

The ailments that undermine education

Md. Masum Billah reflects on what he thinks is an important work

AS I have taught in colleges, including cadet colleges, and as my present position assigns me to work and for secondary school teachers, Samir Ranjan Nath's *Shikkha Asha Bastobota Naba Asha* easily drew my attention, making me read it more than once. The information presented in the book seems very relevant, necessary and fruitful for those who work in education.

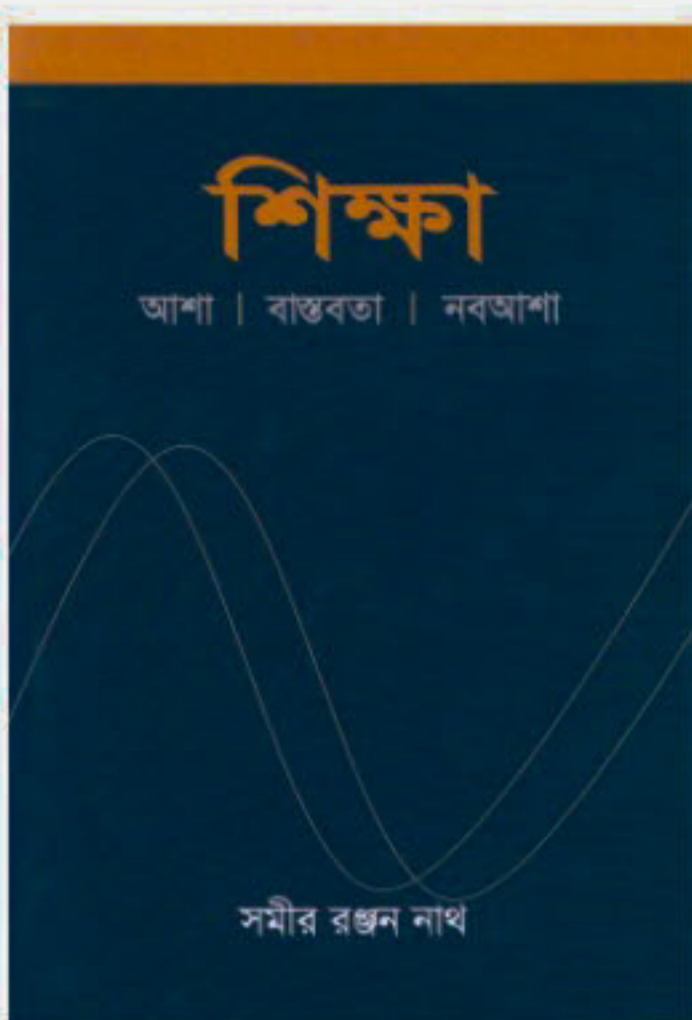
The book at the very outset reveals the fact that we are still lagging behind in the race for education compared to our neighbouring countries. A massive drive in education is supposed to begin in our country of such a gigantic population and yet it has not happened till today. The writer has aptly identified the lack of necessary infrastructure and political causes responsible for this backwardness. One example proves this truth: few of the recommendations made so far have been implemented since 1947, though fourteen education commissions were formed. Definitely the writer has caught the point that to develop this grand education policy, extensive education research, writing and media coverage are absolutely necessary but they prove to be very scant in relation to its magnitude. Fifteen essays have been included in this book. They can be divided into primary, secondary and higher education related categories.

The writer has touched on a very sensitive point. Different tables and sections and subsections of Bangladesh's constitution have been revised several times. But the sections related to education have so far not been changed, thereby highlighting the grim fact of the meager importance given to education by the authorities. Article 17(A) of the constitution says that the state will ensure popular education and universal education for all boys and girls. In 1990 the law of compulsory primary education was introduced but when it would be implemented was not mentioned clearly.

