

REVIEW ESSAY

Placing rural heritage on record

JACKIE KABIR

Baromashi or *baromashya* are songs sung by rural women narrating their agony of being away from their loved ones. The songs usually describe the state of a woman in different seasons while her loved one is missing. As the song mentions, *baromashi* means 'of twelve months.'

Even though there are many *baromashi* songs which have become famous and are often sung by renowned artists, there are very few books on *baromashi*. Some writers have collected and compiled them in the form of research works. Prof Razia Sultana is one of them. In her slim volume, *Shahitya Bikkon*, published by Bangla Academy in June 1998, she has dedicated a chapter to Baromashi literature.

Purbanga Geetika or East Bengal Ballad by Dinesh Chandra Sen has compiled over fifty ballads which were carried on verbally from generation to generation in different parts of Bangladesh. The ballads were composed by illiterate people of the villages with their collective wisdom as early as the 14th century. Chandra Kumar Dey collected the ballads and published some of them in 1913. Later Dinesh Chandra Sen helped him to increase his collection and published *Purbo Banga Geetika* in 1923 from Calcutta University. Dinesh Chandra Sen noted that a record of Baromashis from the ninth century had also been found.

The Bangla calendar was introduced during Emperor Akbar's reign. Farmers had to give taxes and harvest at different times according to the Higi or the Islamic calendar. Akbar reformed the system by making a Bangla calendar which was compatible with the agricultural events of the country. A scholar named Amir Fateullah Shiraji introduced the Bangla *shon* or *foshol shon* from Akbar's accession to the throne in 1556.

According to Dr Razia Sultana, a scholar of Bangla literature, there are two types of *baromashi* --- one which is part of a long book and the other which is independent and can be sung like a song. Then again *baromashi* can be divided into different kinds according to their subjects:

a. Religious *baromashi* (they are also known as event-specific *baromashi*). This kind of *baromashi* is based on religious and social events of middle and ancient times. There are very few of them available now. Most of the *baromashi* that were collected by Bangla Academy were composed for wedding purposes. One such *baromashi* was collected from Sylhet by Chowdhury Golam Akbar. It narrates the result of marriage taking place in the different Bangla months.

The month of Shawon is not for marriage. If one gets married in this month
The results will not be good.

