

## Two reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

# All those men and our heritage . . .

Abdul Matin's interest in Bangladesh's politics, indeed its overall historical legacy, has endured despite his being away from the country for more than half a century. His links with Bangladesh and its people remain as strong as they were when he made his move to Britain in 1960. Unlike so many others, his curiosity about the country has been a constant, a truth which manifested itself especially well during the War of Liberation in 1971 when he threw himself wholesale into garnering foreign support for the Bengali cause.

In more ways than one, therefore, Matin has been a repository of national history, a fact borne out by the regularity with which he has written on Bangladesh over the years. His respect for Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has never wavered. Neither has his commitment to democracy and secularism been anything less than powerfully pronounced. His books, begin-

ning with such works as *Geneva-e Bangabandhu* and moving on to well-researched documents pertaining to the role of Bengalis during the war as also his analyses of politics in post-1975 Bangladesh, have in them all the hallmarks of rich, sustained scholarship.

It is just this kind of the scholarly which he brings into *Jibonsmriti: Ekti Bishesh Oddhaye*. But let no one be lulled into the false belief that the work is a mere enumeration of the little details relating to Matin's life. Of course it is about him, but in a way which places the focus on the men who have over the decades carved out definitive intellectual swathes of territory across Bangladesh's aesthetic landscape. They are all contemporaries of

Matin, individuals with whom his links have naturally become loosened owing to his being abroad. And yet Matin, being the fairly regular visitor to Bangladesh he has always been, has kept in touch with them. Some have passed on, beyond the temporal world. These are individuals whose contributions to the growth of a distinctive secular Bengali identity have kept Bangladesh moored to its heritage.

Observe the list of these illustrious men. There are twenty one of them, beginning with Syed Nuruddin, Sardar Fazlul Karim, Sanaul Haq and going all the way down to Debesh Das and Santosh Gupta. Abdul Matin's interaction with them has been intense, one reason being the common philosophy of life and politics that they have all pursued in the course of their varied careers. One who is familiar with Matin's scholarly pursuits over the years will certainly recall the diligence with which he has maintained the record of a generation which truly brought about a revolutionary change in Bengali life through the secular democratic movements of the 1960s and the War of Liberation in 1971. The generation is Matin's, and of those on whom he dwells in this work. Over the years, Matin has written pretty extensively on such personalities as Syed Waliullah, Shamsuddin Abul Kalam, Shaikat Osman and others. He now brings all these men, and a lot more besides, into the framework of the present work, which is not bad at all.

No, it is not bad. It is actually a brilliant idea to have brought together, within the ambit of his own memories as a Bengali and as part of a trail-blazing generation of Bengalis, some of the figures who have continued to inspire people in Bangladesh. A sure strand of the literary seems to bind these individuals together. In a number of refreshing instances, Matin lets you in on the thought that it was a love of reading -- and the subjects ranged from literature to history to politics -- which drew him to these men. And let it not be forgotten, though, that a young Matin made his way into the intellectual world of the Bengali fundamentally through literature, through writing short stories as it were. Those were good times, in the early 1940s when there were yet no ominous signs of India being sliced into on grounds of communalism.

*Jibonsmriti* is, in that wider sense of the meaning, a compendium of ideas as they have flowed from some of the individuals who can truly be referred to as makers of our history. And while we are on the subject of history, do not forget that Abdul Matin includes in the work a good number of essays on a diversity of social and political issues which have exercised public minds in Bangladesh over the past few decades.

Then there was the claim that Obama was a secret Muslim. As with the claim about his birth, there was nothing to support it. Obama had no illusion that his election would end American racism. In his speech on race, "A More Perfect Union," given on March 18, 2008, he said: "I have never been so naive as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own."

Kennedy is an unusual writer on the difficult and divisive subject of race. His voice is measured, calm. He can discuss highly emotional issues with detachment. But underneath there is an unmistakable passion: for truth, for justice.

He has published four other books, on aspects of race relations that are particularly delicate, for example on interracial intimacies, and on race, crime, and the law. His current book is on race in politics, but it really has a broader vision. In eight interrelated essays, each examining a different aspect of "the racial issues that have surrounded Obama's election and presidency," Kennedy's book makes clear how much we must do to overcome the bitter legacies of racism, and to make the United States a country where every black citizen has an equal opportunity with every white to live the American dream.

Writing on the persistence of racial divisions in the 2008 elections, for instance, Kennedy emphasizes the importance overlooked by the mainstream press of the way in which Obama presented himself to black voters.

He won the black vote, Kennedy says, "by identifying himself as a black man, by carrying himself in a dignified manner as the loving spouse of a black woman (euro) [ and by showing that his candidacy was 'for real' in the sense that he could garner sufficient support from whites to prevail."

Had Obama not appealed to the black electorate in this way, Kennedy writes, "he would not have enjoyed the overwhelming support he has received from Negroes and would thus have been unable to win the presidency." At the same time, in order to attract white sup-

ported, Obama, keenly aware of the stereotype of the "angry black man," was careful to present himself as "calm, measured, (and) unthreatening," and to reassure whites "that he harbored no racial resentment, that he loved America." The use of such different appeals in an election that was billed largely as post-racial should, Kennedy suggests, "have counseled caution in interpreting (Obama's) election as the ultimate racial breakthrough."

Though an admirer of Obama's, Kennedy is nevertheless quite critical of him. He laments Obama's shift from unequivocal support for same-sex marriage to the more politically tenable position that marriage should be sanctified only between a man and a woman. "That the nation's first black president defends separate but equal in the context of same-gender intimacy is bitterly ironic," Kennedy writes.

He recognizes that Obama has been diffident on racial matters he calls Obama's few comments on the American racial dilemma "vague and unilluminating" and observes that he has done little to address the mass incarceration of black men. But Kennedy notes that Obama has still made a significant impact on America's racial environment, not only by promoting racial minorities like Sonia Sotomayor to high office, but also, most importantly, simply by being elected.

It is easy for white Americans to believe that the enormous gains of the civil rights movement, the service of two blacks on the Supreme Court of the United States, and the election of a black president have removed the last vestiges of racism in this country. The reality of a society that is still in many ways segregated is quite different. Readers of Kennedy's book will understand that it will take much awareness and effort to end American "inertia" on race; and he is not optimistic about the prospects of doing so (abridged).

quoting by the young over the years. That old radicalism, reminiscent as it is of the rebellious Bengali vis-à-vis 1971, is even today a stark call to action. Which is just as well, for the rebellious streak in the Bengali has always sustained him in his struggle for a better, more purposeful existence. Note Anarjo's translation: *Now who is in youth / it is the best time for him to go to the procession / Now who is in youth / it is the best time for him to go to the war...*

You get that somewhat queasy feeling that the translation could have been better, could indeed have been a little more of an approximation of the original in terms of poetic sensibilities. But if you are disappointed here, there is something of consolation in the translation of the poem *Agniyushob*. The poet and his translator call it *Festival of Fire*, which seems rather apt:

*That was a festival of fire, on that day / I kept my whole heart on the auto fire-arm / I staked by the name of love / the homeland was born indebted to blood / my eyes were not to you / the homeland then was your co-wife . . .*

There is that dichotomy of love of land and devotion to the lover here. But, then, Hafiz does find a way toward a compromise, in the manner of the lover-patriot he projects himself to be:

*Rather today let us like the songs of Jahidur / Summon boshekh from the heart, bring in both lives / Do you know, Helen . . .*

An acute sense of romance works in Helal Hafiz, love which goes unrequited and yet which must not die. The end of love is but a symbolism of the pointless, even if love has left one in desperate circumstances:

*You know: the neighbours know I did not get you / but you are in the pleasure and sacrifice of this ascetic-poet.*

Move on, and stop at this celebration of love:

*Touch me, woman, touch me close / Nothing miraculous / you are extreme, the owner of humane magic / my rescue is only with your soft touch.*

The mind in Helal Hafiz is in swift motion. It moves from the relationship between man and woman to the obscurity of civilisational decline:

*You can understand neutron bomb / but not man!*

In Helal Hafiz resides a comprehensive poetic soul. The range in him is wide, encompassing within it a diversity of subjects and themes that only modern man lives through and, in a sense, appreciates.

Let the last word be his:  
*Perhaps I have defeated you / or I have been defeated / let the classic obscurity be / who left whom.*

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## Much talked about but never starting

### A.B.M. Nurul Islam studies an old problem

Books on technical matters are a rarity in the annals of Bangladeshi publications. Former Chief Engineer of BAEC and academic, Dr. A. Matin's latest book on *Rooppur and the Power Crisis* is a timely and valuable addition to this genre.

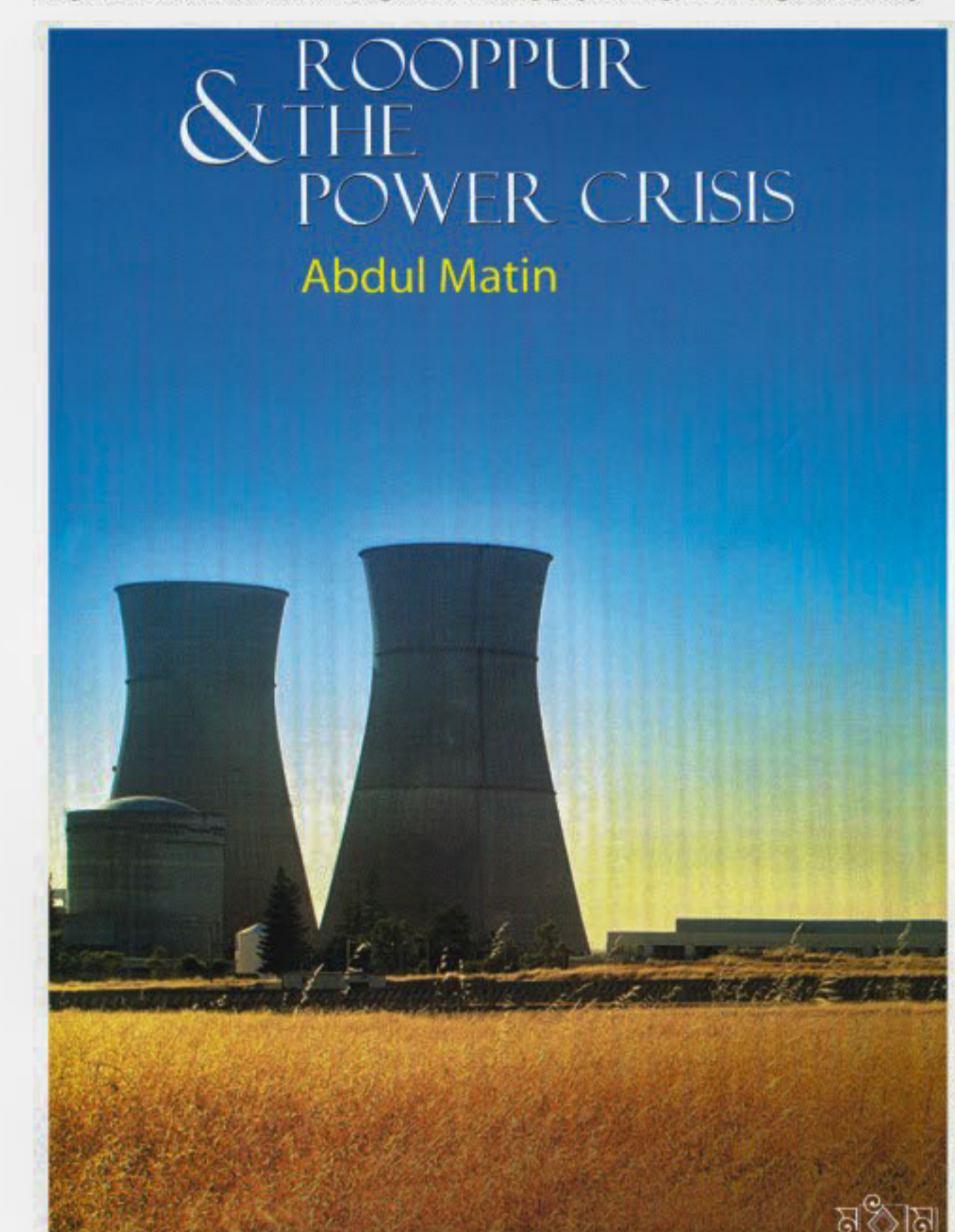
The book is a collection of the articles that Dr. Matin wrote in the period 2009-2011 in different English language dailies of the country. He covers a large number of issues, namely, Rooppur Nuclear Power Project with particular reference to the current Russian proposal, Fukushima reactor accident in Japan and its lessons for the Rooppur Project, nuclear proliferation issues of our neighbourhood, Bangladesh's perennial crisis of electricity generation and in particular the folly of rental power scheme, electrical connectivity of the South-East Asian nations, renewable energies like solar and wind, climate change etc.

As one associated with the Rooppur Project almost from its initial conception, Dr. Matin is eminently qualified to write on this much talked-about but never-starting project. He explains to the reader in simple language how a nuclear reactor works, why nuclear is a good option for a developing country like Bangladesh, which particular reactor type is suitable for Rooppur, analyses its safety and waste management issues, etc. As for the Russian proposal, it is somewhat disheartening that a series of MoUs have been signed between the two Governments but no solid progress is discernible. We still do not know whether the project at the current site is feasible or how much it will cost and who will finance it.

Japan has just observed the first anniversary of the triple whammy it suffered on March 11, 2011: an unprecedented 9.0 magnitude earthquake triggering a tsunami with a record 40 m waves which in turn triggered a worst case scale 7 nuclear disaster in Fukushima. One year on, Japan is still in shock and awe of what it went through. The rest of the world is taking a breather and assessing its nuclear options. Dr. Matin analyses the sequence of events at Fukushima, suggests how to cope with the hitherto unthinkable nuclear meltdown and finally its lessons for incorporation in any future design for Rooppur Project.

We live in a world where Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) keeps nuclear weapon states (NWSs) away from using their trump cards. Bangladesh is in close proximity to three nuclear weapon states, namely, India, Pakistan and China. So when we hear rumours of another neighbour (Myanmar) harbouring a desire of acquiring this trump card, it is worrying indeed. As a non-nuclear weapon state (NNWS), what protection do we have? Our Foreign Office may take up Dr. Matin's suggestion of seeking an amendment to the NPT and CTBT to include a provision of collective nuclear security guarantee from the P-5 members of the Security Council to the NNWSs.

Dr. Matin devotes a large portion of his book on the causes of our perennial electric power crisis and how to overcome it. The genesis of this malady takes us all the way back to the birth of our nation over-use of our scarce natural gas resources for power production to the detriment of its other beneficial uses, not developing local capability for exploration and development of gas resources, not utilising the substantial coal reserves available in the country and finally as a last nail in the coffin the recent rush for rental power plants. As early as April 2010, Dr. Matin warned about the non-sustainability of the rental power scheme: high cost of generation, dependence on an imported fuel as unpredictable as oil as regards its supply and price, high subsidy



Rooppur & The Power Crisis  
Dr. Abdul Matin  
Moddharma

that will be a drain on our economy, etc. The rest is history. Some heads should have rolled by now. Instead of going full scale to develop our high-quality coal resources, the government is now going for high-sulphur, imported coal-based power plants. Energy security cannot be achieved by using imported fuel. And to build such plants close to an ecologically sensitive area as the Sundarbans will bring about an environmental disaster.

The decision to invest in rental power plants using diesel fuel in particular must have been taken on an ad-hoc basis, because it defies any logic. To avoid such ad-hocism, Dr. Matin suggests the use of modern computer based methods of power planning. Such a package called WASP can be obtained from the IAEA, Vienna along with necessary training. PDB engineers can then run and update their plans in a matter of days.

One way to solve our electricity supply problem would be to interconnect all the regional grids with sufficient capacity and tap into the enormous hydro potential of our Himalayan neighbours, Nepal and Bhutan. The author devotes a few articles on this topic. This is a connectivity that can transform the South East Asian region and beyond.

The author's coverage of solar and other renewable energy resources and climate change issues makes one up to date on the latest developments on these topics of vital interest to Bangladesh.

Dr. A. Matin writes in easy, free-flowing English and has a knack of making complex issues understandable to the layman. The book, published by Moddharma, runs into 193 pages with an attractive cover and top quality printing. It is highly recommended for students, teachers, researchers, policy makers, in fact, anyone dealing with energy planning.

ENGINEER A.B.M.NURUL ISLAM IS A FORMER IAEA OFFICIAL



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## ESSAY

# The shame of America

ANTHONY LEWIS

Randall Kennedy is a professor at Harvard Law School, widely regarded as one of the most perceptive and eloquent commentators on racial matters. His two siblings are also lawyers, one of them a federal judge. All three graduated from Princeton; Randall was a Rhodes Scholar.

Their father, Henry Kennedy Sr., grew up in poverty in Louisiana. The achievements of his family sound like an embodiment of the American dream. But he rejected any such notion. What the Kennedys achieved, he said, had been in spite of America, not because of it. His father's view of the United States, Kennedy writes, "was more unforgiving" than that of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, whose "God damn America" so embarrassed his parishioner Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign.

What the senior Kennedy could not forgive was the contumely he and others suffered because they were black. He saw blacks humiliated and terrorized, without a hint of disapproval from authorities. During the 1960s he drove his family from their home in Washington to his wife's old home in Columbia, S.C. Several times they were stopped by a policeman who told Kennedy that this was the South and he should take care to behave himself. "Yassuh," Kennedy replied, in a way "calculated to provide the maximum safety to himself and his family."

As we read in "Reverend Wright and My Father: Reflections on Blacks and Patriotism," one of the essays collected in Kennedy's remarkable new book, "The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency," such incidents profoundly alienated Kennedy's father. And his father was not alone in his feelings.

"The fact is," Kennedy says, "that much of what Reverend Wright voiced strikes a chord with many black people: his contempt for American hypocrisy; his anger at American unwillingness to face squarely the two great social crimes that haunt United States history -- the removal of the Indians and the enslavement of the Africans." Wright's angry words outraged many