Millennium Development Goals (MDG) were set by the UN at the beginning of 2000 with a view to fulfilling the targets by 2015. Health, education, social and economic development factors were emphasised. By 2015 both boys and girls would complete their primary education and women's empowerment to bring about equality between the sexes would be ensured. A grand conference was held at Jomtein, Thailand, in 1990 and then again in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000 focusing on the implementation of the objectives of fundamental education. The book has rightly pointed out that our constitution and the MDG goals have fixed the target regarding education. The only difference is that our constitution did not fix the date of achievement while MDG set it at 2015.

The book contains some important data and information regarding Bangladesh's education scene which will stand education researchers as well as education managers in good stead. Our primary education was nationalized in 1974 but no pragmatic steps have been taken to ensure its quality. It is true that after the 1990 conference in Thailand new inspiration on education for all was created. Progress made in primary education, for children aged 6-10 years, is that 87% go to school; in 1990 this rate was 60%. At the secondary level, the admission rate increased one and a half time in the last seven years. The dropout rate declined while the primary education cycle rate increased. Three-fourths of students who enroll in primary education complete the primary cycle. At the primary and secondary levels the enrolment rate of boys and girls shows Bangladesh's position to be next to Sri Lanka's. The book focuses on political will of the government regarding education, history of education in our country and emphasis on education in our constitution. A comparative situation of both primary and secondary education in present times and in

the past, identifying the problems still plaguing our educational arena, is here presented by the writer. Indigenous children's academic necessities, teacher development programmes and inquiring into ways of addressing such problems have been highlighted in the book. There are 45 ethnic groups of indigenous people in Bangladesh who live in 9,388 villages, constituting 1.6 percent of the total popula-



Shikkha
Asha Bastobota Naba Asha
Samir Ranjan Nath
Academic Press and Publishers
Library

tion. Though we have achieved the participation of primary school children at 77 percent, the rate for indigenous children was 57% in 1988.

It is important to note the non-formal primary education system of BRAC, which comprises a one-room school with one teacher. BRAC launched its non-formal primary education programme in 1985. It follows the NCTB syllabus but the mode of operation is different from that of other institutions in the country. Of the number of learners two thirds are girls. One

programme organizer looks after 12-14 schools. Students complete five years of primary education in four years by narrowing down the number of holidays, which means that the contact hour is greater everyday. Seventy percent of learners are of the first learners' family. BRAC started primary education for indigenous children in 2003. At present BRAC runs 2,205 indigenous schools with 2,915 teachers. In 66 schools there are two teachers. About 57,645 students study here.

The country has seen two strands of development in the field of education. One is the increased rate of admission and the other equality between boys and girls. Compulsory primary education was begun in 1898 in England but in our country it started in 1990, meaning that we have been lagging behind nearly a hundred years in this race. More than a million students become eligible for primary education every year. But thirteen percent still remain beyond primary education, which means that more than 23 lakh students remain deprived of primary education. Having made primary education compulsory we cannot ensure children's participation even after seventeen years. Of those who enter primary education half eventually drop out owing to various socio-economic conditions.

On an average 60% students remain present in the class. If all the students were present the classrooms would not be able to accommodate them. And 40% of children complete primary education without studying. Of those who complete such education only 2% acquire all the qualities and skills determined by the government. Two-thirds of children remain unlettered or pre-lettered. Of those who enroll in class six, 30% pass in the examination taken at the beginning. Of those who enroll in class six, one-fifth pass the SSC examinations.

The classroom is the weakest area. A mere one-way form of teach-

ing is delivered here. Whether students understand or not is hardly evaluated. Students are not encouraged to ask questions, but if they do ask questions there is hardly any response. Most teachers show an inability to teach hard subjects like English and mathematics. They have few clear and transparent ideas about these subjects. Head teachers cannot dedicate themselves to the interest of education because of other commitments.

