

# Dissecting a nation's history

## Afsan Chowdhury is appreciative of a new work on Bangladesh

Willem Van Schendel's *A History of Bangladesh* is an introductory book on a subject that is quite possibly the best of its kind. It is hugely informative, scholarly in its foundation and yet an eminently readable book. Through this book the writer has filled a gap that has been there since Bangladesh came into being.

Bangladesh historiography may have an impressive number of books in its list but not all are impressive. Often they are emotional narratives with little authenticity or are academic works, mostly doctoral dissertations, not attuned to the reading public. But this book, based on proper and extensive academic research, reads as breezily as a work of light fiction. One learns as one is entertained. This is how history books should be written.

Each section deals in some details looking at the major phases of our history. 'The Long View' section deals with the geography, ethnography, multiple and moving frontiers of the land and its people as they have influenced history. Discussing the Bengal delta as a crossroads of cultures and the role of trade and other interactions in its cultural construction, Van Schendel writes, "...Openness was an essential feature of the delta, adding a constant stream of goods to the economy and acting as a boon to local industries. Bengal's population was mobile and participated in overseas trade in various roles...the openness of the delta also exposed the population to many different cultural influences and new ideas" (p 46).

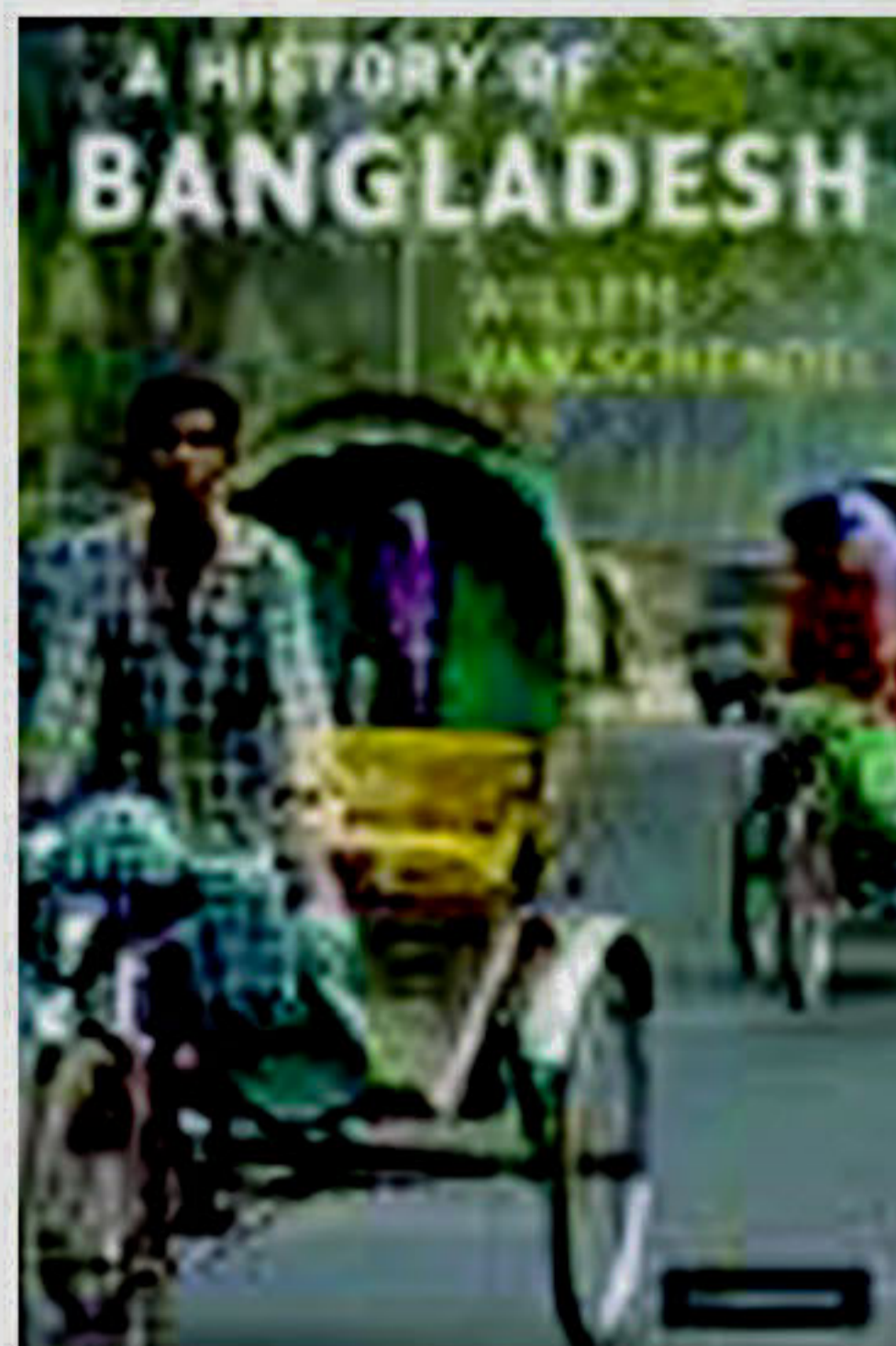
This section dealing with the foundational history of Bangladesh is probably the most interesting part of the book because it discusses issues not found elsewhere in standard available books. WVS describes the many trade systems and practices, the many people who visited Bengal and how all together formed the mosaic that has produced so much of the historical contours of today. The historian examines the past through the agrarian, state, religious and linguistic frontiers that have led to its multiple identities. He says, "... diverse and often opposing cultural strains produced a recognizable regional culture in the eastern Bengal delta ... unlike the surrounding

