

# Lord of the jungle

*Inam Ahmed is cheered by a revealing study on tigers*

Away in the south, there lies a vast area -- 5,770 square kilometers to be exact -- of a mangrove forest -- the Sundarbans. The world's largest and most biodiverse mangrove swamp, it has a fragile and intricate ecosystem that depends on many components such as tides, salt content in water and soil and duration of sunlight. Here roams a majestic animal -- the Bengal tiger. Walking like a shadow, this large cat sneaks upon the deer and sometimes humans too. The mention of the tiger can send a shiver down the spines of those who live around the mangrove forest.

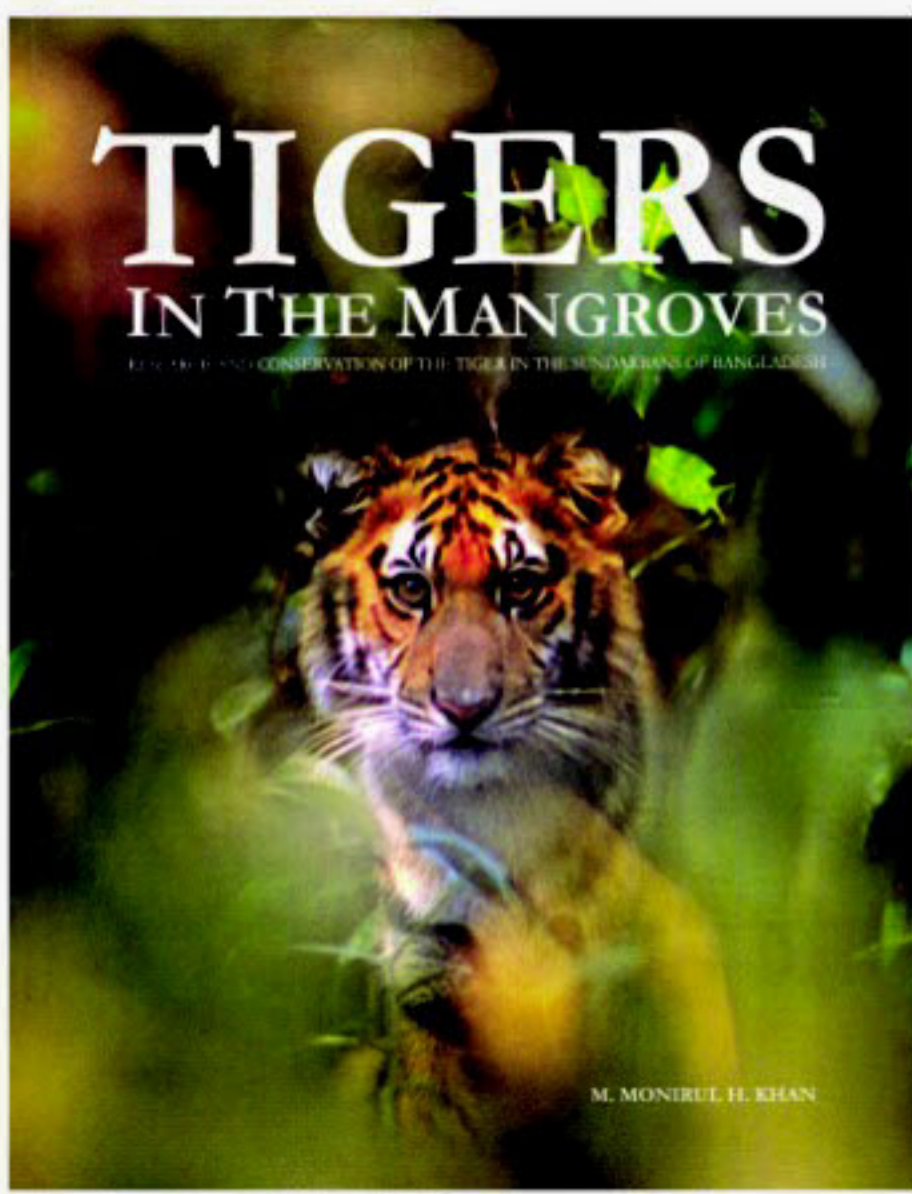
A zoology professor had criss-crossed this forest many times. With his uncanny sense of observation, he has searched the forest floor, scanned the trees, and eyed every crevice and corner of the forest looking for this wonderful animal. The end result: a glorious book called *Tigers in the Mangroves*.

