

## Study of a perplexing regional organization

Shahid Alam observes some hard realities

SAARC, a manifestation of regionalism, emerged in an institutional form on 8 December 1985 as another effort at attaining regional cooperation, this time in South Asia. In Shah Muhammad Ikhtiar Jahan Kabir's view, "SAARC has been contributing to the regionalism in South Asia as an institution, as a process and a spirit." However, further down the book, the author declares: "The SAARC Charter remains a non-starter from the very beginning to guide the regional process." The contradiction in the two observations should not escape the reader, and there are several in *Regionalism in South Asia: A Critique of the Functionalist Approach*. They mar the quality of a serious undertaking, which purports "to address the question of whether the ongoing process of cooperation in South Asia is on the right track; and if it is not, then to explore alternatives or remedies."

And how does Kabir fare in his venture? To get an answer to that question, let us take a look at different aspects of his work. At the outset, he maintains that South Asian regionalism is following the functionalist line of cooperation. Functionalism is a theory that stresses the interdependence of the patterns and institutions of a society, and their interaction in maintaining cultural and social unity. In two consecutive chapters, Kabir discusses at some length theories and concepts of functionalism (following a prominent intellectual fad, a pristine "ism" must surely be followed by prefixes of "neo" and "post"), although one cannot help but feel that, at times, he tries too hard to stretch the theories to fit his observations. Appropriately, he introduces David Mitrany, who developed the concept of functionalism, believing "that activities in different functional areas could bring various nations together which would ultimately contribute to

world peace." EU is probably the best-known, as well as the exemplar, functional organization, but the United Nations system also consists of a plethora of efficacious functional organizations, UNDP, UNHCR, UNICEF, to name a few.

The author begins by taking a pragmatic and cautious look at the prospect of functional cooperation process in South Asia: "Although cooperation is very necessary in the region, the process of cooperation still faces various constraints. Sometimes the process loses dynamism and becomes stagnant because of idiosyncratic behaviour of the national elite, and the stereotyped policies of the states. Even prudent national leaders may fall prey to the pragmatism of popular pressure at the national level as they seldom brave losing the national election. The fear of losing the governmental power may obstruct resolution to regional problem."

Since his study is partially based on primary research data (which, it needs to be said, in line with the author's own admission, has some shortcomings), he provides some telling statistics on peoples' attitude towards South Asian regional cooperation: 87 percent of his respondents identified first and foremost with their respective countries, while only 4 percent felt themselves to be South Asian, and 56 percent thought that India's overbearing posture is the biggest impediment to such cooperation. Kabir also makes this shrewd observation: "Not only with Pakistan, India's relations with...Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal are not entirely sound. Their security perceptions also differ from that of India. India feels the necessity of regional cooperation as a step against external powers while her neighbours feel its necessity mainly as a security measure against a common source, India."

In the face of such realistic scenario, the author at times veers off into painting an extraordinarily rosy picture of SAARC's potency, in the process placing too much emphasis on the powers of Track II and Track III diplomacy by research institutions, NGOs, university teachers, former bureaucrats, journalists, cultural activists, and, it seems, almost everyone under the sun. For instance, he exults: "...the

reason the two countries have pulled back from the brink, or not escalated from limited hostilities, has probably been the possibility of the conflict going nuclear, and not because of any SAARC bonhomie and goodwill.

After all, as Kabir observes, "In South Asia, the primacy of politics is all the more a dominant characteristic (sic) of social reality. The socio-economic agents are highly underdeveloped, very poorly organized and inept in consideration of skill and articulation. The economic forces are subservient to the political ones." How true! Unless the longstanding disputes between India and Pakistan are amicably resolved, especially that of Kashmir, the efficacy of SAARC as an organization designed to promote regional cooperation will remain limited to low-level interactions and positive outcomes. High politics, crucially, the matter of security, dominates the psyche of the policymakers in the two countries, and that will usually override any thought of regional cooperation. Furthermore, especially applicable to India, they are more inclined towards bilateralism, rather than multilateralism, particularly in the South Asian context.

