

Those days of dark, intense fear

Mohit Ul Alam recalls 1971 through a poet's recollections

POET Nirmalendu Goon published a personal memoir-cum-history book on the liberation war entitled *Atmakatha 1971* (a GEMCON literary award winner this year) from Banglaprakash in 2008. The narrative does not, however, cover the whole liberation war but only the events of ten days starting from the fateful night of March 25 (Operation Search Light) and ending on April 5, when Goon goes back to his village in Barhatta, Mymensingh, in the evening.

Though a frontline poet of Bangladesh, Goon has developed a unique prose style over the years, which is unabashedly personal, full of a Falstaffian kind of humour without malice to anybody, and often made at his own cost. One example: he wrote his name on the identity card as 'Goon' instead of 'Goon', and, seeing this, at a check-point the Punjabi soldiers asked for his gun. And the book likewise is written in humorous language, though always revealing profound truths.

This cognizance of his prose style is necessary to take, in view of the material he has undertaken in this book to address. The material is our liberation war, which is a high-voltage issue to write about. But Goon in his forthright manner eased up the matter by privileging his personal outlook over the evidential method, which is the baseline for historical documentation. He dares, because he is a poet, and he boldly says in the preface that he shouldn't be called a historian, but rather an 'itibrittikar', which, I believe, in English may mean a writer of history, and not a historian. He acknowledges the fact that he finds his own life history and that of Bangladesh inseparable from each other. And that it was not possible on his part to write a dry history of Bangladesh following the academic rules and methods of historiography. Even then Goon mentions two books on which he depended in writing this history: *Jatin Sarkar's Pakistaner Jonmo-Mrittu Darshan* and *Rabindranath Trivedi's Ektorer Dash Mash* respectively.

The book basically argues three points. The first is of course the already decided one by a recent High Court verdict about the

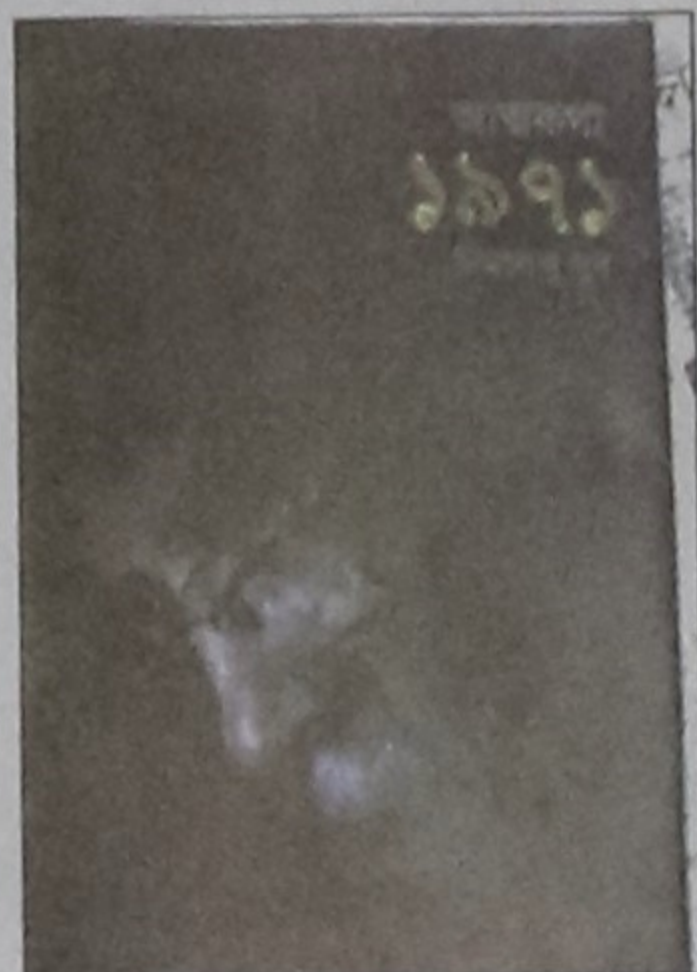
declaration of independence. The second is concerned with the massacre at Jinjira on April 2, which Goon had witnessed and thinks that the day should be declared a national mourning day or Jinjira Day, and the third point is that the martyr Subeder Major Shawkat Ali Chowdhury of EPR Engineering Corps should be given the honorific of Bir Shrestha. The personal experiences of the poet during this period are woven around these three arguments.

