

Tale of two journeys, one sad history

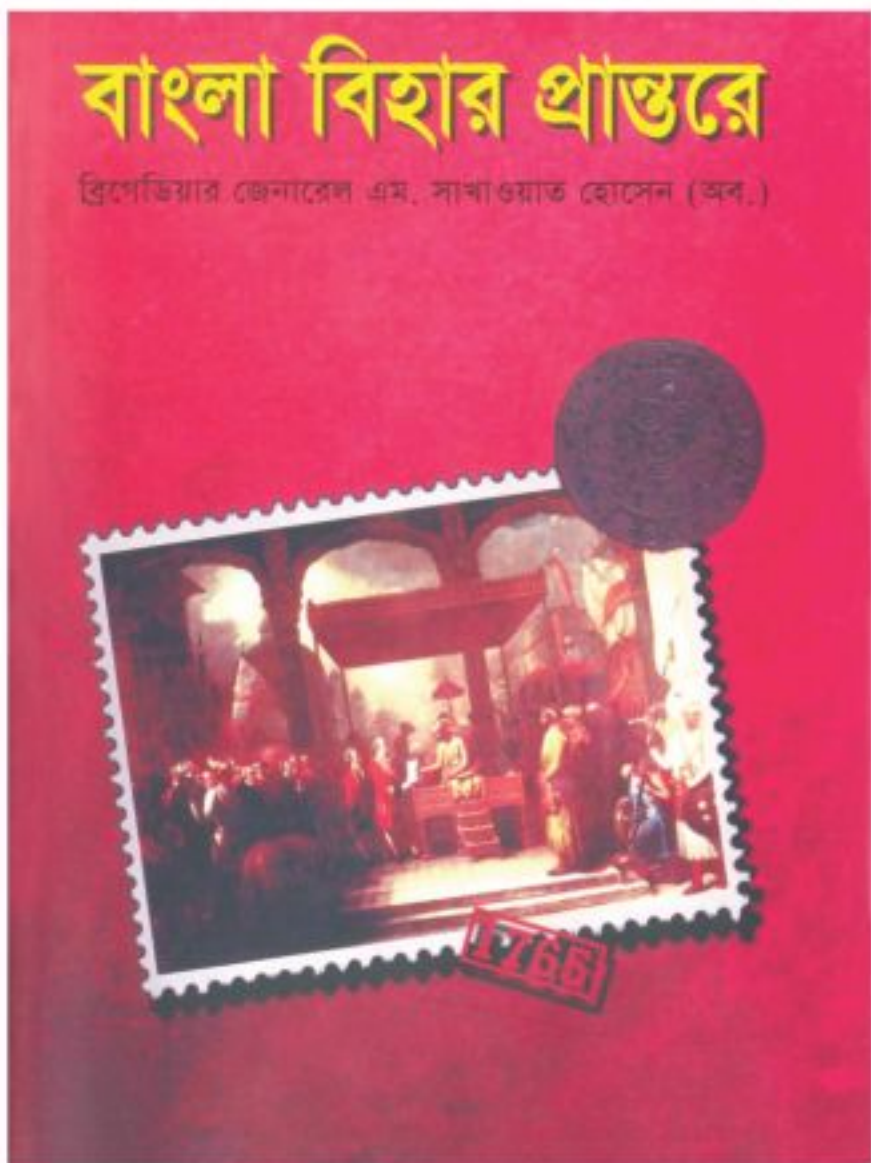
Shahid Alam has his wanderlust take over, again

I have always had wanderlust in my blood, the urge to just pack up and go, to any place that catches my fancy for whatever reason. My great satisfaction has been that I have been able to indulge that urge quite a bit. I am also a history buff. These days, for a variety of reasons, pointedly not including a diminished desire, I am unable to just get up and go, but I still delve into history at every opportunity that comes my way. I was recently presented a book that satiated both of my great interests, one vicariously, the other as supplementing what I already know. Sakhawat Hussain's *Bangla Bihar Prantore* is a pleasant travelogue heavily laced with historical anecdotes, interspersed with astute comments, and some imaginative reconstructions. Some myths and coincidental occurrences, which the author almost persuades the reader as having been real, causal, or consequential, spice up the narrative. The book recounts two journeys undertaken within a few months of each other by Hussain and friends to Poshchimbongo and Bihar in 2010 and 2011. The author's own proclivity for travel and history come through clearly in his writing, and, although he alludes to historical facts of ancient, medieval and modern India, he spends a substantial portion on the Battle of Plassey, its antecedents, and its enormous ramifications for the history of South Asia in general, Bengal and Bihar in particular.