Anyone who knows M Monirul H Khan also knows about his knack for details and his keen powers of observation. He can spot the most difficult bird in the most difficult setting. He can pick up the most indistinct sound. And so when Monirul did this job on tigers, on which he also did his doctorate, the end result was bound to be good.

Bengal tigers were once found in all the forests and even in some village groves of Bangladesh. They were present in 11 of the 17 civil districts of eastern Bengal until the 1930s. Today they have been limited to the Sundarbans other than the occasional ones sighted in the mixed evergreen forests in the Sangu-Matamuhuri and Kassalong-Sajek areas of the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Monirul has mentioned one George U Yule of the Bengal Civil Service who killed 400 tigers in 25 years in Bengal after which he did not keep count of his kills. The government also used to pay a bounty for tiger killing. Today, despite their protected status, poachers are active. They either poison the tigers to death or use poison bait to kill them. And of course, more than three tigers are killed every year when they enter villages in search of food.

Monirul had set up camera-traps and also counted the number of prey and pugmarks to arrive at his own estimate of the numbers of tigers in the Sundarbans. He thinks about



**Tigers in the Mangroves**  
M. Monirul H. Khan  
Arannyak Foundation  
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200 tigers exist in the mangrove against the forest department's claim of 440. That is a number too small to be worried about.

And yet except for a few villages in the Indian part, there is no permanent human settlement in the Sundarbans. The earliest reference to the Sundarbans can be traced back to the epic Mahabharata (300BC to 300AD) where it was mentioned as Gangasagar. Fourth and third century BC Maurya and sixth to fourth century BC Gupta age relics are found in the forest. The Malagis or salt manufacturers set up their plants here between the 18th and 20th centuries.

Whoever the settlers may be, they all looked upon the tigers with respect and fear. People of all religions worship Bonbibi, a deity, to save themselves from tigers. Muslims do not enter the forest on Fridays as they think Bonbibi goes to Mecca on that day.

The reason for the fear is understandable as quite a few humans are killed by tigers each year. Monirul has concluded that the tigers prefer to attack from the back and

hence the honey collectors strap a mask on the back of their heads to confuse the tigers. He thinks the man-eating habit of tigers might simply be a behavioural character but it is exacerbated more by humans and scarcity of natural prey.

Although he is not sure how man-eating became a behavioural character in some tigers, he thinks in the remote past, tigers of the western Sundarbans encountered a large number of human carcasses probably as a result of a cyclone or epidemic disease. When they tasted it they realized that humans were edible. The trend then transferred and spread from generation to generation.

But Monirul has shown that tiger-prey ratio in the Sundarbans is quite low compared to other forests in tiger range countries and this may be a reason for hungry tigers to get close to human habitation.

He has mentioned some interesting facts about the tiger's food habit. Tigers prefer to catch big animals like spotted deer because it is most profitable. But the Sundarbans tigers also eat porcupine, monkey, wild boar, leopard cat, dolphins, red jungle fowl, adjutant storks, crabs and even fish. A camera-trapped tiger carrying a fish in its mouth published in the book is proof to such behaviour.

But Monirul has also found good quantity of soil in the tiger's scat and he has deduced that tigers eat soil probably to supplement mineral needs or to cure infections.

Throughout the book, one gets a good feel of the life and biodiversity of the Sundarbans with splendid pictures. At every step you can feel the danger the writer went through in collecting information. He once told me he had met tigers fifteen times, sometimes at close range. (I have only one experience of a close encounter with a tiger and I don't want to meet another in my life.)

Monirul has made sure that both experts and laymen find the book useful and interesting. This is the kind of book that Bangladesh had been waiting for, for such a long time.

**Inam Ahmed is Deputy Editor, Internet Edition, Business Section and Special Projects, The Daily Star.**

# Paradise in the imagination

*Tulip Chowdhury is impressed by an unusual story*

Eighty-three-year old Eddie is in the last phase of his life. He has been working on the maintenance of the Ruby Pier, an amusement park, for as long as he can remember. When he looks for broken boards, loose bolts, worn out steel all of sudden he stops and seems to listen. After all these years he could hear trouble, he says, in the spits, stutter and thumping of the equipment. But on this particular, eighty-third birthday Eddie dies tragically as he falls from a cart while trying to save a little girl. With his last breath he feels two small hands in his and then nothing.

