

A vanished Bangladesh at its finest

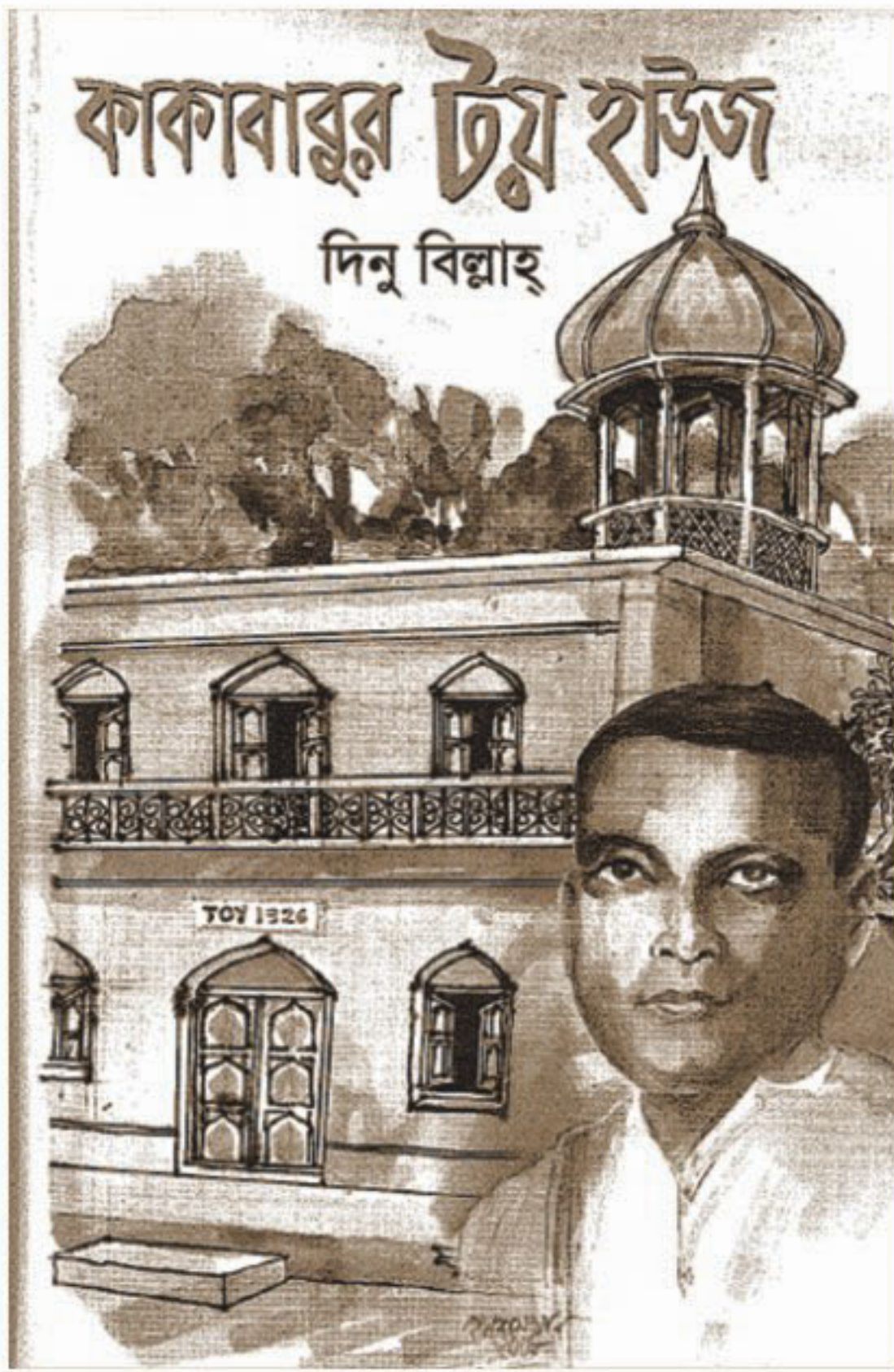
Afsan Chowdhury appreciates a memoir of time, people and values

Kaka Babu'r Toyhouse, a book of reminiscences on time spent by a young Muslim boy (Dinu Billah) in a Hindu household. Of Prof. Ajit Guha - in 1960s' Dhaka is a remarkable piece of cultural history, a truly unique product. Not only is it an enthralling read as a splendid work of storytelling but it reconstructs for readers the mental landscape of several generations of 'Bangladeshis' Muslims and Hindus - who could well be the most liberal, humanist enlightened Bengalis of them all, this or that Bengal.

