

Pigs are horses, girls are boys, war is peace

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque admires Arundhati Roy's analytical mind

AS Arundhati Roy refuses to be known as a 'writer-activist' only because she has been writing political essays since she won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut novel, *The God of Small Things*, a formidable writer emerges with an awesome repertoire of ideas, words that are her powerful arsenal and logic that is absolutely irrefutable. To her the term 'writer-activist' is despicable and brings to her mind an image of the 'sofa-bed' which primarily is a sofa, however much it may be transformed into a bed. In the same way, a writer remains fundamentally a writer whether s/he chooses to write fiction or non-fiction, she argues. She moreover reminds us that although her first book is a work of fiction, nevertheless it is no less political than any of her essays. And exactly this is the point that has been missed by some of us.

The Algebra of Infinite Justice is a collection of eight essays centering on topics drawn from events both national and international, demanding immediate attention and action on the part of any conscious individual not to speak of a government. In the first essay, 'The End of Imagination', written immediately after India detonated a thermonuclear device in 1998, she passionately and very logically explicates step by step the horrors of destruction perpetrated by the human race of whatever exists for us, around us and might have been there for us. As one reads myriads of brief sentences that describe an impending catastrophe for humanity caused by humans, a sensitive mind, while reading, experiences the full impact of it because every word, every expression comes alive through the masterly stroke of her pen, reflecting an extraordinarily enlightened and receptive mind. She reminds those who are religious that this bomb is 'Man's challenge to God.' It says, "We have the power to destroy everything that You have created." On the other hand, to those who are not religious, she warns, "This world of ours is 4,600 million years old. It could end in an afternoon." There cannot be any stronger protest against nuclear weapons than these laconic sentences.

In her second essay, 'The Greater Common Good', Roy deals with the tradition of building Big Dams in a number of countries, particularly India, exposing the ulterior motives of rich countries in this pursuit where the demerits of their actions far outweigh their merits in terms of cost benefit when assessed in a comprehensive way. She charges that the first world has found that big dams do not serve the purpose for which they were

built; and so "they are being decommissioned, blown up." Since it has been proven beyond doubt that they do more harm than good, they are being exported to countries of the third world in the name of Aid for Development. The way other wastes, like old, obsolete weapons, almost unusable aircraft carriers and banned chemical pesticides are being exported to third world countries as aid as exactly was colonialism, countries are made to suffer at the whims of their own governments in collusion with the so-called big companies that operate in the first world. The writer makes it all too public. All her deliberations in this regard centre on the construction of a big dam on the Narmada river valley that flows through three states of India. Meanwhile, she brings in examples of Big Dams financed by the World

times are deprived of their shares of the profit.

In her next essay, 'The Ladies Have Feelings, So...' the author talks about the awful impact of corporate globalisation in developing countries which runs parallel to curses like war, genocide, ethnic cleansing, famine or epidemics, albeit to a greater intensity as it cripples a nation by breaking its spine. Roy raises a number of pertinent questions regarding the actual situation of globalisation as preached and practised. She cites many examples of the ill effects of it of which one can be narrated at this point. India, although it produces more milk, more sugar, more foodgrains than ever before, nevertheless, under the terms and conditions of the World Trade Organisation, was made to lift restrictions on importing 1,400 commodities, including food the country produced as bumper harvest. Through a number of other equally practical examples, Roy unmasks the motives of the WTO, which is simply a means of exploiting some countries with which it is engaged in absolutely unequal trade.

In the article, 'The Algebra of Infinite Justice' after which the book is titled, the author explains why the name of the military operation in Afghanistan immediately after 9/11 was changed from 'Operation Infinite Justice' to 'Operation Enduring Freedom', although the latter is as meaningless as the former; nevertheless, since Muslims might feel insulted (!) at calling a human act infinite, which job ought properly to be attributed to Allah only, the name was changed as suggested by some. The author characteristically is very much sarcastic about the duplicity of American policies in the third world, policies that are so freakish in their faculty of thinking that she comments, 'Witness the Infinite Justice of the new century. Civilians starving to death, while they are waiting to be killed.' Right at this point she traces back the history of American involvement in Afghanistan and exposes the machinations behind their action in relation to their underlying motives. She bombards the actors with myriad questions. She twice gives a list of the countries with whom America has fought its premeditated wars, adding that the lists are by no means comprehensive. Also, the American government's nefarious activities in keeping armed conflict in the poorer nations of the world going in order to have its weapons manufacturing industry thrive has been bared. The most free nation in the world and the International Coalition Against Terror work in cahoots, their sights on making