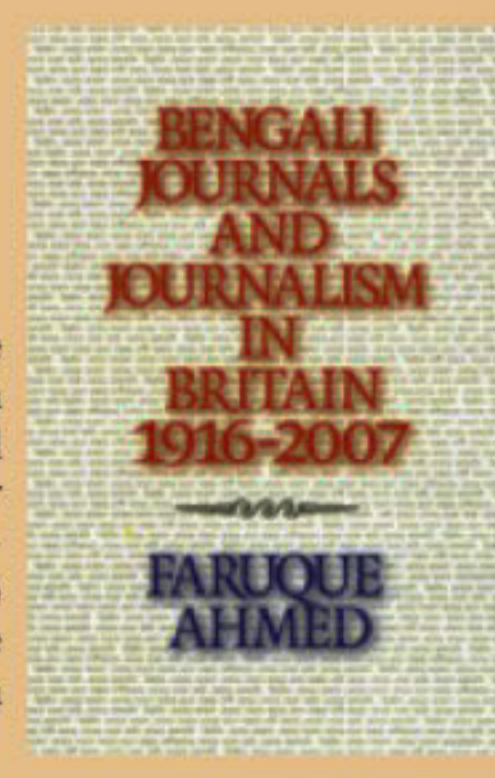
A huge number of primary teachers need to be trained, but only 54 primary training institutes cannot bring all the teachers under training. After receiving training once, they need refresher courses also. But no such provision is available. The matter calls for serious attention from the government in general and the ministry of education in particular. The writer suggests that B.Ed and M.Ed courses need to be confined only to teachers training colleges but should be opened in general colleges as well. If it is done the colleges will be able to fill in the gaps relating to an availability of secondary level teachers as this sector seriously suffers from a lack of trained teachers. If schools can recruit trained teachers, they will not have to spend ten months in B.Ed training, hampering the normal activities of the school. Only short refresher courses can be introduced in that case.

The writer has noted significant other points about education. He suggests that the promotion of teachers at the universities be based on how many research works have been published by them. Nowadays teachers are promoted on the basis of their political inclinations. This culture must be abolished once and for all in the greater interest of the nation. As the book touches on all tiers of education, this reviewer believes that teachers at all levels can derive practical benefit from it.

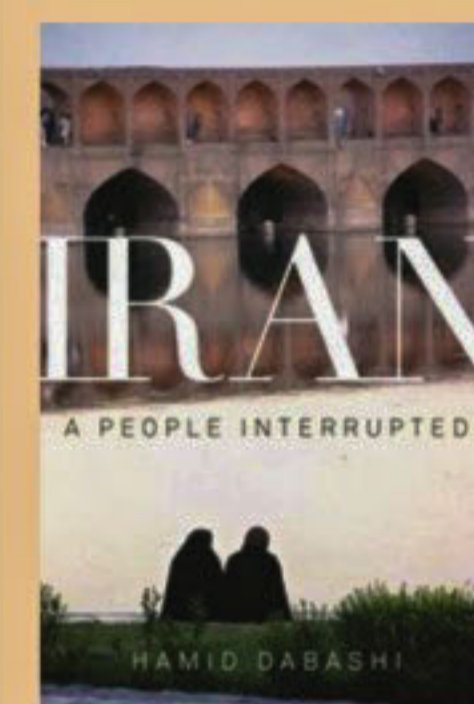
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AT A GLANCE

Bengali Journals and Bengali Journalism
In Britain 1916-2007
Faruque Ahmed
Publisher: Lulu (USA)



