

REVIEW ESSAY

The breeze that touched the poets

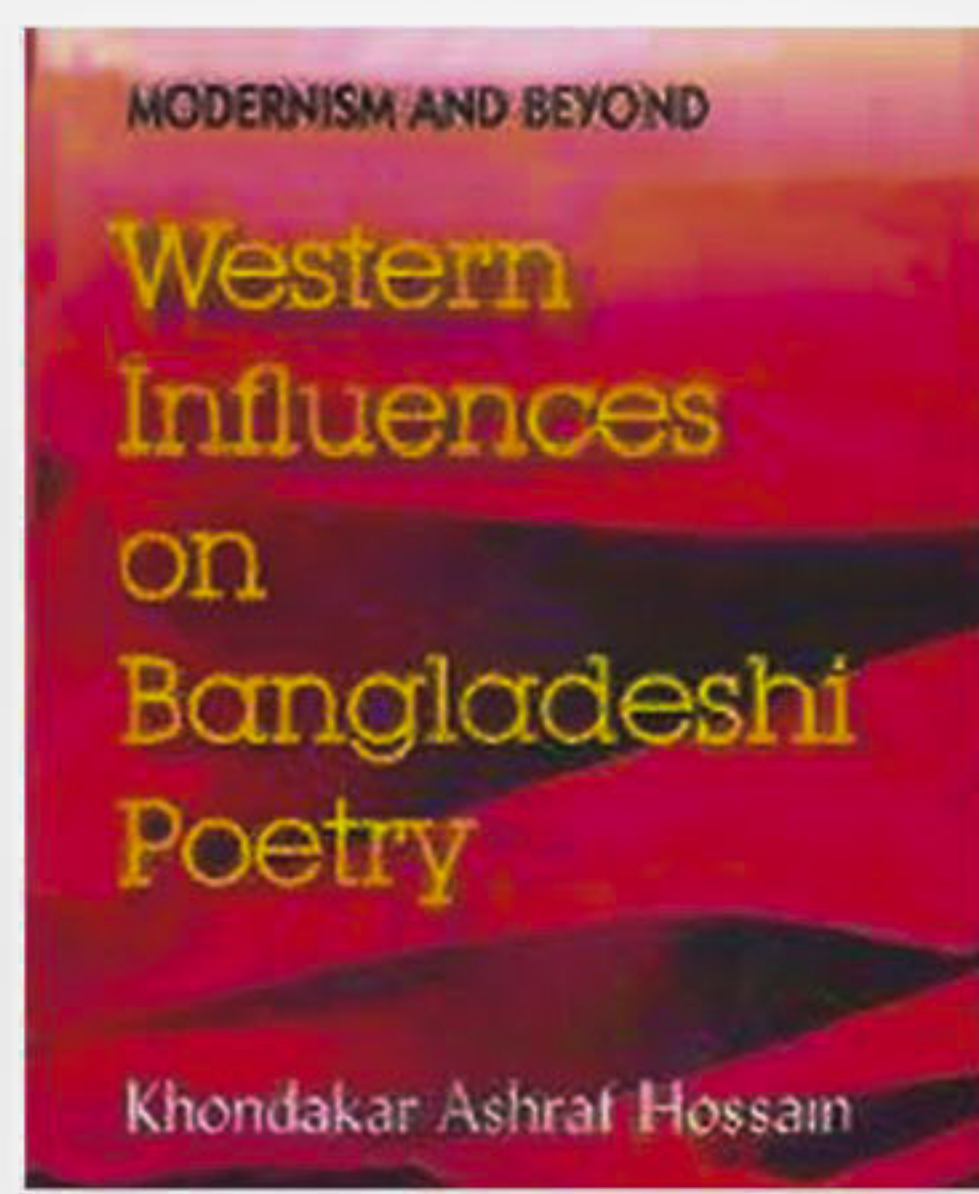
Syed Badrul Ahsan recommends a powerful literary work to readers

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain made waves with *Teen Romoni'r Qasida*, his seminal poetical work, quite some years back. And since then he has gone on to write not only substantive poetry but also purposeful literary criticism, especially on the various facets of Bengali literature. His pre-eminent position as a poet and critic has again gone with his academic pursuits as a senior teacher in the English department of Dhaka University. It is thus that he has carved a significant niche for himself as a scholar, proof of which comes through this riveting study of the degree to which Bengali poetry has been influenced by the incoming breezes and winds which once shaped literary sensibilities in the West.