The Algebra of Infinite Justice
Arundhati Roy
Penguin Books India

Bank and other financial institutions that have created more miseries that were deliberately overlooked by their mentors. The author does not spare the government of her country as she explicates its double standards in commissioning the Farakka Barrage in relation to Bangladesh's need. Her essay on Power Politics states very boldly the agonizing effects of privatising natural resources like earth, forest, water and air where private bodies take control and supervise all functions, thus entering into a contract of bribe-giving and bribe-taking where the lesser men of the third world often-

profits from the miseries of others, she contends. All these are presented elaborately and very tersely in the scholarly essay, 'War is Peace.' She makes it sound most hilarious as she states that when President George Bush announced the air strikes in Afghanistan, he declared, "We're a peaceful nation". It was echoed by Tony Blair, whom Roy describes as 'America's favourite Ambassador' who '... also holds the portfolio of Prime Minister of the UK' ("We are a peaceful people"). The author comments, "So now we know. Pigs are horses. Girls are boys. War is peace." Her quick wit is amazing as is expressed in many an instance.

The author is so disgusted with American policies on the arms industry, the oil industry, its major media networks and foreign policy that she calls its administration "a pathologically meddlesome, promiscuous government." In her next essay, *Democracy*, she manifests her doubt as to its nature and identity which is borne by the sub-title, 'Who's She When She's at Home? Centering around burning of a large number of passengers on the Sabarmati Express that was followed immediately by ruthlessness in eliminating the Muslims in Gujarat and by an extension in India, the author bashes the hydra-headed communalism and in particular communal mentality of the rulers and draws a parallel between contemporary India and pre-war Germany.

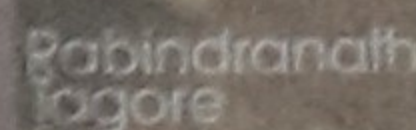
Every essay of her centres around a topic that is the need of the hour, that threatens humanity, that must be addressed now or never. Every essay is substantiated by details as fine as possible following a logical discourse of argumentation. One of the most powerful and responsive writers of our times, Arundhati Roy is an icon of the highest level of erudition, originality in imagination and thinking, a fearless mind and with a heart that is as sensitive as a poet's. Some architectural designs are noticeable on the cover page in the title of the book that very well may imply the chaotic situation created increasingly throughout the world where nothing is at peace. It is not human justice that can be infinite, for infinity is an act of the Creator and is beyond human knowledge of counting. Perhaps that is why the term *algebra* might have been used. In spite of very difficult times closing in on the human race, Roy nevertheless does not resign herself to defeat. She simply will not let us "forfeit our right to dream."

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is a political and social critic and Principal, Radiant International School, Dhaka.

AT A GLANCE

Gora
Rabindranath Tagore
Trans. Radha Chakravarty
Penguin India

Radha Chakravarty has done fascinating work here. A Tagore translator of repute, she brings into her latest exercise a verve and a literary quality that truly show her at the peak of her powers. The sheer charm of the narration and the use of English words and phrases will leave you feeling content.



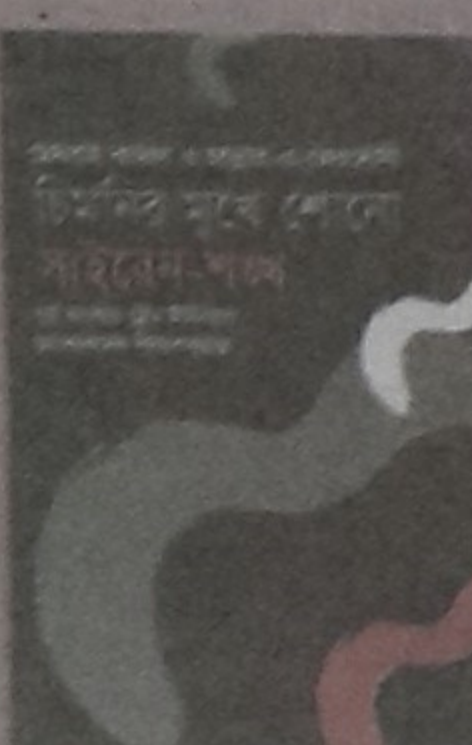
Literature and the Gods

Roberto Calasso
Vintage

How often have we read of gods influencing the course of poetry, of the heart being what the divinities make of it? Well, here is a work that explores the place of the heavenly in the realm of literature. Of course, it is all about the western tradition. But you certainly could also think of the heritage that has been part of history in these South Asian parts.

