

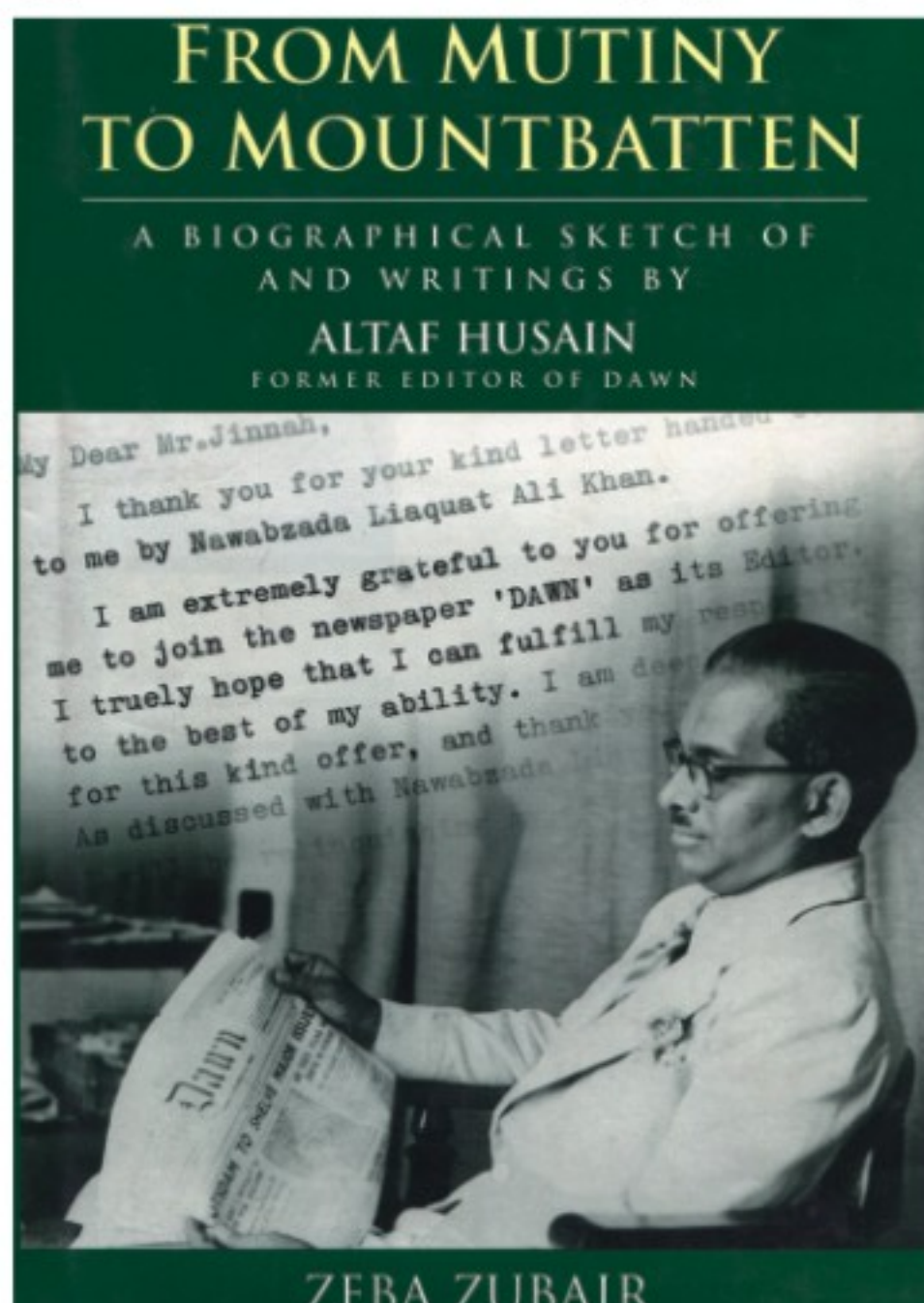
ESSAY

Starry romance across Calcutta sky

Syed Badrul Ahsan speaks of writers, books and unalloyed love ...