In fact, Hussain dwells more on historical figures of the past, people who have changed the course of history, Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah, Robert Clive, Mir Jafar, Mir Madan, Mohan Lal, Admiral Charles Watson, Rai Durlabh, Ghaseti Begum, Yar Lutuf Khan, Jagat Seths, Job Charnock, Subhash Bose, and so many others who are more or less familiar with Bengalis in general. Particularly fascinating is his imaginative reconstruction of the Battle of Plassey. You can almost hear the soldiers charging each other in battle formations, the bark of the commanders, the shouts of the warriors, the neigh of horses, the trumpet of elephants, and the roar of cannons as the fate of an ancient land and its people was being decided. Having been an army officer himself, Hussain draws the picture from the standpoint of military history. That does not mean that he neglected living people he encountered during the two journeys. There are some memorable, some idiosyncratic, some conniving characters to grip the reader's attention. The proverbial Kolkata Bengali tightwad is portrayed tongue-in-cheek by real life characters he came across, as well as the noxious habit, not unfamiliar in Dhaka, of urinating in the early morning

hours along the streets, including well-known thoroughfares like Chowringee, by Kolkata residents. We also find oddballs, charlatans, Good Samaritans --- in short, the diverse composition of the human race.

However, Hussain's forte is history and historical figures. At the beginning of his book he ponders at some length on one of the truly heroic figures of Indian resistance to the British --- Tipu Sultan. Elsewhere he also mentions the name of the Duke of



Bangla Bihar Prantore
Brig. Gen. M. Sakhawat Hussain
Palok Publishers

Wellington. Wellington, of course, is recognized as one of the great captains in military history, but I cannot help recounting his involvement in Indian military campaigns. During the decisive Fourth Anglo-Mysore War of 1799, Lord Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, was a 30-year old Colonel and fought in the Battle of Seringapatam, where Tipu fell mortally wounded. Incidentally, Wellington confirmed his death by checking his pulse. Interestingly, his elder brother, Richard Wellesley, the Duke of Mornington, was then the Governor-General of India. Wellington was made the new Governor of Seringapatam and Mysore. Later, as a major-general, he won a decisive victory over the Maratha Confederacy in 1803 that effectively ended Maratha resistance against the British. He then grew tired of India, and in 1805, returned home. The rest, as they say, is history. Field Marshal Arthur Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington, after securing significant victories over the French, finally conclusively triumphed over them at Waterloo and ended the all-conquering

exploits of one of the military geniuses and astute administrators and reformers in world history, Napoleon Bonaparte.

Hussain, with a heavy heart, follows the fall and death of Siraj-ud-daulah through palace machinations, betrayal by his military commanders, close aides and relatives and, what the author has rather underplayed, his own weaknesses and incompetence. The author reflects on how, throughout the ages, people discard moral values in their quest for power. However, he might have given the French too altruistic a motive in coming to the aid of the Nawab. Great [and small] powers usually have in mind the gaining of the maximum advantage for their national interests in their relation to each other, during peace or war. In other words, realpolitik dictates the behaviour of nations. In the eighteenth century the British and the French were at loggerheads in trying to gain supremacy in different parts of the world, and either of the two countries would usually give tacit or active support to the other's adversaries. Much as American historians might contest this, my own feeling is that, had not the French decisively sided with the American revolutionaries against the British colonial power, the American revolution might well have faltered or even fizzled out. And the French decision had nothing to do with the revolutionaries being of French origin. In fact, almost the entire colonial population, barring the Native Americans and slaves, was of British, mostly English, extraction.

