

## A combination of the sacred and the mundane

Razia Sultana Khan explores a world yet mystical

"THE gods created man," said Srikantha Spathy, "but here we are so blessed that we - simple men as we are - help to create the gods." This is how one of the stories in William Dalrymple's latest book *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, begins. This seeming contradiction plays through most of the nine stories in the book: a nun who sweeps the steps before her with a peacock fan when she walks so as not to inadvertently step on any living creature, ritually starves herself to death; a dalit Untouchable not allowed to use the water of the very well he helps to dig, is revered as a god for three months of the year and illiterate villagers who are still the guardians of an entire oral culture, able to recite a 4,000 line epic by heart.

In the introduction to his book, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, William Dalrymple explores these contradictions by introducing Ajay Kumar Jha, a naked sadhu who was once a Sales Manager with Kelvinator with an MBA from Patna University. William Dalrymple asks the question, "How is each specific religious path surviving the changes India is currently undergoing?" And also, "Does India still offer any sort of real spiritual alternative to materialism, or is it now just another fast developing satrap of the wider capitalist world?"

Also in the introduction, the writer describes the pilgrims he meets on his way to the temple of Kedarnath: "Every social class from every corner of the country was there. There were groups of farmers, illiterate labourers and urban sophisticates from north and south all rubbing shoulders like something out of a modern Indian Canterbury Tale." And the titles of his nine stories are reminiscent of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: "The Nun's Tale", "The

Monk's Tale," and "The Singer of Epics."

Each story is a personal vignette, a combination of the sacred and the mundane, the ancient and the modern, the world we see and the otherworldly. Each tale highlights a different religious path while it

stray from the beaten track of society, separate individuals who have one thing in common: all of them are on a spiritual quest.

The book begins with the life of a Jain nun. For many of us the word nun, projects an image of a Christian missionary in her long white gown. The setting too is often academic. But the nuns in Dalrymple's book evoke different images: a ritual of plucking hair and hour long meals where each morsel is scrutinized for the presence of a living creature.

In the story that follows, "The Dancer of Kannur," we see a Dalit laborer who, for nine months of the year builds wells during the week and is a jail warden during the weekend. Over the three months of winter, however, he answers a greater, more glamorous calling. He becomes a vehicle through which people find god. As Hari Das the theyyam artist says, "Though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and casteiest Mabbodori Brahmins worship us, and cue up to touch our feet."

And so it continues each nine more astonishing than the last.

One very dark story is entitled "The Daughters of Yellamma." It is the story of a Devadasi, a temple dancer or one who is dedicated to the gods at infancy. Though parents themselves dedicate their infant child to become a Devadasi, sometimes even against the wishes of the girl, she is little more than a prostitute, servicing the men of her village from the house of her parents. It is a vicious cycle where the Devadasi then herself dedicates her own daughters to the temple. And when she gets sick, she is literally thrown out or allowed to starve by the very people she had been taking care of.

A thread of sadness prevails in all the stories: the threat to the completeness of a

spiritual life, and the threat for old artisans of losing their children to technology.

It is not just the accounts of the nine lives which hold us spell bound, the magic of the language weaves a spell around us:

*She climbed quickly, with a pot of water made from a coconut shell in one hand, and a peacock fan in the other. As she climbed, she gently wiped each step with the fan in order to make sure she didn't stand on, hurt or kill a single living creature on her ascent of the hill, one of the set rules of pilgrimage for a Jain muni or ascetic.*

