2 A DHAKA SATURDAY NOVEMBER 22, 2008

Complex relations... the pen, the gun, freedom Shahid Alam finds a work on a sensitive issue exhaustive

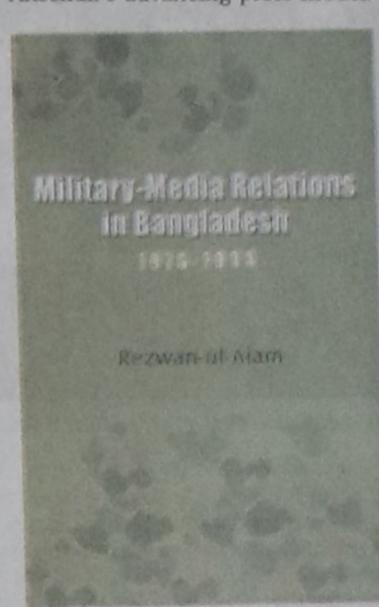
HERE are certain fields of study that scholars, for a variety of reasons, hesitate to undertake, especially in a developing country like Bangladesh, which has experienced for the greater part of its existence military, disguised military, and one-party rule. The latest catastrophe to have hit its political system, the phenomenon called 1/11 and its unsavoury aftermath, has the armed forces shoring up an insipid, at times comical, civilian façade. The fact of military/disguised military rule has been a reality for Bangladesh. As has been a functioning media during those years. And, to say the least, relations between the two have been as sensitive as they have been complex.

Rezwan-ul-Alam has undertaken the task of exploring those relations in the book under review. It is probably among the incipient substantial works on the subject in this country. Military-Media Relations in Bangladesh is, in the author's words, "the reproduction of my Ph.D. thesis titled: 'Military Rule and the Media: A Case Study of Bangladesh'." And, because it is a faithful reproduction, it is beset with the flaws generally associated with the verbatim reproduction of a dissertation format into a book form. Having said that, however, this is a book worth reading, both for its content and analysis. The author begins with a couple of intriguing questions that he later on attempts to find answers to: "Were military rulers responsible for the deterioration of standards of journalism in the country? Was the role of the journalists positive in fighting the autocracy as has been portrayed by the journalists themselves?" The arresting words in the first query are "deterioration of standards of journalism". Other than the purblind, and their numbers are not at a premium, there is a consensus among discerning persons that the

standards have steadily degenerated compared to even thirty years back, and markedly to that of the 1960s. While journalistic standards have hardly risen above mediocrity in the audio-visual medium, the decline in the more vibrant print media is alarming. There are still standout journalists to be found in this medium, but their number might have begun to be overwhelmed by the dubious/mediocre variety. \So, were the military rulers responsible for the steady decline? Alam studies the regimes of Ziaur Rahman and HM Ershad to arrive at an answer. A particular conclusion provides clues to this and several other queries that he has sought to find answers to: "...the concept of press freedom is anathema to the military mind, but that the military relied heavily on elite networks of inter-personal communication within the media for its preparation of coups and for legitimacy after grabbing power." Interestingly, the military viewpoint is graphically captured, albeit provided in the context of the American armed forces, in the words of a US Air Force officer: "Journalists are self-serving by nature, compensated based upon copy-inch published, and focused solely upon their selfaggrandizing ego and the increase in circulation their sensationalism spawned. The visual medium (TV) is the worst of the bunch." And, one cannot resist, while keeping Bangladesh in comparative perspective, this fascinating bit of information Alam alludes to regarding the American military mindset: "In ranking its confidence in various institutions, the military ranked themselves first in confidence, followed by the U.S. Supreme Court, the medical profession and major educational institutions. Newspapers were in 9th place, with the U.S. Congress and television news at the bottom of the ratings." Could that be one of the reasons for

the introduction of the curious sive interview --- plus liberal use of

to explain military-media relations in Bangladesh. His collaborationopposition-collaboration hypothesis is, as he explains, applied to Bangladesh based on J. Herbert Altschull's advancing press model.



Military-Media Relations in Bangladesh 1975-1990 Rezwan-ul-Alam Palok Publishers

The variant has come about as a result of this authorial assessment: "While Bangladeshi journalists are perceived as being socially responsible, there is a great deal of debate whether they all serve truth or are instruments of peace or work for social change or are all instrument of social justice or a vehicle for two way exchanges." Alam has resorted to four principal methods of qualitative research --- case study, field observation, focus group and inten-

phenomenon called "embedded secondary literature to arrive at this journalists" in the 2003 US invasion particular conclusion, as well as to explore his study objectives: to Alam has come up with a theory identify the media climate during the regimes of General Ziaur Rahman and General Ershad; to identify the media's role in reinforcing military rule; to identify the nature of various pressures on the media; to identify the media's role in the resistance against the rule of General Ershad; and to identify the nature of interactions between the

military, media and politics.