Hussain remarks on the modern-day Chief Ministership of Bihar, and marvels at how one person, with vision and dedication to public service, can make a huge difference to a state or country's fortunes. He finds how, under Lalu Prasad's stewardship, "goonda raj" prevailed in Bihar that turned it into a virtual failed state, while, with Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister, it has become more prosperous than Poshchimbongo, with [and there is a direct correlation with prosperity] its infamous reputation for lawlessness and corruption having been significantly arrested. The author has some shrewd observations and comments. He laments on how the Indians take great pains to preserve their heritage sites, while we in Bangladesh seem to do our best to obliterate them. His observation that probably no nation in the world is as litigious as the Bengalis [with attendant disastrous consequences for individuals, families, and occasionally, the nation] is not at all wide of the mark. He has noted how Bangladeshis contribute a substantial amount to the coffers of Indian businesspeople/shop owners come Eid

and other holiday occasions through their buying and spending sprees.

The Bangladesh Mission in Kolkata draws criticism from the author for its lackadaisical attitude. And one may wonder if he could solve the plight of the Kolkata-bound Bangladesh train employees who had apprised him of the matter. He laments the relentless degradation of the Buriganga River in Dhaka. And emphasizes on the relentless verdict of history, irrespective of how it is distorted at any given period of time. He could not have said it better or with greater veracity when he stated that appellation change does not change history; that exercise only distorts it. Historical research will inevitably bring out the truth. The author, from time to time, brings up the overlapping history of Bangladesh and Poshchimbongo. Among the several different instances he cites, the reader may be fascinated by reading how three young educated idealists-nationalists-revolutionaries, Binoy Basu, Badal Gupta, and Dinesh Gupta, sacrificed their tomorrows in the process of assassinating a British Inspector General of Prisons in Kolkata, and were from Munshiganj in Bangladesh. He also recounts the stirring rags-to-riches story of Jhelum-born Mohan Singh Oberoi, the founder of the famed Oberoi chain of hotels. It is a great story of Oberoi's hard work, honesty, enterprise, diligence and trustworthiness that brought him his deserving success. And, then, there is the magical story of the fascinating Frances Johnson, a social butterfly during the early days of the British raj in India.

Anomalies do creep into the narrative. Hussain mentions that Tipu Sultan was buried next to his FATHER Haider Ali. A couple of pages later he states that Shahzada Haider Ali was the son of one of Tipu Sultan's brothers. But then he comes up with the bewildering statement that Shahzada Haider Ali was Haider Ali's GRANDSON Tipu's brother Abdul Karim's son. Elsewhere Hussain says that Job Charnock first arrived in India in 1650-53[?] almost immediately after asserting that he first arrived in 1655-56. And, further, he states that Frances Johnson died on 3 February 1812 at the age of 83 just prior to writing that she was born in 1724 [which would have made her 88 when she passed away]. Notwithstanding these flaws, Sakhawat Hussain has presented an eminently readable travelogue in *Bangla Bihar Prantore*.

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RE-READING

Imagination put to the test

Tanveerul Haque happily goes back to an old work

The turn of the nineteenth century appears to have been a busy time for literary pursuits. On both sides of the Atlantic, in the English speaking world, authors like Henry James with *The Turn of the Screw*, Stephen Crane with *The Red Badge of Courage*, Thomas Hardy with *Jude the Obscure*, Rudyard Kipling with *The Second Jungle Book*, Leo Tolstoy with *Master and Man*, in science fiction Jules Verne with *Propeller Island*, in drama Oscar Wilde with *The Importance of Being Earnest* were gaining in popularity and critical acclaim for their work.

The *Time Machine* was published in 1895 the same year that the German socialist writer Friedrich Engels (b. 1920) and the French novelist and dramatist Alexandre Dumas (b.1824) died.

Herbert George "H.G." Wells was born in 1866 and died in August 1946.

