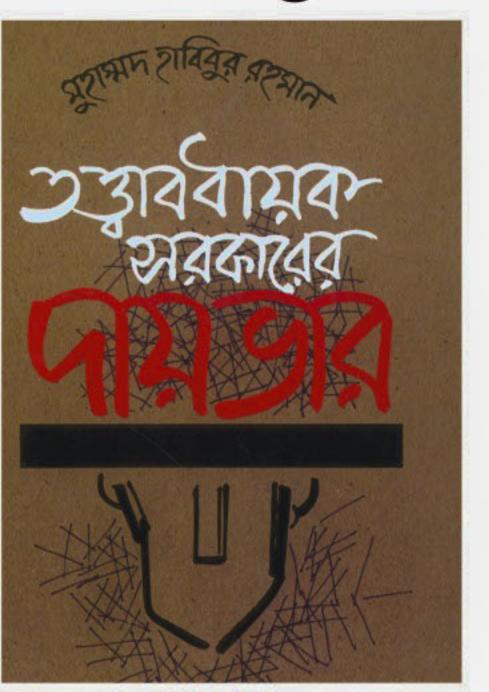
# STAR BOOKS REVIEW

# Three reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

# How to govern a nation, briefly...



Totyabodhayok Shorkarer Daayebhar Muhammad Habibur Rahman Prothoma Prokashon

UNNING a government, even if it is an interim one, is serious business. And writing about it is a good deal more, which is probably why not many who have had the chance of administering a government have generally opted to stay silent. In Bangladesh, where, constitutionally-ordained caretaker administrations have been the norm in pre-election times since 1990, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed has clearly not been tempted to recount his experiences as head of the caretaker government following the fall of the Ershad regime in December 1990. But, yes, Justice Latifur Rahman, on whose watch the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-Jamaat e Islami combine triumphed at the October 2001 elections, did have his own story to relate. It did not make much of an impression. As for the future, one will simply need to wait for Fakhruddin Ahmed to enlighten the nation on the tumultuous times during which he presided over a return to parliamentary government in late 2008. Maybe he will come forth with his observations. Maybe he will not. It all depends.

But what we do have at this point is a rather penetrating account from Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman of his time as chief advisor of the caretaker government that presided over the political fortunes of the country in the run-up to the general elections of June 1996. There is that certain feeling that Rahman, given a choice, would not have accepted the role of the nation's chief executive. The task of presiding over an election is in itself a gigantic one. In Bangladesh, it tests the intellectual and physical endurance of the one constitutionally called upon to ensure a smooth passage to a fresh new phase of electoral democracy. And that is where Justice Rahman had no choice. As the last chief justice of the Supreme Court before the elections, he was the man who was expected to take charge. And he did, after a tumultuous few weeks which saw the ruling BNP organize a pointless election which nevertheless was instrumental in re-fashioning the concept of the caretaker government one thought had ended with the election of February 1991.

Habibur Rahman, a noted scholar beyond his professional calling, speaks in calm, detached manner of the way he went about shaping his three-month administration. He asked his friend Syed Ali Kabir to join his government. Kabir was unwilling, for in his view he would not be able to do justice to the job. But he did suggest that Wahiduddin Mahmud be inducted into the government. Habibur Rahman went along with the idea. The process was carried along, one that also included the search for a press secretary among the media. Eager to ensure a smooth transition to elected government, Rahman nevertheless could not avoid the pitfalls that came with governance. Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina, noting her worries about the security of the chief advisor, assured him that fifty thousand Awami League workers were ready to hit the streets to give him protection. Rahman politely and predictably declined the offer.

But where Hasina was guided by a sense of welfare relating to the chief advisor, Khaleda Zia demonstrated no such niceties when dealing with Justice Rahman. After the elections which saw the incarcerated Hussein Muhammad Ershad triumph from five constituencies, President Abdur Rahman Biswas sought Rahman's opinion about the former military ruler's freedom in order to allow him to join Parliament. Soon after their conversation, Begum Zia called the chief advisor, to tell him: 'Don't listen to the president.' Justice Rahman's response was in line with his constitutional obligations. He told the former prime minister, 'Why shouldn't I listen to the president? I listen to him all the time. We also consider the requests he makes.' That of course infuriated Begum Zia, whose response came in the form of a threat: 'If you do that, we will not let you stay at home and not even in the country.'