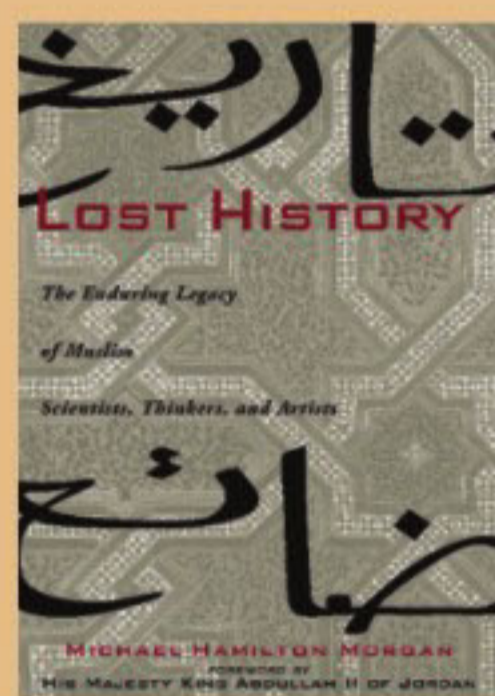
Faruque Ahmed is one of those young Bengalis who, despite being in the West, have been drawn again and again to the history of their mother country. In this work, he does something rather unusual. He delves into the history of Bengali-language journalism in Britain. In a way, it is a tale of Bengali immigrants in the UK.



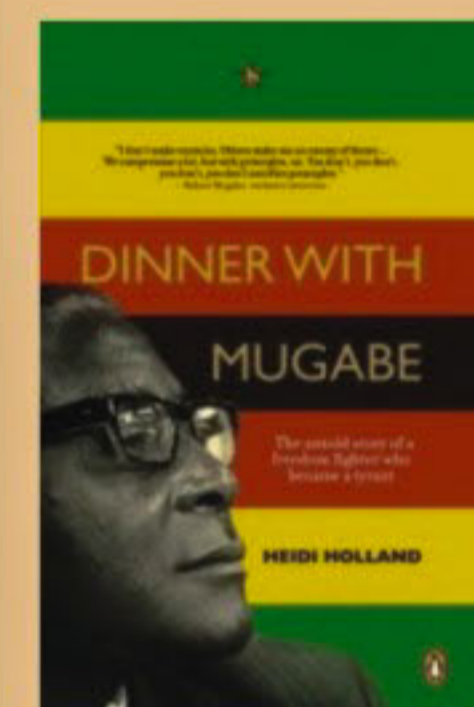
Iran
A People Interrupted
Hamid Dabashi
The New Press, New York, London

There is a sense of pain in this work. Dabashi misses his country, more so because of what he feels has been the long history of injustice meted out to his people. He traces Iran's history right from ancient times all the way to the present. Iranians, he suggests, have always seen their history taken out of their hands.

Lost History
The Enduring Legacy of Muslim Scientists, Thinkers and Artists
Michael Hamilton Morgan
National Geographic



Here is one book that brims over with nostalgia. Morgan brings together, in exquisite form, the history not only of a religion but also of those illustrious individuals who have ensured for it a place in the global intellectual scheme of things. Much that you may be unaware of is covered in this work.



Dinner With Mugabe
Heidi Holland
Penguin Books

In his struggling days, Robert Mugabe happened to have surreptitious dinner with Heidi Holland. She remembers. She recalls to the manner of Mugabe's rise to prominence as a resistance leader in Rhodesia before leading it to independence as Zimbabwe in 1980. And then came time for him to be authoritarian.

For women, the hard way to success

Tulip Chowdhury feels thrilled by a story

THE Bangla literary giant Shomoresht Majumdar holds the reader completely engrossed with the gripping story told in *Heere Boshano Shonar Phool*. The characters and the plot of the story are so real that the reader feels as if he or she is witnessing the events as they unfold with each page. The story is a spellbinding drama of a family that comes out of the stereotyped roles of men and women. It is about a young woman, Titir, who finds the courage to go out of the four walls of her home defying the old conventions and finding a place of her own in the outside world.

Titir, in her early twenties, is desperately looking for a job after her graduation. Living in Kolkata, she finds life tough and competitive as she looks for a source of earning. One day she comes across her actress friend Shuborna, who takes a sudden fancy to taking Titir to an interview for an upcoming television serial. Shuborna is certain that with her Venus-like figure and beauty Titir can make it to the world of acting. Titir makes a hit with the first interview and ends up getting the role of the heroine. There is strong opposition from her mother

and her brother Shubir. To them entering the showbiz world is beyond accepted social norms. They openly tell her, "Bhodro ghorer meyera cinema jogote jaina...."