Chimneer Mukhe Shono Siren
Shonkho
Mesbah Kamal, Zannat-e-Ferdousi
Mowla Brothers

Students of Bangladesh's history have before them yet one more work of substance. This happens to be a recapitulation, in the words of those who were there, of the events and incidents, not to say historical consequences, associated with Bangladesh's labour movements in the pre-1971 days. It is an unputdownable book of that you can be sure.



Tita Mianr Jongonama
Audity Faiguni
Banglayon

Audity Faiguni represents a generation in possession of its sense of history and aesthetics. And it is in line with that understanding that she brings into this work thoughts that touch not only her peers but also those who have been here before her. The language is lucid, the feelings are without pretence and the sensitivities are deep.

Tale of a big time thief

Farida Shaikh takes a peek into nuclear pilferage

BOOK @ zine, shop 1-2 Basement, Jordine House, 1 Connaught Road Central, Hong Kong was one of the sites for the biggest book sale of the year. Among heaps of the latest works on fiction and non-fiction the piquant title of this book struck me. Was the book about the danger we face all the time? Of detonation of the nuclear bomb or man-made formless terrorism?

The word *nuclear* in the title at once got attached to the bomb, to defense, to military warfare, and to reactor. Then there was this other big word, *jihadist*. It comes from *Jihad*, which literally means 'an effort or striving.' It is a religious war against unbelievers, a religious duty, according to the Quran, to advance Islam by repelling evil.

The *Nuclear Jihadist* is then the story of a man who is advancing nuclear know how and nuclear technology. It is a politicized title and presupposes the particular religious creed and gender of the person.

The book takes the western audience's point of view and is written in a narrative style that gives the reader familiarity with the background events that unfolded during the three decade long period of this mysterious nuclear story.

It is about the rise and role of the Pakistani scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan as one of the architects of the second nuclear age. He is said to have been ambitious and though labeled a 'mediocre' professional, he helped Pakistan build the bomb and enabled regional countries acquire, for the first time, nuclear information and technology.

The man was respected throughout the Middle East as the 'Father of the Islamic Bomb.' Much more significant was his exploding the myth that the poor countries were too poor to join the nuclear power. Khan was held up as a great patriot. His one and only aim was to protect his country from arch rival India.

He is said to have stolen secrets from European nuclear designs and change his scientific operations to selling secrets to repressive regions, and 'transforming himself into a nuclear jihadist devoted to pay back real and imagined grievances suffered by Muslims across the world.' Later he became arrogant, corrupt and powerful, operating with impunity, and amassed a fortune out of his black market deals.

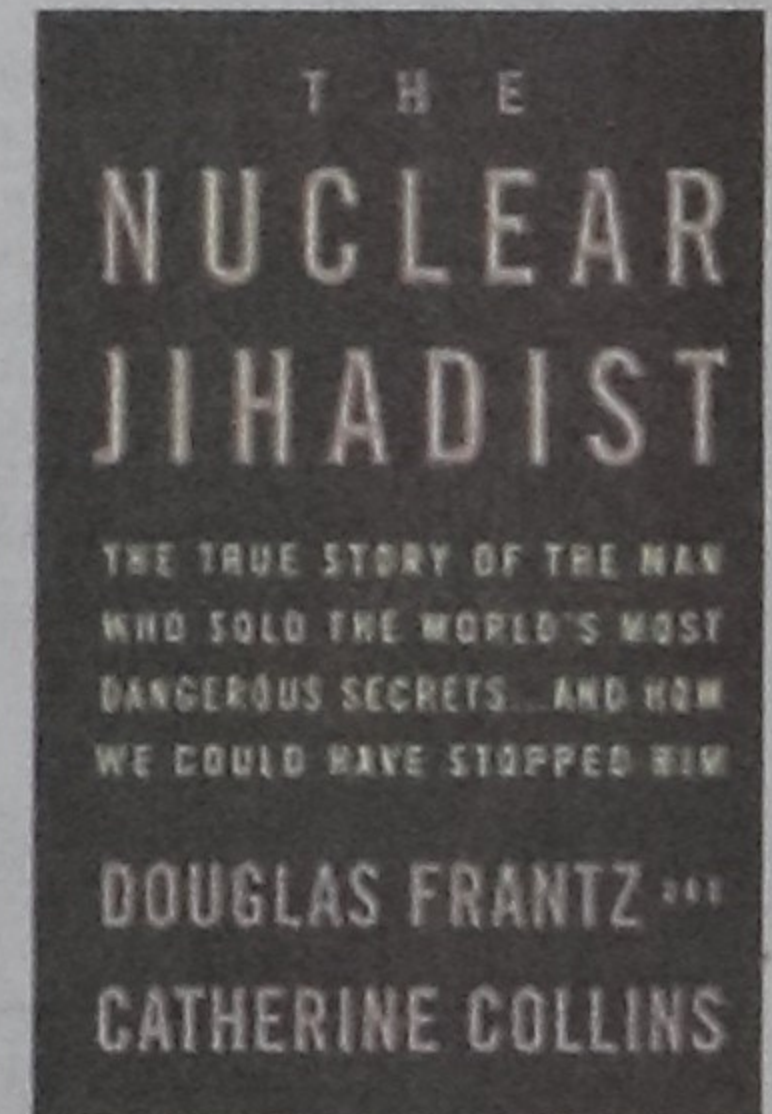
Khan, aged 38 years, was working at FDO in Amsterdam on ultra centrifuges. He told visiting Pakistani scientists about his plan to build a nuclear weapon to save his country from India. Their response was discouraging. So in August 1974 he personally wrote to Z.A. Bhutto with details on uranium enrichment and his expertise in metallurgy. Khan waited impatiently for a response, and in September wrote a second letter, and in December went to Islamabad.