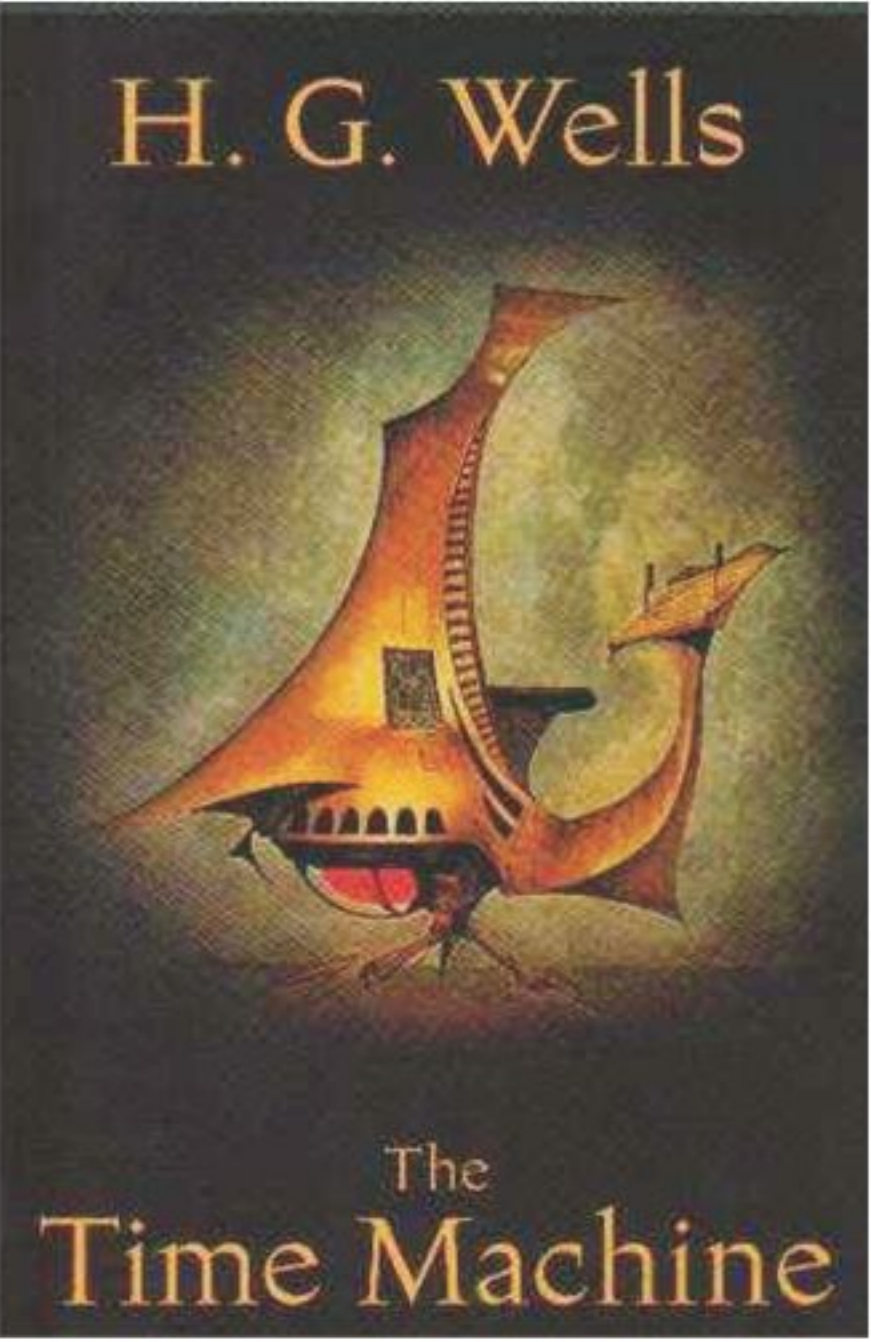
The *Time Machine* is a classic in science fiction under the sub-genre of "scientific romance". The term "time machine" was coined by Wells and is currently used universally to refer to a vehicle that allows its operator to travel through time purposefully and selectively both into the future and to the past.