With quite a bit of deliberation I went on weighing the efficacy or otherwise of buying the hefty collection of writings by Christopher Hitchens I held in my hand last week. The place was Crossword, the large bookstore on Calcutta's Elgin Road, the time of day being the morning. A particular reason for my interest in Hitchens had been the style in which he wrote --- blunt, to the point, unabashed. Once on the left of political belief, he had made a complete swing to the right, to a point where he turned out to be a supporter of the Bush-Blair invasion of Iraq in 2003. That should have put me off Hitchens and it did to some extent. But then, there is always the fact that you must know of what others, who do not think as you do, happen to be nurturing in their minds. It is never a good idea to ignore your enemies or adversaries. Not that Hitchens was either of those for me. I never knew him personally. But, yes, I have always appreciated the quickness of his mind, that sure grasp of ideas he put down in his writings. And, by the way, a few years ago, on one of my regular trips to Waterstone's at London's Piccadilly, it was Hitchens' *The Trial of Henry Kissinger* which took my fancy. For obvious reasons. The slim volume contained distinctive chapters on what Hitchens thought had been Kissinger's role in the murderous coups which felled Chile's Salvador Allende (in 1973) and Bangladesh's Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (in 1975). It promised to make interesting reading. And for all one knew, Hitchens was one man Henry Kissinger was mortally afraid of. I bought the book. It has pride of place on my book shelf today.

But last week, after all that deliberation (and the price, I must admit, was a factor as well), I decided not to bring that collection of Hitchens' writings home with me. I moved on to other books and other sections. Barely a day later, Hitchens died of a heart attack at the young age of sixty two. A lengthy report on his death, sent by its correspondent in London, appeared in Calcutta's *The Telegraph*, the gist



of which was a recollection of the time when Hitchens had denounced Mother Teresa as a fraud who had not been averse to supporting and receiving help from some of the world's most notorious dictators. His comments had sent almost the whole of Calcutta, indeed



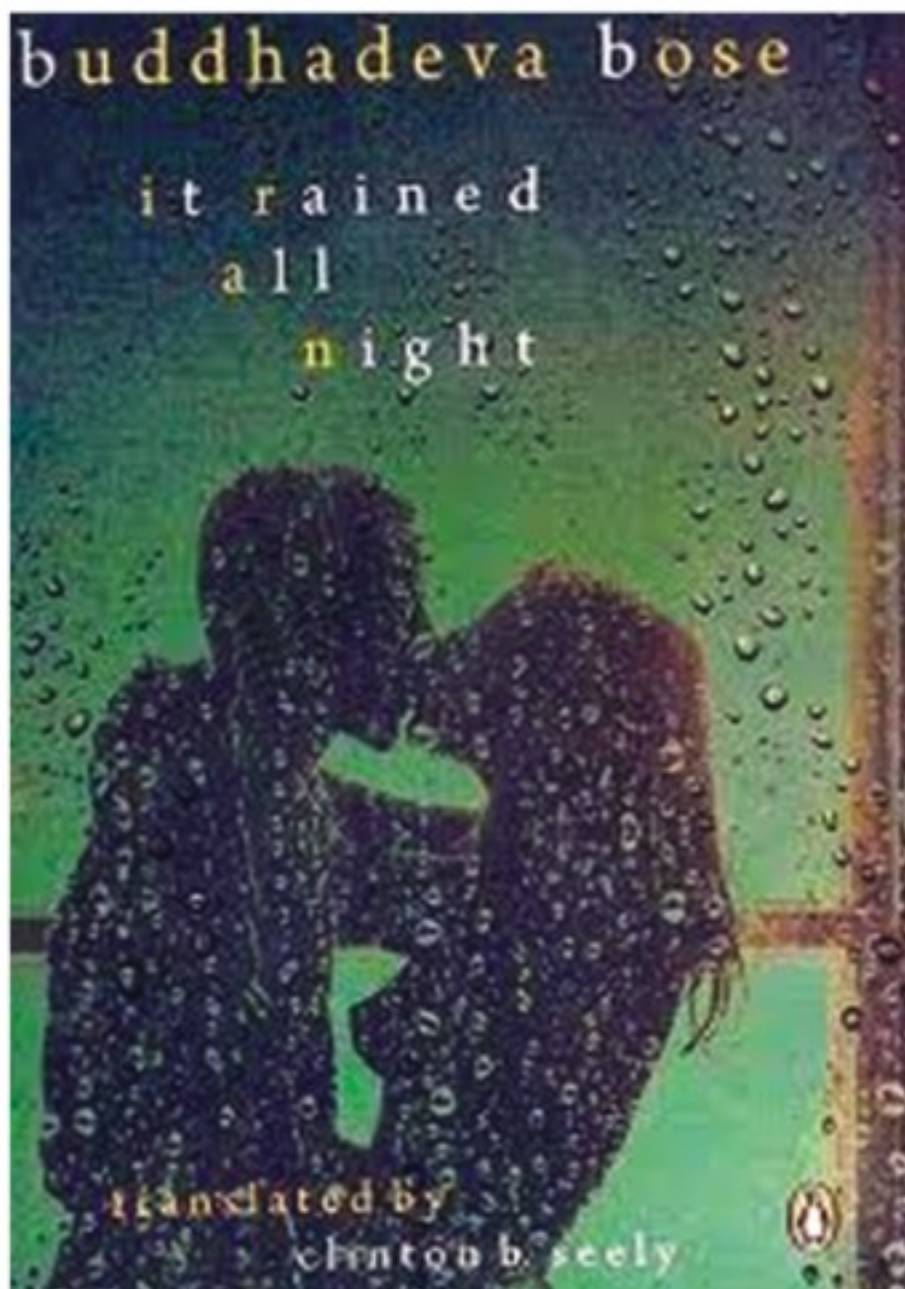
Christopher Hitchens.