A major crisis the Habibur Rahman caretaker government ran into centred around the dismissal of two senior army officers by the president. That prompted an angry reaction from the army chief, General Nasim, who obviously wished to have the dismissal orders rescinded. With the president determined not to yield and with the general stubborn in his refusal to be seeing acquiescing to what he considered a wrong decision, the country teetered on the verge of political uncertainty. It remained for the chief advisor to reassure the nation as well as the outside world that the appearance of tanks on the streets of Dhaka was in no way a sign of an impending coup d'etat. And yet that was just the kind of fear in which citizens lived and that only weeks before the country was to go the polls. In the event, President Biswas prevailed. Nasim was sacked and swiftly replaced by General Mahbubur Rahman. The elections went ahead, producing a result that saw the Awami League ascend to power for the first time since the violent overthrow of the government of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in August 1975.

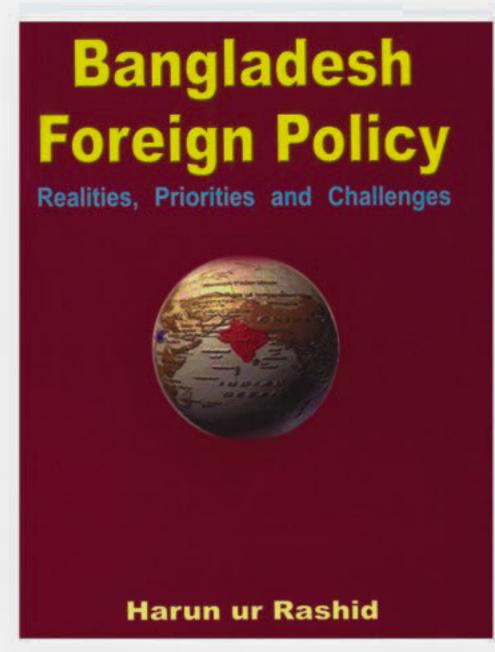
There are the snippets that come with the weightier aspects of Rahman's story. The chief advisor has the Chinese ambassador calling on him. He uses the opportunity of reading out to the envoy part of an English rendering of a poem by Mao Zedong. To his disappointment, however, Justice Rahman notes that the ambassador is more interested in trade exchanges between his country and Bangladesh. At a subsequent stage, it is the Bhutanese ambassador who meets the chief advisor, clearly in a state of great agitation. There are all the reasons why that should have been so. Only a

few days earlier, BNP leader Khaleda Zia, momentarily unaware of the implications of any foreignpolicy related pronouncement on her part, had warned her political rivals that her party would not let Bangladesh become another Bhutan. That could not have gone down well with Thimphu. Besides, Rahman notes, Bhutan was the second state, after India, to accord diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh --- on 7 December 1971.

The work is an enumeration of the travails which sometimes assail those who govern, no matter how brief the period of governance might be. A visitor tells Justice Habibur Rahman that a charge laid at his door is that someone from the land of Mir Jafar had taken over as chief advisor. Rahman hurls his own question at the visitor: 'Where was Mir Jafar born and what was his country?' The man is stumped for a response. And then Rahman tells him that Mir Jafar was born in Najaf in Iraq. End of conversation.

### ... Bengali diplomacy

SUPERANNUATED diplomats sometimes surprise us with their considered view of the profession they have been part of. Of course, there is that matter of distance. The farther you move away from your subject, the more discerning you will likely be in your assessment of a subject with which you have been closely involved. That, if you must know, is something former diplomats have done with a fair degree of regularity in the West. Where the East is concerned, writing on diplomacy or composing diplomatic memoirs is a fairly recent phenomenon. J.N. Dixit and others in India



Bangladesh Foreign Policy Realities, Priorities and Challenges Harun ur Rashid Academic Press and Publishers Ltd

have done a good job of recording their assessments of the history of Indian foreign policy. In quite a few instances, Pakistan has produced a good number of its former diplomats willing to reflect on the times in which they have served the country. In recent weeks, Jamsheed Marker has come forth with his story, one he calls Quiet Diplomacy.

record of events came from Fakhruddin Ahmed, twice foreign secretary and one of the earliest members in a band of former Bengalis in the Pakistan foreign service to forge a foreign policy for Bangladesh. He called his work Critical Times, which remains in many ways a significant account of where Bangladesh's diplomacy succeeded or stumbled, as the case may be, in the years after liberation. There is too Hemayetuddin's A Neighbourly Affair, an analysis of his years as Bangladesh's high commissioner in Delhi. And now comes this pretty serious account of the many dimensions of Bangladesh's foreign policy from one of its more senior and serious practitioners. Harun ur Rashid, again from the old school of diplomats beginning their careers in pre-1971 Pakistan, has since his retirement from service focused on writing for various journals and newspapers in Bangladesh. His interest remains, to a very large extent, diplomacy as it affects relations among the states of South Asia as also countries outside the region. Additionally, his opinions on national politics have demonstrated his grasp of themes and subjects one does not always associate with diplomats.