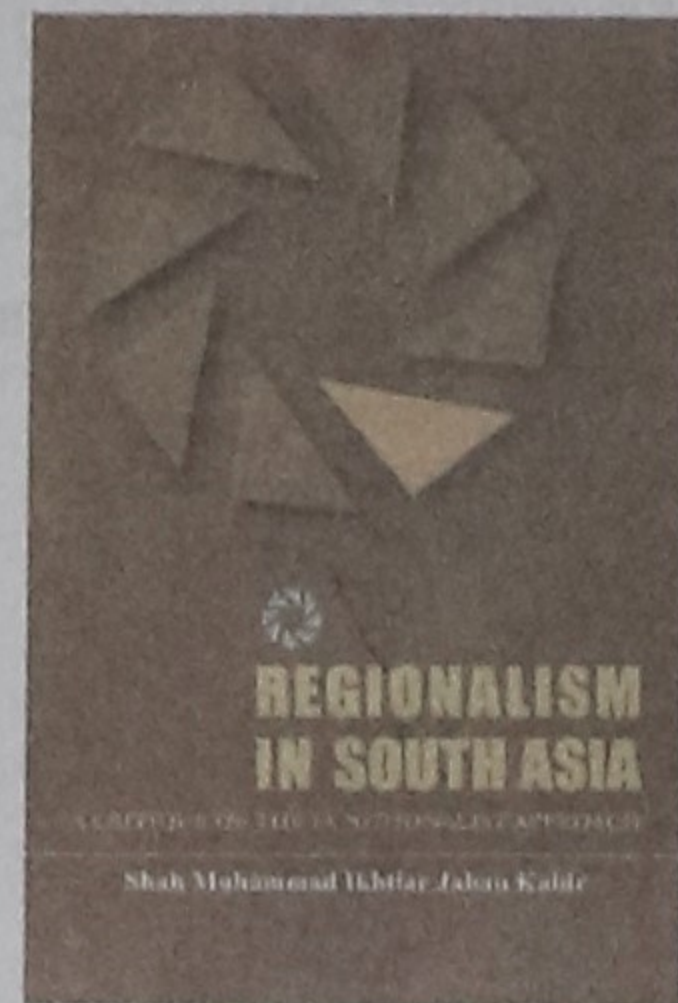
The author takes cognizance of such inclination, as well as the criticism often leveled against SAARC that "nothing happens but 'meeting, seating and eating'." But, then, he extols the potency of a slew of SAARC professional bodies (like Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Federation of University Women, Diploma Engineers Forum, Surgical Care Society, Teachers' Federation, Cardiac Society, Writers and Litterateurs, et al) by asserting that they are not mere names or figures on paper only; all of the organizations have their own Secretariats! And so do any number of professional organiza-

tions in South Asia! It seems to be the appropriate thing to do --- what comes next is for the future to decide --- the more organizations with registration and Secretariats the better! It appears that Kabir is trying his level best to portray SAARC as a vibrant organization destined to bring the nations and nationalities of the South Asian region closer.

One gets the impression that Kabir is torn between a desire to see SAARC succeed in the manner of EU or ASEAN, and a skepticism that pertinent realities of the region would preclude that from happening any time soon. He gets down to some sobering assessment regarding SAARC modalities that hold it back from being an effective organization: Article X (2) of the SAARC Charter states that bilateral contentious issues shall be excluded from the deliberations. And, therefore, in his opinion, the "non-inclusion of contentious issues has made it inert and impotent on many counts." So right! And, "Some of these modalities...are producing more problems than prospects."

Kabir falls into the trap of broad generalization in suggesting ways to strengthen regionalism. For example, in poverty alleviation, "a concerted effort combining the regional forum and the institutional web led by the governments, NGOs, experts and managers, civil society, and the grassroots people are essential..." Might as well say almost the entire population of South Asia. Nevertheless, *Regionalism in South Asia: A Critique of the Functionalist Approach* is painstakingly researched, and sheds light on an elusive phenomenon that could potentially benefit the vast population of South Asia.

