

Of flowing times, of great men

Faruq Aziz Khan relives an era through a new work

FOR anybody who loves Bangladesh, it is a singular pleasure to write a few lines in appreciation of this splendid autobiographical venture from a well-known civil servant of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. It is infinitely more so for a person like me, who has been a close friend of the author, Nurul Haq, for the last half-a-century. He has always astounded me and his enormous circle of friends with his phenomenal memory which enables him to remember minute details of events long past. But even then, I was not prepared for the range and beauty of this wonderful journey down memory lane, describing not just the trials and tribulations of the emerging Muslim middle class of Bengal. At the same time, the work is a very honest and dispassionate chronicle of the struggles, successes and failures of the emerging nation state called Bangladesh.

Anyone who goes through these nearly five hundred pages of an absorbing and fascinating tale will not fail to be impressed by the apparent sincerity and honesty of the author along with his deep sense of history in faithfully describing his personal sojourn through a very troubled time. It all started in a little village of British Bengal, of the name of Belabo in the district of Dhaka not far from where was born Sir K G Gupta, the first Indian member of the Privy Council. Nurul Haq's father was a very respected teacher of the near-by Nagori school, which was established by Portuguese missionaries. He was always proud of the fact that one of his students was Tajuddin Ahmed ("a more meritorious student than him he had never seen during his entire teaching career"). This was the cultural milieu of the early part of the twentieth century Bengal and it is easy to see that Haq has retained this unique humanitarian outlook on life and of life in all that he has accomplished in his profession and now in his unique writing.

Haq describes with great sympathy and feeling one of the saddest periods of our national history when a terrible famine struck Bengal as a direct aftermath of the Second World War. "In 1943 (Bangla 1350) the entire territory of Bengal was visited by the most terrible famine of the twentieth century. Everyday hundreds of people would march along the village road in procession in search of rice and would take the train to Narsingdi, Bhairab and other places. Most of them would

trek back sadly disappointed and even if some of them had the financial resources, they would go without food for there was no rice. After rice had disappeared from the market, a gruel kitchen was run in Ghorasal at government initiative. This helped somewhat all those people who had no money at all".

Life's demands have taken Haq through various countries, exposing him to all kinds of cultures and civilisations and have made him conscious of the struggles and aspirations of



Ja Dekhechi Ja Peyechi Tulona Tar Nai
Nurul Haq
Janantik

people all over the world. But he has never forgotten his little village of Belabo tucked away in a remote corner of Bengal. What is most astonishing is the fact that he has never forgotten the name of a single person who had occasion to meet him even once in life, be it a simple villager or a very important person. Undoubtedly as a civil servant, first of the government of Pakistan, then of the government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Haq had occasionally to suffer indignities at the hands of our rulers, be they of the military type

or of the civilian hue. But it was a pleasant surprise for Nurul Haq when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remembered his name almost correctly, even though he was meeting him after a very long time and, more importantly, after our glorious War of Liberation.

Haq writes about this saga of our nation's history without passion but with tremendous sympathy for the unhappy people of this country. He vividly narrates his first hand experiences during our language movement when he was one of its active participants as a student of the department of physics of Dhaka University. He describes an incident of 1955 when the then government prohibited all activities connected with the 21st February. "On the morning of 21st February (at about 7 am), the police super of Dhaka District came to Salimullah Hall with a contingent of force. His main intention was to remove the black flag which was hoisted on the top of the hall building. Hearing that the police had come, the provost of the hall, Dr M. O. Ghani, rushed to the spot. As the students were ignoring the police super, as soon as Dr Ghani came to the scene, the police super shouted, 'Listen, Ghani'. The students vehemently protested at this impolite language and all started shouting vociferously....." This was an example of the attitude of the government functionaries of those days.

Haq has given us another story involving Farid Ahmed of the Nezami Islami Party who was in Dhaka to attend the session of the National Assembly of Pakistan. Haq attended the session as a visitor on the day when the Joint Election Bill was introduced. Farid Ahmed asked Haq what he thought about the session. Haq told him jokingly in English that the death knell of the Nezami Islami Party had been heard in the National Assembly. This made him extremely furious and subsequently he told Haq, referring to Sheikh Mujib, "Your prophet of democracy is half-educated". Haq replied, "A half-educated person is better than an ill-educated person."

These are undoubtedly isolated instances but they illustrate the humiliation which the Bengali people were suffering all over the country in those days. Haq describes another incident in Lahore when his friend Jamil Chowdhury was driving him home in his car.

