

Somewhere between Rajshahi and Nachol

Syed Badrul Ahsan hears hearts crack in the hills

Sanjeeb Drong writes with quiet passion and with a lot of nostalgia. The loss of heritage, the disappearance of land that was home is a theme that recurs in this work of intense devotion. But, then, Drong is not alone in the way he feels. Anyone who has watched the gradual assaults that have been made on the way, or ways, of life that Bangladesh's indigenous people or adivasis have suffered through since the British colonial period will empathise with him. Consider the recent forest fires in the hills, the casualties in terms of lives and homes put to the torch. But Drong's is not a partisan view of conditions. That he belongs to one of the tribes which have found Bangladesh to be home for long generations is a truth that does not mar the quality of the essays he presents in this work. There is, of course, anger in him as he narrates the tale of the tribal girl from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, a young woman forced by poverty to take the road to the city. It is in the putatively secure confines of domestic employment in that urban centre that her virginity is taken from her.

Yes, Drong is angry, but in a way that suggests a sense of resignation. The fate of the tribes dotting this country --- the Chakmas, Marmas, Tripuras and others --- concerns him as it does a whole swathe of others in Bangladesh. These accounts that the writer presents in Bangladesher Biponno Adivasi obviously range across a period of years when Drong contributed articles to some newspapers. Read them against the more recent facts

of what has been happening to the nation's tribals. The crisis, a shameful affair, that erupted over plans to construct an eco park in Madhupur during the period of the BNP-led alliance government and thereby deprive the adivasis in the region of their claims to their traditional mode of living are all too well known. And if it is, should one be surprised? One need only consider the matter of the national park on the outskirts of the nation's capital, a spot of earth that today is home to thousands of eager picnic seekers in winter. The history of the park, though, is a tale of deprivation. Beginning in 1956 and continuing all the way to 1962, the government cordoned off, in blatant manner, 40 square miles of land inhabited by the Garo people to build the park. Those adivasis were of course pushed out of their homes; and the homes quickly turned into tales of what once had been. Curiously, though, the authorities took care to see that the 15-square mile area where Bengalis resided did not come under the plans for a national park.

Drong narrates the long tales of repression Bangladesh's adivasis have historically seen foisted on them. The fact that no government, in that patent sense of the meaning, has moved to preserve the adivasi heritage, keeps him riveted to the job of pointing out incessantly to what needs to be done. Faced with the calamity that is national parks and eco parks and constant witness to a brazen occupation of historically tribal land, the indigenous peoples of Bangladesh are fast becoming strangers in their own



Bangladesher Biponno Adivasi
Sanjeeb Drong
Nawroze Kitabistan

habitat. Indigenous people everywhere have never subjected themselves to the quirkiness of laws where possession of land is concerned. The earth has been their home since the beginning of time. Ironically, the arrival of modern government has epitomised a gradual shrinking of that home. They do not have papers to stake their claim to land that has been theirs for generations. That makes it easy for governments to step in and claim the hills and valleys in the interest of development. The strange case of the Kaptai lake in the Ayub Khan era remains a ready reference to the continuity of injustice perpetrated on Bangladesh's adivasis. In the case of the Chakmas, the tale has been a grim one. In 1947, as the partition of India became a reality, they happily hoisted the Indian tricolour in the belief that they were to be part of the new Indian republic. A day later came the rude realisation that they had been lumped into Muslim Pakistan. That was when their long suffering took root.

