

Travelling an uneven road to democracy

Shahid Alam probes the chaotic history of Bangladesh's politics

AS things stand, Bangladesh is scheduled to go through an electoral process to vote in its ninth Parliament, and, keeping with the norms of parliamentary democracy, the next democratically-elected government to run the affairs of the country. After an unbroken run of three parliamentary democratic governments, which were marked as much by some major dysfunctions in governance and the political process as by significant achievements in several key social and economic indicators, the country has been in the undesirable grip of an emergency for close to two years. This state of languishing in the doldrums of political torpor certainly does not help in the march towards the establishment of liberal pluralist democracy in the country.

There can be little equivocation that a combination of progressively virulent political partisanship, dubious and/or inept political leadership, and lack of democratic culture within the major political parties has contributed to a dysfunctional political process and system. Equally, there can be little doubt that other sinister elements, comprising internal and external actors and forces, failed and/or obscure politicians, retired bureaucrats, think tank gurus, NGO stalwarts, civil society-wallahs, social engineers, crass opportunists, agent provocateurs, and foreign elements of various descriptions, to name a few, by taking advantage of the prevailing state of affairs, in several instances actually instigating and exacerbating it, have been at least as much, if not more, guilty of expending their effort towards creating the situation that eventually culminated in the phenomenon called 1/11.

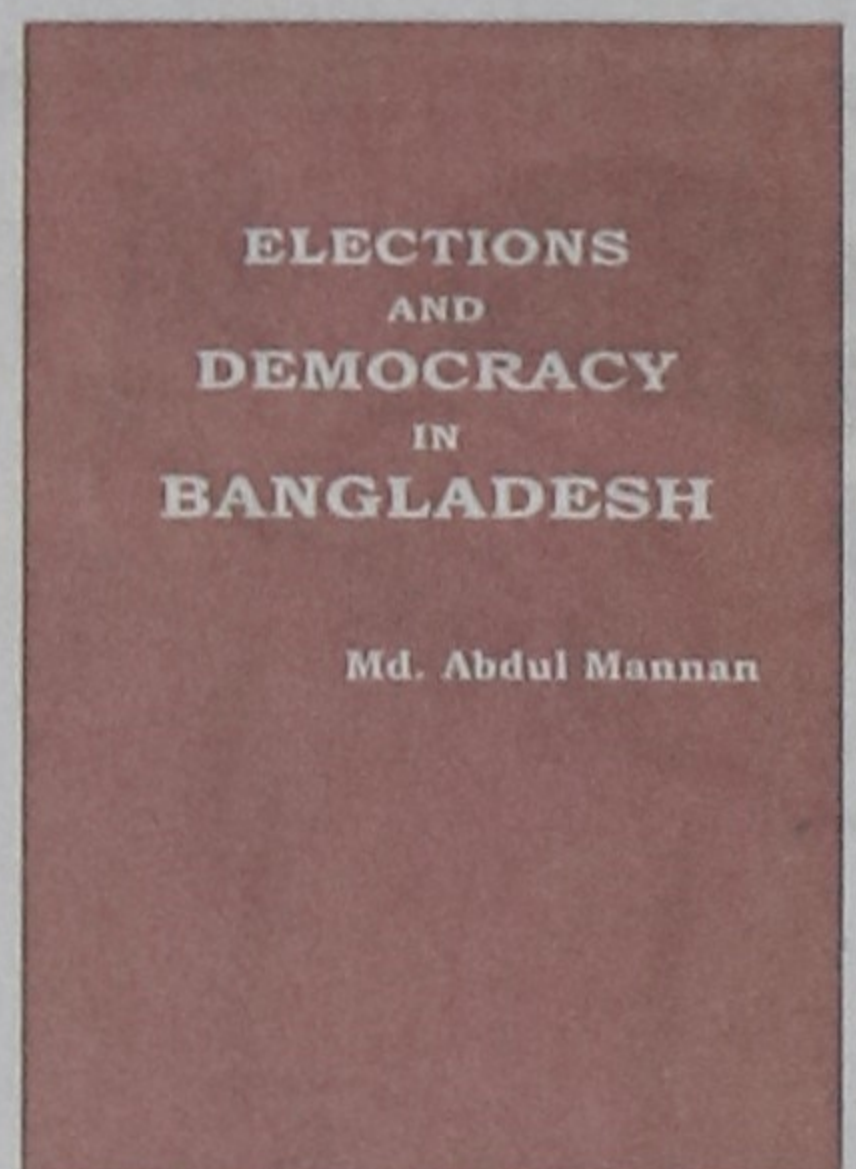
One can only fervently hope that the road towards liberal pluralist democracy, whose most vital ingredient is creating a mindset for it among the general citizenry, is eventually cleared of its road-blocks. Besides the psychological factor

