks necessary to maintain survival. Then it gives elaborate details of poverty seen in Bangladesh. In a developing country like Bangladesh it is difficult to find a woman living without any tree-related activity in the rural areas. Forestry has become an obvious part of their daily life. The book examines the causes of why women, despite their involvement in forestry, remain unrecognised, why they are not the right beneficiaries of their active participation.

There is invaluable historical insight into the beginning of women studies. Then, moving up in time, the book evaluates women's inclusion and efforts to get involved with mainstream development on a global scale. In this context, it focuses on the traditional status of women and goes into an in-depth study of women in a natural environment, especially forestry. With

reference to Bangladesh, it is stated,

"Women in rural Bangladesh are an intimate part of nature, both in imagination and in practice. At one level nature is symbolized as the embodiment of the feminine principle, and at another, she is nurtured by the feminine to produce life and provide sustenance. (Shiva, 1989)

It continues with women's integration in the development of Bangladesh. It is a study that shows that compared to women men enjoy more hours of rest and recreation both during intermediate and slack seasons. Women still are the silent substance bearers. In this regard there is an exclusive study of the UNDP's Report on Gender Gap of Bangladesh. There is also a detailed study of women's integration in the development of Bangladesh in both government and private sectors.

The book comes with some interesting illustrations of its subjects. The background of forestry begins with the historical accounts of man's beginning to use forestry for food and tools. It moves on to a historical evaluation of the place of forestry in the early civilisation of the Indian subcontinent. Forest management systems and policy in Bangladesh include forest management during British era, Pakistani period and continues

on to the Bangladesh period. Studies reveal that social forestry is becoming increasingly significant in Bangladesh in view of certain important factors. The studies show how the country is trying to merge social forestry with women's economic gains. The contexts are not only related to the deteriorating situation in the forestry sector but also have linkages with a large number of other macro and micro level social, economic and ecological factors and parameters. There is significant information regarding depleting government forests, uneven distribution of natural forests, decline of home-stand forests, social forestry in Bangladesh and intensive land use as a result of high population density. Included in the book are some interesting case studies.

In upholding forest, women and poverty alleviation, the book indicates that women's relation with forestry has always been intimate in all rural civilisations. It goes into intense detailed discussions of forestry and poverty alleviation, focusing on the roles of NGOs in social forestry and rural development. The roles of Grameen Bank, BRAC and other NGOs are held up in their varied respective light. Here it is noted that the initial area of skill training many NGOs were found to be costly. Comparatively Grameen Bank's approach, which emphasised the financing

of traditional mercantile and animal husbandry skills, was found to be more economical. This chapter also sheds light on safe water, use of chemicals on crops, pesticides and preservation of seeds. Here we see that rural women want to be the preserver of seeds. Women generally do not possess land. Possession of seeds, therefore, is crucial for them to assert their positive and powerful role in an agrarian culture.

There are revealing discussions of the social, cultural and economic conditions of the village and respondents. There is socioeconomic and demographic profile of the study villages. The work explores the place of women in forestry programmes and activities of rural women in Bangladesh in relevant areas. A survey finding of household consumption, income-employment and contingency states that people in rural Bangladesh are more or less dependent on their own food, fruit, fuel, fodder and timber as well as for income also. Though women are always somehow engaged in preparing homestead food, collecting and doing other forestry-related works, they are not in that income or self-reliance motivated situation. Some women have developed their status both in economic and social sectors. However there is

absence of governmental or informal type forestry activities to help women to upgrade their condition. In conclusion, the book states that women are still fighting against deprivation in societies worldwide; they have not yet gained the totality of spirit to reach their goal. But there is the movement for women to become the main food producer. Here the suggestion is for a developing country like Bangladesh to have clear, transparent and democratic governance and policies that will lead to a process of overall poverty alleviation focusing on issues relating to the vulnerable and the destitute.

The Role of Social Forestry in Poverty Alleviation of Rural Women: A Sociological Study is an invaluable contribution to both social and economic studies. It is a thesis that is expected to help policy makers, gender specialists, forest department, foreign investors and researchers and scholars. Bengal before colonial rule was known as the bread basket of India. Through timely intervention and active recognition of the role of women in poverty alleviation the future researchers of the country can think ahead and mend the 'basket'. Perhaps we will wait for our future generation will dwell extensively on the issue?