According to the scriptures it is forbidden to get married

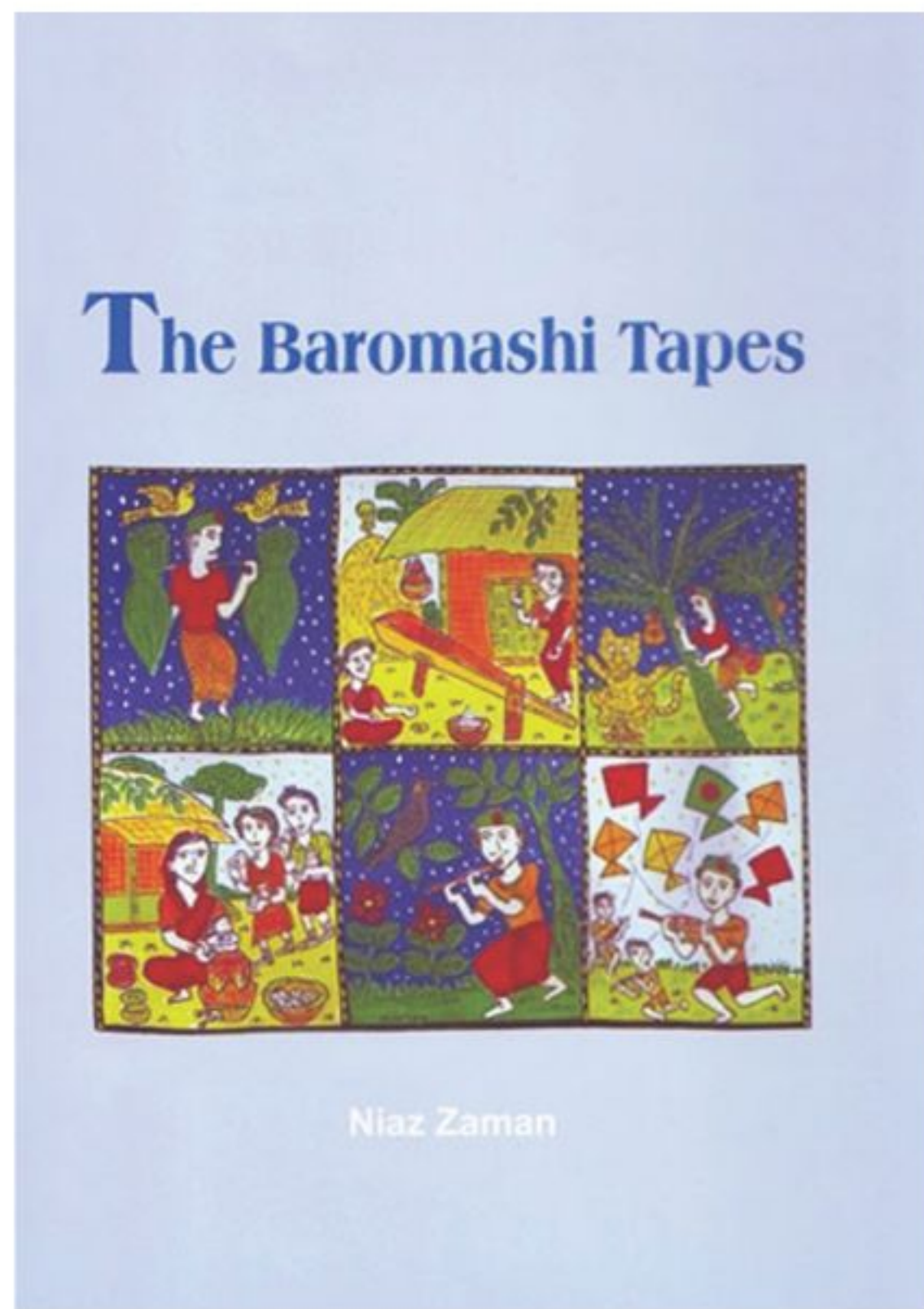
In the month of Bhadra. (abridged)

b. Agricultural *baromashi*: ancient Bengal was formed across many areas and most people living in Bengal were agriculture based. Rural people's lives were ruled by the land at that time. This kind of *baromashi* described how the farmers grew different crops at different times of the year.

c. Descriptive *baromashi*: Mainly stories were narrated in these kinds of *baromashi*. How the beloved missed his or her lover in each Bangla month is the main subject of this kind of *baromashi*.

d. Baromashi on the anguish of separation: This is the most common kind of *baromashi*. The anguish could be for the husband who lives in a foreign land or a girl's parents whom she has left behind. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were the time of composition of these *baromashi* which can be found in Alaol and Shah Muhammad Sagir. They were mostly *baromashi* by female composers.

e. Philosophical *Baromashi* or offerings: many *baromashi* were composed as offerings to the creator. f. *Baromashi* to test: These were descriptions of the husband's testing of his young bride by leaving her for years and then returning as someone else and offering his love. *Mymensingh Geetika* and some other *geetikas*



Baromashi Tapes
Niaz Zaman
Writers.ink

of the middle ages include this kind of *baromashi*. g. Personal *Baromashi* or health related *baromashi* are those that describe their personal feelings or the food habit of the Bengalis. They believed that different fruits or vegetables were the cure for many different diseases.

As a poet says:

Twelve fruits in twelve months.

In Chaitra, the bitter *Gima*.

In Baishakh *Nalita* fried in Ghee.