The genre of Science Fiction was an unexplored and hitherto obscure field which between H.G. Wells and Jules Verne gained literary recognition.

The story opens with the narrator, the protagonist an English scientist and inventor, explaining to his weekly dinner guests that time is a fourth dimension to our three dimensional world. He exhibits a small scale version of his invention to his erudite friends who are knowledgeable and respected people in their own fields that magically disappears in front of everybody's eyes. The narrator then invites his friends to their scheduled meeting the following week.

And the following week the friends assemble but the narrator is nowhere in evidence. But then shortly he stumbles upon the audience and reveals that he had built a larger machine capable of carrying a person on which he had travelled to the future and back and then proceeds to relate his unbelievable tale as a time traveller.

Begging the assembly not to interrupt him till the end of his narrative, he relates how he travelled on his device to the year 802,701 A.D., where he comes upon a world populated by small framed, childlike, elegant, dim-witted humanoid creatures. They are known as the "Eloi" and they live in small communities inside cavernous, spacious futuristic buildings that are slowly deteriorating. The "Eloi" do not have to do any work, are indolent,



The Time Machine
H.G. Wells

partake of a frugivorous diet and lack any inquisitiveness or discipline. To the narrator they appear as a peaceful communist society having arrived thereat by conquering nature with technology. This has resulted in an environment in which physical prowess or superior intellect are no longer essential for survival. All domestic animals have gone into extinction.

From his adventures with the "Eloi" he returns to the spot where he landed, to find his time machine missing. He surmises that the contraption has been dragged and

hidden inside a Sphinx like structure which has heavy doors and is locked from the inside. He notices that the "Eloi" are unusually afraid of the dark and appear to be frightfully apprehensive of fearsome occurrences after nightfall.

The Time Traveller befriends an "Eloi" named Weena after he saves her from drowning. None of the other "Eloi" appear to take any interest in rescuing Weena nor do they take any notice of her. He develops an innocently affectionate relationship with Weena and they have many adventures together.

He soon discovers another "race" of ape-like creatures, the "Morlocks", who live in darkness, stay underground and come out only at night through deep holes in the ground that at first appearance look like wells. He now surmises that the human race has evolved into two distinct species. Those living in the upper world being the leisure loving, ineffectual "Eloi" and the subterranean under world dwelling "Morlocks" who are the working class, brutish and are afraid of light. The Time Traveller concludes that the two species have an adversarial relationship and have both lost intelligence and character which is the essential feature of humanity as we know it.

He is now convinced that the "Morlocks" have hijacked his time machine and he goes in search of it. With Weena trying to prevent him from going into the wells, he climbs deep down into one of those and finds heavy machinery humming to drive down air into the habitat of the "Morlocks". He also discovers to his horror that the "Morlocks" feed on the "Eloi". He is almost apprehended by the "Morlocks" and only saves himself by striking up the matches that he still has with him. Escaping from the underworld he takes Weena with him to explore a structure across a wooded area which turns out to be the ruins of what once must have been a museum the Palace of Green Porcelain. Here he finds an additional supply of matches and camphor, a flammable substance with which he fashions a crude incendiary weapon to use against the "Morlocks" whom he must fight to access his Time

Machine to return home. He plans to take Weena back with him. The long journey back to Weena's home is tiring and as darkness falls they are stuck in the middle of the dark forest where they are attacked by the "Morlocks". The Time Traveller barely manages to escape by lighting the matches and building a small fire that rages into a full-fledged forest fire engulfing the "Morlocks" and consuming Weena.

Getting back to the Sphinx like structure the Time Traveller forces his way in and, fighting off the "Morlocks", makes good his escape to a time thirty million years ahead of his own time. Here he sees strange menacing crab-like crustaceans in pursuit of giant butterflies on a sea beach where the water is blood red. A bloated red sun sits motionless in the sky. He envisions that the earth is dying and going through the last stages of its existence. He then reverses his journey on the Time Machine and travels through extraordinary visages where the earth appears to pass through an Ice Age with the sun growing dim, the world falling silent and living species going extinct.