"A flag-decked, enormous black car hit

Jamil's car from behind at a crossing (where Jamil had stopped). A tall muscular man came out of the car behind us and apologised for the incident and said that his driver was responsible for it. He was a brigadier of the Pakistan army and he promised that he would reimburse the cost of repair of Jamil's car." Following his advice, Jamil subsequently contacted his major, who told him, "You are lucky that you have still not been arrested under martial law."

Haq was naturally very happy in Dhaka during the last days of Pakistan when ninety thousand soldiers of the Pakistan army surrendered to our victorious Mukti Bahini. But before that memorable event took place, let me quote from the book the gem of a story about Munier Chowdhury, brutally murdered by the Razakars on the eve of the surrender. This was the time in 1971 when Sheikh Mujib was carrying on talks with Yahya Khan. Haq writes, "I had no television at home. So I would return home after watching the latest television news at the university club. Bangabandhu used to talk with foreign journalists in English. A certain member of the club suddenly blurted out that he should speak in Bangla, not in wrong English. Professor Munier Chowdhury of the Bangla department was carefully listening to the news and politely said that if the heart was in the right place, it did not matter how it was expressed."

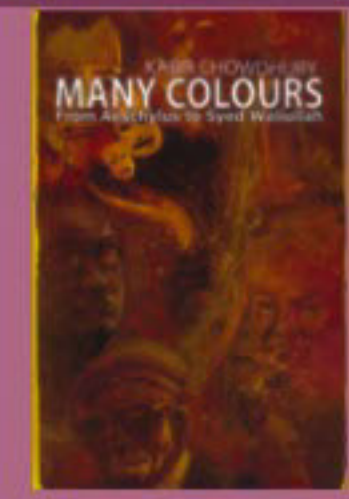
Then and now, millions of people believed and still believe that the heart of Sheikh Mujib was in the right place at the right moment. This was evident on 7 March 1971 when he thundered at the Pakistanis: "This time, it is the War of Emancipation. This time, it is the War of Independence."

Nurul Haq has written with feeling about that historic meeting at the Race Course. "I suffered through the scorching heat of the month of March and yet I consider myself fortunate that I had the opportunity to listen to this majestic speech with my own ears."

Not many people were so fortunate. We are grateful to the author for giving us a vivid account of the moment of the birth of our nation and all one can say is: "Thank you very, very much, my dear friend."

Faruq Aziz Khan is former additional secretary, government of Bangladesh, and former chairman, SPARSO.

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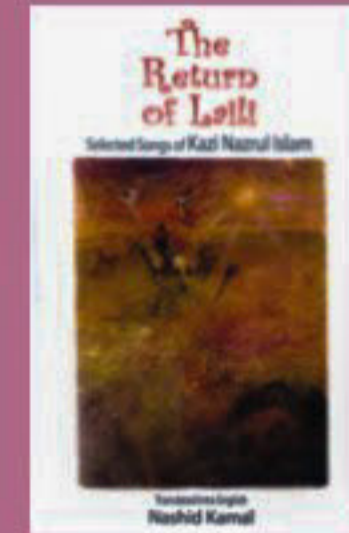
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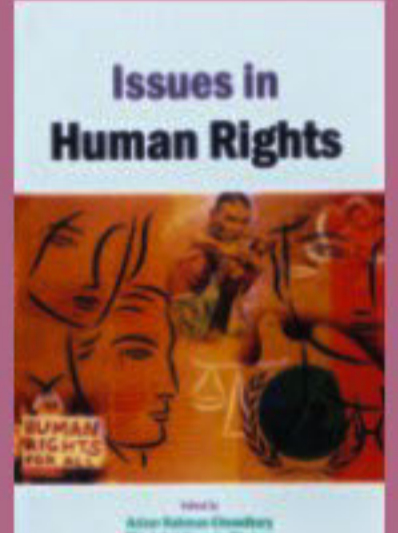
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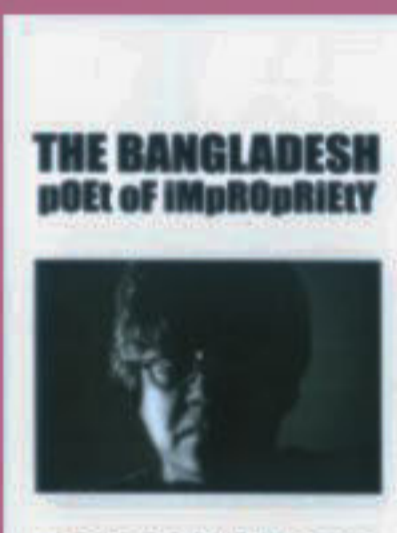
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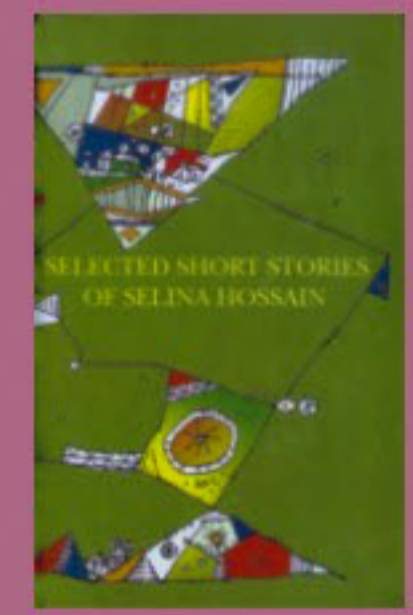
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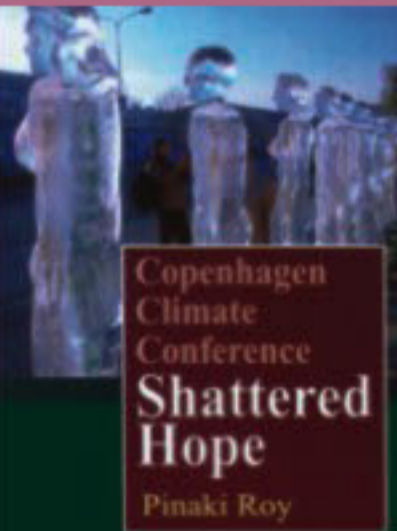
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State of the original people