Goon broaches the matter of the declaration of independence in this way: he went to Kolkata in January 2007 to attend an international poetry conference. There he happened to meet with Belal Mohammad, one of the organizers of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. Belal admitted to him that the circular sent by Bangabandhu declaring the independence of Bangladesh was read out by him many times on 26 March. Abdullah al Farukh, now working with German TV, also read it several times. Afterwards a troop of soldiers led by one Major Ziaur Rahman installed themselves at Kalurghat. They approached Zia to read the circular on the radio to increase the impact of the declaration. But Zia, instead of reading Bangabandhu's circular as it was written, drafted a version of it and read it on the radio. Zia's draft as also Bangabandhu's speech and the six-point demand are all reprinted in this book, and also is published Ziaur Rahman's article, "Ekti Jati Janma" (the birth of a nation) which all have increased the documentary value of the book.

Goon comments that the fact that Zia has mentioned Sheikh Mujib three times in his speech gives a clue to Zia's understanding of the situation at the time. He knew that, says Goon, if Sheikh Mujib was not mentioned in his declaration wouldn't be recognized, as nobody knew him. Goon considers Bangabandhu's 7 March speech as poetry, and mentions *Newsweek's* 5 April 1971 cover story in this context, where Bangabandhu was dubbed as "The Poet of Politics" (Rajnitir Kobi).

Goon also records how he first came to hear Zia's speech. On the evening of 27 March, as he was crossing the Buriganga to go to

Jinjira, he first heard the speech from the radio of a co-passenger. As he was trying the knob of his radio, suddenly he hit a radio station called the 'Swadhin Bangla Biplabi Betar Kendra'. From that centre one Bengali- oldier, Major Zia by name, declared the independence of Bangladesh on behalf of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The name of Major Zia at once clutched to their hearts. They welcomed his announcement with prolonged shouting of the slogan 'Joy Bangla'. Goon concludes the declaration could've actually been read by any army officer, like Major Rafique, Major



Atma Katha
Nirmalendu Goon
Banglaprakash

Oli or Major Shawkat that is, any other army officer could've been Zia's substitute, but Bangabandhu couldn't have been substituted.

Then on the next page, Bangabandhu's declaration sent by EPR transmission system is printed (source mentioned), and then Goon comments that if the two versions are compared it becomes clear that Zia's draft was heavily influenced by the one from Bangabandhu, and, therefore, Zia's declaration can never be considered as equivalent to Bangabandhu's. Zia didn't have the right either. But Zia will also have his place, Goon says, in history.

The March 25 crackdown took place, and Simon Dring, Goon says, watched it from Hotel Intercontinental. On 27 March, Goon along with his friend Najrul

Islam Shah went to Sergeant Zahurul Haq Hall in order to find out his friend Helal Hafiz. His messmate Nazrul Islam Shah, now dead, needs a mention here. The book is dedicated to him, because it was he who literally saved Goon from death on 25 March. Goon at the time was serving as a sub-editor at *The People*, the offices of which were located at Paribagh, and as he was going to office, he suddenly encountered his friend Shah at Gausia Market around 9 o'clock in the evening. Shah forced Goon to return to their New Paltan mess. And the building of the newspaper office was dynamited by the Pakistan army in the first hours of the crackdown.

On 27 March they went to Sergeant Zahurul Haq Hall to look for Helal Hafiz and saw many people dead there. Among the bodies was that of Chisti Shah Helalur Rahman, Cultural Secretary, East Pakistan Students League. Suddenly Hafiz materialized from out of nowhere, and then all three went to Jagannath Hall to see Professor G. C. Dev in his quarters.