Page 2: Nine Lives

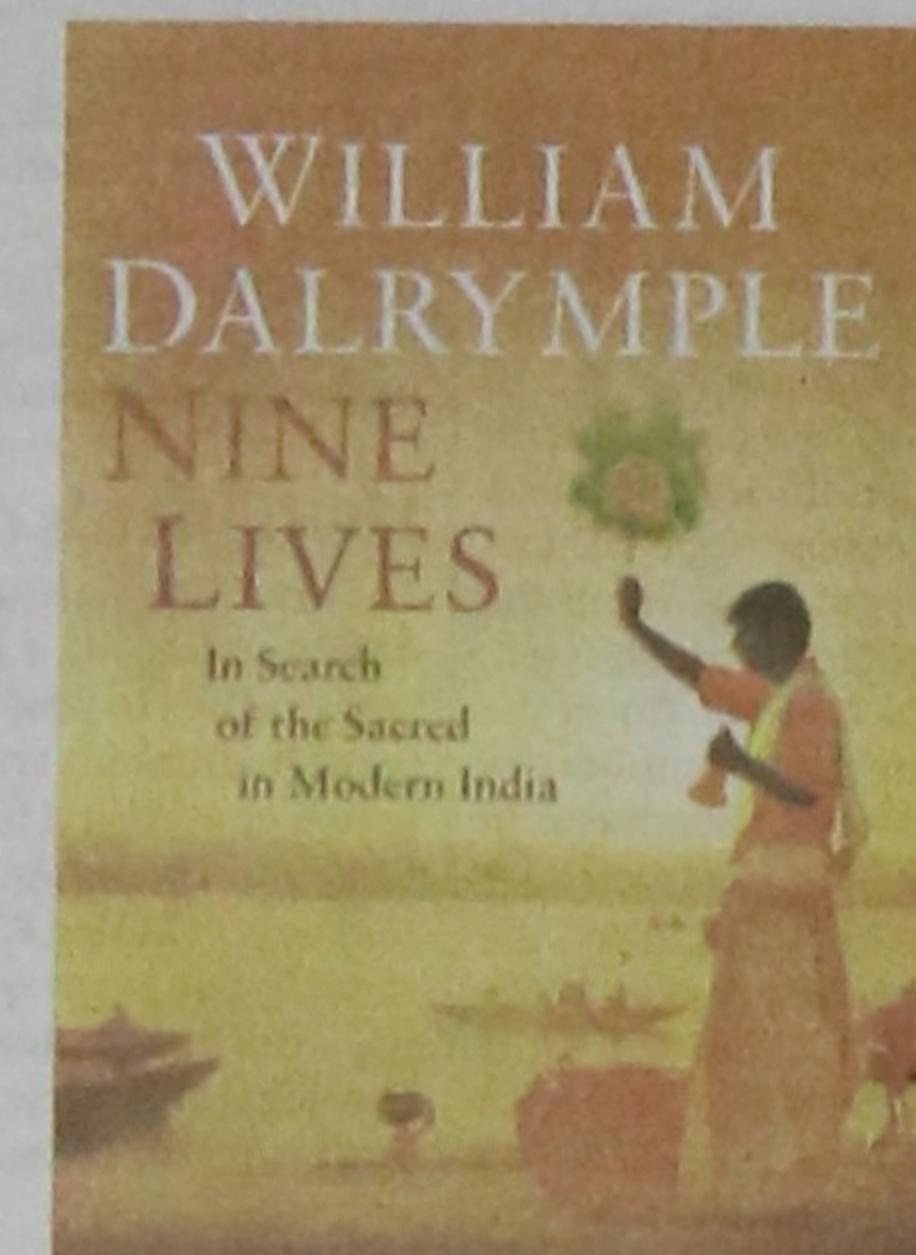
The book is replete with sensory details that chisel out images for us. Such strong details give one a sound grounding of the setting which makes the stories more credible and paradoxically more fantastic.

The encyclopedic information that William Dalrymple notes almost as an aside for the reader is also noteworthy, though this at times did break the focus of the story.

The tone of the writer throughout is nonjudgmental. Even when some behavior sounds bizarre, it is the reader who judges, not the writer. Dalrymple's style is different from the traditional travelogue style where the narrator is the center of the telling. Here his characters have the space to speak. It is their story.

The word *orientalism* comes to mind with Edward Said's definition of *orientalism* as one looks at these characters through William Dalrymple's eyes. It is to the writer's credit that the mystical world still appears mystical despite our familiarity. Perhaps it was a peripheral world we had taken for granted within which we now find ourselves.

