

Economics of Mulla Nasruddin

Alamgir Khan reads a work that enlightens ...

President Harry Truman asked to be sent a one-armed economist, having been tired of economists who say, 'on the one hand, this' and 'on the other hand, that'. *Pararthoparatar Arthaniti*, a serious Bangla book on economics of altruism, by Akbar Ali Khan is, on the one hand, enlightening, on the other hand, lightens the hearts of readers. The University Press Limited published it in 2000 and reprinted it in 2010. Akbar Ali Khan, alternative executive director of the World Bank for some years and an adviser of the caretaker government of Bangladesh in 2006, has written this book in quite a charming way.

Following philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein who said, 'A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes', the author has interspersed this book on economics with many, many jokes, from his personal experience and stories of Mulla Nasruddin. *Pararthoparatar Arthaniti* could be titled equally well as a book of jokes. The jokes are sharp, intelligent and subtle. Mulla Nasruddin has come so many times in this book to give simple explanations of many complex economic theories that this book could as well have been 'by Mulla Nasruddin'. A person asked the Mulla, 'How old are you?' 'Forty' replied the Mullah. The other man reminded the Mulla that he had said the same thing even ten years ago! 'Yes,' replied the Mullah, 'I always stand by what I have said.' On the one hand, this one-word Mulla Nasruddin could have been the most favourite economist to President Truman. On the other hand, the British economist Keynes who used to change his mind with the moving hand of a good clock, in a reply to a question about the inconsistency of his mind said, 'When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?'

Like Keynes, Akbar Ali Khan has also changed his mind with the moving hand of a good clock. On the one hand, he blames the IMF and the World Bank for their enthusiasm in imposing illogical conditions upon the developing countries, which is compared to slapping the face of a boy, before delivering the much-needed cash to them, and, on the other hand, blames leaders of developing countries for being suspicious about the good advices the IMF and WB officials deliver to them. He has pointed his finger at the loan



Pararthoparatar Arthaniti
Akbar Ali Khan
The University Press Limited

sharks of the IMF and narrated a story of Mulla Nasruddin. In the same breath, turning his finger away from the IMF he pointed it towards the developing countries and asked in the voice of Mulla Nasruddin, 'If this is your development, where's the investment, and if this is your investment, where's development?'

The author has mixed up the condition of the United States, the most developed country on earth, with that of Bangladesh, a very poor country, regarding the welfare program of a state. He thinks that social safety net reduces the incentive for work among the poor, encourages them to overpopulate at the cost of the state, and helps the privileged people make abuse of the economic facilities to the poor by appropriating these for themselves. In his view, to help the poor is the hardest task of all. In order to drive

this point home, he has quoted an English proverb, 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions.' The conclusion that can be drawn from his discussion is that the poor are poor only because the rich has not yet discovered a correct method of giving alms to them. He has refuted Francis Bacon's claim that 'in charity there is no excess, neither can angel or man come in danger by it.' In his opinion, Bacon's mistake is due to his lack of experience in Bangladesh and Somalia. In Bangladesh both Emperor Harshavardhana and Akbar Ali Khan have gained the bad experience of humiliation in their attempt to give charity to the poor. The poor in their rush to grab everything took away the garment of poor Harsha and tore away the shirt of poor Khan.

Nobel Laureate economist Joseph Stiglitz, on the other hand, always gives emphasis on the need for strengthening and widening the social safety net in developing countries in order to have gains from the whirlwind of liberalizing global trade. However, there are some shining observations of Akbar Ali Khan in this book. For example, he has written 'Goribera olpei tushto hoy. Borolekder moto tader khudha sharbograsshi noy.' (The poor are satisfied with a little. Their hunger is not as overwhelming as the rich men's.) This reminds one of Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Pui Bigha Jomi* (A half-acre of land) in which the poet says, 'Alas, in this world those who have most want all/And even a king won't stop until he has grabbed everything--big or small!' (translated by Fakrul Alam in *The Daily Star*).

In some way, *Pararthoparatar Arthaniti* is on the one hand this and on the other hand that, yet there are many important things to learn from it. His style and language has lifted this book about a dull subject like economics into the enchanting realm of literature. It gives readers alternative angles to judge familiar things in a new way. This short-length write-up cannot do much justice to this worthy book. The author believes in what Oscar Wilde said, 'The truth is rarely pure and never simple.' Yet to know this rarely-pure and never-simple truth can be pretty wonderful if told by an author like Akbar Ali Khan.