Md. Masum Billah finds a new work on the theme informative

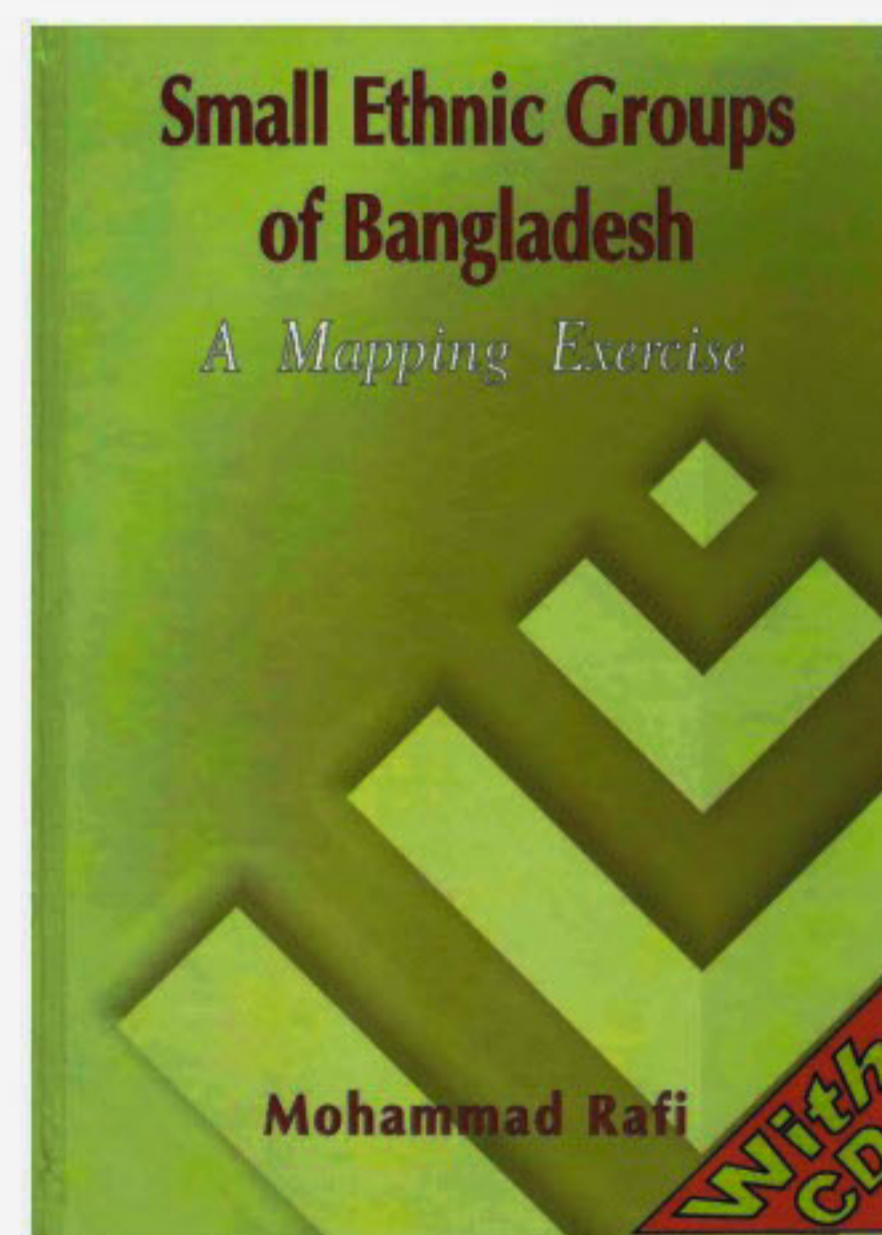
SMALL Ethnic Groups of Bangladesh -- A Mapping Exercise retains the history and culture of ethnic people who constitute an integral part of our population. The historic, linguistic, cultural and social attributes of our ethnic people remain latent in the form of CDs to unfold before us. Social and political scientists may find rich spicy materials in this seemingly small book. The ethnic groups of Bangladesh have enriched our traditional culture and participated in the freedom movement, though these facts have not been widely circulated or known. This book bears the testimony to those realities. The writer has gone to pains to record them for us. This study proceeds with three objectives --- finding out the exact number of small ethnic groups; estimating their size and identifying their locations; and gathering selected information on the demographic, educational and socio-economic status of these groups. Though the study deals with these basic parameters, it rather tends to tilt toward education.

