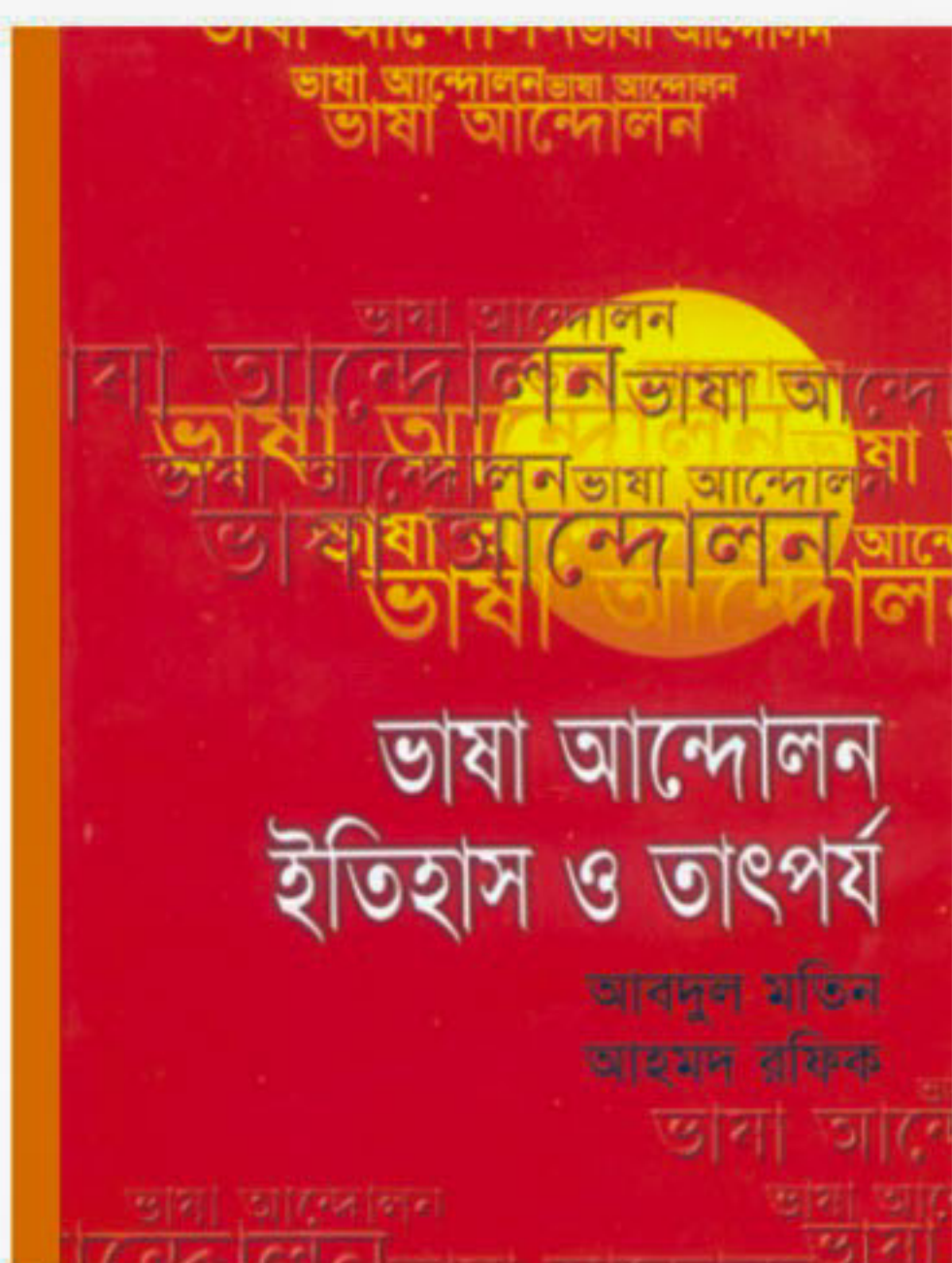


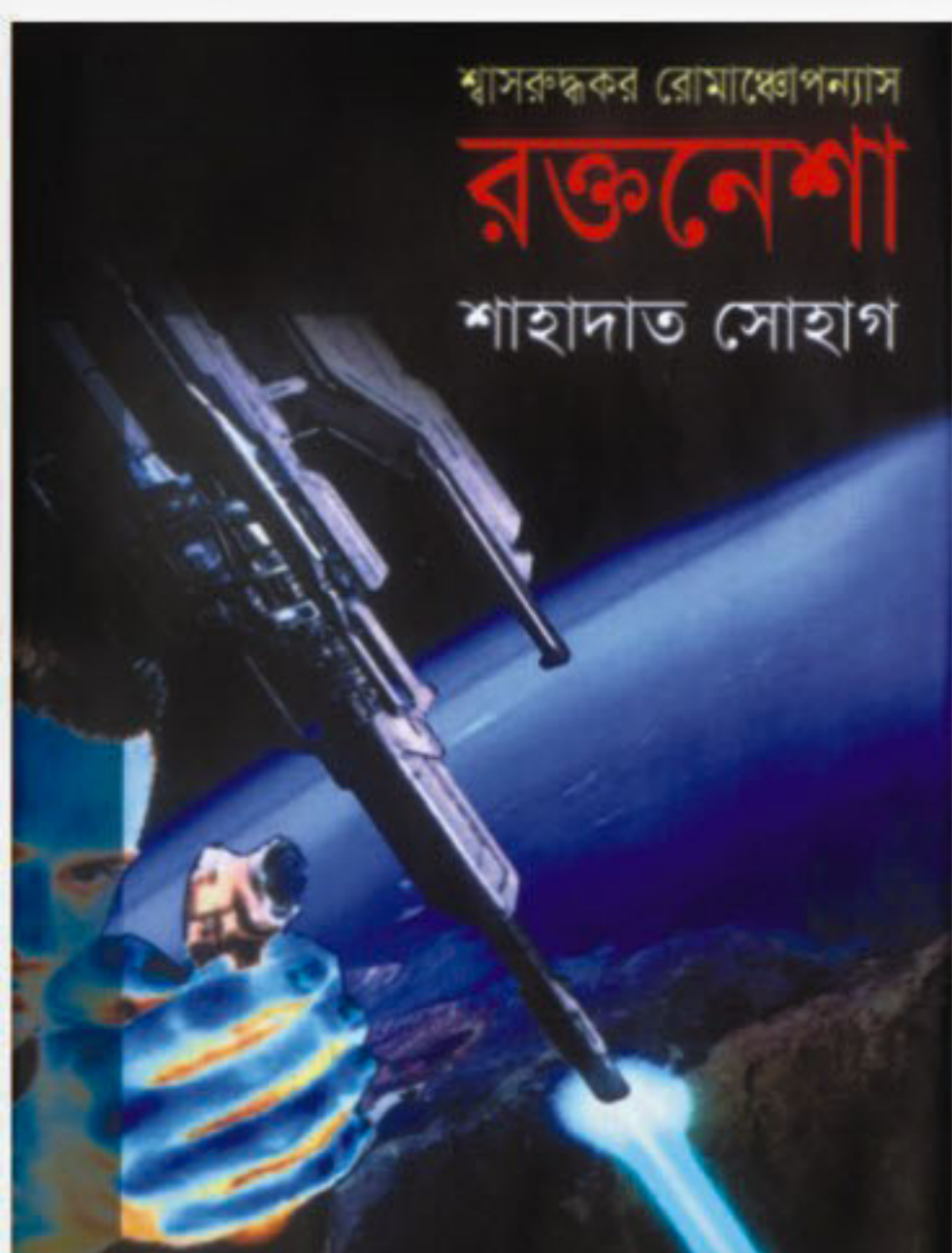
# Of Tagoreans, Agartala and Ghalib

Syed Badrul Ahsan goes looking for books at Ekushey Mela



SYED BADRUL AHSAN

The Ekushey Boi Mela is that annual experience that must seep into your being. It is the same with the Hay-on-Wye festival that you wish you could be part of every May in Britain. There is then the Kolkata Book Fair that many of us would not want to miss, given that Kolkata remains a symbol of Bengali intellectual attainment on both sides of the political frontier. Here in Dhaka, you could safely venture to suggest, the Ekushey Book Fair has increasingly been turning into a defining aspect of life in this free republic of Bangladesh. Yes, there is yet that certain feeling that reading is a habit fast dying out in this country. And yet as you push through those crowds at Bangla Academy (this year the stalls have spilled over on to the road, to our intense happiness), you feel that sure sense of elation coursing through you, all in the knowledge that Bengalis do read. Ah, but if they don't or have lately stayed away from books, they are reinventing themselves. Hardly anyone



walks away from the Ekushey Boi Mela without a book or two.

But enough of that. Yours truly came by a mighty fortunate chance to go fishing for books at the Boi Mela last week. The afternoon was quiet, the roads were blissfully without the kind of traffic that usually makes us hit the ceiling and the pocket was pretty heavy with cash. And, of course, nearly everyone you know was busy watching Bangladesh play India at the World Cup, either at the stadium or on television. It was a moment not to be wasted. And here is what this scribe turned up with.

