

Interplay of harmony and discord

Shahid Alam studies an assessment of India-Bangladesh relations

INDIAN prime minister Manmohan Singh, in a moment of pique, had once famously declared, in reference to Bangladesh, that "we can choose our friends, but we cannot choose our neighbours." How true! Bangladesh can, of course, turn the lament around, and that will quite faithfully reflect the roller coaster ride that the state of bilateral relations between Dhaka and New Delhi has undergone since the substantially smaller neighbour emerged as a sovereign independent country. Hemayetuddin, a retired foreign secretary of Bangladesh, and currently working as a director general at OIC, did two tours of duty on his country's behalf to its very large neighbour, first as a junior diplomat, and then as High Commissioner. A *Neighbourly Affair: Assignment India* is Hemayetuddin's account of his, as much as the Bangladesh government's, diplomatic engagement with India, a country that obviously fascinates him. There is a liberal dose of personal anecdotes with diverse personalities, but there is also a good deal of bilateral foreign policy issues that serve to highlight the seesaw nature of relations between Dhaka and New Delhi.

From the Indian perspective, the author finds, an irritant has been that Bangladesh "never fully acknowledged the debt we owed to them for their active moral and military support in our war of liberation. This view was shared by most Indians, including their leaders." While acknowledging that "we do indeed owe India a debt of eternal gratitude for standing by us when we needed a friend more than ever," Hemayetuddin also proposes a tantalizing "what if": "A longer struggle for Bangladesh's independence without India's intervention in fact could have contributed to better later day relationship between the two countries in which the element of gratitude would not have featured that prominently in

our bilateral relations." The author had a taste of another aggravation that India is bugged by regarding Bangladesh from the highly influential National Security Advisor and Principal Secretary to then Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee, Brajesh Mishra, who bluntly told him that "there were very strong 'anti-Indian' sentiments in Bangladesh and added that this had prevailed irrespective of whichever political party was in power in Bangladesh." Unless any substantial reconfiguration of territorial boundaries occurs in the future, India will hang as an eternal Sword of Damocles over Bangladesh, and the smaller state will have to endure living in the shadow of a big neighbour with whom relations will not always be smooth. There will be demands made by India in its own national interest that Bangladesh may or may not find palatable, or even feasible, for political or economic reasons. Mishra had, in his official meeting with Hemayetuddin, broadly hinted at confidence building measures (in favour of India, naturally) that Bangladesh could take, like handing over the jailed ULFA leader Anup Chetia, signing a bilateral FTA, export of gas to India, and allowing overland transit facilities. A theme that is discernible in the book, one that often rankles the general Bangladeshi, is the implied, as well as overt, big brotherly attitude of Indian officialdom towards the smaller neighbour. Hemayetuddin recounts how he was formally told by the Indian External Affairs Ministry that he would not get, nor should he pursue, any meeting with the Indian prime minister, while the Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka seemed to have easy access to the Bangladeshi premier. That says as much about Indian attitude as about the self-imposed indignity of the high level Bangladeshi

leadership. Hemayetuddin believes (correctly, in my view) that the major impediment towards improving bilateral relations is the issue of security. New Delhi is particularly bothered about Dhaka allegedly sheltering Indian militants and insurgents and infiltration from Bangladesh, while Dhaka's concern centers around the armed insurgency of the *Shanti Bahini* operating from safe havens in Tripura, the separatist *Swadheen Bangabumi Andolon* based in India, sanctuary of criminals and

ational institutions. For its part, the author notes, Bangladeshi paranoia regarding India has not helped in boosting trust and confidence, while the country actually loses out on potentially beneficial ventures. He cites the instance of Dhaka's decision not to sign the Asian Highway Agreement that was partly "motivated by concerns of transit facilities to India although it had little to do with it." In his view, "it was a setback as it not only isolated Bangladesh from the mainstream of the transnational road communication network of the present and of the future, but also because the very reasons cited for not signing the Agreement could be resolved only on becoming a signatory."

