

Hard Covers

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A resourceful collection

Jatiyatabader Orthonity O Onnannya (Economics of Nationalism & Others) by Muzaffer Ahmed

Cover & Illustrations: Qayum Chowdhury. Publisher: Prothoma Prokashan; Pages: 188 (offset); Price: Tk 250

ASJADUL KIBRIA

WHEN economists write about economy, many of them skip the socio-political interrelation mainly due to complexity of analysis. But, by skipping such interrelation, they ultimately narrow the focus of their writings and make their works difficult to understand. Moreover, economics has close interrelationship with politics, society as well as culture. Sticking to hardcore economics is not always enough, rather sometimes misleading. It may be good enough when the talks are all about monetary policy or trade policy, but it is not helpful when one needs to discuss the momentum of growth in detail.

In this context, the book written Professor Muzaffer Ahmed, an economist, can be a classic example. The identity of Ahmed cannot be confined as an economist. He is more than an economist; he is an educationist, a social thinker and finally a philosopher in our time. His in-depth observation on our divided-discriminated society in the context of development and democracy reflects his wide range of valuable thoughts. The book 'Jatiyatabader Orthonity O Onnannya' (Economics of Nationalism & Others) contains such a reflection. This is basically a collection of eight essays written and published in different periods of last three decades mainly as lectures in Bangla. Relevance of all the pieces is still very strong to our

country and this is the strength of the author.

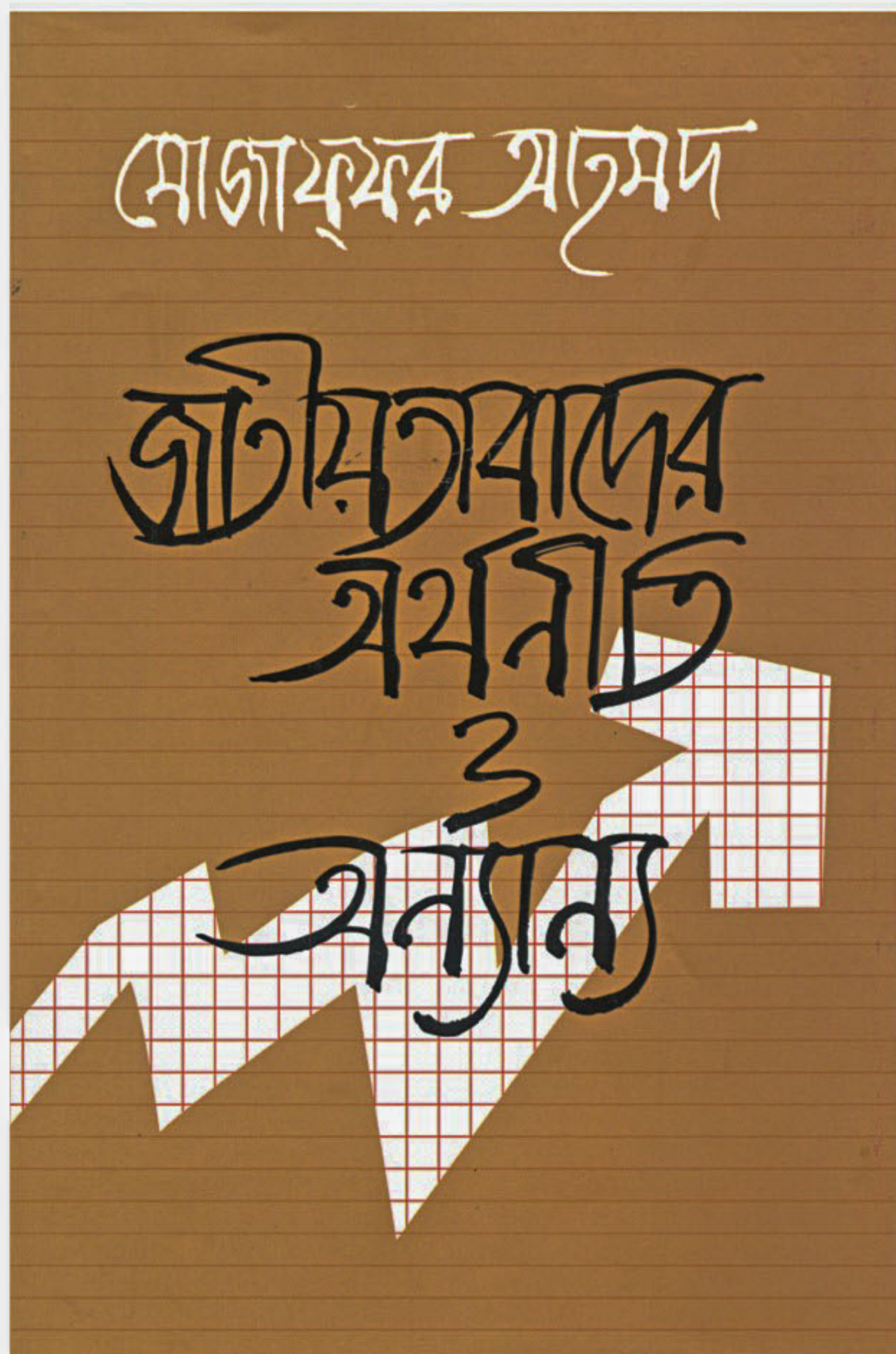
In the theme-essay (Economics of Nationalism), the author nicely illustrates the emergence and continuation of protectionism in different economies and also discusses the consequences. With a lot of historical facts, although brief in nature, the author shows the long path of the nationalist approach in economics in Asia, Europe and America. The essay was written in a time when, under the Washington Consensus paradigm, poor and underdeveloped countries like Bangladesh were forced to adopt a free market economic policy without preparation.