Bangladesh boasts a rich mosaic of ethnic groups, with Bengalis being outstandingly prominent. The rest of the ethnic groups, a little more than 70 in number, demonstrate a rich spectrum of cultural diversity and richness. The small ethnic groups together constitute less than two percent of the total population of the country. But this numerical insignificance should not in any way be seen as marginalization. On the contrary, such diversity adds substance to Bangladesh's cultural matrix. It is regrettable that our policies and practices have more often than not failed over the years to help the various cultural groups to develop strong bonds with the rest of the country. Indeed, a strong sense of social, political and economic exclusion, lack of recognition, fear and insecurity, loss of cultural identity and social oppression have been the reality. Mainstream development efforts have mostly ignored their concerns.

The indigenous people of this land are the descendants of the original inhabitants in these parts. In many cases they overcome conquest or settlement by aliens. The indigenous groups consider themselves distinct from the other sections of society. Owing to the presence of other groups they have become a non-dominant body of people, but they are determined to preserve, develop and transmit their ancestral territories and iden-

tity to future generations. These factors form the basis of their continued existence as people with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems.

It has been observed that small ethnic groups are located commonly among the



Small Ethnic Groups of Bangladesh
A Mapping Exercise
Mohammad Rafi
Panjeree Publications Limited

poorest segments of a population. They engage in economic activities that range from shifting agriculture in or near forests to wage labour or even small-scale market oriented activities in rural or urban areas. SEGs can be identified in a particular geographical area by the presence of the following traits or characteristics in varying degrees: a close attachment to ancestral territories and natural resources in the area, language often different from the national language, presence of customs and primarily subsistence-oriented production, and, most importantly, self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group. In fact, social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society

makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the development process.

Anthropological research has brought to light the fact that amongst the majority ethnic groups in Bengal there prevail various kinds of proscriptions and prescriptions concerning marriage, eating and drinking, and religious rituals. In prehistoric times Bengal was inhabited by Austric and Dravidian language-speaking people. Again, among these groups the majority spoke different Austric languages. Following the invasion of Bengal by the Aryans, communication between victor and vanquished was made in Aryan languages. Bangla arose as a pidgin language with the influence of Sankskrit on it. After sometime it was spoken at home and transmitted as a first language. Therefore, it became what is known as creole. Of course, Bangla first got established as creole, then as a literary and official language.