of ingrained mindset, several fundamental institutional imperatives will have to be met for making the polity operational as well as meaningful. One of them is the holding of periodic elections. The book under review has taken a fairly long, if not quite hard, look at elections and the electoral process in Bangladesh from the 1970 parliamentary election to that of 2001. After briefly introducing the reader to a theoretical overview of the concepts of election and democracy, and a slightly fuller treatment of the failed attempts at establishing democracy in Pakistan leading up to, and including, the critical (in several ways) 1970 election, Mannan deals at much greater length on events in Bangladesh.

Much of the second half of the book, which discusses all the parliamentary elections from 1991 to 2001, including the controversial February 1996 polls, follows a generally routine pattern, providing a backdrop to the election, pre-poll arrangements, election manifestoes of the major parties, the election campaigns, the polls, outcome, and reaction to the results from the losers, winners, and international and local observers. Much of the discussion is matter-of-fact, at times skirting around hotly contentious issues, rarely going deep into the likely reasons indicating why the country has been plagued by an unwholesome political culture, or its offshoot, the state of liberal pluralist democracy that has fallen significantly short of, let alone that of the United States, Great Britain and other advanced democracies, but of the very fundamentals of the polity, including elections that leave a significant portion of the population dissatisfied with the results, and the losing political parties carping ad infinitum, eventually, almost inevitably, inducing them at some point to boycott parliamentary sessions for protracted periods.

Mannan mentions the matter of rejection of results by the losing major party (Awami League or BNP, as the case might

be), starting from the 1991 election, when the demon of discord manifested itself with Sheikh Hasina, after having expressed her "deep satisfaction" over the voting process, complained, on losing, that the election had been rigged, after all. A mirror image reaction was given, after the 1996 election results were announced, with BNP asserting rigging.



Elections and Democracy in Bangladesh
Md. Abdul Mannan
Academic Press and Publishers Library

The ante was upped in the 2001 election when the Awami League charged across-the-board rigging "under the blueprint jointly prepared by the BNP-led alliance, caretaker government and the Election Commission." No matter that foreign and local election observers had characterised each poll as having been generally free, fair, and impartial.

As an interesting sidelight, the case of the sore loser taking refuge behind alle-

gations of vote rigging has been observed in several of the relatively newer democracies over the last few years. Maybe this is a phenomenon that confirms Samuel P. Huntington's proposition in 1968 that the developing countries are not always likely to create liberal-democratic institutions, or that it is a passing phenomenon that will fade as democracies mature, but it is one that has to be satisfactorily brought to a conclusion if a mindset for democracy has to become a part of a person's persona. If political intolerance, mutual exclusivity and distrust have paved the way for the decidedly non-democratic pernicious concoction called the caretaker government system, then inevitably it has become the easy scapegoat of political parties, especially after election results are announced. It is a system that needs to be consigned to the dustbin of history by the next Parliament. The author indicates at the inherent anomaly of the caretaker system: "...the issue of a caretaker government soon divided the political forces into two contending groups: BNP government vs. major opposition parties headed by AL."

Mannan dwells at some length on the shame associated with the farcical interlude famously known as the February 1996 election for the fifth Parliament. He uses it as an example to support his thoughtful hypothesis, originally postulated by Robert Dahl, that "...a regime's rule or some of its other activities can be legalized constitutionally, but political crisis remains unresolved and it obstructs the development of a stable democratic order. So, constitutional rule alone without other prerequisites for democracy seems trivial for democratic development." The same chapter lays bare an unpleasant truism that does not speak well of this country's government and politics, as indeed of a gamut of people and organisations outside the purview of the government structure: "In a poor country like Bangladesh,

usually donor countries exert a significant influence upon decision-making (sic) process at national level."

Turning to electoral politics during the Ziaur Rahman regime, Mannan terms the state system that he initiated since November 7, 1975 as an "administrative state", and the structure that came into being after the 1979 parliamentary election as appearing as being "democratic, but...was in fact dominated by the civil-military bureaucratic elites under a centralized system of authority." And, preceding and foreshadowing HM Ershad's longer term in power, Zia actively sought, through a combination of referendum, presidential and parliamentary election, to legitimize his and his party's rule. The author's comment with regard to Ershad is appropriate in terms of military rule: "Since Ershad came in power (sic) overthrowing an elected civilian government, he urgently needed the consent of the people in order to make his rule legitimate and more enduring. For this purpose, he stepped forward for legitimization of his rule through elections."