much of the rest of the world, into a spirited defence of Mother Teresa. But it did not in the least bother Christopher Hitchens. To all intents and purposes, he had said what he thought needed to be said. And that was that. And that was Hitchens, a journalist and writer who hardly needed the approbation of the world for all that he said or wrote. For him, it was convictions, no matter how flawed they might sound to you and me, that mattered. My regret is that we will not read Hitchens any more because of this small detail of life called mortality. He is gone and with him has gone his ability to arouse intellectual passion in his readers. Which reminds me of the times when I read Bernard Levin with interest. He too was to die rather early, for me at least. And then there was our very own S.M. Ali, whose weekly column *My World in The Daily Star* I read avidly every week. Levin and Ali belonged to some of the more defining, more committed times of journalism which now seem to be dissipating with the onrush of things shamefully worldly. There was Walter Lippmann, whose seminal criticism of the war in Vietnam was being conducted led Lyndon Johnson into doubting the nature of the course his administration had set for itself in the conflict. America lost that war.

Speaking of journalists and writing, there is the pretty cheeky Vinod Mehta with his just-released memoirs, *Lucknow Boy*, a copy of which was recently sent to me in Dhaka by its publishers. I am still reading it and so at this point I am not quite in a position to do a full-scale review of the work. But I can tell you that it is a work the likes of which you do not quite come across in your quotidian wanderings, in the sense that most people who write their memoirs tend to come forth with sanitised versions of their lives and careers. Mehta appears to have pretty much stayed away from that convention and gives readers a rather clear view of all the trouble he has gone through, all the trouble he has caused others, in his peregrinations across the journalistic landscape. He has been a pioneer in setting up newspapers and news magazines before discovering, on some fine mornings, that he was not needed by the owners of those newspapers and journals any more. There is that poignant moment when, jobless and without any prospect of a new endeavour in sight, Mehta slips, literally, into a manhole, emerging from it with reflections on the depths to which life has pushed him. But, more of Mehta later, when I have had cause to go through the entirety of his memoirs.

Meanwhile, thanks to the generosity of my friend Waqar Khan, I have had an opportunity of going through the writings of Altaf Husain,

once editor of Pakistan's influential *Dawn* newspaper (*From Mutiny to Mountbatten: A Biographical Sketch of and Writings by Altaf Husain*). That of course was a long time ago. Indeed, Altaf was asked to edit *Dawn* as far back as 1946, a full year before Partition, by none other than the future founder of Pakistan, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. It was a position Altaf Husain was to hold for nineteen years, till early 1965, when in something of unexpected suddenness he joined the government of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan as minister for industries and natural resources. It is quite disappointing and sad when men who wield the power of shaping public opinion decide, at a critical point in their lives, that they need to be in politics, that indeed they must be ministers. That may be all right, up to a point, the point being that their joining governments elected to office in legitimate, constitutional manner gives them, somewhat, the moral ground on which they can base their shift in career. But Altaf Husain opted to be part of a regime which had for its basis a successful coup d'etat in 1958. In subsequent years, two eminent journalists in Bangladesh emulated Altaf when they linked up with the regimes of General Ziaur Rahman and General Hussein Muhammad Ershad, in the process doing pretty grave damage to their professionalism.