Puffed corn in Jaisthya

Curd in Ashar

Panta and *Ghol* in Shaown

Taler Pitha in Bhadra

Cucumber in Aswin

Arum vegetables in Kartick

Small fish curry in Agraphayan

Oil in Magh

Gur, ginger and wood apple in Falgun

Kazi Nazrul Islam mentions the pain a woman goes

through during the months of Baishakh and Jaisthya, the first two months of the Bangla calendar. In his novel *Badhon Hara*, Mahbuba writes to her friend Shahoshika:

"*Baishakh, Jaisthya* have come and gone and with it so many storms and cyclones have swept through my life! The downpour, however, has not ceased. Today is the first day of *Ashar*. Pray for me, Didi that this *Ashar* may never end."

With the advent of satellite culture, Bengalis appear to be forgetting their age old customs and rituals. Niaz Zaman's *Baromashi Tapes* tries to awaken the concept of *baromashi* among the younger generation. It is a modern *baromashi*, where a village woman whose husband has emigrated to a foreign land in order to support his family describes her anguish and records them. She sends the tapes to her beloved, who only manages to give her a brief reply. Prof Niaz Zaman acknowledges "The migrant worker, who suffers hard conditions, deprivation and loneliness to make a living for himself and his family --- and provides foreign exchange much needed in his country."

Sakina misses her husband Khokon, who has gone to Kuala Lumpur, and records all her feelings on tape which she sends to her husband every month of the year. What makes the book interesting is that there is a recipe of a meal or pitha on each of the tapes. The first tape is from Khokon, who describes his journey to Malaysia in terms of all the hurdles Bangladeshi immigrant workers face during their journey. The reader can see how the Bangladeshi workers who have never been on a plane see the airport and inside of a plane for the first time in their lives.

In Baishakh, Sakina expresses her anxiety at her husband's leaving home and reminisces on some incidents that take place at home. She talks about some workers who have gone abroad and who only come back once or twice in years. The environment of a steamy summer village with a *Kalbaishakhi Jhor* is also described in this tape.

The subsequent chapters are on the other eleven months and the rituals that village folks go through in these times. What is interesting about the book is that every month there is a recipe or food item found specifically for that month. For example, aam, dudh bhaat for Jaisthya, khichuri for Ashar, firni for Srabon, taler pitha for Bhadra, shada polao for Aswin, in the way the *baromashi* songs and poems mention them. Aswin is also the season of Durga Puja. Durga's visit to earth is compared to a village woman's visit to her parents' home. A village *jatra*, which is becoming a rarity these days, is also depicted through Sakina's eyes. In olden times female characters were played by males since women were not allowed to work on stage. That still is the case in the village *jatra*. The legend of Behula Lakhindhor is worthy of note. Female characters who are depicted are strong women who can be compared with rural women who work hard in the fields and at home and also take care of the family. They have resilience which can only be compared with that in the mythical Behula or Meena.

Komolar *Baromashi*, the famous *baromashi*, is cited in numerous chapters as part of the monthly tapes of Sakina. *Baromashi Tapes* can be treated as a record of the rituals of rural life in Bangladesh.

JACKIE KABIR WRITES FICTION, COMPOSES POETRY AND IS A LITERARY CRITIC.