Dinu Billah is a member of the culturally illustrious Billah family of Dhaka who like so many were part of the 60s cultural mix that was built on the rising tides of nationalism. Economically middle class, they were culturally advanced with singing, dancing, literature and social exchange, all part of the platform which identified them in society. Even more significant for cultural and political historians is the fact that they were deeply religious and saw no contradiction between their faith based cultural life. This pattern of life produced an essential mix for personal, social and spiritual growth not just for the family but for the generation as well. Dinu Billah's vivid description of his father sitting on the jay namaz and talking to the family on various secular issues is a reminder of a near vanished society and life where religious and secular aspects were not considered mutually exclusive for many members of that liberal society.

Prof. Ajit Guha, fondly called 'Kakbabu' by all, was not keeping well and hearing this, Dinu Billah's mother decided to send him to stay with the ailing family friend. Kakababu stayed in a slim house which once belonged to the Zamindars of Baldha, who established the fabled Baldha Garden, now in old Dhaka. The book is about his life there where he also met the middle class cultural icons of that time who were all part of the mindset that laid the values that powered the nationalist movement. One doesn't need a political treatise to understand what it meant to be a liberal Bengali then. The lives of these people mentioned in the book describe it with anecdotes, not arguments, making it such a valuable lesson in history. That is why this book should be treated as a socio-cultural text and not just a fine work of remembering the past.

The book has two parallel threads running together, one on the person and the other on the time itself. Ajit Guha was a professor of Bengali at Jagannath College and had become a legend in his time as a teacher and a mentor. He was also an activist of the Ekushey movement and in general was very



Kakababu'r Toyhouse
Dinu Billah
Shahitya Prakash

much part of the progressive socio-cultural movement. But it was a time when opposing the dictatorial government of Ayub Khan of Pakistan meant coming by a traitor certificate. If one was a Hindu, as Prof. Guha was, it meant being accused of being a spy for India, constant watch by the police and the anxiety that comes with such a life.

Dinu Billah tells of many episodes and encounters that describe this shadow life that many professional Hindus lived in. But Guha was even more suspect because he was an intellectual, the one kind who could never be trusted. It was a life which was on constant notice. Yet it's from within this milieu that the Bengali mind, which represented the most enlightened of visions of society, was constructed. The author speaks of the many friends who came to the sitting room and in their discussions were fashioning an intellectual world that was merit based, rational and not influenced

by faith, identity or wealth.

But that's only part of the pleasure of reading this book because there may be no other book to remember the internal/domestic world of gentlemen Hindus of East Pakistan/ Bangladesh like the ancestral zamindar family of Prof. Guha, who lived in Comilla. Describing the family life, its rituals, pleasures and routines, one is irresistibly drawn to it like watching a documentary of a world gone by and away.

The quiet calm of the Comilla Ashram is another such example where stalwarts of that era lived by the principles of their Gandhian leader. Dinu Billah is not a disinterested neutral observer but a passionately involved as one who obviously enjoys the world of cross-cultural social intimacy. Such vignettes are treasures because there are no records of those times and places any more and no observer either. It becomes for the author and perhaps for many readers a celebration of the world of inter-faith harmony that existed in Bangladesh once.

It is this harmony that becomes the great motif of the book and the threats to the same posed by politics. Although the clouds of uncertainty always hang over the lives of the protagonists, it ultimately becomes a disaster when Prof. Guha loses his job. He is forced into becoming a partner of a printing venture, with the inevitable negative consequences. Life really becomes a serious problem and finally his friend Prof. Ali Ahsan gets him a job offer from Chittagong University. On his way to the job he passes away, ending a life that was an example for all who knew him.