They entered the house, Shib Bari, entered his bedroom, saw the blood-soaked bed, and the floor curdled with thick blood, bluish in colour, and the telephone receiver hanging in the air, the cable stained with blood. Probably he wanted to make one last call to somebody in good faith. In commemoration Goon wrote a poem, "Jagannath Hall: 27 March 1971," which is also published in this book. Another such death recorded in the book is that of Commander Moazzem Hossain, he of Agartala Case fame, who was killed in front of his house at Elephant Road. The Pakistan army asked him to cry out "Pakistan Zindabad," but he said "Joy Bangla" instead. This episode was narrated to Goon by Abu Sayeed Masud Babla, the renowned TV actor Joya Ahsan's father, who took part in an attack on an American Embassy's official's house at Dhanmondi on that very night.

Finding Dhaka unsafe, they three decided to cross the Buriganga like thousand others. At Jinjira they met up with Mostafa Mohsin Montu and Khasru who reportedly were the first band of freedom fighters to emerge. They

attacked Keranigunj Thana on 26 March and occupied it. And in Mostafa Mohsin Montu's maternal uncle's house at Nekrosebag, there were many people bracing themselves with guns for the upcoming freedom fight.

The Jinjira operation was conducted by the Pakistan army on 2 April, 1971. Jinjira was part of the Shuvaddya Union, where 40 thousand people, mostly Hindus, lived. According to a rough estimate, around one thousand people were killed on that day in a seven-hour operation from five o'clock in the morning to noon. Goon gives a horrifying description of this massacre, including the details of a man whose head was severed from his body by a cannon shell but who was still running by sheer momentum. Everywhere bullets and cannon shells were flying and people were getting killed in every way. Goon at first took shelter in a mosque, then in an abandoned house, where he climbed up the storehouse of firewood and, most inconceivably, asleep.

He was awakened by noise and realized that the gunfire had stopped and the inhabitants of the house had come back. Seeing him they got scared, but Shuva, an eighteen-year old beauty, recognized him as the poet of *Premangshur Rakta Chai* (1970), and introduced him to her family as such. He was asked to take the noontime meal, but he declined as he had to find out his friends.

The last point that stands out in Goon's book is the sad death of Subeder Major Shawkat Ali Chowdhury, the transmission engineer of EPR working in Pilkhana on 25 March. Goon believes that it must have been him who had transmitted across the country the message containing the declaration of independence by Bangabandhu on 25 March. This claim is also well supported by a letter published in the book by Professor Dr Selina Parvin of Rajshahi University, the martyr's daughter.

The book may claim much wider readership in future.

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AT A GLANCE

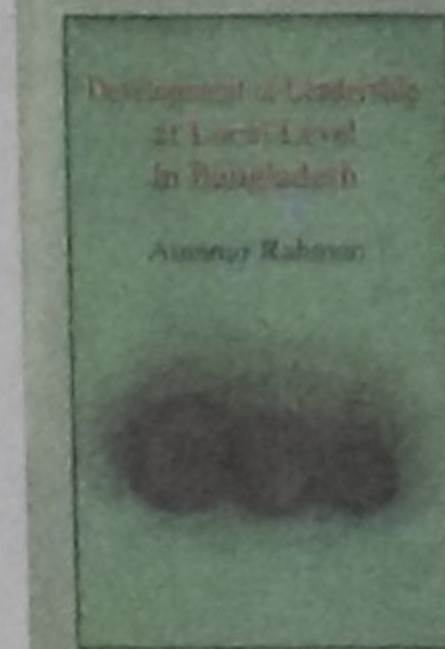
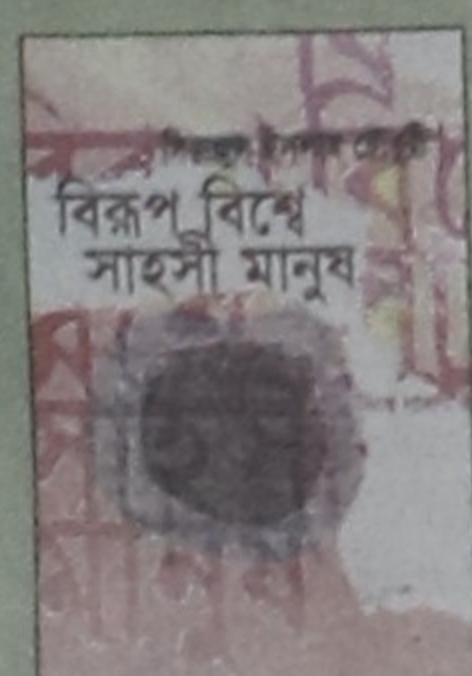


Elite Perceptions of Poverty
In Bangladesh
Naomi Hossain
The University Press Limited

Poverty continues to be a matter of discourse in Bangladesh, for very obvious reasons. In this revealing work, the writer focuses on an aspect of the poverty circle that not many have touched upon. Elist perceptions of poverty are, in that sense, quite a novelty. But do they tally with reality? Read the book before you draw your conclusions.