Titir has to convince them that the old days are over and these days educated people enter the world of acting. Ultimately her mother gives in and is amazed at the cash Titir starts bringing in. For Titir, the outside world, her producer, the makeup man and all other actors and actresses hold a world of their own. She earns respect and recognition with her excellent acting and gentle manners. She begins to realize that freedom gives women wings to soar in the sky. She encourages her brother's wife, the childless Ronjona, to step out of the home and get a job.

Ronjona, with the help of her friend Upashona, finds a job as an events organizer. Upashona guides Ronjona step by step. Ronjona excels in her performance and soon climbs the ladder to success. Titir and Ronjona, the women who had dared to dream of stepping outside the boundaries of their home, find places in the nation's workforce. They learn to socialize beyond the



Heere Boshano Shonar Phool
Shomoresht Majumdar
Anondo Publishers Private Ltd

circle of friends and relatives. To them each and every individual they come across has something to teach, a lesson to impart. They relate themselves to a greater world, a world that expands everyday. Titir comes across producers

who are perfect gentlemen and she also finds herself in the company of men who seek relationships beyond the workplace. She learns to draw the line in her relations with her colleagues. Her brother remains a constant barrier to her work. As she starts getting wider publicity, even neighbours are clearly getting envious. However, her father remains steady in his support of Titir and his daughter-in-law Ronjona. The father's role as a just man is a source of strength for Titir and Ronjona.

Ronjona has a tough time at home for her husband is set against her working outside the home. Their clashes reach a stage when she is forced to leave him and go back to her parents. Titir continues her uphill struggle. One day Shubir comes to Titir's workplace and finds her working in a heroine's role. He is disgusted to learn that the actor playing the hero's role is an alcoholic. Although Titir tries to convince him that the man never gets drunk while he is acting, Shubir sets her mother against her. Her mother gives the final warning that she has to leave her home or give up acting.

As Titir, the protagonist in the story, continues to defy the obsta-

cles on her way to stardom there brews a sweet romance. Krishanu, an upcoming actor, finds a place in her heart. Krishanu comes from a good, educated family and his parents too grow fond of Titir. However, there are still obstacles to overcome till the final bells ring and Titir can find some peace in her life.

The family saga portrayed in *Heere Boshano Shonar Phool* is most absorbing as it touches human nature with minuscule details. It is a story that readers can relate to everyday happenings around them, a story that casts light on both the breaking and making of a family. If fiction is supposed to be attached to real life like a spider's web, this story certainly spells out all that can happen in the drama of real life. At the same time the book is a beacon on how tough the fight for freedom can be for women. The book imparts the lesson that one should never give up on one's values and beliefs. Titir remains a role model for women who wish to earn their individual rights. The book ends on a happy note, with the reader relishing each moment spent turning its pages.

Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a teacher.

NOTES

Writers link up in Jaipur

ONCE again, the Jaipur Literature Festival brought the world of books to life. Jaipur in January has become the spot to air ideas, to hear fresh voices, and to enjoy the simple pleasures of writing, reading and intelligent debate. The festival, which ran from January 21-25, featured 140 authors from fifteen countries and 20,000 people in total. Bangladesh's Shazia Omar, author of *Like a Diamond in the Sky*, who was invited to attend, was recognized as a 'star' at the show by one of the festival organizers and fellow writer, William Dalrymple, in India's Outlook magazine.

This year, one of the themes discussed at the festival was the growing violence and terrorism that plagues the world. "The festival is based on the belief that books, films art, music and literature are what give South Asians an identity, joy and momentum. That is why fanatics abhor them so much, and precisely why the writer and the artist must be as ruthless in pursuing cultural harmony as the terrorist is bent on destroying it," said the organizers.



