

# A tale not often told

*Shahid Alam revisits victims of the Pakistan army*

*Rising from the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971* is, from a critical standpoint, a compendium of almost all facets of human nature, ranging from extreme cruelty to supreme acts of kindness (at times from unexpected quarters), with avarice, lust, selfishness, betrayal, sympathy, empathy, fatalism, and wily thinking thrown in between. Specifically, the book is a narrative about Bengali women during the war of liberation. The Foreword (by Hameeda Hossain) to the anthology explains the background of the undertaking: "In 2001 Ain o Salish Kendra published oral histories of 22 women who recounted their experiences during the war of independence in 1971 --- accounts of loss, sexual violence, displacement, desertion, escape."

Subsequently, with Niaz Zaman's deft translation, UPL has published the book in English. The expected larger readership will get to know about the privations suffered by Bengali women during the war, and, importantly, for years after Bangladesh had become a sovereign independent nation-state.

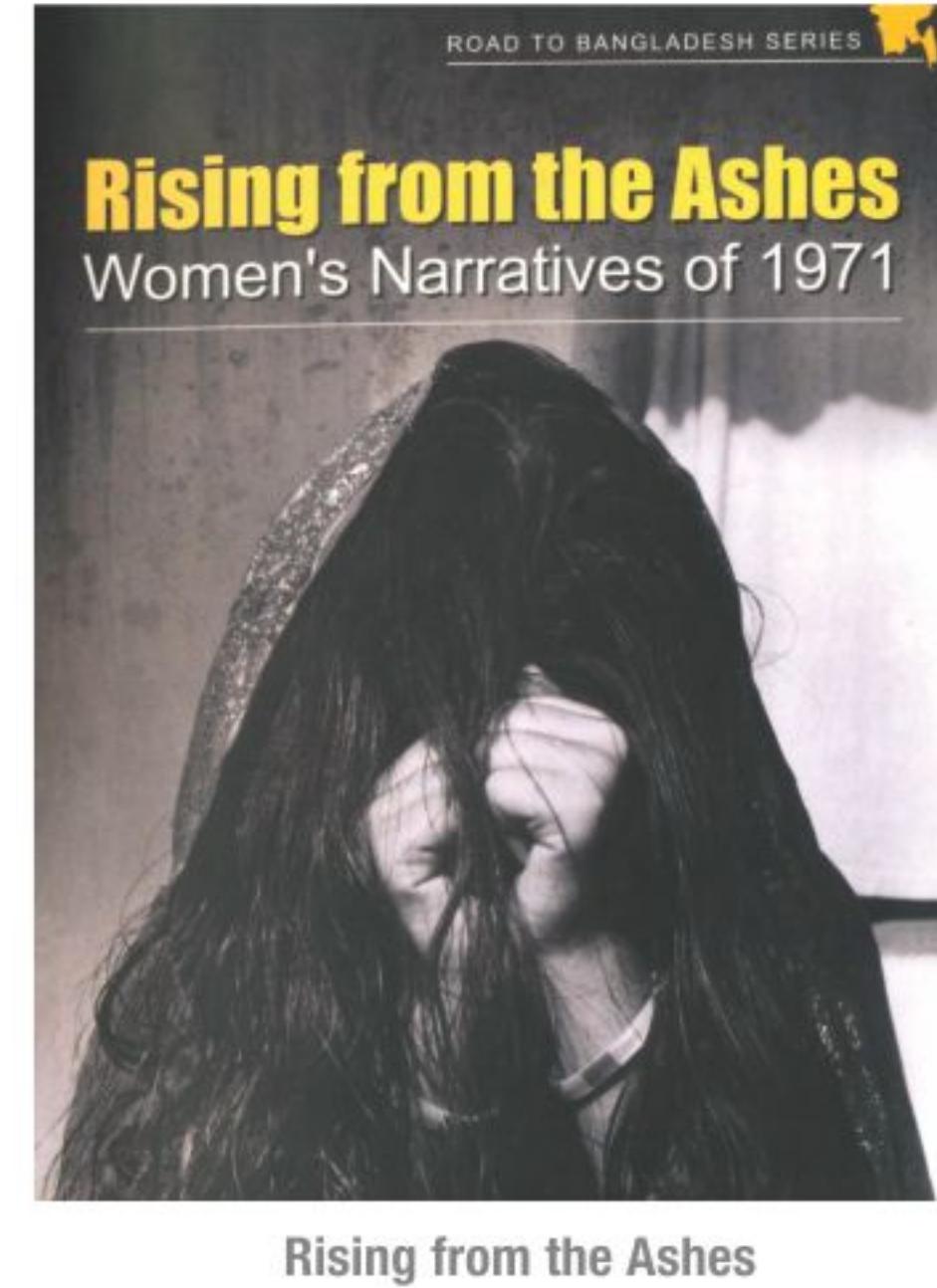
The narratives of the 22 women, while being able to move most readers, do not attempt to present any profound sociological or socio-economic theory, although several of the writers round off their individual pieces with comments and observations that are reflective of the usually highly-charged persona of the average Bangladeshi. Almost all the interviews of the women were conducted in 1997, with a significant follow-up of one case in 2005. The rationale for making their stories public at the risk of their falling victims again is provided by Hameeda Hossain: "...many feminists argued that women needed to share their pain as part of the national narrative, to seek not only retribution for the past, but restoration of their human dignity. Justice also demanded that these stories of war crimes became warning signals against the violence in our societies." The reader will discover that several women actually suffered a variety of repercussions when their stories went public, and in some cases their human dignity was debased, while one can legitimately wonder if