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Regionalism in South Asia  
Shah M. Ikhtiar Jahan Kabir  
Academic Press and Publishers Library

spirit of SAARC has reached far beyond the establishment to accelerate cooperation from one sector to another." Or, "SAARC is an instrument serving what has been labeled the most sensitive region for strategic volatility and after the inception of SAARC there have been no major clashes or sustaining conflict." Of course, India and Pakistan have been on the fringe of all-out war on a number of occasions since SAARC's creation, and was actually engaged in a short intense conflict in Kargil. The primary

## Party and state and loveless marriages

Farida Shaikh relishes reading the memoirs of an emigre

XINRAN, with the manuscript of *The Good Women of China* in a bag is physically assaulted while on her way home from teaching an evening class at London's School of Oriental and African Studies. When the policeman arrives at the scene he asks her why she has risked her life fighting over a bag. Xinran, trembling and in a state of shock, says, 'It had my book in it.' The policeman then asks, 'Is a book more important than your life?' And Xinran thinks that in many ways life is more important than a book. 'But in so many ways my book was my life.'

Xinran, born in 1958, collected the material for her book over eight long years, and then she could bear it no more and wanted to breathe 'new air...in a free society.' She left China in 1997 and while working at SOAS she began writing her book on women. Someone told her, '...if you don't write these stories your heart will be filled up and broken by them.' The book is for every Chinese woman and her son Pan Pan.

Beginning in 1989 Xinran hosted *Words on the Night Breeze*, a radio program. She invited women to talk about themselves. These were true stories of politics, Communism, and personal tales, of patriarchal suppression suffered by Chinese women. They were terrified to talk openly about their own feelings. Xinran won the trust of the women. They talked on taboo topics and buried emotions. Xinran listened to them patiently and discovered true stories about ordinary women. She was discouraged by her senior male colleagues about running the radio program. Their

opinion was that she could never change the laws affecting women, and women would never speak their minds.

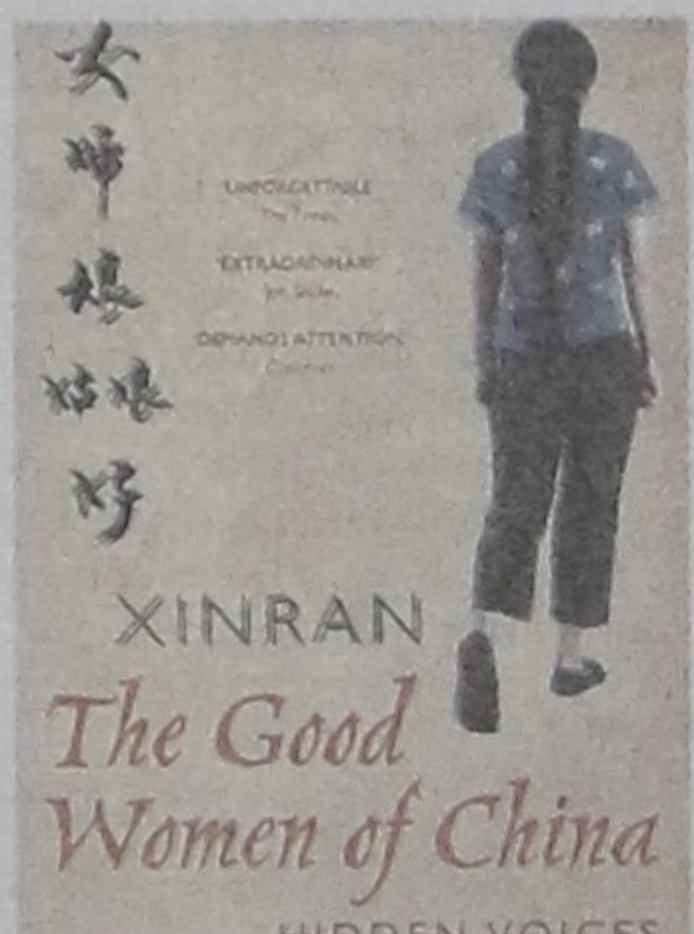
The book is a portrayal of what it means to be an average woman in modern China. Xinran's work is exceptional, an approach to history from below, focused more on what happens among the masses at the base level of society, close to subaltern studies, while Jung Chang's *Wild Swans* and Aiping Mu's *Vermillion Gate* are stories of women writers from the upper echelons of Chinese society writing about themselves and their families.

It was in 1983 that Deng Xiaoping's effort to open up China took roots. Xinran as an employee of the state radio system and other journalists had to attend political study classes covering Deng Xiaoping's views on reforms and Jiang Zemin's political economy theory. Condemnation of colleague was regular during these sessions; petty matters made large, such as not announcing leaders' names in the right hierarchical order, non-disclosure of a love affair to the Party and other similar shortfalls. Radio programs were controlled and constraints were imposed by government censors.

