

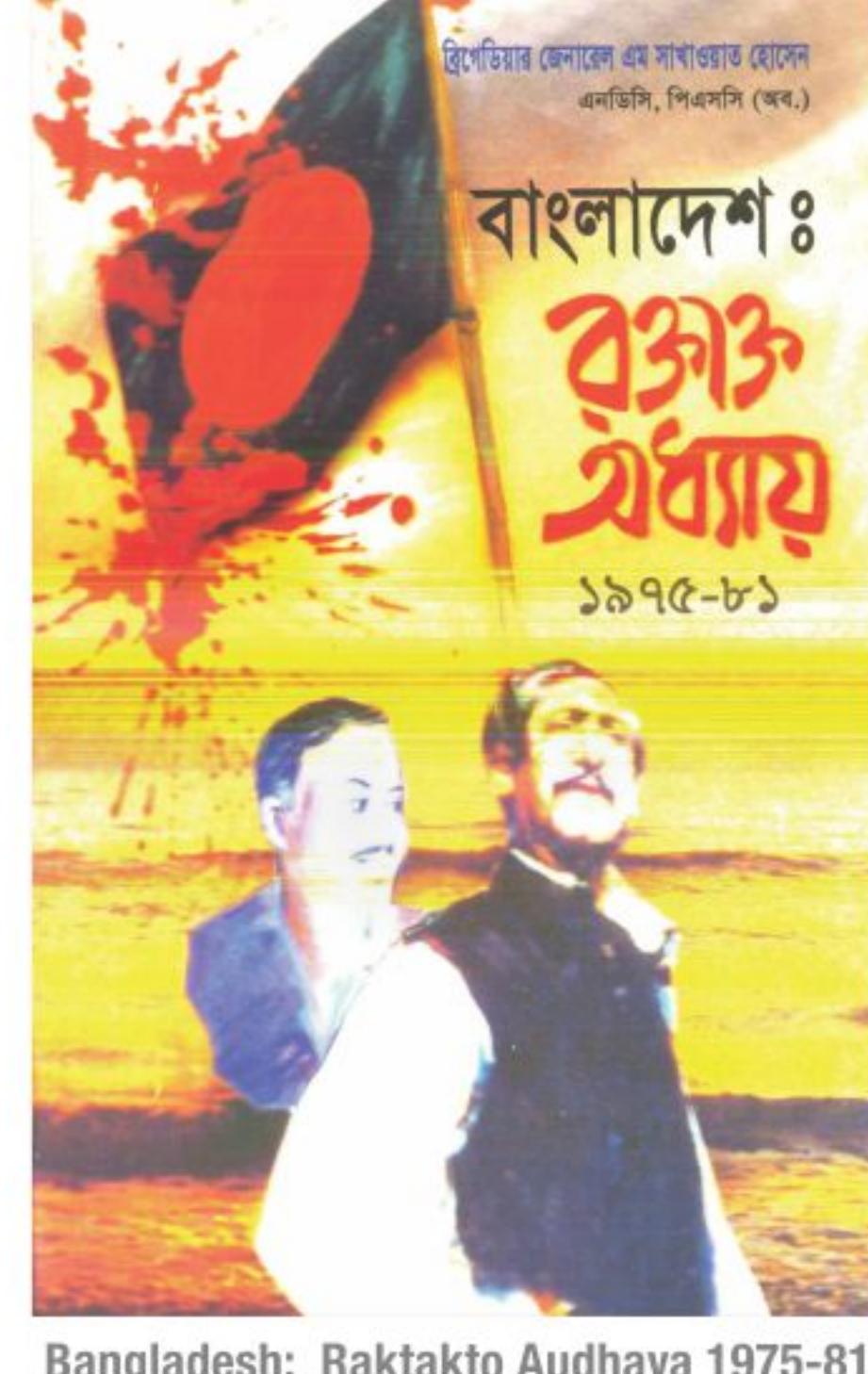
# Revisiting a dark period in history

**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.

Sakhawat Hussain 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. Hussain, 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.