That sense of politics, or call it his understanding of history, is what Rashid brings to the fore in Bangladesh Foreign Policy. With the general view being that the younger crop of Bangladesh's diplomats has progressively been unable to project the political backdrop against which foreign policy has been shaped in the country, it is quite encouraging to have Rashid give over two entire chapters (and they provide the beginning of the work) to a presentation of Bangladesh's history. That should be rather useful to the reader, whether or not the reader intends to make a career of diplomacy. In a bigger sense, the detailed explanation of the economic and political realities of pre-1971 Pakistan the writer provides as a step toward the larger enumeration of foreign policy making and application in free Bangladesh serves as a composite picture of some of the realities we have lived with. The writer might be excused for sounding somewhat like a pedagogue in his definitions of foreign policy and the many aspects it covers. And the reader could be excused for skipping through these portions of the work, for beyond these come the major factors in the making and implementation of foreign policy in Bangladesh.

The formative years for Bangladesh's diplomacy were of course the times in which Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman symbolized the national spirit. And that is precisely the point where Rashid begins his exposition of the theme under his consideration, of course not before he has drawn attention to the War of Liberation which served as a defining moment for the country. Bengalis had little question as to who sympathized with their cause (in this case the Soviet Union and India) and who did not (read China and the United States). And that was a prime factor in a delineating of foreign policy perspectives once Bangladesh emerged as a sovereign state in late 1971. Once Bangladesh became a reality, however, there were some other realities that confronted the Mujib government. Rashid

notes four issues that the government faced in

1972: repatriation of Bengali civilian and military officials from Pakistan; recognition from the international community; admission into the United Nations and trial of the 195 Pakistani military officers for wartime offences committed in 1971.

Foreign policy under Bangabandhu's government was affected, naturally, by the turbulence that the era typified. And yet it was a time when Bangladesh did succeed in some major diplomatic areas. The international community, with the exception of China and Saudi Arabia, was swift in according recognition to the new state. Membership of international bodies was attained in smooth manner. And by September 1974, once the Chinese had decided not to wield their veto against Bangladesh in the Security Council any more, the country found itself in the UN. There were other accomplishments as well. Bangladesh, besides involving itself actively in the Commonwealth, went cheerfully into the nonaligned movement. Bangabandhu's presence at the NAM summit in Algiers in 1973 was considered a pivotal moment for the new country. In February 1974, with Pakistan finally agreeing to recognize Bangladesh's independence, Mujib led his country into the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) at a summit in Lahore.

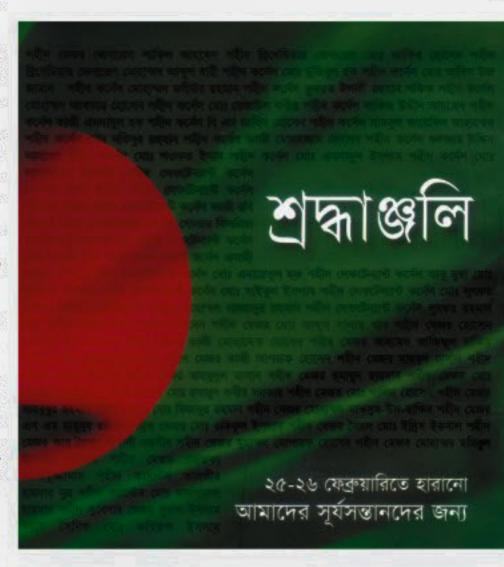
Diplomacy then took a wholly new turn. The catalyst was of course the assassination of the Father of the Nation in August 1975. Khondokar Moshtaque, in his role as 'president' following the massacre in Dhanmondi, quickly made it clear which course Bangladesh meant to take now that the right wing was in the ascendant. This rightward shift took an increasingly definitive turn in the Zia period, to be followed by a further shift away from the original principles of foreign policy under those who came after Zia. Harun ur Rashid focuses, however, on principles rather than personalities in his analyses of the trends Bangladesh has followed in a formulation and implementation of its foreign policy objectives. The sub-title of the book hints at the points Rashid makes. In his view, there are the realities, priorities and challenges that Bangladesh's diplomacy is confronted with.