But it's also about the Billah family, their intense cultural commitment, balance between the secular and the divine and articulation of nationalist ideals that make them a showcase of the luminaries of the Bangladesh in its prime. The Billah sisters and brothers are all well known cultural activists but it is the mother who shines as the leading light of the family. On her own as a widow, she not only nursed their mind and body but their souls as well and it was on her insistence that Dinu Billah went to live in the Toyhouse. It is the mothers of Bengal who have written its most glorious but silent chapters. Billah's becomes the greatest character in the book and it becomes a homage to her too.

Once in a while, a book is read which it is a privilege to praise and this is one of them. It is one book which every Bangladeshi should read to understand the kind of cultural environment that was generated but which later died in Bangladesh's post-1971 politics.

Afsan Chowdhury is a historian, social critic and journalist.

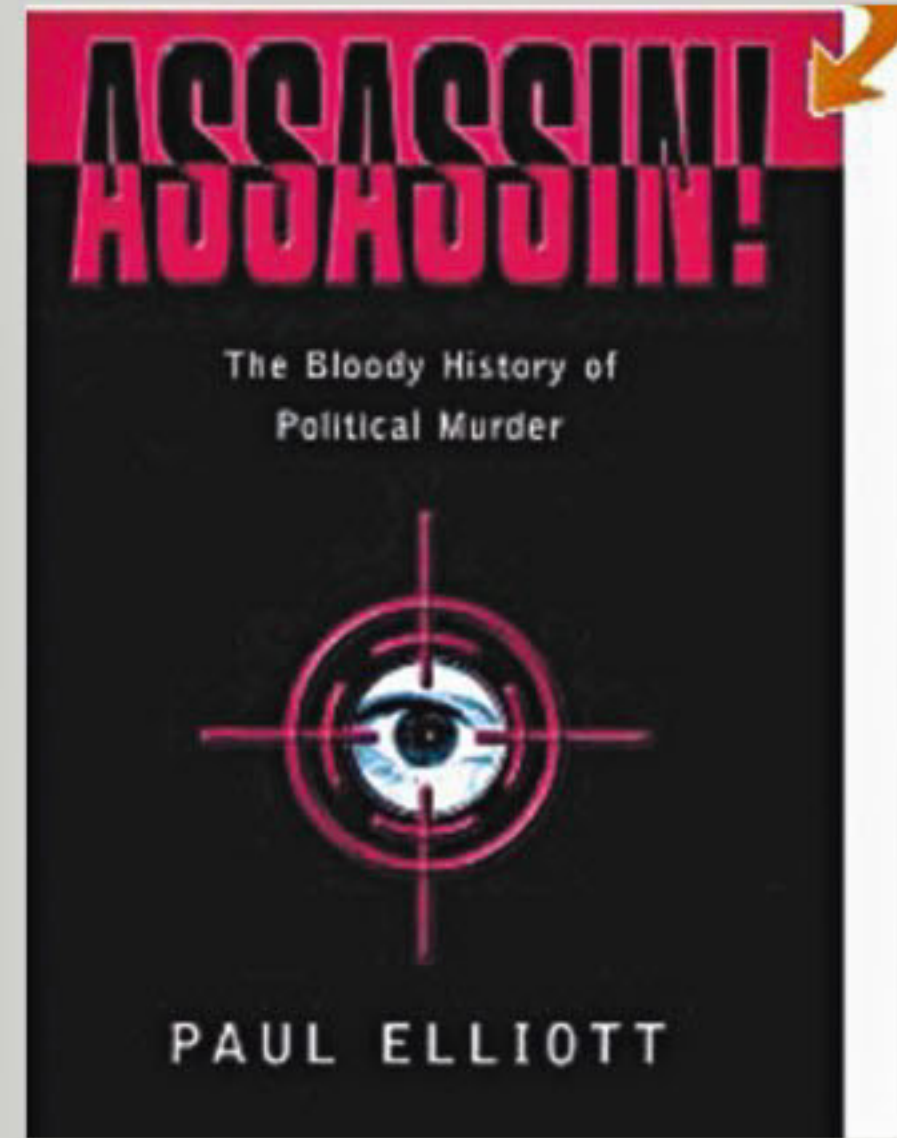
The dark world of political murder

Syed Badrul Ahsan studies a work on assassinations in history

Assassins have regularly been part of humanity's darker side. And assassinations have throughout history been an insidious part of politics, or a mutation of it into a calling of the lowest of categories in human behaviour. For those of us who inhabit South Asia, assassinations have done a good deal to undermine our perspectives on politics and on life in general. In Bangladesh, the assassinations of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his political associates at the hands of soldiers in 1975 were to leave an entire nation in a tailspin only three years after it had gained freedom from Pakistan in a bloody war of liberation. In Pakistan itself, the judicial murder of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1979 and then the killing of his daughter Benazir Bhutto in 2007 only demonstrated the degree to which assassinations could go in damaging a country. But, of course, Pakistan first went through assassination in October 1951, when its first prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan was murdered in Rawalpindi.

The story in India has hardly been any different. Indira Gandhi died at the hands of her Sikh bodyguards in 1984. Barely seven years later, it was her son Rajiv Gandhi who was murdered in Sriperumbudur. And then there is the long litany of murder and mayhem in Sri Lanka, beginning with the assassination of Prime Minister SDRD Bandaranaike in the late 1950s. In the tumult caused by the conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the government in Colombo, Sri Lanka has seen a number of its prominent figures fall prey to terrorist attacks. Prominent among these figures have been Ranasinghe Premadasa and Lalith Athulathmudali. And then, to be sure, there are the assassinations which have been carried out far from the shores of the subcontinent. The tragic end of the Kennedy brothers in 1963 and 1968, together with that of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, was to have a profound effect on politics in the United States.