Hussain, 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



**Bangladesh: Raktakto Audhaya 1975-81**  
Brig. Gen. Sakhawat Hussain (rtd.)  
Palok Publishers, 2012 (5<sup>th</sup> edition)

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 Rakshni 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 Hussain 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 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, Hussain 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, Hussain 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 Hussain'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, Hussain 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, Hussain 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, Hussain 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.

**Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communication Department, Independent University Bangladesh (IUB) #**

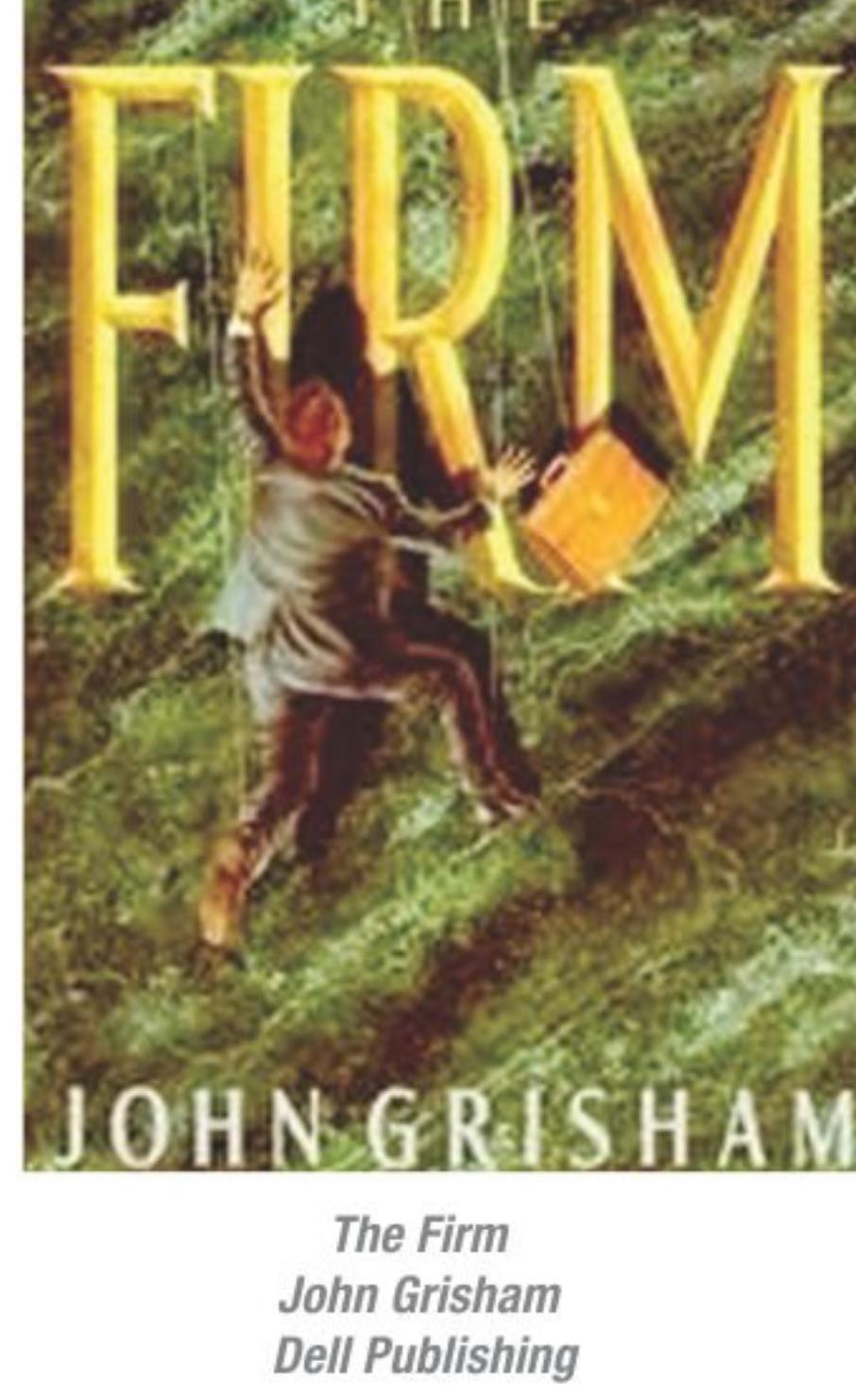
# In the world of the sinister

**Tulip Chowdhury is thrilled by plots and intrigues**

BOOKWORMS often change their taste in reading. At times reading romances, autobiographies or anthologies give way to reading something different. At such times when one wants to go for some suspense, crime and thrill, there is John Grisham for you. You will stay hooked to the last line while crime is committed, the jury meets and judges pronounce the verdict. While all these go on, there is mystery and suspense gripping your mind, leading you on, sniffing for the plots to reveal the untold tales and unravel deep-rooted secrets that have you gasping for breath.

Mitchell Y. McDeere, a lawyer from Harvard, considers himself very lucky to get three job offers. Among them the most lucrative is the offer from Bendini, Lambert and Locke. It is a relatively young law firm but most of the partners here have retired in their late forties or early fifties with money to burn, with six-figure incomes guaranteed for the rest of their lives. Mitch is offered a brand new BMW, a large house in an expensive neighborhood and even his huge student loan is also paid. The firm believes in having lawyers without loan headaches and the expensive car and the house is for social status. When Mitch tells Abby, his wife, of this offer she falls from the sky. Their ramshackle apartment and shaky Mazda to be gone for the grand changes with a salary of \$80,000 per month and a confirmed partnership at the firm! It seems as if life is suddenly too generous with them. Mitch is ready to take up the challenge; it is a "once-in-a-lifetime" offer for him.

