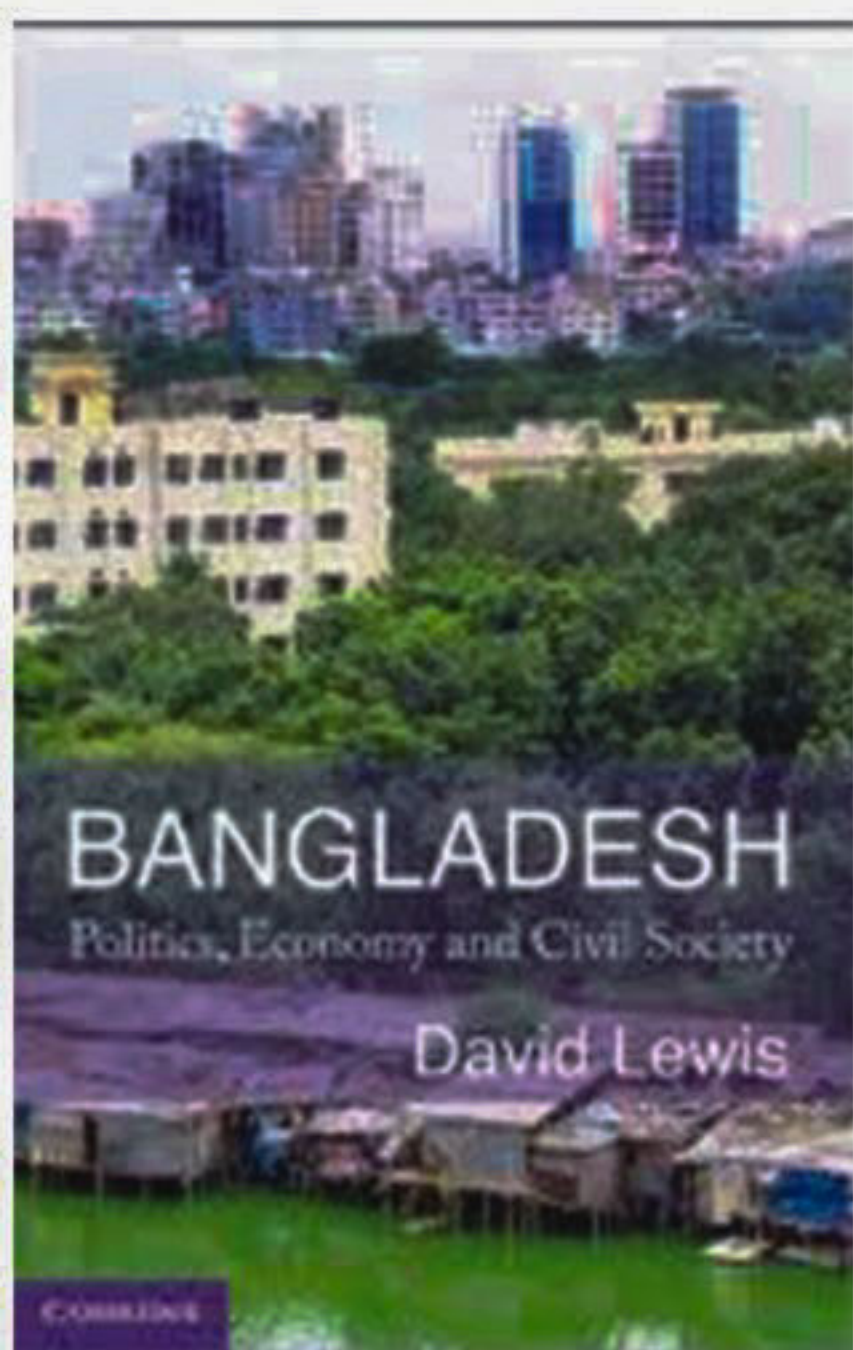


Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

Backwater or beacon of hope?



