

# Revisiting a dark period in history

**Shahid Alam goes back to the age of coups and counter-coups**

Just how sensitive, fragile, and plainly dysfunctional Bangladesh's political culture has become down the years can be read into what the book under review has to say, and, probably more importantly, is unable, or unwilling, to say. Obviously, with it running into its fifth edition (reprint would probably be the right word) from the time it was first published in 1997, *Bangladesh: Raktakto Audhaya 1975-81* has been a popular read, at least in the number of copies sold. However, whether it has been universally popular among the readers, given the deeply fractious nature of political opinion existing in the country, is open to question. On very politically sensitive issues writers and conference speakers prefer to steer a safe course, gingerly skirting around subject matters, for fear of offending one or the other major political party/inclination. Political intolerance of opposing views is, and has been, a reality in Bangladesh for some time now. At times such intolerance flares up into physical violence. Such is the sad state of pluralist democracy in this country.

Sakhat Hossain is also careful that he does not ruffle too many, if any, political feathers in *Bangladesh: Raktakto Audhaya 1975-81*, and lays down a fairly straightforward account of a slew of political assassinations that took place in the country between 1975 and 1981, beginning with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and ending with Ziaur Rahman and the sequel to his killing. In fact, the author categorically blames political failures for the spate of murders carried out by military personnel. And makes this observation: that the armed forces are supposed to be under the control and direction of the country's political authority, and, whenever this situation fails to materialize, dictatorship is a likely outcome. One can hardly dispute either of the two remarks, if one believes in, and adheres to, the norms of liberal pluralist democracy. Hossain, however, to underscore the point that he chooses to play it safe with sensitive political issues, only goes so far as to state that he hopes his book will inspire future generations of writers to delve deeper and wider into the tragic events of those years to come up with their own analyses.

Hossain, a former senior army officer, not surprisingly, dwells at length on the military officers, from junior to senior levels, who were involved one way or the other with the events. He singles out for praise the sacrifice of Brig. Gen. (posthumous) Jamil Ahmed for Bangabandhu on 15 August 1975, and Lt. Col. Ahsan and two other officers for Ziaur Rahman on 30 May 1981. As he says, these four splendidly exemplified the soldiers' code, "That I shall go wherever my superior orders me even at the peril of my life." The author is particularly harsh on the Jatiyo Rakhsa Bahini (JRB), which, as he accurately points out, was an irregularly-constituted political force under the inordinate influence of a mysterious Indian army Major Reddy, and was used primarily for gaining political ends. This created animosity among the armed forces, who were united on this one issue, in spite of their differences regarding freedom fighters and non-freedom fighters/repatriated military personnel, a situation that contributed to the tragic events of 15 August 1975. As Hossain notes, several of the officers involved were valiant decorated freedom fighters. JRB's activities, as he correctly observes, also served to make the Awami League (later BKSAL) government of the time unpopular with the general public, and to belittle Bangabandhu's image. Furthermore, JRB did not even offer an iota of resistance

against the coup d'état mounted by a few junior-level officers that profoundly changed the course of Bangladesh's political history, and gave rise to the political chasm that bedevils the country to this day. The author's account of Maj. Faruk Rahman's chutzpah in bringing JRB to its knees and total capitulation is interesting.

Hussain takes to task then army chief Maj. Gen. K.M. Shafiullah for his indecisiveness and inaction, blaming his inexperience at taking senior command-level decisions to his rapid promotion up the ranks. He believes that the disarming and arrest of the handful of



**Bangladesh: Raktakto Audhaya 1975-81**  
Brig. Gen. Sakhat Hossain (rtd.)  
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officers involved in the coup would probably have restored discipline in the armed forces, but acknowledges that the reaction to such action could not have been determined with absolute certainty. Certainly most of the Awami League leaders lost no time in falling behind the coup leaders or extending their allegiance to Khondoker Mushtaque Ahmed, the mastermind (and an Awami League front ranking leader to boot) behind Bangabandhu and his extended family's assassination. Except for a very few, none of them protested. The prominent ones who did were either subsequently executed or fled the country. From a military standpoint, Hossain stresses on maintaining the chain of command in the armed forces. Once that chain is broken, as was done in 1975, discipline, a cornerstone of the military, weakens, and, as happened on a number of occasions in post-1975, coups, counter-coups, and drive for state power ensue.

Regarding the formation of BKSAL, Hossain wonders how Bangabandhu, a lifelong champion of pluralist democracy, could have adopted one-party rule for the country, and concludes, from hearsay, that, in this venture, he was decisively swayed by Sheikh Moni (who

was also killed on 15 August). And, interestingly, (a harbinger of things to come and/or a clue to the complex mosaic that culminated in the coup?), Maj. Shariful Huq Dalim, a key leader, named Bangladesh as an Islamic Republic when he first announced the news of the coup over the radio, although it was not subsequently repeated. The author links the pre-1975 political failures to the legacy of blood that 15 August 1975 ushered in. And that legacy included a succession of coups and counter-coups that were less political in nature than a naked grab for state power.