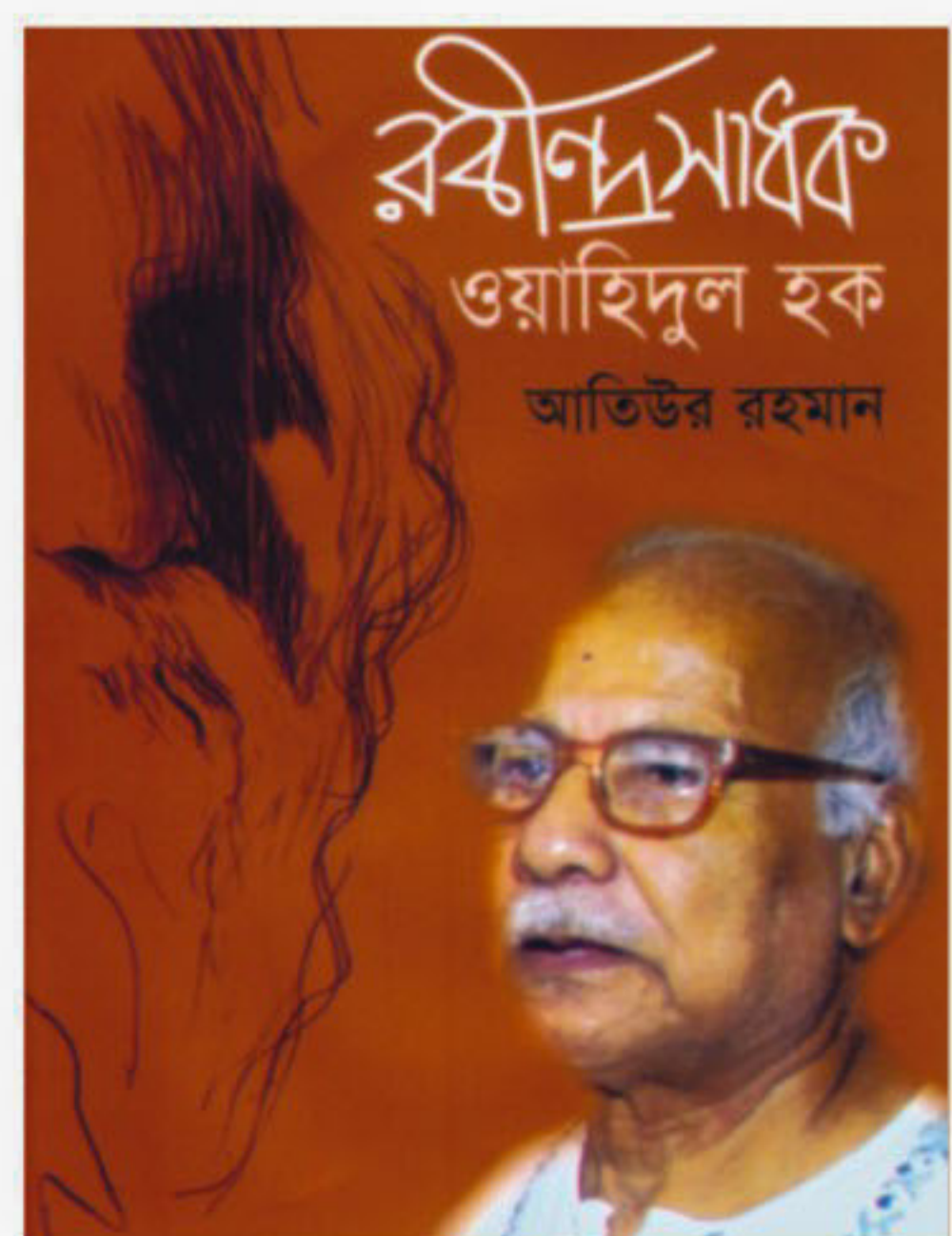
One of the first works to be got hold of was a new copy of Nilima Ibrahim's *Aami Birangona Bolchhi*. Those of you who have read it might wish to flip through the pages again, for it speaks of the darkness which once nearly felled all of us in this land. My friend the Mongoose had asked me to look for a copy. When I did spot it, I lost little time in informing her of the discovery. She was thrilled. And so was I.

Speaking of books once read, there is Lt.

