

REVIEW ARTICLE

When your history goes missing

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

The end of the year is a pretty good time to reflect on the books that have been read in the preceding months or those that are being read or those that will be read in the days and weeks to be. Close to a fortnight ago, Nazrul's *Bandhonhara* was launched in its English translation in Dhaka, to much acclaim. It surely goes to the credit of The Reading Circle that it undertook this rather gigantic task of going for the

INDIAN DEMOCRACY'S PRE-EMINENT CHRONICLER TIME

**RAMACHANDRA GUHA
PATRIOTS & PARTISANS**



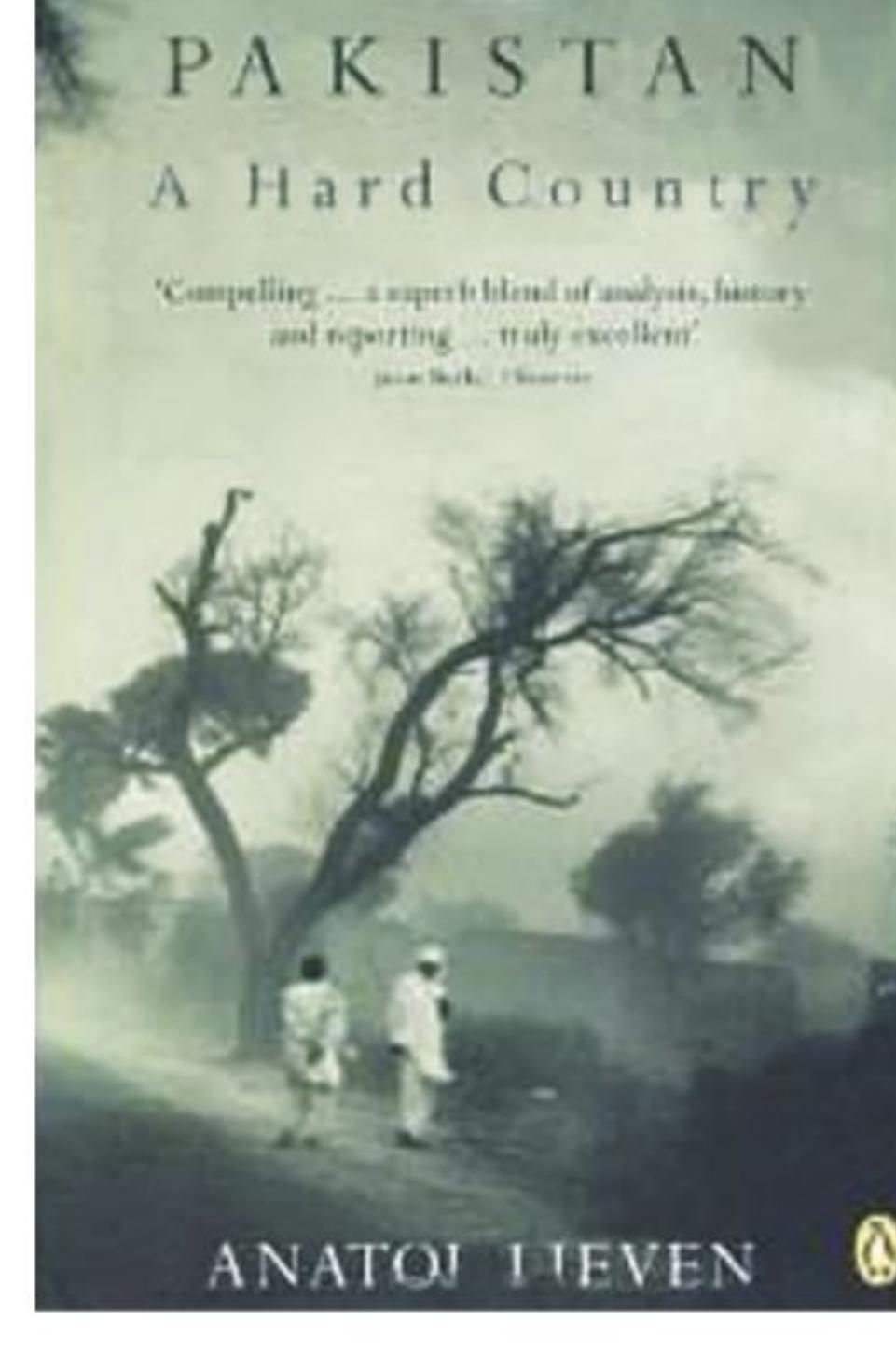
translation. Something, as they say, is always lost in translation. But then there are translations that hold your attention, that are indeed riveting. This translation of *Bandhonhara* promises to be one work that could make a difference. I am yet to read it and when I do, I know that old bug, the urge to review, will take hold of my imagination and I could actually end up doing a critique of the work.