Eventually Ziaur Rahman, after having survived a number of attempts on his life by sections of the armed forces (which also cost a number of officers and enlisted personnel their lives, many through summary court-martials), was assassinated in Chittagong. The accusatory finger for the deed pointed to the GOC Chittagong, Maj. Gen. Manzur, like Zia a valiant freedom fighter, who was regarded in the army as a bright, intrepid and very intelligent officer, but who, in Hossain's judgment, became ambitious for state power. The author brings up a perplexing problem afflicting Bangladesh while discussing Manzur. When serving as the GOC Chittagong, he was, ex-officio, principal coordinator of civilian policies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Apparently his policies were instrumental in settling Bengalis in various parts of CHT, especially Khagrachhari, Rangamati, and Bandarban. In some places, for protecting themselves, the resettled Bengalis were also provided with arms. Regarding Zia, Hossain comments on his personal honesty, and states that his example is rare among Third World heads of government/state.

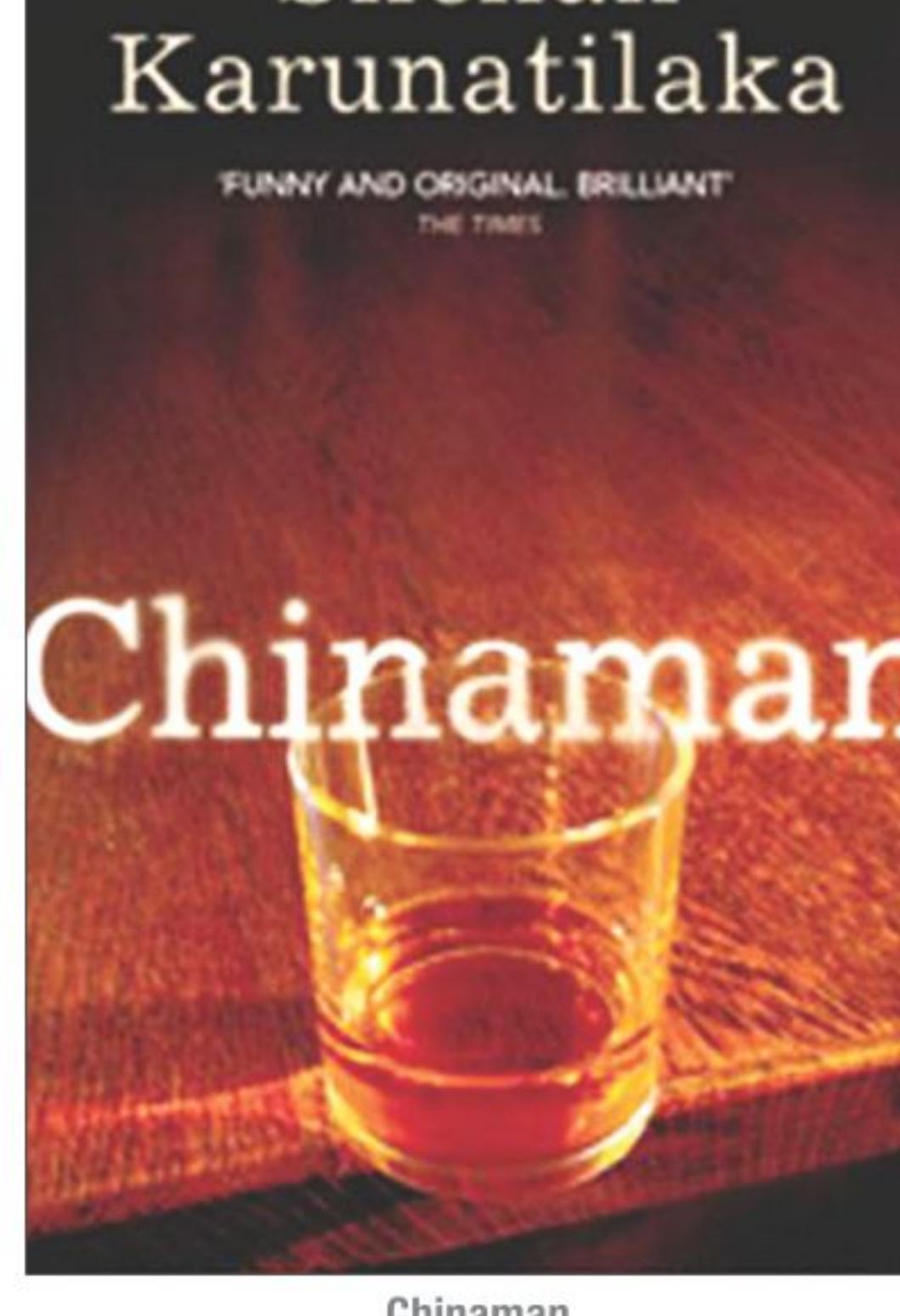
There are a number of reflective observations that enhance the book's intent. Citing the country's low political culture, he believes that the lower the level of political culture of a country, the more powerful a well-organized force like the military becomes, especially in a Third World country, like Bangladesh. He also thinks that the internal bickering in political parties, and the self-interest and high ambition of individual politicians have served as impediments to the development of a healthy political culture in this country. And, lest one forgets, that very same low political culture was instrumental in ushering in the emergency of 2007. History should not repeat itself. In the context of Col. Abu Taher, another counter-coup stalwart, Hossain observes that leftist politics has never struck a chord in the heart of the general populace of Bangladesh, and predicts that it almost certainly will not in the future.