Regarding the unresolved issue of the un-demarcated 6.5 km boundary between the two countries, Hemayetuddin ruefully concludes that "it is a lingering ulcer in bilateral relations...and looks as though it would never be resolved." He also dwells on the thorny issue of water-sharing and India's planned river linking project. While he mentions the efforts of *Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon* and other organizations in voicing the concerns of Dhaka, evidence suggests that individuals and organizations within India played an earlier and more crucial role in making the Indian government place on hold the river linking project. A prominent Indian environmentalist, Sudhirindar Sharma, exemplifies the thoughts and travails of fellow-Indian travelers when he writes about the river linking proposition: "The politicization of water through this mega-project will have far-reaching consequences on the access to water and the price people will pay for getting it. In a dangerous trend, narrow political interests have brought inter-basin transfer of waters from the technical domain into the political arena."

Hemayetuddin, who, refreshingly, often pulls no punches when



A Neighbourly Affair
Assignment India
Hemayetuddin
The University Press Limited

anti-Bangladeshi elements in that country, and smuggling of large quantities of drugs into Bangladesh. These, and other, issues work against the establishment of good neighbourly relations, and downplay the fact that Bangladesh is the largest market for Indian exports in South Asia, or that it has the largest number of tourists visiting that country, or that Bangladeshis spend a huge amount of money in Indian shopping malls, hospitals, or educa-

stating his position, even if his views could be challenged, has a couple of astute observations that the reader might find disturbing. One is the media, the author's designated "villain": "The media in both the countries would never allow an incident or development involving bilateral relations to go unreported.... My regret...was that I found that even the most reputed newspapers that claimed objectivity would frequently give a twist that would make the report opinionated and a misrepresentation of the facts." Another is that "the Track II diplomacy for improving relations between Bangladesh and India was not going to lead anywhere because of the emotions and deep mistrust between the two sides." And an amusing one: "I wanted to get out of Bangkok as I was quite fed up attending our Ministers and lesser VIPs who would not miss an opportunity to transit in Bangkok for pleasure, medical treatment or personal business...."

A Neighbourly Affair is, by the author's admission, "not a work of research but a rambling narration...of events and description of persons that came in and contributed...to the course of the affair." It is generally as he claims, but there are issues of vital importance to the bilateral relations between New Delhi and Dhaka that he brings up and discusses from the point of view of his own personal involvement and other factors that have had significant impact on them. In the end, one would be inclined to lend support to his bewilderment as to "why our two countries could not invest in the tremendous goodwill that came out of the bloody war of Liberation that we fought together and many opportunities that came in the way thereafter to cash (in) on that goodwill."

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AT A GLANCE

Lalon Shah
The Great Poet
Abu Ishahaq Hossain

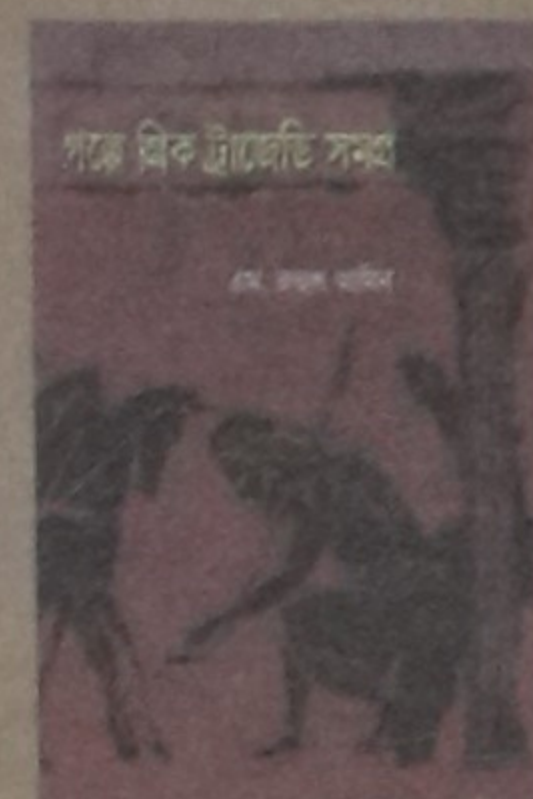


Lalon Shah
The Great Poet
Abu Ishahaq Hossain
Palal Prokashoni

The legendary nature of Lalon Shah has never been in doubt. Indeed, his reputation has only grown over the years and come to embrace wider regions of Bengali thought. In this much welcome work on the mystic poet in the English language, the writer dwells on the thoughts and social circumstances that shaped the Lalon personality.