Not a shallow book *Shusruto Rishik* goes for some leisurely reading

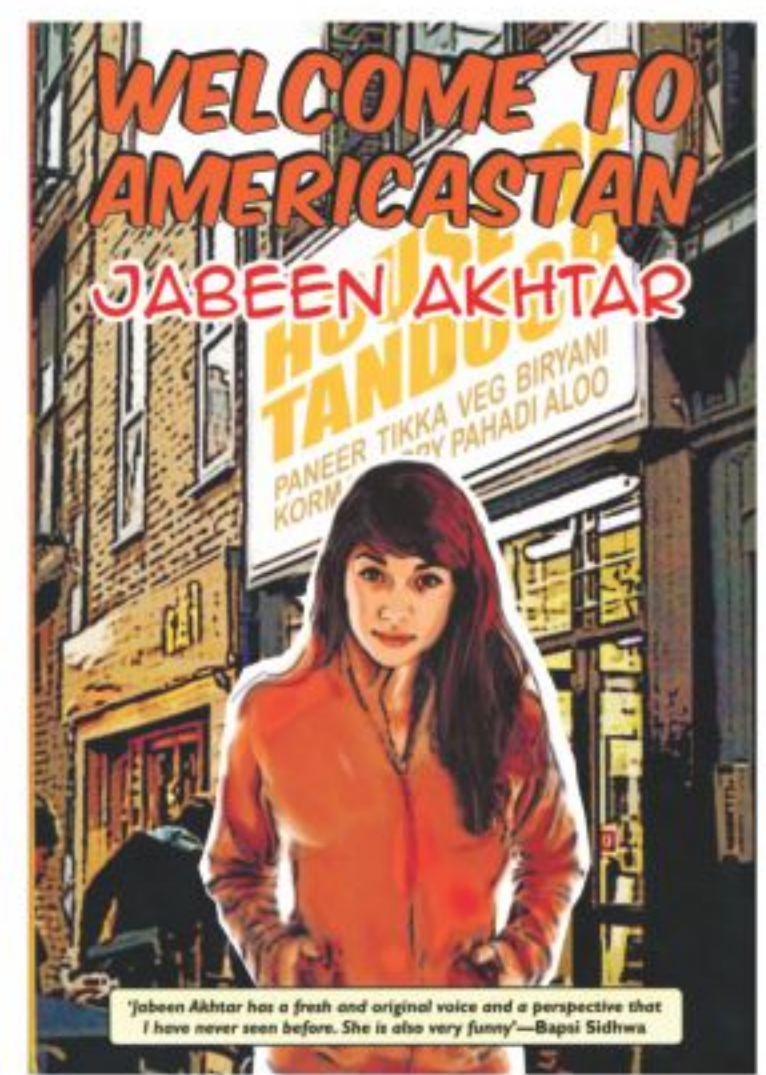
Suppose you had a nightmare where the police suspect that you are a terrorist (even though, in truth, you're as clean as a whistle). You're on the brink of going to jail. You had a bright future ahead that is reduced to dust. Your boyfriend/girlfriend cheated on you. You had a criminal record slapped on you which reduced your career prospects to window-cleaning and even that is a long-shot. But before things get 'too' bad, you can simply wake up. The protagonist, Samira, in Jabeen Akhtar's *Welcome to Americastan* has no such luck- all of the events, while seeming like a bad nightmare to her, is very, very real.

Welcome to Americastan is a very refreshing novel. The story follows Samira, a Pakistani-American through a very rough patch in her life. There are no extravagant elements in the story, no fist-clenching thriller moments and no elaborate plot that ends with a gut-wrenching twist. However these do not have to be, and in this case certainly aren't,

disadvantages. On the contrary, it really helps the reader relate to the events and characters in the story. The story is narrated in a very down-to-earth way. The words flow quite informally and there is a very definite and mischievous sense of humor. We basically see Samira come to terms with her situation and move on in life. Throughout all this self-reflection there are bound to be emotional situations and there are. However, the author makes sure they get topped with a twinge of humor which prevents it from getting too sappy.

The book provides excellent entertainment but it isn't shallow. The author does bring observations about real life into the book. However, they aren't elaborate descriptions of philosophy. They are more of a tiny push which starts one's mind thinking. There are too many of these little pushes in the book to really describe comprehensively and it is quite difficult to pick one or two out while leaving the rest. The writer manages to bring in a plethora of topics ranging from religion and regimes to sibling-family relations/ quarreling. All these topics are woven seamlessly into the story-events with a prod of humor giving credence to the notion that humor really is the last form of free speech left. There are so many topics and perspectives at work that it may be difficult to form a non-biased opinion on them. How the reader perceives some of the plot points may be dependent on how he/she processes the issues involved, some of which are a little touchy. What might seem 'right' from the protagonist's point of view might be unfair if looking through the eyes of another character. Yet from another perspective the whole situation might seem to be petty quarrel over unimportant issues and life would flow more smoothly if the characters compromised with each other.

Welcome to Americastan is leisurely read for the casual reader but it also holds messages between the lines for curious readers wishing to look a little closer.