There is a generally consistent pattern of thoroughness to the study of his stated objectives, although the occasional information gap, uncertain analysis and moot conclusion crop up. However, his topic of study would probably preclude any consensus on his major conclusions. A couple of Alam's observations will provide a fairly accurate picture of the media during military regimes: "The media in Bangladesh has a long history of troubled and difficult Bangladesh 1975-1990 is an importimes during 15 years of military rule. They were forced to rally support for the military regimes and was subjected, under threats of suppression, to act as an instrument of propaganda for the policies of those regimes. This general pattern of behaviour of the media, especially television, led The Times of London to comment that the press in Bangladesh was "traditionally a cowed and obedient poodle" (17 December 1990). And, "However...(o)n many occasions the journalists of Bangladesh stood firmly and bravely against attempts by the military authorities to limit the freedom of the press."

In an important chapter, Alam delves into the legal provisions affecting freedom of the press in Bangladesh. He refers to Article 39 of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of the press and the

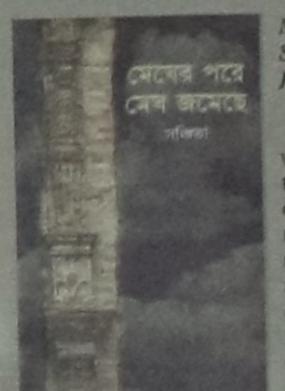
right of every citizen to freedom of speech and expression, but they are subject to "reasonable restrictions" that include matters relating to state security and international relations, public order, decency and morality. It is a caveat that has been liberally resorted to by civilian and military regimes. He also focuses on such civilian government restrictive acts like the notorious Special Powers Act of 1974 that have been put to good use by military regimes.

Alam devotes a fair amount of attention to the role of the British press, BBC, VOA and the two major journalists unions in Bangladesh during the period of the military regimes. Here some of his conclusions may be found by some to be somewhat tenuous, but that would be natural in view of the divergence of opinions sure to be found whenever the matter of the impact of the foreign media on Bangladesh's affairs comes up.

Military-Media Relations in tant work that should be both instructive to all concerned about the future of the liberal democratic system in Bangladesh, and to scholars wishing to study the subject matter in its other dimensions. One would not wish to relive these strident observations of Alam with regard to the military rule from 1975 to 1990: "... journalists of Bangladesh lived under strict vigilance by the military authorities, who were not prepared to tolerate any criticism of their activities. The frequent closure of various publications and continued suspension of others reflected a marked disregard for internationally recognized standards of basic press freedom."

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

AT A GLANCE

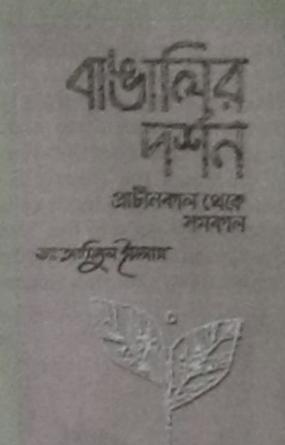


Megher Pore Megh Jomechhe Sanchita Jyotsna Publishers

As always, another exquisite work of fiction from Sanchita. The tale is simple. Call it a story, or a collage of stories that bring out the reality or the myth. Or both. The simplicity of language and the allusion to literary thoughts and expressions give this work a richness of a different kind. It has that certain pull on the reader.

Bangalir Darshan Dr. Aminul Islam Mowla Brothers

Contrary to what others might say about an absence of philosophy in Bengali life, Aminul Islam thinks there are ample instances to show that Bengalis have always been driven by a sense of philosophy. Indeed, he spots that evolving philosophy in a whole range of men of letters and spiritual souls, Read on. It is pure enlightenment here.



DANI JOHASON Compact five and Parenty Minder. Oriock the Goers to True Wealth, Prosperty, Native and Happines: 19 FREE CONCESSION OF THE PERSON OF THE PERSON

SPIRIT

Spirit Driven Success Dani Johnson

It is one of those books that brim over with matters of a sermonising nature. But, no matter. There are people willing to be shown the positive; and Dani Johnson does it with that little touch of the religious. She goes back to the Bible, repeatedly, to tell readers how to create wealth without succumbing to the selfish in the soul.

