

Does civil society matter?

Kajal Bandhyopadhyay explores the many dimensions of it

A proof of widespread charlatanry in Bangladesh is how we go by shallow and superficial ideas about important issues. One may easily place the example of our handling of the concept of a civil society. Civil society is what we nowadays mention off and on. Very recently one typically important person here came to call it 'evil' even. It is difficult to pinpoint when this phrase came to acquire wide currency in our country, but once it settled in, nobody looked back before using it to mean this, that and what not.

As far as I remember, NGOs and some related political quarters introduced the term during the early nineties in vague and unclear meanings, and that they did to conceal the truth of their failure in solving important problems in the running of the state. Civil society has been offered here also as an alternative to the political class, thus misleading people and luring them into confusion and false optimism. This may have connection with the rapid development of the concept of civil society on a global scale after the fall of the communist system and that again may be a part of the neo-liberal strategies linked to what is known as the Washington consensus. Studies have also been published, which deal with unresolved issues regarding the use of the term in connection with the impact and conceptual power of the international aid system. So, finally, the mystery of a sudden introduction of this concept in very loose and vague meanings can be said to be connected with the character of our state and its rulers who were unsuccessful and refused to admit that.

An attempt to correct the situation of confusion about civil society has recently been made by Prof. Rangalal Sen, who has come up with a full-length book in Bengali on civil society and some related issues. The main component of Prof. Sen's remarkable elaboration of the concept of "civil society" is his introducing us to the ideas of the pioneering Scottish thinker Adam Ferguson. As he informs us in the introduction to *Civil Society*, he could collect a copy of a core book in the area of civil society or the whole subject of sociology, *Essay on the History of Civil Society* with the help of his daughter, Papiya, studying at Arizona University in the USA. As some of us may know, Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* is an epoch-making book. We may also know that Adam Ferguson created this classic work in sociology in 1767. He was a leading thinker of the Scottish Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and was a friend of Adam Smith and David Hume. Born in 1723, he succeeded Hume in 1757 as librarian to the faculty of advocates, and in 1764 was appointed Professor of Natural Philosophy at Edinburgh. He resigned from his professorship in 1785, and in 1792, published his collected lectures under the title, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*. He died on February 22, 1816.

A philosopher and historian, Adam Ferguson occupies a unique place in eighteenth-century Scottish thought. A man of energy and verve, he made important contributions to social and moral theory, political philosophy and to the study of history. Reared in the highlands of Scotland, he lived most of his life in the enlightenment world of Edinburgh, participating in the city's social clubs and in the broader public and intellectual life of his nation. Renowned for *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), he also wrote pamphlets on political issues, published works of moral and political philosophy, authored a multi-volume history of the Roman Republic and composed numerous manuscript essays. Distinguished by a moral and historical bent, his work is framed within a teleological outlook that upholds the importance of action and virtue in the emerging commercial society of the eighteenth century.

Rangalal Sen has dealt with the topic of civil society in three essays here, namely "Civil Society: Adam Ferguson's Pratham Prostabona", "Civil Society: Plato Theke Rousseau" and "Rashtra Ebong Civil Society: Prasango Ekusher Panchash." In the first of these essays, we find Prof. Sen elaborating on Ferguson's distinct and characteristic ideas that led him finally to arrive at an idea of the margin of civil society over civilization or society. He points out that Ferguson's importance as a thinker rests on his recognition of the important role played by society in shaping human values. Ferguson particularly rejected any notion of a "state of nature" in which men lived as individuals before society was established. Being a social animal, man was condi-

tioned by necessity, habit, language and familial or societal guidance. Societies as a whole, Ferguson asserted, are dynamic, following a pattern of change from "savagery" to "barbarism" to "civilization." Like individuals, they learn from and build upon the past. Different societies may, however, reflect particular characteristics based on factors such as geography or climate. Ferguson's ideas are thus shown to have a materialistic bent. And then Ferguson rather celebrates contradiction to be the guiding force of history.