There are a couple of reasons, if you think about it, why *Western Influences on Bangladeshi Poetry* should make a difference in any future assessment of literature as it has developed and could yet sprout in Bangladesh. The first, of course, is that Hossain is perhaps the first Bengali scholar, in this part of the old political divide, to have delved critically and so broadly into the question of how Bangladeshi poets have let their works feel a whiff of the powerful western fragrance. And the second is that, in a very admirable way and to his credit, Hossain has chosen to convey this assessment of Bengali literature in the medium of the English language. That last bit is quite an encouraging change, given that readers in the West have hardly had any contact with literature as it has been pursued in Bangladesh. Translation, good translation, of Bengali literary works is always hard to come by. Again, translation of literature or literary criticism all too often leaves certain gaps that do little justice to the original. The good news, though, is that Professor Hossain has now come forth with a study, in the English language, of Bengali poetry that ought to leave readers, in this country as well as beyond it, sitting back in satisfaction.

Western Influences hints broadly at what Hossain intends to do. He sets off by making a distinction between Bengali literature that has been the hallmark of West Bengal and Bengali literature that has imperceptibly but patently evolved in what was in time to become the independent state of Bangladesh. But, of course, Hossain zeroes in on 1947 as the cut-off year when the two parts of Bengal went their separate ways, the eastern part of the old province branching out towards creating its own literary ethos. To be sure, the excitement generated by the creation of Pakistan was in the years immediately after partition defined by the essential communalism of the new state. You could speak here of Farrukh Ahmed, an unquestionably brilliant poet who nevertheless was too carried away by the idea of Pakistan and to a point where Islamic symbols, with imagery characteristic of Arabian deserts, began to define his poetry. Farrukh Ahmed, then, was a lost cause right from the beginning.

In large measure, modernity was what poets in the mould of Farrukh Ahmed did not have. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain then informs us that the modernity which was to define poetry in Bangladesh had for its genesis not merely the poetic thoughts of the French genius Baudelaire but also such western pioneers of literary styles and formulations as TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Federico Garcia Lorca and William Butler Yeats, among others. But, of course, these purveyors of western poetic thought had Bengali followers preceding those who were to emulate them in East Pakistan/Bangladesh. You could think here of Buddhadev Bose, Jibanananda Das and Sudhindranath Dutta.



Modernism and Beyond
Western Influences on Bangladeshi Poetry
Khondakar Ashraf Hossain
Dhaka Viswavidyalay Prakashana Samstha
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And Tagore? Hossain is emphatic in his assertion that the East and the West fused in Tagore, enough for Bose to describe him as the 'first European in Bangla literature.' It is interesting to note, however, that the western influence which was to work its way into the poetic imaginations of Bengali poets in the 1930s and subsequently in post-1947 East Pakistan/Bangladesh was a factor that was missing in Tagore's poetry. Every inch a modern man, the Nobel laureate remained nevertheless firmly rooted to his land, to the distinctive romanticism that defined his poetic personality from beginning to end. That was not the case, in large measure, with men like Amiya Chakravarty or Bishnu Dey.

The truth was that modernism came to exercise an influence in Bangladesh's poets in the way it once did with Baudelaire and Eliot. For these western poets, the city emerged as a

focal point of poetic thought with its desperation and its despondency and its loneliness. There were too such creative eruptions as the French Symbolist Movement, the English Imagist Movement and French Surrealism, all of which were to find expression, down the years, in Bangladeshi poetry. And when did Bangladeshi poetry begin? Professor Hossain is clear about it: it all began with the partition of India in 1947. Barring the early euphoria of communal politics in Pakistan, Bangladeshi poetry essentially took off with the three poets Hossain considers to have been the vanguard of the secular modernist tradition in the eastern part of Pakistan. And these poets were Abul



KHONDAKAR ASHRAF HOSSAIN

Hossain, Syed Ali Ahsan and Ahsan Habib. And yet could Ahsan's truly be regarded as a definitive secular presence? Hossain points to his divided poetic persona, that side of it which upheld his secular spirit and that which yet tempted him with its call to Islamic grandeur. This ambivalence remained all too pronounced in his *Chahar Darbesh*. With Ahsan Habib, no such ambivalence was at work. What was significant, though, about his poetry was the Eliotesque which defined it, indeed in the very first volume of his poetry, *Ratrishesh* (The Night's End), published in 1947. Frustration and failure are at the core of the inaugural poem in the compilation. The sense of modernist alienation was at work.

With Abul Hossain, an avid reader of western literature, the modernist came through a deliberate sidetracking of romantic lyricism and a consciousness adoption of a sophisticated prose style which brought his poetry close to quotidian colloquial speech. Abul Hossain's poetry too owed much of its ideas and perspectives to the Eliotesque. The imagery of wastelands and mirages is as much part of Hossain's poetic landscape as it is of the 1930s' poets. Syed Ali Ahsan's dichotomy, caught as he was between the modern and the Islamic, did not however prevent his getting drawn to such metaphysical phenomena as time and eternity.