Regarding India's decisive help for the Bangladeshi cause during the Liberation War, Hossain brings up a matter-of-fact issue in international politics. He states that New Delhi was serving its own self-interest, because the break-up of Pakistan would weaken it, and it would cease to be a huge threat to its security. This ploy is well-known in international relations theory and practice as *realpolitik*, and is usually the driving force in inter-state relations. Notwithstanding the "safe" handling of sensitive political issues, and the inordinate number of spelling errors in the sparsely-used English-language sentences (one would have thought that, by the fifth edition --- really reprint --- they would have been rectified), *Bangladesh: Raktakto Audhaya 1975-81* will offer the reader insights into the military's role during the coups and counter-coups that occurred in that period, and some homespun truths regarding the political culture of the country.

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# Sparkling intelligence at work

**Sal Imam goes through meditations on life**



**Chinaman**  
The Legend of Pradeep Mathew  
Shehan Karunatilaka.  
Vintage Books, London

This then is the core of the story. A has-been sports journalist, the aforementioned W.G. Karunasena, known as "Wije" for short, makes it the focus of his benighted dipsomaniac life to ferret out the details of the career and current whereabouts of a cricketer named Pradeep Mathew, who, he firmly believes, was the best spinner ever produced by Sri Lanka and perhaps by any country in the world. It so happens, however, that all the facts about this person are shrouded in a mystery which seems only to grow the more Wije continues to search. Tantalizing glimpses alternate with red herrings, except one doesn't know which is which. Every so often one is ready to dismiss the whole tale as nothing more than a doomed quixotic adventure, which is all the more believable because Wije is accompanied throughout by a Sancho Panza-like figure, his close friend Ari, the one who 'smiles but only shows his teeth when he's lying'. Each time though, to confound the reader, a nugget of staggeringly realistic weight is then thrown into the

mix. For example, the description of the "double-bounce" ball, which breaks successively in opposite directions, that Pradeep supposedly perfected so lovingly detailed that one cannot help but suspend disbelief and imagine that such a miracle delivery is indeed possible. Throughout the chase for Pradeep we are kept in doubt about whether this is all just a tall story or whether it could conceivably be factual. It is a measure of the writer's artistry and technique that this suspense is maintained up to the very last page of the novel, and even beyond!

But, in the course of the book, the author, Shehan Karunatilaka, pulls off yet another sleight of hand which, to me, is worthy of even greater notice. As the pursuit of Pradeep goes on, imperceptibly the reader begins to get more and more involved with the pursuer. Wije emerges in all the glory of his disreputable but irresistible personality, as lovable a rascal as ever existed! Even his worst character flaws get transformed into mere foibles because of the ruthless honesty and wit with which he observes, and judges, himself. Whether hobnobbing drunkenly with his cronies or quietly lust after unapproachable women, whether needling pompous officials or placating assorted gangsters, Wije remains one step ahead of his fate. His relationship with his only child, Garfield, is sensitively drawn. Exasperated by the, usually disastrous, life-choices of his son, "a typical twenty year old, a fool who did not know he was one", Wije secretly holds him very close to his heart. Garfield in return is caught in a spiral in which disgust for his father is twined with a muted sympathy which only grows as the years pass. And naturally Wije has a long-suffering wife whom he irritates and charms in equal measure. Finally, we realize that the book has become a meditation on life itself, summed up perhaps by the moment of understanding right at the end, "Just like love, karma can wield its club in strange ways".

A great book, written with a sparkling ironic intelligence which produces choice, memorable, lines on almost every page. It is not structured like a classic novel and the reader has to be prepared to skip back and forth in space and time and among a whole universe of exotic characters. Sometimes it can be hard to keep everything in straight order but that is, I am now convinced, the very purpose of the author, who may have done well to take up cricket as a profession, left arm spinner maybe? Certainly Shehan, if I may be permitted a cricket observation, in your whole over, we could never middle!