**Bangladesh
Politics, Economy and Civil
Society
David Lewis
Cambridge University Press**

Bangladesh has in these past few decades been in near danger of turning into a backwater of Asia. You might sit up, and rather indignantly too, considering the enormous risks it took in winning its freedom from Pakistan through a bloody War of Liberation forty years ago. That was perhaps, so far, its crowning moment. For the first few years after its emergence, the country was the recipient of global sympathy, its struggle for liberty celebrated nearly everywhere and its leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman looked upon with awe, and for all the right reasons, as a revolutionary who had through sheer sagacity and foresight led his impoverished, exploited nation to freedom.

That is what David Lewis gives you as he opens his own portal to Bangladesh through this incisive work on a country not many are willing to consider a serious player on the world stage. In the years since the violent collapse of the government of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the rest of the world has increasingly turned away from Bangladesh in the sense that the country has not been taken seriously in the world's important capitals. And, of course, the world cannot be blamed for this fall in the country's fortunes. The spate of coups, almost all of them bloody in the extreme, which undermined the structure of the state in its first eleven years of independent nationhood, have left their marks on the body politic of the country. Add to that that other grim reality: the failure of its elected political classes, all playing their roles in a never-ending dynastic cycle, to put in place a meaningful pluralistic dispensation since the last military ruler was ejected from office through a popular upsurge twenty years ago. Politics, rather than striking deeper roots in the country, has only plumbed newer depths. A dysfunctional parliament, a division of society along broad partisan lines, regular agitation on the streets have all kept

Bangladesh in a state of limbo.

Given this bleak picture, Lewis' work is surely a welcome move to bring Bangladesh back into the global arena, the better to acquaint the international community with the pains it has been going through and yet the resilience it has at various stages of its history demonstrated about keeping itself going. Which begs the question: does Bangladesh go on in spite of the poor leadership it is saddled with? The answer to that does not come from Lewis, who does however cite instances of the extremely poor out on their own in their battle to survive. Lewis makes liberal use of surveys and studies to demonstrate the extent of the poverty which keeps Bengalis down, often to a point where the poor sink into the position of becoming landless. To be sure, there have been all the efforts made toward a reduction of poverty. But then comes the question: to what extent are these efforts effective? Not much, if you would like to know, for these efforts have focused on an individualistic premise rather than home in on a structure-based improvement in social conditions.

David Lewis, who teaches economics and political science at the London School of Economics and Political Science, does a creditable job of bringing together the various strands of the political history of Bangladesh dating right back to British colonial and Pakistani times and the atmosphere of freedom which the 1971 war produced for its people. But he does not stop there, which is just as well, indeed is welcome. For he showcases the many issues which the country, despite the impediments it has constantly run up against, has tried tackling in the decades since it won its independence. The role of NGOs, the critical importance of issues which the country's fledgling civil society has tried highlighting, et cetera, have been at the centre of the country's efforts to rear its head out of the water. Then again, one must raise the query of whether civil society has had any impact on the formulation of policies as also their implementation. In this respect, Lewis takes the reader to what he calls 'uncivil society' --- that zone of danger where life for Bangladeshis somehow gets to be a hostage to anti-social elements known in local parlance as *mastans*. That as also the deterioration of student politics, once a powerful weapon in the attainment of political enlightenment, into a body of people who go around intimidating and destroying, are for the writer a way of suggesting that civil society has yet a long way to go before it can be counted as an influential force. And do not forget that not much of the political class is enamoured of civil society. One could well argue here that the viciousness with which politicians, particularly in the present ruling dispensation, have come down on the Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus reflects the deep malaise in which civil society still finds itself.

David Lewis' interest in Bangladesh, in how it has fared over the years, in what it has done to itself and others and in how others have looked at it, comes across in clear brush strokes of conviction. The points he makes in his discussion of such issues as migration, with notable reference to the troubled Chittagong Hill Tracts, are those that need to be studied at