Elections and Democracy in Bangladesh is mercifully free of an unseemly number of editorial errors/oversights. Of the very few that have crept in, one is particularly glaring in terms of an erroneous presentation: "...most of the Muslims (in Bangladesh) belong to the Shiite set of Islam that brought religious harmony in this country." While the book fails to explore the probable deep-rooted causes that have placed liberal pluralist democracy and one of its fundamental ingredients, periodic elections, under a cloud since the country's inception, it is an honest attempt at chronicling the electoral experience in Bangladesh. It would serve as an adequate textbook in the field of government and politics in Bangladesh.

Shahid Alam is Head, Department of Media and Communication, Independent University, Bangladesh.

AT A GLANCE



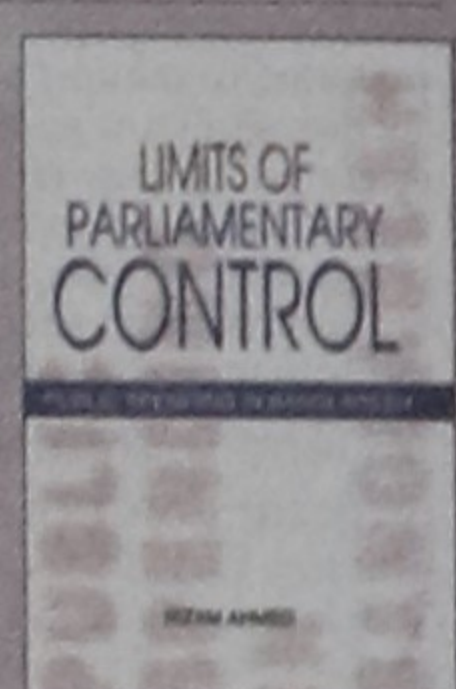
Writing Across Borders
Ed. Niaz Zaman
Writers Ink & IBCI
Tel: 9335607

Fiction in the English language in South Asia has in recent times been a growing phenomenon. In this collection of stories, Niaz Zaman brings together writers from across the subcontinent, each with his or her perspective on life as expressed through short stories. The work is one more foray, with creditable results, into enlightenment.



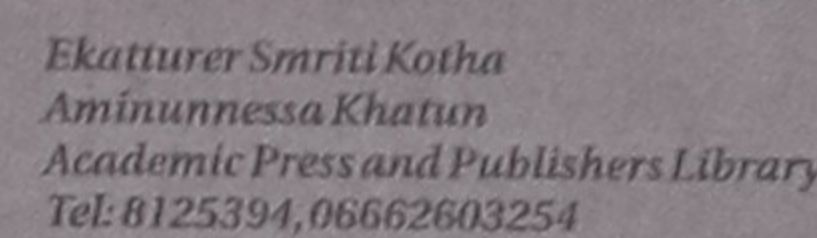
Limits of Parliamentary Control
Public Spending in Bangladesh
Nizam Ahmed
The University Press Limited
Tel: 9565441, 9565444

The work explores the nature of Parliament or, more appropriately, the limitations it goes through in carrying out its functions. More significantly, though, it provides a clear picture of public spending in Bangladesh and the various ways in which the subject generates public debate throughout the country.



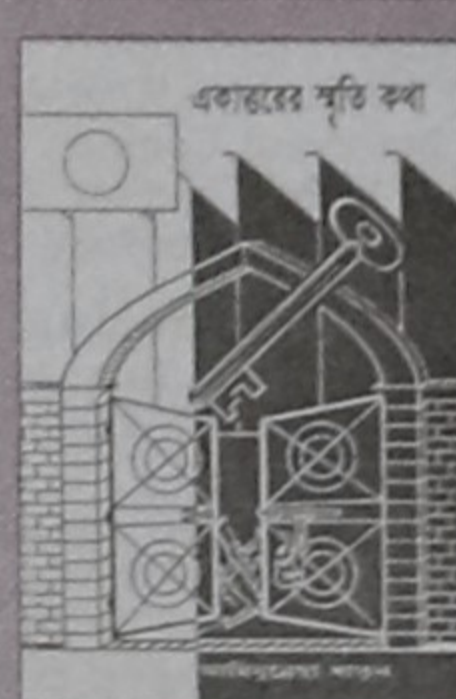
Emerging Global Economic Order
And The Developing Countries
Ed. Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad
The University Press Limited
Tel: 9565441, 9565444

The recent collapse of banks in the West should be a spur to the reading of this anthology ably put together by Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad. The many ways in which developing economies have been put through the grinder and how they have emerged from it or are still trying to emerge from it come through in the work.