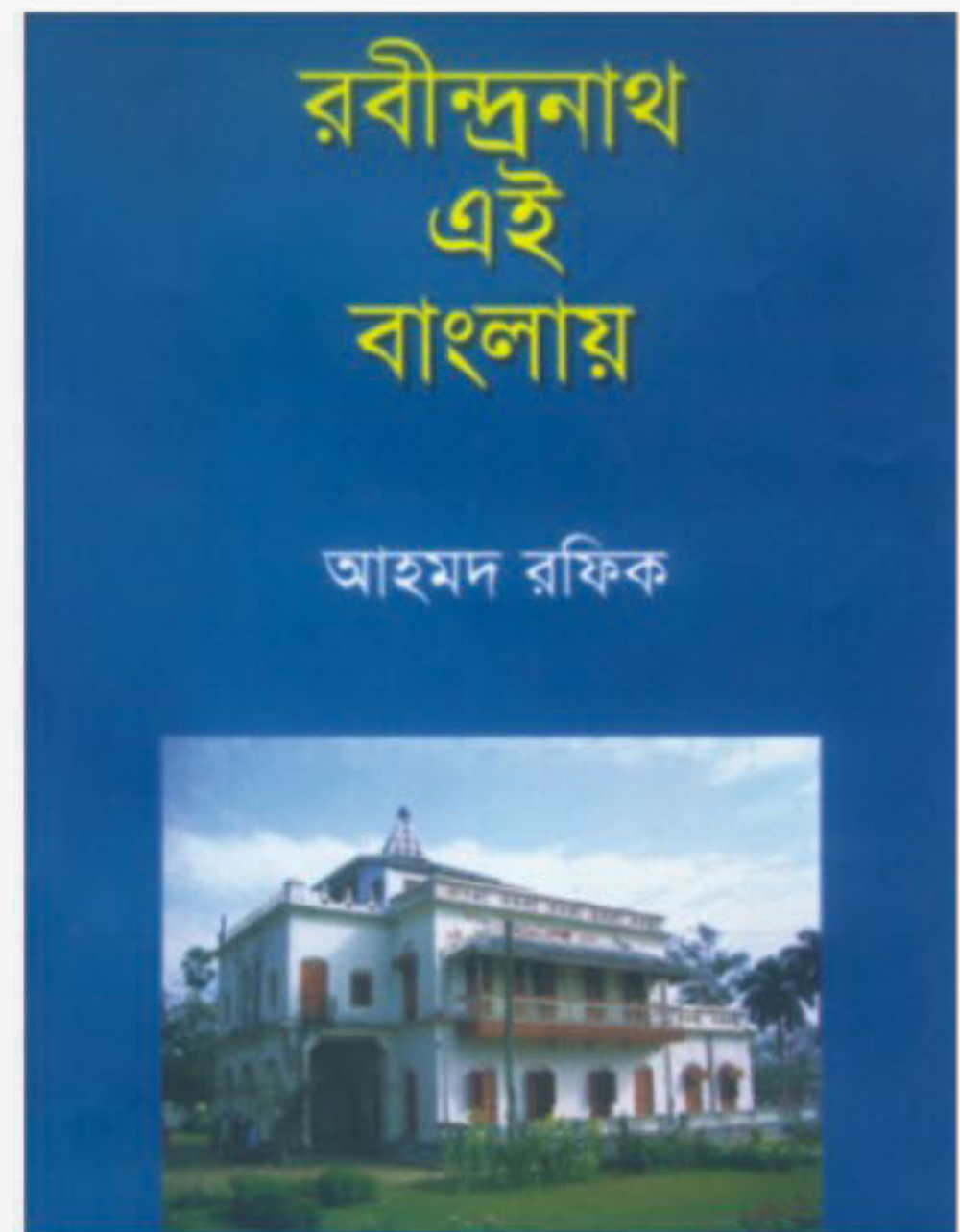


Col (ret'd) M.A. Hamid's *Teenti Obbhutthan O Kichhu Na Bola Kotha*. It was first published in 1993. The copy of it that I read in that long ago year has somehow gone missing. Losing books is forever a heart-breaking affair, especially when you misplace or lose one which gives you information that is pretty startling as also revealing in nature. Hamid's work makes grim yet fascinating reading. You only have to go through his description of the manner in which the corpses of Bangabandhu's family members were transported to Banani after the carnage of 15 August 1975 to recall once more the shame which enveloped all of us on the day. By the way, had Hamid not checked all the coffins, Sheikh Naser's body would today be lying buried in Tungipara instead of Bangabandhu's. One of the killers had mistaken Naser for the Father of the Nation. I now have a fresh copy of this work, from the Boi Mela.