Which reminds me. I have in hand a copy of Ramachandra Guha's new work, *Patriots & Partisans*. Now, Guha has always been a fascinating writer and has proved to be exceedingly brilliant in dealing with a diversity of topics. A few years ago, recovering from an ailment, I whiled away the days going through his coruscating work on the history of cricket and the stars who have given that particular shine to the game through the decades. I have never been a cricket buff. Indeed, sports have always been my Achilles' heel, for the fundamental reason that there is hardly a game which I understand. Despite all such inadequacies, though, I did manage to go through the entirety of that fascinating work on cricket. I am not sure I understand cricket better as a result of that reading, but it was certainly enlightening going through the stories of the players and commentators who today are legends in the history of the game.

Guha's new book, the one I have in hand, is of course on a political level. Basically a collection of essays on a

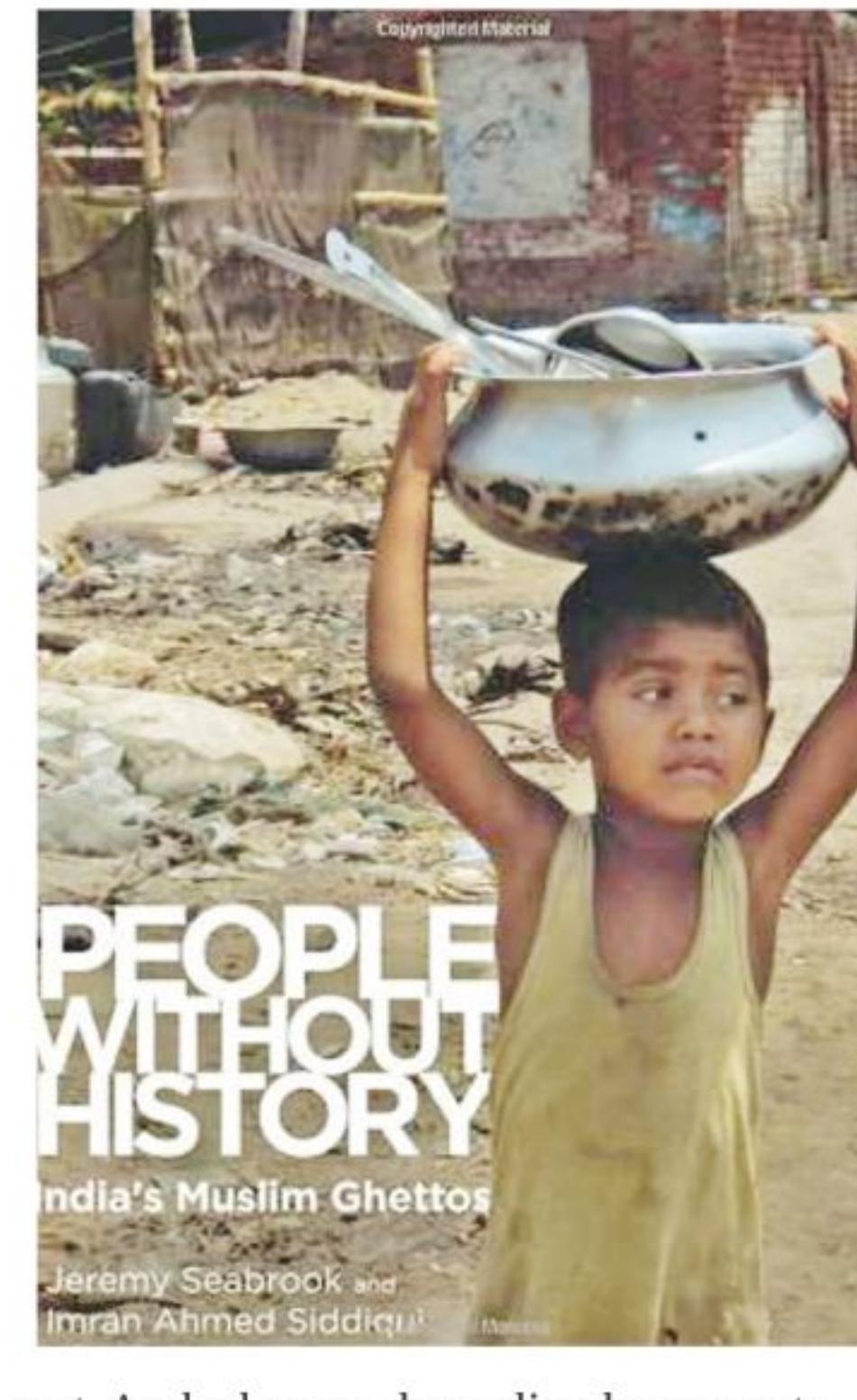
diversity of subjects, the work is a revelation of a liberal mind at work. More significantly, it is a hint of the objectivity that writers must pursue if they mean to be taken seriously. Ramachandra Guha gives you his take on Hindutva. He calls this particular chapter on the topic 'Hindutva Hate Mail', which ought to be a broad hint of where he means to take you. There is too the quite saddening write-up on India's first prime minister, one that Guha titles 'Verdicts on Nehru: The Rise and Fall of a Reputation'. The tenor is one of Nehru being studied on the larger canvas of history. Guha's sympathy for Nehru is unmistakable. The Nehruvian concept of society, of socialism, of diplomacy --- all of these are put under the scanner. And among those peering through the scanner are politicians, such as L.K. Advani, whose politics has generally been at a far remove from that of Nehru. In this one chapter, you tend to observe Nehru through the prism of a lifetime. Even the Mountbattens are pulled into the picture.