There were hours of tapes on her answering machines--- angry, muted or posing a question, or relating experiences, all by anonymous women who bore the marks of civil strife in a restrictive society. Among the piles of letters she received each day was one from a village boy wishing to remain anonymous for fear of being killed. He told her that an

old man of sixty had kidnapped a young girl of twelve to be his wife. Xinran tactfully drew the attention of the village headman who rescued the young girl. The power of the peasant gave her an understanding of how Mao had defeated Chiang Kai-shek, the British and the Americans.

Just as Xinran was winding up a day's program, a woman called and asked her opinion on homo-



The Good Women of China  
Xinran  
Vintage Books, London

sexuality, and why people discriminated against them and why homosexuality was illegal in China. Homosexuality originated from the imperial court of China. It was common during the rule of the Tang and Song dynasties. It helped soldiers cope with war. As the need for procreation was strong homosexuality never dominated society, though a Chinese Homosexual Association

was in place that called conferences.

To the woman caller Xinran explained that one had the right to choose one's lifestyle and the right to one's sexual needs. Heredity, environment, or curiosity was not the sole reason for homosexuality. People with different experiences in their lives make similar or different choices. Recognizing differences does not mean expecting others to agree on the subject of homosexuality--- this expectation leads to prejudices. 'To our homosexual friends who have experienced prejudice I would like to say 'sorry' on behalf of the careless people. We all need understanding in this world.'

Among the letters that Xinran received, there was one letter from sexually abused Yan Yolang that established the prevalence of the cruel practice of incest, and the 1975 diary of orphan Hong Xue raised questions on love being equated with immorality and public decency. Suicide was illegal, irrespective of any social significance.

In 1995 a survey in China found, among other four categories of workers, that journalists had a short life expectancy. They witnessed shocking and upsetting events. Reporting the true face of what they saw was very difficult as Party principles governed all news. Often they were forced to write and say things they disagreed with.

Xinran interviewed many women living through loveless political marriages, cruel deprivation of food after childbirth or dumbfounded due to physical torture. She wept, unable to help them because of broadcasting

regulations.

Xinran thought China's opening up was like 'a starving child... devouring...everything indiscriminately.' The world saw a happy, well-fed China. But the journalistic community saw a body suffering the pain of indignation with an insufficient brain 'to absorb truth and freedom.' Journalists were not allowed to speak their minds. This unbearable conflict made Xinran give up her journalistic career.

In 1996, a year before she left China, Xinran, in the guise of an anthropologist, travelled to the backward and poverty stricken north-western part, actually west of Xi'an in central China, 'a corner forgotten by the Revolution'. Xinran was stunned to see the extremely low level of primitiveness surrounding the women in the tiny village of Shouting Hill on the border of the desert and the loess plateau --- not shown on any map! They were women of her generation and time living in cave houses and water was the most precious and rare item. Women were the common items of trade and reproduction.

In conclusion Xinran says '...out of the hundreds of Chinese women...spoken to over nearly ten years of broadcasting and journalism the women of Shouting Hill were the only ones to tell me they were happy.' This, to me, in the 229-page book, with 15 episodes, prologue and epilogue, stands out as a unique metaphor.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and member of The Reading Circle.

## The burden of a name

Jackie Kabir finds a novella engrossing

SYED Shamsul Haq is unquestionably a pre-eminent intellectual personality in Bangladesh. He is a writer, playwright, poet and critic all rolled into one. He has won numerous awards for his writing at home and abroad, including the Bangla Academy Award and Ekushe Padak, two of the most prestigious accolades in Bangladesh. His writing career has earned him the honorific "ambidextrous writer", meaning someone who can work with both his hands. Haq has been one of the most prolific writers of recent times in the field of literature for more than fifty years now. A number of his plays and novels have been translated in many different languages.