Earlier, in 1972, Bhutto had toured the Middle East, scouting for funds to build Pakistan's nuclear program. Struck by the international oil crisis a

year later, Bhutto called Muslim nations to an Islamic summit in Lahore in 1974. There he announced his plan for an alliance of poor Muslim countries with wealthy brothers to fight the Zionists and their western backers. Khan was deeply inspired by outcome of the summit. He had in 1971 wept over the Pakistani surrender, the permanent division of Pakistan and the emergence of the new nation of Bangladesh.

One clear objective of BCCI's international finance super fraud was the provision to Pakistan, privately and through public finance, of the means to create the necessary nuclear industry as the foundation for the country's weapons program.

Frantz is very critical of the CIA's approach to nuclear non-proliferation. He observes that at each juncture over more than twenty years, the CIA had both the clear evidence, and the means for stopping the Pakistani project, but in each instance decided against that track and in favor of more passive watching and waiting in hopes of finding yet



The Nuclear Jihadist
Douglas Frantz, Catherine Collins
Hachette Book Group USA

more tentacles of Khan's nuclear marketplace.

During the Reagan years the policy was to downplay any aspect of non-proliferation policy in favor of short-term political interests, such as maintaining Pakistani support for the 1980 war in Afghanistan. Any official could be linked to responsibility for the Khan network's success in building the Pakistani Bomb, and spreading the industrial knowledge of widespread proliferation.

The *Nuclear Jihadist* is definitely an exciting read. However, as the reading progresses the gaps in thinking begin to show in the form of dramatic stunts, farce, irony and questions.

Farida Shaikh is a literary critic and regular book reviewer.