A culture of the minority, particularly in the national development effort, is not often found in Bangladesh and important segments of society are left without the tools to participate in the process. However, local non-government organizations are working to fill this gap. Most ethnic minorities are incidentally trapped in social underdevelopment. Though education has been recognized as a universal and fundamental human right, quality education continues to elude indigenous learners in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region. Inadequate educational resources coupled with high dropout rates --- with almost 20 percent of the dropouts linked to linguistic obstacles --- create an environment where inhabitants are neither benefiting from development efforts nor are they equipped to participate in them. And yet Article 17 of the Bangladesh constitution stipulates that all children should receive an education compatible with the needs of society, an indication that there is no legal barrier to providing education in regional languages.

Although it is well known that Bangladesh is ethnically heterogeneous, to our surprise available studies, including the national census of Bangladesh, could hardly answer a very fundamental question: how many small ethnic groups reside in Bangladesh? Such a startling observation prompted this mapping exercise. In fact, the exercise is a census of small ethnic groups of Bangladesh but conventionally it is of the households rather than

of the individuals as done in the case of census. The study proceeded with such objectives such as finding out the exact number of small ethnic groups in Bangladesh, estimating their size and identifying their locations and gathering selected information on the demography, educational and socio-economic status of these groups.

It may be assumed that in the beginning various communities were confined to their own enclaves, more or less unaware of the existence of other language groups in the neighbourhood or were indifferent to those. Sometimes, the boundary between two languages was knife-edged, by a hill, forest or river; but in the case of others, for practical reasons, communities with different languages interacted. While linguistic pluralism was a state of mutual existence of several languages in a continuous space, it did not preclude the possibility of interconnections between one language and the other. Along the line of contact between two languages, first there developed a zone of transition in which people were bilingual. Subsequently, give and take between the language groups often resulted in systemic borrowing from one language to the other. As a result, languages over time evolved or transformed and took a new form and in cases became dead as their users picked up the language with which it came in contact.

The data generated for this study in its tabular form comprise about 1870 pages. To make the data set user friendly, it has been provided in a compact disc along with an interactive program which would allow users to draw a part of the data from the whole set as desired. The disc is pocketed on the inside back cover of this booklet. The disc also includes maps showing the status of SEGs in unions throughout the country. The book, to the best of our knowledge, is the first comprehensive account of small ethnic groups in the region. This extensive quantitative research based on field observations should attract a wide range of users. Policy planners, politicians, social anthropologists, government administrators, students of development studies and, most importantly, the small ethnic groups themselves will come to regard this as a pioneering work.

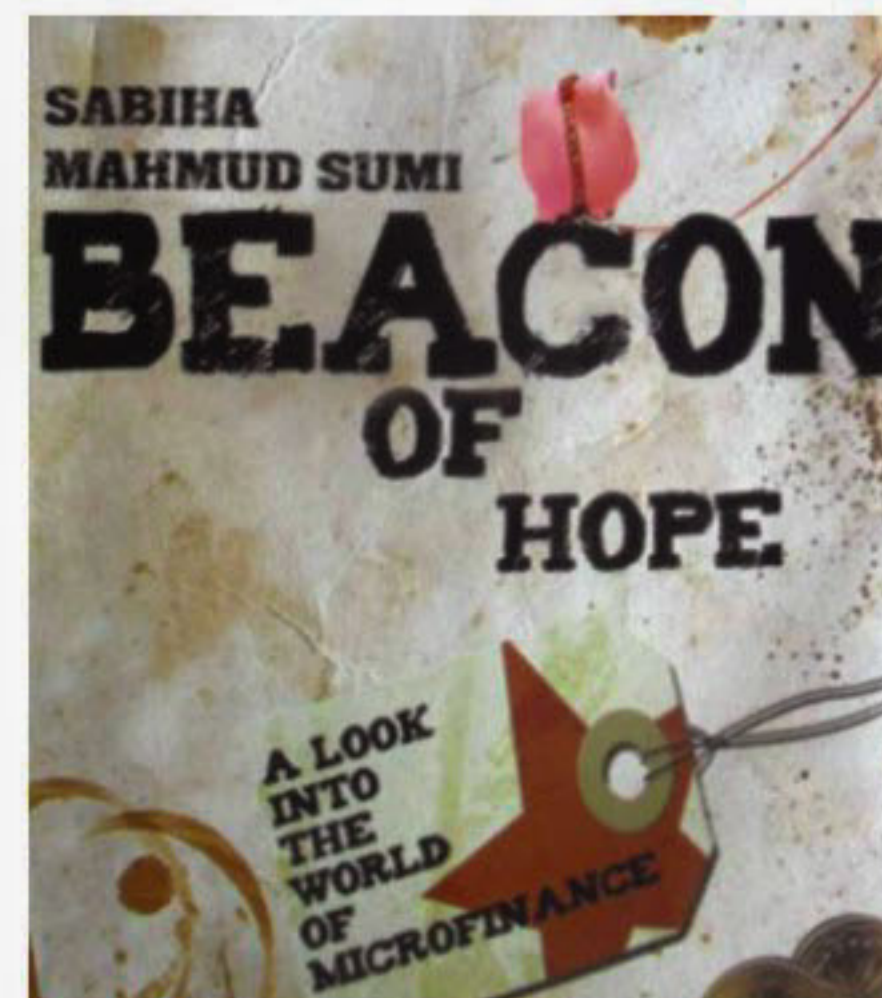
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Light unto the dark