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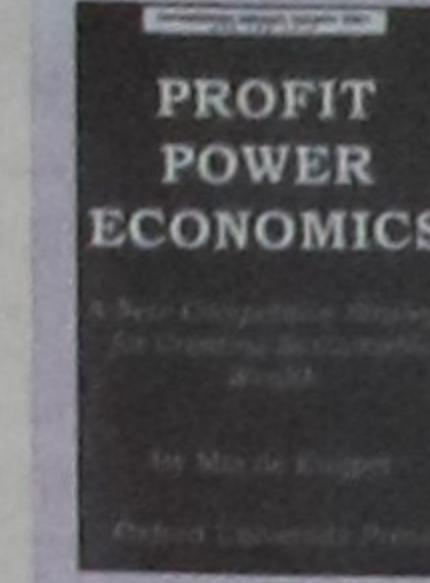


**Nine Lives**  
In Search of the Sacred in Modern India  
William Dalrymple  
Bloomsbury

reflects the changes taking place around it. *Nine Lives* is a book of travels not just the physical journey of the writer but the spiritual journey each character takes.

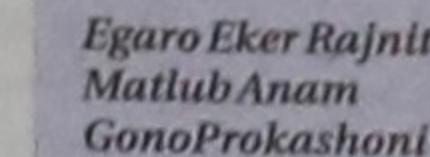
The characters William Dalrymple brings together are strange bedfellows. He conjures them up as if from a brass lamp. They

## AT A GLANCE



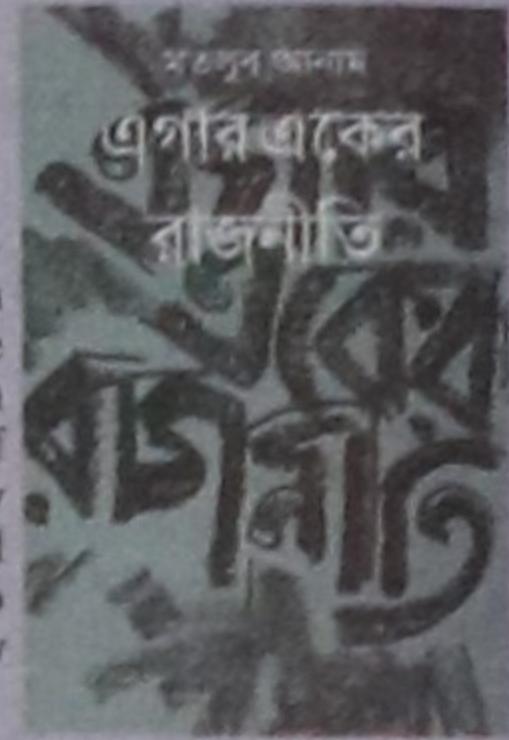
**Profit Power Economics**  
Ma de Kuijper  
Oxford University Press

If you wish to know about corporate strategy, this is the book that should be in your hands. It is a work that gives you, for the first time in three decades, an idea of perfect information. The writer would have you know that it is a manual that is nothing less than a new economic paradigm for our times.



**Egaro Eker Rajniti**  
Matlib Anam  
GonoProkashoni

A well-articulated series of arguments on politics that Matlib Anam places here. As the title shows, these are fundamentally write-ups dealing with politics and society in the aftermath of the declaration of emergency in early 2007. The seriousness, the sarcasm and the biting tone the author brings into his assessment of conditions will draw your interest.



**Development Experience And Emerging Challenges: Bangladesh**  
Eds. Quazi Shahabuddin, Rushidan Islam, Rahman  
The University Press Limited



With Bangladesh struggling to emerge on to the high ground of development, it is only natural that voices will be raised about what needs to be done to attain that goal. There are the challenges, those that the articles in this work deal with amply. The imperatives the country faces come through rather well here.