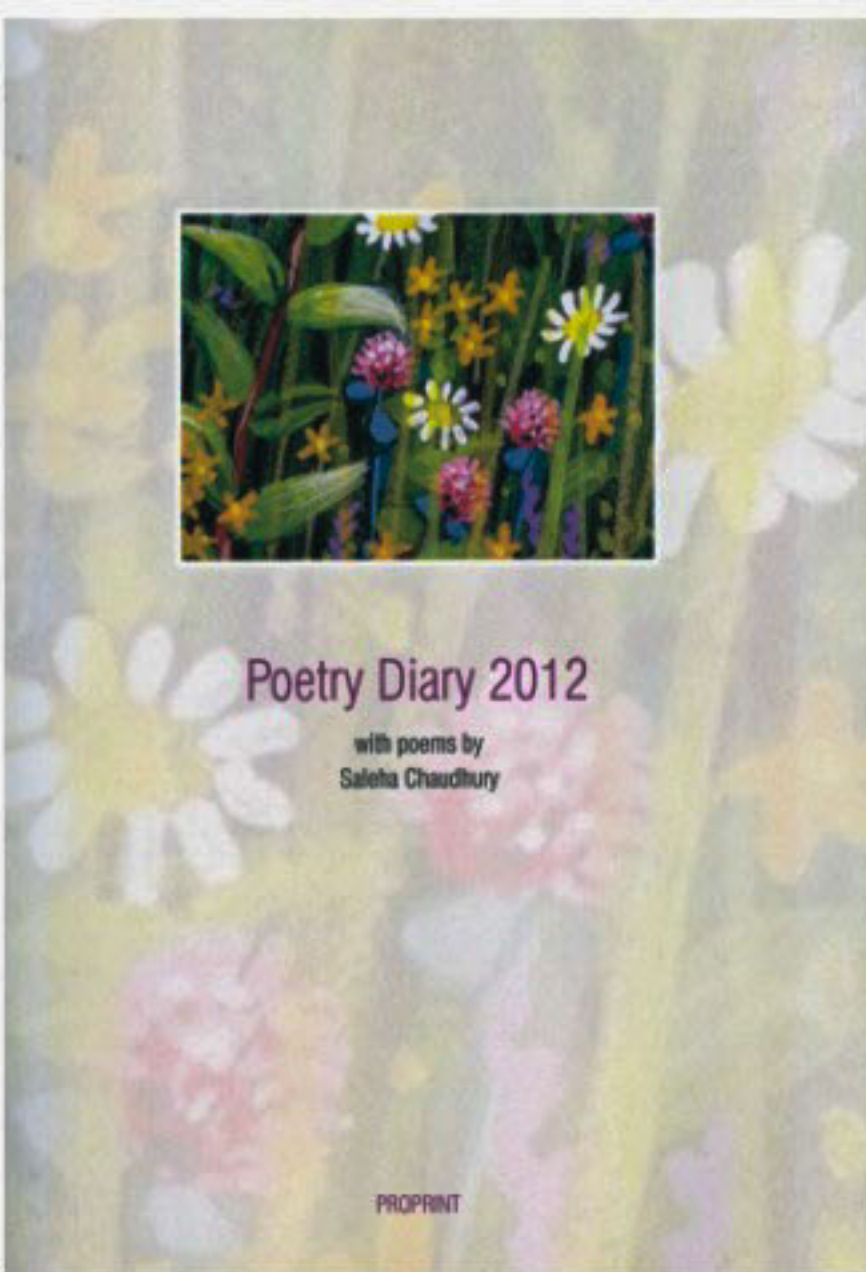
a deeper level by those who read this work. But if the reference to the CHT is indicative of a worried nation-state, there is too the note the writer takes of the difference made by Bangladeshis travelling abroad, especially to the Middle East and, when conditions turned tough, to states in South East Asia.

Bangladesh, so the writer appears to be suggesting loud and clear, is far from being the failed or failing state many outside its frontiers are ready to make it out to be. His sense of optimism is significant. The 'resilience and adaptability of Bangladesh's people remains an important beacon of hope.' That cheers the soul, surely.

Dewdrops on the grass

Saleha Chaudhury keeps getting drawn to a country she left in the earlier part of the 1970s. It perhaps did not occur to her back in 1972, within months of the liberation of Bangladesh, a time that would take her to foreign shores, that intellectually she would remain tied to the old moorings, that her permanency of residence in London would not come in the way of her reconnecting with her country.

And so she keeps coming back, in form and substance which nevertheless



**Poetry Diary 2012
With Poems by
Saleha Chaudhury
Proprint**

informs you that while she remains every inch a Bengali, she also brings into her literature, indeed into her poetry elements of western culture which only add to the richness of her intellectual world. In *Poetry Diary 2012*, she does precisely that. Why, one might ask, does poetry have to be fettered to a particular year?