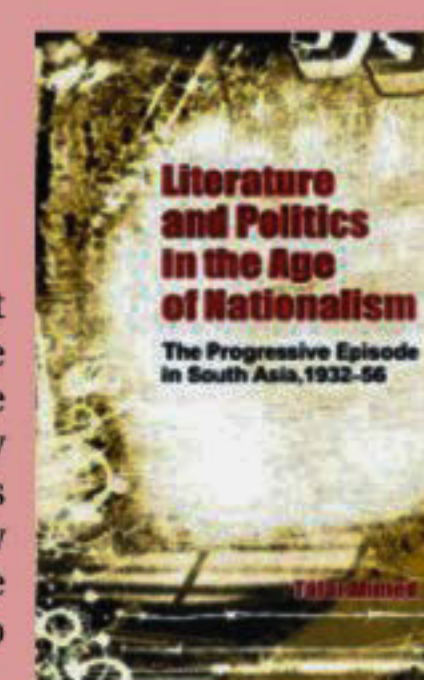
There are the individual pains that Drong speaks of in his essays. Leafing through the documents of the Tribal Welfare Association, he stumbles into the disturbing episode of how conspiracy nearly undermined tribal tradition in a Netrokona village in 1986. In the matriarchal society that adivasis profess fealty to, a young Garo woman Suchitra Sangma runs into difficulties when her sibling Poritosh, in league with his Muslim friends intent on laying claims to his ancestral land, embraces the Islamic faith and demands that the rights of property be handed over to him. After all, under Muslim inheritance laws, it is men who hold sway. Poritosh convinces his parents to become Muslims as well. The result is uproar in the Garo community, endless legal wrangles and family bitterness. By the time the whole sordid episode draws to an end, Suchitra Sangma has won the battle, even getting her parents back into the tribe. But by then, a considerable part of the land that had been in the possession of the family has been lost.

A retelling of history, of the forgotten aspects of it, is what Sanjeeb Drong presents in these essays. Time and again he draws attention to the various tribal revolts that broke out in British colonial times. There were, of course, the rather well known Santal and Munda rebellions. But not many will be aware of how events were shaped by a tribal revolt along the banks of the Godavari in Madras between 1878 and 1880. Already battered by a famine, the Rumpa tribe found itself victim to new predatory activities by the colonial administration. In need of money to finance their wars in Afghanistan, the colonial authorities thought that nothing would so benefit them as an imposition of taxes on the tribals. That was the beginning. In the two years that the revolt went on, the Rumpas under the leadership of Chandria constantly harassed the British and would have continued doing so had Chandria not eventually lost his life. Sanjeeb Drong travels through the villages and hamlets where Bangladesh's adivasis eke out a bare existence. On one of his journeys, through a Santal village named Mundumala, somewhere between Rajshahi and Nachol, he hears a young tribal woman sing a poignant song, 'What if the night ends, to tell us that Bangabandhu did not die?' The writer wonders if this young woman, in the care of missionaries, comprehends the full import of her song. And then he asks if the adivasis would have felt as helpless as they do had Bangabandhu lived on.

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AT A GLANCE

Literature and Politics in the Age Of Nationalism: The Progressive Episode in South Asia 1932-56
Talat Ahmed
Routledge



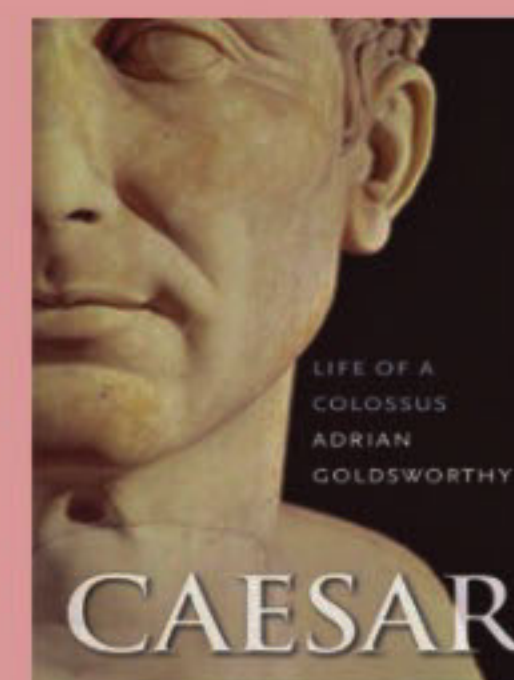
Clearly it is a vast subject Talat Ahmed deals with here. And the period he covers happens to be one of the most formative in the history of India as it was before as well as after Partition. He delves into how literature and politics shaped the nationalistic spirit in the run-up to vivisection and after.