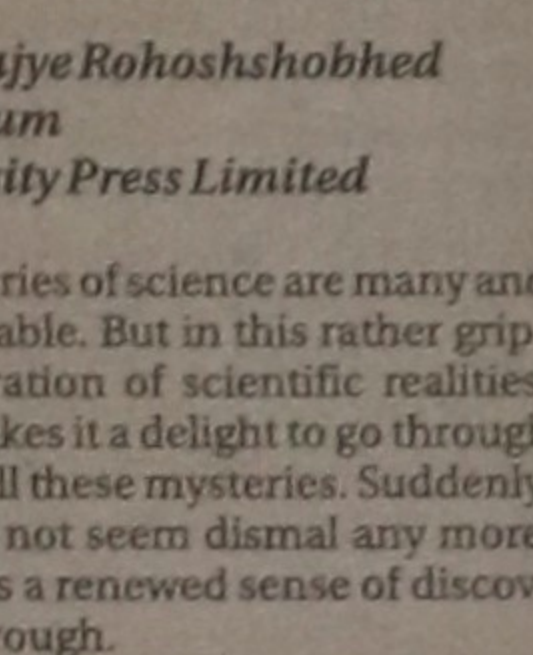
Greek Golpe Tragedy Shomogro
M. Ruhul Amin
The University Press Limited

Greek tragedy has been pivotal in shaping much of what eventually came to be known as western literature. The sense of tragedy is of a kind of sublimity that has always elevated the human spirit despite the death and destruction that are the regular theme in the works of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus and so many others. Read this work. You will enjoy it.



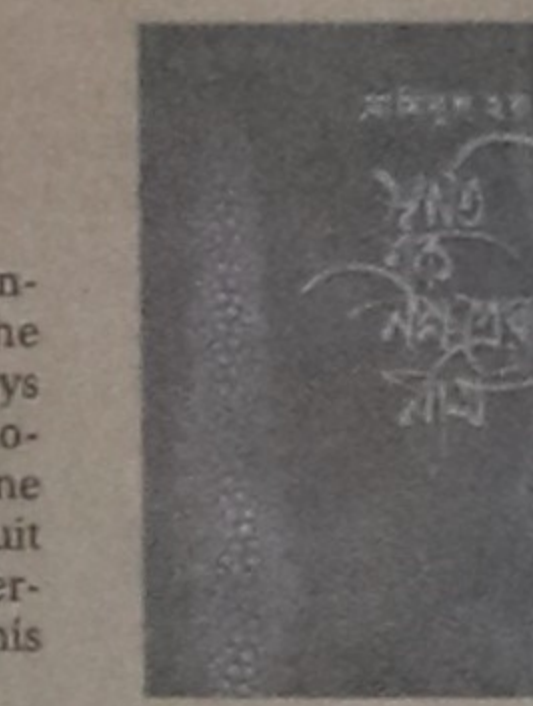
Bigyaner Rajye Rohoshshobhed
Abdul Qaiyum
The University Press Limited

The mysteries of science are many and often inscrutable. But in this rather gripping enumeration of scientific realities, the writer makes it a delight to go through the maze of all these mysteries. Suddenly, science does not seem dismal any more. Suddenly, it is a renewed sense of discovery you go through.



Swati Ek Nokkhotrer Naam
Momin ul Hoque
Adorn Publication

The work is an intensely pleasing sensation. And that comes through the themes and the images the writer employs in the telling of his tales. These short stories are reflective of a modern mind, of one who has engaged seriously in the pursuit of fiction as a form of art. Hoque will certainly make an impression through his narration of the human experience.



An alcoholic tale, or an exposure of evil

Mizanur Rahman plods through some complexities of life

IN an alcoholic tale (literally, because the entire gamut of characters of the novel turn to liquor), Aravind Adiga chooses to expose the evils of Indian society stretching from Laxmangarh to Bangalore via the Indian capital New Delhi. Adiga's journalistic reportage in *Time* magazine (he had been a New Delhi correspondent of *Time* for quite a few years) definitely makes its mark in his Booker winning debut novel *The White Tiger*. It chronicles the India of the 21st century from the perspective of a lower caste Indian, if not from Adiga himself. The witty and pungent satire used in the novel are at times didactic and prophetic, leaving it to readers to settle whether they should pay heed to the prophecy of a person coming from the North Indian ghetto who likes to introduce himself in a wryly elevated term as "an entrepreneur."