The story of Eddie begins backwards, from the ending as he wakes up in heaven. He learns that heaven does not come at the end of life but in fact is another beginning where your life on earth is explained by five people who are already there. Eddie learns that all endings are also beginnings, we just don't know it at that time. Life's values and lessons are explained to him and he realizes that life is just opening up with all its meanings for him after it is over in reality.

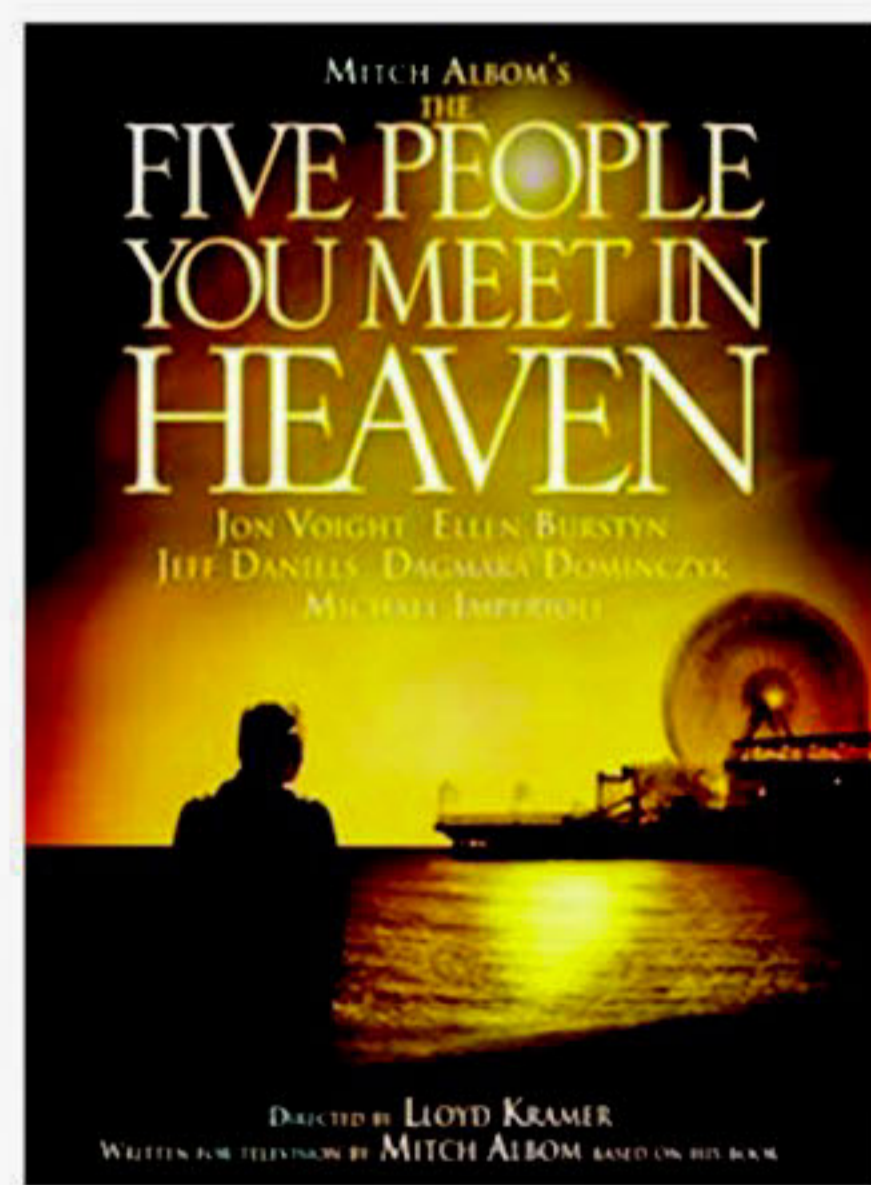
The first person to visit Eddie is the Blue Man. Eddie is back at the pier and it is his childhood again. The Blue Man says that the feeling is there because he had known the Blue Man when he was a child. The Blue Man tells him that the five people Eddie meets in heaven had come into his life for a reason. He further says that people do not come to heaven to laze about in gardens and walk by peaceful rivers. They come to have life explained to them, they come to reach solace in their life. Eddie learns that each of the five people he will meet will give him lessons on life. Eddie visits different life scenarios and has the Blue Man explain different situations. The Blue Man says that he died when he was trying to save Eddie from hitting him with his car. And when Eddie says that life is not fair the Blue Man replies,

"Fairness does not govern life or death. If it did no good person would ever die young." He also says that birth and death intersect people, that people had come to his funeral even though they did not know him because the human spirit knows that all lives intersect. That death just doesn't take someone, it misses someone else. And in the small distance between being taken and being missed lives are changed. Eddie learns about life and wishes that The Blue Man would stay with him. But the Blue Man is gone and Eddie is left to reflect on all the secrets opened up to him.