Ahmed also shed lights on different theories of free market economy and pointed out benefits and limitations of these in his second essay. He draws examples from different incidents in Bangladesh to make the discussion lively. With empirical evidences and series of logics, Ahmed concludes: "Adoption of free market system without considering and adjusting the political, economical and social values is bound to be harmful for poor people and marginal farmers, who are the majority of the population (p-50)."

Although the original essay was written in July, 1998 and presented as a memorial lecture, readers can find it very relevant today as reflected in the conclusion. So, by reading first two essays one can get a broader context of market economy.

Ahmed's essay on consumption, savings and investment is basically academic but very strong as the author draws real experiences of some Asian countries along with Bangladesh. Undergraduate students can find it as a good reference piece.

The essay on military rule or regime and economic develop-



ment is also a valuable one. The author delivered the speech in mid-1990, the last year of former president HM Ershad's army-backed autocratic regime. Here the author discusses different countries' experience during military regime. Before doing that, he goes through theoretical background very briefly. The author shows that it is not possible to establish any logical correlation between military regime

and economic development as both success and failure are there. But, his final observation is: "During a military regime, generally economic development can't be faster and effective." Our latest experience clearly validates the observation. The rule of army-backed caretaker government in Bangladesh for two years (2007 and 2008) distorted the development route to a large extent.

For the last couple of years, global financial crisis as well as recession brings Keynes in the limelight. The free market philosophy comes under severe criticism and Western governments' intervention to fix financial market raises question. Ahmed's article on John Maynard Keynes is a nice piece to briefly understand Keynesian economic philosophy as well as life and works of the great economist. It was written in 1983 as a tribute on the occasion of his birth century.

The diversity of Ahmed's thoughts is reflected in the essay on health. He lucidly analyses conditions of health system in the third world countries along with Bangladesh through the lens of global political-economy. This is an unparallel write-up illustrating commercialisation of health where multinational companies take the lead. He shows how such multinational companies move to undermine the efforts of World Health Organisation (WHO) as fully profit-driven commercial interests of the companies face obstacles due to different initiatives of the WHO.

The article further illustrates that the World Bank actually forced Unicef to support privatisation of health services in the poor countries and thus has made health service costly for the poor. In this article, the author also discusses problems of drugs and medicines as well as the unscrupulous role of pharmaceuticals companies. The article was written in 1998 as a memorial lecture on Muhammad Ibrahim, a pioneer in diabetic treatment in Bangladesh. At that time, Ahmed categorically predicted that the adoption of the health policy prescribed by the WB was meant to strengthen the nexus of private players and so 'health for all'

would not be realised.

More than a decade later now, the scenario of the country's health sector endorses the truth. The poor people of the country are highly marginalised in health care as state intervention is distorted to provide more space for the private players.

In his seventh essay, the author discusses the philosophy of university education in line with the thoughts of Edward Schills, an eminent scholar and educationist. Through the discussion, Ahmed argues that learning and researching in the university need to be linked with intelligentsia-discipline and free-thoughts among the teachers and students. Otherwise, quality education and superior knowledge cannot be achieved.

The last article is Nurul Motin memorial lecture on 'Ethics in Banking.' Here Ahmed sheds light on different dimensions of the development of our banking business. With the help of academic theories, series of international evidences and essential logics, he strongly argues that operation of banking with strong ethical standard creates foundation of dynamic development, while doing opposite puts the economy into crisis. He also discusses philosophical aspects of the ethics and linkage of ethics with professionalism.

Overall, the book is a resourceful collection with some timeless pieces. All the articles are very well written. Arguments and counter-arguments are presented very systematically. It requires good attentiveness of readers to realise the depth of the thoughts and ideas presented by the author. We expect more such collections in future.

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Transit demystified, partially

Tranjiter Tanaporen (Transit Quandary) by Asjadul Kibria

Cover Design: Shabbasachy Hajra; Publisher: Jagriti Prokashani. Price: Tk 160; Pages: 96 (white).

BITHI MAHMUDA

FOR the last two years, the issue of transit has become a hot topic of debate in Bangladesh. After the prime minister's visit to India in January 2010, a series of initiatives have been taken to revamp the Indo-Bangla relationships. The issue of transit is also top on the agenda as it is one of India's long-standing demands.

But the government's move to provide transit to India sparks debate and discussion among different quarters of the country, which are still going on. Business journalist Asjadul Kibria has tried to briefly outline the course of debate-discussion in his latest book that hits the Ekushey Boimela in Bangla Academy. The writer has written several articles in newspapers and newsmagazines in the last year to track the transit debate. These articles are compiled in the second part of the book.

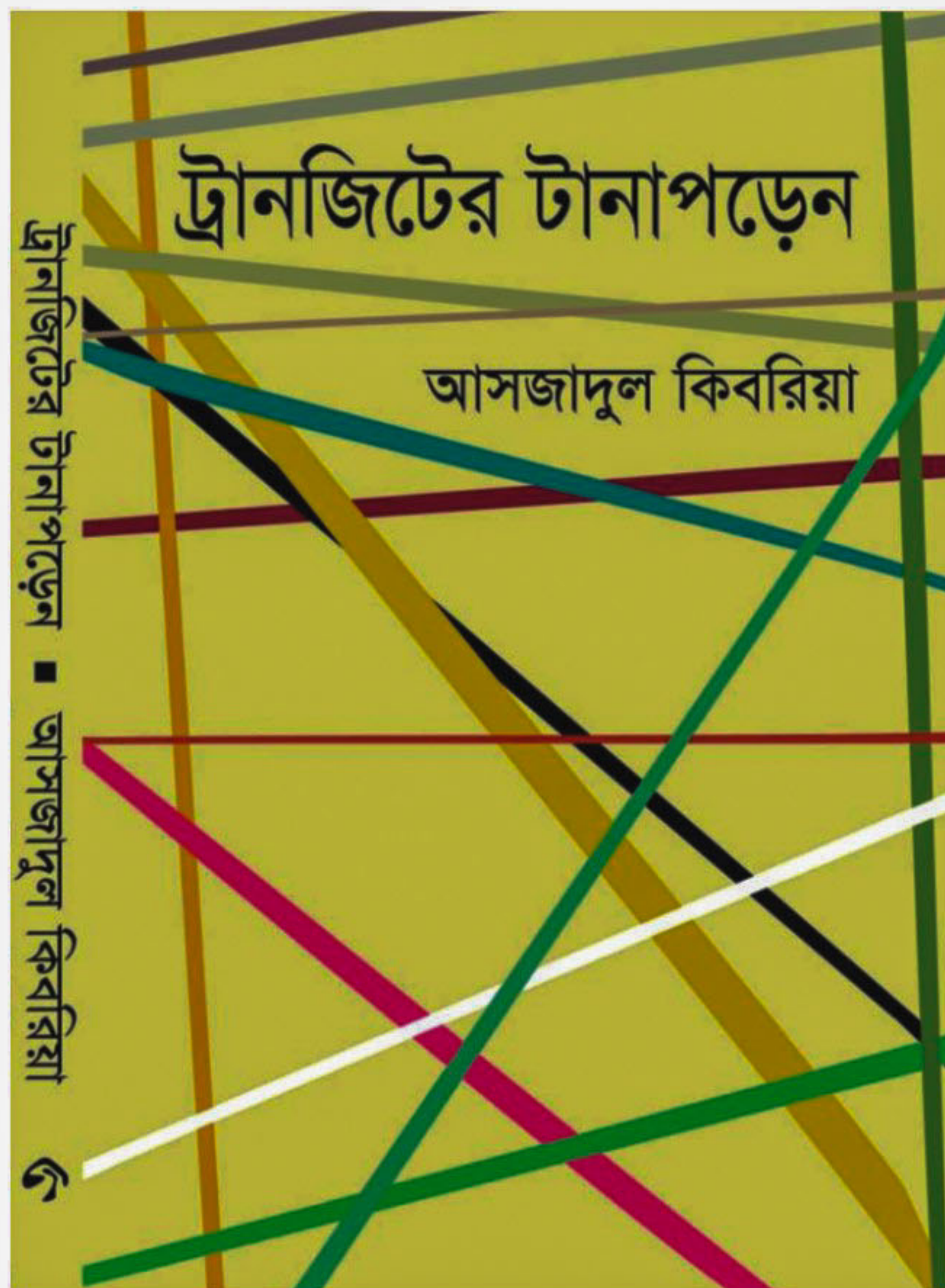
In the first part, major issues, including conceptual aspects, relating to transit are discussed with relevant examples. Here, he also tries to explain the difference between transit, transshipment and corridor as well as the guiding principles of transit. Kibria also extracts