Biroop Bishwe Shahoshi Manush
Serajul Islam Choudhury
Jagriti Prakashani

Serajul Islam Choudhury comes forth once more with his scholarly interpretations of history. In this work, he focuses on individuals he believes have challenged social and political mores and have then emerged triumphant. As the title suggests, these individuals have defied a hostile world in their urge to create better space for those they were speaking for.

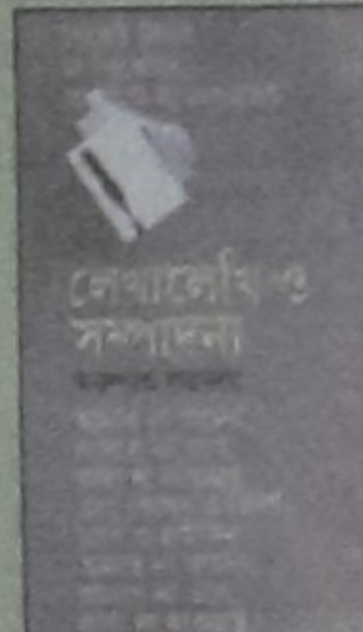


Development of Leadership at Local
Level in Bangladesh
Amanur Rahman
Eti Prakashon

At a time when local government happens to be a critical issue for the country, Amanur Rahman draws attention once more to the constraints the nation faces where grassroots participation in the governance dialogue is concerned. His reflections on the ways in which local leadership can be developed will set you thinking.

Lekhalekhi O Shompadana
Arunabh Sarkar
Bangla Academy

Language should be a priority for everyone and that includes journalists. That is the idea which the poet-journalist Arunabh Sarkar throws your way. In this extremely remarkable collection of essays on the various ways in which journalistic language has been employed in the newspapers, he tells you how it could have been made better.



Observing nature and writing poetry

Mustaqim Kazi is impressed with the literary seasonal

PUBLISHED from America, *Madonna of the Rain* is the debut collection of English poems by poet Rabiul Hasan, now living in America and working as a teacher of English at Southern University in the state of Louisiana. Poet Rabiul Hasan writes poetry in Bengali as well and has published two collections of poems in the language. He has three books of short stories in Bengali also. However, going through the poems of *Madonna of the Rain*, this reviewer has found that poet Rabiul Hasan is most brilliant when he paints scenes, mostly of nature. "Madonna of the Rain" is a poetry collection for all seasons, the publisher's blurb on the back page of the book notes. And indeed he is.

The very first poem, entitled "Summer Evenings in the Mississippi Delta", beautifully captures the evening scene in the region. The presentation of the evening scene is realistic and draws the admirable attention of the reader. Here is the whole poem for readers: *The sun had set in, the fields heavy with muffled sound / A dog hibernates by the garbage truck / Two Negro women become shadows beside the hogsties / The skies turn the color of their breasts / The magnolias dies for rainclouds / The cottonpickers gasp on the railroad tracks / The haystacks burn in the fallows / In the brushwoods an army of insects buzz / I see their eyes glowing in the dark.*

The next poem, "Autumn 1980: Mississippi", is a prose poem and takes you to an autumn evening in Mississippi: *Flivers loaded with frolicsome faces rumble down the gravelled country road. The sun wears out: burn swallows twitter in their nests. Dragonflies drift in the breeze, flies buzz in the strawberries, ants mill about the cider-press. Broken corn blades blown by the wind abound along the road to the grain elevator ...* Unlike the previous poem, "Summer Evenings in the Mississippi Delta", where one finds the atmosphere is parched and dry, in this prose poem the poet paints a picture of contentment, "where my mother and Marianne, my girl, are threshing in the Harvest Moon."