Eddie feels his feet touch the ground and is back on earth. He is surrounded by black rubble and he can hear explosions and bomb blasts. He is running, running with the measured steps of a soldier. Ah, yes, he is in the battlefield, he is in his life as a soldier with his captain. They had served together in the Philippines. In the war they were

taken captives and tortured for days. Then one day they had been able to smite their enemies and come out of their prison. On their way out they had burned down their prison. Eddie had a vision of a child being burnt in the burning house. He had gone back and when he was trying to get inside the burning house he was shot on his leg. Ever since that bullet shot he had not been able use his right leg properly.

Now that Eddie meets the Captain in heaven he is told that it was the Captain who had shot him in the leg. The Captain admits that he had shot Eddie on his leg to save his life. All these years Eddie had cursed the person who had made him lame. Now he finds that the Captain had saved his life by shooting on this leg for he would not have come out alive from that raging inferno. Eddie is at loss for words when he further



**The Five People You Meet in Heaven**  
Mitch Albom  
Hyperion, New York

learns that the Captain had died on that day evidently after saving Eddie.

All his life Eddie had been in awe of his father. His mother had been the one to smother them with love while his father had been the one with the rod. Of parents Albom writes, "All parents damage their children. It cannot be helped. Youth, like pristine glass absorbs the prints of its handlers. Some parents smudge, others crack, a few shatter childhood completely into jagged little pieces, beyond repair."

The damage done by Eddie's father was the damage of neglect. On Saturdays his father would take him to the amusement park. Eddie would have visions of cotton candy and rides. But his father would leave him in the care of the animal keeper or other man and come back drunk. When Eddie has a vision of his father and wants to call out a

voice calls out, and he finds his third person in heaven. It is Ruby, wife of the owner of Ruby Pier, the amusement park. Ruby shows him how kind his father had been to others in his life. Though he had been abusive at home he had lived all his life helping and saving the life of man who had degraded his wife. Eddie learns of various incidents that shows how generous and brave his father had been. It is Ruby who changes Eddie's long standing opinion of his father and he finds solace in his heart. Ruby tells him that things happen like a chain. If Eddie's father had not worked at Ruby Pier she would not have come to tell Eddie about him. She says,

Then Eddie enters a world of wedding ceremonies. He goes through African, Lebanese and other counties' weddings. And at the end he finds his own bride, he finds his beloved wife Marguerite. She is the fourth person he meets in heaven. Marguerite tells him she too had five people explain her life to her after she came to heaven. Marguerite is in her youth, just like the days they had been married. Eddie feels the bliss of love, feels the happiness of being in love and be loved back. They never had children but their love thrived all tests of life. Marguerite tells him that she is utterly happy here in the heaven and that she knows his love is complete for her. Love, she says goes beyond the world of the living and that is why even in heaven they still love each other completely. Eddie understands that love, like rain can nourish from above, drenching couples with a soaking joy. But sometimes under angry heat of life love dries on the surface and must nourish from below, tending to its roots, keeping itself alive.

Marguerite died just when she was 47. She told Eddie that he must have felt his love was snatched away from him. Lost love, she says is just another form of love. Life comes to an end, she says, but love doesn't. When Eddie is holding her with the complete knowledge of their love, feels that life has been wonderful after all, Marguerite vanishes.

Eddie finally finds peace with his life upon the earth. His work at the pier seemed to have been worth all the time and efforts he had given there. They story in *The Five People You Meet In Heaven* builds up to its climax very gradually. There is a vivid description of the places and people Eddie meets in heaven. The plot is mind blowing and it stretches the imagination of the reader. The life in heaven holds a intriguing questions for us all and this book seems to pave away to a deeper layer. The characters portrayed indeed seem to be out of the world. The reader has a sensation as if one is reaching out to those people who are no longer in the world. The book is a real mind stretcher!

**Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction and is a teacher.**

# Before the Opium Wars

*Charles R. Larson appreciates a writer's humanity*

Amitav Ghosh's amazing historical novels *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke* reclaim the era leading to the opium wars by relating their stories from a non-Western perspective: mostly Indian but also Chinese. The first of these novels was published three years ago and brings together a disparate cast of characters who eventually find themselves on a converted slave ship, but this time the voyage is to take indentured workers from Calcutta to Mauritius. There are also several felons who are being sent into exile to the same destination, including a Raja who has been accused of forgery under rather dubious circumstances and an American mulatto who has quickly risen up the ship's hierarchy because of an earlier voyage which wiped out much of the *Ibis*'s senior crew. *Sea of Poppies*'s mesmerizing narrative is compulsive reading because of Ghosh's historic details about raising opium in India (a British monopoly at the center of the East India Company's phenomenal success), the hazards of shipping (whether to transport opium, slaves, or indentured servants), a plethora of information about the environs of Calcutta in the early part of the nineteenth century and, of course, the lives of people associated with the opium trade. Ghosh's incredible array of characters and assure a winning novel in every way.

There's a haunting scene in *Sea of Poppies* that is as memorable as anything I have ever read. When Neel (the Raja who has been accused of forgery) is imprisoned, awaiting transport to Mauritius, he's thrown into a cell that reeks with stench, so overwhelming that he wonders if he himself will survive. Under one of the beds he detects a feral creature, covered in vomit and excrement, scabs and sores, huddled into a ball. But this previously pampered Raj, who has never had to lift a finger in his life, never worked or associated with the lowly, washes the silent figure and in the process humanizes himself. It takes days to clean up the creature, arrange to have his hair cut (The prison's barber tells him, "In all my years of hair-cutting...I've never seen anything like this"), all the while talking to the man, who never responds.

Neel looked over the barber's shoulder at his cell-mate's scalp: even as the razor was shaving it clean, the bared skin was sprouting a new growth film that moved and shimmered like mercury. It was a swarming horde of lice, and as the matted hair tumbled off, the insects could be seen falling to the ground in showers. Neel was kept busy, drawing and pouring bucketfuls of water, so as to drown the insects before they found others to infect." Yuck.

But he doesn't get a response, and what Neel finally understands is that the man who appears to be part Chinese is an opium addict, undergoing withdrawal. Questions such as "What is your name?" lead to no reply. Then one night in the darkness, Neel feels an arm around him, comforting him in the midst of a nightmare, and the man speaks, "My name Lei Leong Fatt.... People call Ah Fatt. Ah Fatt your friend." The relationship that Ghosh between the two of them makes them is touching and will take them, eventually, not to Mauritius but to the environs of Canton, which is the setting for much of the second volume, *River of Smoke*.

After a terrible storm in the Indian Ocean, the *Ibis* is thrown off course, as is true of two other

ships on their way to Canton: the *Anahita*, loaded with one of the largest consignments of opium ever headed for China; and the *Redruth*, a nursery ship, with a horticulturist who plans to acquire plants that have a medicinal value, swapping them for others from India and the United States. All three ships because of the storm eventually end up in Canton's area for foreigners, Fanqui-town, since China is closed, forbidden to outsiders. The time is 1837-38, when the Chinese are beginning to clamp down on the importation of opium, the central conflict of *River of Smoke*.

The moral issue is clear. England and India had already banned the sale of opium in their countries, but the East India Company (a Calcutta State Enterprise), and therefore Britain, had no qualms about selling opium to China: "The revenues of India, the opium branch included, have repeatedly received the sanction of Parliament. The opium manufacture, and the trade inseparable from it, have received the highest sanction bestowable in one country, on an article proscribed in another. The British merchant went out from the high places of legislation to attend the sales of the East India Company. Authority, example, sympathy, were on his side; what cared he for the interdicts of the strange, despotic, repulsive government of China?" It's a little like the United States, years ago, banning DDT and infants' flammable pajamas, but then peddling them overseas the tobacco companies, knowingly selling an addictive substance to children.