these stories have had much of an, if any, effect against violence in our society.

A more practical limitation in terms of intensive study on the subject is offered in the introduction by Mofidul Hoque: "Any oral history project has its strengths and limitations. Oral accounts can probe deeper into human experience that remains outside the purview of formal history, but the broad perspective of historical events cannot be fully explored by oral accounts only. Moreover, there is a limitation on the number of oral accounts one can collect and analyse." The reader, therefore, may choose to go through these accounts as individual narratives, and then draw the appropriate conclusions. The selected women are drawn from Dhaka, Narayanganj, Chittagong, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Khulna, Satkhira, Kushtia, Natore, Barisal, and Sherpur.

Several of the respondents, even though a quarter of a century had passed between their traumatic ordeal and their interviews, showed signs of what I think (and I could be wrong on this) is being called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to explain the behaviour patterns of US (and other countries') veterans of the Iraq and Afghan wars. Zebunnissa Begum, Nilufa, Rumana, Farzana and Sharmin (the last four being sisters), all from educated middle class backgrounds, displayed what can only be described as PTSD syndromes while being interviewed or while talking of their experiences and acknowledging that they were psychologically disturbed. Zebunnissa, mother of well-known Rabindra Sangeet singer Sadi Mohammad Taqullah and dancer Shibli Mohammad Enamullah, lost her husband, who was murdered by some Biharis in Mohammadpur as soon as the military crackdown began. Almost at the same time, in Narayanganj, Nilufa and her siblings lost their parents, killed by the Pakistan army.

Then there were the privations suffered by women (in some cases, they were hardly more than children) from a rural, not-so-well-off background. Most were raped, some had lost their husbands at the army's hands, and all were (expectedly) severely traumatized. Most have carried their psychological scars even to



*Rising from the Ashes  
Women's Narratives of 1971  
Eds Shaheen Akhtar, et al  
Translated by Niaz Zaman*

the day they were interviewed a considerable distance in time from the events that took place, and almost all have complained of their perceived and real neglect by successive governments of Bangladesh, and the social ostracism they have endured after they testified in public at the people's court organized by the Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee.

The effects of war have been much greater than the loss of a loved one or of the forcible violation of one's body. For example, in Zebunnissa's case, she is convinced that her eldest son went through a major personality change for the worse as a result of the loss of his father and the war itself. She herself had to go through enormous hardship to make ends meet, and care for her children as they were growing up. Hers is a story of a brave woman determined not to let the sustained trials and tribulations of life defeat her, but the impression that unmistakably comes

through in her narrative is that she has been deeply scarred psychologically, a condition from which it will take a lot to come out of. The more poignant story is that of Nilufa (who was barely into her teens when her parents were killed) and her younger siblings. Not just having to go through the loss of both their parents, they had also to undergo the collective onslaught of avarice, deprivation, injustice, neglect, indifference, snide remarks, and suffering at the hands of relatives, immediate and close, long-time neighbours, opportunists, and the government. Farzana's anguish is an eloquent testimony to their situation: "Losing our parents, we lost everything.... It becomes impossible to maintain one's social status if one's parents are dead."