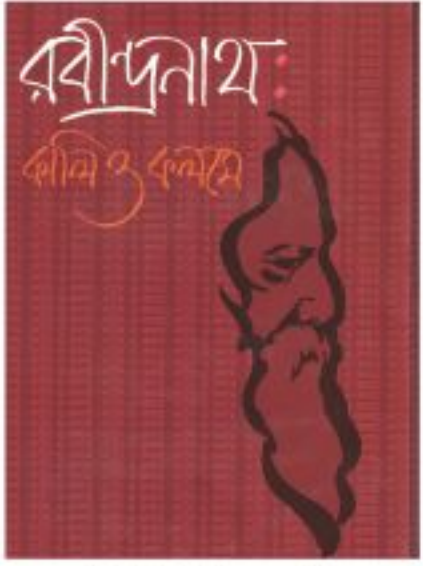




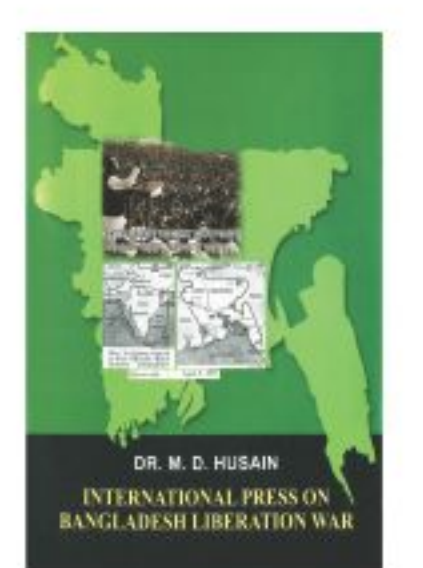
Miraculously, he returns to his laboratory and in a dishevelled state relates his adventures to his awestruck friends. The only evidence of his sojourn that he has with him are two strange flowers that Weena had put in his pocket.

The following day one of the friends visits the Time Traveller's residence to see him in readiness for another journey. The Time Traveller promises to be back in half an hour. But it is now already three years that he has been gone and there is no trace of him.

The *Time Machine* is a quick and provocative read, crisp and fascinating. It's a novella, only 32,000 words that popularized the concept of time travel. It has a very different story that makes logical sense, with vivid sensory depictions. It has an open ending without a clear resolution. A thoroughly enjoyable read.

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BOOK choice

 <p>Rabindranath Kali O Kolom-e Ed Abul Hasnat Bengal Publications Limited</p>	 <p>Ranabi'r Bishwa Darshan O Romyo Kothon Rafiqun Nabi Bengal Publications Limited</p>
 <p>Khelaghor Al-Haj Mohammad Jamshed Ali Botomul</p>	 <p>Rabindranath Dhormo Bhabna Kajal Banerjee Murdhonyo</p>
 <p>Rohoshyopur Kishore Thriller Shahadat Shohag Shikha Prokashoni</p>	 <p>International Press on Bangladesh Liberation War Dr. M.D. Husain Professor Publications</p>

Young people in melancholia

Abdur Rahman speaks of love's beauty

Junaidul Haque mainly writes short stories and essays on literature and culture. But he is up to the mark as a novelist too. His Bishader Tarunya is quite good as a first novel. He is a natural writer. He has trained himself well too. The novel is short but of a high quality.

Bishader Tarunya begins seemingly abruptly. It seems that we are in the middle of the story. Then the writer slowly but surely unfolds everything. The characterization is simple but attractive and exposes various social eccentricities, tricks and the many faces of man-woman relationship. Even the thought of feminism is there.

The male protagonist is Khairul, who is well-educated and thoughtful. Various incidents of his life unfold with the passage of time. He works in an international NGO but he is capable of working in better places. He is an idealist and is not ambitious. But this creates problems for him. He cannot marry the girl he loves.