*The Blue Sting* is a novella by Syed Shamsul Haq and translated by Kabir Chowdhury, a scholar of repute and translator. The slim book has a heavy message to convey. It is about a man named

Kazi Nazrul Islam, a name that gets the Pakistani army into believing that the owner of the name is the famous Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. The whole novella is about Nazrul Islam's ordeal in an interrogation cell of a jail. The writer aptly shows the feeling of an innocent man as he is taken in by the soldiers. It is about how he tries to explain that his similarity with the rebel poet Kazi Nazrul Islam and himself ends in their names and the fact they are both originally from Burdwan. But his explanation does not satisfy his tormentors. They persist in torturing him with all their hideous methods, hoping that he will somehow reveal his identity. They keep him without food and water and finally treat him with water therapy. As they do not get any results, their anger rises and they beat him to a pulp and leave him unconscious. Finally they bury him alive.

A significant aspect of the book

is that the cruelty of the Pakistani army is dealt with remarkable dexterity. The other, of course, is



The Blue Sting  
Syed Shamsul Haq  
Adorn Publications

the irony of the protagonist being the namesake of a reputed poet. Readers are liable to be shocked by the vivid descriptions of the atrocities committed by Pakistan's soldiers. The tale also shows how helpless one might feel in the kind of situation Nazrul is in. It is also noteworthy that the army has no knowledge about the famous poet and his whereabouts. This bit of information could be vital for Kazi Nazrul Islam's fate as he bears that famous name. The protagonist's predicament also provides glimpses of the situation in Dhaka during the War of Liberation. People having no connection with politics also become active during that period and attend the public rally where Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman delivers his stirring address. And they witness the birth of a new nation that has long been manipulated by foreign forces.

The narrative is in tune with the realistic. The easy language of the questioners and the detainee make the book a comfortable read. It is quite enjoyable other than the fact that the description of the punishment meted out to the protagonist can make the reader feeling rather disturbed.

The author dexterously portrays the psychology, the state of mind of the protagonist. But, as in most translated Bengali works, some English phrases sound unusual. The book has been segmented into eleven short chapters and can easily be a page-turner. It is one of Syed Haq's most well-known works and so it is commendable that Professor Kabir Chowdhury took it up for translation. The book is dedicated to Ruby Rahman and to the memory of her late husband Nurul Islam.

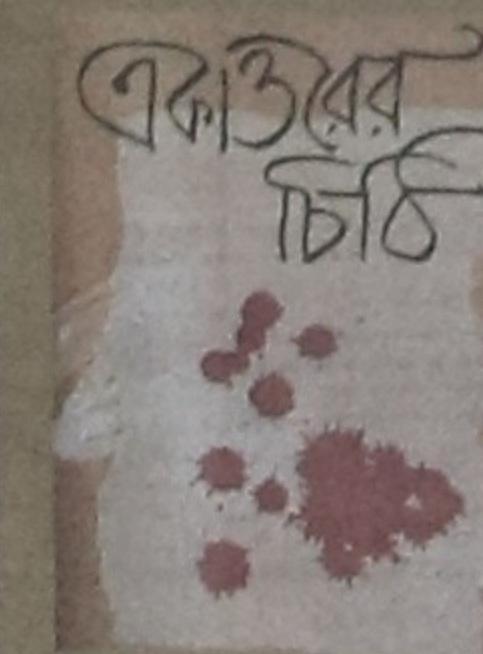
Jackie Kabir is a teacher and critic

## AT A GLANCE

Vintage Short Fiction  
From Bangladesh  
Trans. edit Sagar Chaudhury  
The University Press Limited

Vintage  
Short Fiction  
from  
Bangladesh

This collection promises to be a delight. It brings together a total of thirteen short stories by eminent writers from Bangladesh. In a social ambience where translations of Bengali works into English are hard to come by, Sagar Chaudhury's efforts should be injecting hope in the Bengali literary world about its works finally making a foothold abroad.