One of the more significant of publica-



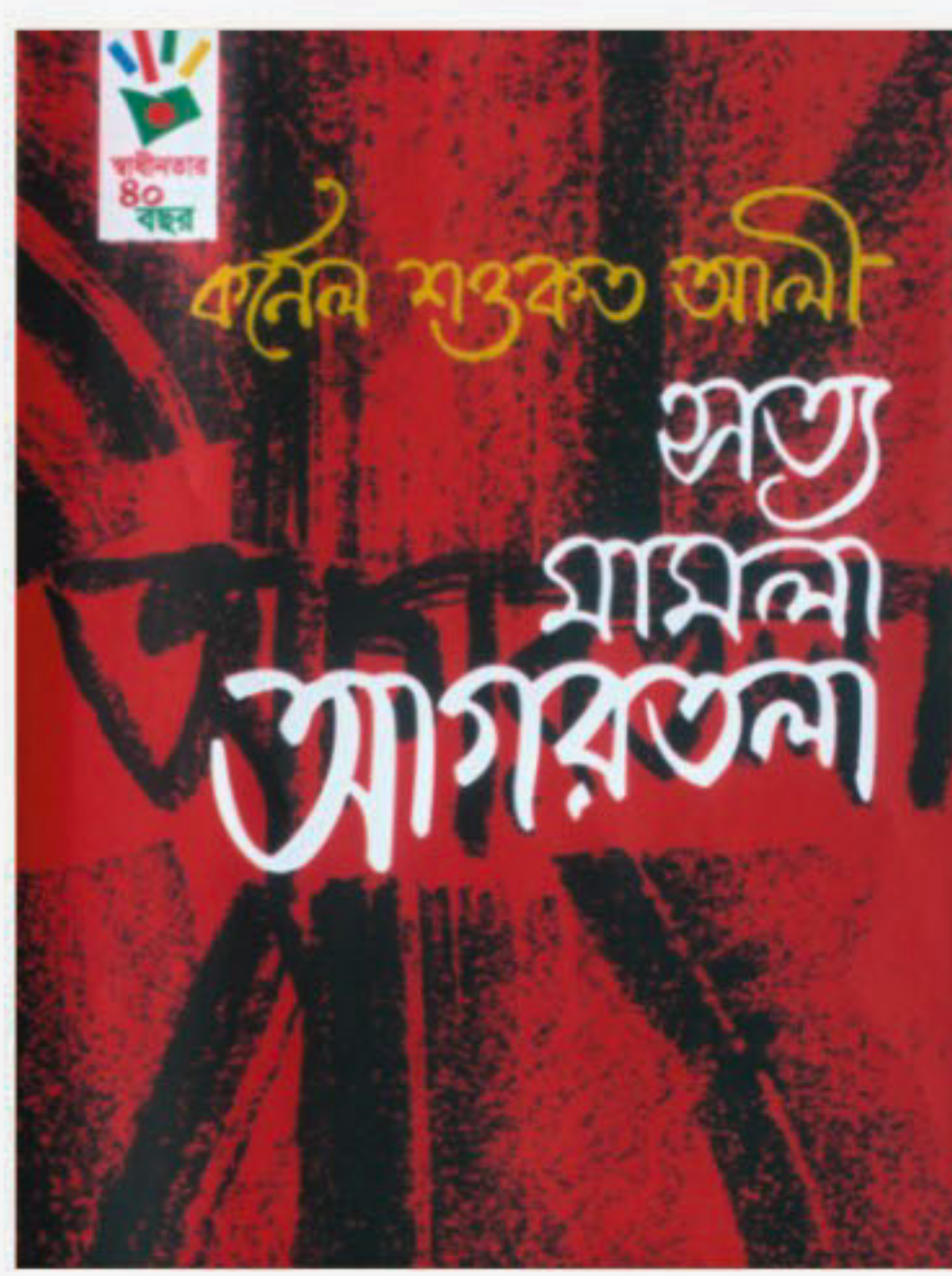
tions to come out of Ekushey this year is Col. Shawkat Ali's *Shotyo Mamla Agartala*. For the first time since the so-called Agartala Conspiracy Case led to dramatic changes in our lives and helped pre-1971 Pakistan throw Ayub Khan out of office, Ali tells you that there was indeed a plan by Bengali military and civil officials to declare East Pakistan's independence as Bangladesh. There was no conspiracy, he tells you, for everything he and his associates did was a result of their patriotism, their feeling that Bengalis needed to be free. Ah, but there is this question which quite might nag you: had Shawkat Ali and the others involved in the case succeeded in their plans, how much of global acceptability and local credibility would their operation come by? Besides, there is always a difference between secession and independence. You finish reading the book somehow thanking the Almighty that back in 1968 we did not secede from Pakistan and that in 1971 we did seize the day and give ourselves a free state based on histori-



cal and political legitimacy.

Imtiar Shamim's analysis of the life and times of Tajuddin Ahmed (*Tajuddin: Nishshongo Ek Muktinayok*) is a fresh reminder of how much we as a people have lost through losing the wartime leader. You could be forgiven for wishing that Tajuddin Ahmed had gone on being prime minister after Bangabandhu's return home from Pakistani incarceration in early 1972. But what you cannot truly get over is the shabby treatment he suffered through when he was asked to leave the cabinet in 1974. He should have lived, for if he had, Bangladesh's future would be secure in his hands. But then, there are always shadows prowling in the dark, ready to dispatch good men to their graves before they have passed through a fulfilling life. Tajuddin was a good man, a powerful leader, an original intellectual. The likes of him are rare in our world of banalities.