Alamgir Khan is Coordinator, Ethics Club Bangladesh

A ghost speaks

Syed Badrul Ahsan takes a plunge into the soulful

When one hears of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan's diaries, incredulity is what one is struck by. There is a reason for that. When towards the end of his decade-long presidency of Pakistan in the 1960s he came forth with his memoirs, bearing the arrogant title of *Friends Not Masters*, a goodly number of questions were raised about the ghostwriters who probably had worked on them. And indeed there were the ghostwriters, all of whom in later years were spotted explaining away their roles in the making of the memoirs which, incidentally, amounted to little that was enlightening or revealing.

Now the diaries are upon us, raising a wholly different set of questions altogether. Why do they cover the period from 1966 to 1972 and not that which came earlier, when Ayub was at the height of his powers? Again, why did his family, son Gohar Ayub in particular, wait thirty three years after the old dictator's death to let the world in on the news that Ayub had actually left his diaries behind? Perhaps the most audacious question of all relates to how much of the diaries comes in Ayub's language and how much of it is addition and embellishment by others. The American academic Craig Baxter has of course edited and annotated the diaries. But that is not the point. The more relevant issue is the authenticity of the diaries. F.S. Aijazuddin in Pakistan has mischievously pointed to the fakes that were Hitler's diaries in the 1980s. Like him, there are quite a few others willing to ask if some considerable portions of Ayub Khan's diaries were composed after his death. Take your pick. After *Friends Not Masters*, it has never been easy to trust Pakistan's first military ruler.

As for the entries in the diaries, there is little mistaking that the thoughts are quintessentially Ayub-like. He respects no one and is forever ready to pronounce judgement on the reputation of all the good men who simply cannot take a liking to him. Of course he admires the likes of Justice Munir, a man who remains notorious for his ingratiating loyalty to the general who for no rhyme or reason began to call himself a field marshal. In life, Ayub admired few men. In death, his comments take on a vicious hue. Not even Abdul Jabbar Khan, the Bengali speaker of the national assembly, escapes his sarcasm. While commenting on Jabbar Khan's worry about the Agartala conspiracy case in a 9 January 1968 entry, Ayub has this caustic comment: '(Jabbar Khan's) misfortune is that he has several sons who keep on going in and out of jail for their misdeeds. This must be a source of great worry to him'. In another entry on the same day, Ayub reveals his suspicious streak, this time about his own loyalist Abdus Sobur Khan: 'I sent for Abdus Sobur Khan and questioned him on the part he is alleged to have played in the (Agartala) conspiracy. He denied all knowledge and tried to show that the people in East Pakistan are greatly shocked by the incident'.

There are the regular intervals in which the then military ruler takes a swipe at Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, his former foreign minister. Bhutto, he notes in a 2 December 1967 entry, had 'held a two-day convention in Lahore to launch his so-called People's Party'. The man's inability to read the writing on the wall is mind-boggling. Even when the writing gets to be bold and the wall draws closer to him, he pretends not to see it. But of all the men and matters that leave his nerves on edge, it is Bengalis and a rising Sheikh Mujibur Rahman that exercise his mind. This is how he speaks of Mujib on 26 April 1967: 'One revealing thing that came to light was that Mujibur Rahman had been telling his followers that once they raise the flag of rebellion in East Pakistan, the Americans will rush to their assistance'. A few lines later, this is the acidic comment, 'It is quite obvious that this man is a menace and will continue to mislead the Bengalis as long as he lives'. You tend to get the feeling that the dictator was already cooking up the conspiracy case that was to come in December of the year. It was a case that would eventually lay him low and catapult Mujib to the status of a Bengali national icon. By 22 February 1969, the day the Agartala case is withdrawn by the regime and Mujib walks out a free man, Ayub Khan is defeated. Amazingly, however, there is no entry in the diary for that day. On 23 February, though, Ayub notes, 'A serious political situation is emerging. Bhutto in West Pakistan and Mujib in East Pakistan are gaining ascendancy. Something has to be done to prevent such a dangerous combination'. The entry must have been made only hours after Mujib had addressed a mammoth rally in Dhaka, where he had just been honoured as Bangabandhu, friend of Bengal. Three days later, on 26 February, there is a perceptible, though slight, change in Ayub's tone toward Mujib: 'Incidentally, Mujib came to see me last night. Our talk was cordial. He seemed conciliatory though making no bones that he was the uncrowned king of East Pakistan and he must be recognized as such'. In his twilight, the military ruler makes no mention of the offer he makes to the Bengali leader, that of the office of prime minister, a gesture Mujib spurns.