population, most inhabitants of the active delta came to define themselves as both Muslims and Bengalis..." (p 38).

In the section titled 'Colonial Encounters', the author looks at the history of eastern Bengal from the Mughal Empire to the British Empire and the subsequent events of the 1947 partition that threw up new states. He explains how the Mughal submission brought devastation and ruin to the area but also economic growth at the later stages. Bengal was described by some officials as a "hell full of bread." It not only brought commerce to the zone but Dhaka became the centre of activities, a trend that has had profound consequences on our history.

The colonial Brits were economic experimenters who were not happy just in taking Bengal's wealth but wanted to increase and extract its wealth further. Not only was the introduction of the Permanent Settlement, which produced the final version of the zamindari system, an economic project but one which generated a variety of cultural constructs many of which as remnants still influence our mind. They also developed commercialized agriculture significantly. It was not new in Bengal but the British were more organized and more ruthless in ensuring that.

WVS' simple but evocative description of the 1947 partition as it affected the common person is insightful. Instead of ranting on the evils of communalism and how everyone was a brother but suddenly became enemies, he explains how the situation came to such a pass, politically and socially. The context is set by the reality of emerging new states bent on achieving their goals at all costs. Van Schendel writes, "For the first time in its history, the Bengal delta was encased in a modern international border, a phenomenon that its inhabitants had no previous experience of whatsoever" (p100). Yet it was not the management of geographical borders that became the most difficult one but the people, caught in old lands and new states. Population transfer and production of refugees were also different in the area as no immediate transfer took place but one which was a much 'slower, longer and complicated process" (p101).



A History of Bangladesh  
Willem Van Schendel  
Cambridge University Press

Moving on to the language movement of 1952 in 'Becoming East Pakistan', the author writes, "What made 1952 a defining moment was that it marked a sharp psychological rupture. For many in the Bengal delta it signified a shattering of the dream of Pakistan and the beginning of a new political project, still hazy and fully supported by only a few: the search for a secular alternative to the communal idiom of Pakistan and for an autonomy that the delta had last experienced in pre-Mughal times" (p 114).

It would seem that there is a sense of historical continuity of the political struggle and its link to geography that began so long ago. Mentioning in an earlier chapter that "geography was destiny" for many, it brings out one historical root of our statehood of later years. However, it wasn't the only reality and

nor should it be read as a determinist trend though history. After all, Bengal could have survived intact in 1947, Pakistan could have been a successful experiment and so on. But neither can one deny a link that goes back over time in a series of overlapping trends that together have pushed forward the history of this people.