Even as he has been painting natural and realistic scenes, Rabiul Hasan has been writing poetry in English for a long time; and all the poems in *Madonna of the Rain* have been published in different reputable international journals. These journals include *Writer's Forum*, *Widener Review*, *Coe Review*, *The Macguffin*, *The Texas Observer*, *Borderlands*, *The Mochila Review*, *Wind*, *The Black Fly Review*, *Images*, *Poet Lore*, *Permafrost*, *Aura Literary Arts Review*, *RiverSedge*, *Eclipse*, *Blue Light Review*, *Visions*, and *Louisiana English Journals*.

However, the very titles of the poems in *Madonna of the Rain* tell us

that poet Rabiul Hasan is a nature observer. "On a Moonlit December Night Near Charleston, Mississippi", "December Snow", "Landscape Near Columbus", "Sandra Williams in December", "Snowfall in Columbus", "Christmas Night, 1979, With a Friend at a Nightclub in Columbus, Mississippi", "A Dream of a Fair Woman on a Late October Evening", "Moon Malady in May" all these suggest the poet's preoccupation with the seasons as well as Mississippi.

The title poem, "Madonna of the Rain", is a superb piece and describes a woman whom the poet is not being able to identify: Who is she? Marianne? Michelle? Melanie? Yes, the poet can discover who she is. She is the woman of his imagination: *"I know her like the dreams I have not dreamt / the falls I have not slipped / The wrongs I have not done / The lies I*



Madonna of the Rain
Poems by Rabiul Hasan
RWG Press, USA

have not uttered / The sins I have not committed." She is the poet's *madonna* (my lady). The publisher's blurb has not exaggerated things at all when it notes that "Rabiul Hasan's insights stretch the classic Italian *madonna* imagery to refreshing new fronts." This lady figure appears in the pages of the book, reminding the reader of the realities of existence.

As a whole, the poems of *Madonna of the Rain* are strikingly impressive and readable. Because of his remarkable mastery with words as a poet, Rabiul Hasan has earned the credit of being anthologised among a cavalcade of noted American poets and is listed in *A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers*.

One expects to come by more of such poetry from Rabiul Hasan.

Mustaqim Kazi is a journalist and critic.

Clash of security paradigms

Shahid Alam reflects on the state of a state

"...THE leading contributor to insecurity is the injustice inherent in the idea of development. As a leading development economist, Gerald Meier puts it, the idea of development was developed 'by colonial economics out of political expediency'. These words fairly sum up the contents of *Pakistan: Haunting Shadows of Human Security*, a profound study of an enigmatic country, thoughtfully and logically edited by Jennifer Bennett. The book is an output of a three-year regional collaborative project on Human Security in South Asia, conducted by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIIS). From a number of standpoints, including, crucially, the lines we began with, several of its findings are relevant to the experience of Bangladesh.

The volume is made up of seven chapters written by assorted authors: chronologically, they are, "Introduction" by Jennifer Bennett, "Governance, Democracy and Human Security: Lurking Echoes" by Jennifer Bennett and Maha Jahangir, "Education Reform in Pakistan: Challenges and Prospects" by Pervez Hoodbhoy, "Women, Violence and Rights: The Case of Pakistan" by Jennifer Bennett and Saima Jasam, "Dilemmas of Water and Human Security" by Abrar Kazi, "Pakistan's Food Security: Unnecessary Risks and Potential Prospects" by Najma Sadeque, and "Poverty: The Irony of Development" by Jennifer Bennett and Maha Jahangir. The profoundest is the opening piece, which discusses the meaning of security from two distinct perspectives, and outlines the crux of the arguments presented in the remaining chapters.