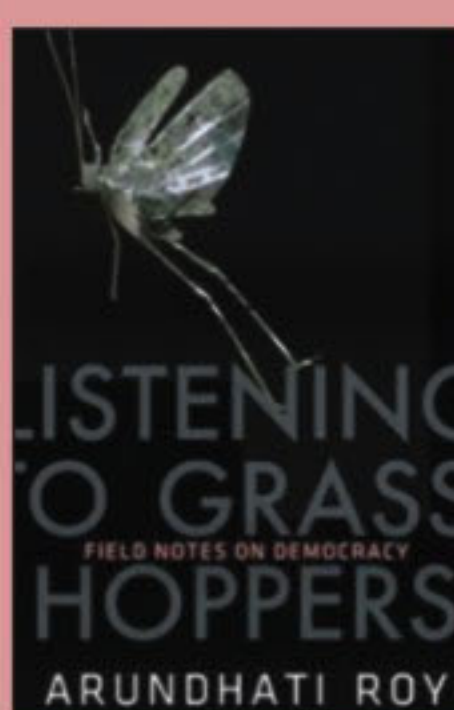
Red Star Over China
Edgar Snow
Grove Press, New York

This is a famous old book, the chances being that it is not to be found easily. Written in 1937, it is a first hand account of Snow's interaction with Mao Tse-tung and Chou En-lai years before the communist revolution in China. Reading it makes you understand why that revolution was inevitable.

Caesar
Adrian Goldsworthy
Phoenix



There is Shakespeare, always, to remind us of the tragedy of Julius Caesar. But here at last is a comprehensive biography of a man the ancient Romans knew as a dictator but who, in reality, was a consummate politician, a brilliant general and, overall, a ruler who cared for his people. It is a gripping read.



Listening to Grasshoppers
Field Notes on Democracy
Arundhati Roy
Hamish Hamilton

Arundhati Roy does it again. In this collection of essays on various aspects of Indian and global politics, she mines no words in her forensic analysis of conditions. It is always a pleasure coming by her convictions. And it is doubly so because of the position she has adopted as spokesperson for the underdog.

Medical science with Shakespearean undertones

Binoy Barman appreciates a work doctors should love

COMMON allegation against physicians in Bangladesh is that they do not discharge their professional responsibilities with a mind of service to humanity, which their profession is meant for. Maybe it is not applicable to all physicians but it is true of a large number of them. There are multifarious reasons for this. As a nation we lack a humanitarian service-rendering tradition; many physicians coming out of poverty-ridden families set money-making as their only goal in life; at the institutional level it is not ensured that physicians will come to patients' service whenever and however necessary; ethics of medical practice are not inculcated properly in a physician's mind; and a wave of capitalism has driven medical practitioners into a rat race for material gains. It is undoubtedly a sorry state of affairs.

Samiran Kumar Saha is well aware of the situation. So he laments the plight in the country when he relates it to ideal medical practice. He remembers Dr. Rieux, who dedicated his life to the treatment of plague patients in the city of Oran in Algeria, as depicted by Albert Camus in *The Plague*. He says: "Did we ever come across such a doctor in our society...?" It is a difficult question which flies in the face of medical practice in our country. Of course, there are great physicians like Dr. M. Ibrahim, founder of the Diabetic Association of Bangladesh, but their good image is overshadowed by the 'bad' doctors whose negligence to duty leads to patients' deaths.

The profession of a physician is undoubtedly a noble one, which implies great responsibility to ailing individuals. A physician must be caring, with sufficient knowledge of curing. "Tact, sympathy and understanding are expected of the physician, for the patient is no mere