The White Tiger is an epistolary novel addressed to the Premier of China, Wen Jiabao, on the eve of his visit to India. In the detailed account of his entrepreneurship (!) Ashok Sharma, the protagonist (with the evolution of the status of his profession his name changes: from Munna to Balam Halwai to Ashok Sharma, but inwardly he always sticks to the title "White Tiger" conferred upon him by his elementary school teacher), elaborates his experiences as a student in the elementary school, as a tea stall boy, as a driver, and finally as

the owner of a company that boasts having twenty six Toyota Qualises that work on a contract basis to fetch to office and return home the employees of the "Internet Companies" that are located in Bangalore. Additionally, he is resolute to make a fortune in the real estate enterprise. Munna was born in the household of a rickshaw puller, in a north-Indian village named Laxmangarh which is near the suburban town of Dhanbad. Munna's family indeed takes its course designed by the domineering grandmother of the household Kusum.

Munna had to quit school and served at a tea shop in exchange of repaying a debt of the family that was taken on the occasion of the marriage ceremony of his cousin-sister Reena. Later he moved to Dhanbad and after taking lessons in driving managed to get the post of a driver cum aide in the house of one of the landlords of Laxmangarh who had a coal business in Dhanbad. When the young son of the family moved to Delhi to settle an income tax stalemate by bribing the minister and his allies, he carried Balam (in this household Munna got the name Balam) with him. Though a "country-mouse", a keen observer of the things that go around, Balam did not take a lot of time to adapt to cosmopolitan Delhi. No wonder the sights and sounds of Delhi together with his master's degeneracy (though he had

human compassion for the poor, especially for Balam) and the misdeeds of the other drivers of the apartment house where he lived with his master contributed to his mischief. Balam, starting from siphoning petrol, to take the car to a corrupt mechanic who billed him for work that was unnecessary and picking up paying customers in the car, even (when favoured by chance) started drinking and made futile attempts to sleep with a girl with golden hair. Ultimately, he murdered his master by hammering the strong "Johnnie Walker Black" with the least scruple. The novel ends in



The White Tiger
Aravind Adiga
HarperCollins India

Balam escaping to Bangalore and taking the very master's name, i.e. Ashok, whom he killed. It is not apparent whether Adiga is a "minstrel for the Indian cause", but deep down he cherishes the dream of bringing about change in Indian society. Balam/Ashok wanted to establish an English medium school for the poor with the money earned through real estate business: "After three or four years in real estate, I think I might sell everything, take the money, and start a school - an English language school for poor children in Bangalore". But a master in story telling, Adiga takes readers through a maze because they cannot take Balam/Ashok even to be the blurred shadow of Adiga.

Therefore, Balam's prophecy ("the future of the world lies with the yellow man and brown man now that our erstwhile master, the white-skinned man, has wasted himself through buggery, mobile phone usage and drug abuse") might / might not be Adiga's. But surely while considering the didactic bits, *The White Tiger* puts forward the lesson that "poverty creates monsters" has macrocosmic significance for lands stretching from Laxmangarh to Las Vegas. Adiga's hero Balam, though not new, is idiosyncratic, esoteric and most complex among heroes in modern English literature.

Again, Balam seems to be mentally ill; he is more like a psy-

cho who turns a deaf ear to the sufferings of his family. By killing his master, though, he comes out of the coop but paves the way for the doom and destruction of his family. Above all, things that heighten the bond among human beings are not discernible to him. Even in his intercourse with everyone from family members to fellow workers he kept his private life walled off from public view. Ultimately, Adiga in this novel digs into the cravings of both rich and deprived and brings to our notice only the rottenness of India. The picture that the novel draws is Indian society on the verge of rottenness. But obviously there are many other illuminating aspects that give birth to present-day India vying or even toppling the West in many respects.