The diaries are replete with fulminations against what Ayub sees as Bengali leanings toward India in general and Hinduism in particular. In May 1967, he is blunt: '... East Pakistan will go under Hinduism and be separated forever'. Ayub Khan's contempt for Bengalis is a constant refrain throughout the diaries. As early as 11 April 1967, after a meeting with Syed Sharifuddin Pirzada, his new foreign minister, he writes: '(Pirzada) said that East Pakistanis are incapable of seeing beyond their nose. In their hatred for West Pakistan, and especially the Punjabis, they were capable of doing anything stupid. They got an empire as a result of the partition of Bengal in 1905 with Assam included. They lost it through sheer stupidity'. The president must have enjoyed these crass remarks, for he seemed to making his own at a meeting with Altaf Gauhar on 23 July 1967: '(Gauhar) asked me how long will they remain with Pakistan? I said till India was ready to swallow them'. A little while later, this is how he insults Bengalis, '... the Bengalis have no stomach for self-criticism nor for listening to the truth about themselves'. His myopia reaches a new extreme a month later. In a 23 August entry (during a visit to Dhaka where he meets what he calls a cross section of intellectuals), he notes, 'I told them that through emotional upsurge the East Pakistani had cut himself off from Urdu, the vehicle in which Muslim thought and philosophy is expressed. In consequence, he was now totally at sea, drifting. This will prove very dangerous for their future.'

Ayub Khan papers over the truth behind his departure from power in March 1969, trying to make it appear that he has opted to quit voluntarily. But bitterness is all over the place. The bitterness nearly explodes in December 1971, when East Pakistan finally and irrevocably becomes Bangladesh. On 16 December, as Dhaka stands liberated, he notes, '(The Mukti Bahini) are busy butchering the nationalist and Jamaat-e-Islami types'. A few lines later, this: 'The expectation is that Mujibur Rahman's Awami League won't last long. They will be superseded by the communists who will soon join hands with Naxalites and other communists in West Bengal'. In a 1 January 1972 entry, he notes: 'Individuals like Maulvi Farid, Fazlul Qader Chaudhary have, of course, been murdered, but Sobur Khan apparently was skinned alive first and then hacked to pieces.' Obviously he did not verify the better part of the information he had come by. On 10 January, as Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrives back home in Bangladesh, Ayub Khan notes, clearly in suppressed anger, 'After a three hour stay in Delhi, Mujibur Rahman flew on to Dacca where he was given a grand reception. In a public meeting, he declared that all ties with Pakistan were snapped and that Bangladesh was a free and sovereign state. The separation of Bengal is now complete. What the future now holds in store for the Bengalis is not difficult to guess.'

The diaries are, in a sense, a reminder of all the reasons why Bangladesh needed to cut itself loose from Pakistan. You can read them out of sheer curiosity. If you choose not to, you lose nothing.

(The review is a reprint.)

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.



Diaries of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan
1966-1972
Edited and annotated by Craig Baxter
The University Press Limited

A springboard of dialogue

Farida Shaikh is bowled over by a unique story

Interwoven in myths, history and surrealist imagination, *Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, 1995, an essay on BLINDNESS is an allegorical, thought provoking and introspective work of the Portuguese writer Saramago, winner of the Nobel Prize 1998.

There is a sense of contradiction to start with: '... I think we are blind.' And we ask, how? The answer: (we are) '... blind people who can see, but do not see.' Aha! Then seeing is an act of volition! So, blindness is a sign of limitation. And if this should happen then it causes the entire society to be dysfunctional. The epidemic of blindness---a metaphorical illness that becomes the cause of social catastrophe and then suddenly there is miraculous recovery and return to sanity upon realization of humanness, of life and living.

