

Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

Memories of a literary landscape

Literary seductions have always worked wonders. You think of Virginia and Leonard Woolf and the impact they had on the Bloomsbury group and by extension on modern English literature. There is then the quiet passion, never publicly acknowledged, which forged a proximity between Isaiah Berlin and Anna Akhmatova, a relationship that was as mysterious as it was deep, in its many dimensions. In times closer to ours, Harold Pinter and Antonia Fraser are rather impressive models of what literary relationships ought to be. And do not forget the riotous links, of a publicly carnal nature, which kept Henry Miller and Anais Nin bound to each other all their adult lives. The Brownings, yes! Who can forget them?

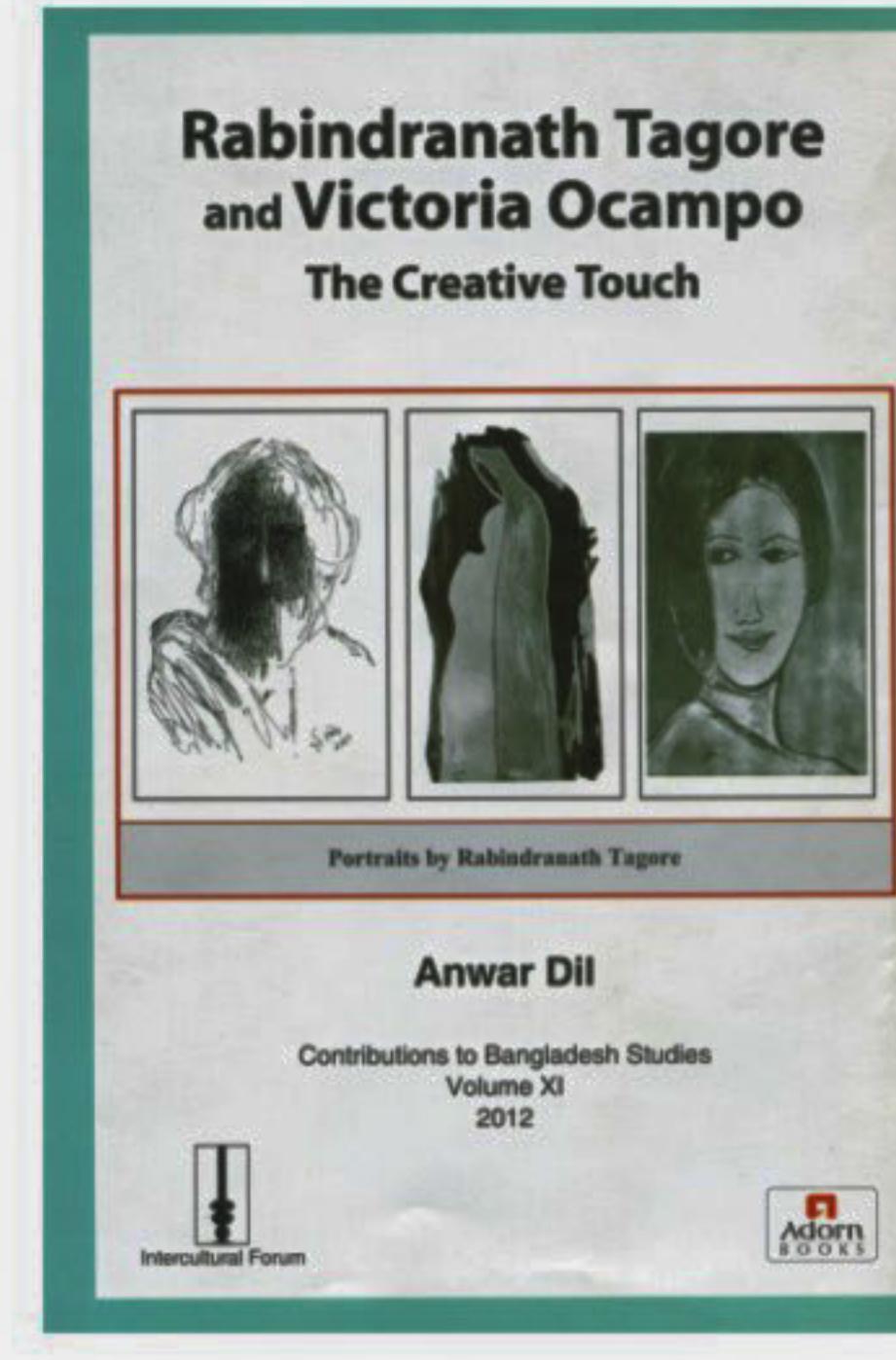
All of this is of course reason enough for us to go back to the poetic friendship which a relentlessly creative Rabindranath Tagore had caused to develop with the Argentine poet Victoria Ocampo in the 1920s. In a pretty inexplicable way, the poetic interaction which subsisted between Tagore and Ocampo has remained unexplored, at least for a very large swathe of literature enthusiasts in our part of the world. But now observe Anwar Dil, the quintessential scholar who has in these past several decades traversed a very wide expanse of Bengali cultural traditions, come forth to offer a fresh new perspective on the Tagore-Ocampo story. In *Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo: The Creative Touch*, Dil throws up in full measure the dimensions of the ties which brought the two poets together and despite the large difference in age between the two added fresh new substance to their poetry. Twenty nine years younger than Tagore, Ocampo nevertheless found a soulmate, sort of, a kindred being in the Bengali Nobel laureate. Ah, but that old question of whether age matters at all in the creative landscape arises again. The answer is simple: it does not. Which then is one impediment removed from the path to an understanding of the Bengali and the Argentine as they came in touch with each other and stayed that way in subsequent times.