Prof. Sen has thus placed the historical perspective of the idea of 'civil society,' placed it as one socio-political phenomenon related with society that went before and composed the perspective of the rise of state in the history of mankind. The concept of *societas civilis* is Roman, and was introduced by Cicero. The political discourse in the classical period places importance on the idea of a 'good society' in ensuring peace and order among the people.



Civil Society
Dr. Rangalal Sen
Tapan Prokashon

The question of safeguarding private property definitely was a crucial motivator in all talks about peace, order and civility. The philosophers in the classical period did not make any distinction between the state and society. Rather they held that the state represented the civil form of society and 'civility' represented the requirement of good citizenship. Moreover, they held that human beings are inherently so rational that they can collectively shape the nature of the society they belong to. In addition, human beings have the capacity to voluntarily gather for the common cause and maintain peace in society. By holding this view, we can say that classical political thinkers endorsed the genesis of civil society in its original sense.

John Locke developed a concept similar to Hobbes', regarding the political condition in England. That was the period of the Glorious Revolution, marked by the struggle between the divine right of the Crown and the political rights of Parliament. Rarely can a society by-pass this kind of conflict, and this led Locke to forge a 'social contract' theory, of a limited state and a powerful society. Both Hobbes and Locke had thus set forth a system, in which peaceful coexistence among human beings could be ensured through social pacts or contracts. What is impor-

tant is that their attempts to explain human nature, natural laws, the social contract and the formation of government had challenged the divine right theory. In difference from divine right, Hobbes and Locke claimed the human capacity to design political order. And, this idea had a great impact on the thinkers in the Enlightenment period. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant also argued that people are peace-lovers and that wars are the creation of absolute regimes. As far as Kant was concerned, this system was effective to guard against domination of a single interest and check the tyranny of the majority. And, in Bangladesh, we sometimes find consideration of such roles to be played by civil society.

What Dr. Sen doesn't come to place in his book is how G.W.F. Hegel completely changed the meaning of civil society, giving rise to a modern liberal understanding of it as a form of market society as differently from institutions of nation-state. Unlike his predecessors, he considered civil society as a separate area, a "system of needs", that stood for the satisfaction of individual interests and private property. Hegel held also that civil society had emerged at the particular period of capitalism and served its interests: individual rights and private property. Being an area of capitalist interests, it would be characterized by conflicts and inequalities within it. Constant surveillance of the state is, therefore, imperative to sustain moral order in society. Hegel thus came up with the idea of the state as the highest form of ethical life, and also that the political state has the capacity and authority to correct the faults of civil society. Alexis de Tocqueville, however, on the basis of comparison between despotic France and democratic America, contested Hegel, attributing opposite weight on the system of civilian and political associations against liberal individualism and centralized state. Thus, Hegel's perception of social reality was moderated by Tocqueville, who saw a difference between political society and civil society.

And, this was the conception that Karl Marx carried forward. As Marx saw it, civil society was the 'base' where productive forces and social relations worked, whereas political society was the 'superstructure'. He agreed with the idea of the link between capitalism and civil society and that the latter represents the interests of the bourgeoisie. The state also, as superstructure, therefore, protects the interests of the dominant class; it ensures the domination of the bourgeoisie. Marx thus rejected the idea of the positive role of state Hegel put forth. He rejected the role of the state as a neutral negotiator or arbitrator. Marx considered both the state and civil society as tools and instruments of the bourgeoisie, and wanted them to wither away.

Then this all-negative view about civil society, in a further turn, was worked upon by Antonio Gramsci. And, nowadays, we find in Bangladesh some echoes and reflections of Gramsci's views. First of all, and differing with Marx, Gramsci did not consider civil society as all-colocated with the socio-economic base of the state. Gramsci located civil society rather in the political superstructure. He indicated, however, a crucial role of civil society as a contributor to the cultural and ideological force required for the survival of the hegemony of capitalism. And, so, in stead of viewing it as a problem, as in Marx's thoughts, Gramsci viewed civil society as an instrument of crisis-mangement.