Ekattorer Smriti Kotha
Aminunnessa Khatun
Academic Press and Publishers Library
Tel: 8125394, 06662603254

1971 continues to exercise power over those who were there when the Bengali nation went to war for freedom. Khatun is therefore one of those who feel they have stories to relate. In this personal account of a year that was the best and the worst in Bengali life, she relives the days when Pakistan's army went shooting both people and ideas.



Recompense for past pitfalls

Hemayetuddin Ahmed goes back to history and emerges a sadder soul

UNDERSTANDING the Muslim Mind by Rajmohan Gandhi looks like recompense for the past 'pitfalls' of the Indian National Congress in the half-a-century long freedom struggle in India that pushed Muslims aside from the political mainstream. It caused intractable Hindu-Muslim bitterness, eventually forcing the departing British Raj to partition the country.

This is a remarkable book at least on three counts.

First, it is a well-researched, non-partisan, objective analysis of five decades of tumultuous events in the Indian social and political scene before partition. Second, this was written after a painstaking research by the author for eight months in the US as a Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars in Washington that allowed him to take a cool, dispassionate view of the past eventful days he watched first-hand from the privileged position of being a family member of the illustrious saint-philosopher and politician who dominated Indian politics single-handedly for half a century preceding the freedom - Mahatma Gandhi. Third, the methodology the author followed in this study is also rather rare in historiography research. He made an eclectic selection of eight outstanding Muslim leaders ranging from so-called 'communal' to others branded as 'nationalists', to find out what had gone wrong and why India had finally to be partitioned.

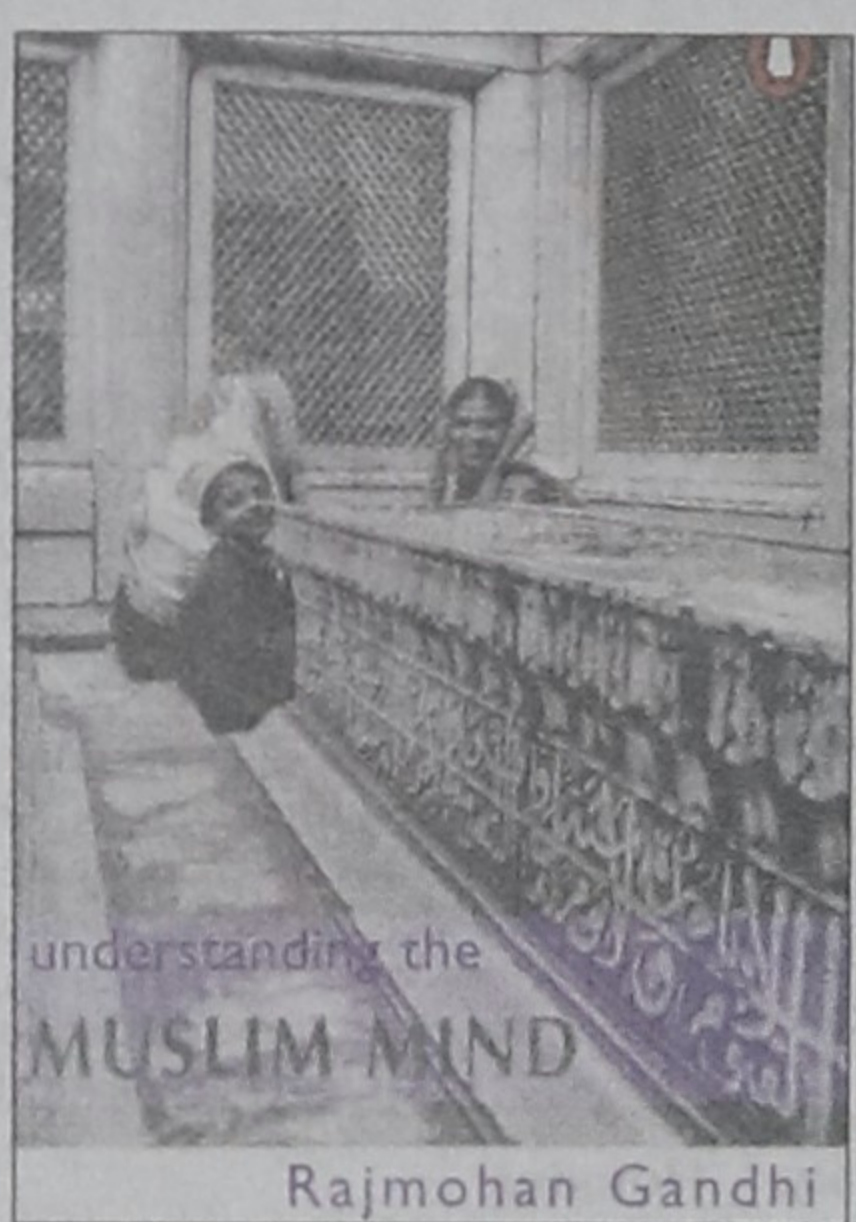
Gandhi begins his tale with a rueful remark he heard from his father as a twelve year old boy one day in 1947 in their second floor flat at Connaught Circus. His father Devas was talking to his friend Moulvi Hamid of the Jamia Millia College with a nationalist