Or do political murders have any effect on politics other than causing momentary interruptions in the normal conduct of government? In this riveting account of the history of assassinations, Paul Elliott examines some of the more notable murders which have taken place around the world and appears willing to agree that while assassins have by and large had little influence on a shaping of events through their dark deeds, they nevertheless have left behind the big question of how things might have shaped up had they not come into the picture. Elliott refers to that cataclysmic moment in English history in the



Assassin!
The Bloody History of Political Murder
Paul Elliott
Blandford
London

twelfth century when Thomas Becket was murdered in Canterbury Cathedral by loyalists of King Henry II. The archbishop tried to save himself, but as he was about to mount the steps leading out of the chapel, the assassins caught up with him. One of them shouted: "Where is the Archbishop?" Becket turned and declared: "Here I am, no traitor but a priest of God, and I marvel that you have entered the church of God in such attire. What do you want with me?" One of the four knight-assassins told him brusquely: "That you should die. You cannot live any longer!" Elliott goes back in time, all the way to the rivalry between Pompey and Caesar in Rome. Both men were brilliant soldiers. Both were desirous of claiming the niche Sulla had earlier occupied in politics. And yet ambition came in the way of both. A better tactician than Pompey, Julius Caesar made it known, once he and his men had crossed the Rubicon, that the time for a negotiated settlement had passed. Pompey fled to Egypt, where treacherous soldiers on his staff, eager to curry favours with the newly powerful Caesar, killed him. Weeks later, when Caesar himself arrived in Egypt, Pompey's head was presented to him by the assassins. He turned his face away in disgust. Only four years later, Caesar himself was assassinated in the senate by politicians unhappy with his dictatorship.

Assassinations, as the writer makes fairly obvious, have sometimes been part of politics. To what extent murder could reshape politics, or leave it twisted out of all recognisable shape, was to be seen in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. Joseph Stalin was unable to tolerate enemies, real or imagined. And so it was that the purges commenced, with not a little help from the likes of Lavrenti Beria. Stalin was a strong leader; he had an enormity of understanding of world literature. But none of that could explain the ruthlessness which was to characterise his leadership of the Soviet Union. He would not rest till he had archrival Leon Trotsky murdered in faraway Mexico in 1940. The assassin was named Ramon Mercader.