Part four is titled 'War and the Birth of Bangladesh', in which the author manages to put across all the important facts and positions of that event without burdening the reader. He also remains even-handed in doing so. Schendel writes about the nature of nationalism with great insight and without sentimentality: "the new nationalism was distinctly deltaic. It was limited to East Bengal /Bangladesh, the region where the Bengali-Muslim identity was most salient. Certainly, deep currents of empathy connected Bengalis in Bangladesh with their counterparts in India, but Bangladeshi nationalism did not envisage reunification. Some Indian observers underestimated the strength of this feeling of 'separate Bengalinness'. Insufficiently aware of how East Bengalis remembered 'colonial social arrangements', how the Pakistan experience had molded the identity and how they felt that the Bengali cultural centre of gravity had shifted eastwards. These observers were taken aback when their tentative suggestions of more intimate ties with India met with firm rebuttals" (p183-184).

Yet the problems of the new state were obvious from the start even though it was supposed to be a new imagination of an ancient aspiration. It was a state beset with the problems political and social. While it could and did overlook the issue of the human rights of the Biharis, putting them into unbelievable misery as a continuous ethnic punishment for the community's support to Pakistan, the moderate anti-Leftist government found it more difficult to deal with the task of administratively managing the new state. If the various opposition political groups were dealt with effectively, the famine of 1974 wasn't which came atop the crushing mal-governance of early Bangladesh. "Awami

League rule soon turned out to be a case of party over nation... Mujib was aware of the "blatant abuse of power and corrupt practices of his party people but always the party loyalist, did nothing to stop them" (p 179)

Describing the post-1975 situation which saw the rise of single party rule followed by military rule, WVS writes, " Bangladesh's long cherished dream of popular democracy had first turned into a nightmare of civilian autocracy and now into military rule" (p 182)

The final section, 'Independent Bangladesh', deals with contemporary issues such as the roots of military dictatorship, the identity controversy Bengali or Bangladeshi or Muslims- the CHT war, remembering the liberation war, development policies, the rise of NGOs, population and food production boom, transnational linkages, new economic sectors and so on. Each section deals not only with the transitional facts of nationhood but also the ancient strands of history that exert pressure on the present.

In the final chapter, 'A national culture', Van Schendel makes an observation on the emergence of the new hero who was a symbol of the transition. He writes, "The new cultural model was self consciously nouveau riche; clothes had to be flashy, jewellery chunky, houses and their interiors ostentatious. The new cultural hero was no longer the delicate poet, the demure homemaker, or the idealistic student activist. Now it was the streetwise rowdy, the mostan or mustan" (P 252)

Schendel's conclusion is insightful and optimistic despite its struggles. "Today's inhabitants of the Bengal delta cope - often magnificently - by bringing into play a flexible, upbeat resilience that is one of the region's most valuable historical legacies.

If you were to read one book to understand Bangladesh and its history, this would be it. (Willem Van Schendel is professor of Modern Asian History at the University of Amsterdam. He has written several books on Bengal and Bangladesh).

Afsan Chowdhury is Research Associate, York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR), York University.

# Poetry in desolate landscape

## Nausheen Rahman courses through rocky land

Translated from the Norwegian by Ingrid Christophersen, *The Bookseller of Kabul*, authored by Asne Seierstad, gives us an overview of war-ravaged Afghanistan and its courageous, resilient people after the fall of the Taliban. Written by a journalist, it appears in a literary form; it is at once well-researched, keenly-observed reportage and a very readable story book.