Welcome to Americastan
Jabeen Akhtar
Penguin/Viking

SHUSRUTO RISHIK, A LITERATURE ENTHUSIAST, IS A KEEN REVIEWER OF BOOKS AS WELL.

What we need to remember

Probir Kumar Sarker reads of old treachery

The Pakistan army with the help of anti-liberation elements Razakars, Al-Badr, Al-Shams and Peace Committees killed over 7,000 people in Dhaka only in the twenty four hours beginning from the wee hours of March 25, 1971.

The severity of the butchery is exposed in a telegram sent to Washington by US Consul in Dhaka Archer K Blood on March 28. Under the title 'Selective Genocide', Blood wrote (translated from Bangla): "We are the silent and horrified witnesses of the reign of terrorism launched by the Pakistan Army. The martial law authorities have with them a list of Awami League supporters who are being picked up from their homes and shot dead... Other than the Awami league leaders, the list also comprises student leaders and university teachers. Instigated by the army, the non-Bangalees are launching attacks systematically on the houses of poor people and killing the Bangalees and Hindus."

The then public relations officer of the Pakistani army, Major Siddique Salik, (who later became a brigadier) in his book *Witness to Surrender* narrated the horrors of the night of the military crackdown: "...the prominent feature of this gory night was the flames shooting to the sky and at times, mournful clouds of smoke accompanied the blaze but soon they were overwhelmed by the flaming fire trying to look at the stars... The gates of hell had been cast open..."

In the next nine months, the Pakistan army turned the whole country into a sea of blood, when over three million people were killed, tens of thousands of women were raped and tortured brutally and thousands of homes were set on fire.

There have been many international and local news reports, letters, other documents and photographs put in the book *Ektattorer Ghatok O Dalalera* (Killers and Collaborators '71) by the writer, Azadur Rahman Chandan. A journalist by profession, he translated the English and Urdu matters into Bangla for the benefit of Bangladeshi readers who will certainly find the book a brief yet precious document on our War of Liberation.

Jatiya Sahitya Prakash has published

the book.