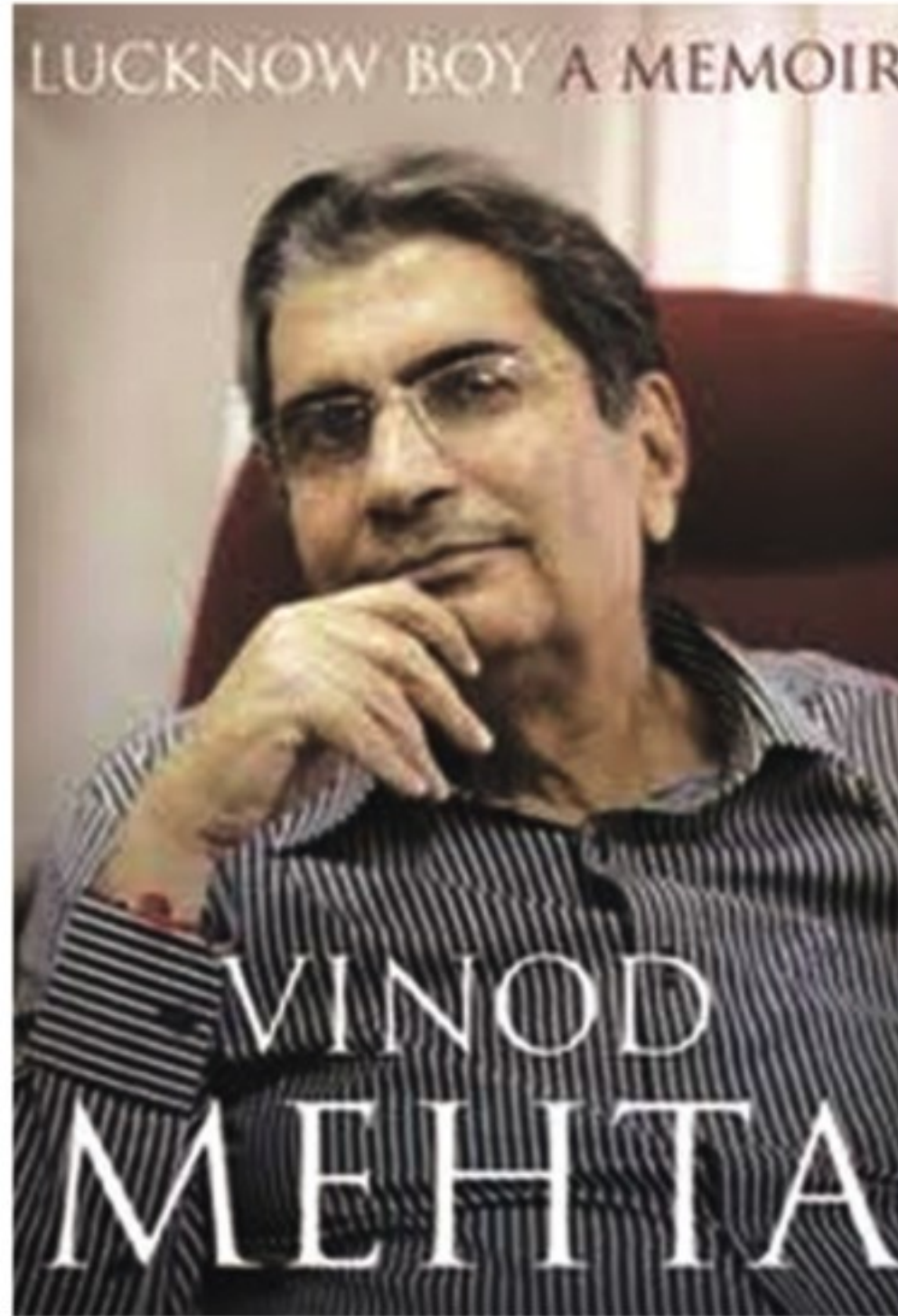


Be that as it may, Altaf Husain's writings, published posthumously --- by his daughter Zeba Zubair --- are representative of a time where my generation went to school, to be taught what was patently false history. Reading Altaf Husain's editorials and articles was for me a going back to the history of the Indian subcontinent I was taught in school --- everything Muslim was good, everything Hindu had something of the satanic about it. Curiously, on the three visits I made to Pakistan after 1971, I found little that had changed. I wonder if someone has by now taken up the onerous job of informing Pakistan's children of the truth behind the loss of East Pakistan in the Bangladesh war, but back in 1996 and 2000 curiosity made me flip through some history textbooks taught in Pakistani schools. To my disappointment, the chapter which dealt with 1971 simply informed these young people that East

Pakistan had been lost because of a conspiracy hatched by the Indians and some disloyal Bengalis in what used to be Pakistan's eastern province.