Reshaping the Holy Democracy, Development and Muslim Women in Bangladesh Elora Shehabuddin Columbia University Press

Shehabuddin goes into an exploration of the lives of women in Bangladesh. The focus, of course, is on how these lives have been transformed by secular NGOs even as faith has remained an integral part of experience for them. The study throws up revealing facts about individuals combining modernity with the spiri-



Democracy, governance and security

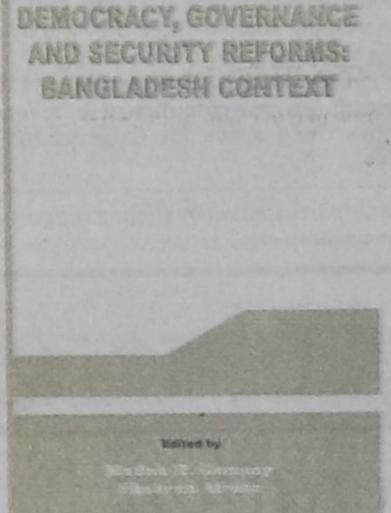
Mustagim Kazi is appreciative of the ideas a book throws up

HE book under review Democracy, Governance and L Security Reform: Bangladesh Context is in fact a compilation of papers presented at a workshop organized recently by Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) in collaboration with the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS), Honolulu, Hawaii. At the workshop five keynote papers were presented by five notable persons, viz., Begum Asma Siddiqua, ATM Amin, Abul Haseeb Khan, Mizanur Rahman Shelley and Mohd Aminul Karim. Besides these papers, the book also contains the address of President Iajuddin Ahmed, and important speeches of Colonel Abul Basher Imamuzzaman, Lieutenant General (retd) Ed. Smith, Ms Geeta Pasi, Mufleh R Osmany at the inaugural and concluding sessions. Highlights from the speeches of the main discussants on the keynote papers pointing out the merits and demerits of the papers are also included in the book.

In Bangladesh, the very constitutional provision for a mid-term, non-partisan caretaker government suggests that something was wrong with the normal functioning of democracy in which an independent election commission holds general election even when an elected party is in power. But in Bangladesh a party or parties could never earn the trust of other parties because the opposing parties know for sure that the party or parties in power will manipulate the election in their favour. This mistrust among the parties has made Bangladesh politics confrontational rather than

cooperative. Hence we have had weak parliaments of boycott and walkout, hartals and work stoppages. We never had a fruitful debating parliament participated in by the treasury and the opposition for a meaningful democracy. The leaders of one party know for sure that the leaders of the other party are corrupt. At least this system of government suggests that things are so. Then what is the solution to the problem, how to hold a neutral election? The answer surely is the caretaker government. And even though this system can be trusted to organise a fairly neutral election, it can never be a permanent solution to Bangladesh democracy. If it goes on, it will be remain a stigma for the nation rather than as a blessing. And why not? After holding three

general elections for the third time, the caretaker government failed to hold a fourth time. The two major contenders in the election, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, drew daggers against each other over, among others, the formation of the caretaker government with President Prof Iajuddin Ahmed, a BNP nominee, as its chief adviser. Mutual distrust reached such an extreme that it gave rise to a crisis of the magnitude of one/eleven when the nation was pushed to a virtual civil war. This crisis triggered the formation of a new caretaker government of a different nature, that has been ruling the country for about two years, rather than its usual time limit of three months, as the constitution stipulates. Well, this time the military did not come to handle affairs of state directly and openly.



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

But such a negative political development has indeed created the scope for direct military rule of the kind this nation has witnessed in the past. Weaknesses on the part of political leaders have legitimized past military governments.

and Strategic Studies, Dhaka

The nation's political leaders may not agree, but it is true that their inability to guide the nation as well as their corrupt nature are mostly responsible for the sorry

state of affairs in the political, social and economic domain. If these politicians have failed to learn lessons even after such a period of humiliation, when they were thrown behind bars by Dr Fakhruddin's caretaker government on corruption charges, the nation may yet face harder times However, it has to be mentioned

here that on the conceptual or

ideological side, the nation probably does not have a short supply. What it lacks most is the power of transforming those concepts and ideas into reality. The people here know that for a vibrant functional democracy, leaders should be people-oriented. The political leaders also profess to serve the people selflessly. But in practice they prove themselves to be lamentable failures. The people here know that actions of the leaders should be transparent and they have to be accountable to the state and people for their actions. The people here know that for an effective democracy, three things, viz. good governance, rule of law and freedom of press are essential. But in actuality it is seen that the powerful in society take the law in their own hands for their own selfish gain and gag the press, completely oblivious of the national interest. Their mindless corruption has made the country heavily dependent on foreign donors' money, creating a huge gap between the rich and the poor inside the nation. Hopefully, the drive of Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed's caretaker government against the corrupt politicians and business-