Before we move on, though, we must not fail to read the especially exhilarating chapter, 'A Short History of Congress Chancagiri', in this eminently readable work. If Guha has been kind, even deferential, to Nehru, he makes it clear that he does not have a similar opinion about his descendants. Dismissive of Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi and even Rahul Gandhi, he is seemingly willing not to touch Indira Gandhi. But you get a trifle worried when Guha informs you that Nehru had no wish to see Indira Gandhi as his political successor. That being so, how does one explain the fact that in the late 1950s Indira Gandhi served as president of the Indian National Congress for a year?



Nehru may have disapproved of Indira's role here, but, again, he seemed content to go along with it once the reality came to pass.

Reading about politics gives you the kind of energy that often refuses to burn

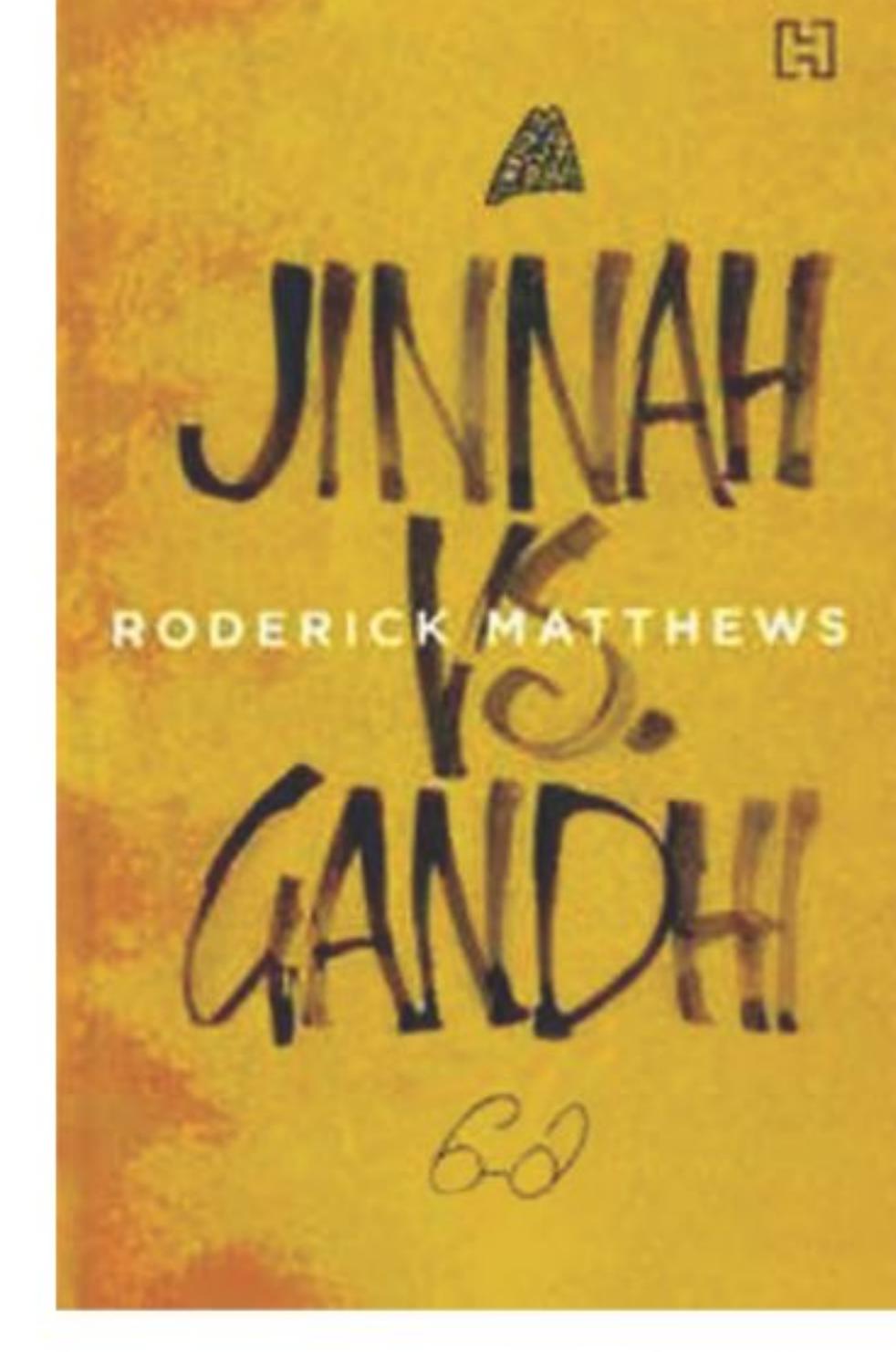


out. And when such reading happens to relate to particular countries, the energy seems all the more pronounced. There is Anatole Lieven's *Pakistan: A Hard Country*. If you have been going the endless turmoil Pakistan has been muddling through, you might get a sense of this absolutely thought-provoking work. It traces the history of Pakistan's politics and the key actors in the drama that has been playing out as tragedy and farce and comedy or a combination of all three since the country's eastern wing went its own way to become Bangladesh in 1971. Lieven wonders --- and that is something that will complement your thoughts --- how East and West Pakistan, separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory, with such a yawning gap in culture, even thought of being a single state. People in West Pakistan never considered the Bengalis of East Pakistan Muslim or Pakistani enough to be treated fairly, either in the political or economic sense. The break that occurred in 1971 therefore had to come.