The White Tiger is intricately knit and tightly woven; there is hardly any space in the plot to be filled with anything else. From the very outset to the end it is gripping as well as thrilling. The most important role of literature, that is, to entertain the reader is in every way maintained by Adiga through his powerful use of wit, humour and irony. Therefore, apart from the world of academia a big number of amateur readers will find reading it a rewarding experience.

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The hard terrain one woman walks through

Farida Shaikh feels she has a resounding read before her

AYAAN HIRSI ALI is a controversial political figure, a freedom fighter, and a champion of free speech. In this profoundly moving memoir she tells of her traditional Muslim childhood and her intellectual awakening. She became an atheist, and her criticism of Islam enraged the Muslims and leftists.

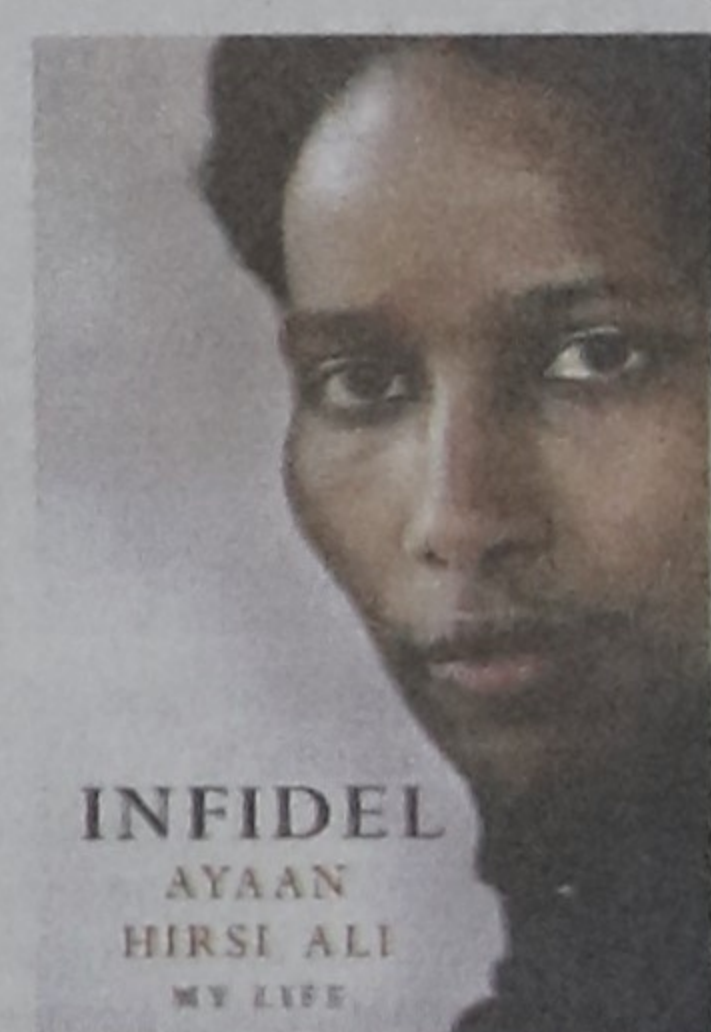
She survived civil war, female circumcision, brutal beatings, and escaped forced marriage. She sought asylum in the Netherlands, and while fighting for the rights of Muslim women and reform in the religion, she became an enemy of reactionary Islamists and was under constant threat.

Hirsi Ali comes of a family of nomadic desert herders in Somalia, where one's ancestry and clan determine social status. She and her siblings grew up following the tribal dictates. When she was five, in accordance with custom, she was mutilated by men of the tribe, her clitoris was cut off so that she would remain "pure" for her husband. Her father Hirsi Magan Isse, was a powerful man in Somalia, rebel leader against the dictator Siad

Barré. It was this involvement that led to Hirsi Ali's family fleeing Somalia and moving to Saudi Arabia and later to Kenya. Growing up out of her native country, Ayaan Hirsi Ali noticed the cruelty and violence against women and their inferior position in society.

The writer's adolescent years were spent in Kenya where, on one occasion, a Quran tutor beat her so severely for disobedience that he fractured her skull. Here in school she was influenced by English and Western authors. She was shocked to learn that her Kenyan boyfriend was an atheist.