Yet another political history and an afterthought

Shahid Alam admires a new work, warts and all

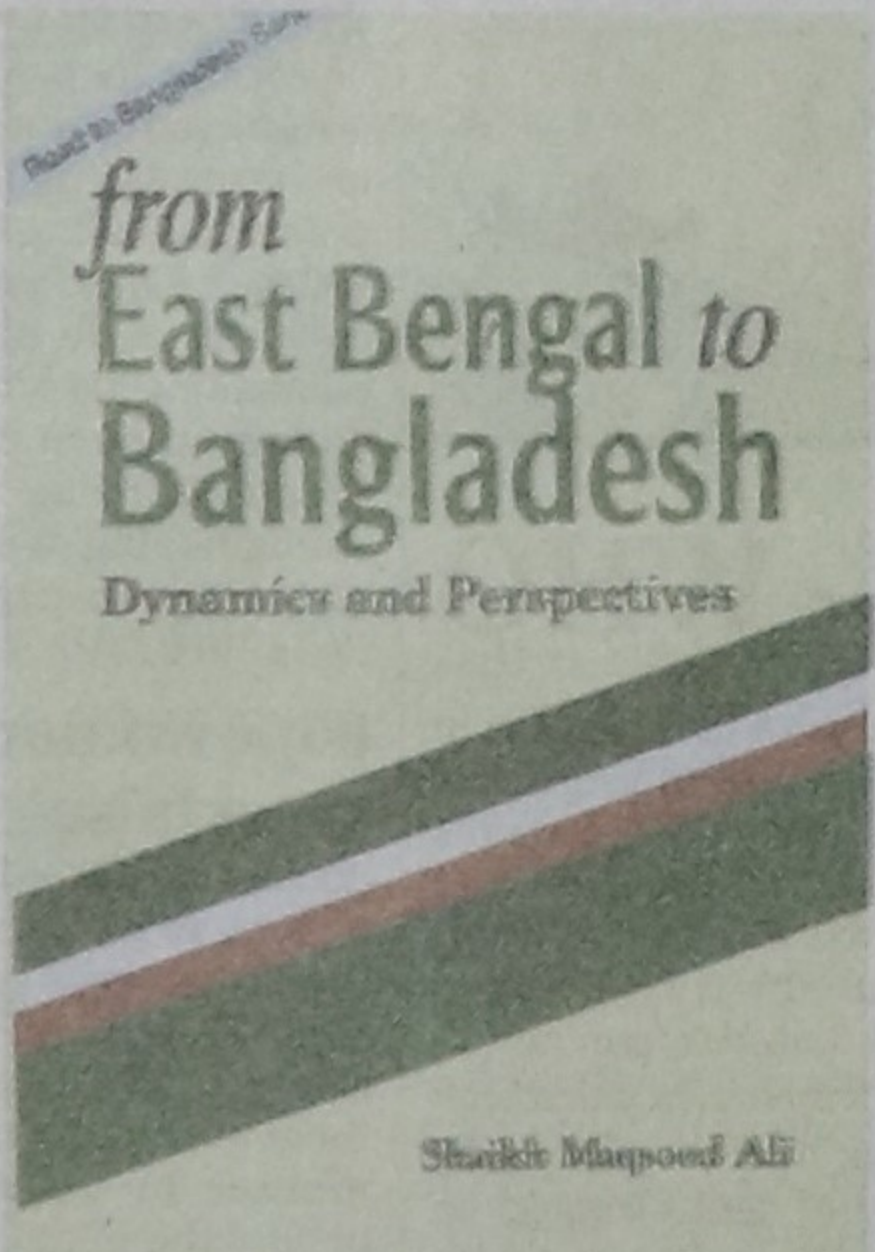
POLITICAL history is fascinating because it offers an insight into the genesis of political institutionalization, or the failure to do so, in any particular country. Political history, not infrequently, is a bone of contention because that insight might, and often does, take the form of diverse interpretations, which might only partially agree, or be at significant variance, with one another. The fact remains that Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign independent nation-state from the province of East Bengal, which was subsequently renamed East Pakistan. The fact also remains that the interpretation in the context of this emergence is often as diverse as the authors offering the explanation, and is inevitably influenced by new information coming to light. Therefore, any new work on political history will, in all probability, not be the final word on the subject, especially since new evidence regarding the emergence will continue to materialize for the foreseeable future.

Shaikh Maqsood Ali's *From East Bengal to Bangladesh: Dynamics and Perspectives* is one such work. It constitutes a part of the publisher's "Road to Bangladesh Series". The author, even though having a few axes to grind, and his own perspectives to air out, does not appear to have any particular agenda to champion, unless one considers sympathy for social justice as one. Ali lays out his objective at the outset: "This Book tries to throw some light on the overall predicaments of Former Pakistan and shows that the deeper reason for the dismemberment of Former Pakistan had been substantially 'structural'." If those capitalizations appear odd, there is a variety of them spread throughout the book, like Institutional Developments, News Paper, and others.

The author has advanced several propositions to support his structural hypothesis for Pakistan's dismemberment. Much of what he says is encapsulated in these sentences: "...over the long years of history, West Pakistan had developed itself as a feudal-tribal/caste-military dominated socio-political culture with a clear preference for authoritarian and centralized rule while East Bengal had emerged as a significantly successful fighter challenging its own feudal system with distinct preference for reform in the direction of representative governance and pro-people social change. Therefore, when in 1947, the two regions came under one polity at the end of the colonial rule, it

was, not surprising for the people of East Bengal to find the West Pakistani power elites more interested in consolidating their power rather than handing it over to the people's representatives. Therefore, Former Pakistan, right from its beginning, seemed to be "one country" with "two societies" at "two different stages" on the historical development scale."