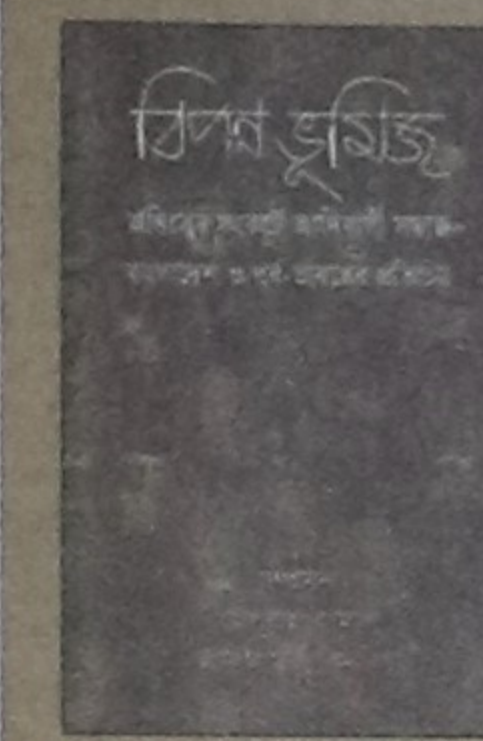
Ekattorer Chithi  
Edit Salahuddin Ahmed, others  
Prothoma Prakashon

An excellent presentation of history as we saw it shaping up before our very eyes in 1971. These letters from freedom fighters of all ages to their loved ones are direct, substantive evidence of the war as it developed apace. The sadness, the excitement, the sheer patriotism and a clear belief in victory punctuate these missives.

Histrionics  
A Treasury of Historical Anecdotes  
Geoffrey Regan  
Robson Books, London



Humour is what this work is all about. Fundamentally Europe-centred, it throws up amusing anecdotes and witty comments that have all too often underpinned human behaviour in the West. There come up all the unknown sides to the character of some of the most powerful men and women in history that you come by here.



Bipanya Bhumija  
Ostitiyer Shonkote Adivasi Shomaj  
Edit Mesbah Kamal, Arifatul Kibria  
Adorn Publication

Worries about Bangladesh's indigenous communities have risen in the last few years. And it is pure good luck on our part that men like Mesbah Kamal have been diligently working on the issues that the country's adivasis have been confronted with. This work is not merely a study of problems but also an insight into adivasi history.

## Being busy, being happy

The workplace gives Tulip Chowdhury good cheer

MOST of our adult life is spent working. Taking into account commuting time, overtime, thinking about our jobs and worrying over work, we spend increasingly more of our waking hours in the office, on the road, behind the desk than we do at home. This is a reality shared by countless workers. How many of us can put on a genuine smile and say, "I love my work and all that comes in the package?"

These days stress is the hard nut working people have to crack. Stress takes its toll on mental and physical health. *The Joy of Working* sets people to taking work with less anxiety and with more ease. The saying (in Bangladesh) becomes not "TGIT" (Thank God it's Thursday) but "TGIS" (Thank God it's Sunday). A reading of this book seems to give the reader wings to fly out to work and take the full benefit of being alive, healthy and to be working.

The key to personal profit, productivity and prosperity lies in being content with your life and enjoying your work. Now everyone, from secretaries to CEOs, from house painters to homemakers can learn to mix business with pleasure and make every job a labour of love. *The Joy of Working* is a practical, down-to-earth guide that will help you radiate confidence and competence in everything you do. Step by step and day by day this book has a 30-point program that is sure to make your job more satisfying, more exciting and more fun.

The book begins with self-esteem, pointing out that self-esteem is the first key to finding happiness on the job. Self-esteem is the cornerstone of success. It is that deep-down feeling in your soul of your own self-worth. The opening page begins thus:

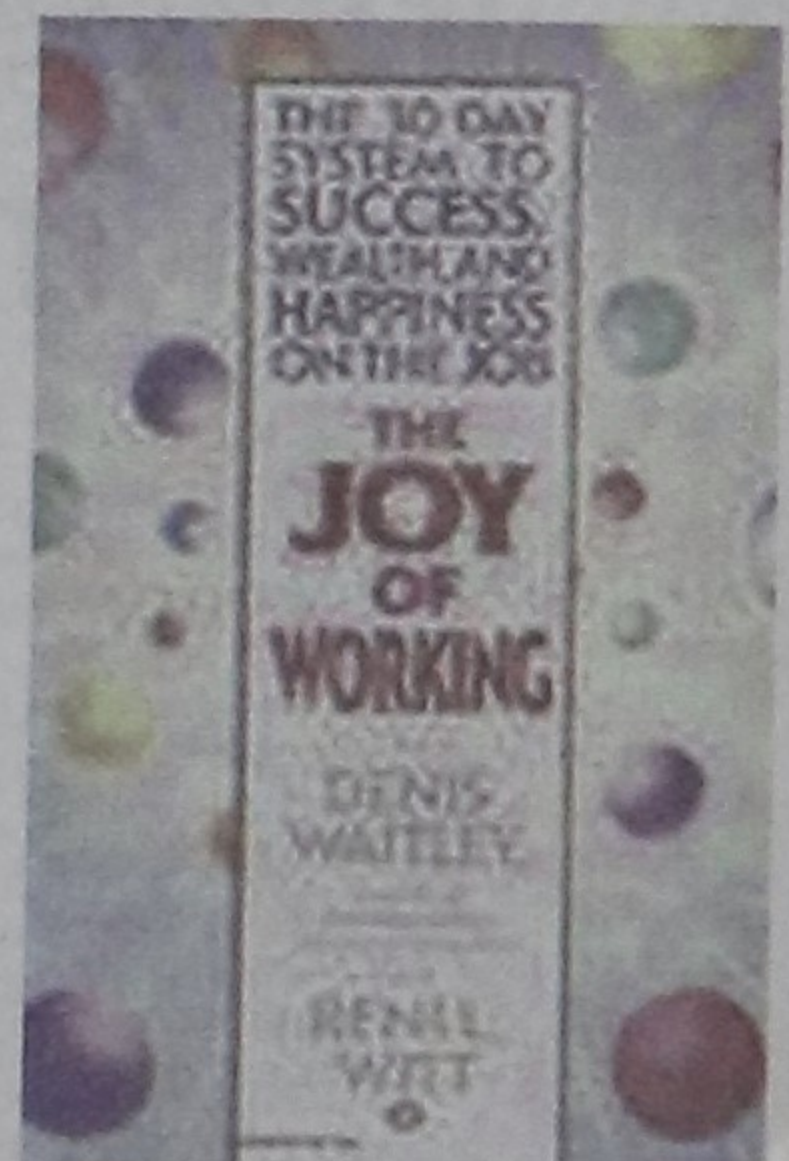
"You are the most valuable person. No one can quite fill in your shoes. No one can be you. You bring your unique being to work every day. You bring your talents, your abilities, your knowledge, your skills, your personality or just plain know-how."

The opening lines seem to open up new roads for the reader and do not fail to boost the self-confidence that often does get low as the pressure on the job mounts. The book leads on to our attitudes at our workplace. The necessary nutrient for joy is our attitude. Positive attitudes are like nourishment to the body and soul. The right attitude can carry one through the worst days at work. On the other hand, negative attitudes are absolutely poisonous to the body. The book informs us about the recent discoveries in psychopharmacology and how the subject relates to the theory of why a positive mental attitude is one of the single most important traits toward achieving health and happiness.

*The Joy of Working* advises people to hold up their dreams no matter how worrying the workplace might be. It says that dreams are the harbinger of significant accomplishments.

Each one of us has a dream, a desire, a longing that represents our soul and our ideas of happiness. That is why dreaming is essential to the joy of working. When Peggy Lee, the famous torch singer, was a carnival barker, shouting "Ten throws for a dime", she was really singing for her dreams. She may have been working in a game booth, but she was dreaming about starring on a stage.

Like a beacon to success, *The Joy of Working* leads the reader on with mind capturing pieces on goal setting, planning, perseverance, achievements, priorities and responsibilities and many other book markers that the reader will go on reading and re-reading. About risk-taking, the authors argue that happiness at the workplace cannot come without some elements of risk. To one degree or the other, most of us are afraid of making changes, even if those changes mean gaining something better. Too many of us have a negative



Denis Waitley and Reni L. Witt  
Ballantine Books, New York

attitude about taking risks. But we have to realize that it is necessary to risk something in order to bring about a change for the better. We also learn about how to take stock of our talents, highlight our strong points and turn obstacles into opportunities. And we learn to make a program of exercise, nutrition and relaxation to help us get going and keep us going.

*The Joy of Working* is like an eye opener to our life around us. It reminds us to learn the life lessons from our failures and success. It encourages us to stand by the criticisms and learn from our mistakes. It lights the way for us to find the zenith of our beings. It teaches us to be hard working and at the same time enjoy the work that we do. We learn to put the joy factor to work in our life and turn our ideals of success and happiness into reality.

Tulip Chowdhury is a teacher, poet and short story writer.