The traumatic experiences of women were not limited to just the Bengalis, Muslims and Hindus alike. The story of two indigenous women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts, one poor, and who was raped, and the other from a well-to-do, influential, and distinguished family lineage, whose husband was killed by the army, allegedly at the instigation of another indigenous man, are both a narrative of army brutality, and one of jealousy and avarice. Both the affected women have apparently remained stoic in the face of post-traumatic adversity, but that could be due to any number of reasons, including personality traits of their ethnic community. The poorer of the two, however, in addition to being stoic, has also been suffering from PTSD and has fatalistically resigned herself to the physical trauma that was visited on her.

Many of the affected women talk about the negative attitude of their relatives. Social mores and strictures often gain ascendancy over the victimized kin's distress and psychological scarring. The experience of Zulekha, who was raped and whose husband was killed, illustrates this point. Not only in the post-liberation period her neighbours, under various pretexts and stratagems, gobbled up what little land she and her husband had owned, she was ostracized in her community, and when she went for financial help to her well-to-do elder brother's house in Bashirhat, India, she was told by him

and his wife never to come see them again. In a cruel twist of fate, she had to sell the metal water jug she had carried with her for raising money for her return fare back to Satkhira.

Among the saddest outcomes of the raped women's fate have been the taunts and vicious remarks their children have received from various people. These children themselves became tangential victims, and some even contemplated suicide while a few even blamed their mothers for having been raped. Some of the husbands understood their wives' ordeal; others were much less accommodating. The most startling story in the book is the saga of Binapani Saha, the widow of an affluent Hindu businessman of Sherpur, and Major Riaz of the Pakistan army. One has to read this fascinating story to later cogitate over the otherwise improbability of it all. Except that it happened as narrated. The story was told by the slain Nibaran Chandra Saha's widow Binapani and their son Gautam Chandra Saha, who was about to enter his teens in 1971. Nibaran Saha was killed apparently on the orders of the Pakistan army commander in the area, Major Riaz. There are a lot of twists and turns in the tale, but eventually Riaz became the protector (mainly from a variety of local people) of Binapani and her son. The upshot was that neither mother nor son is prepared to place any blame on Riaz for Nibaran Saha's death.

In fact, the reader will get a lot of reactions regarding the war and their ordeal from the victims that might defy their credibility or common knowledge. For example, Zebunnissa, who lost her husband at the hands of Biharis, also singles out other Biharis who saved her and her family. Blame has gone around on several directions to explain their misfortunes, both during, and following, the war of liberation. *Rising from the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971* should enthrall the reader, though the more research-oriented scholar will have to look for much more additional material.

**DR. SHAHID ALAM --- FILMMAKER, ACTOR, CRITIC ---  
--- IS HEAD, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION  
DEPARTMENT, INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY  
BANGLADESH (IUB).**

# Between the law and the lawless

*Tulip Chowdhury is moved by a thriller*

The story of *The Client* is an account of unexpected happenings in the lives of two small boys on the outskirts of Memphis, USA. It's a tale of a week's events and yet its breathtaking plot and the vivid portrayal of the characters are left for the reader to recall and savour for days to come. Eleven-year old Mark Sway and his brother Rick are in the woods to take a puff of forbidden cigarette when a black car pulls into a small clearing. Mark, like all curious boys, waits to see what is happening. By sheer coincidence the brothers witness the occupant of the car, the famous lawyer Romney, shooting himself. But before that happens Mark is taken into the car by the drunken lawyer and is told about the location of the dead body of a murdered senator.

Mark, a very bright small boy, is used to hardship living in their trailer. His mother Diane, a single mom, struggles with life while working for a lamp company. Mark goes through a tough life when his alcoholic father had beats and abuses the family. When his mother divorces his father, Mark gets in touch with the law enforcing agents. After witnessing the suicide, feeling that he should do the right thing, Mark calls the police. Once the FBI is there they question

Mark, but out of fear Mark lies, leaving out all details of how he was with the deceased and the conversation they have had. But the police trace fingerprints and soon are sure the kid is lying and want to take him into custody. Desperate and scared Mark finds Reggie Love, a lawyer who agrees out of pity to start working for the boy with the retainer money of just a dollar.