It is a thought which underpins Uchcharon, his volume of poetry. Khondakar Ashraf Hossain makes it a point to note a few other trends that defined, even at that early stage, the nature of Bangladeshi poetry. Of those trends, the Marxist and the Islamic happened to be more pronounced than any other. In Sikandar Abu Zafar and Sanaul Haq, Marxism was significant; in Golam Mostafa, Shahadat Hossain and Talim Hossain, the poetic imagery was derived from an Islamic past, with necessarily its roots in distant Arabia.

If the trio of the 1940s were the precursors of the modernist trend in Bangladeshi poetry, it was the Fifties Quartet, as the writer puts it, who injected substance into that poetry. These were the men --- and we speak of Shamsur Rahman, Al Mahmud, Shahid Quadri and Syed Shamsul Haq --- who, untouched by anything of the communal or the religious, branched out into a wide expanse of secular poetry. Of course, they borrowed from the West --- from Baudelaire, Eliot and from a whole range of others --- as they explicated the themes of pleasure and pain and love and beauty in their poetry. Hossain does not forget to inform us that the quartet actually had its finest hour in the 1960s and 1970s. But he does note that their modernity started off in the 1950s, symbolising a time when the Bengalis of East Pakistan were on their tentative path to a rediscovery of their historically secular identity. Shamsur Rahman's early poetry was fundamentally conceived in the shadow of Baudelaire. Romance gives way to fear of the city. And let us not forget that Rahman was the versifier who brought Dionysian elements into Bangladesh's poetry. In the end, it was the interplay of the classical and the romantic, in the tradition of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, that sustained much of Shamsur Rahman's poetry. For Shahid Quadri, it was natural for foreign influences to make broad inroads into his poetry and for him to flaunt the occurrence cheerfully. French Symbolism served as a measure of his poetic genius, but unlike the romantic in Rahman, he goes for the cerebral. His images reflect the squalid realities of the city, to a point where, as the writer notes, his poetry can be regarded as an extended diary of a disconcerted and even deranged citizen on his nocturnal rounds. Read Quadri's *Uttaradhikar*. The arrival of rain is symbolic of disorder, even terror.

Like Quadri, Syed Shamsul Haq passed under the Baudelarian influence. That does not detract, though, from the fact of his heavy indebtedness to Jibanananda Das, Yeats and Eliot. In *Purana Prasaad*, there is a clear going back to Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. And yet Haq refuses to stay trapped, as it were, in such a mould. The Freudian seduces him, with its powerful allusions to sexuality, a factor that becomes a potent ingredient in his poetry. Haq's poetry is, in that sense, the earliest indication of unadulterated

eroticism making its way into Bengali literature. With Al Mahmud, the stream of poetic thought is an entirely different happenstance. He is every inch a modernist and yet appears to be striving to take poetry away from the modernist trend and back to its pastoral roots. Through an employment of colloquial speech, Mahmud seems to be reminding readers of the old traditions that once underlined literary endeavours in the Bengali cultural landscape. To that extent, his poetry comes in the tradition of the Yeatsian rather than the Eliotesque. There is, in Al Mahmud, a profusion of references to nature in Bangladesh, in much the same lyrical manner in which Yeats refers to the natural ambience of his native Ireland. Ironically, it is Eliot's dictum which Al Mahmud clearly seems to be living through --- that 'a writer writes with the history of his country in his bones.' You only have to go back to Mahmud's *Sonali Kabin* (1973) to appreciate the thought.

Khondakar Ashraf Hossain's interpretations, at once gradualist and incisive, of the western literary trends that have found echoes in Bangladeshi poetry, flow into the 1970s and into the periods thereafter. The Sixties are a labyrinth for him and into them step Nirmalendu Goon, Rafiq Azad and Abul Hasan, poets he describes as the most remarkable in the decade. The confessional mode, as it defined American poetry, is for a while an attraction for these poets. Abul Hasan dies young, at twenty eight, but his three volumes of poetry remain a confirmation of the confessional strain he worked on. Indeed, as Professor Hossain shows in his analysis, there is a wide-ranging pattern of influences that have helped shape Bangladeshi poetry. Think here of the Liverpool poets, a kind of poet-singers or singer-poets or, more appropriately, a new kind of troubadors (in Hossain's terms) who were a clear pull for Bengali poets.

Western Influences is comprehensive in its examination of not just Bangladeshi poetry but also of the themes and motifs Bangladeshi poets have unreservedly drawn or borrowed from the West. But much more remarkable than the borrowing is Khondakar Ashraf Hossain's painstaking, detailed and transparent elucidation of the long road Bangladesh's poetry has travelled in the more than six decades since its links with the other half of the old Bengal were snapped.

