

In a state of denial

Syed Badrul Ahsan condemns historical falsehood

Revisionist history is what Sarmila Bose gives us. In *Dead Reckoning: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War*, she begins her search for the truth on a false premise: that Bengalis seceded from Pakistan in 1971 and that what happened in that year was a clear case of civil war between the two parts of Pakistan. In 1861, states in the south of the United States decided to secede even as Abraham Lincoln prepared to take over the presidency. And what followed was four years of civil war as both Union troops and Confederate soldiers struggled for supremacy. The struggle ended with Robert E. Lee's surrender to the Union army in April 1865. In 1967, Odumegwu Ojukwu's Biafra seceded from Nigeria, to spend the next three years waging war against the Nigerian army in defence of its land. Biafra collapsed in 1970.

In 1971, the province of East Pakistan did not secede from Pakistan. It was not until the Pakistan army launched Operation Searchlight that Bangladesh's independence was formally proclaimed. And once that was done, it was a state of war between two nations. There was no civil war, for a civil war pits the people of one part of a country against people from another. In 1971, people in West Pakistan stayed well clear of the conflict zone. It was their army that went into committing genocide against people who had been their compatriots till the last minute of 25 March. Sarmila Bose's research thus runs into roadblocks right at the beginning. And it stumbles all along. She makes, and repeats, the preposterous notion that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman remained involved in negotiations till the end because his goal was to take over as prime minister of Pakistan. His call for freedom on 7 March and yet his careful staying away from an outright declaration of independence are for Bose a 'double game of public incitement and private negotiations'.

This is poor historical research. Sarmila Bose is blissfully unaware of the bigger realities leading to the collapse of the March talks. She thinks the Yahya Khan regime and the Awami League remained engaged in negotiations till 25 March. That is another place where she slips. After the talks on the morning of 24 March, the Awami League leadership waited for a response to its proposals on a projected confederal arrangement from the regime. No response came. On the evening of 25 March, Yahya Khan surreptitiously flew out of Dhaka, leaving Tikka Khan to let the soldiers loose on the restive province. Bose loses the argument by her reliance on comments and documents patently biased toward Pakistan. She notes

Raja Tridiv Roy's reference to the 'violence and threat of violence by (Mujib's) armed Awami League cadres' in the course of the non-cooperation movement stretching from 1 to 25 March. That is poor analysis, given that Tridiv Roy, having found refuge in Pakistan, cheerfully served as minister and then as ambassador for his adopted country after the war. Bose frequently refers to the 'White Paper' published by the regime in 1971 as a way of pointing to the 'crimes' that Bengalis themselves committed against non-Bengalis prior to the military crackdown. That further mars the quality of her work.

Bose speaks to a number of Pakistani

were abducted and murdered. Bose does not know that Husain was one of the pro-Pakistan Bengalis to claim abroad in 1971 that no intellectuals had been killed by the army in Bangladesh. She notes Zahir Raihan's disappearance on 30 January 1972 and quite rightly supposes that the disappearance could not be linked to the Pakistanis, by then POWs in India, or the al-Badr death squads. And yet the fact escapes her that the Biharis of Mirpur (and Raihan was their kill) put up concerted resistance to Bangladesh's forces till the end of January. Raihan was not recovered, but Mirpur stood freed on the last day of January 1972.

A trivialising of Bangladesh's history is what runs through *Dead Reckoning*. Sarmila Bose notes the Pakistani soldiers' poor argument that it was the resistance of students at Jagannath Hall that prompted action by the army. Again, could it not be that the Bangladesh authorities made no move to exhume the dead from the Jagannath hall mass grave because among the bodies would be those of non-students who might have been around on the night of 25 March? Bose is perturbed that Amartya Sen neglects to mention in his work *Identity and Violence* the killing of non-Bengalis by Bengali nationalists. Her defence of non-Bengalis, of Biharis, of pro-Pakistan Bengalis runs its full course through her work. Evidence to back up her arguments is paltry. She notes the rebellion by 2 East Bengal Regiment in Joydevpur on 29 March and the killing of West Pakistani officers by mutinous Bengali soldiers. Is Bose surprised? After what the Pakistanis did in Dhaka on 25-26 March, did she, did anyone, expect Bengali soldiers of the Pakistan army to go docile? The rules of war, sir, the rules of war!