The suspense in the story discloses one astounding event after another. Mark's lies give way to other lies and the boy finds himself caught in the snare of justice. Even Reggie is not prepared when she finds herself in the midst of the most horrendous killing of the year. The Mafia and the FBI both are on hot chase of the boy. They want the boy because they suspect that Romney had told the boy about the hidden body of the dead senator. The mob threatens Mark, at knife point, to wipe him out if he opens his mouth and the government prosecutors are willing to break all the rules to make him talk. The mob burns down his trailer home. Rick is hospitalized with post-traumatic disorder and Diane has to be constantly by his side. As Mark's life is threatened by the mafia, Reggie decides that it will be safer if

he is under police protection in the juvenile detention centre and agrees to this proposal of the cops. But she has to protect her client against the government lawyer's taking Mark to a court hearing for he will have to reveal the truth of his knowledge of what Romney had confessed before shooting himself. Reggie, being a lawyer, cannot advise Mark to lie under oath.

The climax of the story reaches heart throbbing excitement as Mark escapes from the juvenile centre. Only Reggie knows of his whereabouts but if she helps out Mark she becomes his accomplice. Both Reggie and Mark wonder if they should take another option the government lawyers have given. Mark can change the identity of himself and his family and disappear to a faraway place after helping the FBI find the hidden body. Mark has watched hundreds of crime movies and knows that the Mafia never stops hunting down the people they want. Mark, the eleven-year old boy, faces a dilemma of life and death. He is aware that even if he manages to give everyone the slip the mob will not spare his mother and little brother. But Mark is brave and can take decisions that might be unthinkable for adults and with good luck he has a lawyer



*The Client  
John Grisham  
Dell Publishing*

who is kind and compassionate enough to risk her license of law practice. However, a decision has to be made and made within the fast tracking hours!

*The Client* is an engrossing tale of the most unlikely events that fate can hold for people. It depicts a picture of the under-cover world of crime, murder and deception. Grisham's perception of starting off the story with two innocent brothers in a wood for a puff of cigarette and leading the tale on to a great story of the Mafia and the FBI caught up in violence and a fight for justice certainly shows the great writer's mastery of storytelling at its best. The characters portrayed are so real and life like that readers could imagine being a part of the whole show, as if they are living with the tormenting life threats of Mark, and can feel their hearts cry out for the seven-year old Ricky as he spends days in the hospital. The unfolding story is truly spell binding!

Grisham fans shouldn't miss the opportunity to read this epic thriller. It keeps the readers on the edge of the seat until they finally reach the last sentence.

**TULIP CHOWDHURY WRITES FICTION AND POETRY  
AND TEACHES.**

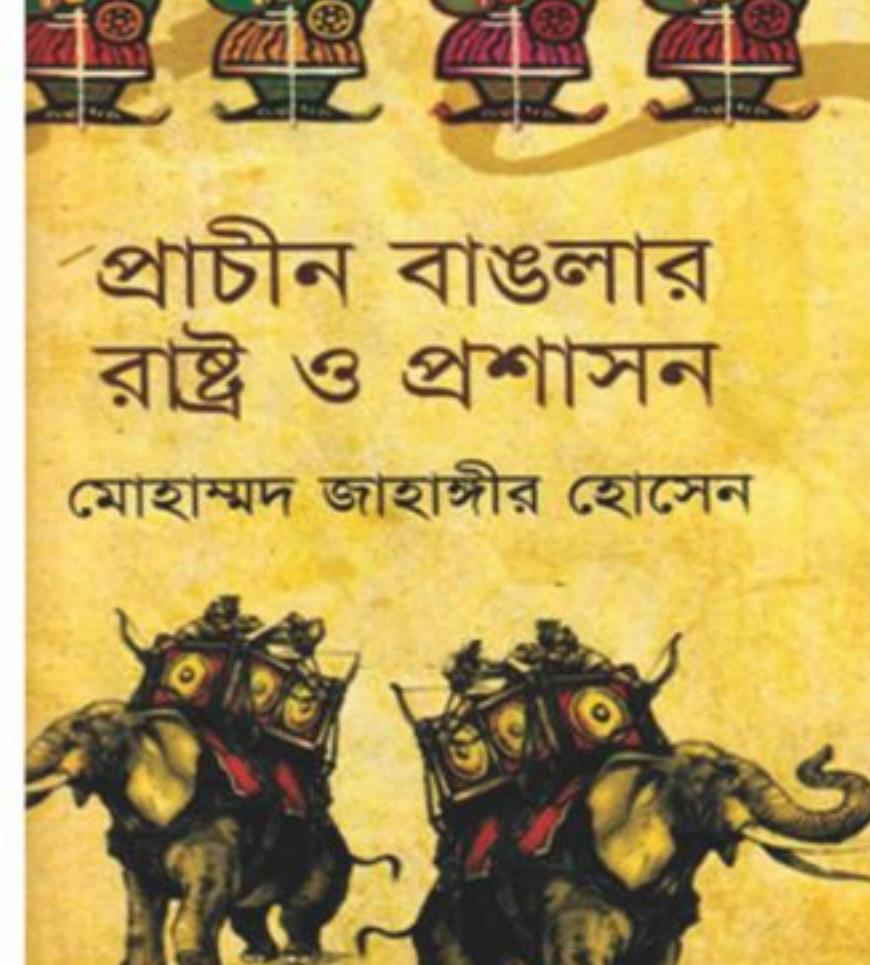
# Evolution of state and governance in ancient Bangla