Quite a few gifts at the Ekushey fair this



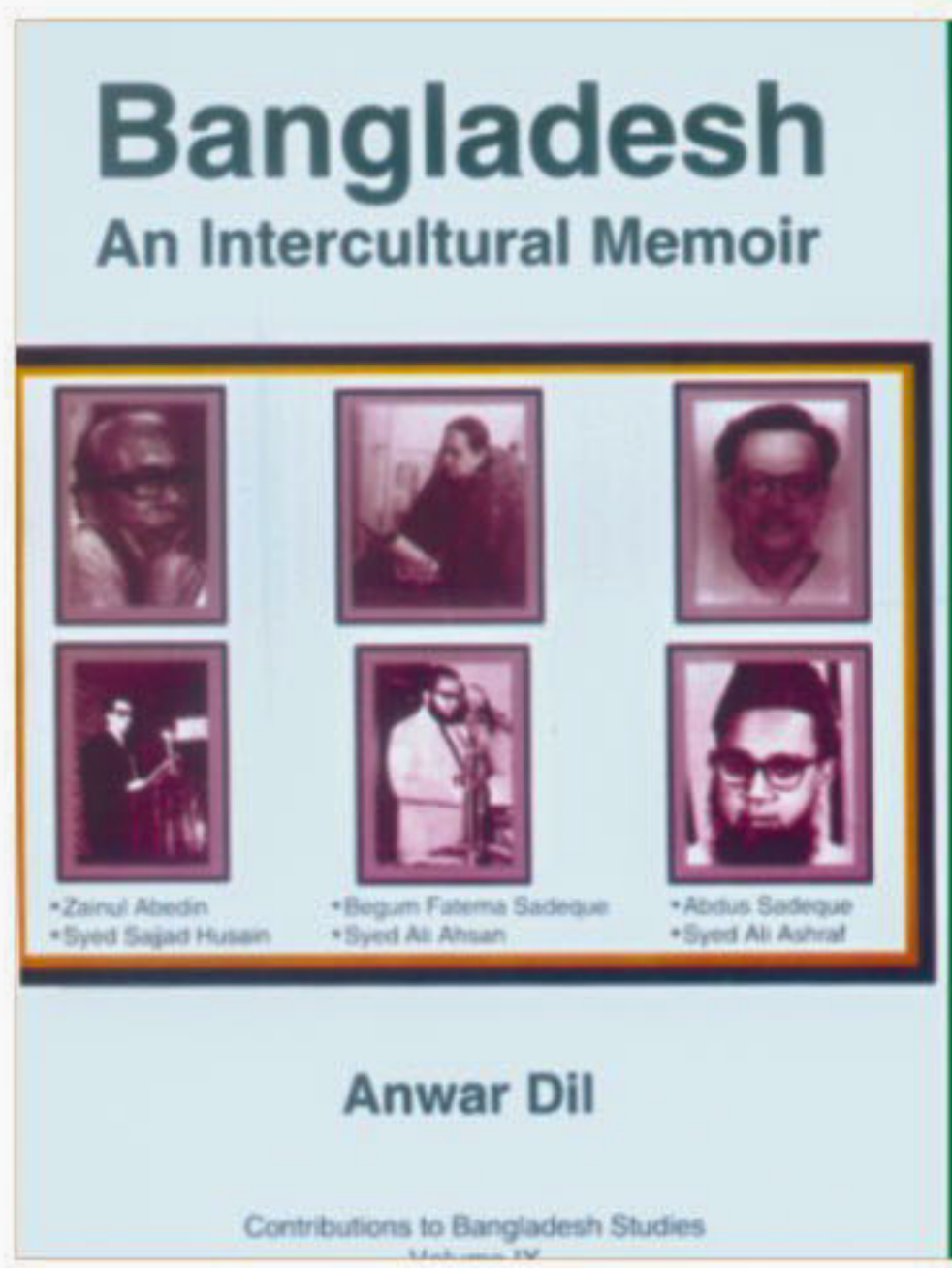
She calls the work

*Jamuna Nodir Mushaira.*

Which reminds me: how many of us have known of the use of the term *mushaira* in Bengali literature? But here we have it, per courtesy of Selina



Ah, but there is this question which quite might nag you: had Shawkat Ali and the others involved in the case succeeded in their plans, how much of global acceptability and local credibility would their