Sarmila Bose's work carefully avoids any mention of the Mujibnagar government and its operations, its proclamation of independence. To her, the only invading force in 1971 was the Indian army. She quibbles over numbers. Only 26,000 Bengalis were killed by the Pakistan army (read the Hamoodur Rehman Commission report); and (she quotes General Niazi) it was not 93,000 Pakistanis taken prisoner but only 34,000 soldiers and 11,000 civilian police and other armed personnel, a total of 45,000 men'.

Men like David Irving once denied the Holocaust. Now Sarmila Bose denies the genocide in 1971. Her book does not change anything. It is wobbly scholarship, a disturbing misreading of history. You lose nothing by not reading it.

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officers who served in Bangladesh in 1971. Predictably these men deny the charges of murder against them. Many profess to be surprised at Bengali attitudes toward them. Bose gives you the impression that these are honourable men, in contrast to the Bengalis whose sense of 'victimhood' gets in the way of a true presentation of history. Reading her account of the exploits of Jahanara Imam's son Rumi, you would think the young man made no particular contribution to Bangladesh's freedom, save what his mother remembered of him. She sympathises with Syed Sajjad Husain in his post-16 December plight, but mentions nowhere that it was on his watch that teachers of Dhaka University

RE-READINGS

A thread of sadness runs through

Razia Sultana Khan walks through a valley of stories

"The gods created man," said Srikantha Satpathy, "but here we are so blessed that we - simple men as we are - help to create the gods." This is how one of the stories in William Dalrymple's book, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, begins. This seeming contradiction plays through most of the nine stories in the book: a nun who sweeps the steps before her with a peacock fan when she walks so as not to inadvertently step on any living creature, ritually starves herself to death; a dalit

untouchable not allowed to use the water of the very well he helps to dig, is revered as a god for three months of the year and illiterate villagers who are still the guardians of an entire oral culture, able to recite a 4,000 line epic by heart. In the introduction to *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India*, William Dalrymple explores these contradictions by introducing Ajay Kumar Jha, a naked sadhu who was once a sales manager with Kelvinator with an MBA from Patna University. William Dalrymple asks the question, "How is each specific religious path surviving the changes India is currently undergoing?" And also, "Does India still offer any sort of real spiritual alternative to materialism, or is it now just another fast developing satrap of the wider capitalist world?"

Also in the introduction, the writer describes the pilgrims he meets on his way to the temple of Kedarnath: "Every social class from every corner of the country was there. There were groups of farmers, illiterate labourers and urban sophisticates from north and south all rubbing shoulders like something out of a modern Indian Canterbury Tale." And the titles of his nine stories are reminiscent of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: "The Nun's Tale", "The Monk's Tale", and "The Singer of Epics."