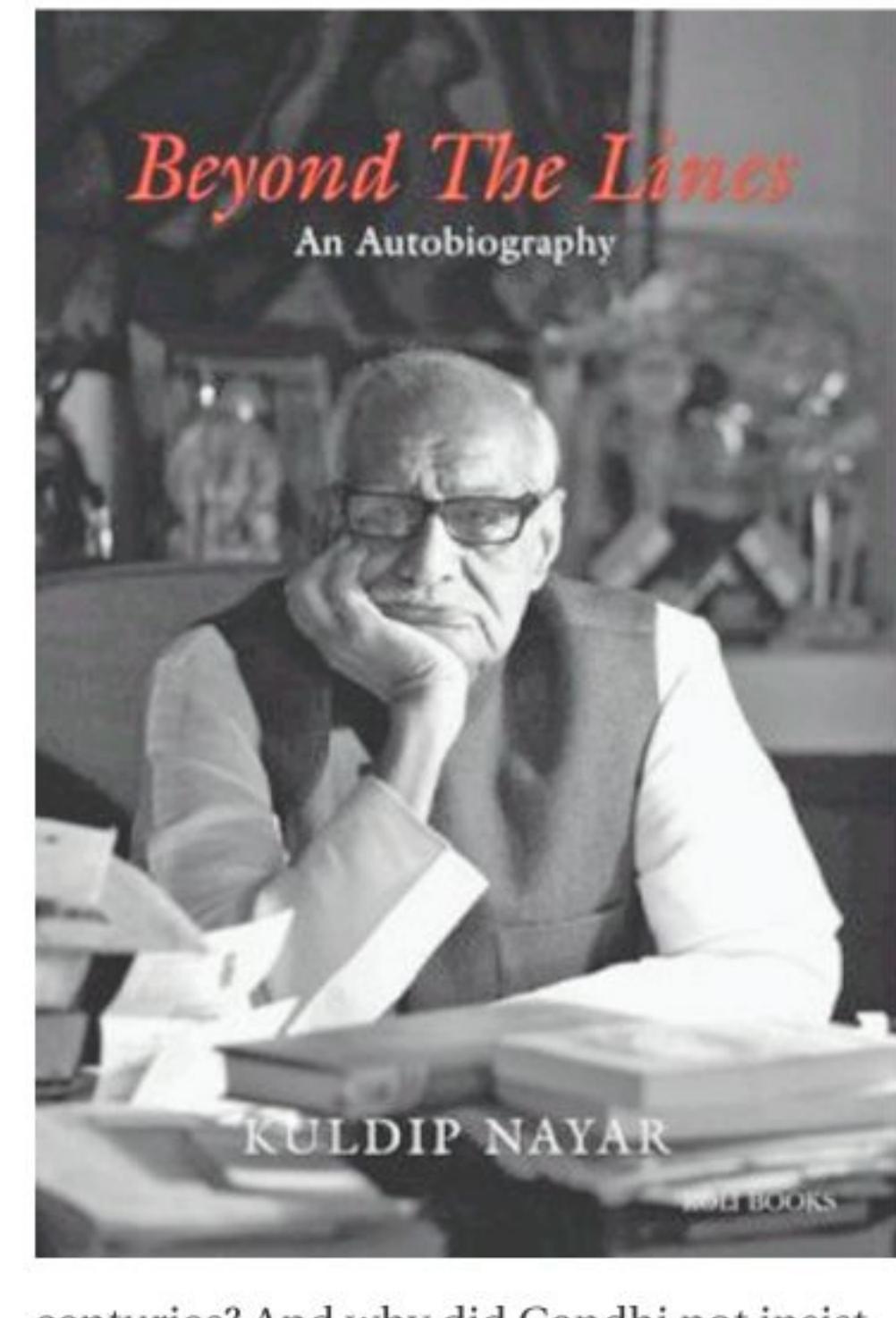
And then Lieven moves on, to a critical assessment of the troubles that assail present-day Pakistan from a whole range of directions. The feudal nature of its politics, its industrial base, the dominance of the Punjab in nearly every sphere of life and, of course, the role of the military in nearly every area of socio-political activity are the issues Lieven focuses on. Pakistan has for large numbers of people around the world been in a state of relentless decline, nearly a failed state, which are something that not many Pakistanis will agree with. But when you observe the fragile nature of its politics, the weakness of its institutions and the battering it has been getting from both the Pakistani Taliban and American drone attacks, it is that old question asked by Tariq Ali years ago --- 'Can Pakistan Survive?' --- which ominously raises its head once again. At this point in history, you cannot quite say that Pakistan will go the way of the Soviet

Union, but you are pretty sure that it will wobble through, at least in the foreseeable future. And here is again cause to remember Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Even after so many decades have gone by, you cannot but be amazed by the man. There was not much of emotion in him and it did not occur to him that, like Gandhi and Nehru and Azad, he needed to wage a struggle to have the British colonialists out of India. His insensitivities to the sufferings of millions of Hindus and Muslims remain the stuff of bad legend. But if there was any regret on Jinnah's part about the damage he and his Muslim League had caused to the country, to both Muslims and Hindus, it comes through in Kuldip Nayar's recently published memoirs, *Beyond the Lines*. The story comes from Mazhar Ali Khan, who told only his wife Tahera about it, making her promise to keep it within her. Years, many years, later, Tahera Mazhar Ali would spill it out to Nayar: Jinnah, surveying the sordid scene of refugees moving to India and Pakistan in the early days of Partition, is for the first time horrified by the enormity of what has happened. "What have I done?" That is what escaped his lips. He said nothing more.