At age twenty three, Hirsi Ali's father announced that he had given her away in marriage to a man she had never met. She protested, and decided to escape by travelling to Europe under the pretense of meeting her husband there; and while in the Netherlands she was granted asylum. The facilities available to all citizens there impressed her. She studied political science and later worked as a translator to support herself. She was granted citizenship and eventually worked her way up to a position at the American think tank, the American Enterprise



Infidel: My Life
Ayaan Hirsi Ali
The Free Press

Institute. Ali's doubts about the rigid, restrictive dogmas of faith steadily loosened, and the defining moment came after 9/11, when she analyzed the interpretations of Osama bin Laden on his faith. She reached the conclusion that she

could no longer in good conscience remain a member of a religious community whose views she could not share.

When she began giving speeches and interviews questioning various aspects of the faith she had turned her back on, she achieved quick notoriety. She joined the Netherlands' opposition Liberal Party as a candidate for office, and was elected to Parliament in 2003. While in office, she successfully implemented reforms such as requiring the Dutch police to count honour killings as a separate category of murder. It was also at this time that she collaborated with Theo van Gogh as scriptwriter of his film *Submission* that outraged Muslim viewers. Theo was murdered and she went into hiding under the protection of Dutch security services.

Ali also became the centre of a scandal as the rumour spread that she had made a false application for asylum. Escaping an arranged marriage was not considered to be a proper justification for refugee status at the time, although Hirsi Ali had been freely admitting to this on

the national media for years. Ultimately, she stepped down from Parliament, but when the Dutch immigration minister, Rita Verdonk, tried to strip her of her citizenship, such confusion arose that Verdonk was forced to resign and her party's coalition government collapsed. In the end, Hirsi Ali retained her Dutch citizenship. She still receives threats on a regular basis, but she has continued to be vocal in her views of religion.

Infidel is thus an autobiographical book, a translation of the Dutch book *Mijn Vrijheid* (My Freedom), released in English by a female ghost writer who for security reasons remains anonymous.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's painstakingly assembled account reads like a very sharp reaction to a code of life that she has lived and later chose to break away from. However, her experiences and realizations cover too narrow a ground and fall short of a wider comparison for readers to appreciate her dramatic response. Even so, the book is indeed a resounding read!

The schoolboy soldier

Anisur Rahman is moved by some battlefield stories

THE superbly driven narrative tales in Mazibbar Rahman Khoka's book *Ekjon Kishor Muktijoddhar Juddhakatha* have exposed the state of the mind of a young boy and his spirit, connecting many diverse happenings during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971.

The 110-page work is a collection of Khoka's reflections, observations and memories featuring his participation in processions as a schoolboy and then as a freedom fighter overwhelmed with confidence, courage, commitment, dreams and aspirations. One notes, though, that the writer presents many parallel issues in line with his days in Nature, Brahmanbaria, training camps in India, his accounts of fighting against the Pakistan occupation army and cooperation from the poor Bengalis. Such images are drawn in a subtle way.

At the beginning of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, juvenile freedom fighter Khoka's original intention was to manage permission from his family to flee to India for training in order to fight against Pakistan. Anyway, it was not tough for him as his family was too involved in the war and convinced of the urgency of Khoka's participation in the war. His father helped him in attaining his objectives.