Professor Rangalal Sen has included a number of essays that touch upon the bearings of these other viewpoints from which the question of civil society can be looked at, particularly in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's historic Language Movement, Liberation War, struggle for democracy here, etc., are definitely some of them. Others are there. Actually in the third most important essay in the book, "Rashtra Ebong Civil Society: Prasango Ekusher Panchash," Prof. Sen has taken exactly this scope, and placed many of the historical and theoretical contexts and debates we have placed above.

A book with better-grounded discussions on the very important topic of 'civil society' has not perhaps yet been written or published in Bangladesh.

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Stirrings in the heart

Syed Badrul Ahsan cruises through poetry

Poetry elevates the soul. It sharpens the senses. Best of all, it explores the entirety of being. That happens to be at the core of this work. Do not be surprised by the bilingual nature of it. There are the poems in the original, by Zahida Meherunnissa. And then there are the English versions of them, crafted into meticulous form by Feiroy Adams. You might argue that there is a straying of the rules here in that the poems come in a package, that is, in a single volume. Obviously, though, Adams was too moved by Meherunnissa's poetry to consider coming forth with them separately. And thus you have the pleasure of a work, coming to you per courtesy of Meherunnissa, enhanced through the constructive engagement, as it were, of Feiroy Adams.

The title (or titles) of the work speaks of the principle underlying its form and substance. Meherunnissa calls it *Atyotsharon*. Adams takes it on from there, coming up with the rather reflective *Elevation of the Soul*. And, indeed, in the elevated begins the poetry. You start off with Ekushey February, a seminal point if ever there was one in the history of Bangladesh. Ekushey, in the national consciousness, has been the sheet anchor of Bengali nationalist politics. It is precisely such a point which Meherunnissa and Adams seek to convey through their poem here. In simple terms, every remembrance of Ekushey is a rediscovery of the individual and collective soul of Bengal. It is a stream of thought that extends itself through the poetry. In *Onadhokare Ot Pete Achhe*, it is the War of Liberation that emerges as the theme. Yes, the war is over and yet there are all the hyenas lying in wait in the dark. You cannot miss the sense of politics here. But then, poetry must speak of momentous events. And that precisely is what it does, if you look into Meherunnissa's soul.

There are patent images of the fearful state the poet draws here. She speaks of the stubborn pride of Zaidee Muntazar, of his refusal to bow before the forces of autocracy. Adams gives that powerful sentiment his own voice:

The strength and courage that you bear / Give particles of those to your comrades to steer / Over the waves of cowardice and fear . . .

Poetry, in simple terms, is often a loud protest against the manifest injustices of society. And yet poetry must also go back to its other, some would say original moorings. Nothing could be more stirring about love, about the bonding of hearts, than an expression of it through verse and rhyme. In *Shomaj Bichhhinno*, *Shudhu Tumi Aami Deep*, translated as *Isolated Island by Aami*, it is the heart that wishes to take flight. Crazy love searches far and wide for contentment, on a journey that will not end:

Behold, my lover on that ground / Green youthhood cannot be found / Youth is trying to ebb away . . .

Love then assumes the shape of passion, almost epic-like in its quality, in the poem *Tomar Jonno Aami* (I Stand for You). Observe the lofty call of the heart:

For you / I can become a river . . . / Which flows to the sea, huge and grand . . . / I can try / To change the colour of the sky / And to blossom the flowering shrub . . . / I can melt / as under within moment / From ice to waterdrops / I can become Behula for you . . . And then, softly, almost on tiptoe, love transforms itself into the lyrically passionate. In the Bengali original, *Bolgahara*, is captured the essence of the throbbing of the heart:

*Nebhena kokhono
Amar koshter bonhidohon
Hridoyer pothe tumi shudhu jege thako . . .*

It is a journey of the soul you undertake through the poetry. There is longing, interspersed with the intensity of desire. Something stirs in the heart.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review and Star Literature

Of poetry and science

M. Zahidul Haque rediscovers Nazrul

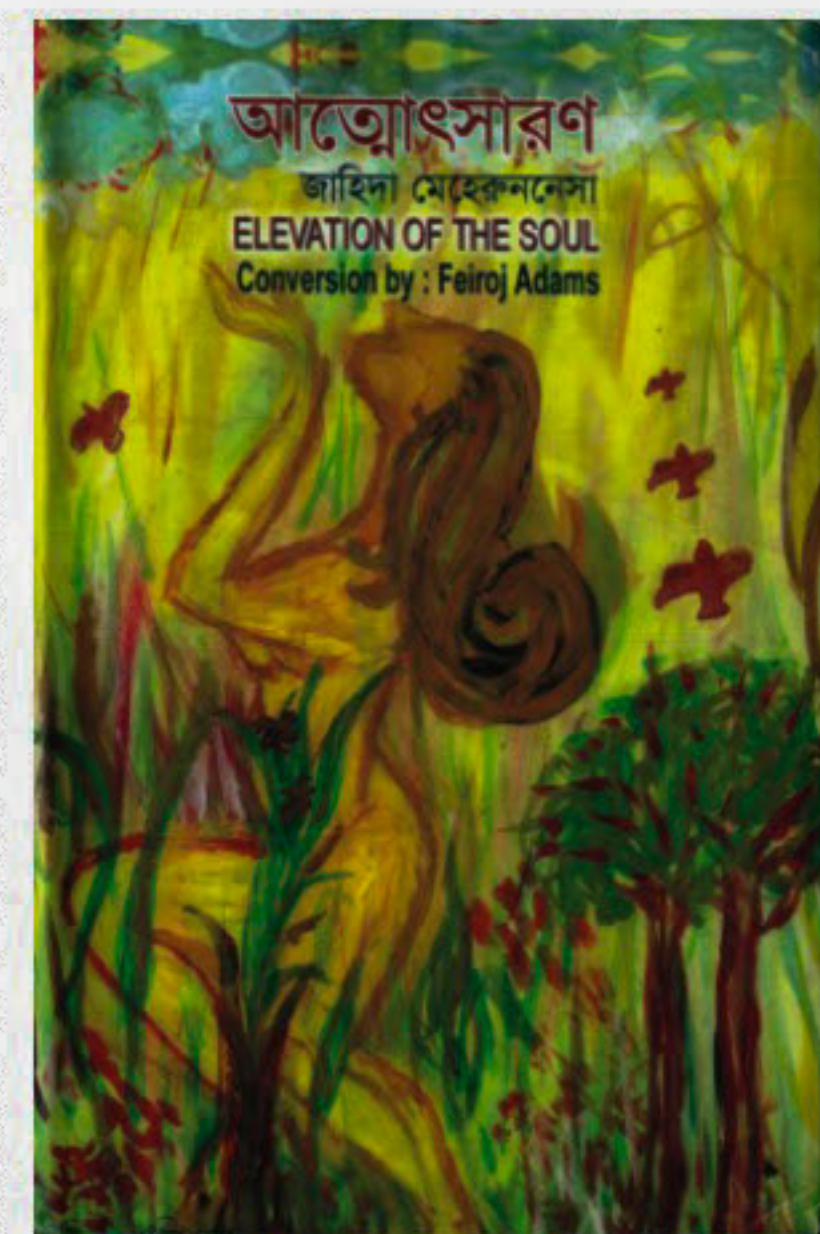
THE book under review, although a small publication, yet contains some important observations on our national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, who is popularly known as the Rebel Poet. We know that Nazrul Islam was a genius with versatile talents. Till now much research on the literary aspects of the poet's outstanding works has been conducted and a lot of unknown findings have also been released. But as far as this reviewer's knowledge goes, no research has so far been undertaken to explore the scientific aspects of Nazrul's wonderful poetic creations. The author of the work *Mohabiggani Kobi Nazrul* undertook research work to explore the scientific messages hidden in the poetic verses of the great poet. As revealed by the author, it was Poet Nazrul who hinted at the arrival of the mobile phone (or mutho phone) in his famous poem *Sangkalpo*: "BISHSHAWJOGOT DEKHBO AAMI AAPON HATER MUTHOYE PURE . . ." (I shall see the universe by capturing it in my own hands. . .)

Nazrul's above verse contains important scientific information and guidelines, which have now become a reality! The proof is today's mobile phone, internet network. Now we have succeeded in capturing the entire universe within our communication system, that is, within our hands through the application of internet and mobile phone technology.

While investigating the insight of Nazrul's work philosophy, the author discovered the great poet's in-depth knowledge about the firmament. Pointing to the infinity of space, the poet said: "SHUNNE MOHA-AKASH MOGNO LILA-BILASHE BHANGGICHO GORICHO NITIKHONE KHONE . . ." In the firmament, the process of construction and destruction is going on continuously. The temperature at the centre of the sun is 1.5 crore degree celcius. In order to generate this heat sixty crore tons of hydrogen are burnt every second. The sun is a star and in every star this process of construction and destruction goes on. And the poet through his above verses indicated this natural phenomenon. This finding suggests that Nazrul was a firmament-observant scientist too. There are many more startling facts and scientific connections revealed by the author about the scientific thoughts reflected in the poetic works of Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. The book is full of scientific information used by the author to interpret the hidden messages in the poems of the great poet. There is hardly any doubt that readers will find the book quite informative, interesting and thought-provoking.

Comments on the work have come from a number of distinguished personalities, among whom are Ashraf Siddiqui, Chairman, Nazrul Academy and former Director General, Bangla Academy; Prof. A.A.M.S. Arefin Siddique, Vice Chancellor, Dhaka University; Prof. Dr. Md. Shah-E-Alam, Vice Chancellor, Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, who have given messages of good wishes appreciating Krishibid Rafiqul Islam Chowdhury's book 'Mohabiggani Kobi Nazrul', calling it a unique work which opened a new vista of Poet Nazrul's outstanding talents.

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Atyotsharon
Zahida Meherunnissa
Elevation of the Soul
Conversion: Feiroy Adams
Salahuddin Boighar

Perspectives of a Bhutto

Syed Mahbubur Rashid finds a new book on Pakistan riveting

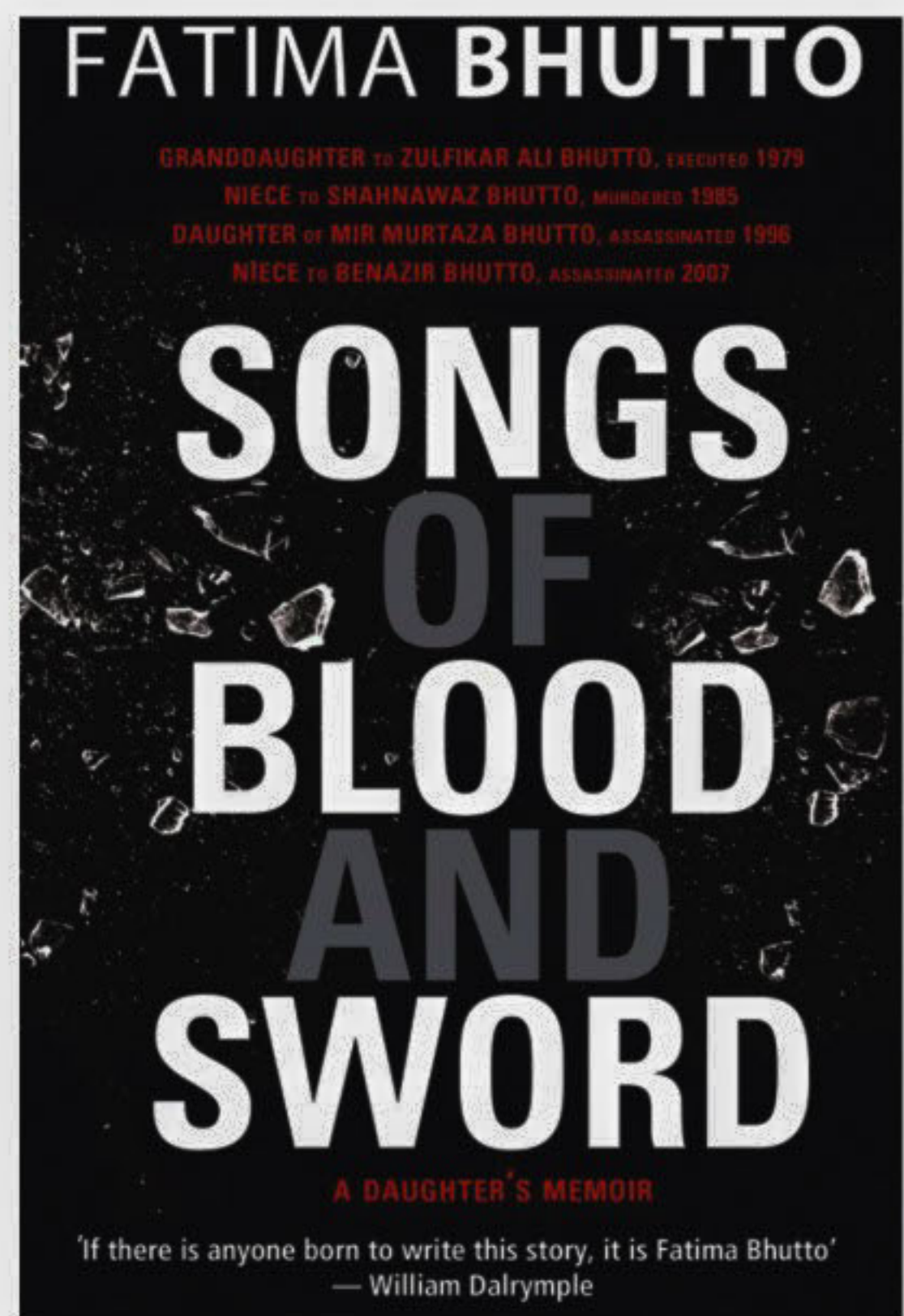
FATIMA Bhutto has taken great pains in writing this book. She conducted a series of interviews both in and outside Pakistan of the persons who were either related to the Bhutto family in different ways or in the knowledge of affairs as media people. The writing indicates that the author is in quest of searching the glory and merit of her late lamented father Murtaza Bhutto, the first son of ZA Bhutto, former prime minister of Pakistan who was hanged by his protegee General Ziaul Haque through the so-called trial held by the army influenced civil court. Throughout the book I have found the agony of Electra for securing justice for her father. The book opens with the chapter where she has narrated the painful incident of the shooting of her father. When she first hears the sound of shots of firearms, she frantically tries to contact her aunt Benazir Bhutto then prime minister of Pakistan. But, according to her, Benazir's oleaginous husband Asif Ali Zardari (presently president of Pakistan) refuses to give in. Finally it is he who confirms that Mortuza has been shot. Can it be thought that the brother of the prime minister can be so openly shot and killed without the blessing of the state? But, of course, this is the legacy of Pakistan.

One may not agree with all of Fatima Bhutto's views but in certain cases she has remained faithful to the history. Before going further I would like to comment about the title of the book. She is the grand daughter of the executed ZA Bhutto. Her father Mir Murtaza Bhutto was shot and killed at a time when her aunt (Murtaza's sister) was prime minister of Pakistan. Her uncle Shahnawaz Bhutto had earlier been mysteriously killed. In 2007, during the election campaign her aunt and former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated. All these incidents fully justify the title of the book. As a matter of fact, in Pakistan a number of atrocities have claimed a large number of human lives through army action either in Balochistan or in Bangladesh (during 1971). ZA Bhutto was the pioneer of political activities so far as his family was concerned. His political odyssey began in 1958 when he jumped on to the army bandwagon under General Ayub Khan. It was a wrong choice. The Pakistan army along with the Punjabi civil bureaucracy had always intrigued and conspired against political leaders from the very inception of Pakistan. So it was a Faustian agreement for Bhutto when he came under the fold and tutelage of the Pakistan army in order to carry out its political mission. According to Fatima Bhutto, "Mujib wanted the constitution to be framed by his party, allowing him to form the government, while Zulfikar was not comfortable with the army's assurances that the PPP would be given as equal a hand as the Awami League in the proceedings. Effectively, promising power and position to both parties, the army played the two men against each other and ensured that no harmonious settlement was reached." Ultimately the Pak army let loose the reign of terror in the then east Pakistan.

Fatima Bhutto has to a great extent admitted the fact. Let me quote from her book: "The violence of the conflict was staggering. Reports from East Pakistan placed the number of civilian casualties in the millions, citing figures of around 3 million killed. Pakistani officials, via the ludicrous

Hamood-ur-Rehman commission --- whose pages were edited by the army and whose full copy no one has yet seen --- insisted the number was closer to some 30,000, a mere by-product of the war. International figures, treading lightly, estimated around 200,000 dead on the Eastern front. While the numbers differ, estimated around 200,000 dead on the Eastern front. While the numbers differ, there is no dispute regarding the sheer force used by the Pakistani Army against civilians, most notably women." Again, "In addition to reports of sanctioned violence towards women, there were charges levelled against the Pakistani Army for its use of violence towards intellectuals, academics and minorities, Hindus specifically. Word had spread to Karachi that the Pakistani Army, having killed 200 intellectuals in Dhaka, was planning to carry out the same kind of massacre in Sindh to quell inconvenient questions of their brutality in the civil war."

On getting this news Bhutto became furious and called General Gul Hasan, corps commander of Sindh, and

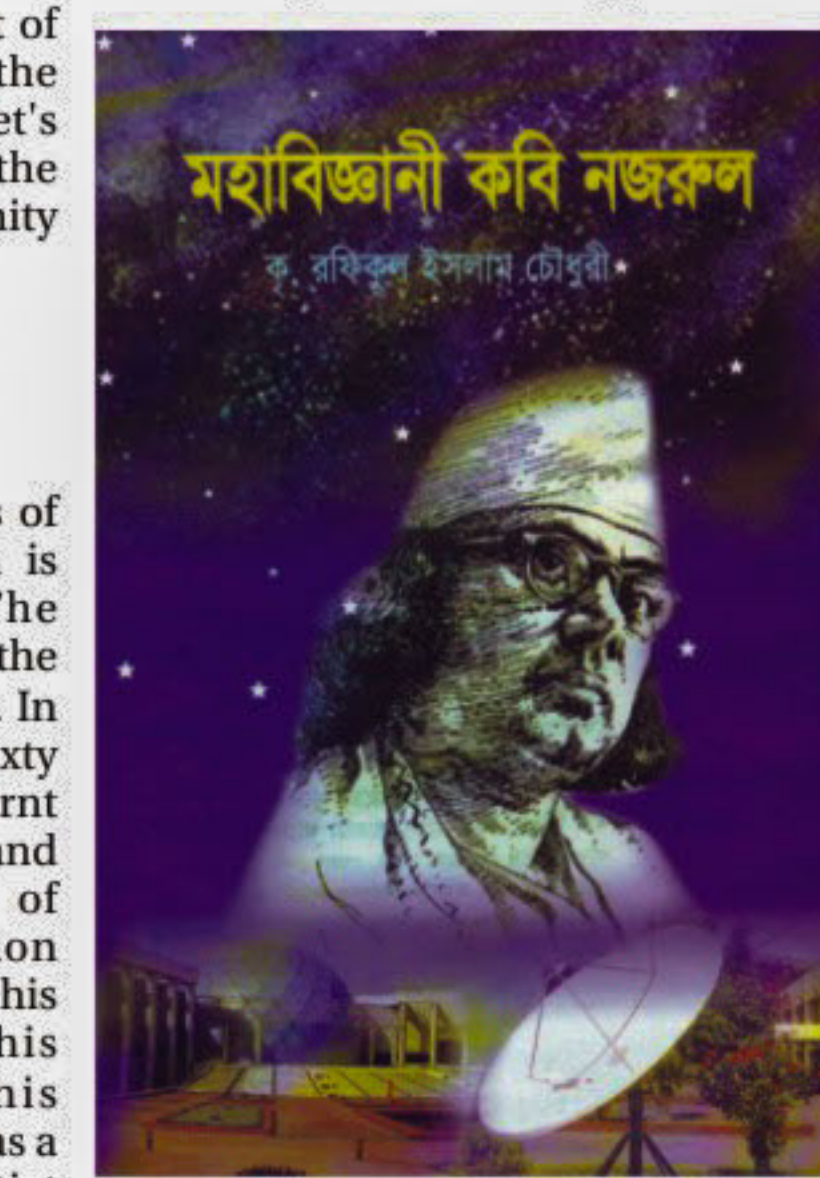


Songs of Blood and Sword
Fatima Bhutto
Viking/Penguin

threatened that in such a situation he would be the second Mujib. This comment of Bhutto is an acknowledgment of the fact that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was a brave and undisputed leader of Bangladesh. Fatima Bhutto should get a salute from us as she has challenged the misleading information provided by Sharmila Bose who, in 2005, came to Bangladesh and went back with the tutored knowledge that the incidents of rape in 1971 were negligible. Sharmila Bose is the grand daughter of the great Indian Nationalist leader Subash Chandra Bose. She is also a Harvard educated academic.