Ali painstakingly chronicles the separate paths that West Pakistan and East Bengal (he consistently retains this nomenclature for the region except for using "Bangladesh" where relevant) had



From East Bengal to Bangladesh
Dynamics and Perspectives
Shaikh Maqsood Ali
The National Press Limited

historically gone through before merging into Pakistan. He draws on the pre-British and the British periods to highlight various issues that emphasized differences in societal development, ethnic makeup, culture, and economic activity, among others, between the two. "West Pakistan's structured society," the author contends, "its tradition of the Punjab administrative systems and its military organization made its people familiar with strong preference for a 'strong executive' and 'paternalistic authoritative rule.'" At the end of which, he poses the obvious question: "Thus East Bengal and West Pakistan differed significantly in terms of social structure and political culture and so the question of the hour was: could the

two different cultures form a viable State?" The answer, of course, was resoundingly given in 1971. Demonstrating his social outlook as much as a thoughtful what-should-have-been-done in nation-building of two almost mutually exclusive nations, Ali ponders: "...a Bengali ascendancy to power in Former Pakistan appeared to be 'historical necessity' for initiating drastic pro-people social change in West Pakistan."

Possibly because of his civil service background and higher education in Economics, the author gives much emphasis on the bureaucratic and economic factors that served to alienate the Bengalis against the West Pakistani ruling class. He refers to differences between what he calls the British colonial Punjab and Bengal systems to stress this point. The Punjab Administration system in Northwest India emphasized greater centralization, weaker local government and more discretionary power in the local administrators' hands, while the Bengal Administrative System stressed greater decentralization, local governance, and law and order. The Bengal system, to the British, appeared to be over-legalistic and slow, while the Punjab system seemed to be paternalistic, but swift in handling problems.

For colonial purposes, the British preferred the Punjab system, and, consequently, in conjunction with a few other factors, the higher civil services and the armed forces saw domination by people from Northwest India. This preponderance of the Punjab system and personnel in the key services became even more stark when Pakistan came into being, a factor that was crucial in depriving the Bengalis of their legitimate political and economic rights, with catastrophic consequences for the country. The first concerted political reaction of the Bengalis to their sense of subjugation came in February 1950, when a Grand National Convention, presided over sequentially by Aatur Rahman Khan and Kamruddin Ahmed, was held in Dhaka. Its significance is articulated by the author: "This was the foundation of what the East Bengal leaders described later as the struggle of Bengali emancipation from West Pakistani domination."

All, like others before, and undoubtedly since, him, discusses the major political events that culminated in the birth of Bangladesh. Two observations in this context deserve mention for their insight and import: "The significance of the 1954

election in East Bengal was great: it was not only a protest against the Punjab dominated Central Government; it also marked a new phase of social revolution within East Bengal." And, "...the higher civil servants of Former Pakistan were responsible to a great extent for the failure of the Parliamentary system in the country." The overwhelming majority of these higher civil servants were from West Pakistan. The author provides an extensive account of this phenomenon, including the manifold machinations that led to the grabbing of central governmental power by some of them.

Ali devotes several pages to the political, economic, and social development scenario of sovereign independent Bangladesh. Among other observations may be found a couple of sobering ones that serve to highlight the dysfunctions that this country is afflicted with: "By and large these rising middleclass elites in Bangladesh shared semi-feudal values --- although they spoke rhetorically about social and economic justice for the poor particularly during the pre-independence days." And, after the fall of the HM Ershad regime: "...although democracy had (been) restored in the country, the reluctance of the upper middle class political power elite to share political and economic power with the poor did not change much."

From East Bengal to Bangladesh contains more than its fair share of poor punctuation (especially the use of the comma), and a few spelling and grammatical errors have crept in. And there are some factual mistakes, and confusing or contradictory information. Sikhs are Punjabis just like the Punjabi Muslims and Hindus. The statement, "the President himself became the Chairman of the Planning Commission" is followed a few pages later by "the Chairman of the Planning Commission being given the status of a minister..." And Iskander Mirza cannot be Pakistan's third Governor General only to become its fourth Governor General a few pages down, while Ghulam Muhammad becomes the third! Notwithstanding these shortcomings and quirks, *From East Bengal to Bangladesh: Dynamics and Perspectives* is an illuminating addition to the growing literature on the political history of Bangladesh.

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