men and some of the major institutional reforms including the separation of the judiciary from the executive as well as preparation of the voter list and national ID cards with photos are some of the achievements which will go a long way for establishing a corruption-free democratic society in Bangladesh. The nation now needs the necessary political will to continue the drive and make the institutional reforms meaningful through practising participatory and accountable politics. Ultimately, the future of democracy in Bangladesh lies in the hands of its politicians. The nation is truly in need of skilled and visionary political leaders who can trans-

form these ideas into reality. Coming back to the book, the five papers viz. "Democracy and Rule of Law" by Begum Asma Siddiqua, "Civil and Military relationship: Bangladesh Perspective" by A T M Amin, "Emergence of NGOs, Civil Society and Democracy in Bangladesh" by Abul Haseeb Khan, "Role of Governance in Combating Corruption" by Mizanur Rahman Shelley and "Role of Security Forces in a Democracy" by Mohd Aminul Karim point out problems and suggest ways for establishing lasting democracy in Bangladesh. The articles are enlightening and intellectually stimulating. The idea that these papers, along with the speeches of the guests and views of the discussants of the workshop could be compiled into a book is notable.

Mustagim Kazi is a freelance book reviewer.

Comedy and erotica Farida Shaikh dwells on ideas

URIAL At Sea is a long, short story by Khushwant Singh, a widely read contemporary writer. The book is a quick mix of fictional formulae with a blend of history, the partition period, political doctrine, capitalism-communism, amoral life reflected in death and disaster on personal account against the looming shape of sexuality.

Like another great story teller, Naguib Mahfouz's great novel, The Beginning and the End, death, funeral, and burial are also the beginning and the end of the story, Burial at Sea.

The story is deeply embedded in encounters and events that have occurred in the writer's own life. Love, Truth and a Little Malice is the title of Singh's biography.

In this story Mr. Mattoo earns more as the chairman of his son's company than he has done as a lawyer; the fact that Jai Bahgwan's business empire started out with a textile mill is similar to the writer's personal

This work has also been described as a literary version of Osha Rajneesh by The Times of India. He was a mystic and spiritual teacher who settled in Bombay. Speaking out against socialism, Mahatma Gandhi and institutionalised religion, he advocated a liberal attitude towards sexuality.

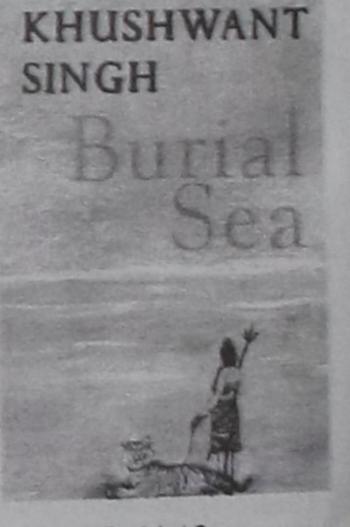
The characters of Victor Jai Bhagwan, whose dream is to make India rich and prosperous; his close friend Madhavan Nair, from Kerala, who reminds Victor of Shakespeare's Cassius; Victor's daughter Bharati and the tantric god-woman Ma Durgashwari are all sketched

against these ideals. The narration follows a linear fashion. Reading is regular to the end, though the conclusion of the story is a hurried one It is as if the writer has become a bit impatient while narrating telling the story. However, if one were to read the book on a long flight, the end of the story would appear to be

quite agreeable! The story, which begins on a calm note and moves on steadily, becomes too loaded with happenings and incidents over too short a period. And towards the end of the story, the

reader feels kind of 'fast forwarded.'

Victor Jai Bhagwan loses his temper with the leader of the unions and slaps him hard, who shouts back crude epithets and abusive terms one after the other. The tantric god-woman Durgeshwari comments: 'Lose your temper and lose the argument'. She needs to hide her pregnancy to save the reputation of the tycoon, 'hamare tumhare beech sambhand hoga bandhan nahin.' Freedom and pleasure are jeopardized. They decide to end their relationship. There is also betrayal in the long standing friendship between Jai Bhagwan and Nair the commu-



Burial at Sea Khushwant Singh Penguin Books India

nist politician.