*Helal Uddin Ahmed recommends a new work to readers*

Compared to other branches of social science, books on the history and evolution of public administration in Bangladesh are quite few and far between. Against this backdrop, the book under review, *Prachin Bangla Rashtra O Proshashan*, by Dr. Mohammad Jahangir Hossain can be termed as a pioneering work on the evolution of state and governance in ancient Bangla, the territory of which included the country we currently inhabit.

In ancient times, the land of 'Bangla' comprised the territories of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa.

The Bengali-speaking people or Bengalees were the majority in that land. Its domination extended from Kamrup (Assam), Pataliputra (Patna) and Bhubaneswar (Orissa) up to the border with Iran. This was the ancient state-structure of Bangla which had evolved gradually since prehistoric times. This book by Dr. Jahangir Hossain retraces the lost footprints of the Bengalee nation's journey over time with the objective of finding out the roots of state formation in Bangla. It strives to bring to light the fossils of the then statecraft and governance in this territory by linking up evidences from ancient literary sources as well as archaeological relics of the



*Prachin Bangla  
Rashtra O Proshashan  
(State and Administration of  
Ancient Bangla)  
Mohammad Jahangir Hossain  
Bangla Academy, Dhaka*

time.

The then state system, administrative programmes, departments of central administration, civil and military bureaucracy, duties and responsibilities of the state employees, hierarchical levels in bureaucracy, their relationships and interactions with the masses, and relevant ingredients of ancient history have all been juxtaposed elaborately in this compact volume alongside highlighting findings from archaeological excavations in different areas. A sociological analysis was undertaken to identify the primary stages and characteristics of state formation and the administrative framework of Bangla during the ancient era.

Side by side with elaborations on the administration of Bangla, the book has also attempted to construct an administrative history of the region. Debates have been provoked deliberately while filling up the gaps between various episodes on the basis of literary and archaeological findings. The opinions, building blocks and ingredients presented in the book will no doubt provide an insightful glimpse into the readership about the depth and originality of the administrative history and culture of Bangla.

The book has been divided into nine chapters. The first chapter dwells on the society and habitat of Bangla during prehistoric times as well as the role of bureaucracy and communications in the state apparatus. The second chapter describes the governance system of community-based alliances and people's state in ancient Bangla. The third chapter traces the emergence of the concept of state and governance in Bangla mainly based on literary and archaeological evidences. The fourth chapter elaborates on the theme of a common ancestry of Bangla and Magadha in the context of the historical evolution of the Indian

subcontinent. The fifth chapter dwells on the Magadha cum Bangla-centric administration in ancient India, starting with the Mauryan and Gupta eras. The sixth chapter highlights the elements of governance and administrative philosophy contained in Kautilya's famous book 'Artha-shastra'. The seventh chapter covers the period of 'Matshyanay' (total anarchy) in Bangla during the 7th and 8th centuries, the advent and flourishing of Buddhist rule in the form of the Pala dynasty and the collapse of the Sena

dynasty during 12th-13th centuries in the face of the Muslim invasions. The organized governance structure in ancient Bangla has been summarized in the eighth chapter while the ninth and concluding chapter recapitulates all materials in the book in a nutshell.

The book has been presented in a very lucid and free-flowing language by the author, who won the national TV debate championship back in 1982 while a student of Jahangirnagar University, earned a PhD in mass communication and journalism from the University of Dhaka in 2007 and served as Director General of Bangladesh Film Archive and Department of Films and Publications. This pioneering work on public administration of ancient Bangla by Dr. Mohammad Jahangir Hossain undoubtedly deserves favourable responses and attention from both academics and history enthusiasts alike.

**DR. HELAL UDDIN AHMED, A SENIOR CIVIL SERVANT, IS AN ESSAYIST AND POET. HE CAN BE REACHED AT HAHMED1960@GMAIL.COM MAIL TO: HAHMED1960@GMAIL.COM**