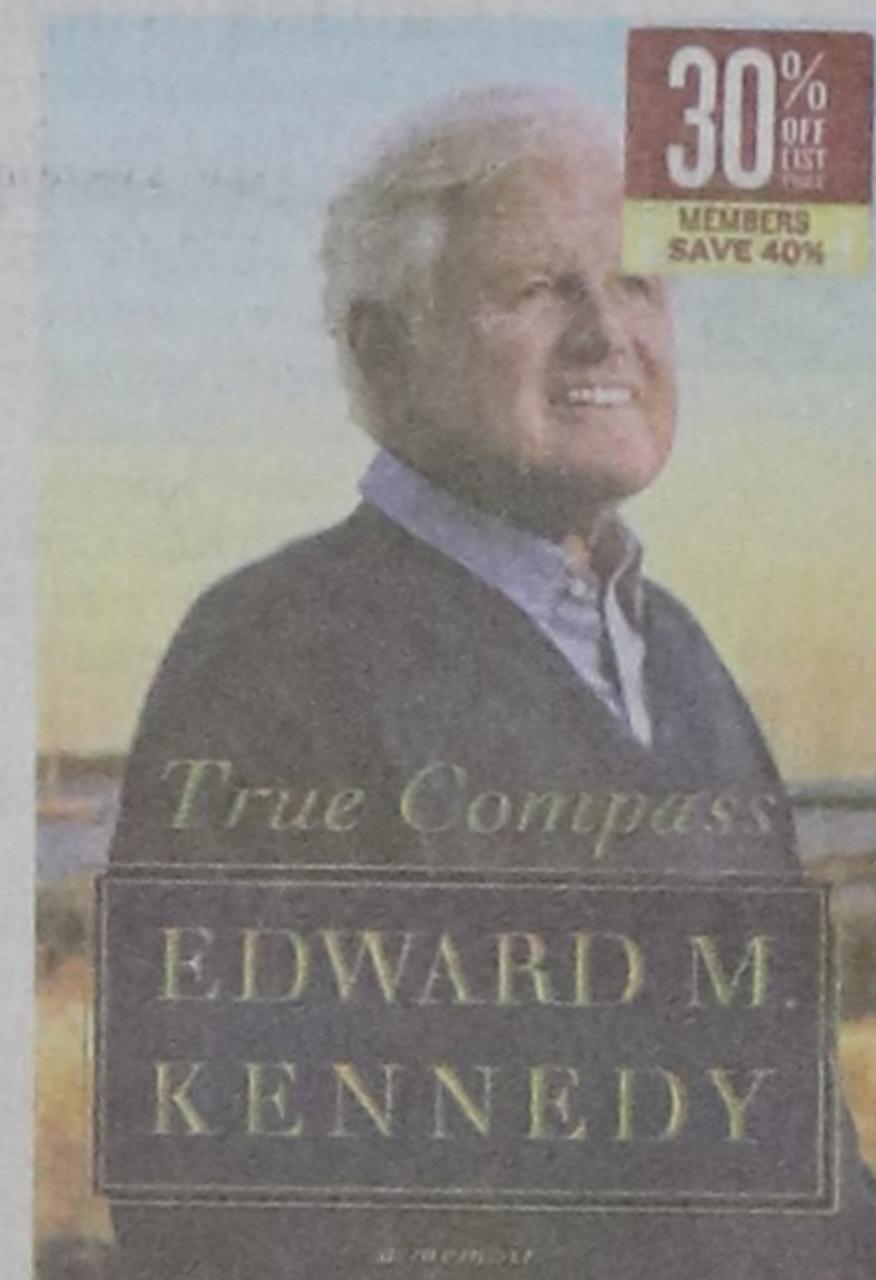
## Three reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

### No wisdom, but nuggets anyway ...

EDWARD Kennedy's death a few months ago was cause for the celebration, in a manner of speaking, of a dynasty that yet exercises a hold on the public imagination. It does not really matter that the dynasty, as it used to be, does not happen to be there any more. That the mystique of the Kennedys has become frayed over the years is no more in question. But, again, there is that certain reawakening of sensibilities, of memories, every time the Kennedys are mentioned. That explains the grandeur of Edward Kennedy's funeral. The fact that he was the only Kennedy brother to survive to ripe old age (he was seventy seven when he passed on) did little to stop the flow of a revival of popular interest in the clan. The Obamas and the Clintons and the Bushes and the Carters made sure, through their presence at Kennedy's memorial services in Boston, that the clan was remembered.