Turn the pages. You will come by somewhat of an idea of foreign policy as forged and practised by a nation buffeted by gales on many fronts.

#### The tears of the lonely...

HERE are tears that never dry up. And there are the cracked hearts that will likely never heal. You do not need a book to tell you all this. Neither is there anything in philosophy or literature to instill in you the lesson that tragedy is part of life. Tragedy is what we have lived through, indeed might yet live through in the times to be, in Bangladesh. Begin with the beginning. The War of Liberation claimed the lives of 3,000,000 Bengalis. And then came a series of tragic events that were to push much of Bangladesh's political and military leadership to unnatural deaths. The murder of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the four leaders of the Mujibnagar government in 1975 left the country crippled. Whatever remained of idealism as it was shaped during the war came to quick confusion with the murder, over a period of time, of many of the military officers who had taken part in the War of Liberation.

Observed from such a perspective, the murder of seventy individuals, fifty seven of them senior and mid ranking army officers, through a mutiny at Bangladesh Rifles in February 2009 is but a continuation of the long tragic story that has In Bangladesh, an early instance of a diplomatic defined life independent Bangladesh. And yet it was a tragedy different from all the other horrific tales that had come earlier. For one thing, these murdered officers did not lose their lives in a strug-



Shraddhanjali 25-26 February te Harano Amader Shurjoshontander Jonno **Colonel Mojib Trust** 

gle normally waged for political supremacy or power. For another, the very fact that a wellorganized conspiracy was afoot to dispense with their lives was never suspected, let alone apprehended, by the state. That the intelligence unit of the BDR itself was involved in the sinister act is reflective of the depths to which conspiracy could slide. It was not a mere mutiny or conspiracy that left the nation reeling in shock. It was patent, premeditated murder.

Recall the sheer cruelty of the men who went about murdering their commanding officers and then molesting the families of the dead. Those were scenes straight out of the past, a throwback to the Pakistani occupation in 1971. The difference was that where earlier it was foreign depredations that were doing Bengalis in, now it was Bengalis mercilessly snuffing the life out of other Bengalis. And then there were the graves, shallow and surreptitiously dug, even as the leaders of the mutiny were being escorted, improbably, to a meeting with the nation's prime minister, for the bodies to be dumped into.

Here, in this labour of love and tears, is remembrance of the fallen. The wives weep in fond memory of the young, energetic husbands they have lost to human insensitivity for all time. The children recall the faces of their fathers and will grow into youth and old age with scars that will not heal.

It is a tale that makes a nation remember. The tears will come again. The cracks in the heart get wider.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs/ Literary Editor, The Daily Star

### Taking a peek into a lost era

Subrata Kumar Das enjoys reading on men and events

ROFESSOR Mozaffar Hossain, though not a very well acquainted literary figure, has been contributing enormously to the liberal arts in the last decade. A teacher of philosophy, Mozaffar Hossain's most praiseworthy book has been Aro Koyekjon Socrates that was published in 2008. Before that his translation from English into the Bangla of Marxism and Poetry by George Thomson, The Mayor of Casterbridge by Thomas Hardy and Islam by Alfred Guillaume drew attention of a good part of the literati of the country. His recent book Pata Ultai, an autobiographical work in nature, is also worth mentioning as a significant work.

Pata Ultai is not a traditional autobiographical book as is generally found at the booksellers'. Rather it is a compilation of write-ups, not necessarily essays in the true sense, that tell of a gradual tale of a man who is now on the verge of seventy five. Write-ups compiled here have added some introductory and concluding chapters as well. It has some pages which tell of the wisdom, in brief, that Mozaffar Hossain attained through his own experiences in life. Thus the book becomes a worthy read for anyone, young or old, educated or less educated.

'Educated'? Mozaffar Hossain strongly states that the phrase 'educated person' is wrong terminology because 'educated' is one who has finished his education. Some more aphoristic thoughts like that may be cited here:

Your tongue is your friend, and not a less great

Kindness to all living beings is a fake idea. If Goutama Buddha knew that plants have life too, what would he eat? But slaughtering animals in a festive way is an exaggeration.

One can give a speech or become a chairperson against his post, but cannot become a wise man. Politeness and modesty are strengths, not weak-

nesses. You may have failed to discover greatness in some

aspect in one whom you consider less than great. Man is not finally 'good' or 'bad'.