There have been innumerable books on Partition and there will be more. Sixty five years after the departure of the British, you still come across serious debate on who or what could have been responsible



for the tragedy. The burden of guilt falls, for the most part, on Jinnah. But there are also those who fervently believe that Nehru has to share part of the blame. What if he had not made those incendiary comments on the Congress' attitude to the Cabinet Mission Plan? What if Jinnah had been offered the position of independent India's first prime minister? Should Mountbatten and Radcliffe not have been pilloried for the manifest damage they did to generations of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who had inhabited India for



centuries? And why did Gandhi not insist, a little more assertively than he did, that India stay as one indivisible country?

These are questions that will be asked long into the future. And the answers will always be a muddle, all of them betraying agitated states of mind in those expected to respond to the questions. And while you reflect on it all, consider reading Roderick Matthews' engrossing work on Partition. He calls the work *Jinnah Vs. Gandhi*, a title which gives you a fairly good idea of what the writer means to talk about. In simple terms, it is a comparative study of the personalities and politics of the two men who played pivotal roles in the shaping of an India moving toward freedom as well as vivisection in the later part of the 1940s. As you read through the book, two questions always pop up before you, as they pop up before the writer. First, how did Gandhi, trained to be a barrister in England, end up wearing homespun cloth and becoming a man of the masses? Second, how did Jinnah, a modern man happy in emulating the English in his profession and social dealings, decline to being the founding father of a state based on the narrow concept of religion?

Answers to these queries will elude you, at least for now. Which is when you might try a different tack. Go to Jeremy Seabrook and Imran Ahmed Siddiqui's *People Without History: India's Muslim Ghettos*. You feel the pain of these people as you read of the dismal lives they lead, in places like Beniapukur, Tiljala Road and Tangra. The communal politics of the 1940s, of the Muslim League's obduracy and the Congress' indifference (toward the end) has stymied the future of these people. When your history goes missing, when past, present and future are indistinguishable one from another, you know where you need to point the finger.

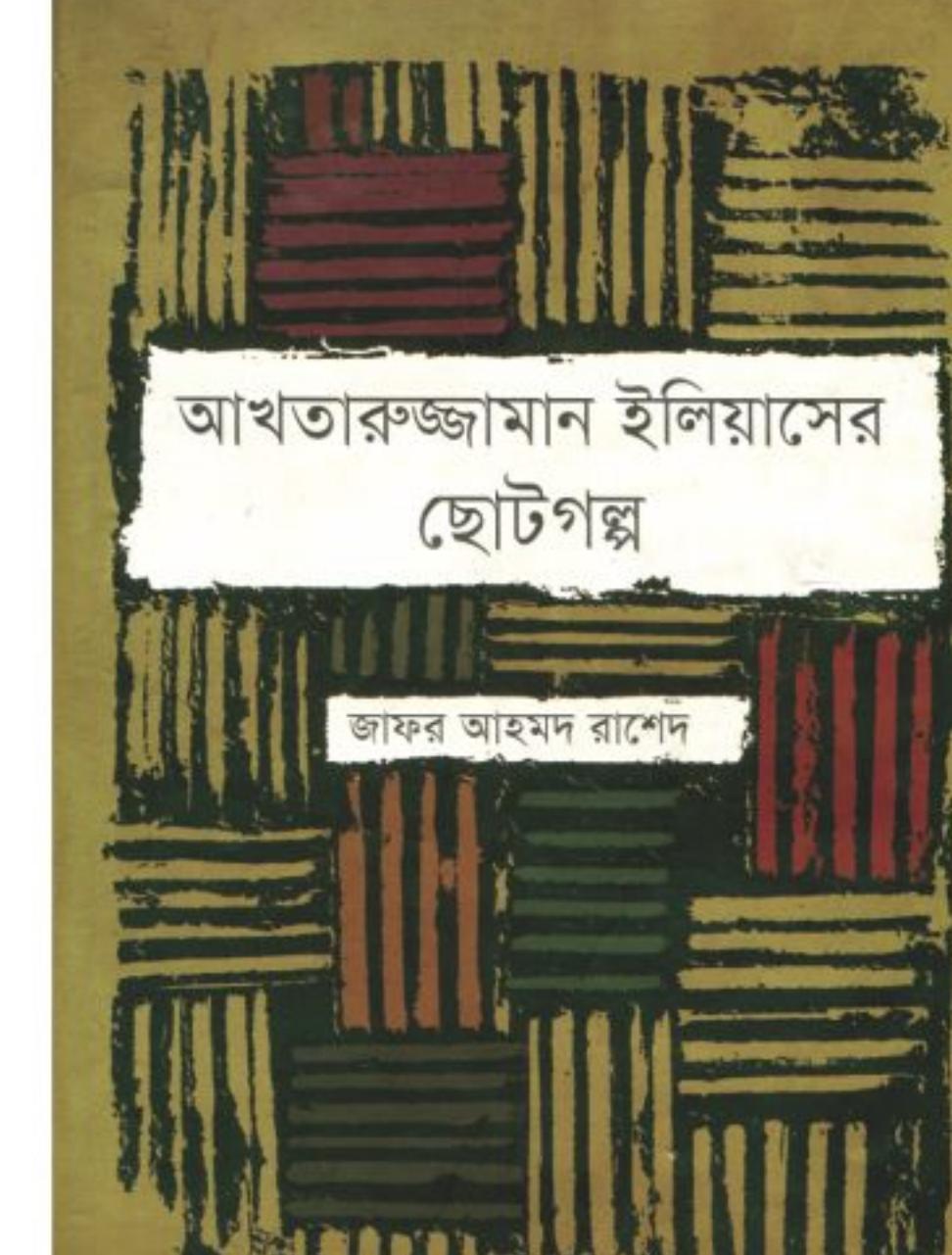
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A commendable approach to Elias' short stories