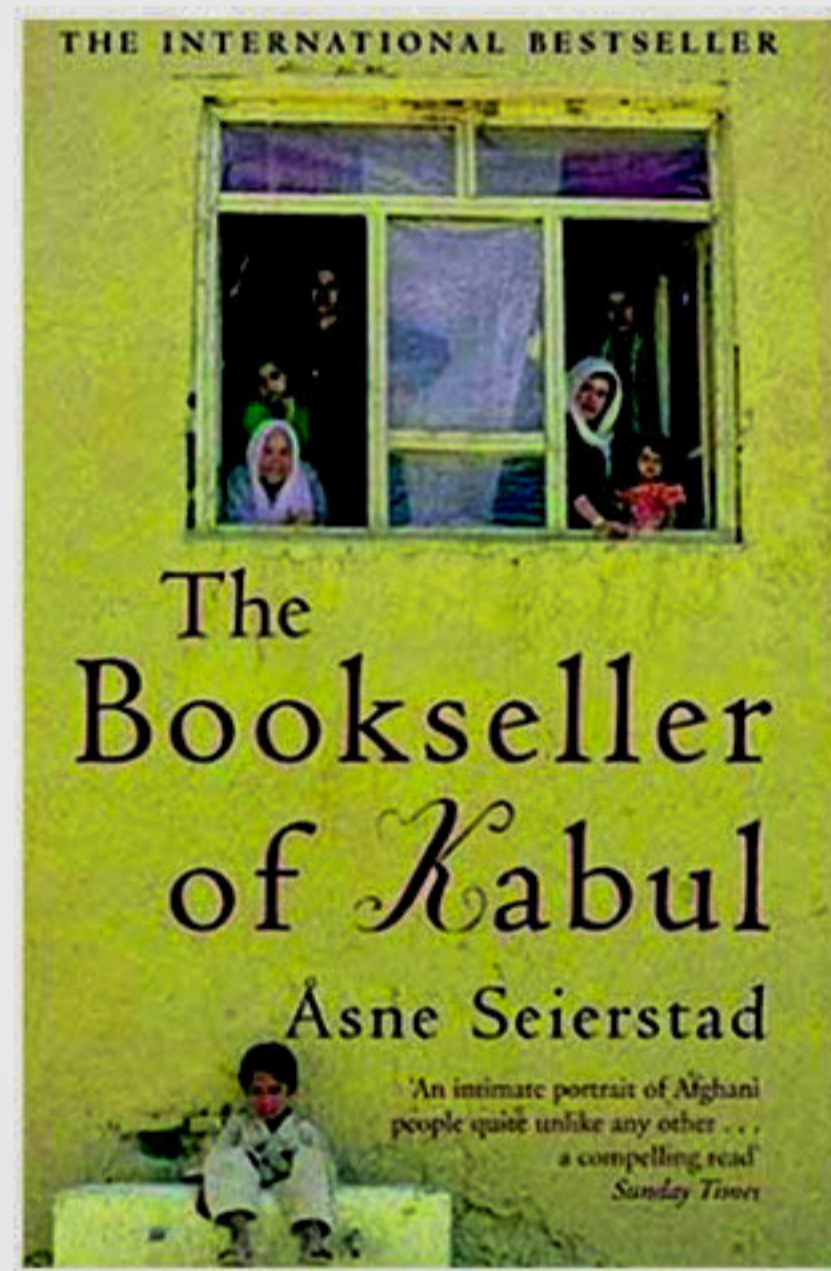
Seierstad wanted to write a book on Afghanistan and so spent a few months in Kabul (soon after the Taliban's flight). She lived in the house of Sultan, a bookseller. She says she did not choose that specific family to write about because she wanted it to represent all other families, but because it inspired her.

This is about a country which was used to continual strife between ethnic / tribal groups and between warlords who ran away, letting the mullahs take over. Civil war, drought and the Taliban have devastated entire areas. Afghanistan had been a scenic, popular tourist resort before all the mayhem began. There's a startling contrast between what the region could have been and what it has become.

We can't help but be spellbound by Sultan's love for books and by his braving arrest and punishment, time and again, as he persists in his mission of supplying books to Kabul residents, even after many of his books are burnt. Once when he was in jail, where non-reading material was permitted, he somehow managed to smuggle in books every week. It was in these difficult conditions that his interest in Afghan culture and literature and Persian poetry was strengthened. He was determined to spread knowledge of Afghan culture and history and to protect his books from further destruction. We recoil in horror as we read how the Taliban set about ruining the heritage of the country: "It took them half a day to annihilate a thousand years of history". They burnt books and smashed or blew up sculptures which dated back nearly two thousand years and were Afghanistan's "greatest cultural heritage".