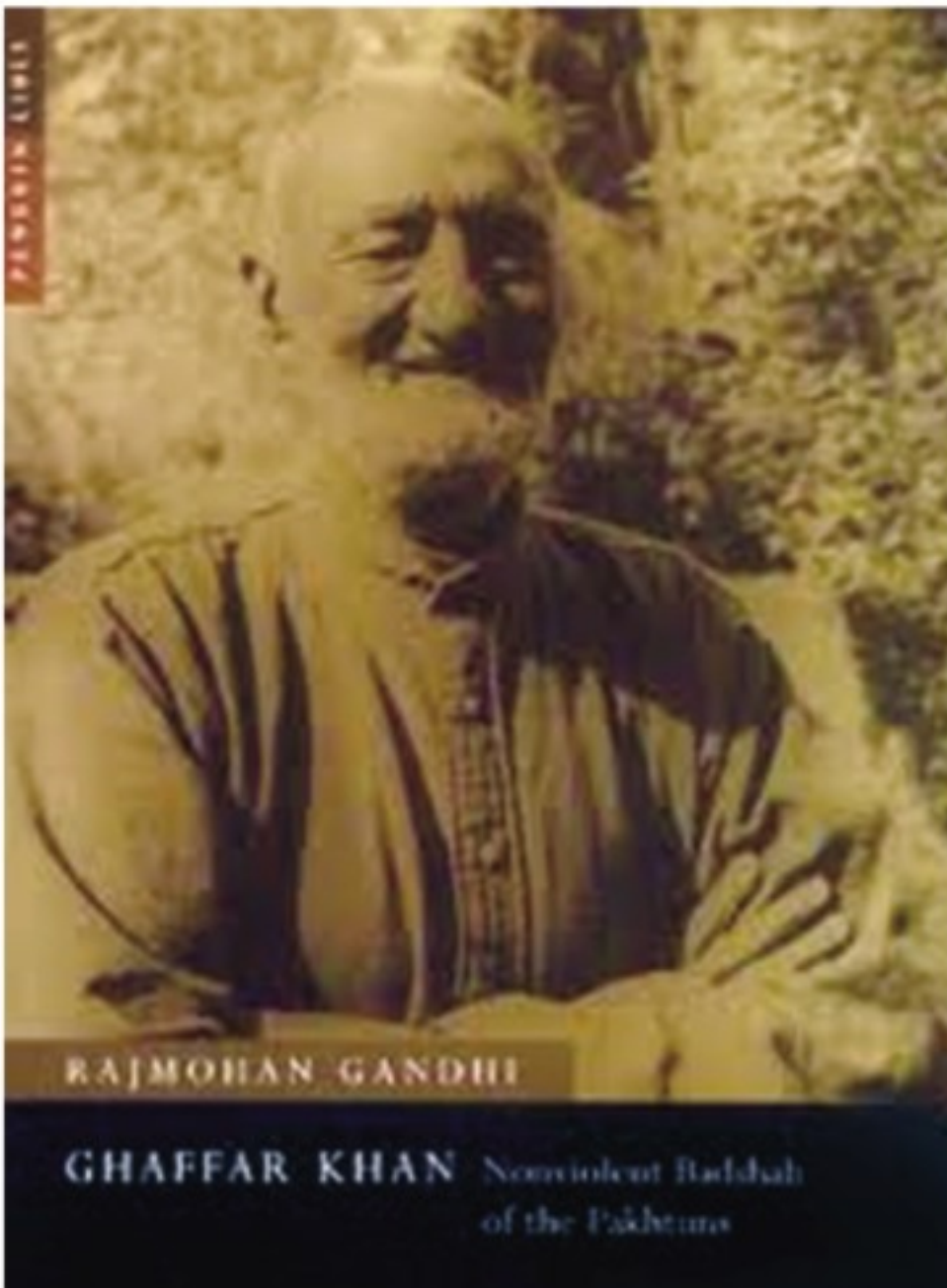
In Altaf Husain's writings (he died three years before Pakistan lost the war in Bangladesh), it is that old argument, based on communalism, that you plod through again. There is that ubiquitous plea for national integration, for vigilance in the defence of national solidarity. To your immense surprise bordering on consternation, you have Altaf Husain's family informing you that had Altaf been alive in 1971, Pakistan's destiny would be different. In other words, Pakistan would not be dismembered. Which raises the old question: would Pakistan not have come apart even if the Bengalis had not gone to war against it in 1971? Even if you assume that the Mujib-Yahya-Bhutto negotiations had turned out successful, there is that inescapable factor of the determined manner in which Bengalis would have gone for a confederal scheme of things, leading eventually to a split. The point is that the foundations of Pakistan had always been hollow; and fundamental hollowness has no way of being filled in by the substantive. It is this same story that everyone seems to be living through today as Pakistan lurches from one crisis to another.