The answer, again, lies in poetry itself. There are all the turnings of the seasons; and the seasons keep coming back. But then, there are certain seasons which the soul must keep embedded within itself. A year which passes, or will pass, sometimes

is a reminder of the immediacy of our surroundings being proof of the universality of time. Read, then, these poems --- interspersed with quotes from individuals of substance straddling the history of literary fame ---- that draw our attention to the twelve months of the year. Read, for January:

*A sky is blue,
Over the Atlantic Ocean
Window seat in a plane.*

I pen, poem after poem.

Something of the liberated soul underlines the poem. Thoughts are supposed to come in clearer mould in mid air. In silence? Observe what Saleha Chaudhury has to say in another poem dedicated to January:

*In silence flowers bloom,
In silence trees grow,
In silence everything reflects,
We learn more.*

But soon the poet moves on, to her need to talk in February. Words are what she plays with as she writes:

*Words are freshly minted coins!
I toss them and turn them
Over my writing desk.*

Bring the lyrical into the words, set them into a rhythm and what you have is a flute. And how does Chaudhury define the flute? Watch:

*Some deep cut holes
On a tender bamboo stick
It oozes music.*

Intimations of spring, or the earliest hint of a world about to change, are all a-flutter when March tiptoes in. Life gets moving, the heart begins beating in good cheer once more. The poet is celebratory mood:

*Love wakes up
Lazarus from the grave
When he is hopelessly dead.*

It is dawn which makes a difference. The moment of coming alive shoots forth across nature, most pleasantly painful-like:

*Dawn breaks
Dewdrops on the grass of blade.
My heart aches.*

But then there are the realities which sink in. In October, as the leaves fall and the lights grow dim, it is banality which enters the home. Chaudhury gives it a name. She calls it 'Haunting Tune':

*Ages ago we shared a song!
At the sink, in a boring kitchen
The tune haunts.*

Must someone be blamed? Saleha Chaudhury's thoughts in September are clear about human frailties, this propensity to point the finger for man's follies at divinity:

*The definition of God is
We blame Him
For all our follies.*

The poetry here gives a lilt to the imagination. Nostalgia wriggles itself out of torpor in the bitterness of a December day. Chaudhury reaches out to J.M. Barrie, to speak to us of inexplicable seasonal charms. Barrie makes you remember, for the mind and the imagination are all:

*God gave us our memories so that we
might have roses in December.*

It is that fairy tale hour when you should be looking out for stars in the deepening night sky.