Tulip Chowdhury is a critic and teacher.

The Hindu widow and those mystifying compromises

Tanveerul Haque gets glued to a poignant tale

A bookmark that I have states, "Never judge a book by its movie." I think it is particularly apt for Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Water* as it is based on the movie. Movies are based on books but this one's the other way round. The author was asked to write the novel in ninety days to coincide with the release of the movie. The story is dated 1938, with Gandhi's Ahimsa movement gathering momentum.

Widowhood in Hinduism is a very unique form of existence that was perpetuated without question for centuries. We have nebulous conceptions of this phenomenon from various Bengali writings. I think Bapsi Sidhwa being a woman, has been able to bring out the trials, tribulations, sensory deprivations and vicissitudes of Hindu widowhood in its stark nakedness. That in itself hits the reader like a sledgehammer.

Reading the book is a treat to be doled out in small measures. The story revolves around the eight year-old Brahmin girl Chuyia (meaning little mouse), who is married off to a much older Brahmin without her knowledge. Widowed two years later, never meeting her husband, let alone knowing him. She accompanies the dying man to the Ganga river bank somewhere on the border of Bihar and Bengal. Her mother-in-law and her father take her along by bullock cart. After the funeral pyre has burned down, they abandon her in a nearby ashram. Widows are accursed, she has to

make amends for the sins from her previous life which supposedly caused her husband's death.

There is the description of Chuyia's childhood (shall we say girlhood?). Her playful abandon brings back memories of our own childhood. And then the sudden, jarring descent into the harsh life of an ashram! The shaving of the head, the abandonment of coloured clothing, the restriction of diet! It's like Alice falling down the unending hole, only not arriving in Wonderland but in Nothingland! In her own mind Chuyia fantasises that her mother will come to rescue her from the ashram any day. But she finds no escape and the head of the ashram Madhumati induces her into widowhood.

Against this backdrop, we learn the rules of the game of an ashram of that period -- the hierarchy, the pecking order, the mystifying compromises, the helplessness that Hindu widows had to endure. The rigid power structure. Its unchallenged acceptance. The position of the "Madame" of the house - Madhumati, a thickset woman in her 70s. The use of the eunuch Gulabi (not an inmate of the ashram) by Madhumati. To consolidate her own position. To ferry the beautiful Kalyani, the ill-fated heroine to the genteel patrons in the ashram's vicinity. Kalyani's earnings take care of the provisions of the ashram and the drug habit of the Madame. She was forced into prostitution as a child

and is the only widow whose hair is not shorn.

Of all the widows in the ashram, Shakuntala is the only literate one. She maintains a stern reserved aura of her own and even Madhumati gives her a wide berth. She is a devout Hindu and finds consolation in the guidance of the priest Sadananda who enlightens her on the true spirit of Hindu Scripture. One day in Chuyia's company there is a chance meeting of Kalyani with Narayan the scion of a rich Brahmin and the hero of the novel. There is immediate chemistry between the two - a fatal attraction but circumstances prevent both from following their hearts' desires. Though they contrive a secret meeting at the riverside (ghat) it is very brief. Kalyani turns back Narayan, saying that conversing with widows is a cardinal sin.

Of course Kalyani always has Narayan on her mind and as a form of protest she sullenly attempts to disobey Madhumati by not serving her clientele.

A determined Narayan contemplates a secret tryst with his beloved, Narayan sets up a clandestine rendezvous. They meet and ride in a covered horse buggy through the British cantonment area in secluded privacy. He professes his undying love to Kalyani and informs her of his secret plans to elope with her.