In line with this theme, one of the many discussions at the festival was on the topic of *In a Tough Neighborhood Perspectives on the hard realities of foreign policy in South Asia*. The discussion was moderated by Siddharth Varadarajan, the Editor of The Hindu and one of India's leading commentators on foreign affairs. Members of the panel were: Shazia Omar of Bangladesh, Asma Jahangir, a Pakistani lawyer and human rights activist, Ali Sethi, a writer from Pakistan, Ramesh Guneseckera, a writer from Sri Lanka, and Shyam Saran, India's ex-Foreign Secretary. The panel

discussed the influence of Indian hegemony on the region. Shazia Omar commented on the Bangladesh Prime Minister's recent visit to India, commending the strengthening of relations between the two countries, but calling on the leaders of both nations to approach future ventures with an attitude of enlightenment which will benefit the masses on both sides of the border. She also called for greater cultural exchange to increase trust, harmony and mutual understanding and encouraged more people to start writing in English from Bangladesh.

Among the authors present at the festival were international stars like Alexander McCall Smith, Hanif Kureishi, Louis De Berniere, Booker Prize winners Roddy Doyle and Anne Enright, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, diaspora heroes like Vikram Chandra and Pulitzer-winning investigative journalists like Lawrence Wright and Steve Coll. Om Puri, Javed Akhtar, Gulzar and Shabana Azmi were some of the celebrities present, along with musicians who performed in the evenings Paban Das Baul, Susheela Raman, Rajasthan Roots and Shah Jo Raag Fakirs.



In search of one's roots

Syed Badrul Ahsan follows a writer all the way

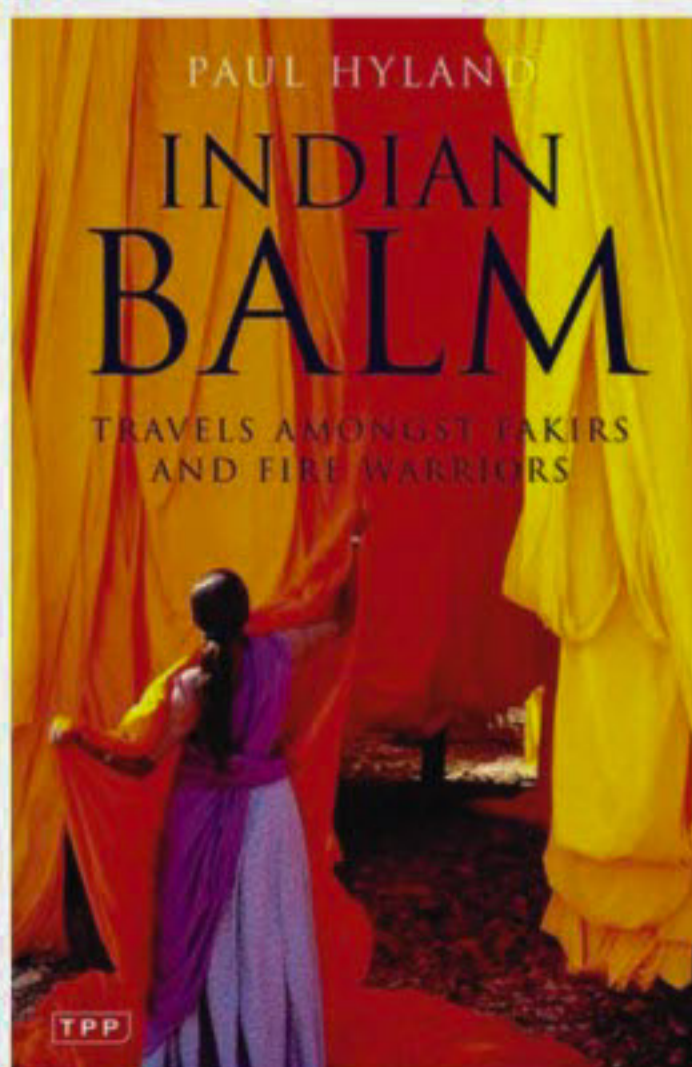
INDIA remains, especially for people in the West, a land of mystery and mysticism. Paul Hyland happens to be one of those drawn to a land that is noted as much for its political history as its cultural heritage. Hyland focuses on the latter, a particular reason being that his ancestors once made what was, back in the 1830s, an arduous trip to India and then stayed on to breathe in the aroma and the pungency of a country as varied in its landscape as it was, and is, in its cultural diversity. The author's hundred-year-old grandmother, not in the best of health in Devon, perks up when grandchild Joy speaks of Narsapur. And Narsapur is what the centenarian associates with her own past. For she was born Lily Bowden 'at Kakinada, on the eastern delta of the River Godavari which flows into the Bay of Bengal'. As Hyland takes care to let readers know, only forty years earlier, her grandfather William Bowden had been an apprentice stonemason in Barnstable but soon took off, along with his newly-wed wife, for Madras.