benit. Devas was then a very influential journalist, being the editor of the Hindustan Times. In a remorseful voice he told the aggrieved Muslim educationist: "Hamid Sahab, Mei Sharminda Hoon" (Mr. Hamid, I am ashamed). All around Delhi at the time, in what was still an undivided India, people "vied with one another in the capacity to kill, maim, abduct, burn, loot and expel." And in Delhi, "the Muslims were the victims."

While writing the book 38 years later, the author could still see Hamid Sahib clearly saying very little, "conveying his pains through his silence and somewhat surprised and moved". Today, after half-a-century, to a reader, this would ring somewhat like the title of a present day Mahesh Bhatt tragic blockbuster. Devas Gandhi was deeply moved by the carnage and sufferings of the people and regarded the transfer of power in 1947 as less significant than the inhumanity to which many Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs sank together that year "a year of shame, not of achievement".

With all the major players in the political drama during the freedom struggle deceased meanwhile, and no other sources available for first hand interviews, Rajmohan had to take recourse to the published documents sometimes left by the leaders themselves and sometimes by other historians and writers.

Of the eight outstanding leaders from amongst the Muslims of the latter half of the nineteenth century, ranging from Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan, social reformer loyal to the Raj who first raised the awareness of the need for advancement by the backward Muslim community through education to Dr. Mohammad Iqbal, who conceived the idea of Pakistan - a homeland for the minority Indian Muslims (comprising the Punjab, NWFP, Sind and



Understanding the Muslim Mind
Rajmohan Gandhi
Penguin

Baluchistan) and also later added to it Bengal. Then came M.A. Jinnah who took up the cause of a separate Muslim homeland and carried it with single-minded determination and dexterity to success.

Rajmohan also discusses the life and times of Moulana Mohammed Ali (1878-1931), a leader of the Hindu-Muslim Khilafat movement, Moulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), one time President of the Indian Congress, Pakistan's Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan (1895-1951), and India's President Zakir Husain (1897-1969) and Bengal Chief Minister A.K. Fazlul Haque (1873-1962)

The author has gathered a mass of materials from different published sources as evident in over 30 pages of bibliography notes and references, carefully sifted them and made a beautiful brief presentation reflecting the life and times of these leaders that sometimes read like fiction. The story en passant of the passionate poet-philosopher Dr. Muhammad Iqbal's affairs with Atiya Fyze, a young avant-garde woman from an aristocratic Muslim family of Bombay and their spending time together in Cambridge, London and Germany is revealing. To Atiya, the poet admitted once, "I am pragmatic and utilitarian outside but a mystic inside". Atiya, attractive, intelligent and ahead of her time, on the other hand, spoke of the Iqbal of this period as "self-assertive and gregarious". Similarly the story of the fastidious bachelor and a successful lawyer, M.A. Jinnah at 40, living alone in a large but somber Malabar Hill bungalow, bowing to ladies and praising their sares, keeping, however a distance from them, falling in love with the 17 year old daughter one of the most eminent Parsee families in Bombay, Sir Dinshaw Petit is no less absorbing.

At the end Rajmohan asks himself: Do the eight lives say anything to us? Our times differ from theirs. After the 1947 and 1971 divisions and the consequent population migration, Hindus have outnumbered Muslims by 15 to 2 in India, and Muslims similarly outnumber Hindus in Bangladesh, and even more decisively in Pakistan.

Rajmohan concludes the main reason for the great divide between two major communities in undivided India was due to 'ungenerous' Indian National Congress support towards reforms introduced by the British Raj to prepare the

Indian populace for self-rule first by the 1909 reforms (Morley-Minto Act) that provided for separate electorates, then by 1919 reforms (Montague-Chelmsford Act) that gave partial self government with two-third elected legislators and cabinets of Indian ministers, but retaining vital subjects of finance, police and general administration for the governor to handle with the help of a nominated Executive Council, and a stage further by the 1935 reforms (Government of India Act) that provided for provinces to be governed entirely by Indian ministers responsible to an assembly.