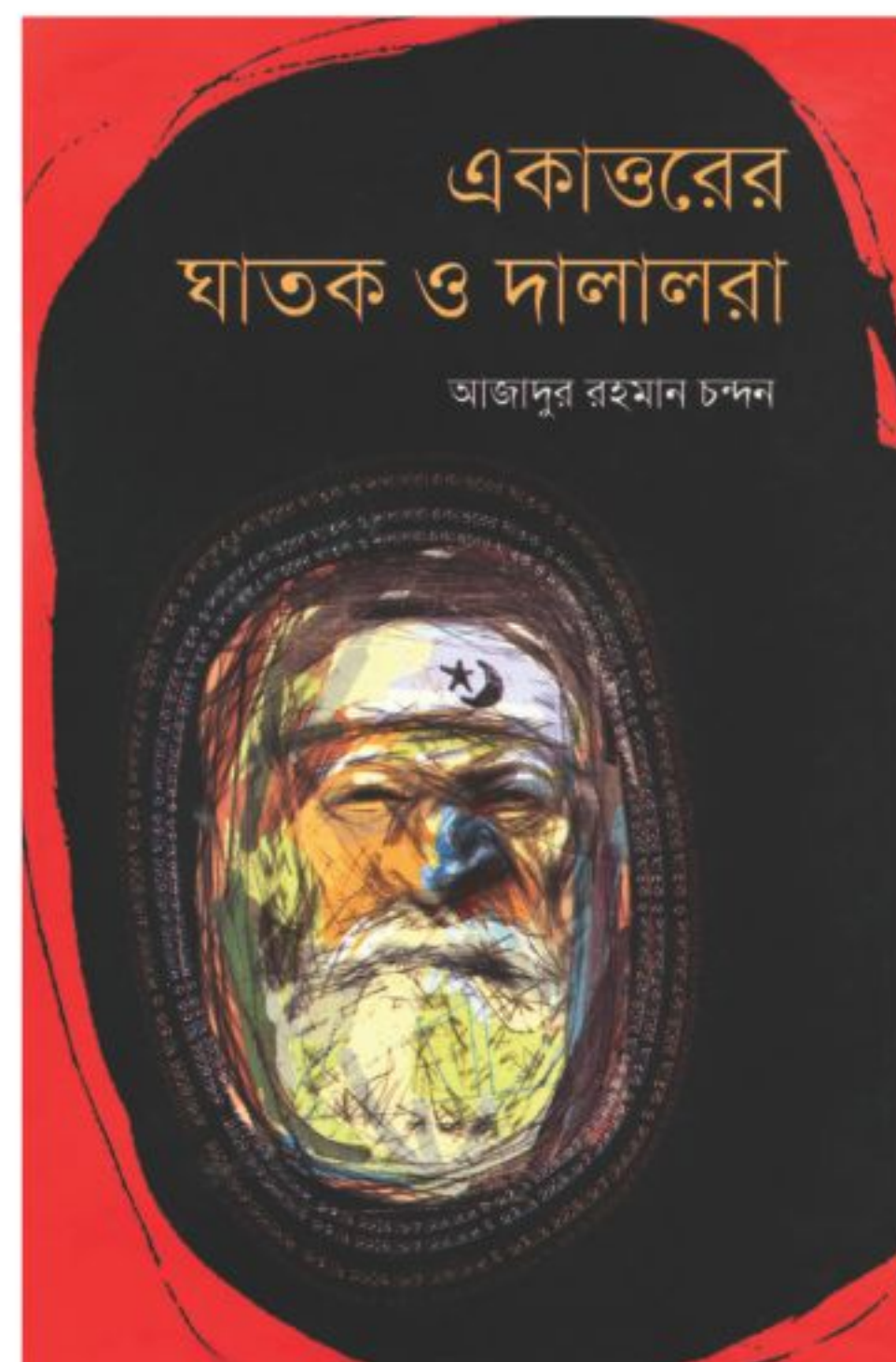
Just before the launch of the crackdown, the Pakistan army kept all the foreign journalists confined in Hotel Intercontinental (now Ruposhi Bangla) only to forcibly fly them out the next day. All but two had to accept the fate. The Telegraph reporter Simon Dring and photojournalist of Associated Press (AP) Michael Laurent went to the hotel's rooftop, using the passage of its air-conditioning system. The Bangalee staff helped them hide until March 27 when the curfew was lifted.

Having experienced the March 25 and 26 massacres on Dhaka streets surreptitiously, Simon Dring wrote his first report, which is also the first-ever international report on the atrocities as seen by a witness, and submitted it to his office in London. It was published on March 30 under the title "Tanks Crush Revolt in Pakistan: 7,000 Slaughtered, Homes Burned".

A part of the report is given in the book in Bangla (translated): "In the name of 'God and a united Pakistan', Dhaka is today a crushed and frightened city. After 24 hours of ruthless, cold-blooded shelling by the Pakistan Army, as many as 7,000 people are dead, large areas have been levelled and East Pakistan's fight for independence has been brutally put to an end.

"It is really tough to ascertain the number of innocent people who have died, but adding the number of deaths in Chittagong, Comilla, Jessore and Dhaka it may stand at 15,000. What is assessable is the ruthlessness of the military crackdown as students have been killed in their beds, butcher at their small shop, women and children burnt alive at homes; the Hindus have been killed after being tacked together, and houses, markets and shops set afire.

"...the first target as the tanks rolled into Dacca on the night of Thursday, March 25, seems to have been the students. An estimated three battalions of troops were used in the attack on Dacca --- one of armoured, one of artillery and one of infantry. They started leaving their barracks shortly before 10 p.m. By 11, firing had broken out and the people who had started to erect makeshift barricades --- overturned cars, three stumps, furniture,



Ektattorer Ghatok O Dalalera
Azadur Rahman Chandan
Jatiya Shahitya Prakash

and concrete piping --- became early casualties.