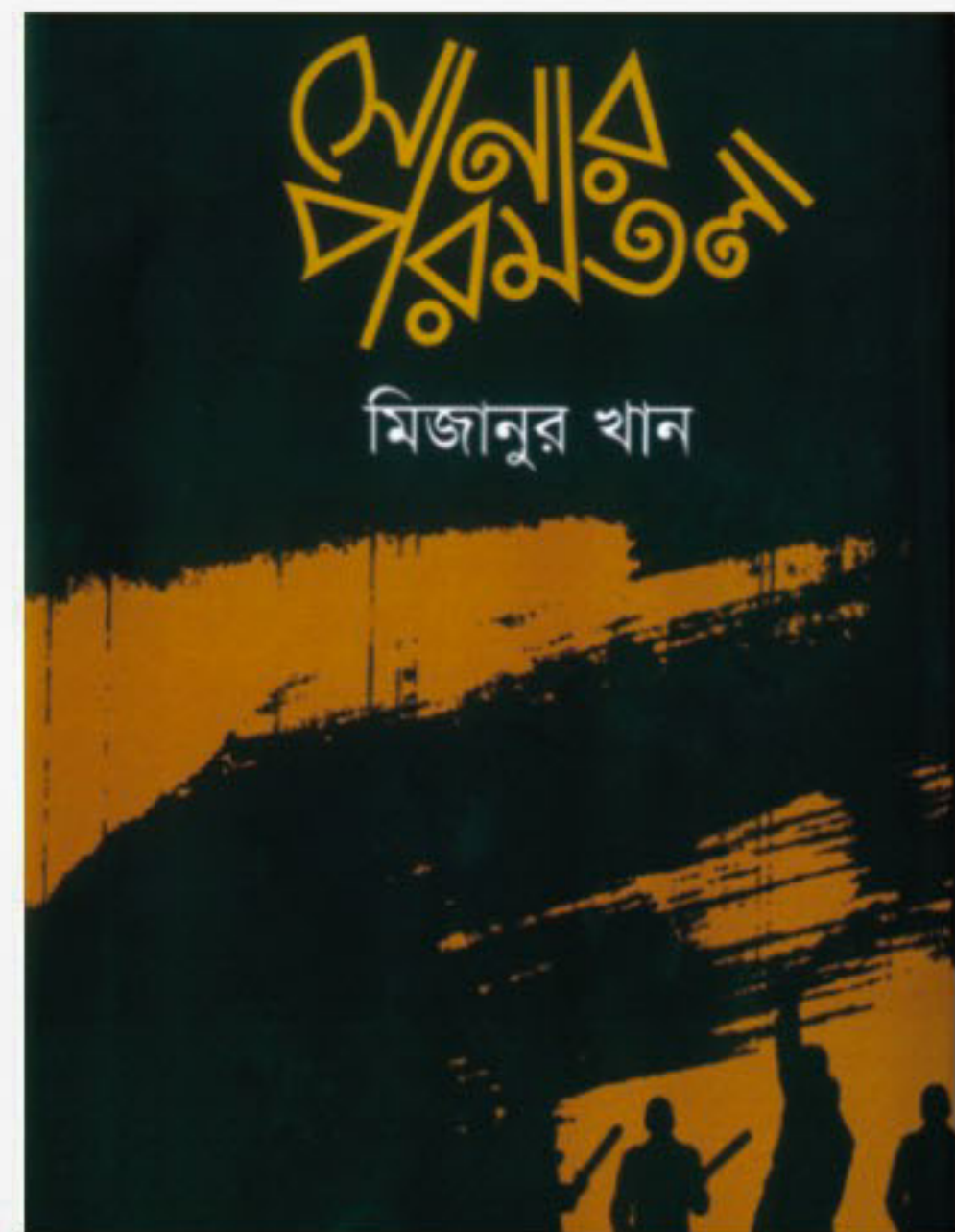
year come from Adorn Publications. It has come forth with a goodly number of works from Anwar Dil and Afia Dil, basically with the theme of Bangladesh as their underpinning. One of these works, *Bangladesh: An Intercultural Memoir*, by Anwar Dil, is a candid assessment of some leading men of letters as also artists of Bangladesh, those who happened to have passed on. You think here of Zainul Abedin, of Begum Fatema Sadeque, of the Syed brothers Ali Ahsan and Ali Ashraf, of Abdus Sadeque. You get a portrait of Syed Sajjad Hussain too, though when you recall his role in Bangladesh's War of Liberation you wonder why such a brilliant man felt the need to associate himself with people who went around killing his fellow Bengalis. Human psychology is a mysterious affair. Perfectly good men often mutate into perfectly questionable individuals.