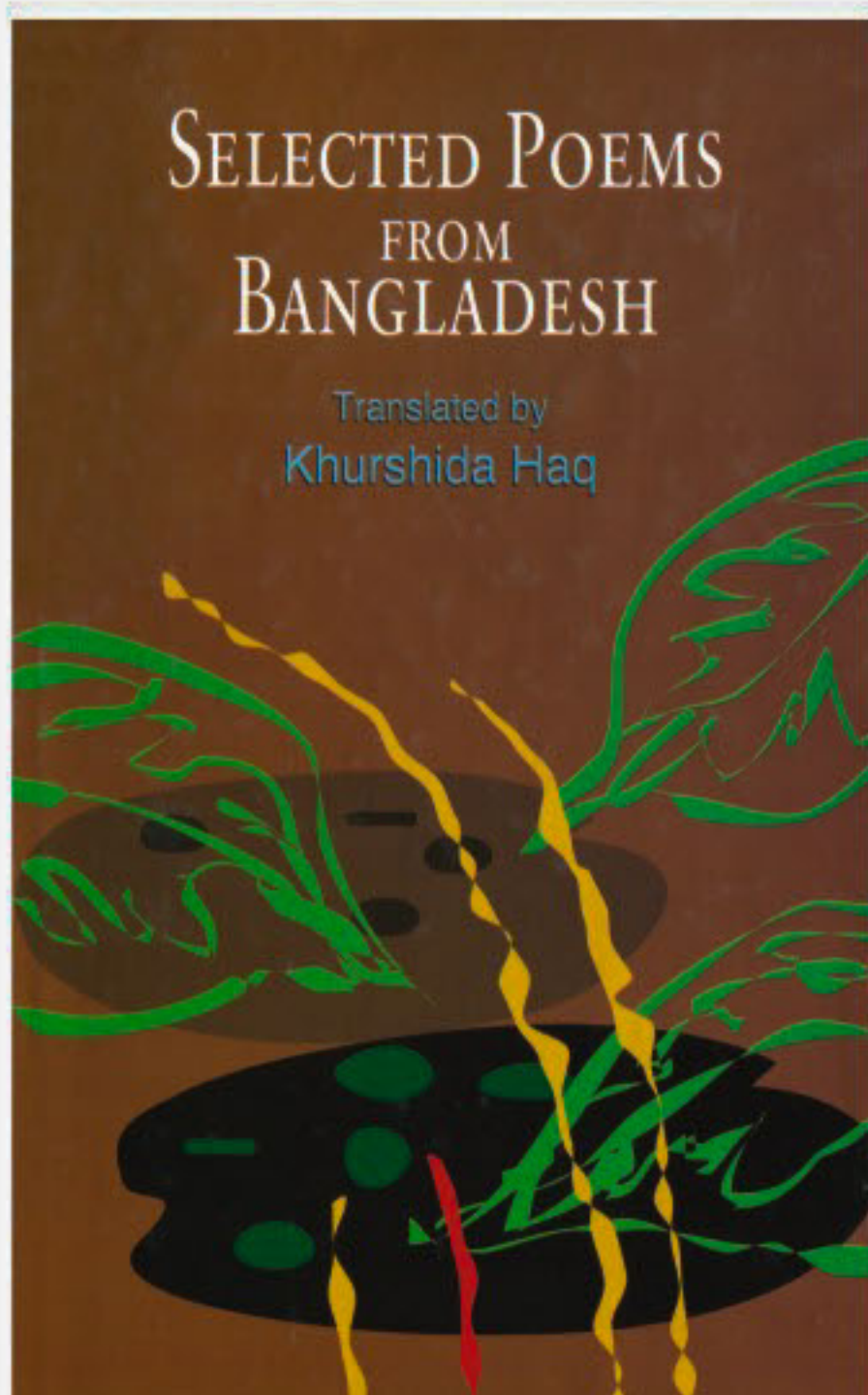
**SYED BADRUL AHSAN IS EXECUTIVE EDITOR,
THE DAILY STAR.**

Not lost in translation

Probir Kumar Sarker is happy reading poetry

A collection of poems written by senior and eminent as well as prospective new poets, the book accommodates over 25 works that reflect the moods of Bengali minds -- relations, love, nature, humane crisis and the Liberation War. Interpreted by Khurshida Haq, a Chittagong University graduate in Bangla literature, the book also carries the Bangla versions of the poems. Haq has come up with the poems of Kazi Nazrul Islam, Jibanananda Das, Shamsur Rahman, Nirmalendu Goon, Mahadev Saha, Helal Hafiz, Al Mahmud, Shaheed Quadri, Abul Momen, Abdul Hai Sikder, Syed Shamsul Haq and Abu Karim. Side by side, a few works by younger and not so young poets like Shameem Azad, Begum Jahanara Arzoo, Jarina Akhtar, Humayun Choudhury, Quazi Mahmudur Rahman and Taslima Nasrin have found space.

Most of the works cited in the book were published in different newspapers and magazines. With the intention of introducing Bangladesh's literature to the outside world better, the interpreter, also a former TV journalist, thinks the book, though a meagre initiative, may serve the purpose. She urges all to interpret more Bangla poems to this effect, mentioning that even the works



**Selected Poems from
Bangladesh
Translation Khurshida Haq
Jatiyo Shahitya Prokash**

of our national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam have not been published in their full version.