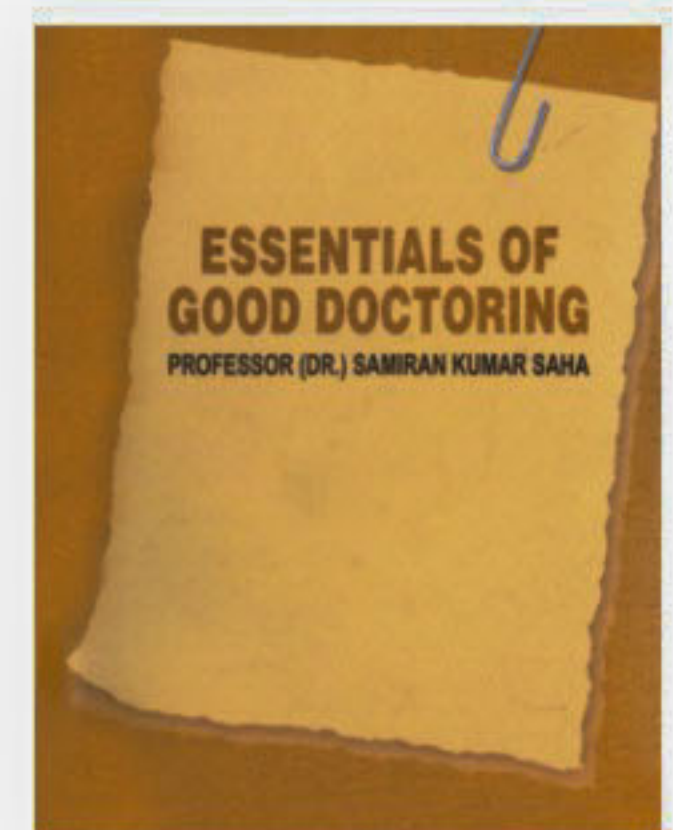
collection of symptoms, signs, disordered functions, and disturbed emotions. He/she is humane, fearful and hopeful, seeking relief, help and reassurance," observes Dr. Saha. A physician is a scientist as well as an artist. He/she knows the art of pacifying a patient psychologically as well as the science of eliminating diseases from his/her body. Almost axiomatically, medicine is the most scientific art and the most humanistic science.

How should the relationship be between a doctor and a patient? Should it be like master and slave, teacher and pupil, or lawyer and client? No, the relationship should be rather like that of friends, who talk to each other with sympathy. A doctor must patiently answer all the questions asked by patients and their relatives and adopt an agreeable way of treatment. He/she must be a good listener. Dr. Saha says, "To diagnose, manage and treat a person's disorder, physicians must have learned to listen." From a biopsychosocial perspective, a physician must not only have working knowledge of patient's medical status but must also be familiar with how a patient's individual psychology and socio-cultural milieu affect the medical condition, the emotional responses to the condition, and the involvement with the doctor.

A good physician knows the techniques of handling patients. The better a physician knows about a patient's beliefs, feelings and habits, the bigger is the chance of proper treatment. He/she must know how to deal with different types of patients: difficult patient, depressed patient, histrionic patient, dependent patient, impulsive patient, narcissistic patient, obsessive patient, paranoid patient, isolated patient, malingering patient, demanding and passive-aggressive patient. He/she should be able to read a patient's mind

correctly. He/she utilises his/her good communication skills to elicit information about the patient's condition. His/her communication with the patient never fails. He/she negotiates passionately, shares knowledge and responsibility, identifies the real problem and gives effective prescriptions.

The Bangladesh Medical and Dental Council provides a guideline which prohibits certain acts on the part of the physician. These include issuing false certificates, making



Essentials of Good Doctoring
Prof. Dr. Samiran Kumar Saha
Dibyaprakash

improper profit, misuse of professional knowledge, abuse of physician-patient relationship, skipping personal responsibility to patient, and canvassing, advertising and using false titles. To stay on the right track, a physician must strictly adhere to the professional code of conduct in any case.

Life is invariably associated with disease; it is the weakest aspect of life, taking us to Greek mythology. "We all have an Achilles' heel" - that part of inner self which was ren-

dered forever vulnerable to mortal cares when we were dipped in the waters of the river Styx as it flowed down the wards of our first disillusionment," says Saha. Medical science manifests the struggle against human ailment. Its ultimate goal is probably thwarting death with the assurance of good health. Immortality is the dream which always lures but eludes medical science. Death is still inevitable and its thought makes us feel uneasy and unhappy. Tagore said once, "Who can prevent death? Each star of the sky is calling him." Saha dedicates a chapter to death, reminding us of the harshest reality in human life. How does a physician deal with a patient on the verge of death? The writer gives some advice on terminal care and breaking bad news. "I am sorry" from the doctor's lips followed by a little silence means something which is well communicated to the patient and his/her attendants. Sorry! As a reader, don't get gloomy. Here are a few words from Shakespeare which should cheer you up (cited by Dr. Saha in his book):

"To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub;

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,

When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause."