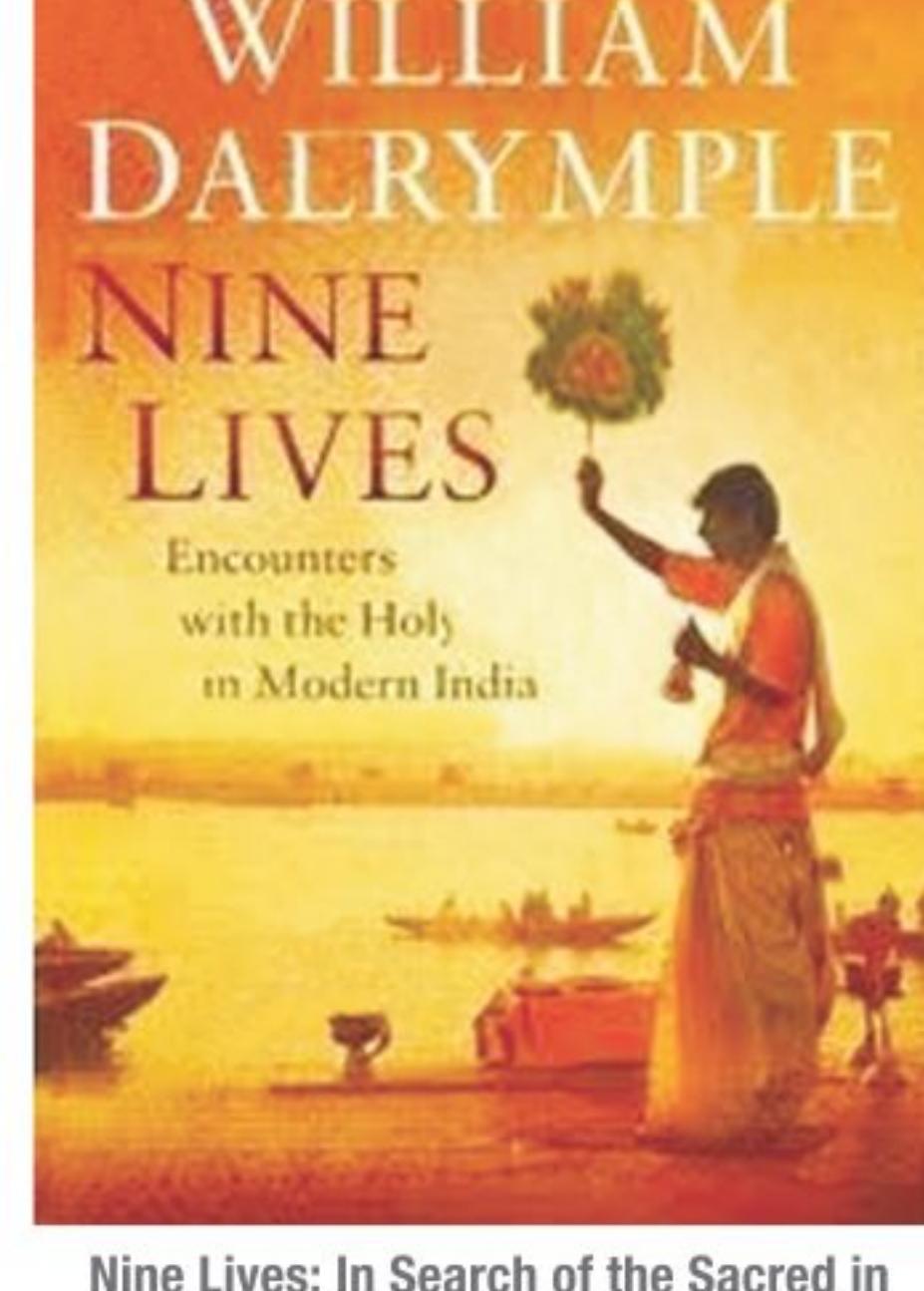
Each story is a personal vignette, a combination of the sacred and the mundane, the ancient and the modern, the world we see and the otherworldly. Each tale highlights a different religious path while it reflects the changes taking place around it. *Nine Lives* is a book of travels, not just the physical journey of the writer but the spiritual journey each character takes.

The characters William Dalrymple brings together are strange bedfellows. He conjures them up as if from a brass lamp. They stray from the beaten track of society, separate individuals who have one thing in common: all of them are on a spiritual quest.

The book begins with the life of a Jain nun. For many of us the word 'nun' projects an image

of a Christian missionary in her long white gown. The setting too is often academic. But the nuns in Dalrymple's book evoke different images: a ritual of plucking hair and hour long meals where each morsel is scrutinized for the presence of a living creature.

In the story that follows, "The Dancer of Kannur," we see a dalit laborer who, for nine months of the year, builds wells during the week and is a jail warden during the weekend. Over



Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India
William Dalrymple
Bloomsbury

the three months of winter, however, he answers a greater, more glamorous calling. He becomes a vehicle through which people find God. As Hari Das the theyyam artist says, "Though we are all Dalits even the most bigoted and casteist Maboodi Brahmins worship us, and queue up to touch our feet."