Saramago, an atheist, began work as a car mechanic which experience remained, and in *Blindness* '... it is the brain that actually does the seeing (just as) It's the same as a carburettor, if the petrol can't reach it, the engine does not work and the car won't go.' Eyes are the organ of sight. Blindness is no visual impairment. The blind can see but will not see. Here man's will, volition and mind is what gives meaning to what a person's eyes focus upon and see. It is as the proverbial saying goes: Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder, and '... those who believe not, there is deafness in their ears, and it is blindness in their (eyes).' Quran 41:44

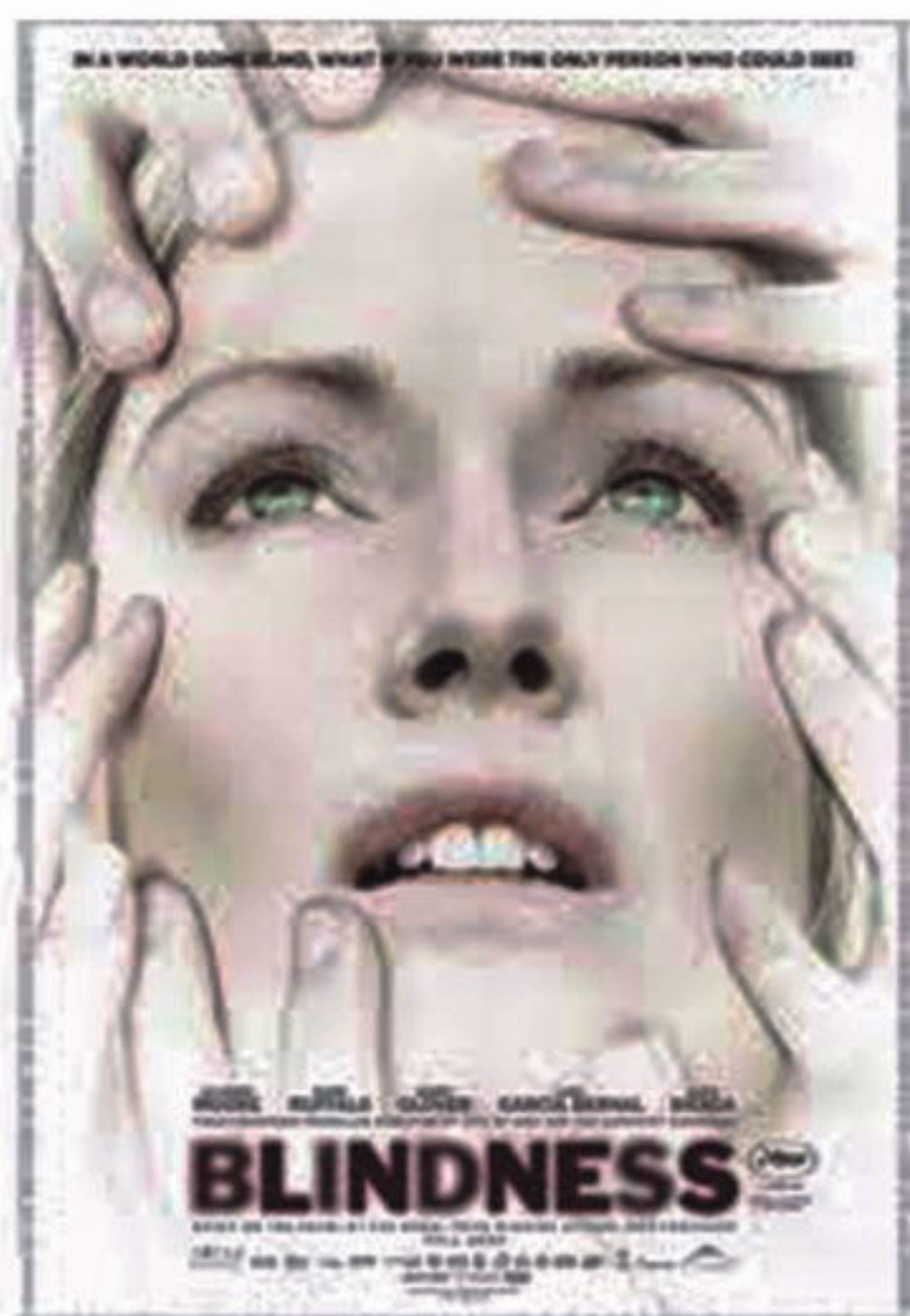
Describing his 1995 novel as depicting a blindness of rationality, Saramago's 'white blindness' is a type of illumination, '... like the sun shining through mist reveals the dependence of people on one another and the necessity of society's deliberate organization.'

Blindness is an exploration into 'an alternative reality,' and deals with the inner realities of people. And this applies to all people irrespective of caste, creed, and culture. People are found in every country and corner of this world. Blindness is a universal condition. So, Saramago's novel is set in a nameless country. And '... inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are.' Names, therefore, are not important for the blind; the characters in the novel are nameless persons. The novel is in the style of oral narration just; as the story tellers most often do not use names, rather descriptions to identify the characters.