Haq believes that only the interpretation of poet Nazrul's *Bidrohi (Rebel)* and some of his famous poems on discrimination and the class system could be disseminated around the globe. This book carries the rebel poet's *Shikal Porar Gaan* (Song Of The Chained) which the national poet of Bangladesh created as an inspiration to those oppressed and subjugated. *Nishiddho Sompadokiyo* (Banned Editorial) by Helal Fafiz gives a similar impression. It deliberately inspires the young to speak up and protest against the odds, or, to be more precise, injustice. The first line states: *This is the best time to join the procession for him who is young.*

The poet of nature and love, Jibanananda Das, in his historic poem *Abar Asibo Fiire* (I Will Return Again) depicts why he is a patriot and why he wants to return to his homeland again and again. His pen has elaborated the splendid scenario of rural Bangladesh --- with its people, nature and river Dhanshiri serving as the focal point. Mahadev Saha's *Ami Ekhon Tai* (So Am I) portrays his emotional craving for

nature --- seems to be free of vengeance.

Home by Abu Karim illustrates his desire to stay with his lover at a house close to nature; it could be a farm house in Siberia or Kazakhstan or inside a rubber or coffee garden in South America.

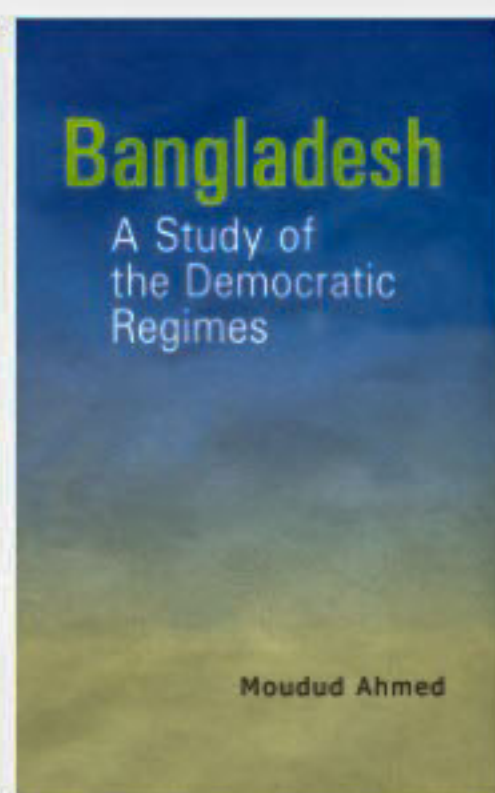
Shaheed Quadri in his *Tomake Obhikadan, Priyotoma* (Salutation To You, My Beloved) presents his dearly loved one with tough and even impossible things in a way that they lose their cruel character and get to be devoted to her. On the other hand, in the poems of Taslima Nasrin -- *Sanad Potra* (Certificate) and *Sostar Jinish* (Cheap Things) -- she portrays the state of women in Bangladesh and expresses her frustrations over their submissive mindset and reluctance towards establishing personality and empowering themselves the society.

Shamsur Rahman's *Tomake Paoar Jonyo He Swadhinata* (To Achieve You, Oh Freedom) narrates the struggle of the Bengali people in achieving the nation's independence in 1971 in a bid to live with honour within their own traditions and culture.

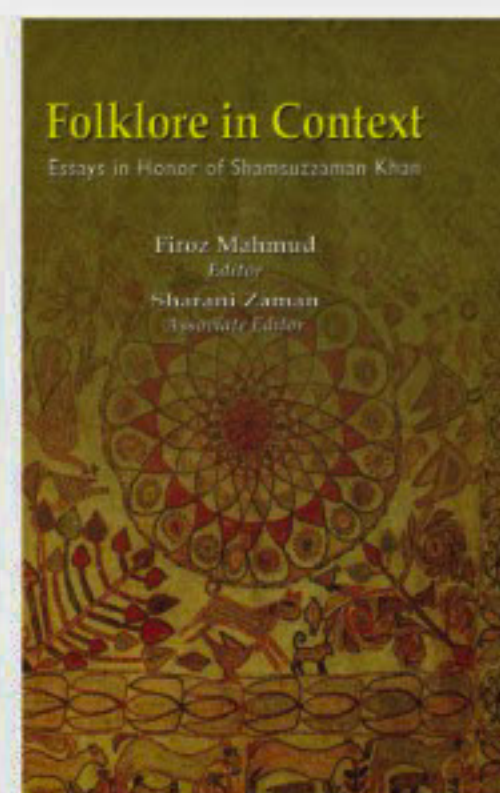
**PROBIR KUMAR SARKER IS SUB-EDITOR AT THE
DAILY STAR.**