Ghosh orchestrates the lives and activities of the figures from the three ships and their increasing hostility from the Chinese, who have seen the sale of opium as a trade violation that has been questioned for nearly forty years. All of this comes to a head in the spring of 1838, when High Commissioner Lin, following the dictates of the Emperor, totally prohibits the sale of opium, with a decree that any ships that contain the substance will have their stocks

destroyed. When the Commissioner asks one of the Englishmen point blank if he does not regard the sale of opium as a monstrous activity, the Brit replies, "No, sir.... Because it is not my hand that passes sentence upon those who choose the indulgence of opium. It is the work of another, invisible, omnipotent: it is the hand of freedom, of the market, of the spirit of liberty itself, which is none other than the breath of God." Sounds too much like the Republican presidential debates this fall, which is only to say that greed has always been with us.

I have dwelled on the moral ambiguity of Amitav Ghosh's two novels, especially of *River of Smoke*, but this is only context and a disservice to the author. Both novels are rich in character and plotting and above all in historical detail. I found them compulsive reading and I'm only frustrated that it may be several years before the final volume of Ghosh's trilogy is published. True, at times I thought that *River of Smoke* read a little like the middle of a narrative yet to be completed which it is but by the end of this second volume I had nothing but admiration for Ghosh's humanity, his joy for life amidst all the horror of human greed and duplicity.

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# A book, but only a textbook

*Alamgir Khan takes a new look at the dismal science*

*Arthashastra Parichoy* (Introduction to Economics) is a book in Bangla on the basic ideas of economics written by Anu Muhammad, professor of economics at Jahangirnagar University and one of the leading economists as well as a political thinker and activist in the country. It has been published by Samhati Prokashan. It is important to have Bengali language books on various branches of academic knowledge. Economics is a complex subject with many mathematical expressions, theories and hard-to-crack terms. But it can be imparted to almost anyone in fairly easily understandable terms and language. This is lacking in our literature. Therefore Anu Muhammad's initiative in writing an introductory book on economics in Bangla should be an appreciable step in that direction.

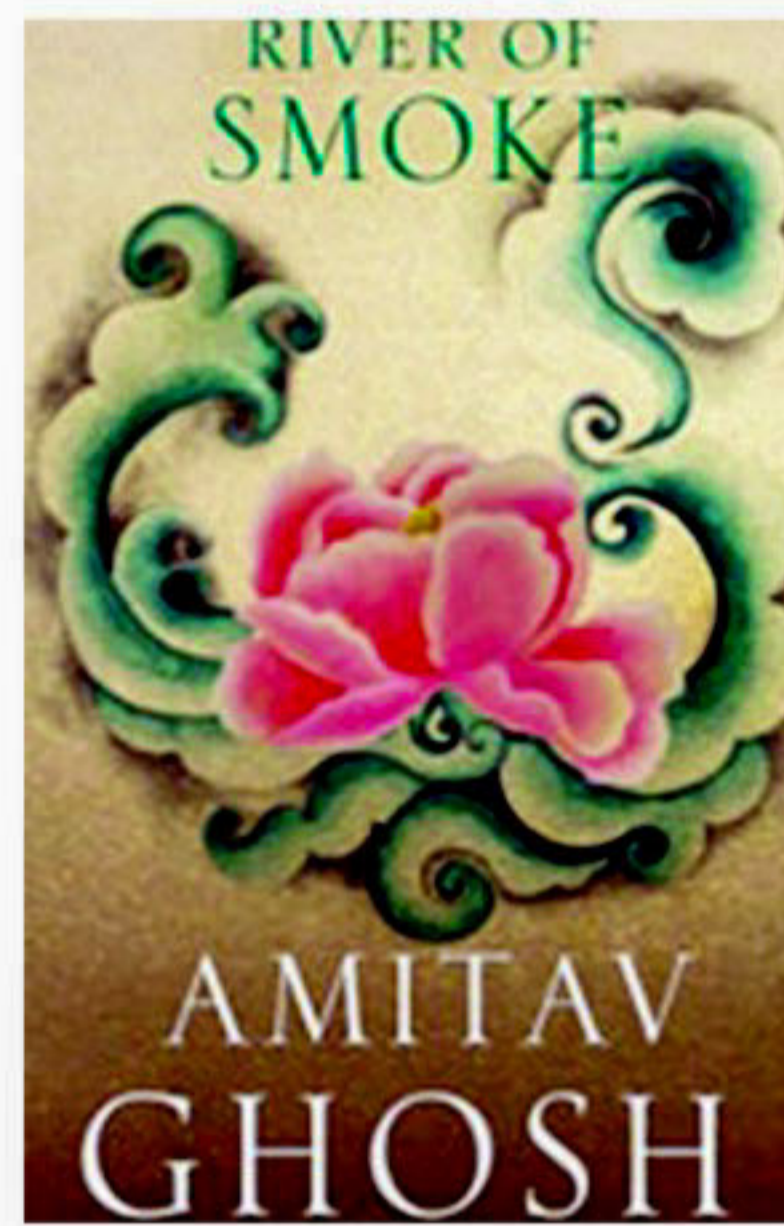
This is written as a textbook, but it is not limited to not just students of economics, but for others as well. It has covered some of the basic concepts of micro- and macro-economics, such as consumer behaviour and theory of demand, consumer equilibrium, income-consumption curve, degree of demand and elasticity, production, production cost, market and perfect competition, imperfect competition, pricing of factors and distribution, international trade, balance of payment and terms of trade, public sector and private sector expenditure, etc. All this discussion is full of mathematical equations, graphs and heavy terms. It is fit only for students of economics, but even for them it may not be much helpful because the discussion of the economic terms and theories is all too brief and comes without adequate explanation. It is good as a handbook of economics