A breathless Kalyani confesses the secret wedding plans to

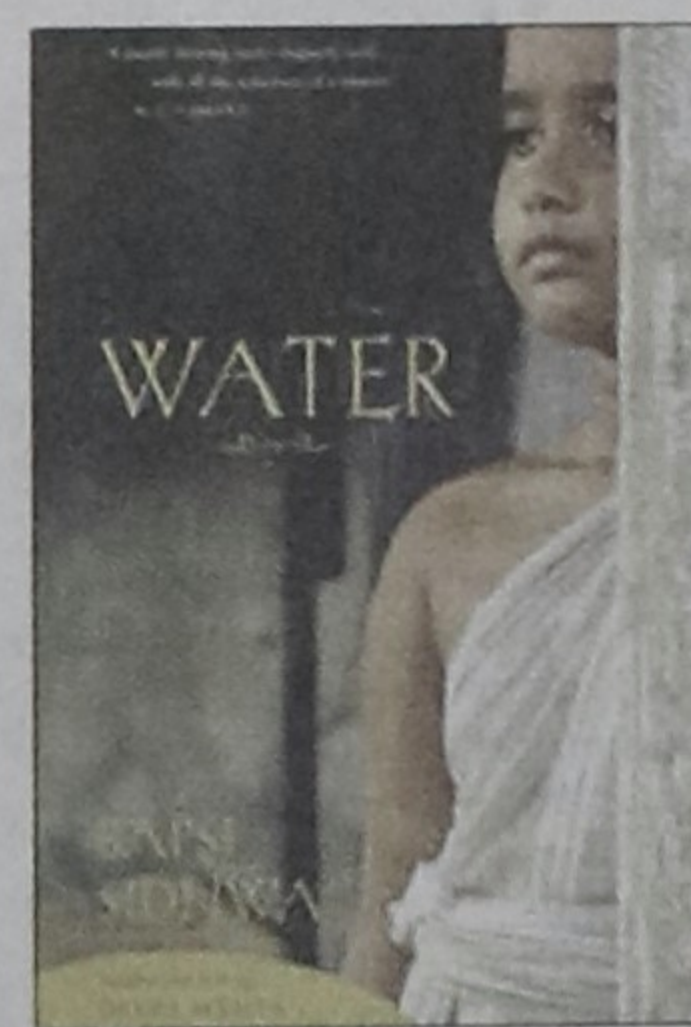
Chuyia who is overjoyed at the prospect of a wedding feast where one can indulge in eating all the forbidden delicacies to one's heart's content.

Narayan's accidental meeting with Kalyani and the blossoming of irrepressible love and desire put the reader on guard for a star-crossed tragedy. The diaphanous love story is wonderfully woven into the morbid existence of the ashram. The characters in the ashram all female are portrayed with the intense sensitivity that is possible only by a feminine author of Sidhwa's calibre.

Kalyani struggles within herself to maintain her sanity and nurture her love. All the while unsure of her fate her acceptance by Narayan's parents, the breaking of social taboos. The discourse between mother and son when Narayan reveals he wishes to marry a widow. The mother's shock and ultimate grudging acceptance are poignant.

Catastrophic consequences arise when the news of the imminent marriage between Kalyani and Narayan is revealed. Madhumati cannot reconcile with Kalyani's audacity. She storms into Kalyani's isolated room wrestles her to the ground, cuts off her long black hair and locks her up without food or water.

Shakuntala rallies to Kalyani's support. Much against the wishes of the other widows in the ashram, in an act of defiance, she sets Kalyani free.



Water
Bapsi Sidhwa
Milkweed Editions

Kalyani leaves the ashram with Madhumati's insults buzzing in her ears. She bathes in the ghats and meets Narayan in the adjacent temple. A passionate Narayan proposes to her. Upon her acquiescence Narayan takes her on a boat ride to his father's home. The boat ride is described in ethereal beauty. As the boat rounds a bend in the river Kalyani is aghast at the sight of Narayan's family home; she asks Narayan's father's name and immediately demands that Narayan turn the boat around; not revealing to an utterly befuddled Narayan the reasons for her change of mind.

In a change of scene, we see

Narayan confront his father - to be told the stark reality that he had used Kalyani as a prostitute. Shattered in grief and sorrow Narayan decides to pick up Kalyani from the ashram and join Gandhi's train which is due to arrive at the station.

It is too late. Kalyani is dead.