In the concluding chapter, the author's finding is that the Raj had not created the divide. He held as true what Maulana Mohammed Ali said in 1930 in London, "We divide and they rule." When Sarat Bose repeated this to Lord Wavell, the Viceroy retorted and said what they were trying was for the Indians to unite and the Raj to quit. The book finally ends with the failure of the Cabinet Mission Plan in 1946 envisaging a loose federation of three groups of states one large central comprising what is now by and large present-day India with a Hindu majority and two others, on the east and west, with Muslim majorities. Though the Muslim League had promptly accepted this, the Congress had laid down certain conditions, following which the Muslim League had also withdrawn its acceptance. When Rajmohan started the book, it looked like recompense. But as the study was nearing completion, it turned out to be a requiem for what had been a lofty idea of Hindu-Muslim partnership.

Hemayetuddin Ahmed is former Director General of External Publicity and can be at Hemayetuddin29@gmail.com

Reflections on the non-violent soul

Mohsena Reza Shopna dives into a tale of spiritual placidity

A deceptive cover which gives one a picture of being at a hill station. Browsing through it gave me a totally different image. First published in 1999 as *Olive* from Jericho it was published in India by Penguin books in 2000.

This book is a collective record of what people are doing around the world to bring peace to their lives and nations. Thanks to them who revealed the richness of their physical and spiritual landscapes.

"In the midst of darkness light prevails" were Gandhi's words and for Anees Jung a kind of compass to travel. Her country witnessed violence wrought silently and deviously by poverty; in the Balkans a violence equally timeless, spurred on by centuries of ethnic strife; in Northern Ireland violence engineered by religious differences; Jerusalem, the home of three great religions, today torn by fear and hatred; in North America, so richly endowed by the spirit of egalitarianism and equally divisive, that divides blacks from whites. The same spectre looms over South Africa despite freedom and globalisation. Mass migration has begun to spill people out of their homes into alien landscapes that question their identity and turn them into targets of hate and violence. We get a glimpse of all these in one pack.

Jung has a recipe for peace, that is, religion. Aurobindo and Gandhi echoed Swami Vivekananda when they thought that in order to bring about changes one must work through religion. Almost all major reform movements of the 19th century drew their inspiration from

religion and acted on it. She also believes that to bring peace you have to conquer the lions within yourselves.

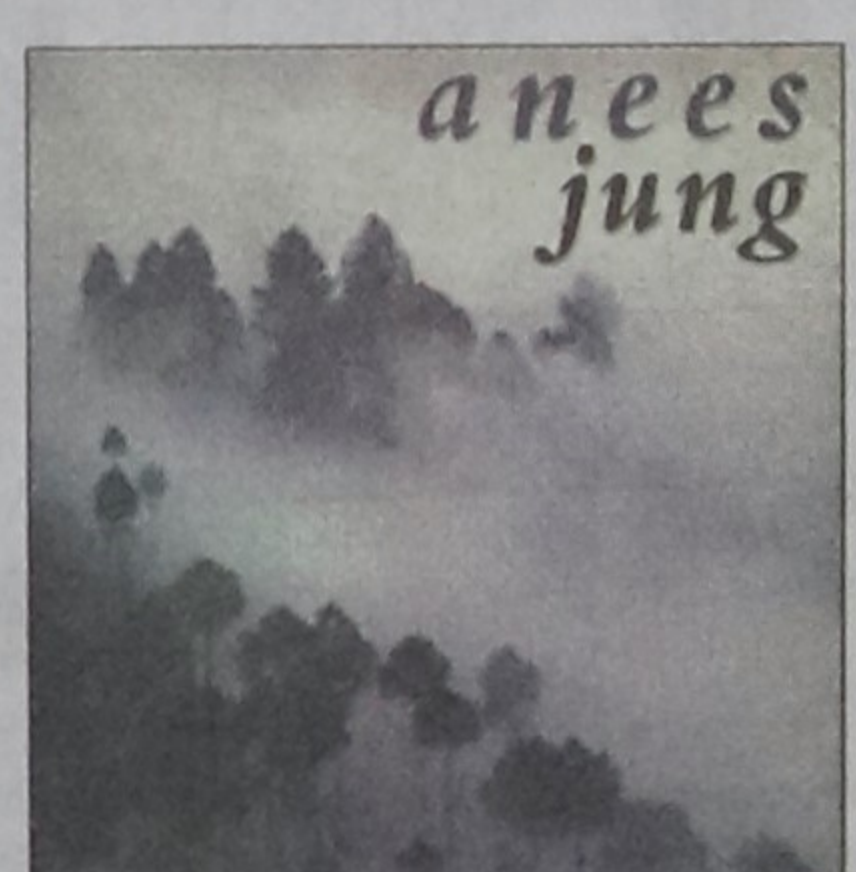
"The travelogue of stories", as David C. Smith of McGill University labels it, would have been richer if Jung had recorded earlier instances of non-violence. Much before Dadaji and Gandhi, there the Prophet of Islam who set innumerable examples of forgiveness and love. Jesus Christ, another apostle of peace, has also instances of forgiveness to his credit. With such predecessors we can still hope for peace.