Nabila Obayed is impressed by a work on micro-finance

"STARTING from 2003, I have been part of ASA and have taken loans of small amount like Tk.5,000, Tk.9,000, etc. This has helped us in buying coal and metal for our business." It was the answer by Mrs. Kunja Lata to the question, "What have you gained by becoming a client of ASA?" Again, another client, Mrs. Chandana Sarkar, answered the same question thus, "Before ASA, we were so poverty-stricken that I was working on the streets for a single meal. With the help of ASA my family was able to recover from these situations and once again regain life."

From these expressions we as readers can learn how the NGO called ASA is helping the needy people of Bangladesh by providing micro credit. However, you must be thinking how I have come across these exclusive interviews. Well, I have definitely collected them from a source and my source book is called Beacon of Hope. The young author of Kaleidoscope: A Compilation, Sabiha Mahmud Sumi, has come forth with her second publication, Beacon of Hope. This genius of a twelfth-grader has brilliantly compiled a work full of information that can be handy for



Beacon of Hope
A Look Into The World of Microfinance
Sabiha Mahmud Sumi
ASA

any sort of work and study.

Microfinance "refers to a movement that envisions a world in which as many poor and near-poor households as possible have permanent access to an appropriate range of high quality financial services, including not just credit but also savings, insurance, and fund transfers." This is one of the explanations of microfinance that the author brings up in her book. To illustrate this concept clearly like glass, she not only provides different definitions of microfinance but from time to time she tries to define the "meaning of microcredit". At the beginning of the book the author thoroughly sheds light on these two concepts as they are basic to an understanding of the concept of the entire book. After that, Sabiha Mahmud explores the history behind ASA's growth as an NGO, its authority chain, offered products and services, future plans vis-a-vis organization, et cetera, systematically through the various chapters.

The young author provides each and every bit of information in detail. For example, in chapter seven, she explains elaborately all the products and services that ASA provides. One

of them is a small loan product both for male and female that ranges from Tk.1,000 to Tk.5,000. And, of course, the loan they get is based on their need. Besides, a reader can also find different charts that present important and comparative information. There is a chart where the year of establishment and the year of the inception of micro credit programs of different well known MFIs are given.

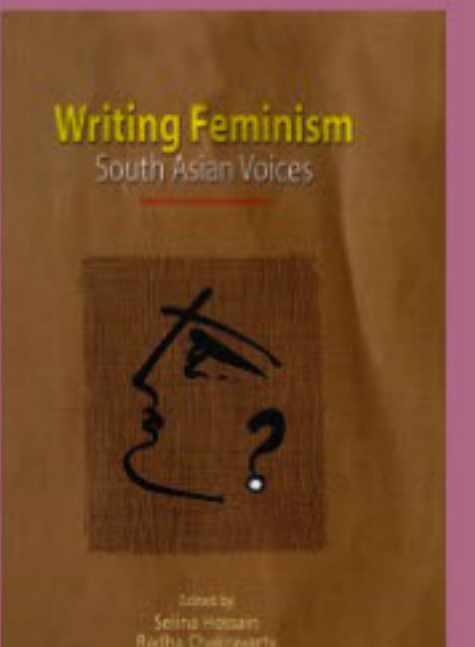
"BRAC works with people whose lives are dominated by extreme poverty, illiteracy, disease and other disadvantages." This is stated by the founder of BRAC, Fazle Hasan Abed, in an exclusive interview with Sabiha Mahmud Sumi. Not only BRAC but some other MFIs as well, along with ASA's founder's experiences and opinions, have been compiled in this book, facts that are indeed as invaluable as those gifted people.

In a word, this book can be considered a point of reference on NGOs. A reader without wandering here and there can get a great deal of information from this single book. This book will be especially handy for students.

Nabila Obayed is a freelance writer.



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