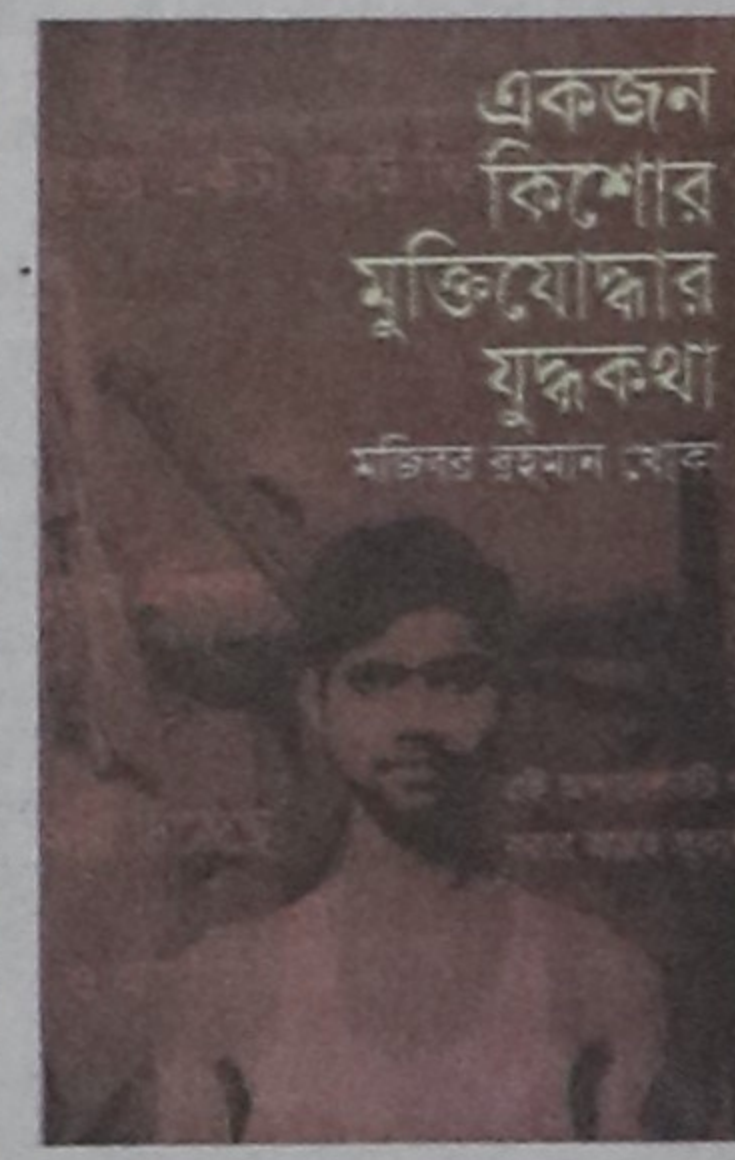
The writer also makes observations of the discrimination between the two separate parts of what used to be a single Pakistan, the arrogance of West Pakistani ruling elements, class divides, hypocrisy of razzakars or collaborators, heinous faces of Pakistani soldiers, poor Bengalis' sacrifices, their patriotism and much more. And thus, Khoka, an eminent publisher by profession, is now winning attention as a writer too.

Khoka grew up in different mufassil towns as his father was a government official who had postings at different places. Their ancestral home is in Brahmanbaria, but when the Liberation War started, their family was in Nature. As now the issue of trial of war criminals has seen a boom in media and politics, opening up a much wider space for the republic, such a book will certainly strengthen the initiative as well. Such a book presented by a young freedom fighter will inspire this generation and those to come in future as well.

Readers will make note of the bourgeois political nature in some political leaders even in 1971 along side the poor people's progressive, sacrificial as well as secular spirit. The writer has keenly accounted all of these in his memoirs. Khoka's mindset as a young freedom fighter was so strong because he could dare to argue with his commanders

regarding a commencement of operations against the Pakistani forces and their collaborators the razzakars. The book will hopefully make young readers curious about the country's liberation war and when they read these tales and reflections, one hopes that they will be in such a state of mind as to start to think of the stories as their own. As a result, it is expected, they too will raise their collective voice in ensuring the trial of war criminals-- the notorious killers of women, children and men in 1971.

Khoka will be causing most excitement to the young, having grown up in a liberal progressive atmosphere. The work is a reflection of his days in training camps as well as on the fields of war. Readers will also come across many more personal tales that are naturally



Ekjon Kishor Muktijoddhar
Juddhakatha
Mazibbar Rahman Khoka
Bidyapokash

connected with Khoka's days on the battlefield.

My teacher Serajul Islam Chowdhury has written in the introduction of the book that Khoka has done rewarding good work by participating in the Liberation War of Bangladesh and, additionally, has done the finest work by narrating the tales connected with his participation in the war. The writer deserves thanks twice.

Moreover, through this book, publisher cum writer Mazibbar Rahman Khoka has come up with art, with a real sense of urgency and personal commitment. Yes, commitment to war, to country, to people and of course to readers.

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