Sultan has collected books for thirty years and says he "could not allow the Taliban, or other aggressors, to destroy even more of the Afghan soul". To him, there's nothing more important than work. He is convinced that progress lies in hard work and in doing away with war. His ambition is to build an empire of books.

It is amazing that in a country where life is so insecure and uncertain, and where three-quarters of the population is illiterate, people continue to love and value books.



The Bookseller of Kabul  
Asne Seierstad  
Virago

What is more impressive is "the power of literature to withstand even the most repressive regime" (a quote from one of the blurbs).

Ironically, though, Sultan whose life revolves around books and other sources of learning, does not allow his sons to go back to school when it reopens. He wants them to become businessmen and believes that the best place to learn business is in the shop.

Each chapter of the book revolves around one member of Sultan's family and, as his or her story unfolds, the culture, tradition and changing situations of Afghanistan flash across the pages. We can perceive how the habits and psyche of a people are shaped by the environment and circumstances they are raised in, and by the experiences they are exposed to.

Seierstad based the stories on the narratives rendered by the family members. These stories not only tell us about their respective joys and sorrows, aspirations and let-downs, but also give concrete information about the different kinds of obstacles, prohibitions and restraints they have to confront in their daily lives (especially women).

A woman longing for her love is taboo. To protect the family honor, a girl is killed by her brother at the behest of the mother. Having a daughter is a little "catastrophe". These are some of the things we are told about the state of women in Afghanistan.

Facts worth noting are that, in the previous century, women did not wear burkhas, and that burkhas were gotten rid of by the upper classes, by those who had started the custom (the dress code changed with the changing of the rulers). A lot of positive changes have taken place since the fall of the Taliban, but unfortunately, within the family circle, things remain more or less the same.

One very interesting chapter, "Suicide and Song", is about Afghani women who rebel, privately by taking their own lives, or by writing poetry. Syed Bahodine Majrouh, an Afghan poet, tells us about this in a book of poems written by Pashtoon women (he was killed by fundamentalists in 1988). The poems are called "landay", meaning "short". In Majrouh's words, they are of few words, short and rhythmical, "like a scream or a knife stab". These women wrote mostly of forbidden love, and exchanged poems discreetly with one another. The protagonists in the poems defy the chains put around their wishes and are willing to die for love. Where they live, "passion is prohibited and punishment is merciless". In one poem, the woman tells God that she would prefer to be a stone, rather than a woman, in the next life. The poems reflect the disappointments and hopelessness reigning within women; some aim to deliberately stir up men's virility.

The thing that mars the book's literary qualities, however, is the blatant tone of derision throughout. Writers sometimes have to be hard-hitting, but it is not necessary to hit below the belt. Admittedly, cruel practices must be condemned, but there is no need to propagandize issues. A chronicler has to present facts as they are, but harsh censure sounds didactic and, to think, all the noise being made in the western world is against 'morality' in Muslim countries.

An Afghani woman writing about the way women's confidence is crushed and how they are oppressed, or about the constraints of the burkha, would not have sounded as offensive. An outsider passing judgment or making fun of the burkha is not acceptable.

I wish I could say that the book's good parts outweigh the derogatory parts, but my conviction that people's rights to their own religious practices must be respected, prevents me from doing so. And I do not say this as a Muslim or as a woman, but as a fair, rational human being.

Nausheen Rahman is a teacher and literary critic.