An epidemic of blindness spread in a nameless city, starting with the seven nameless characters of the narrative. When the information reached the government health authorities, an order was issued: the blind are rounded up in an old lunatic asylum---a concentration camp. So, is blindness a mental affliction?

The isolated blind were to be representative 'of an act of solidarity with the rest of the nation's community.' They were given strict instructions on the utilities within the premises, on food, fire and illnesses. A doctor's wife follows her husband to the asylum. Around them a small group is formed who try to maintain some moral values. As corruption, rape and violence spread, resulting in chaos and collapse of the social system. Fear is pervasive, inducing panic amidst the blind inmates.

The first man was struck by white blindness



Blindness
Jose Saramago
The Harville Press, London

while waiting for the traffic lights to change. The next man, out of altruism, drove the first man home, risking his own identity and person. He succeeded in escaping the police but not blindness. Misjudged, he came to be known as the car thief.

The first blind man's wife took him to the eye doctor, who while engaged in medical research on agnosia, amaurosis and neurosurgery, was struck by blindness. The blind doctor debated on the cause and effect of his blindness and the statistical relevance of the cases he had examined.

With no relevance to ailment, the health minister suggested that the other facilities available for the blind were the military installations, not in use as the army was being restructured --- the trade fair and a huge market building.

The blind were housed in one, and those who were in contact with the blind were in the other wing of the asylum. Guards outside would arrest escapist. Later they too became blind, all in a country of the blind. The only exception was the clever wife of the eye doctor, who told a white lie, so as not to be separated from her husband and lived in the asylum to lend support by finding food and water for the blind. She climbed into the ambulance that came to take her blind husband and told the driver that she had gone 'blind that very minute,' an instance of the writer's dark humour.

After years of marriage and no children, husband and wife continued to greet each other with words of affection. The doctor's wife had learnt a great deal being in close proximity. 'Blindness does not spread through contagion and turn into an epidemic,' and blindness is not through looking at each other. 'Blindness is a private matter, between the person and the eyes with which he or she was born.' The eye doctor, professionally

trained in medical school, has an obligation to know what he is saying. He wanted to talk on the subject 'doctor to doctor' and let the other doctor responsible to make the bureaucratic system do its work.

The girl with the dark glasses was suffering from conjunctivitis. She was a prostitute who went to bed with men in exchange of money. In a broader sense she lived as she pleased and 'gets all the pleasures she can out of life.' While on her way in a taxi she recounted the 'multiple sensations of sensuous pleasure.' Within twenty two minutes after reaching hotel room 312 she was 'exhausted and happy,' and saw 'everything white.'

The boy with the squint, who was taken to the hospital by his mother, and later on to the asylum without her, as she was a simple person, was unable to maneuver like the doctor's wife. The old man with a black eye patch was a cataract patient; though impotent he was able to satisfy afterwards the girl with the dark glasses. And the dog of tears had grown to be close to humans.

Saramago's narrative illustrates the social and moral degradation of modern urban society through dysfunctional food distribution, disturbance in sex and other bodily functions, shifting from private to public, cult of mass rape and not burying the dead.

The book is dedicated to his wife and only daughter. Quoting from the Book of Exhortation, 'If you can see look, observe.' Near the end of the novel, one of the seven central characters say, 'I don't think we did go blind, I think we are blind. Blind but not seeing. Blind people who can see but do not see.' These two lines indicate the political and the philosophical intention of the novel.

In his Nobel Lecture in December 1998, Saramago said: 'Blindness to remind those who might read it that we pervert reason when we humiliate life, that human dignity is insulted everyday by the powerful of the world, that universal lie has replaced the plural truths, that man stopped respecting himself when he lost the respect due to his fellow creatures.'

Saramago originally refused to sell the rights of a film adaptation of the book: 'I always resisted because it is a violent book about social degradation rape and I didn't want it to fall into the wrong hands.' However, finally, upon two conditions, the English film adaptation of the book was that it would be set in an unrecognizable city and the dog of tears should be a big dog.

Blindness has much hilarity. Reading pp. 47-48 set me off in uproarious laughter. And I also thought that in my country any writer could substitute 'white' for 'traffic jam blindness' and see the social spillover effect and dysfunctional system.

Blindness is a rich book in open ended narrative with many lessons to be learnt, which Saramago will not spell out. The book is like a springboard of dialogues and discussions, unlike novels that offer comforting closures. And this is perhaps what makes this a challenging book, and a mesmerizing read.

Farida Shaikh is a critic.