A noted reviewer of the book comments 'Burial At Sea seems harried from the beginning and very scattered, lacking direction. The conclusion doesn't fare any better as the tale ends abruptly and unsatisfactorily. It seems like this novel was written in a rush, meant to either quickly satisfy a publisher's contract or to add a boost to the author's bank account'.

Even so, the book is a brief enjoyable read through a smooth text of comic irony and erotic examples. It is vintage Khushwant Singh, after the classic two-volume A History of the Sikhs.

Farida Shalkh is a member of The Reading Circle.

Soldiers in trauma and nurse in love

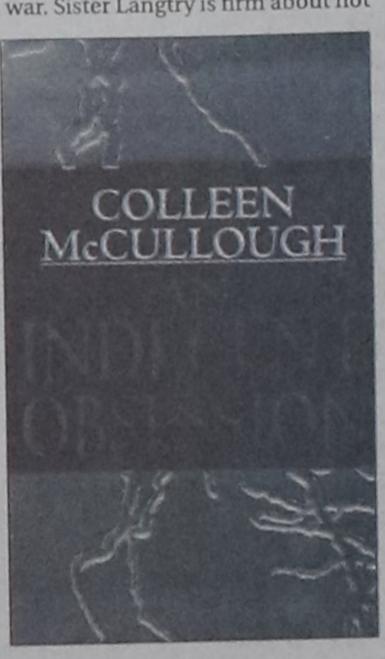
Tulip Chowdhury enjoys stories in a story

OLDIERS sacrifice their lives makes him stand out from the rest deeply affected by the violence of for their countries when of her patients. To Neal, Nugget, war. Sister Langtry is firm about not soldiers who cannot take the trauma of witnessing the death and destruction of war even long after the war is over. In Australia, such soldiers were sent to Base Fifteen, in Sister Honour Langtry's care. To the battle-broken soldiers Sister Langtry was all they had. The selfless devotion of the beautiful nurse calmed the seething hostilities of the soldiers. An Indecent Obsession is woven around the war torn soldiers. The devoted Sister Langtry and their life in the army hospital is a moving saga of conflict between love and duty. Colleen McCullough comes up with a gripping psychological drama that raises endless questions of love and sacrifice.

Ward-X of Base Fifteen holds emotionally disturbed Australian soldiers during World War II. Sister Langtry's work in Ward-X goes on smoothly until Sergeant Michael Wilson is admitted into it. There is something different about him that

called to duty. And there are Benedict and Luce she is "Sis" and they treat her as nothing less. But when Michael too starts to call her Sis, she feels as if he does so without his heart in it, as if he is not meant to call her that. He just does not fit into Ward X. It seems to Sister Langtry that he is hiding something. The calm days that Sister Langtry enjoys are left behind and she finds herself waiting for the day when her patients can be sent home.

Sister Langtry spends busy days dealing with six of her patients. There is Luce, the overconfident man who always imagines himself as her hero and is constantly telling her that she is missing something by not giving herself to him. There is Nugget, the hypochondriac whom she gives vitamins, telling him that they are remedies for his constant ailments. And there are Benedict and Matt, disturbed and fidgety, needing counseling constantly. And there is Neil who has come to her



An Indecent Obsession Colleen McCullough Avon Books

letting down her professional guard cide. and yet Neil is often in her thoughts. When Sergeant Wilson comes she with a deep outlook on life as it is finds herself in a new awakening of her soul. His manly appearance, his rugged looks catch her unawares. She has thought that years of loneliness, a life without closeness with any man will wash away all romantic feelings and lust. And yet there she is entertaining the very thoughts that she had thought were non-existent in her. The woman in her is aroused once more.

Wilson in Ward-X the other occupants are also taken by surprise at his calmness. When the war is ravaging people how could it have made Wilson all the more indifferent? And indeed why is he in Ward-X? In the meantime Luce commits suicide. Hands seem to point to Sergeant Wilson, for he is the last person to be involved with the dead man prior to the latter's taking his own life. However, there is an inquiry to establish the truth behind the sui-

found in army field hospitals. There is the drama between the doctors and the nurses, the superiors and the subordinates. And the lives of the patients hold unique everyday stories that are sometimes hilarious. With unique mastery of words the writer weaves the life stories of six troubled soldiers and their nurse. The unforgettable cast of characters seems to be very much alive. The tale is passionate, witty With the arrival of Sergeant and so believable and strong that the presence of the characters lingers even long after the novel ends. The reader feels transformed after reading the saga of the wartorn soldiers.

An Indecent Obsession is a book

Nothing to read in the warm sunshine of the coming winter days? Grab this book; let it fill your days with sunshine of a different kind, the kind that illuminates your

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher and