

A freedom fighter's testament

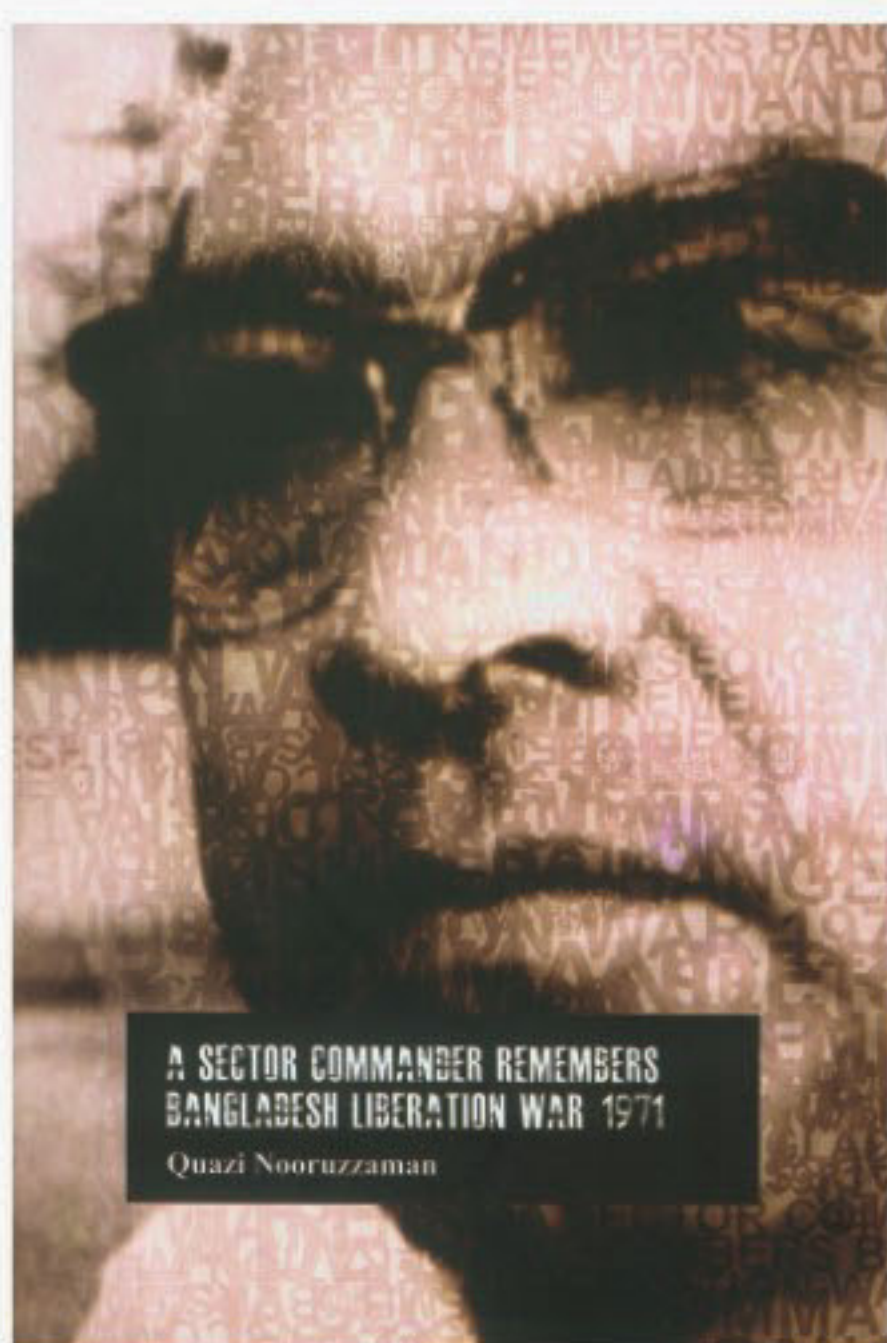
Shahid Alam has a positive opinion of a soldier's tale

“THOSE who try to distort history are living in a fool's paradise, because history itself proceeds unopposed, victorious with the passage of time, crushing untruth. History cannot be influenced by any particular polity.”

Now, isn't that the truth, but one that the abysmal political culture of Bangladesh seems to consign to the dustbin of history by being the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand believing that, by so hiding from reality, the storm that is blowing about is really not happening? But however much one tries to hide from the truth, the harsh reality is that, some day, the truth will come out. History will see to that. The lines quoted at the outset have been taken from Quazi Nooruzzaman's slim volume entitled *A Sector Commander Remembers Bangladesh Liberation War 1971*, translated by Zahiruddin Md. Alim. And he has given his perspective on the Liberation War all right, at least some of which will give heartache to a number of people, but, which, I dare say, detached and unbiased history will one day establish as truths.

“History exists,” as Elias Bickerman, once Professor Emeritus of History at Columbia University, has written, “only in a persisting society which needs history to persist.” And, more than many countries, history needs to persist in Bangladesh. Quazi Nooruzzaman was the commander of Sector 7 during the Liberation War who, unusually for someone who risked so much in the battle zone, but which reveals a good deal about the man and his way of thinking, declined the award of Bir Uttam on the ground that the Liberation War was a people's war, and that gallantry awards are given to professional soldiers (“Everyone is a soldier in a war of liberation, young and old alike...It would be impossible to pick and choose among the many who deserve it.”). And, throughout the book, he strives to show that the freedom struggle was fought mostly by ordinary people rising to extraordinary heights. These words eloquently capture his efforts at telling the people's story, and not just of those who took up arms: “The ones whom I would rather write about are not ones lost, they have never even been properly recognized. Nor have they demanded recognition.”

And, so, “Let the history of the Liberation War be told truthfully. I should write whatever I can remember of those who had supported



A Sector Commander Remembers Bangladesh Liberation War 1971
Quazi Nooruzzaman
Writers.ink

the Liberation War from their hearts; who had given their all, with no thought of reward or recognition. It was they who made this land free. At the same time, unpleasant truths should also be written. There were those who just wanted to enjoy the fruits of the Liberation War, claiming the right without having fought. They should be exposed.” He does not pull any punches when giving his views on the negatives that he saw or heard or surmised during the course of the freedom struggle.

Among them is his conviction (and he provides some compelling evidence) that India had planned for Bangladesh's Liberation War to be managed by, and controlled from, New Delhi on its own terms and in its own time frame, including deciding on who would best serve its interests in post-bellum Bangladesh. Therefore, a specific group of men (who later named themselves Bangladesh Liberation Force, BLF for short,

but who were called “Mujib Bahini” after 16 December 1971) were trained as political commandos by Indian Major General Oban. The reason? “The Indian authorities realized that many college students with leftist ideas would join the liberation forces and possibly help to build a leftist ideology in Bangladesh. The political commandos were established to neutralize such a possibility. The intention was to disarm the purely-motivated freedom fighters and put power in the hands of the government in exile, once victory had been achieved.”

He clearly and pointedly distinguishes between the BLF and the vast majority of the freedom fighters known as the Mukti Bahini, freely to the former's discredit. He also states that, going by the experiences in his sector, the “Awami League leadership kept little contact with the Mukti Bahini...I had asked more than one MP to come and stay at the sub-sectors, but they did not. We were told that their lives were too valuable to be put at risk in the sub-sectors. Because of their absence, the politics of the Awami League did not reach the freedom fighters.” Zaman then ties this factor with India's strategy and planning, including as the war was entering its endgame stage. “Political thinking within the Mukti Bahini was not within the scope of the Awami League. The Indian intelligence department was able to sense this. For this reason, the Mukti Bahini was not given heavy weapons. India also had to take steps not to prolong the Liberation War. Apart from keeping the Mukti Bahini under control they also had to consider the international situation. It became necessary for the Indian army to intervene, and not just wait it out.” Furthermore, the Bangladesh “sector-members were preparing for a long war, which is not what the Indian authorities wanted. It went against their aim, which was to maintain their influence over Bangladesh after the war was over.”

Zaman talks about the famous 7 March speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, an event where he was present, and heard the Father of the Nation ending his speech with “Pakistan Zindabad”, and, moments later, on the advice of the student leaders, “Joy Bangla”. Zaman takes no issue with the end salutations, reasoning that Pakistan was still politically undivided, but takes a dim view that the words “Pakistan Zindabad” have been expunged

from the rendering of the speech with the observation that, “I believe this tampering with the speech diminishes Sheikh Mujib's political efforts.” And, over a particularly contentious issue that continues to deeply divide the nation against itself, Zaman is convinced, offering a number of arguments in support, that Ziaur Rahman first announced the independence of Bangladesh over the radio. He then reasons, “Let's say it was Ziaur Rahman who was the first announcer of independence. What does it matter? Does this announcement belittle the Awami League or Sheikh Mujibur Rahman? Not in the least.”

Zaman recounts acts of great bravery, cruelty, as well as cowardice, both from freedom fighters (including an officer who refused to go to the frontline to observe Pakistani positions, and another who self-inflicted an injury to avoid going to the front, but who later on ended up becoming a general), and of the BSF of India. He did not think much of General (then Colonel) Osmani as a military leader or of his temper tantrums. He draws a very sympathetic portrait of Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir, one of his sub-sector commanders, who was killed two days before liberation and was posthumously bestowed with the highest gallantry award Bir Shreshtho. Zaman also recounts how another of his officers, Major Najmul Huq, was killed, but was denied permission by the Hindu authorities to let his body be ritually cleansed at Malda Circuit House (in India) because he was a Muslim, and how impoverished Hindus inside Bangladesh succored him and his troops with their meagre possessions. There are other personal accounts in this compact little volume. My particular favourite is Zaman's antipathy towards Ayub Khan (one time Pakistan's president) developed over several encounters with him that later contributed to his joining the Liberation War. In 1949, before a number of foreign dignitaries and high officials, on Zaman telling him that he was from East Pakistan, Ayub pronounced that, other than the Dhaka Nawab family, there were no “good” families in East Pakistan. Zaman's riposte was that only people from a good family can recognize others from a good family. Touché!

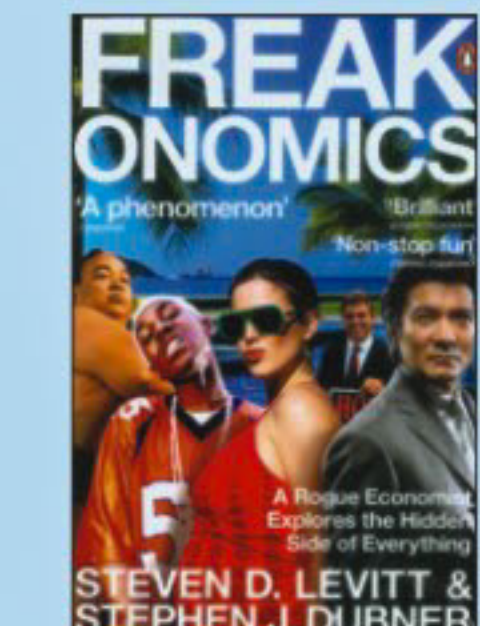
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BOOK CHOICE



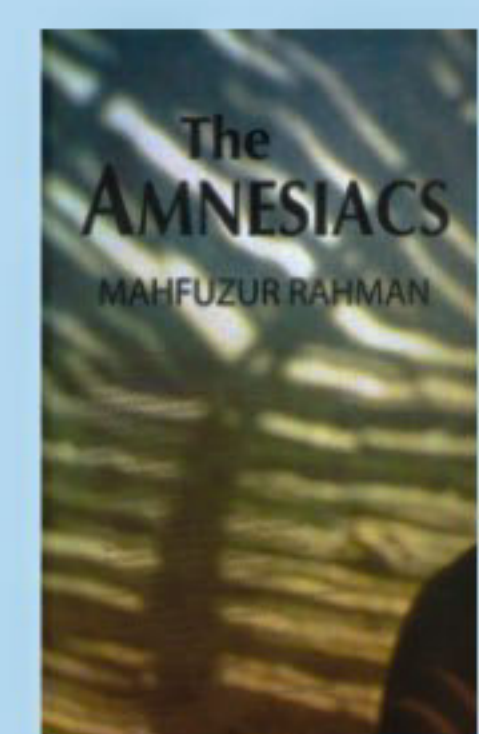
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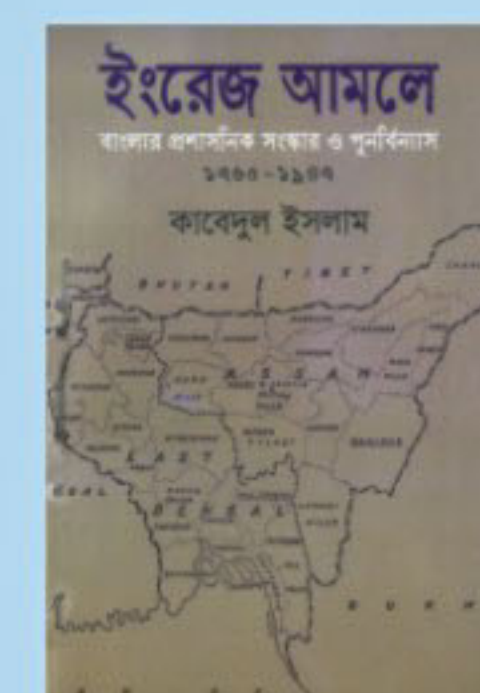
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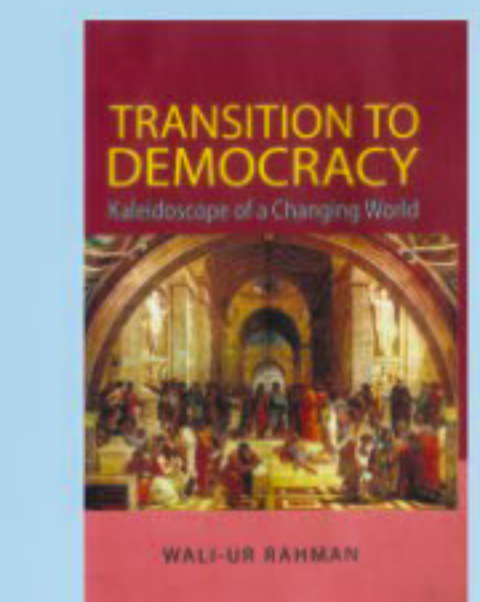
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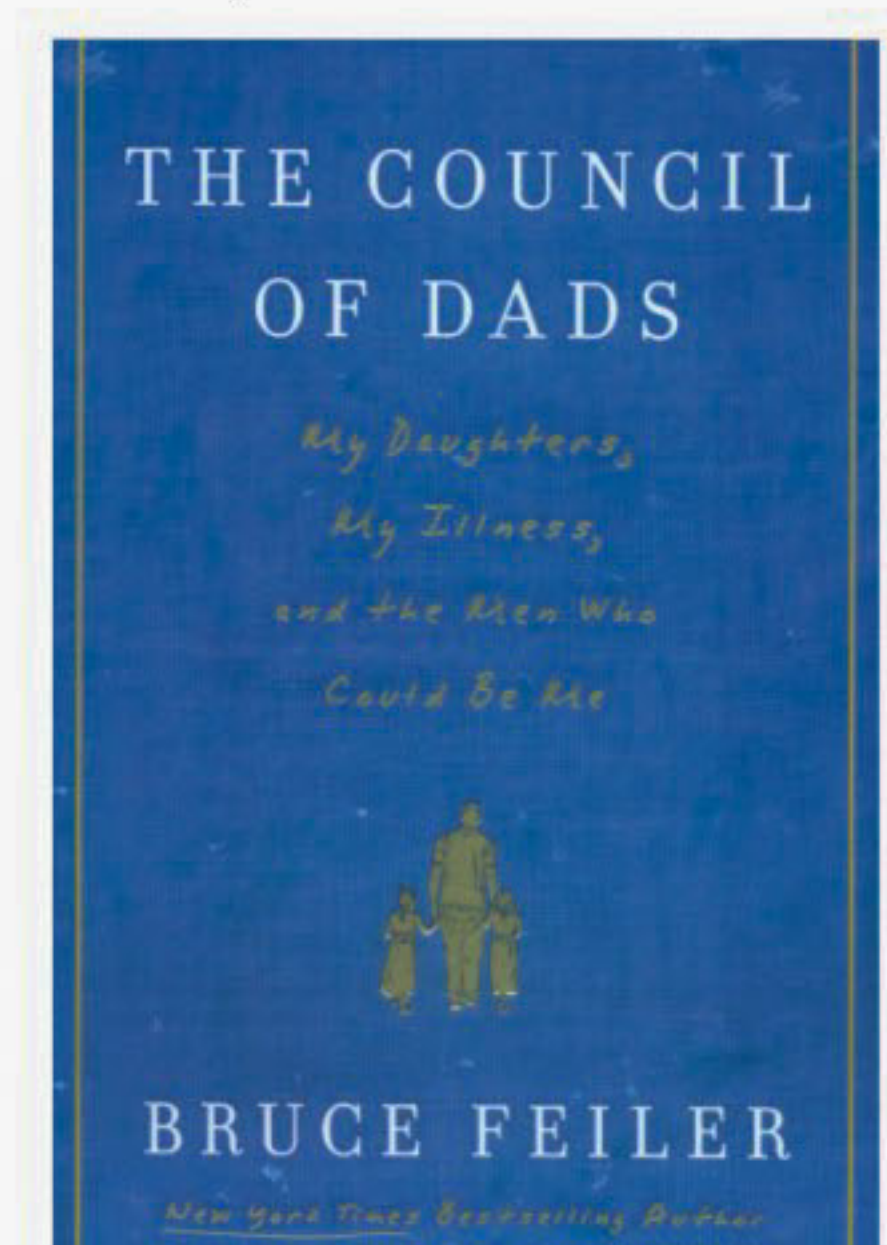
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Thoughts of death and plans for life

Nazma Yeasmeen Haque is moved by a tale of twilight

A primordial song of life is sung by the author, Bruce Feiler, throughout the book, effecting a visual diary that tells us about his physical vis-a-vis mental condition in a most agonizing state. And he sings not only for himself but for humanity as a whole to live a life in perpetuity even when physically the person is no more. Life is so endearing that the author would not let go of himself from his near and dear ones and therefore delves deeply into the matter of being re-created through his language and its expressions, his voice, beliefs and convictions, his ways of life in a comprehensive way, his society and on top of everything to be projected as the kind of man and father that he has been. Thus he works in a most down-to-earth manner, bringing together a group of men, all dads, to concretize a project that he undertakes and in which he plays the role of a leader in all possible and not so possible ways. It is the story of the life of the author himself: after nearly four decades, bone cancer is detected in exactly the same part of his leg that had met with some bone injury from a bicycle accident on a high street at a rather young age. He is devastated. Nevertheless, he does not bend. From amongst the group of his friends, acquaintances and a whole lot of other people, he forms a council of dads consisting of six males who will play his role to his twin young daughters after he passes away. A unique trait in his personality is thus manifest, something that is almost unbelievable for a reader. In other words, as he almost comes by his death warrant, he still embarks on a plan to do something novel and succeeds in fulfilling his objective. Through personal contacts, regular correspondence and close interaction, a network of people who are reliable, warm-hearted and sensible enough to represent him before his little daughters from different phases of his life is formed. This gives the



The Council of Dads
Bruce Feiler
William Morrow (an imprint of)

author much strength to fight his physical condition and also often through viewing a deadly disease like cancer as a strong motivation to work. Consumed by the thought of what kind of world his daughters will face without him, Feiler asks, “Would they wonder who I was? Would they wonder what I thought? Would they yearn for my approval, my love, my voice?” All such futuristic thoughts shape his concern, so much so that finally he opens a website for helping distressed hearts in sharing and upholding the cause he is committed to. His personal agony

thus turns into an altruistic vision and translates into a great job.

The Council of Dads is a new book in every sense of the term. Published in 2010, it bears an unusual title; its content is new of its kind and therefore unique. The personality of the author that is manifest through the deliberations at every phase of his illness and concomitantly the stage of progress in his work plan emerges as equally unique. A brave heart emerges here, although there are tears blurring his vision. He wears a number of feathers in his cap, which makes a reader wonder what role is he best at. As a great writer? As a social leader involving a congregation of human beings and with his empathy for them? As a great thinker who constructs his philosophy of death in a newer perspective, which is that life will live on even though it may not vibrate? Or is he best at being an understanding patient suffering from an almost terminal disease that he narrates so meticulously, in a scientific way and in seven parts that he describes as ‘Chronicles of the Last Year’ aiming at informing others about grasping the whole drama of his illness that may afflict anyone anytime? Notwithstanding all such evaluations that a reader might naturally make of his attributes, he best presents himself as a most dutiful father visualizing how truthfully he will be perceived by his daughters later in their lives while he will remain absent physically. Here emerges a great visionary with a yearning for the permanence of an individual life through an enactment of his existence within the domain of non-existence. Feiler draws inspiration from great writers. He echoes Whitman --- “I too lived” --- that forms the central thought of his life. A great walker that Feiler was, he lost much of his ability to walk due to his bout with his

disease. At this point, he remembers Mark Twain's words about the way people hurry in their lives. “Everyman seems to feel that he has got the duties of two lifetimes to accomplish in one, and so he rushes, rushes, rushes, and never has time to be companionable --- never has any time at his disposal to fool away on matters which do not involve dollars and duty and business.” Keeping in line with this thought, Feiler's wise sayings are, “Don't be in a hurry” and “... behold the world in pause.” T.S. Eliot's verse on time adorns the first page of this book as if it is the preface. The lesson that the author learns from this and teaches us, the readers, as well, is that time in terms of its present, past and future is all entwined and nothing ceases to exist absolutely. A great precept that aims at saving humanity. Feiler does a wonderful job not only in his personal conviction of the matter but also through uttering words didactic import.

Feiler's literary prowess elevates the narration of his disease to a magnificent piece of literature. The chapter entitled ‘The Last Few Steps’ that he composes on his visit to the bucolic Bonaventure Cemetery where his ancestors lie buried is perhaps the most touching of all. A blend of literature and philosophy is perceived in his expressions on life and death that keeps readers engrossed. Feiler dwells on the same subject with his six chosen male friends and his chief oncologist applying the method of catechism that brings forth invaluable insight into the course of human life. He himself is a wonderful listener, a teacher of life for all of us and a giver of hope to a multitude of distressed hearts. We need a leader like Feiler to show us the way.

Dr. Nazma Yeasmeen Haque, a literary and music enthusiast, is Founder Principal, Radiant International School, Dhaka.

NOSTALGIA

Writing and reading letters

Syed Badrul Ahsan remembers some black and white seasons

TIME was when we used to write letters. It was an era when people made contact with one another, and over long distances, through letters. Something of the intensely personal came with those letters, something of communication between one heart and another. The beauty about letters was that the soul came with it. Feelings embedded in the heart simply poured forth and once they all came to be encapsulated in letters, we felt something of a burden lifting from us.

Those days, of course, are now memory. No matter how much of a positive view you may hold about technological development, about the revolutionary progress brought about by the coming of the internet, there is the unassailable truth that the day we stopped writing letters and switched our attention to e-mails and then this little strangeness called sms, the warmth went out of us somewhat. And with that went away huge slices of intellect. For you cannot but admit that writing letters was always an intellectual exercise, even if it came in

desultory fashion. Fathers wrote to their children about the health conditions of mothers in manner that made entire familiar scenes of home come alive. Sons sent off missives to parents, proffering advice on their health and seeking their comments on plans they on their own were making about the future. Daughters went off to distant villages, or small towns, to be part of in-laws' families and from there wrote to their mothers about themselves, about the thousand and one ways they missed home.

When you speak of letters, you realise how much of a role the epistolary has played in the shaping of history. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote an immensity of letters to his young daughter Indira, from prison and outside. Rabindranath Tagore spent an entire lifetime writing letters to other great men and women of his time. Not many years ago, a reputed Indian journal published a series of letters that Buddhadev Bose and his child wrote to each other. There have been instances of writers, men and women, who have

written to one another and eventually fallen in love with one another, with results that could only benefit the world.

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Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin wrote copiously to each other and bared their innermost desires. Robert Browning and

Elizabeth Barrett discoursed on poetry and then discovered, almost to their surprise, that they had become lovers.

In the days when letter writing was an integral part of life, grandfathers living in little villages in Bengal cheerfully showed off the missives their school-going grandchildren had sent them from faraway lands. In the medieval era, as also later eras, monarchs wrote to other monarchs in various manifestations of temperance. Some demanded tribute, some pressed for military aid against their enemies and some proposed the marriage of their children with those of the royalty they were writing to. In the days when the movement for Indian independence began to gather pace, a flurry of letters was observed defining the situation and delineating the parameters of the negotiations that would take place on the decolonisation of the subcontinent. In early 1969, Ayub Khan sent out letters to the opposition Democratic Action Committee inviting its leading lights to a round table conference in Rawalpindi. In the course of the Second World War,

Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle maintained necessary contact with one another through dispatching letters to one another. In the year 44 BC, as the conspiracy to eliminate Julius Caesar gained in substance, it was decided that anonymous letters would be pushed through the gates of Brutus' home as a way of convincing him that the future of Rome was in his hands and that he was expected to lead the uprising against the dictator. In 1958, days after being appointed minister by President Iskandar Mirza, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto wrote an ingratiating response to him, to tell him that history would record him as a great man, that indeed it would say that he was greater than Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

In whatever way you look at it, you cannot but admit that there was a profusion of rich sentiments that came with writing letters. Letters revealed minds at work, for they threw up images of the people behind them. In letters came a grave attention to the subject at hand, with little or no room for distraction or pointless

conversation. Letters have always been symbolic of enlightenment, of a development and enhancement of thoughts in the individual. In the old days, the very young were taught the varied ways of letter writing --- personal letters, letters to newspapers and letters in response to job-related advertisements. And then there were the sad moments of life, when children inhabiting foreign lands or distant shores became recipients of letters informing them of the demise of a parent back home in the ancient ancestral village. Those letters took an hour to be written. It took weeks, sometimes months, for them to reach their destinations.

In 1964, the Labour Party won the elections in Britain and Harold Wilson took office as prime minister. On Robben Island, the imprisoned Nelson Mandela would know about it only in 1980, long after Wilson had come and gone. It was Margaret Thatcher's generation running the show.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Book Review #