Anwar Dil, a Pakistani married to the Bengali writer, academic and critic Afia Dil (both are now resident in the United States), begins on a pretty dramatic note. Observe:

This is the story of love between a man born in Calcutta, India, in 1861, and a woman born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1890, one hundred and eighty degrees of both latitude and longitude apart on the opposite ends of the globe.

Dil goes on, to describe Tagore as tall and handsome and Ocampo as 'a beautiful young member of a rich and prominent family' who 'loved reading literary masterpieces in French...'. It is the year 1913, a time when the Bengali poet seized the world's imagination by becoming the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. For Victoria Ocampo, the future lies ahead.

Pause a while before you go into the relationship between the two poets. Dil's clear stance of



Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo
The Creative Touch
Anwar Dil
Adorn Books

describing the relationship as one of love may not quite be the way you look at it, for the simple reason that Tagore was essentially a poet in love with the idea of love. And within that concept came his fascination for women, for the spiritual, indeed for an entire spectrum of existence. What was it, then, that Tagore shared with Ocampo? The two first met on 6 November 1924 when Tagore arrived in Buenos Aires. Ocampo, having learned of his arrival, went over to the hotel to meet the poet. She came across Leonard Elmhirst, who let her in on the news that the poet's health did not permit his continuing his onward journey to Peru. A cheered Ocampo gushes:

"I immediately offered Elmhirst to arrange matters (sic) ... I was resolved to move heaven and earth in order to find immediately a refuge where Tagore could spend his convalescence, far from the city's noise. And what incredible luck it was to have been on the spot at the precise moment when I could be of use to him!"

That was the beginning. Ocampo, in a frenzy, went about arranging accommodation for Tagore. She would subsequently note that at the time it was Gandhi and Tagore in her thoughts, considering that she had read Romain Rolland's work on the future father of the Indian nation and indeed had written about him and the poet in *La Nacion*. Tagore moved from his hotel to San Isidro, whence would flow a plenitude of conversations and poetry between the two. Ocampo showed Tagore the river from the

balcony. She would later reminisce:

"I had instinctively led Tagore to that balcony upon his entering Miralrio, certain that if he was to take anything away on leaving it, it would be this: the memory of the landscape that would meet his eyes morning and evening, with its changing light. That landscape was the only gift worthy of him."

And Tagore? He called her Vijaya, clearly in translation of 'Victoria', and would soon be penning a poem to her he would call *Arithi*, or The Guest:

*Woman, thou hast made my days
Tender with beauty
You received me with a quiet
And sweet smile
I don't know your language
But I have heard you sing:
You are a guest of love,
O my poet,
My guest for ever ...*

Anwar Dil is expansive in his dimensional view of the Tagore-Ocampo relationship. He brings the perspective of time into his assessment and within that ambience explores Tagore's understanding of the world as he perceived it through his links with other individuals. Ocampo was part of that process, and to that extent played a significantly contributory role in the working of his creative imagination. Again, Tagore's contribution to Ocampo's poetry was noteworthy. Here was an Indian poet come from a world far away, to cause waves in the soul of a beautiful woman whose poetry could only be even more enriched by such communion.