Rifat Munim detects the refreshing in a new work

When I first came across the book *Akhtaruzzaman Elias er Chhotogolpo*, I was indeed taken by surprise. It is a well written and well referenced book but more importantly, it is an attempt at a comprehensive critical approach to Elias's short stories. One would still wonder why a critical approach should surprise one in this way. That Elias's stories call for extensive critical attention from a variety of angles is an agreed-upon truth. The same can be said about a good many of his contemporaries from Hasan Azizul Haque to Mahmudul Haque. Evidently, the reason behind giving this critical attempt a special place lies elsewhere. Starting in the 1950s, modern Bengali prose fiction in this part of Bengal has been thriving like an ever-flowing stream since the 1960s. True this stream has taken many turns and even at times shrunk with its flow apparently ebbing forever. A creative pool of writers, however, has always found a way to

break new ground and thus inject new life into its shrunken state. But what this stream has always lacked is an inquisitive breed of explorers whose job it is to dig out the gems from the rock bed and then continue to discover the geological stages and processes which have contributed to form them. Literary critics are that breed who turn an apparently simple moss-covered rock into a pearl of endless signification. Elias's fiction constitutes one of the most potential stretches of that stream. Although one or two critical essays on his death or birth anniversary have at times tried to pay tribute to his creations, they at best could take us to the opaque surface. It is from this angle that Zafar Ahmed Rashed's *Akhtaruzzaman Elias er Chhotogolpo* deserves to be given a special place. I am not saying this is an impeccable piece of criticism or that it encompasses all angles. The writer himself does not claim so. I myself have



Akhtaruzzaman er Chhotogolpo
Zafar Ahmed Rashed Ittadi
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spotted an error in historical information such as the one that the Jukto Front (United Front) government was dismantled in 1958 whereas it was actually dismissed just three months after its formation in 1954. In spite of this, the book certainly takes us beyond the surface, dipping down and down until it touches the bed, full of variegated rocks.

In order to give a clearer picture, Rashed also takes readers on a brief tour of the different literary strains predominant in different decades. He also provides in short the social, political and historical developments that Elias and his contemporaries were exposed to. All these not only put Elias's work in context but also point out where and how he was different from his peers and predecessors. The pitfall of a dearth of literary criticism is that most authors are given short shrift and subjected to flawed or improper interpretation. Which is why

Elias is often termed 'the storyteller of the real world' and Shahidul Zahir the 'magic realist'. Because of this gross generalisation, at stake are the many forms and layers that come into an imaginative play to create a world full of unfulfilled desires, dreams, conflicting realities and struggles. Rashed, with his meticulous look spread across all of Elias's short story collections, does justice to this 'heteroglossia' created in Elias's fiction where characters from different classes, races and genders intermingle not in a realistically constructed world, but in a far more complicated place that sees the boundaries between dreams and harsh realities blurred every now and then.

Rashed's attempt not only opens a critical window to Elias's fiction but also sets literary criticism on a new path committed to exploring the gems of Bangla literature.

RIFAT MUNIM IS WITH THE DAILY STAR.