Fatima Bhutto has described the touching incident involving a rape victim named Khadija on page 101 of her book. Fatima Bhutto narrates the sufferings of the Baloch, another wretched group in Pakistan. The Baloch people did not want to join Pakistan but their rulers were bribed and they joined Pakistan. Ever since Baluchistan, rich in mineral resources, has been plundered by successive Pakistani rulers. Earlier in Ayub's time the butcher General Tikka Khan carried out a massacre in Baluchistan. General Tikka won a double crown as butcher when he committed genocide in Bangladesh in 1971. In the words of Fatima Bhutto, "In 1972, the Baloch found themselves pushed against the wall once more. They had voted alongside the Awami League and were further isolated when East Pakistan broke away from the union." ZA Bhutto also sent the army at the instigation of the Shah of Iran, who had been apprehending armed attacks from Baluchistan." In the resultant encounter, ten thousand Baloch people were killed. Fatima Bhutto's narrative continues: "The army was sent into Balochistan once more. Zulfikar was not the first premier to take excessive measures against the Baloch, but he shouldn't have acted in conformity with his predecessors, all insecurely prone to excessive violence against the Baloch people." In 1976, after General Tikka Khan retired, Bhutto appointed General Ziaul Haque as the new army chief over the heads of five senior generals. When Bhutto was arrested and General Zia made almost all arrangements to hang him, his sons Murtaza and Shahnawaz moved around the world to save their father's life. As part of this campaign Bhutto's sons met Yasser Arafat, the PLO chief, who assured them that Bhutto's life would be saved. Arafat was confident. Why? This would be clear from Fatima Bhutto's narrative: "He recounted a story of running into General Zia at Mecca while both men were performing the Hajj. Arafat told the brothers that 'he asked General Zia in front of the Kaaba to spare Bhutto's life and that the General had promised clemency.'" Every author is sure to have his/her personal views, philosophy and social and political outlook. From this point of view certain comments or remarks of Fatima Bhutto seem to be faithful to history. She is reticent in making her comments about a person or an incident. This book can be treated as a work of research and will be of great use to those who wish to dwell on the political history of Pakistan --- of the present or of bygone days.

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Mohabiggani Kobi Nazrul
Krishibid Rafiqul Islam Chowdhury
Chhayaneer, Tangail