The Creative Touch is a whole lot more than an examination of the insularity of a relationship. It reaches out to other individuals and other perspectives to offer a broader insight into Tagore's place on the global literary scene. The book is replete with essays on the many aspects of the poet's life and literary activities. You have Mukul Dey, Shahid Suhrawardy, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Mulk Raj Anand and others dissecting the principles which shaped the poet's life. Your pleasure soon grasps at greater heights, with the delightful addition of articles written at various points of time on Victoria Ocampo. Of course, Anwar Dil mentions Dyson's in particular. Equally especially, he brings forth a collage of the moments in which Ocampo stamped her own image on literature. Her feminism, her role in the journal *Sur*, her reputation as a builder of bridges between cultures are put across in clear outline here.

You read Anwar Dil, and you appreciate the meticulous manner in which he goes about delving into the links between the grand old man of Bengali poetry and the bright young woman spreading her light in the literary salons of South America. Somewhere, in somewhat a mysterious strumming of the violin that is the soul, you seem to hear Tagore sing *shunilo shagorer shyamolo kinare / dekhechhi pothe jete / tulonahina re ...*

Rahman in Rawalpindi at around the same time. Khalilur Rahman and Brigadier Majidul Haq walk into deputy secretary Hedayet Ahmed's home in Rawalpindi, only to find Reaz Rahman seated there. Earlier, banner headlines had appeared in West Pakistani newspapers about the 'courage' demonstrated by Reaz Rahman in defying the 'miscreants' (the term Pakistan employed for Bengali freedom fighters) and arriving in Karachi from his posting at the Pakistan high commission in Delhi. The diplomat takes issue with the writer about the genocide in Bangladesh. Obviously, he is unwilling to accept realities. The conversation ends on a bitter note. In 1973, following his repatriation to Bangladesh, Khalilur Rahman spots the same Reaz Rahman occupying a key position in the Bangladesh Foreign Office!

Rahman's book asserts the old idea once more of how times of critical essence can end up defining the roles individuals play in contradistinction to one another. While on the one hand he recoils in disgust at memories of those Bengalis who collaborated with the Yahya Khan junta, on the other he recalls the immense sufferings that a number of Bengali army officers went through in West Pakistan all through 1971. Much pain underlies the recapitulation of the agony men like Brigadier Majumdar, Colonel Masud and Colonel Yasin were put through. All of them were put under detention in Bangladesh, brought over to West Pakistan and then subjected to the most intense kind of humiliation that could be imagined. Their fault? They refused to be dictated into saying that they had known of the 'conspiracy' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the Awami League had 'hatched' to dismember Pakistan. The interrogation yielded no credible results, except that one of the men was eventually compelled to read out a 'statement', before the special military court trying the Bengali leader, relating to the 'conspiracy'. As he read the document prepared for him by the army, a bemused Mujib, pipe between his lips, looked on.

Khalilur Rahman would stay on in Pakistan, a captive officer, until 1973. It was his good, or bad, fortune to be around when only days after Pakistan's surrender in Bangladesh a large group of angry, young military officers heckled General Abdul Hamid Khan into silence. Rahman was still in uniform, a position he would give up within a short while through exercising his option for Bangladesh. And then would come the months of waiting, in a camp in Mandi Bahauddin with his family. The rest is a tale we are all too familiar with.

SYED BADRUL AHSEN IS EXECUTIVE EDITOR, THE DAILY STAR. HE ALSO EDITS STAR BOOKS REVIEW AND STAR LITERATURE.

Matters of aesthetics

Takir Hossain appreciates a collage of ideas

Recently Bengal Foundation brought out a quarterly journal, *Shilpi o Shilpo*. Abul Hasnat is the editor of the journal. Among the members of the editorial board are Professor Anisuzzaman, Jogen Chowdhury, Rafiq Nabi, Ramendu Majumdar, Subir Chowdhury, Shushovan Adhikari and Monirul Islam.

The contents in the second issue of the journal include art, photography, film, theatre, music and more. It also highlights Indian art and culture, thus bringing a variation in the presentation.