# Rabindranath Tagore in analysis

## Subrata Kumar Das is cheered by a commemorative journal

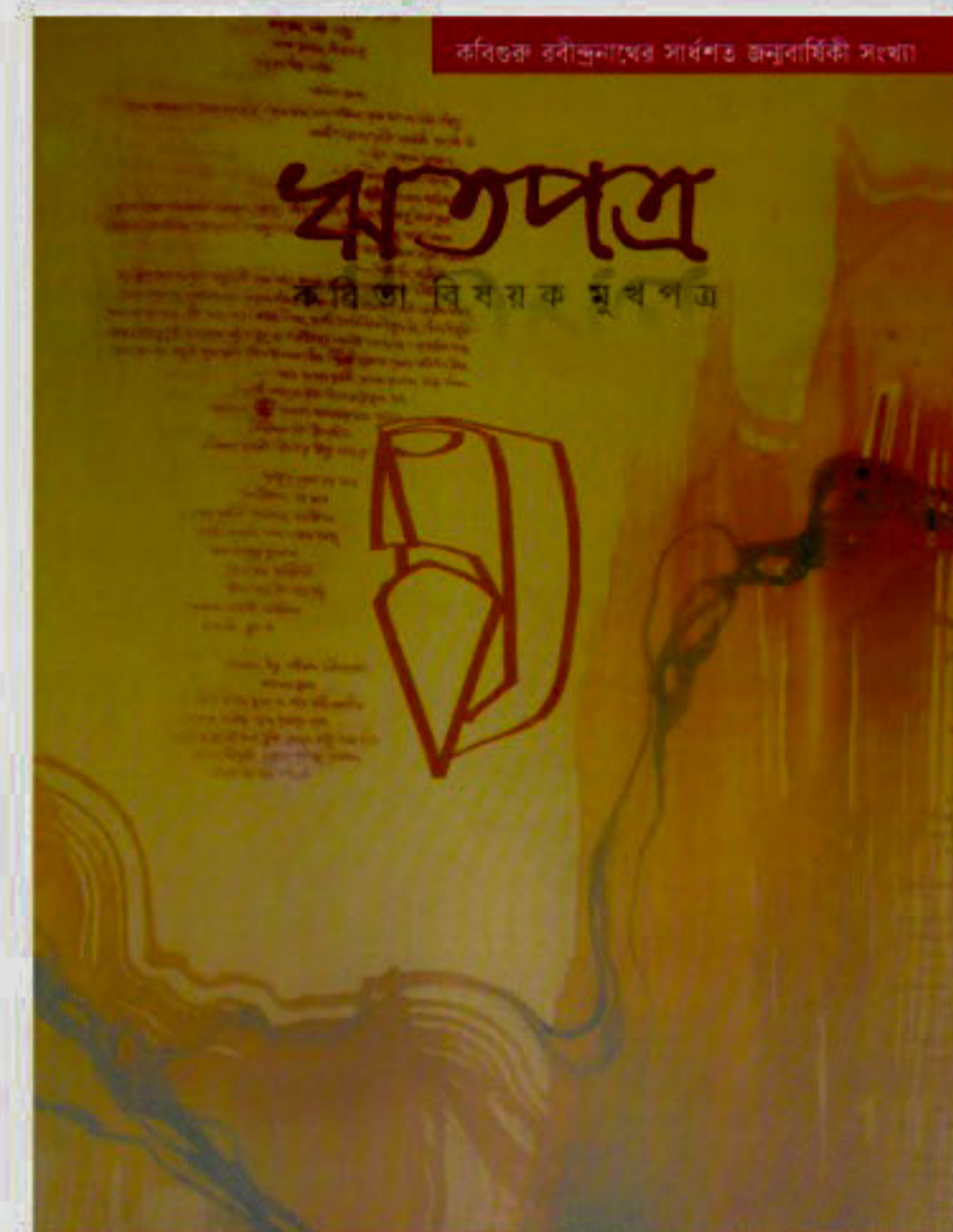
*Ritopetro*, a little magazine on poetry published from Chattagram (Chittagong in Anglican terms), has brought out a special issue on Rabindranath Tagore on the sesquicentennial birth anniversary of the Nobel winning Bengali poet. On this great occasion, which is being observed across the world through the initiative of the United National Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), scores of books and periodicals dealing with the works and life of this internationally acclaimed author and activist have flooded the West Bengal book markets. However, worthy publications on the poet are only a few from Bangladesh and among those *Ritopetro* can certainly draw the attention of many.