The book covers a wide range of medical issues, including physicians' communication skills, medical ethics, good medical practice, patient's right to confidentiality, consent to examination and treatment, evaluation of ethical methods, and evidence-based medicine. It is a useful work in terms of its content, although many readers may find the title of the book ambiguous. The writer uses the word 'doctoring' in the special meaning

of 'performing duty of a doctor'. But in common parlance, the word 'doctor' has negative meanings as a verb. It may mean 'to change a document in order to deceive people' or 'to secretly put a harmful or poisonous substance into food or drink'. These are harmful acts, which have been associated with the word 'doctor' unfortunately. And see, it is not all good work that doctors always do. Sometimes they are alleged to intentionally make people sick instead of curing their disease, kill them instead of saving their life. As Dr. Saha points out, the killing machine 'guillotine' was invented by a doctor. A fellow of the Royal College of Physicians pushed intravenous potassium to kill a malignant rheumatoid patient to relieve his pain.

The writer makes references to the classical texts of creative literature, the aim being the creation of an emotional effect on readers. He says, "We need to produce physicians who will have a Shakespearean breadth of interest in the wise and the foolish, the proud and the humble, the stoic hero and the whining rogue; we want physicians who will care for people." We come across wise words from Winston Churchill, Maxim Gorki, Anton Chekhov, Dostoyevsky, Somerset Maugham, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sunil Gangopadhyaya and Humayun Azad. We hear the verses of Rabindranath, Nazrul, Jibanananda, Shamsur Rahman and Wriahi Arobinda. We come in contact with the philosophers Socrates, Plato, Kant, Leibniz, Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau. It is like reading a literary work through the hard facts of medical science.

(This review is a reprint in the interest of readers).

Dr Binoy Barman is a writer and head, Department of English, Daffodil International University.

Exploring the mind landscape

Mohammad Abdul Hai dissects thoughts

THE field of study called Memetics arose in the 1990s to explore the concept of cultural ideas, symbols or practices being transmitted from one mind to another through speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena. The etymology of the term relates to the Greek word 'mimema' which means something imitated. This controversial new field, therefore, makes an elaborate study of the universal human tendency to imitate.

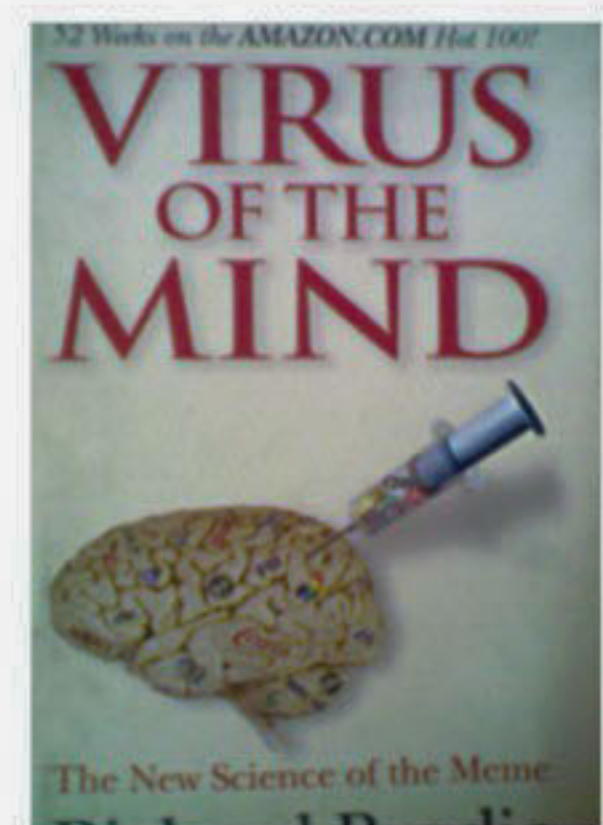
Virus of the Mind is the first popular book devoted to the science of memetics, and it goes beyond the periphery of psychology, biology, anthropology and the science that studies the mental process of understanding. Richard Brodie has simplified the definition of meme (rhyming with 'cream') as being a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that more copies of it get created in other minds.