In the edition, Abul Mansur has an in-depth an essay on veteran Bangladeshi painter and printmaker Safiuddin Ahmed. The painter is now bed-ridden and has been suffering from old age complications for a long time. The writer has tried to explore the ins and outs of the maestro's life and works. The article has focused on the artist's time consuming techniques, themes and his characteristic traits.

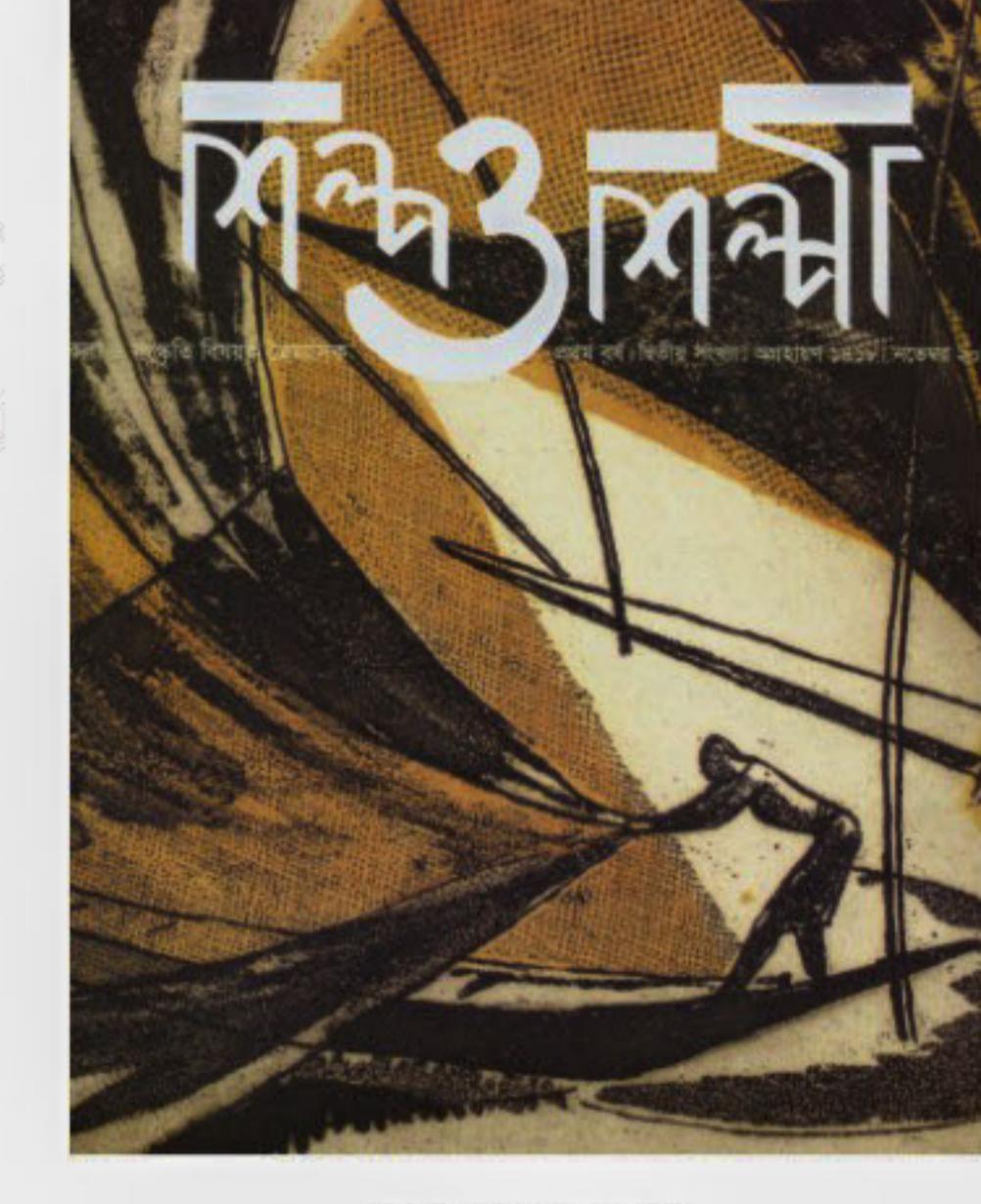
Zakir Hossain Razu comes forth with a thought-provoking article on Tareque Masud and his immense contributions to Bangladeshi cinema. The article narrates the filmmaker's creations and the social, cultural and economic aspects of his movies. Through the article, the readers will have an opportunity to know about the social, political, religious and historical context of Masud's works.