And so it continues, each one more astonishing than the last.

One very dark story is entitled "The Daughters of Yellamma." It is the story of a

Devadasi, a temple dancer or one who is dedicated to the gods at infancy. Though parents themselves dedicate their infant child to become a Devadasi, sometimes even against the wishes of the girl, she is little more than a prostitute, servicing the men of her village from the house of her parents. It is a vicious cycle where the Devadasi then herself dedicates her own daughters to the temple. And when she gets sick, she is literally thrown out or allowed to starve by the very people she had been taking care of.

A thread of sadness prevails in all the stories: the threat to the completeness of a spiritual life, and the threat for old artisans of losing their children to technology.

It is not just the accounts of the nine lives which hold us spellbound, the magic of the language weaves a spell around us:

She climbed quickly, with a pot of water made from a coconut shell in one hand, and a peacock fan in the other. As she climbed, she gently wiped each step with the fan in order to make sure she didn't stand on, hurt or kill a single living creature on her ascent of the hill, one of the set rules of pilgrimage for a Jain muni or ascetic."

---Page2: *Nine Lives*

The book is replete with sensory details that chisel out images for us. Such strong details give one a sound grounding of the setting which makes the stories more credible and paradoxically more fantastic.

The encyclopedic information that William Dalrymple notes almost as an aside for the reader is also noteworthy, though this at times did break the focus of the story.

The tone of the writer throughout is nonjudgmental. Even when some behaviour sounds bizarre, it is the reader who judges, not the writer. Dalrymple's style is different from the traditional travelogue style where the narrator is the center of the telling. Here his characters have the space to speak. It is their story.

The word Orientalism comes to mind with Edward Said's definition of it as one looks at these characters through William Dalrymple's eyes. It is to the writer's credit that the mystical world still appears mystical despite our familiarity. Perhaps it was a peripheral world we had taken for granted within which we now find ourselves.

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Stepping on to different shores

Ghazi Shahadat Hossain reads of Bengali travelers to Albion

After conducting my regular classes, I go to the chairman's room to say hello or to discuss some important matters concerning classes, examinations or the upcoming seminars. One day while waiting for my chairman and other colleagues to come for a formal meeting, a book having a light blue color, which is my favorite color, drew my attention. The book, titled *Kalapanir Hatchhanni: Bilete Bangalir Itihas*, seemed a very interesting one from the very opening paragraph and after I had read several pages, I felt it would make such compelling reading that I could not put it down until I had finished it, although I was very busy with conducting examinations, checking scripts and preparing results.

Ghulam Murshid's *Kalapanir Hatchhanni: Bilete Bangalir Itihas* contains interesting details of how Bengalis from different parts of undivided Bengal journeyed to London and different parts of England defying social barriers, the reasons behind such migration, the way they settled there and the forces that compelled them to assimilate in London and other parts of England, their attitude toward English people and society and vice versa, how these people contributed to British society and to their own country from the colonial periods to the present time.

The book shows that despite social and religious restrictions, the people of undivided Bengal started going to England from the early seventeenth century. Some of them migrated to England as servants to look after the sons and daughters of their white masters, some of them as wives or concubines, some as teachers and translators of Arabic and Persian and Bangla, some of them just to see the pomp and pleasure of British civilization and many of them as sailors for a better living.

It is interesting to note that the people who crossed the seas to go to England fall into two categories. Many of them were illiterate sailors or servants. However, some aristocratic and highly educated people like Itesham Uddin, Sheikh Din Mohammad, Mirza Abu Taleb, Ghonosham Das, Raja Rammohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore went there as teachers or tourists. Unlike the educated people mentioned here, the uneducated ones had to suffer a lot. It was especially after the death of their white masters that they became very helpless. The writer mentions some books where the plight of the poverty stricken Indians has been described. They were seen begging on the streets and sweeping the streets and sometimes they experienced torture at the hands of their masters. Incidents like killing at the hands of their white masters also happened. Being entirely helpless, some of them got married with locals after being converted to Christianity. Some others took to prostitution as their profession. Reasonably enough, the native people had a very poor impression about Bengal, its people and greater India.