Politics is forever a theme we need to go back to, just as we must return sometimes to some of the more dramatic moments in the history of literature. There is Boris Pasternak's agony over *Doctor Zhivago* and all the pain it caused him back in 1960, when word came through that he had won the Nobel for literature. The pain was caused by the indignation with which the Soviet government, led by Nikita Khrushchev, greeted the announcement. In the end, Pasternak was compelled into renouncing the award, a sign of how viciously the modern state, in unmistakable patterns of the medieval, can sometimes come between life and aesthetics. Pretty much the same thing happened to Buddhadev Bose in 1970, when court proceedings were drawn up against him in India over his bold exploration of extramarital love, *Raat Bhor Brishti*. He had, it was said, outraged morality by his depiction of a theme that was taboo in Indian society. Eventually, Bose was cleared of the charge. He died four years later, in 1974. His birth centenary was observed some years ago. My links with his works are a reality the credit for which goes to my friend Junaidul Haque, from whom I first heard about Bose. Since that time I have read *Raat Bhor Brishti* and its English translation. Last week, at Oxford Bookstore on Park Street in Calcutta, I picked up a copy of Clinton B. Seely's powerful translation of the story, *It Rained All Night*, and went through the story again. Love, I have been persuaded into believing all these years, is always a question of the heart venturing out into beautiful new dimensions through the seasons. It is part of marriage; and then again, it goes beyond marriage, without spoiling the marriage, into newer territory. That term 'extramarital' is quite misplaced when pure love comes into a relationship. You touch a woman's cheek and then she takes your hand and places it on her other cheek as well. It is when you place your hand on her waist, to make her feel slightly tremulous in happy embarrassment, to let her know that she and



you share a new world, that new, intellectual love happens. That is chemistry working for you, love blossoming in a new garden. It takes care that the old, established gardens do not go through a withering of the flowers swaying in the breeze all across their expanses.

That was the thought coming down from Buddhadev Bose, as I drove through Jodhpur Park on a deepening Calcutta night. Starry romance floated across the cold nocturnal sky even as I remembered that I needed to begin reading Rajmohan Gandhi's work on Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi for whom life was a



totality of political struggle. Khushwant Singh's work on women, love and lust and bosoms, I reasoned with myself, could wait awhile.

(PS: As I proceeded to bring this essay to a conclusion, news came in of the death of Vaclav Havel --- playwright, crusader and politician --- in the Czech Republic. More on him later).