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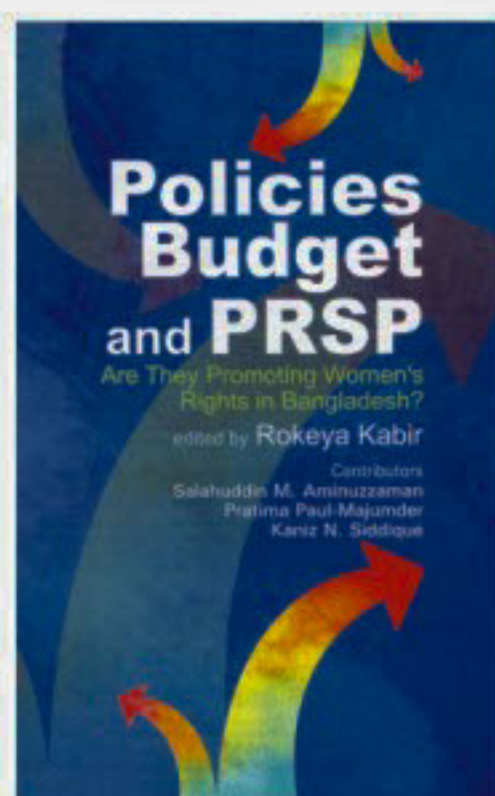
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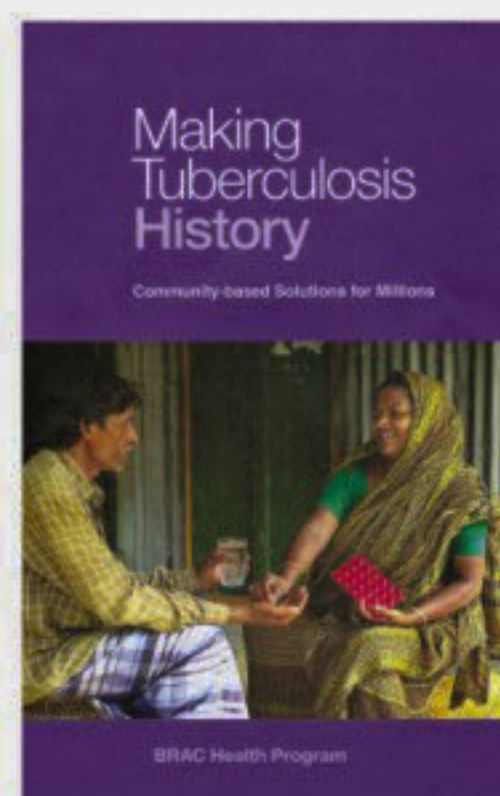
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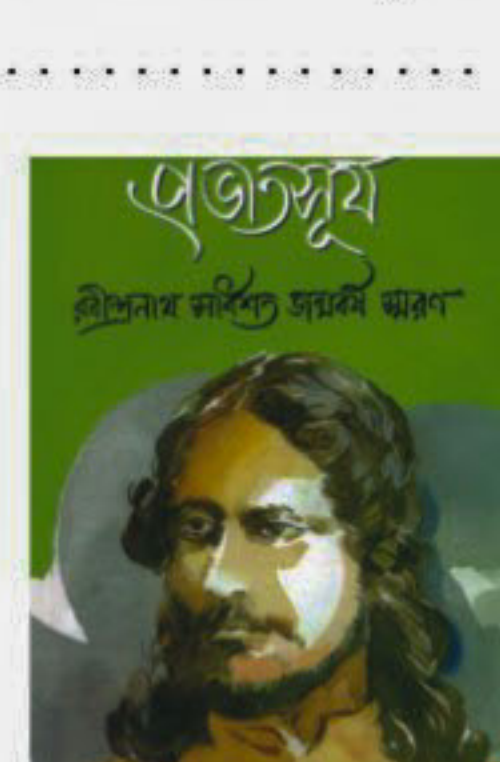
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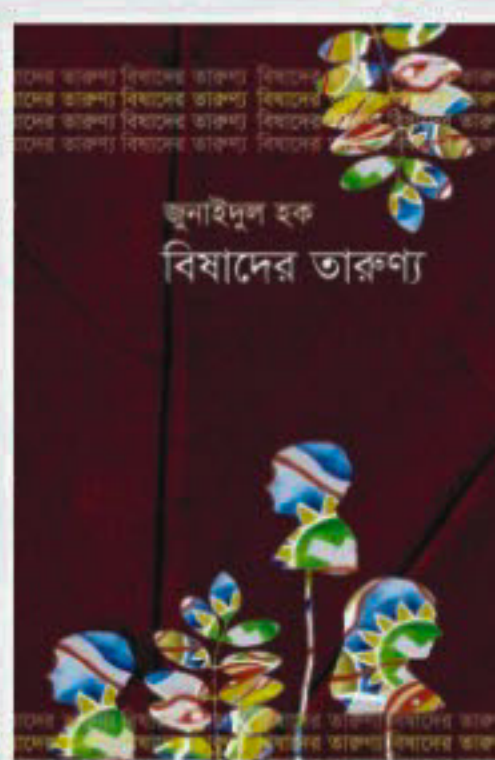
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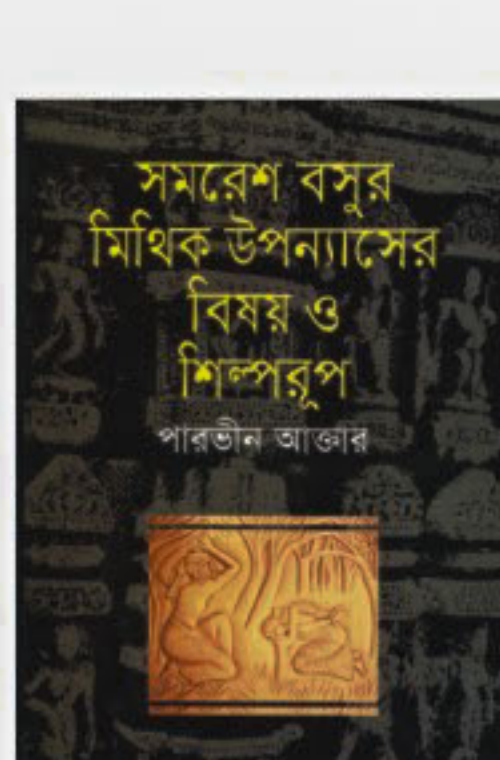