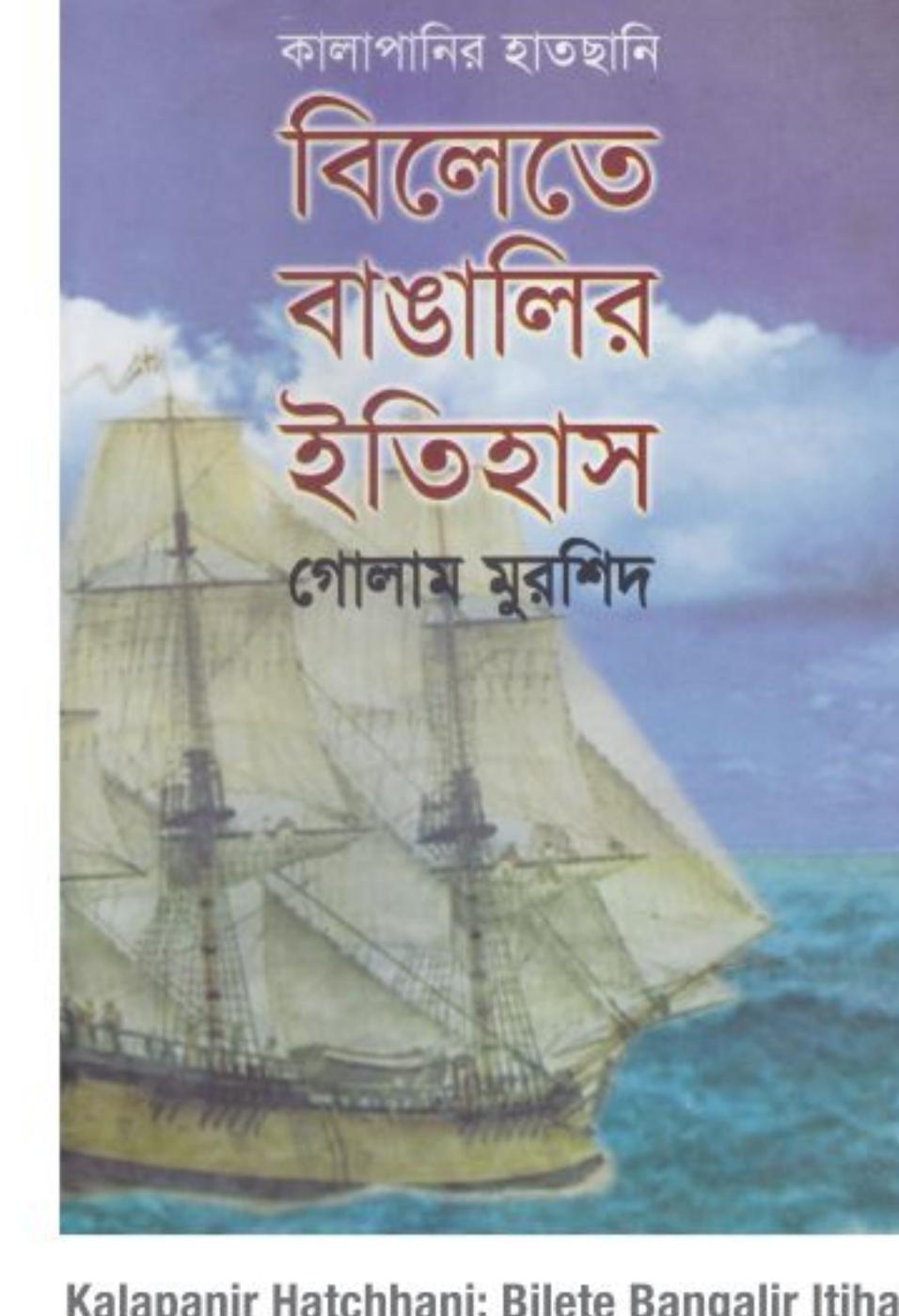
On the other hand, some educated people started going to England from the second half of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier, these people went there as language teachers or translators. Some went as tourists. For example, Mohammad Ismail and Mohammad Hossain went to England in 1773 and 1776 as teachers of Arabic and Persian, and Golam Haider, Moulavi Mir Abdul Ali, Mirza Khalil and Mir Hasan Ali moved to England at the beginning of the nineteenth century for the same purpose. These people's visits to England were very significant in the sense that they were able to repair and change the poor impression set by their predecessors since they were enlightened, educated and were born and brought up in socially high families of India. They had interaction with the higher classes of people in England, among whom were royalty, officials, intellectuals, writers, et cetera. For instance, Dwarkanath Tagore met Queen Victoria four times and was invited to dinner four times and a complimentary comment from the queen was, 'The Brahmin speaks very good English and he is very intelligent and interesting as well.'