Kalyani's dreams have suddenly vanished into thin air. The raised expectations and the dashed hopes. She knows she has no place in the ashram. She returns to the ghat and decides to drown herself and thus "mother Ganges claims her daughter". Suddenly the landscape has turned monochrome.

Against this desolate scenario we see the evil Madhumati sending out Chuyia with the pimp Gulabi for Narayan's father as a new offering. By the time Shakuntala finds out she rushes to the shore only to find a ravaged Chuyia returning in a senseless state. Traumatized she spends the night at the ghat with Chuyia in her lap. At first light she walks through the town with Chuyia in her arms. In a daze she learns that Gandhi's train is at the station and people in droves are going there to receive his blessings. As the train pulls off Shakuntala beseeches people on the train to take Chuyia with them. Suddenly she spots Narayan on the train and gives Chuyia to him. The train departs.

Tanveerul Haque (tanveerh@yaho.co.uk) is a businessman, a booklover and an intrepid traveler. Also a TRC member.

What is civil society?

Rahad Abir studies the history behind it

CIVIL society. The term has now been around for a few decades, largely since the 1980s. Some sociologists and political scientists coined the term here in Bangladesh. The thought of civil society mainly originated, however, in the eighteenth century in Western Europe. But why and wherefore civil society in Bangladesh?

Now, let us try to find out what civil society actually is. The primary idea of civil society came from the writings of Hobbes (1588-1679) and Locke (1632-1704). They thought of civil society as an artificial construct. According to them, human beings' usual dwelling place is nature. They considered civil society as a sphere that maintained civil life, the realm where civic virtues and rights were derived from natural laws. However, they did not hold that civil society was a separate realm from the state. Rather, they underlined the co-existence between the state and civil society.

The leading thinkers of the Enlightenment considered civil society as a separate realm that stood for the protection of individual rights and private property. Conceiving this idea, Hegel held that civil society had emerged at the particular epoch of capitalism and therefore it serves its interests. Those interests are individual rights and private property. Hence, he used the German term *Buergerliche Gesellschaft* (bourgeois society) to denote civil society.

For Karl Marx civil society was the 'base' where productive forces and social relations took place. Agreeing with the link between capitalism and civil society, Marx held that the latter represented the interests of the bourgeoisie. He considered the state and civil society as the executive arms of the bourgeoisie; therefore, both should be allowed to wither away. This negative impression about civil society was rectified by Antonio Gramsci that led to the revival of the term in contemporary times.

Karl Marx apart, Gramsci did not consider civil society as coterminous with the socio-economic base of the state. Rather, Gramsci viewed civil society as the site for problem-solving.

At this point in time, we may take a serious look into Fakrul Chowdhury's *Civil Society*. This book, 304 pages in all, is a collection of the write-ups of twenty five individuals. Among the names worth mentioning are Jean Jacques

Rousseau (translation by Sarder Fazlul Karim), Rangolal Sen, Muntasir Mamun, Joyantokumar Roy, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, Dr. Atiur Rahman, Salimullah Khan, Jatin Sarker, Anu Muhammad, Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Rashed Khan Menon, Emajuddin Ahmad, Farhad Mazhar, Syed Manzoorul Islam, Michael Edward, Thomas Caruthers, Lesley A Murray, and so on.

In Bangladesh, a dispute arose regarding civil society in the year 1997. The cause basically centred on a convention on the subject that took place at the Asia and Pacific Ocean regional scale on 24 July 1997. At the time, many write-ups from our intellectuals were observed on the issue in different newspapers. Since that convention a decade has gone by. But still most of us are not clear about the goals and activities of civil society. This book will help readers to have a better understanding of this topic.

Undoubtedly it can be said that this book is a pioneer work in the Bengali language. Moreover, on this theme this collection happens to be the first in the two Bengalis. Fakrul Chowdhury, the editor of this book, is a versatile writer and has had a penchant for this kind of intellectual exercise. Last year he published a collection on the subject of colonialism and post-colonial readers. Fakrul Chowdhury's *Civil Society* should be the recipient of appreciation by readers on a wide scale.

Rahad Abir is a journalist.



Civil Society
Theory and Application
Ed. Fakrul Chowdhury
Kathapokash