And now, in posthumous form, we have Kennedy's memoirs before us. *True Compass* ought to have come to us when Kennedy was alive; but, as he makes clear early on in the telling of the story, it was fast, oncoming cancer that came in the way. Or perhaps it was a sense in the veteran senator that death needed to be overtaken, in however slight a degree, by his narration of the tale of his life. Make no mistake about it: Kennedy's memoirs are no more profound than the way he had conducted his life right from his youth to his old age. For those ready to be peppered with wisdom by men whose political careers have spanned nearly half a century (Kennedy served in the United States Senate from 1962 till the end of his life), *True Compass* comes as a bit of a disappointment. But is that surprising? The Kennedys have never been known for their wisdom or acute intelligence. Glamour and wealth have been part of their lives. Yet Edward Kennedy was different from his brothers in that his legislative accomplishments were feats that neither President John Kennedy nor Senator Robert Kennedy, both of whom were driven by thoughts of occupying the White House, could match. Even so, these memoirs will likely leave the reader wondering: where are the philosophical insights one spots in long-serving politicians?

There are none. But there are other nuggets, those that give you a compact as well as complex picture of the evolution of a politician in our times. Ted Kennedy, as he was known, came to occupy his senate seat in 1962, the same that his brother John had held till he was elected to the presidency, when he was only thirty. His rival was the nephew of House Speaker John McCormack. In the course of the campaign, the young McCormack taunted Kennedy about his pedigree: 'If your name had been Edward Moore instead of Edward Moore Kennedy, your candidacy would be a joke.' The joke would eventually, and tragically, turn out to be a long ride into legislative experience. JFK's assassination would leave the clan shattered. Robert Kennedy was rendered psychologically immobile, as Ted states here. As for himself, he was presiding over the Senate on 22 November 1963 (part of



**True Compass**  
Edward M. Kennedy  
Twelve  
Hachette Book Group  
New York

tradition allowing junior senators to be in that position at times) when the news of the assassination was brought to him. Five years later, it was RFK's murder in Los Angeles, moments after he had won the California primary against Eugene McCarthy, that sent Edward Kennedy spinning into a new circle of shock. Suddenly, the baby of the family (Ted was the youngest of Joseph and Rose Kennedy's children) found himself in the position of family guardian. Two widows, Jackie and Ethel, with their children, claimed his attention. More tragedy was to come. Ted's son was to be diagnosed for cancer. His wife Joan, shattered by the two assassinations, was succumb to drinking problems. The senator himself was nearly to lose his life in a plane crash.

No, do not go looking for gems of wisdom in *True Compass*. Focus, rather, on the moments Kennedy considers significant in life, those he thinks readers should know about. He is clear about his feelings where RFK's 1968 run for the presidency is concerned: he believed in 1968 that 1972 would have been a better time. Once Robert was dead, his camp followers approached Ted to take up the banner. Edward Kennedy wisely declined. But by early 1969, seeking a specific role for himself, he challenged the long-serving Senator Russell Long for the position of Democratic whip in the Senate. To everyone's surprise, he won. It would turn out to be a pyrrhic victory, seeing that he would lose it two years later --- a direct consequence of Chappaquidick.

Which of course brings up the death of Mary Jo Kopechne soon after Kennedy beat Long. With him at the wheel and Kopechne beside him, Kennedy drove his car into the river, clambered out of it, went home. Meanwhile, Kopechne died in the water. The senator goes to great lengths to give vent to his sorrow about the tragedy and makes no effort, absolutely none, to explain away Kopechne's

death. It is obvious that Kennedy has been deeply scarred by the tragedy and yet there appear to be gaps in his narration of it. That it was a criminal act on his part to walk away from the scene of the disaster is a truth he does not acknowledge. It leaves the reader feeling pretty uncomfortable. The tragedy was to ruin Kennedy's chances for the White House. He aged, missed 1972 and then 1976. But then came 1980, when he challenged embattled President Jimmy Carter for the Democratic nomination. It ended in disaster, for both men. Kennedy did not win the nomination, but he wounded Carter enough for the president to be trounced by Ronald Reagan in November of the year.