It is interesting to notice that while early uneducated Bengalis migrated to London and other parts of Great Britain for reasons of economics and educated Bengalis to witness the progress of science and western civilization and to relish English social life, many of their successors in the nineteenth century went there to study medicine, law, physics, chemistry, literature, agriculture and also to appear at the Indian Civil Service (ICS) examinations. As most of these students were very talented, their performance impressed not only their English teachers at different British universities; they also changed the image of the subcontinent in England. Another important aspect is that many of these brilliant students like Dhakanth Bashu, Soojo Coomar Goovede Chuckerbutty, Promoth Chowdhury, Jodogish Chandra Basu and Profulla Chandro Roy went to England for

studies but came back to their country after successfully completing their studies and made valuable contributions in their distinctive fields, and thereby served their beloved country.

The book also exposes another fascinating fact --- that many Bengali women showed enormous eagerness and enthusiasm about western life style, education, politics and culture. The first woman going to England was Komol Moni, wife of Gyanendro Mohan Tagore in 1859 and then many others, like Khetro Mohini, Toru Dutt, Rajkomari Bondya Paddai, Gayannandini Devi, Shuniti Devi and Sarojini Naidu went to England with their husbands, brothers or other relatives at different times and for diverse purposes. These included studies, educating their children, observing social and political conditions and the state of women in England, acquiring knowledge about science, technology and literature.

In his book, Murshid shows how Bengali culture has been influenced by interaction between the Bengalis and the English. He shows how Ehtesham Uddin and Abu Talib were enamored of English people and their lifestyles and their followers like Ram Mohan Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore and Annada Mohan Basu were more enlightened than their predecessors. They became familiar with the Renaissance, humanism, rationalism, liberalism and individualism thoroughly while staying in England and tried to change the fabric of their own society back in Bengal and greater India and shape it on the basis of these philosophies. In addition to the political and intellectual impact, there has been a considerable influence on lifestyle, dress, and food habits, the position of women in society and even on husband-wife relations. On the other hand, the Bengal diaspora began taking shape in England hundreds of years ago and since then thousands of Bengalis have settled there and the number is on the rise. This big number of people and their culture have left an indelible impression on British culture.



Kalapanir Hatchhanni: Bilete Bangalir Itihas
Ghulam Murshid
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The influence could be traced to areas like food, cooking, dress, music and politics.

The author also gives detailed descriptions of the political and social position of present-day Bengalis in England, their education, profession, the gaps between different Bengali generations and communities, the state and nature of interaction among different groups of Bengalis and between the Bengalis and the English. We come to know that there are more than three hundred thousand Bengalis in Great Britain, divided into three groups. The largest group, which is eighty percent to be specific, consists of people from Sylhet, and the second group comprises people known as 'Dhakaia' The third group is comprised of people from Calcutta.

Written in very plain and lucid Bangla, the writer takes readers from one chapter to another in a very captivating manner and smoothly, and much unlike a typical history book, it is free from just a recording of facts. The writer states the facts, supported by a lot of reference books, which makes the book very scholarly and what is interesting is the observations made by the writer. He describes the events, the causes behind it and also the impacts of it on other happenings. In addition to these, the pictures of different places and people, the interviews, the statistics of the number of people who migrated to England at different times make it enjoyable, interesting and a useful one.

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