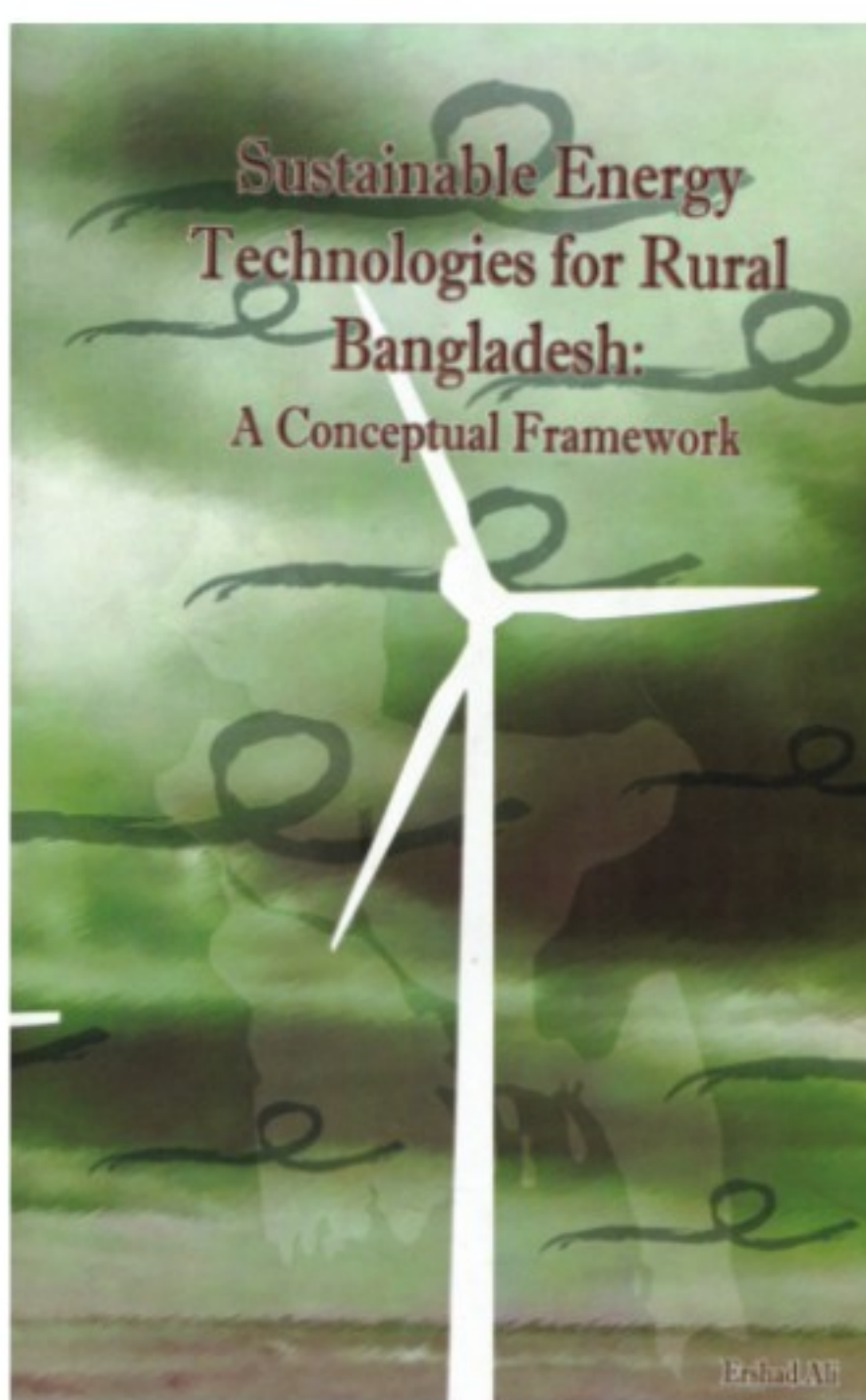
SYED BADRUL AHSAN EDITS STAR BOOKS REVIEW AND STAR LITERATURE

For self-reliant rural energy

Rifat Munim is happy with a writer's recommendations

Thanks to continued development programmes funded by international NGOs and organisations in our country, there has been an upsurge in research on social development. Research works have focused on various sectors that are integral to projected development goals, such as education, employment and infrastructure. Many of those have taken extensively on predominant ideological stigmas standing in the way of development. Very few, however, have dealt with the fundamental inter-relation between energy resources and sustainable development. Seen from this perspective, Ershad Ali's *Sustainable Energy Technologies for Rural Bangladesh: A Conceptual Framework* appears to be a remarkable difference that attempts to bridge the gap between the energy sector and development. It also relates non-renewable energy such as fossil fuel to global warming and suggests thereby a set of renewable as well as sustainable energy technologies that as well as meeting the burgeoning demands are environment-friendly.

The energy sector, Ali tells us, was responsible for 46% of the increase in Greenhouse Gas (GHG) effect until the last decade. Although developed countries are mostly responsible for the largest chunk of carbon dioxide emission, developing countries also contribute to it, though on a smaller scale, as they resort to



Sustainable Energy Technologies for Rural Bangladesh: A Conceptual Framework
Ershad Ali
Global Study Research and Publications

deforestation as an alternative means to meet energy demand. This scenario applies to rural Bangladesh. So, Ali suggests that "one of the best ways to keep control on GHG emission is to generate energy from environmentally friendly sources instead of fossil fuel."