Mitch and Abby are full into the new, posh life. Their dreams are big. It is all luxury and comfort for the first time since they have been married. Mitch's pride knows no bounds when he opens the door of his BMW and slides onto the



**The Firm**  
John Grisham  
Dell Publishing

of all these lie the challenges of deceiving Mitch's colleagues and getting thousands of photocopies of important documents that the FBI are after. In the office building Mitch often goes to the room that has photos of five dead employees and remembers Terrance's warning that the deaths were only made to look like accidents. Mitch has goosebumps as he stares at the smiling employees, employees that were supposed to become millionaires as the firm prospers day by day. He often wonders if his photo is going to be there too one day since his colleagues are already suspecting him of double play.

Mitch, a brilliant lawyer, knows that if he plays it safe with the Bendini firm the FBI will get him at one time or the

other and Terrance has already warned him of being behind bars once they get to the bottom of the murders and the hidden smuggling ring they know Bendini is involved with. And if he plays it into the FBI game he will take their money and disappear once the papers are handed over. Along with the help of a trusted friend, Mitch and Abby play the gamble of life, and it's a dangerous game. As the Bendini firm finds out about Mitch's betrayal they are already planning on a sixth accidental death and even the FBI is not sure they can give protection on time. For Mitch and Abby life hangs onto minutes and seconds, on split decisions and courage. None of them are sure of what the final play of the lurking dangers hold for them. They wonder if they will be able to keep their commitment for the FBI and still be alive when the Bendini firm is hunting them as their most wanted enemy.

Like Grisham's other thrilling crime stories, *The Firm* also holds the reader from the first word to the last. There is mystery, suspense, death and survival, each taking the reader to exciting revelations beyond imagination. And within this all there is also the sweet tale of Mitch and Abby's love for each other and their devotion. The reader cannot rest in peace until he or she reaches the end of the roller coaster ride on the vivid descriptions of the plot and characters. Along with the protagonist the reader holds onto the reins to come out of the dark and dangerous games of crime and justice. The book is a real kick as one feels the adrenaline surge and the heart beat faster as events unfold with the deft play of words. It is a score read for Grisham fans.

**Tulip Chowdhury writes fiction, teaches and is a poet.**

# 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.

**Nausheen Rahman is an academic and literary critic #**