This being the month of Ekushey, you would generally expect people to write and



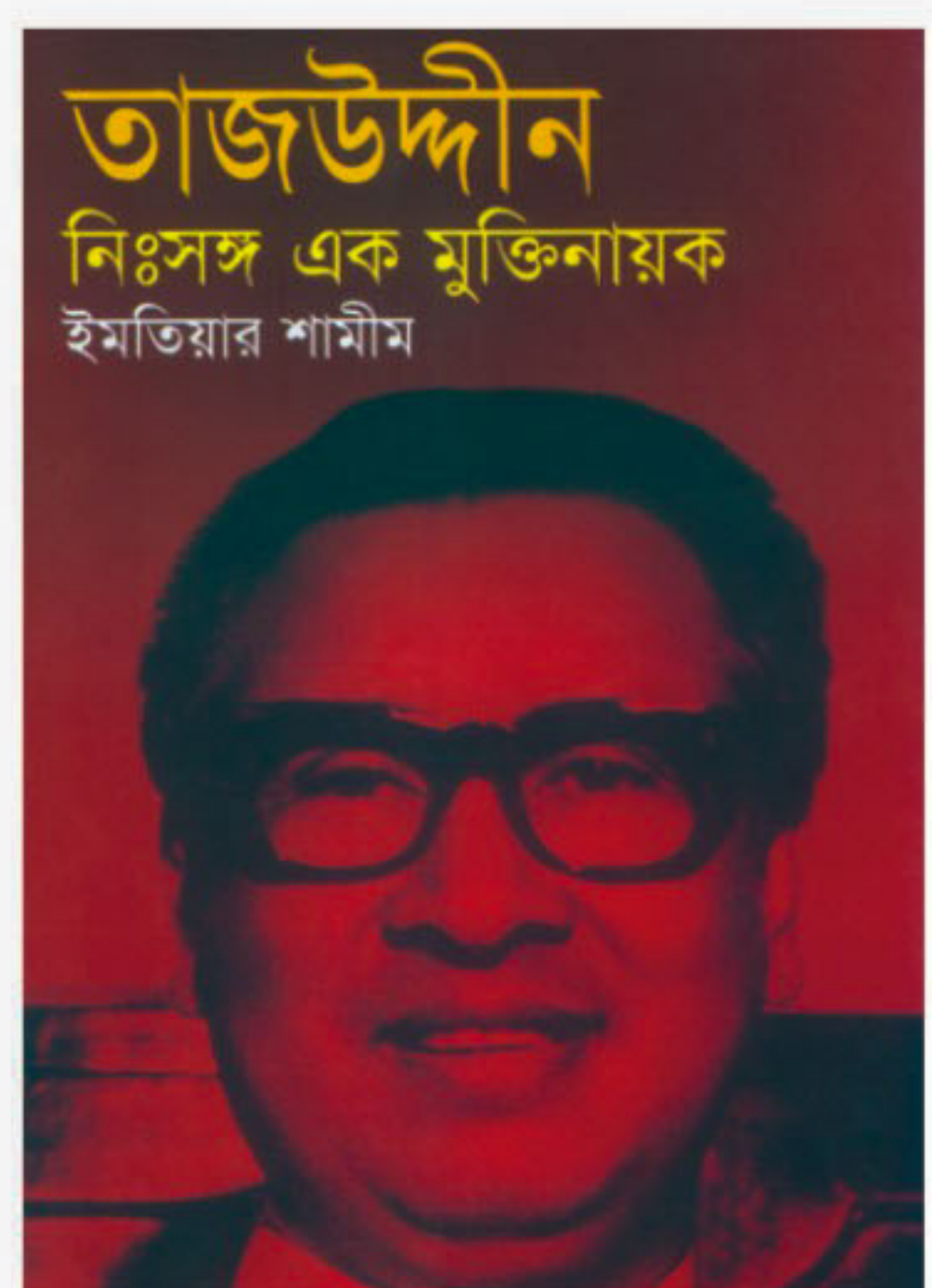
speak of the way things were back in 1952. Indeed, that is what people do, though many among these people often come forth with inanities and with what we already know. Which is one huge reason why *Bhasha Andolon: Itihash O Tatporjo*, from Abdul Matin and Ahmad Rafique, is one analysis of the Language Movement you cannot easily put down once you have picked it up. The two authors debunk some myths about the movement we have always lived with. They have no holy cows, which is one reason why they go straight for anyone and everyone who has trifled with some significant details related to the happenings of February 1952. Gaziul Haq, Badruddin Umar, et al are some of the men whose assessments of 1952 are shot down by Matin and Rafique.

Waheedul Haque, for all his humility and self-effacing nature, was a larger than life personality in Bangladesh's cultural arena. He was a good journalist, a leading Tagore exponent, indeed a scholar par excellence. That happens to be the truth Atiur Rahman



brings forth anew in his pretty engrossing *Rabindrashadhok Waheedul Haque*. Those who have not known Haque, or have known the man without knowing the essence of the man, will find a veritable treasure trove in this work. It is a book you ought not to miss, for it gives you something more than Waheedul Haque. It gives you a broad idea of Bangladesh in its multi-layered cultural dimensions.

Go back to politics, or its negation, again. For there is one work which rekindles thoughts of all the sinister happenings that overwhelmed this country in the six years between 1975 and 1981. It comes from Anwar Kabir through his eminently enlightening *Shosostro Bahini-te Gonohotya: 1975-1981*. Assassinations, executions, authoritarian decisions, you name it. It is all here. In a very important way, it is a work that should go into the hands of those young people whose perceptions of history have all too often been waylaid by the purveyors



of untruth. Besides, there is the need to keep the record straight. And the record comes from Anwar Kabir.

Here in Dhaka, you could safely venture to suggest, the Ekushey Book Fair has increasingly been turning into a defining aspect of life in this free republic of

Selina Hossain, always the quiet, humble writer, gives us this year a remarkable work of literature which brings Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib back into the memory. She



calls the work *Jamuna Nodir Mushaira*. Which reminds me: how many of us have known of the use of the term *mushaira* in Bengali literature? But here we have it, per courtesy of Selina Hossain. Literature, for her, for everyone else, is a matter that transcends frontiers. So let *mushaira* come into Bengali literature. After all, all literature is an embodiment of the soul. And the soul is what Ahmad Rafique brings into his study of Rabindranath Tagore in *Rabindranath Ei Bangla-e*.

Let us call it a day. Or is it morning? Whatever. But before we get down to the remaining business of the day, let us note a few other works that should create sparks in the soul. Mizanur Khan's war-based work of fiction, *Sonar Poromtola*, looks like a promising read. And Shahadat Shohag is here with not one but three works, each written on a different note. Yes, we speak of *Robotron*, in the science fiction category, and *Roktonesh* and *Tritio Mon*.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review.