Love comes inevitably in life. But Khairul is facing a crisis. Shamima's mother would prefer a more established son-in-law. Shamima herself is unhappy at his inability to get a respectable job. In our society this crisis is well-known. But Sonia, the beautiful, intelligent and inspiring friend of Khairul, encourages him to face his problem courageously. She wants them to marry soon. Sonia showers a lot of affection on lonely Khairul on his birthday. She likes him a lot. He is very fond of her too. Both of them like to read a lot and write. Sonia even paints.

Shamima's hesitation is very realistic. A middle class girl seeks security and respect. Frustration meanwhile forces Khairul to almost fall in love with Sonia. But the latter's firmness saves all of them from a deeper crisis. She sends Khairul to meet Shamima and patch up. He tries his best to convince her to marry.

Sonia and Khairul talk merrily and delightfully in the office. They are very witty. Sonia playfully tells Khairul that if Muslim males can marry four times, why can't girls do the same? They need a 'husband' to clean the house, one for shopping, one for cooking and one as the real husband. The writer shows feminist sympathy and sides with millions of women who work hard both at home and in the office. He does it artistically.

The novel ends in an interesting manner. Khairul returns home at night. It is a journey from war to peace, from insecurity to security, from melancholy to optimism. Love of his mother and his siblings soothe Khairul's weary soul.

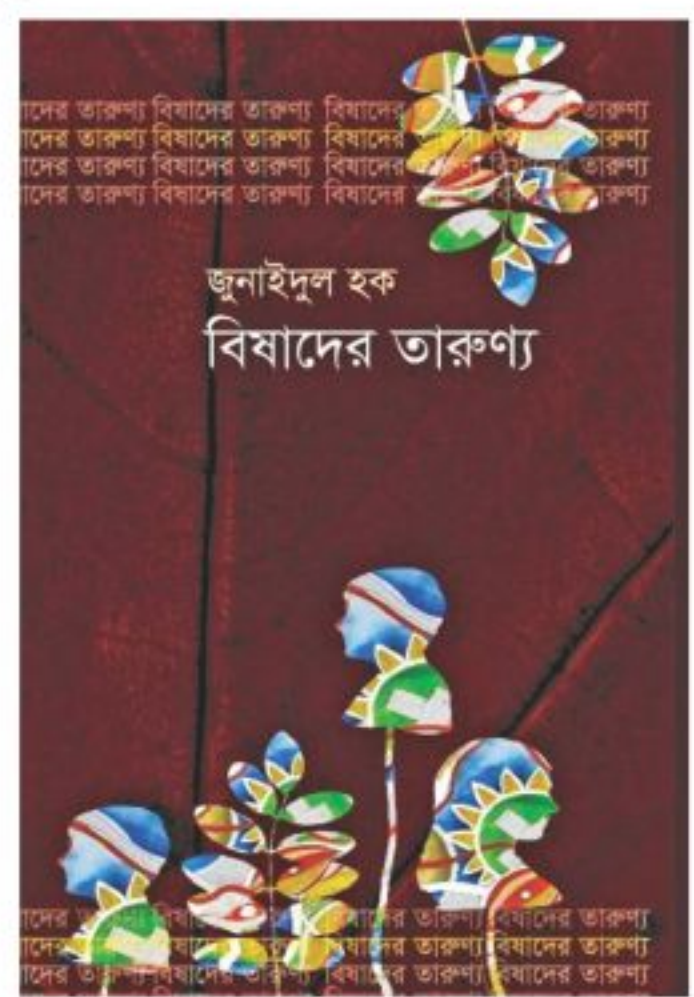
The writer asks a question at the end: Are twentieth century people born to suffer only?

Khairul is dreaming of a happy spring after a sad winter for Shamima and himself. Sonia emerges as a great friend, intelligent and considerate, idealistic and utterly likeable.

Junaidul Haque has a lucid prose. The reader thoroughly enjoys reading the interesting novel. Here is serious fiction which is very readable at the same time. Sanjay De Ripon has drawn an excellent cover.

We expect a bigger novel from the writer soon.

ABDUR RAHMAN IS A TEACHER AND WRITER



Bishader Tarunya
A Novella
Prakriti