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**A tragic tale told anew**  
**Nausheen Rahman relives a sad period in history**

One in a series of books (based on historical facts), under the heading "My Story", *The Great Plague* is a very well-written representation of life in London in 1665-1666 when the city was struck by the great plague.

The author, Pamela Oldfield, creates her protagonist in 13-year-old Alice Paynton, and gives us a lucid description of the happenings through her diary. Hence, it is at once a very informative journal and a gripping story.

Today's young people (most of whom seem to have no time for, or interest in, significant events of the past), will benefit a lot from this very easy-to-read book. Oldfield's vivid observations of people, their feelings, and various occurrences are bound to make readers appreciate all that had happened during that very dreadful period.

Seen from a thirteen-year-old's perspective, the story takes on an awe-inspiring aspect as we read of the sufferings Londoners had to face. Alice lives with her father, her aunt Nell (her late mother's older sister), their maid-servant, Maggie, and her dear dog, Poppet, in what she calls her "beloved London". She likes her life in the busy metropolis and is happy enough, despite the distressing fact that she is thirteen and has no admirers (!)

A few days after Alice starts writing in her new diary, she is confronted with the most shocking news she has ever heard: their London has been attacked by the hated and extremely contagious disease, the bubonic plague.

Alice's short (almost daily) entries are very successful in drawing a very clear and graphic picture of how conditions worsen progressively. We must have read of the Great Plague in various pieces of writing, but this narration drives home the facts of the circumstances very effectively. A child's artless way of looking at things intensifies the gravity of the situation.

Reading about what London (countless people's favourite city) was like during the terrible pestilence is a whole new experience. The fear of the contagion and the drastic measures taken to control it make worthwhile reading.

Alice's rather quiet and placid life undergoes an upheaval as her aunt Nell falls victim to the plague. Alice's unhappiness is aggravated because she thinks she is responsible (as she had helped someone who may have passed on the disease to her aunt). She is, but naturally, in two minds about whether to flee for her own safety, or to remain by her aunt's side and help her. She prays for courage and chooses the latter option.

Alice's guilt makes her want to do penance. The honesty and simplicity of her words make our hearts go out to her, especially when she appeals to God, but also feels that he is "being overwhelmed with such entreaties" and wonders if he "even hear hers among the clamour".

This brave and spirited girl with a strong sense of fairness also goes through a tormenting few days when she is afraid she might have been afflicted, and muses about whether she will last till her 14th birthday some days away.

The processes of isolating infected houses, treating infected patients, fumigating infected places, etc, are described very well and hence, the entire picture lies open before us. It is a picture that fills us with sorrow, fear and desperation.

Agonizing things happen in Alice's life as the days pass somehow - until she can finally get out of London. However, what ensues is even more heartbreaking. Normalcy seems to have become a thing of the past as London becomes a city of the dead and the dying.

Then, things begin to change. Light rays of hope occasionally come filtering into Alice's life - for which she expresses tremendous gratitude. Bits of heartwarming incidents dispel the cloud of gloom and despair. Amidst all the horrible things that happen, these apparently small occurrences lift the spirit; they also help Alice to appreciate "small mercies". One of the best things that happen is that she meets Edward Bell, a young man, (for whom aunt Nell's phrase "Handsome is as handsome does", is appropriate).

Alice and Edward grow to care for each other and their match receives approval from their elders. As a birthday gift and also as a preparation for her marriage, Alice's father lets her have a year's dancing lessons. She has to forgo the pearls he has promised her and says, "But I am older and wiser and know that to be without pearls is scarcely a hardship when others in the world have so little".

Before things can become completely normal, there's another disaster: a destructive fire breaks out in the city which is still tottering from the after-effects of the plague. Speculations about how the fire had started give us information about England's relations with her neighbours and the Catholic Protestant conflicts.

The devastation caused by the wild fire so soon after the plague seems too horrendous to be true; numerous Londoners become homeless and lose all their worldly belongings. However, there is a silver lining in the cloud of helplessness and frustration (there's always a silver lining if we want to see it). The burning down of the cities would rid the city of the remnants of the plague - and London would gradually be rebuilt. It would become a better city with wider roads and brick houses - which would not be so close to one another.

More than 60,000 people perished during the Great Plague (roughly a third to a half of London's population then). The Great Fire rendered more than 10,000 people homeless (fortunately not many people died).

Alice Paynton's diary concludes on a happy, optimistic note: "London will rise again from the ashes and I look forward to the future with hope in my heart - and with my dearest Edward by my side"; this reaffirms our belief that all bad things come to an end. A few words of wisdom from Alice's father further confirms that bad things have to be accepted in life. When Alice says that if her aunt could be with them life would be perfect, her father smiles and says "A perfect life would be of little value". Alice understands that he believes that people learn from their mistakes and grow strong by suffering. Thus, the story of London's great misfortunes leaves behind a valuable lesson for us all.

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