**Bigyaner Rajye Jana
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**Probhatshurjo
Rabindranath
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**Bishader Tarunno
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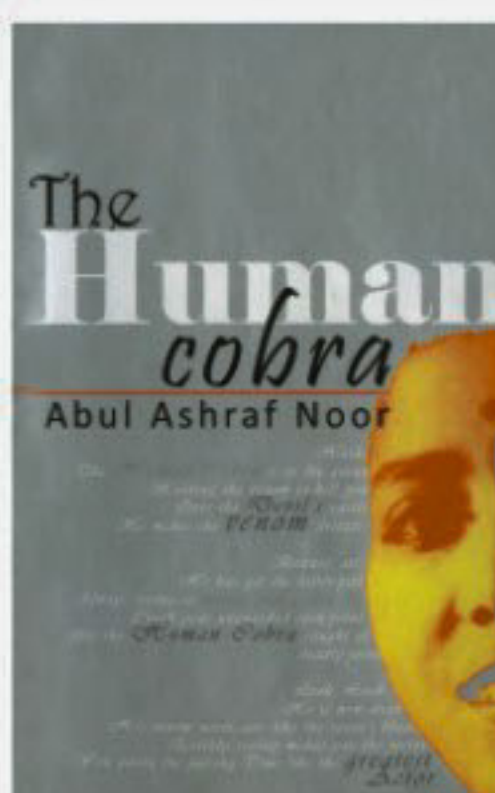
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Mythic Uponyasher
Bishoy O Shilporoop
Parveen Akhtar
Dhrubapada**



**Nirbachito
Probandho
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