Swami Satyananda believed western culture to be monolithic and its way of thinking one of confrontation. In the last century they were the ones who have fought the biggest wars. The long list of prominent figures includes Dalai Lama, who has spoken of compassion and love for all sentient beings--- a message hard to practice! Here she unveils his life theme, "If you smile it always comes back".

She travels further, meets Arafat who radiated a natural warmth and courtesy violence seemed distant. His former colleague explained one of the most questioned phrases--- "Islam a religion of the sword". He said, "If we had resorted to compassion and good will, there would not have been in history the Islamic Empire". Peace in Winter Gardens answers various queries that nag you. By quoting various people, Anees Jung makes her narrative more pronounced. Nicholas Christopher, who wrote the heart-rending poem *Terminus*, says, "It seemed as if in the Serbian onslaught on

the Muslim civilians in Bosnia, I was reading about events that occurred during the hey day of Nazi Germany." He was equally disturbed about events in Kosovo.

In a disarrayed world we have been given a role model, the multi-ethnic city of Mostar, a heritage that blended so finely the best elements of Austro-European and Islamic cultures. Jung



Peace in Winter Gardens
Anees Jung
Penguin

quotes a Croatian, "What is taken is under curse, nature is slow but just, it has its own way of leveling the hills". His message to the world is, "Work, work and work honestly".

Jung meets an enlightened Irishman who opines, "I cannot change the world but I can change people who are around me; if there was something that made me happy it was to see a man change." We should embrace the Gaelic word for soulmate, Anam Cara, a person to whom one reveals the hidden intimacies of one's life. It is a friendship that cuts across all conventions and categories.

When a person shares part of his/her self with you it is difficult to hate or hurt that person. This is a positive prescription for a troubled world. The book is a thorough observation of the lifestyles of various communities. In Islam, she says, "They thrive in divergent conditions."

The book covers quite a vast area. South Africa, "blessed by God but dismissed by men", had the strength to live so divided! Living in a country where schools were glorifying apartheid, Nomaandia had to wait 45 years before freedom would dawn on her land, not with Gandhian ways alone but with the tenacity of a leader like Mandela, who despite his faith in non-violence called for arms to fight for freedom.

James Lawson, a black preacher who directs the United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, observes that western culture, particularly of the United States, is a very violent culture. Nations have cultivated violence because they are mesmer-

ised into thinking that their life is dependent on strength that is physical rather than spiritual, moral and inward. The United States has a peculiar romance with violence. Public policy endorses expenditure on war rather than on domestic development. The national budget is oriented to research for the manufacture of arms. Racism is more overt, influential, more attached to public policy. He deplores the secret forces that practiced the policy of assassination in the 1960s which prevented the maturing of a leadership that would have offered America a different way. The killing of the Kennedys removed from the political scene two major voices that were calling for change.

Let us remember the enriching words of Martin Luther King, "Where do I/ we judge another individual by the colour of their skin and not by the content of the character? Where can I/ we contribute in small and large ways to healing our human family?" A quintessential Norwegian writer says, "In a very short time we have come under the influence of western mass culture. We are McDonaldized. We eat texMex food; we are pounded over our heads with cheap American movies. It is the general European fears that we are living in a migratory world that is increasingly becoming multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-racial. The European Union is trying to keep people out because the fear exists."

Mohsena Reza Shopna is Past President, Inner Wheel Club of Dhaka North.

Story of an emotional ordeal

Ekram Kabir marvels at a gripping plot

WHAT would you do when you learn you've been jailed for seventeen years? Dip into utter frustration? Lose your sanity? Or look forward to finishing the stint and coming out and beginning a new life?