These are instances of some 121 pieces that Mozaffar Hossain, a man of simple living but high thinking, has arranged very amusing manner in the

The book comprises 19 chapters, big as well as small, along with some 23 sub-chapters. The subchapters are included in 'Khondo Chitro Ekattor', 'Bikshipto Smriti' and 'Smritir Manush'. The people about whom the writer has constructed stories include Dr Govinda Chandra Dev, Mizanur Rahman, Narendranath Mitra, Khogesh Kiron Talukder, Waheedul Haque, Aroj Ali Matubbar, Rajendralal Das, Kazi Abul Hossain, Poet Ataur Rahman, Safat Ahmed Chowdhury, et al. No doubt the 30 pages dedicated to the aforesaid personalities, great in any sense of the term, are a precious treasure for readers.

How does Mozaffar Hossain open his book? 'Je Karone ei Lekha', a one-page piece, makes the reader interested in diving into the remaining 140 pages. A touch of nostalgia and sorrow hovers over the page, or to speak true over the whole book. "My father would, every now and then, say, 'If you write a book, even a book for children, you will be remembered." Mozaffar Hossain, born in 1936, then ushers the reader into the next phase, small pieces called 'Nijer Kotha Bolar Eti Neti', 'Nijei Nijer Mukhomukhi', 'Proyato Priyojoner Proti Sroddha' and 'Amar Proyato Pita Ekjon Mohajagotic Manush'. These small pieces are very simple in thought and language but do have many keen points that allure the reader not to move any other

Additionally the author has incorporated some informative pieces that shed light on many of the different phases of the writer's life. 'Koto Chhotobelar Kotha', 'Amar School Jiboner Prothom Din', 'Mama Bari O Mamu-Bhagina Golpo', 'Chollish Doshoke Dhakaye', 'Dhaka Theke Dinajpur', 'Dinajpurer Mukh', 'Proyato Pitar Dairy', et cetera, give a flashback of the multifarious turns that took place during the childhood, adolescence and youthful stages of Mozaffar Hossain's life.

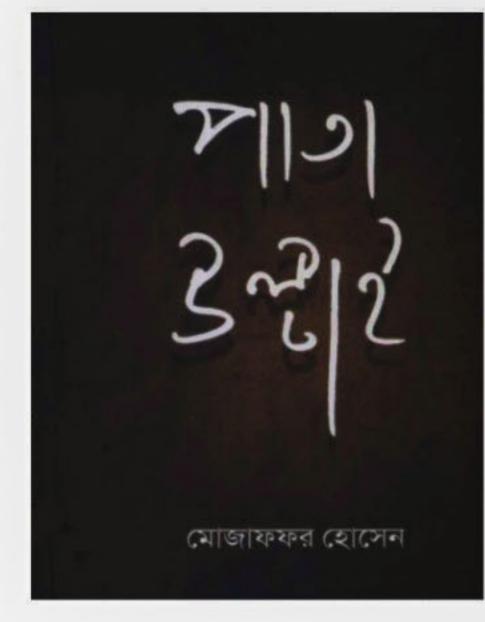
Later on came the eventful events of 1971. The

writer has incorporated six pieces on the 1971 War of Liberation. These are not the usual Muktijuddho writings, but have some special touches that make them worthy of being read. 'Bikshipto Smriti' demonstrates many different aspects of our life. Modernity and entertainment of the bygone days, music of the old, how started reading, or the films of lost times are really great documentations of Bengali life in the 1950s and 1960s. To have a clear view of the old but golden days, Pata Ultai could prove an invaluable read for many.

Mozaffar Hossain has given accounts of his personal encounter with people of great importance, some of whom were his teachers. Some were colleagues, some were teachers cum colleagues, and some were his friends. He has not shaped very scholarly dissertations on them, but his thoughts actually bring out reflections if the true inner mind of the truly scholar personality.

Failing to control temptation, I am presenting below some of the excerpts (in my own translation) from those outstanding prose pieces:

"At Bahadurabad Ghat, the checker of the ferry challenged him (Dr Govinda Chandra Dev) as a passenger of the first class. Maybe it was because of



Pata Ultai Mozaffar Hossain Bodhi, Dhaka

his shabby outfit. Being asked to show his first class ticket Dr Dev responded, "I am a man of first class though I look third class." Now so many first class people do have third class minds. Alas! If the Pakistani army had made the same mistake considering him a third class person!" (p. 104)

"Mizan Bhai (the editor of Meezanur Rahmaner Troimashik Potrika) observed the riots of 1946 that he later recounted in his book Krishno Sholoi (The Black Sixteenth). ... We all know that Hindus and Muslims killed people of each other's community in the riots. But we know little about those who sacrificed their lives to save people of the other community." (p. 106)