Kaber Gayen has focused on the movie *Guerilla*. The film has so far received a tremendous response for its unique storyline and the stars' remarkable portrayal of various roles in it. Joya Ahsan's role in the film has been much discussed. Nasiruddin Yousuff based the film on Syed Shamsul Haq's novel 'Nishiddho Loban' and his personal war-time experiences as a freedom fighter. The writer feels this is the first film where women's contributions have been properly documented. This film depicts what really happened during the war. This provides the youths of our country an opportunity to familiarise themselves with our history. After liberation, many films have been produced on the theme of the War of Liberation. Most of the films could not truly touch the souls of the audience because of their technical faults and weak plots.

Indian art reviewer Mrinal Ghosh has highlighted a group sculpture exhibition which was recently held at Ernami Chisel Art Gallery, Kolkata. A number of contemporary Indian sculptors took part in the exposition. His article gives a comprehensive idea about contemporary Indian sculpture trends and orientations. The article also provides an overview of master Indian sculptors such as Ramkinkar Baij, Chintamoni Kor, Shomnath Hore and others. The exhibition brought together significant sculptors inhabiting

different decades in India. Uma Shiddhanto and Bipin Goshwami are two leading sculptors of the 1960s. The works of some leading sculptors of the 1970s, like Biman Bihari Das, Ashim Bashu and Manik Talukdar works were displayed at the exhibition. The sculptors have used bronze, marble, terracotta and wood. Most of the sculptors have worked on bronze as their favourite medium.

Indian critic Ina Puri has highlighted the life and works of the noted Indian painter Gonesh Halui. The painter was born in Mymensingh in 1936. Following the partition of India in 1947, Halui's family shifted from Bangladesh to Kolkata and settled there. He completed his honours from Government College of Art and Craft in Kolkata in 1956. The painter has worked in different medi-



Shilpo o Shilpi
Bengal Foundation
Editor Abul Hasnat

ums and his mode of expressions is varied --- figurative, landscape, non-objective and pure abstraction. Currently the painter's focal point is colours and fragmented compositions.

In his write-up, Ramendu Majumdar has emphasised the recently held 33rd International Theatre Institute (ITI) World Congress in China. He was a participant in it and narrates his personal experiences in the article. Internationally acclaimed dramatists, dancers, musicians and theatre experts taking part in the congress from different parts of the world read out essays, papers on their specialized areas.