Our hero does. Shaheen, a journalist and political activist, with fate taking a twist, has to be charged with committing a murder. He could have made the case more complicated by saying that he did not do it, but, to readers' surprise, he confesses. He is jailed for seventeen years. Solitary life, a life away from his wife and children, takes Shaheen through many psychological and emotional ups and downs. He starts to lose self-confidence. He develops a special kind of hidden anger for everybody who is not in jail, who is free, especially his wife Nadira. On the other hand, Nadira is devoted to him, and waits along with her two children - for her husband to come out of jail and start his life again. But it is not a society that would allow a woman to remain single for seventeen years, is it? That would not be very realistic, would it? What would be good for Nadira? Wait for Shaheen, or someone who extends an affectionate and caring hand to save the entire family from its various crises? This dilemma in Nadira sometimes makes her a more interesting character than the protagonist Shaheen. This is the point where Badal comes in. A patient man in all respects, Badal offers a life to Nadira that she could have never dreamt of during Shaheen's absence. Badal somehow compels her to stand up again, start a new life, provide a better environment and education to her children. Shaheen ends up in a complete psychological coma. He recovers, but there is not any time to save his marriage. He bows to reality, no matter how unacceptable it is to him.

Seventeen years go by Shaheen comes out of jail. He does not have anywhere to go, anyone to confide in. His wife has now married someone else, his children are now someone else's children and they do not want him to intrude in their lives so that things become more complicated for them.

Shaheen gets the job of a journalist again. The unexpected happens; he falls in love with a woman, Raihana, an extent against his will. It would, however, be very inappropriate to say Raihana did not supply any fuel for Shaheen's graduation in falling in love with her. Despite being much younger than Shaheen, she contributes a lot to the relationship. He really loves her but finally realises his love's folly. He finally goes into self-exile apparently out of his remorse about the fact that he could not prevent expressing his love for Raihana. He goes to Bandarban.

This is a story of a protagonist's fall in every respect moral, psychological and physical. When Shaheen confesses to the murder, his fall begins. He could have easily got away with it if he had not confessed. Then, in jail, his psychological fall begins. He loses his wife and children. He jumps for another fall at the end when he fails to uphold the admiration for and of a woman, possibly the only person left for him to lean on. He commits the mistake a sin, the old sin. With it, he feels that he needs to be punished for it.

The structure of *Tin Parber Jibon* is noticeable. Islam divides his story into three parts: Brittoporbo, Bindooporbo and Shunnoporbo. Brittoporbo deals with how Shaheen ends up in jail and

loses his sanity; Bindooporbo narrates his painful realisation that he has lost everyone. This part also opens another chapter in his life: meeting Raihana. The last part, Shunnoporbo, deals only with his journey towards Bandarban. There is one structural oddity with Shunnoporbo. Only two pages of the 127-page novel have been dedicated to Shunnoporbo.

Explicitly the writer himself is the narrator here. This is typical of Syed Manzoorul Islam. He keeps himself in the background while telling the audience about the story. Readers can also feel his presence during the course of the story. It all reminds one of the chorus in Greek tragedy, doesn't it? No, not really. Islam's story begins with a sinister incident in the protagonist's life, but has many positive turns that can bring the hero out of his inner and outer chaos. The tragedy is that he does not utilise this scope to emerge from the mess he is in. This is what interests the readers about the character.

When a novel by Syed Manzoorul Islam is displayed on the shelves, the audience is naturally driven by great expectations. Islam is one of the very handful of writers in the country to have this quality. Islam is a great creator of plots. That is obvious from the story in *Tin Parber Jibon*. There is, however, room for pointing out a few expecta-

Tin Parber Jibon
Syed Manzoorul Islam
Anayprakash

tions that have gone unheeded. A few more things would have the book perfect. Islam's prime character spends a long time in jail. Some aspects of his prison life, their clearer depiction, would have made the experience more interesting. Shaheen does not seem to be in any financial crisis when he is freed from prison. Not even once. Lastly, his self-exile is much too abrupt; the entire show seems to culminate in one go in Shunnoporbo. Islam could also have described a few aspects relating to Bangladesh's communists of the time when Shaheen goes to jail. In fact, he does. This is rather interesting: a bunch of revolutionaries imbibing drinks manufactured by a capitalist as they used to say the enemy of the proletariat.

In many ways, *Tin Parber Jibon* seems to be one of Islam's offhand works. Surely, the readers know, he can do much better than this. Islam is a tested writer. He has written a whole lot in Bengali, and the writing has brought him many laurels. Somehow, there is a feeling among his readers that it is time for him to cross boundaries: go for an international audience. That means writing in English. The story of *Tin Parber Jibon* is too local, but it should not be tough for a craftsman like Islam to attract an international audience.

It's about time.
Ekram Kabir is a journalist.