Bennett astutely spells out the distinction between the two outlooks: "Traditional security is primarily militaristic and state-centric in nature. It emphasizes the importance of territorial integrity, political independence, survivability, and hence, the capability of a state to protect its own citizens. Such security requires the unity and loyalty of the population within the state; even repression has been considered justified if there are threats, real or imag-

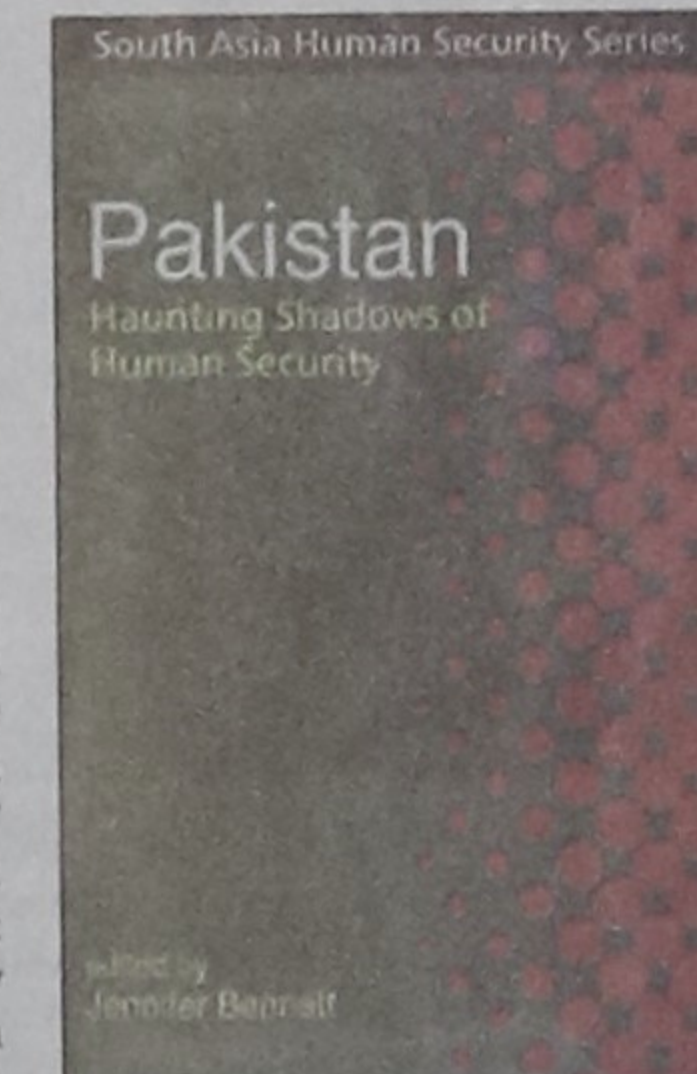
ined, to territorial integrity. Human security, on the other hand, is a concept designed to redirect security debates from an exclusively national and military focus toward the daily conditions differently-situated people face in maintaining everyday life and as such, to render them secure.... It embraces two underlying paradigms: firstly, the protection of individuals is a strategic concern for national, as well as, international security; second, security conditions for people's development are not bound to traditional matters of national defence and law and order, rather they encompass all political, economic and social issues enabling a life free from risk and fear."

The concept of human security is a relatively recent phenomenon, evolving in the 1970s, and should be an integral part of a nation's security concern, but, as Bennett acknowledges, it runs into formidable roadblocks, and, depressingly, "the dramatic changes provoked by the events of 11 September 2001, on the international scene are likely to undermine the promotion of the human security agenda putting more emphasis back on traditional security matters." Depressing? Absolutely. Reality? Empathically. Bennett provides the reason why: "In short, the current security paradigms operate or function within the realm of power politics and place the international community's insecurity at the helm of affairs." For the foreseeable future, the rest of the world's human security will only be determined to the extent that the global powers approve of it in their own national interests, while the weaker nations will continue to emphasize human security primarily because they will not be in a position to sway global power politics in ways they might want to.

Pakistan is a potent nuclear-armed, military-influenced state, even when civilian governments are in power, and its human security issues usually take a back seat to traditional security concerns. This is an enigmatic country, which almost invites the pursuit of militaristic security due to its geopolitical importance, when the two viewpoints of the concept should not be mutually exclusive in operation for the comprehen-

sive development of the country. "Given the legacy of its colonial past," Bennett observes, "Pakistan has remained fraught with nationalistic, ideological, ethnic and religious daunting since its birth."