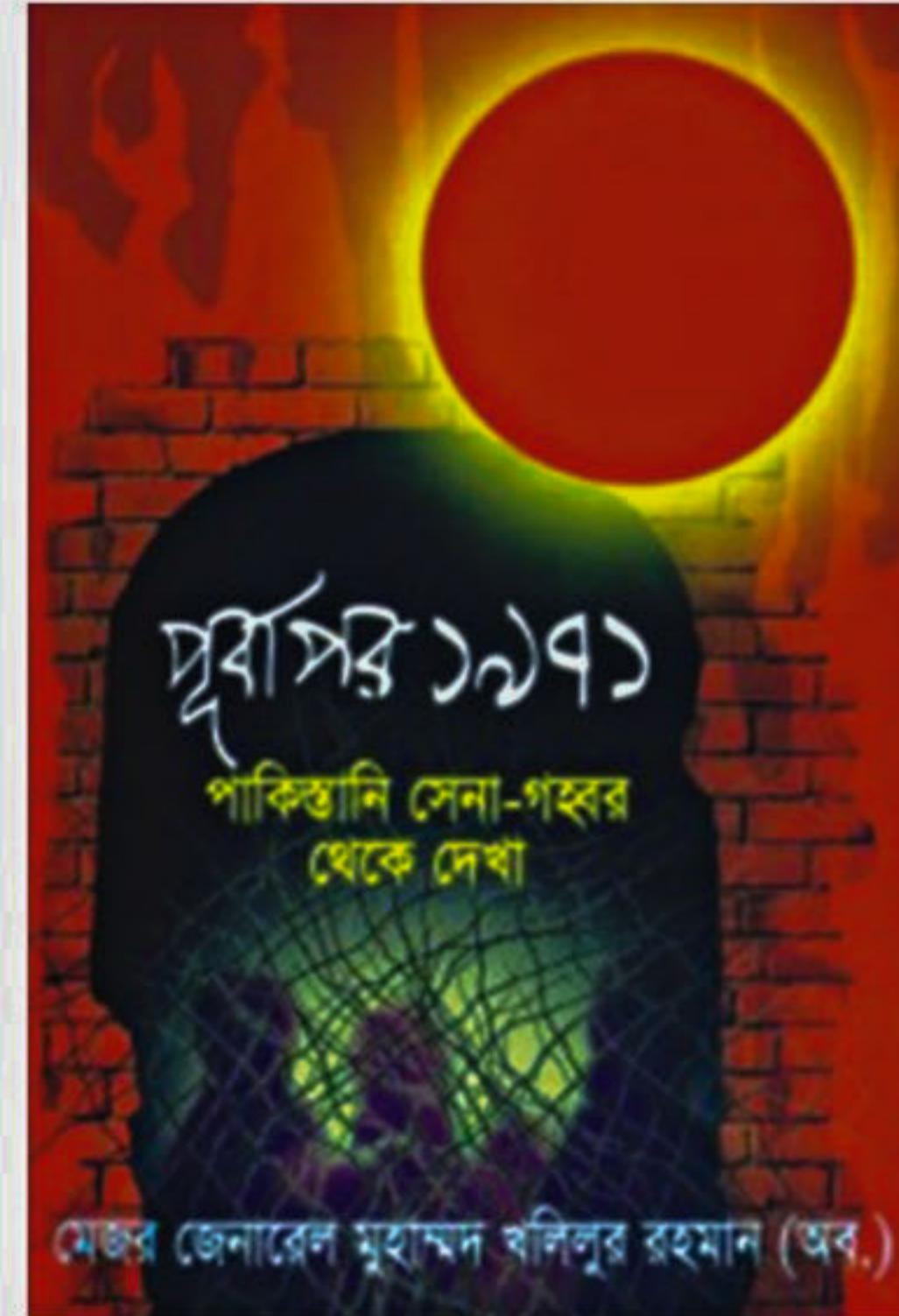
TAKIR HOSSAIN IS WITH ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT, THE DAILY STAR.

The Bengali brigadier in Pakistan's army

The war of 1971 remains a point of reference for Bengalis, especially those with first hand experience of the conflict as it built up and then moved towards a denouement. With men like Khalilur Rahman, the War of Liberation was at once a distant affair, fundamentally because they were away in West Pakistan when the Pakistan army launched its genocide in occupied Bangladesh in March. And yet there was a closeness, in spirit and temperament at least, where comprehending the issues involved was concerned. Rahman was a senior Bengali officer, a brigadier, in the Pakistan army and stationed in West Pakistan at the time. It certainly was not the best of times or the best of places for any Bengali to be in. Like Rahman, there were hundreds of other Bengali officers and sepoys stuck in a place from where all the salvoes were being fired at their compatriots in occupied Bangladesh. And then there were the thousands of civilian officials, employees and their families stranded in what was definitely hostile territory for Bengalis. Briefly, West Pakistan after March 1971 was a place where Bengalis were treated with open disdain and, almost always, as traitors to the country Jinnah had built in 1947.

General Khalilur Rahman's account of the period is essentially composed of two streams of thought. The first relates to the attitude he saw manifested in his fellow officers, all West Pakistanis, toward the crisis in Bangladesh. And the second was his observation of the privations, psychological as well as physical, that Bengalis went through in West Pakistan not only in 1971 but also through the entire length of time they remained stranded there after Pakistan's eastern wing emerged as the sovereign state of Bangladesh in December 1971. Within the ambit of his observations, Rahman recapitulates incidents and remembers personalities he met and shared thoughts with about the war, for the war was the one issue that mattered at the time. He relates the tale of General Shaukat Reza, a decent Pakistani who did not hesitate to quit his job when he found General Niazi willing to pass off the criminality of his men in Bangladesh as the spoils of war. Reza was a gentleman to whom the military's atrocities in East Pakistan were having the opposite of the intended effect. Niazi, however, did not appear perturbed. 'This is a low lying country', he said blandly. 'People here are low and they lie'.