In *Virus of the Mind*, Brodie carefully builds on the work of the British scientist Richard Dawkins, who introduced the word "meme" in *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 as a basis for discussion of evolutionary principles in explaining the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena. Meme had also fascinated scientists like Douglas Hofstadter, Daniel Dennett, but it is Richard Brodie who has gone beyond the traditional explanation and understanding of the human mind and has plunged into the meat of the issue. The author tries to explore the possible impact of the mind virus in our lives, and feels that the impact will not be less than that of the emergence of atomic physics during the Cold War.

While the advancement of science has affected everybody's life, viruses of the mind touch our lives in a more personal way. The positive thing about it is that the pernicious effect of the virus will wane out as human beings always tend to retain the beneficial influence of it. Mind viruses have already infected governments, educational systems and domestic patterns, leading to some of the most pervasive changes hitherto unknown to our social scientists. Mind virus, the author points out, is not a thing to be kept aside for future consideration: it is here with us now and is evolving, to become better and better at its job of infecting us. The recent explosion of mass media and the expansion of the information

superhighway have made the earth a prime breeding ground for viruses of the mind.

The author explains that memes enter our minds without our permission. They become part of our mental programming and influence our lives without our even being aware of it. So it is of little use whether one desires it or not; it will be there to make you think or do a thing in a certain way. It will influence you to choose a dress or force you to adopt a set pattern of behavior by inducing a kind of logic deep in your mind. Since there is no way out of it, trying to understand and



Virus of the Mind
Richard Brodie
Hay House, New York

making necessary adjustments to adapt to a desirable life pattern is the smartest idea.

Like many conscious readers, the author also raises questions as to where this virus will lead us to. He wonders whether it will ultimately plague our minds or whether only some of us will survive with our free will intact. But the important point, one that shows light at the end of the tunnel, is that human minds, in a majority of cases, reject the malignant influence, retaining the beneficial ones. Hence, there is absolutely no reason for us to worry about the future influence of the mind virus. A clear understanding of what a meme is and how it works will without question help one to hold against the pernicious effect of the virus.

Virus of the Mind is a mental adventure. It stimulates, educates, and awakens you to what really happens to things you see and hear. Pick up this book. Study it and then give it to someone you love and you will spread a truly valuable virus.

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Of reputations proper and misplaced

Anisur Rahman finds a polemical work pretty appealing

SWEDISH linguist Sven Ohman (1936-2008) knew differently, and it would be even harder to imagine why he believed that Noam Chomsky (b. 1928-) has never been a linguist. It is something hard to believe for anyone who is familiar with the name of Chomsky and the reputation it carries. Formerly an Uppsala University professor of linguistics, Sven Ohman in his book, *The Essence of Language: A Philosophical Problem*, has successfully established his observations and findings denying Chomsky's position as a linguist.

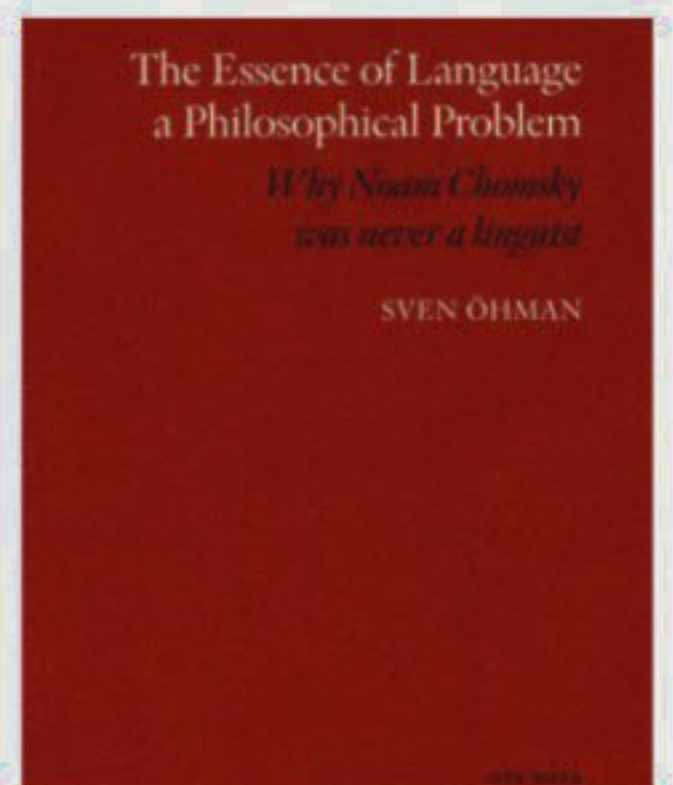
The book is a concise presentation of some linguistic questions as well as answers to those questions, writers' own opinions, reflections and dismissal of definitions of linguistics that have been in vogue to date. All these provide something of a personal account which the writer has featured in the book in a convincing way for readers inside and outside the ramparts of the linguistic and philosophical world. This slim volume includes a whole range of thoughts --- basic ideas of traditional grammar phonetics, phonology, the concept word, the use of the human voice in spoken language and much more. Obviously, they are aimed at shattering the 'myth' of Chomsky's standing as a linguist despite the