"As the university came under attack, other columns of troops moved in on the Rajarbagh headquarters of the East Pakistan police, on the other side of the city. Tanks opened fire first, witnesses said; then the troops moved in and levelled the men's sleeping quarters, firing incendiary rounds into the buildings. People living opposite did not know how many died there, but of the 1,100 police based there not many are believed to have escaped."

In the nineteen chapters accommodated in the book, the writer has also described chronologically the happenings of 1971 and the role of the perpetrators the Pakistan Army and their local collaborators. The names of the 195 Pakistan army officers who were branded

war criminals by the maiden Bangladesh government in 1972 have been posted here.

The later sections mainly describe the role of pro-Pakistan Bangladeshis, mainly politicians of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Council Muslim League, Convention Muslim League, Nezam-e-Islam and People's Democratic Party (PDP).

The names of provincial lawmakers of erstwhile East Pakistan, political representatives who sided with the West Pakistan government and those working abroad against the emergence of Bangladesh are also mentioned in the book.

The names of the masterminds of the collaborating forces --- Razakars, Peace Committee members, Al-Badr, Al-Shams of different areas of the country are to be found in the book along with evidence of newspaper reports relating to their involvement in genocide and other anti-Bangladesh activities.

The work notes that the brutality of the Jamaat and Razakars had reached such a level that the other local collaborators were disturbed by it. The PDP of Nurul Amin expressed its grievances about the gruesome killings, torture and looting, as a secret document of the East Pakistan home ministry sent to West Pakistan in early October shows.

The book precisely describes Ghulam Azam, the former Jamaat Ameer, as the mastermind of the local collaborators who, ten days into the bloody war along with Nurul Amin and Khwaja Khairuddin met the then governor of East Pakistan, General Tikka Khan, and extended his support to the Pakistan government. Two days later, he had an exclusive meeting with Tikka Khan.

The Peace Committee headed by Khairuddin was formed on April 7. Ghulam Azam was one of its prominent members. On April 15, it was renamed as the Central Peace Committee for East Pakistan. A 21-member committee was formed and its leaders again met Gen Tikka Khan on April 16.

On June 16, Ghulam Azam proposed to the then Pakistan president Yahya Khan the formation of the Razakar force and urged the government to provide arms to those supporting the unity of Pakistan.

The Al-Badr was experimentally launched in Mymensingh as a voluntary force with Islami Chhatra Sangha activists as its first recruits to wage war against the freedom fighters. They were enlisted and trained under the guidance of Mohammad Kamaruzzaman, the assistant secretary general of Jamaat and now a war crimes accused.

Senior Nayeb-e-Ameer Abul Kalam Mohammad Yusuf first formed the Razakar force in Khulna. He was also the convener of the Peace Committee in the district. Under his leadership, 96 Razakar members used to torment freedom fighters and pro-Liberation War people at nine torture cells in the town. They were later taken to four killing grounds and executed. A minister in the Dr Malek cabinet, AKM Yusuf also campaigned at home and abroad against the war.

This book is also rich in providing specific information on ABM Khaleque Majumder, an Al-Badr commander who was involved in the abduction and murder of intellectuals; Quader Mollah, better known as a "butcher" in Mirpur area; Delawar Hossain Sayedee, who with the help of Pirojpur Jamaat and Muslim league leaders, organised looting, arson and killing of many Hindus and after the war turned popular through his charismatic way of sermonising at religious functions; Mir Kashem Ali of Chittagong, an Al-Badr commander who through his anti-freedom fighter activities had been given the position of general secretary of East Pakistan Islami Chhatra Sangha; Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, son of Convention Muslim League chief Fazlul Quader Chowdhury of Rauzan, who exercised massive brutality against the Hindus of the area with the help of Pakistan soldiers; Maulana Abul Kalam Azad aka Bacchu Razakar, who had turned his home in Khardia village of Nagarkanda upazila into a mini-cantonment; and Maulana Abdus Sobhan, the then acting chief of Pabna Jamaat unit and vice-president of Peace Committee, who was also behind the formation of Razakars and Al-Badr committees in the district.

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