Assassinations are sometimes an outcome of individual frustration. The murder of Britain's prime minister Spencer Perceval in 1812 in the lobby of the House of Commons is one such instance. The good news for Britons is that except for Perceval, none of their prime ministers have been murdered, though it appears the Nazis did try blowing Winston Churchill to pieces as he flew back to London on his way from the Casablanca conference. Margaret Thatcher and her cabinet went through a real brush with death at a Tory party conference in the late 1980s. Such good fortune has generally eluded the Americans, who have seen four of their presidents murdered. One, Ronald Reagan, survived bullet wounds in 1981. Sweden's Olof Palme was not so lucky. He was killed as he stepped out of a theatre with his wife on a winter evening. His blood littered the fallen snow.

An unquestionably fortunate survivor of assassination attempts was General Charles de Gaulle. The number of times his enemies tried to kill him remains unparalleled and yet he survived it all. Altogether thirty one attempts were made to kill the French leader, prompting the writer Frederick Forsyth to weave his tale in *The Day of the Jackal* around a move to try to kill him. In July 1944, one of Hitler's staff officers tried to blow him up. The attempt failed.

It is a good, if sometimes macabre, read you have here. The story of how the ninja came to be employed as assassins in warlord-driven Japan puts a new perspective on how murders can be organised. The work would have been a trifle more substantive if Elliott had cast his net wider, to include in the narrative the many murders which have been committed in Asia and Africa over the years. Mahatma Gandhi and Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, together with the likes of Abdel Karim Kassem, Celal Bayar and King Faisal (in both Iraq and Saudi Arabia) could indeed have been some very readable chapters.

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Star Books Review.

Woeful tale of a city

Shahid Alam assesses the decline of the nation's capital

As I was going through Salma A Shafi's *Urban Crime and Violence in Dhaka*, I was struck by a sprinkling of emotions, ranging from acute nostalgia for a Dhaka that I had grown up in, then an essentially large town which was not bad to live in, to acute cynicism about what it has essentially turned into, a crime and violence infested glitzy mega-slum, which has, for several years at a stretch, been assessed by an international rating organization to be the worst, or second worst, city to live in anywhere in the world. The capital of Bangladesh has, when judged against even the modest large cities of the planet, with all their attendant problems, simply become unlivable. But people live here, and continue to add to the city's population with each passing day, adding to the woes that have taken an iron grip over it, including that of alarming urban crime and violence.

Salma A Shafi, an architect and urban planner, undertakes a study of crime and violence in Dhaka city generally covering the period from 2001 to 2008, although the data and information generated from both primary and secondary sources have been obtained during the period from 25 August 2005 to February 2006. She does a competent job in chronicling the types and trends of crime and violence the people of Dhaka have to experience and live with, analyzing many of the causes and effects, and offering suggestions on how the situation could be improved. In Shafi's words, her objectives in undertaking the study were to:

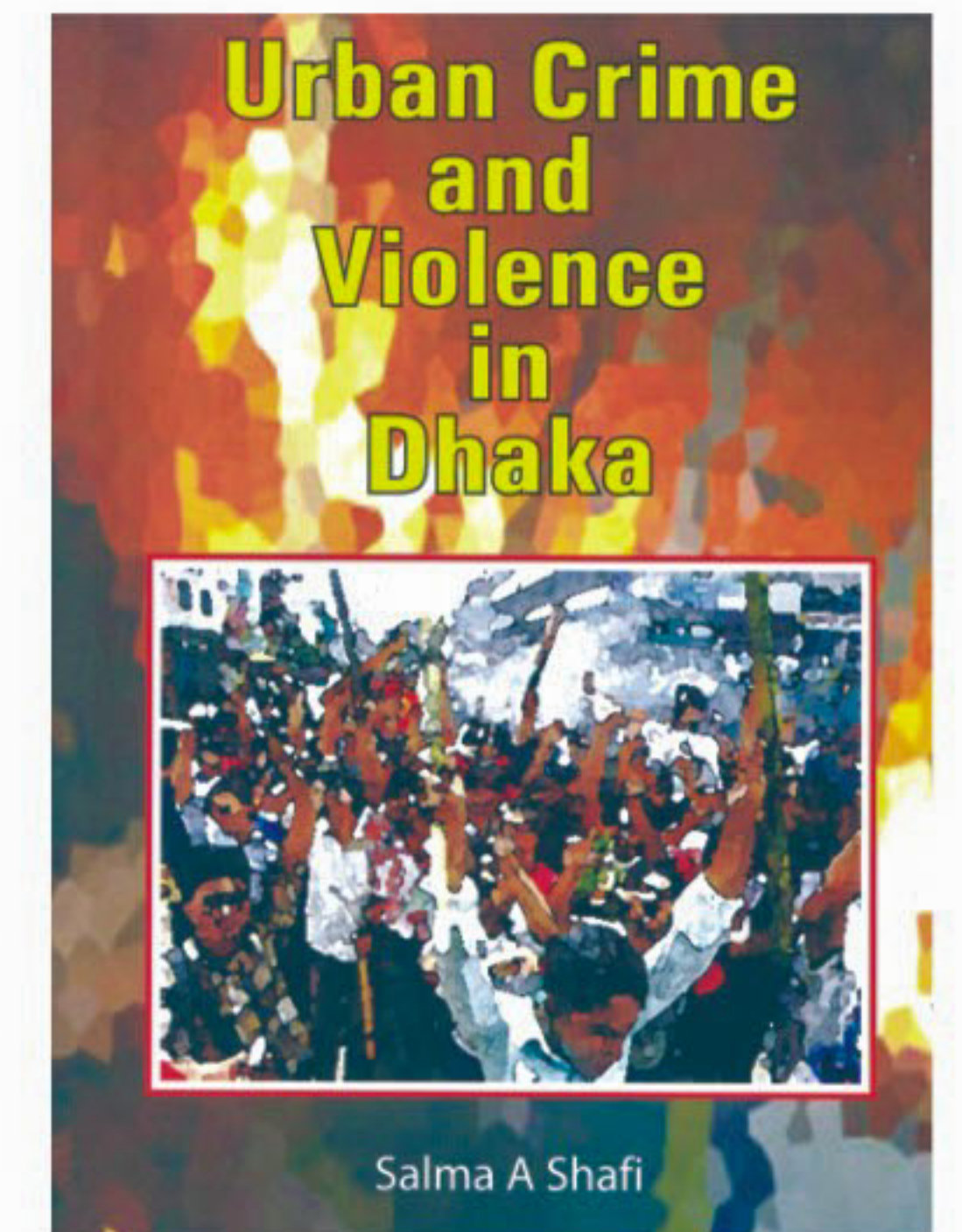
"Increase awareness and knowledge about the nexus between urban crime, violence, poverty and ineffective urban governance.
Develop a body of evidence-based knowledge.
Suggest appropriate measures to combat urban crime and violence."

And, what does she hope to ultimately achieve? "It is hoped that the findings...will contribute to adoption of policies and programmes by the government that will improve living conditions of the urban poor by mitigating violence and promoting safety and suggest ways of upgrading urban life and poverty reduction programmes, thereby promoting pro-poor governance." Forlorn hope, but that is the cynic in me talking; nonetheless, as things are going on in the crime and violence front, it will take a Herculean effort, one bordering on the miracle, to turn things around. New York city did it several years ago, and Dhaka, in terms of financial resources, planning, leadership, vitality, and innovativeness, is no New York city.