She highlights the problems that it faces in simultaneously carrying that baggage and paying inordinate attention to military security: "Pakistan's political, economic and social structures provide an outstanding example of a country entrapped in a situation marred by global structural adjustment programmes and liberalization of economics benefiting the rich and adding to the widening disparity between the rich and the poor. The spread of such influence



Pakistan: Haunting Shadows of
Human Security
Ed. Jennifer Bennett
The University Press Limited, 2009

exhibits weak internal political situation of a country which allows unlimited interference of powerful nations, especially the United States, that intervene, determine and design its state politics. Given Pakistan's security policies, which are militaristic in nature, the major chunk of its GNP is expended on upholding its military infrastructure and on paying off debts to the IMF/WB." In the process, its agriculture, fisheries and forestry sectors have suffered, and widespread inequity has led to "social strife and rampant violence leading to crime, provincial disharmony, terrorism, trafficking, violence of all kinds, militarism and systematic repression and viola-

tion of human rights." Not a pretty picture, and, one may note, several of these dysfunctional elements also plague Bangladesh, and for much the same reasons. For Pakistan, the picture it presents is of a singular blend of rising economic growth and rising poverty.

Bennett and Jahangir identify four principal forces that have shaped the state of politics and governance in Pakistan, which, in turn, have generated a situation that makes good governance a trying exercise at the best of times: dictatorship, the military, fundamentalist and ethnic forces and confrontational forces. Probably the most pernicious single factor that has bedeviled Pakistan has been the rise of fundamentalist forces in the country, and former President General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq the person to have given them the impetus to take the country back to medieval times. The extent of his efforts may be seen in their terrible dimension in these lines: "Zia-ul-Haq injected the state with Islamic ideology and introduced several laws and reforms to mould Pakistani society in the light of Islamic principles.... Islamic conceptions and rules of war were incorporated into the teachings at the Pakistan Military academy, where young cadets were indoctrinated with the idea that they were soldiers of Islam. Zia wanted to create a more devout and puritanical army.... Islamisation process had its calibrated use among the ranks of the army." This process had far-reaching influence on empowering the fundamentalist forces to preach, and force, their diktat of a medieval way of life on the rest of the Pakistanis. Pervez Hoodbhoy relates how the formation and government (of Pervez Musharraf) approval of the Agha Khan University Examination Board provoked street demonstrations, with the Jamaat-e-Islami accusing it of possessing a secret agenda to "secularise Pakistan and uproot it from its moral foundations."

Hoodbhoy delivers a stringent stricture on Pakistan's education system: "...education is not perceived as vital or central need of Pakistani society." He is understandably crestfallen at the proliferation of, and patronage given to,

madrasa education. His thoughts on the subject are worth remembering: "For madrasa education the notion of human progress carries no meaning. Knowledge is considered a set of unchallengeable, immutable, truths.... Questioning of precepts and assumptions is not welcomed; the teaching style is authoritarian, punishment common, and problem-solving minimal. This demand for intellectual docility and unquestioning obedience has particularly destructive consequences for science education." No sane modern person can quibble against his simple prescription to rid Pakistan of this archaic system of education: "It is time to start living in the present rather than inflicting upon students medieval concepts of knowledge, values, and behaviour."

The same puritanical Islamisation of laws instituted in full by Zia-ul-Haq, has led to multifarious oppression of women, a topic that Bennett and Jasam deal adequately and in depth. The issue of water as a function of human security is similarly handled competently by Abrar Kazi. The author relates an interesting account in this context, citing Sundeep Waslekar. In 1990, then Brigadier Pervez Musharraf, while training at the Royal College of Defense Studies in London, submitted a dissertation where he suggested that the issue of Indus waters had the "germs of future conflict". For the first time, the idea was propagated that a link existed between water and wars between India and Pakistan over Kashmir (all the five vital tributaries of the Indus river system --- Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej --- originate in Kashmir). A glaring error in the book makes Hubert H. Humphrey President of the United States. Of course, we know that he was Vice President when Lyndon B. Johnson was President. This slip-up aside, important topics on human security are knowledgeably covered in *Pakistan: Haunting Shadows of Human Security*. The book has relevance to the topic of security issues beyond Pakistan's borders.

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