"The man (Rajendranath Das) left the government job lest he might have to leave Dinajpur. But what a tragedy that he had to leave the country! He had to do it as a result of some conspiracies that caused insecurity for him." (p. 119)

"No contemporary time shows due respect to its revolutionary genius. If sometimes it does, it is earned as a reward of much oppression and tribute .... At the end of his (Aroj Ali Matobbar's) life, he could draw respect from some kind souls." (p. 125)

Bodhi, a sister organisation of Takshashila, has set a good example through publishing this nonprofitable book. We believe readers in Bangladesh as well as West Bengal will applaud the writer and publisher of Pata Ultai in terms of its contents and material qualities.

Subrata Kumar Das, a teacher and essayist, has set up a web site called

## Light in the dark

#### Md. Zahidul Haque celebrates an endeavour

PARK of Light In Poverty Alleviation and Rural Development for A Quarter Century is actually a research report composed by two eminent faculty members of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University (SAU), Dhaka, Prof. Mohammad Hossain Bhuiyan and Associate Prof. Dr. Md. Sekender Ali and published on the occasion of 25 years of Dipshikha, an international nonformal education, training, and research society for village development. The book contains databased information with research findings and interpretations about the development activities rendered by Dipshikha during its 25 years of dedicated service to its client system, donor agencies and development workers. In 1984, Dipshikha took birth as a silent social movement from grassroots level initiated by some self-driven and selfmotivated non-elites who ranged from school teachers to local leaders. Since its inception Dipshikha has been working with the least educated downtrodden people in the field of agriculture, education, health and sanitation, human rights and good governance and has succeeded in attaining significant achievement in the sector of socio-economic development in Bangladesh and

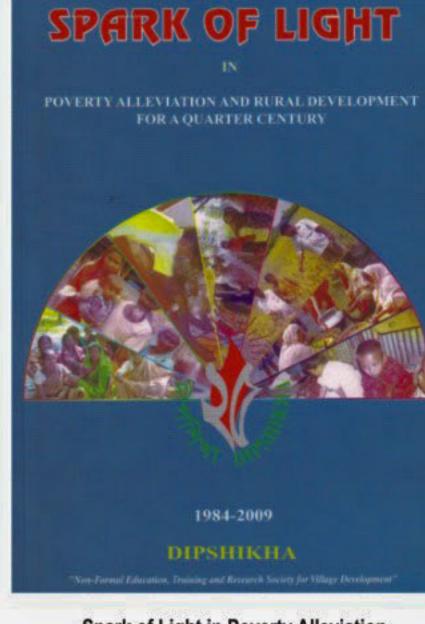
elsewhere. Poverty is one of the major problems in Bangladesh. It signifies an inability to afford basic food and non-food items to people. The Bangladesh government has been working hard to alleviate poverty. Dipshikha has also its poverty alleviation programme, which is being implemented through its Group Based Approach (GBA) and Family Development Approach (FDA). According to research findings related in the book, both GBA and FDA have been effective in poverty alleviation, enhancing the numbers of the upper middle class from 16 % to 37.40, which indicates a significant drop in the percentage of extreme poor to poor people. According to the book, Dipshikha has introduced many income generation activities to contain poverty. Agricultural innovations were transferred and training extended to diffuse new technologies into the social system. The book also contains findings on Dipshikha's accomplishment in the fields of education, health and sanitation. During the last quarter century, Dipshikha has established nearly 404 pre-schools in different areas of Dinajpur and Sirajgonj districts and ensured elementary education for 16,620 children. It has made outstanding accomplishments in the

people of its project area and sanitary latrines for 47.9% beneficiaries.

In a nutshell, Dipshikha has made remarkable achievements in making people self-reliant and poverty-free.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter focuses on the development perspectives in Bangladesh by the government and NGOs in relation to the national and millennium goals (MDGs) set by the United Nations. The rest of the chapters deal with Dipshikha's activities and outcome as also research findings.

The work indeed shows the spark of light gener-



Spark of Light in Poverty Alleviation And Rural Development for a Quarter Century Mohammad Hossain Bhuiyan Md. Sekender Ali Dipshikha

ated by the persistent efforts of Dipshikha towards promoting human welfare and rural development. The book can serve as an excellent reference for development workers as also for those planning development projects in rural Bangladesh.

health and sanitation sector as well. It has ensured Professor M Zahidul Haque is associated with Shersupply of safe arsenic-free drinking water for 98.8% e-Bangla University, Dhaka.