The author acknowledges the challenges of implementing any combination (and that is what it will take) of solutions, while indicating some of the factors that have negatively affected the health of the capital city: "...any solution is easily offered than enforced, particularly in Dhaka city where community identity is being almost lost due to unplanned urbanization and lack of socio-cultural ties among residents, particularly in new settlements or residential areas." Exactly! It seems that all roads lead to Dhaka, which, people from all parts of Bangladesh have decided, holds Aladdin's lamp for fulfilling all

their aspirations and desires. With the vast improvement in physical communication from even twenty years ago, people are taking advantage to over-populate Dhaka into an unplanned, or ill-planned, mega-slum, while leaving their own districts and communities behind to struggle with underdevelopment. But people find that, on coming over, there is no eldorado in Dhaka. But they come because successive wielders of political and economic power have left them little choice but to do so if they want to have a shot at making fame or fortune, or, ideally, both, including by crooked methods.

Shafi touches on various aspects of society that have contributed to the situation in Dhaka: "The deterioration of discipline and teaching standards in educational institutions, a general breakdown of moral values in society, lack of employment opportu-



Urban Crime and Violence in Dhaka
Salma A Shafi
The University Press Limited

nities, shrinking scope for taking part in healthy outdoor and indoor activities...are among the factors pushing a large part of the juvenile population towards violence, hijacking, drug addiction and other criminal and anti-social activities." And, incisively, "...the popular belief that poverty leads to crime is not the only reason for crime and violence and deterioration of law and order. Rather, a lot of blame is to be attributed to increasing corruption in everyday life and unhealthy competition in all stages." Drawing on the survey results of her study, she identifies six reasons for the crimes taking place: poverty, criminals receiving protection from those in power positions, unsatisfactory relations between the police and the judiciary, corruption in the police department, innocents landing in jail, and criminals going scot-free. Notice the preponderance of dys-

functional governance in this grouping.

The respondents in the survey characterize Dhaka city as what amounts to this reviewer's depiction of it as a glitzy mega-slum: among other uncomplimentary epithets, they have called it a city of hijackers, insecurity, garbage, anarchy, lawlessness, and crime, in that order of emphasis. And, going by the responses to different queries of those surveyed, the secondary sources used, and, indeed, a general perception that may be found among the city dwellers, one can detect a common thread running through all of them. "Organized criminal gangs function in Dhaka city and pose a serious threat to the security of city dwellers," observes Shafi. "Their main consideration is money. They have very good links with politicians, government functionaries and the police, precisely the sections of the administration responsible for maintaining law and order. Most of the time they are immune from police action and the legal process."

While Shafi concentrates primarily on the immediate factors relating to urban crime and violence, she brings up nuggets of important observations that have relevance to the wider society of Bangladesh. For example, "After the early seventies, income distribution has changed drastically. Rising income (consumption expenditure) and inequality have reduced the nation's potential for poverty alleviation." And, especially with the debate over microfinance going on, "...out of 30 percent of the total population identified as ultra-poor, micro-credit has reached only 12-15 percent." Furthermore, "though the political system, including the governance of the country, is supposed to be based on democratic principles, it is surprising that very little democracy is practiced within the parties themselves." Then, "Now student politics and terrorism have become synonymous..." And, "In a very crude way the two major parties have supported growth of religious fanaticism over the last 15 years by not restricting their sectarian actions..."

Urban Crime and Violence in Dhaka is compact and does not resort to redundancies. However, in Chapter 6 ("Observation of Public Spaces"), editorial carelessness may be observed in that the introduction to the next public space to be covered should ideally have been highlighted through italicizing the paragraph or emphasizing it in boldface; as they have been presented, they appear to be a continuation of the previous section, whereby the reader gets an unpleasant jolt. Nonetheless, Salma Shafi has come up with an illuminating book on an ugly facet of Dhaka. She eloquently portrays the poignant helplessness of its victims: "Majority of respondents mentioned not receiving any support or aid during their personal experience of crime and violence and therefore did not complain to law-enforcing agencies about the incidents. Those who complained stated their dissatisfaction with police procedures and also progress of investigation. In the end respondents mentioned that resorting to personal safety measures was the best precaution to combat crime and violence and also the only remedy."

Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communication Department, Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).