The energy sector in our country centres on natural gas and imported fuel. As a result, oil price hike in the international market is creating tremendous pressure on the country's foreign reserves. Yet the gap between demand for and supply of energy is nonetheless widening with the major part of the produce being distributed to city dwellers while rural communities have barely any access to grid-supplied electricity. Acute shortage of energy supply, in Ali's analysis, is precisely what accounts for poor development in rural areas, thus impeding the country's overall progress. In matters of cooking, he points out, wood and animal waste are the main sources for rural people. Instead, he suggests that hydroelectricity, biomass, solar power and wind power can be turned into sustainable energy alternatives.

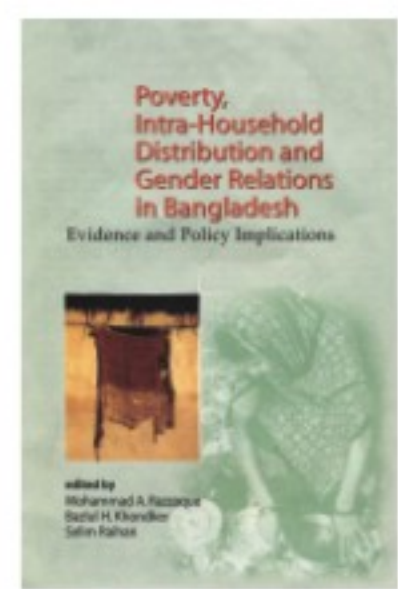
But the alternatives are not without challenges because they entail certain technologies adopting which are not impossible but arduous due to several factors. First come the bureaucratic red tape and corruption in concerned government bodies. Then there has to be

the necessary infrastructure in place for adopting the required technologies, which involves financing. Therefore, this aspect poses the biggest challenge. But each of the alternative means involves several other geographical and sociological factors that need to be addressed. For example, the technologies required for biomass are affordable but their success depends largely on the availability of land. Although it works as carbon dioxide absorber, it is not completely free from environmental hazards. On the other hand, solar power and wind power are very friendly to the environment but require considerable financing and involve fairly complex technologies. At the same time, the author is not oblivious of the need for an awareness campaign to make those means popular and acceptable to rural people.

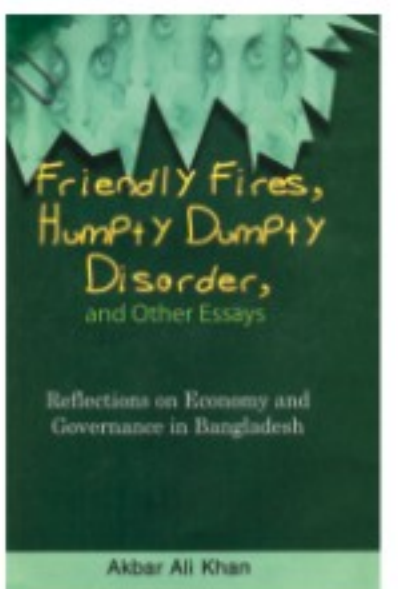
In spite of all the challenges, with an in-depth policy analysis Ali shows that if proper emphasis is put by policymakers on sustainable energy technologies, attaining a self-reliant rural energy sector is only a matter of time. Without adopting these means, he argues, rural areas cannot be turned into bustling places of economic activities and without sustainable rural economic growth national progress is sure to remain a far-fetched utopia.

RIFAT MUNIM IS A JOURNALIST AT THE DAILY STAR.

BOOK choice



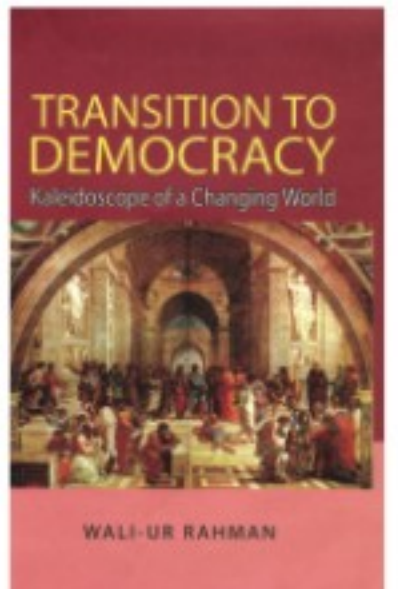
Poverty, Intra-Household Distribution And Gender Relations in Bangladesh
Eds. Mohammad A. Razzaque, Bazlul H. Khondker, Selim Raihan



Friendly Fires, Humpty Dumpty Disorder, and Other Essays
Akbar Ali Khan



Green Fire
Shahidul Alam



Transition to Democracy
Kaleidoscope of a Changing World
Wali-Ur Rahman

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