fact that some of Chomsky's books are an integral part of syllabi on linguistics at universities in various countries.

Sven Ohman, a scholar and academic, taught linguistics at different universities and studied and conducted research on the same at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and elsewhere. The more interesting, rather ironic, part of the story is he even enjoyed the lectures on linguistics by Chomsky at MIT. The book under review is a result of detailed scholarly scrutiny, focusing as it does on the unsettled linguistic debate and anatomy of linguistics centring on Chomsky.

Ohman frankly notes that he took Chomsky's teachings to his heart, and had several friendly discussions with him in connection with his classes. It is clear that he feels there was a relation of friendship between them. And yet, perhaps his being six years younger and his deep respect for the man Chomsky were obstacles in the way of a true, fulfilling intellectual friendship. Sven Ohman's findings aim at demonstrating that Chomsky's language theories cannot replace traditional linguistics by appealing to mathematical constructions. For that approach does not have much to contribute to our general understanding and use of actual languages.

The writer dismisses the notion that linguistics is sometimes described as the science of language by showing us how to deal with language problems. Thus he establishes his own definition through formulating his own ideas:



The Essence of Language
A Philosophical Problem
Why Noam Chomsky Was Never A Linguist
Sven Ohman
Nya Doxa, Sweden

in a brief form, linguistics is the science of words as used in saying things by means of letters in writing.

Ohman believes that, probably inspired by his own interpretation

of the example of theoretical physics, Chomsky settled for an in-depth analysis of linguistic facts that could be observed in language and that shed light on crucial matters that Chomsky considers to be linguistic theory.

Ohman belongs among those who feel that Chomsky's ambitions completely undermine his grand project regarding linguistics. However great a linguist Chomsky may be projected in the media to be, Sven Ohman continues to maintain that linguistics is a study of the actual use of what everyone knows as language. The book is a clear attempt at showing that Chomsky is not a linguist at all but an intellectual soldier of fortune. Ohman makes a note of MIT linguistics being just a media hoax!

The suspicion is that Noam Chomsky has never received any formal training in any academic discipline and has not submitted a doctoral thesis for examination in any subject. Ohman tries to establish this suspicion as fact by simply pointing out Chomsky's saying: 'we try to show...' The writer thus suggests that Chomsky confirms the suspicion that for him linguistics is, of course, a branch of applied mathematics, in which he makes assumptions from which he mathematically derives conclusions which he may feel rhyme more or

less well with what he takes to be linguistic facts.

In connection with Chomsky's visit to Sweden in 2002, Sven Ohman wrote a long article for *Svenska Dagbladet*, a morning newspaper in Sweden, to explain that Chomsky is not a scientist at all, but a political ideologue who started out in the 1950s by seizing power over American linguistics through overthrowing the somewhat provincial behaviorism that had reigned supreme in indigenous American psychology since the early 20th century and to which American linguistics the Bloomfield school had pledged its allegiance.

Ohman makes some more interesting observations over a Nobel Prize vis-a-vis Chomsky.

He notes that that there is of course the prize in literature but it is only awarded to poets and writers of fiction. Chomsky's writings do not qualify for this distinction.

There is finally the Nobel Peace Prize, but Sven finds it hard to believe that the committee will consider Chomsky eligible on political grounds. Well, ... who knows? If Henry Kissinger and Barack Obama could get it, why not Chomsky as well?

Anisur Rahman, a journalist, is at present doing research in Sweden.