The anecdotal forms a significant part of Khalilur Rahman's story. Colonel Qayyum Chowdhury's refusal to identify with the Bangladeshi struggle, despite the fact that he was the brother of Munier Chowdhury, comes in for comment in the work. Rahman is informed by Major Mannan Siddiqui (who later became a major general in the Bangladeshi army) that Qayyum Chowdhury had gone to Berlin to attend a military training course.



Purbapor 1971
Pakistani Shena-Gohobor Theke Dekha
Major General (Retd) Muhammad Khalilur
Rahman Shahitya Prakash

He could have defected from there. He did not and instead used the occasion to berate the imprisoned Sheikh Mujibur Rahman over his role in the making of the crisis. Qayyum Chowdhury's prejudice against his fellow Bengalis remained so deeply ingrained in him that he was quite willing to believe that Munier Chowdhury had been murdered by the Mukti Bahini!

And that is not all. The author recalls the arrival of Justice Nurul Islam, then chairman of the East Pakistan Red Cross, in Rawalpindi in July or August 1971 in the company of Dr. Deen Mohammad of Dhaka University. Both men were on their way to Europe, clearly to argue Pakistan's case in war-torn Bangladesh. At one point, Islam breaks into tears and then quickly collects himself as Deen Mohammad (having finished his prayers in the adjoining room!) walks in. An interesting footnote to the meeting is provided by Rahman when he notes that in 1973, Justice Nurul Islam requested him to provide evidence that he had not gone to Geneva of his own volition in 1971! The author makes note as well of his meeting with the Bengali diplomat Reaz

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BOOK choice

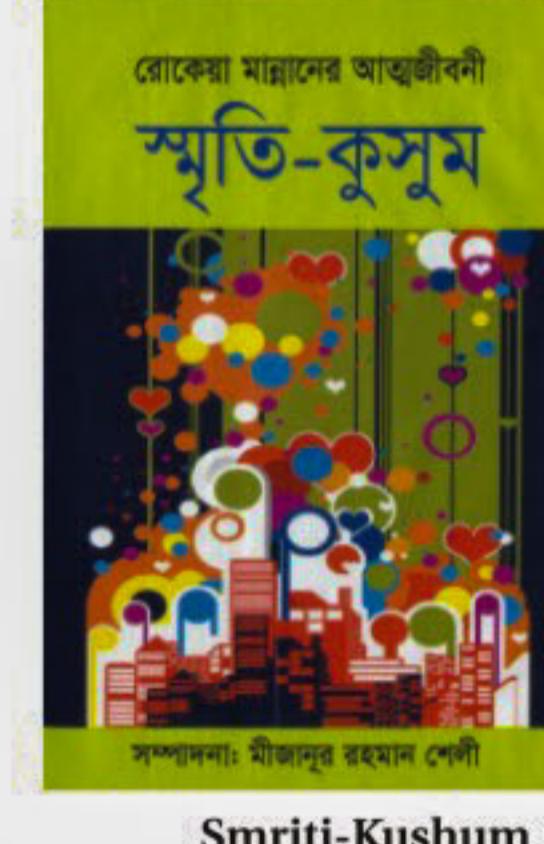
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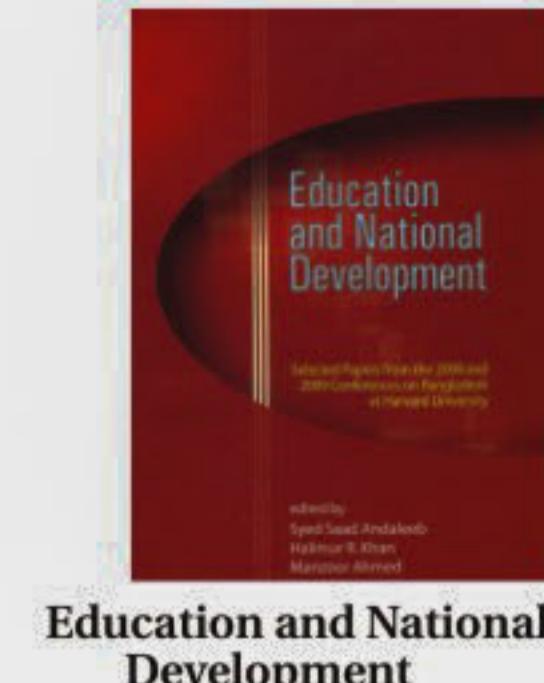
Russia's Djinli Syed Najmuddin Hashim Shuddhoshor



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