analyses of experts like MA Taslim, Debapriya Bhattacharya and Monjur Ahmed. He makes it clear that blindly opposing transit to oppose India is not a logical option and rather, skilful negotiation is a must to gain from transit.

In this context, he nicely summarised two recent studies on transit and also pointed out some limitations. A study conducted by Asian Development Bank identified that Bangladesh would be able to earn \$50 million annually during the initial five years as transit fee. Later, based on up-gradation and construction of necessary infrastructure, annual earnings will be \$500 million in the mid-term and will reach \$1 billion in the long-term.

The study suggests that Bangladesh needs to invest some \$3.5 billion to construct and upgrade necessary infrastructure, including roads and railways. Kibria mentioned that such estimation is to some extent misleading and the study is not officially revealed to public. He rather inclined to agree with the study conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, which calculated that some \$15-\$30 million could be made in return of investment worth \$100 million for limited transit, mainly based on railways.

A significant thing in this section is revealing some fact-figures and observations made by the core committee on transit headed by the chairman of Bangladesh Tariff Commission in its comprehensive



report. Although the committee submitted the report to the government in September, it has not been

made public yet. Kibria's apprehension is that two advisers actually shelved the report, as they are not

happy with the recommendations.

A compilation of the articles, published in different periods of 2011, will help readers understand the moves in transit of that particular period. It is interesting to note that Kibria heavily came down on the controversial role of two advisers to the Prime Minister and categorically shows how they are misinterpreting international rules and misleading people.

In more than one article, Kibria pointed out that Bangladesh has no legal bindings to allow India-to-India transit, which is basically a corridor facility. He draws relevant paragraphs of GATT article V (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) of The World Trade Organisation (WTO) to nullify distorted argument that under WTO rule, Bangladesh could not collect any fees or charges for transit.

There are some pictures, maps and statistics to help understand the subject. The language is lucid. The book is written in Bengali except two English articles. A list of the references is good. But there is a good opportunity to make the book more informative with historical context. The writer slightly touches the area only. Moreover, some discussions appeared more biased and not based on facts. A few observations may be misleading unless read very attentively. Despite the limitations, it is an effort to demystify the issue of transit to the people.

The writer teaches in a college in Dhaka.

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