Wisdom may not be the fundamentals of *True Compass*. But it is a work which you cannot easily put away. You come away missing its author and his ebullience, despite the very deep flaws that marked his personal and political career.

### ... Voice from a lost era

YOU associate the early history of Pakistan with the life and times of Moulvi Tamizuddin Khan. There was his run-in with the executive branch of the government in the early 1950s, a conflict that could have had a lasting, positive impact on Pakistan's politics had Khan managed to stay the course. He almost did. It was Pakistan's system that did him in. Whatever. The fact remains that Tamizuddin Khan played a pivotal role during that period in trying to uphold constitutional politics in Pakistan. It was a process that proved to be short-lived, for the country had by then been taken over by a cabal of sinister men, led first by Governor General Ghulam Mohammad and then by his successor Iskandar Mirza, individuals determined to sideline politicians and ensure governance by bureaucracy. Ghulam Mohammad and Mirza, be it recalled, were both part of the bureaucracy and were therefore not expected to do any better. Along the way, they were joined by the military, whose spokesman General Ayub Khan was only too happy to keep the political classes at arm's length.

There is little need, at this point, for a new observation of the history of the Pakistan state. It is important, though, to try getting a sense of the politics Tamizuddin Khan pursued throughout his career, of the turmoils he went through in the last decade of his life. But even more critical is the tale of how he made his way to the centre of politics in pre-partition India. It is hard to forget that Khan came from the eastern part of Bengal. And like it, he was pursued by poverty, a condition he was able to overcome through sheer grit and purposefulness. In *The Test of Time*, his posthumous memoirs brought out by the Tamizuddin Khan Trust, Khan provides readers with detailed insights into the long, difficult trajectory his career took even as he pursued education as a young man in

rural Bengal. Tamizuddin Khan, like so many of his generation, is not sure of the precise date of his birth. But, again like others, he is able to piece together the time when he was born from evidence he collects diligently, obviously through family oral tradition. He was born, as 'ascertained from unmistakable evidence', in March 1889. It was, as he takes care to inform readers, in an ancient village named Khankhanapur in the district of Faridpur that his birth took place. There is evident pride in his detailed analyses of the roots he springs from; and in the manner of individuals whose sense of values has always been pretty pronounced, Tamizuddin Khan speaks fondly of the men and women from whom his respect for tradition springs.

Tamizuddin Khan went through a rounded upbringing. And that meant, for him and for others of his generation, something more than formal education. Khan lists all the games he played in childhood --- hadudu, top spinning, gollachhat, tambari, cricket, football, lathikela and what have you. It was an era when the young sought to make an impression. As his career was to demonstrate so well, Tamizuddin Khan did make an impression. His interest in the arts, indeed in matters aesthetic, came to underline the course his career was eventually to take. He went into *puthi* reading, thus making it clear that his connection to his roots was what defined him as an individual. He derived pleasure from witnessing *jatra* and drama

then its centre. In this work, he dwells on the historical events, notably the partition of Bengal in 1905, that exercised the minds of Muslims in India. The years moved on and Khan found himself in the thick of political circumstances. Imprisonment came his way. And in the lives of India's Muslims, it was eventually a separate state that would decide their fate.

Moulvi Tamizuddin Khan's life and career came to an end on 10 August 1963. At the time, he was Speaker of the Pakistan National Assembly as constituted by the Ayub Khan regime following the adoption of a new constitution in 1962. Respect for him, for his politics, has never dimmed in the years since his passing. Or since the end of Pakistan in these parts.

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Following the publication of a book

carrying the details of the president's

amorous life, Galbraith asks Alice

Longworth, daughter of Theodore

Roosevelt, about the relationship.

Longworth shoots back: 'It means noth-

ing. Everyone knows that Franklin was

paralysed from the waist down.'

Galbraith's admiration for Eleanor

Roosevelt, especially after the latter

began to play a more activist role in

politics following her husband's death in

April 1945, was as equal to, if not more

than, the reverence in which he held