The two basic categories of writings in the magazine are essays and poems. All the essays deal with Rabindranath's life and literature while the poems are dedicated to Rabindranath himself. The writers of the essays include Ahmed Rafiq, Karunamaya Goswami, Anupam Sen, Dr Maniruzzaman, Jotin Sarkar, Sanat Kumar Saha, Ardhendu Chakravarty, Arun Dasgupta, Subhashchandra Datta, Mahadev Saha, Prakriti Chakravarty, Dr Kanailal Sen, Bhaswar Bandopadhyay, Nripendralal Das, Shahid Iqbal, Manabendra Bhattacharya, Tapomon Ghosh, Ananya Banerji, Tareq Reza, Tarok Roy, Pujon Ghosh, Nazimuddin Shyamal and the present contributor himself. The poets include Ashim Saha, Golam Kibria Pinu, Nitai Sen, Mridul Guha, Faujul Kabir, Shahnewaj Biplol, Nilanjon Bidyut, Chandan Chowdhury, Paritosh Haldar, Mahfuz Ripon, Muzahid Ahmed, Soumyo Sarkar, Ranjana Biswas, Murshida Ahmed, Nasir Ahmed, Amitava Chakravarty, Dulal Sarkar, Shihab Sarkar, Sathi Das, Khalid Ahsan, Mahful Parvez, Obayed Akash, Kamrul Hasan Badal, Tapan Bagchi, Anirban Roychowdhury, Khaled Mahmud Morshed, Monirul Monir, Rahel Rajib, and Arun Sen. Essayists and poets from both Bangladesh and West Bengal come forward to enriched studies of Rabindranath in these times.

Ahmed Rafiq, the veteran literary activist and well known Tagore researcher, has focused on the poet's attitude towards the rural development of Bangladesh. On the other hand, Anupam Sen has analysed the relationship of Rabindranath with Kadambari Devi, his sister-in-law, a much-talked about personality impressing the poet in his teens hugely. Dr. Maniruzzaman has explored the many details related to *Sanchayita*, the anthology of Rabindra poems selected by the poet himself. It could be mentioned here that some Rabindra devotees published another anthology called *Choyonika*, before *Sanchayita*. The four plays by Rabindranath --- *Achalayaton*, *Muktadhara*, *Roktakabi*, *Rather Roshi* --- have been evaluated from a Marxist point of view by Jotin Sarkar, the elderly scholar of the country. Prof Sanat Kumar Saha has pointed out the resemblances between T. S. Eliot's 'Preludes' and Rabindranath's 'Bangli'. The earlier odes of Rabindranath have

been researched well in the essay by Arun Dasgupta, a noted journalist and veteran authority on Rabindranath from Chattagram. It is worth mentioning that analyses of Rabindranath's odes are a rarity and we believe the writer will finish his job by working on the later odes of the poet too and thus give readers a complete picture in this regard. Prakriti Chakravarty illustrates Rabindranath's deep affinity with and affection for his niece Indira Devi, to whom almost all the letters of *Chhinopetro* were written. Prof Nripendralal Das sketches the influences of the great maestro on the literature of Mujtaba Ali and thus has illuminated a less focused facet of Tagore research to readers.

Among the many poems, the one by Ashim



Ritopetro  
April 2011  
Editor Arun Sen  
Chittagong

Saha is certainly a good read. Nasir Ahmed's 'Ponchishe Boishakh Mone Rekhe' is also instructive to read. Obayed Akash has contributed with his prose poem that has added novelty to the whole work.

We remain hopeful that *Ritopetro*, an irregular but valuable publication from Chattagram, will draw further attention of the literary circles among Dhaka society and spur increased interest in Tagore studies. Arun Sen, the editor, has been expending huge efforts toward making the journal into document of literary excellence. He surely deserves appreciation from our literati.

Subrata Kumar Das, author of www.bangladeshinovels.com, can be reached at subratakdas@yahoo.com