That is where the tale begins. Hyland sets out on a new discovery of the route the Bowdens, his great-

great-grandparents, must have taken when they first alighted in India. And Indian Balm, the title he gives his book? Hyland notes that within two years after his grandmother's death a shop in Barnstable stopped selling an ointment that had been a popular demand for as many as eighty-five years. The ointment cured people of a variety of ailments, among which were muscular complaints, skin diseases, burns, eczema, piles, chilblains and rheumatism. W. Bowden's Indian Balm it was called. The author's great-great-grandfather had produced, 'concocted' is how Hyland puts it, the ointment during his years in India.

Indian Balm occupies, of course, a bigger canvas than its medicinal parameters. It is a metaphor within which the author brings his own perspective to bear on the Indian religio-cultural background. He descends on the country, as it were, in search of his roots and yet remains acutely conscious of the reality that where his great-great-grandparents and their friends disembarked in south India fired by the kind of nobility which informs individuals with the missionary spirit, he can only go around redis-

covering the spirit that sustained the Bowdens in the country. Along the way, he does come across Christians, some of them relatives removed from him by time and geography. They are all part of the



Indian Balm
Travels Amongst Fakirs and Fire Warriors
Paul Hyland
Taurus Parke Paperbacks

legacy left behind by missionaries, and not just English ones. Hyland goes beyond them and walks through the narrow alleys and cacophonous roads of such cities as Hyderabad, drops in at temples to listen to songs directed at Hindu deities and eats at restaurants brimming over with pungent Indian food.

It is a timeless India that Hyland travels through, in cousin Joy's old Ambassador car or riding pillion with a new friend. To be sure, it is India, or a segment of it, that has for decades been offered up to westerners by modern-day tourists come visiting. The difference with Hyland, though, is the sense of involvement he brings into his observations of the culture of the place. He watches Hindus, Muslims and Christians (he hardly meets any Sikhs here) energising, endlessly, the multi-faceted heritage in Andhra Pradesh that in its broad sense speaks of secular India. The Charminar evokes a tale of a long ago Muslim presence in the region. Pushing his way through crowds of devotees at Hindu temples, he notes the poverty that has denoted the country for ages, through the hands outstretched for alms or

tugging at his shirt sleeves in attempts to draw sympathy. The sheer stretch of geography he covers --- he is in Vijayawada, Madras, Amaravati, Machilipatnam, Narsapur, Rajahmundry, Hyderabad, Golconda, Nidadavole, Muskepalem --- at times leaves the reader reeling from the details of the sights and sounds that inform the author's sensibilities. But tedious? It is simply not there, for every place Hyland passes through and every individual he communes with has an altogether different story to tell. In the end, it is the vibrancy and vigour of India which shine through in these tales.

It is a robust narrative of the southern end of India, indeed of the idea of a composite India, that Paul Hyland takes readers through. What starts off as a search for the trails of a journey undertaken by William Bowden in an era now lost to time and space subtly and most happily morphs into a wider examination of the ties that have bound India, piece by exquisite piece, across the centuries, in geography and in the imagination.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.