for them. With all the graphs and equations, it is also good for exam papers. That it is written by a teacher of economics is clear through its style of writing. However, there is little in it to attract and help readers beyond the academic boundary. The Anu Muhammad known to people beyond economics students of Jahangirnagar University is hardly to be found in this book. Only one thing in which he has made himself distinct from other writers of economics textbooks is his assertion that no economy, no economics and economic theories are constant. The economy and economics dominant in the present world are a few hundred years old and fated to be replaced by some new economy and corresponding

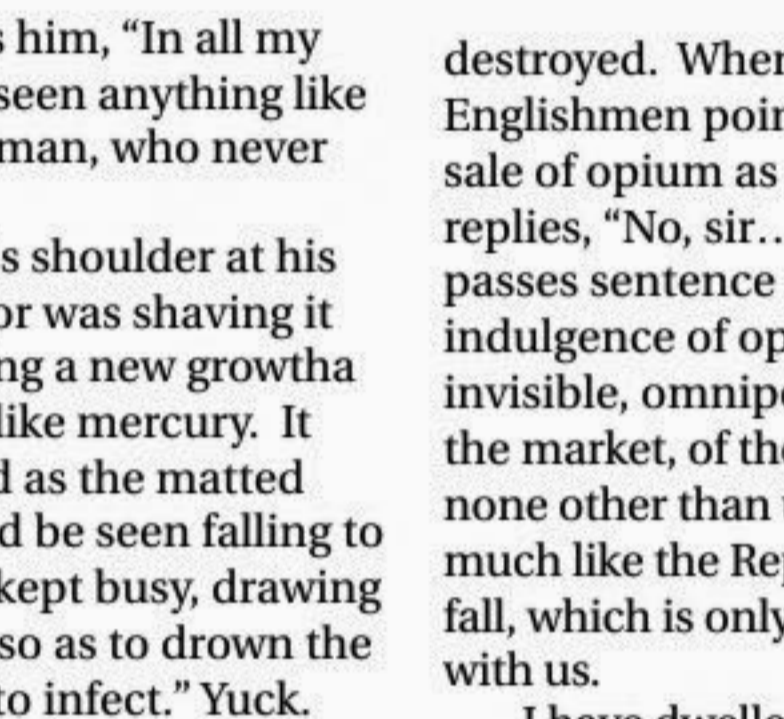
economics. His distinct contribution in producing this textbook type book about mainstream economics is that it warns readers from beginning to end that what they are fed with in classrooms may not be the only truth, and even some may not be the truth at all. Some crucial economic truths may be lying beyond textbooks. His assertion in the first chapter of the book is that the economic study is affected by the existing economic system. And all economic systems are transient.

Anu Muhammad's *Arthashastra Parichoy* is good only for those who are already familiar with the basic concepts of economics, which is dominant and known as mainstream nowadays. There should be many more books on economics in Bangla that will make it our subject instead of simply a western one.

**Alamgir Khan is Coordinator, Ethics Club Bangladesh.**



**River of Smoke**  
Amitav Ghosh  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux



**Arthashastra Parichoy**  
Anu Muhammad  
Samhati Prokashan