This is a work that should reach all enthusiasts of Bangladeshi literature, both at home and abroad. The reason is self-evident: it gives, at last, an authentic voice to the aesthetic and cultural aspirations of a people whose overriding claim on history has been their language and the magic they have wrought by weaving seamless patterns of beauty through it. (Reprinted in reader interest).

SYED BADRUL AHASAN EDITS STAR LITERATURE AND STAR BOOKS REVIEW.

Perspectives on ticklish issues

Shahid Alam goes through a worthwhile read

If anyone can genuinely and productively help in decisively resolving the latent, at times turning demonstrative, contentious relations between India and Pakistan, then all those ponderous thoughts offered in the book under review for bringing about fruitful cooperation among the nations of the South Asian region will fall into place, post-facto resolution of the thorny issues between the two nuclear-armed neighbours. *Regional Cooperation & Globalisation: Bangladesh, South Asia and Beyond*, edited by Zillur R. Khan and Meghna Guhathakurta, longtime academics both, concentrates heavily on the South Asian region, with only a solid analytical-conceptual chapter ("Empire, Globalisation and the Political Subject" by Ranabir Samaddar) and a distinctly pedestrian one by Abul Kalam justifying the inclusion of "Beyond" in the book's sub-title. Eleven chapters make up the anthology, which has been dedicated to the memory of Ambassador Fakhruddin Ahmed, once a foreign secretary to the government of Bangladesh. As is often the case, the articles written by a variety of authors are uneven in quality, although the overall quality of the book should satisfy the average reader.

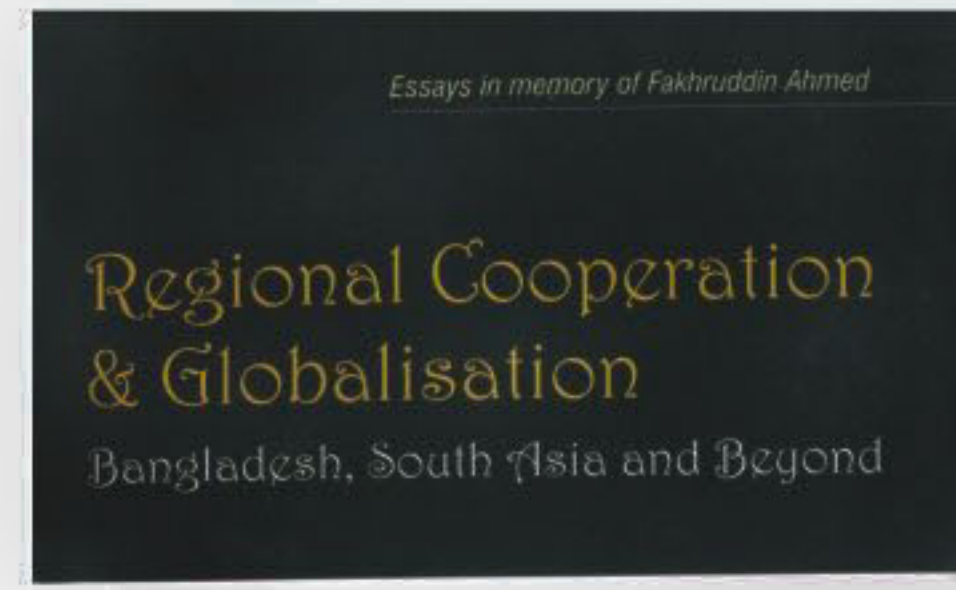
In view of the book's primary focus, the otherwise run-of-the-mill (not to say somewhat skewed) article by A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed ("Bangladesh: Present State and Future Prospects") turns out to be its most significant chapter. The editors lay out a rather grand vision for the book: "...designed to epitomize the hope, expectations and aspirations about regional cooperation and trust building..." This objective can be achieved "through a process of regional cooperation generating a concerted effort to address the issues and problems facing South Asian nations.... The shared experience thus gained in problem-solving and policy-making is likely to enhance the capacity to devise innovative non-zero-sum game approaches in securing the benefits and avoiding the pit-falls of joint ventures." It is always good to hold high hopes in the South Asian context, with its pervasive India-Pakistan imbroglio, although the authors acknowledge this sobering reality: "Bilateral issues still remain unresolved preventing normalization and improvement of relations between India and Pakistan...." Therefore, SAARC, in effect the

major focus of the book, has "limited multilateral scope". Now we are talking sobering reality. The articles are littered with a number of rhetorical suggestions, many that are unlikely to come down to earth from the realm of pure pedantry, and a few others that are practical and practicable.

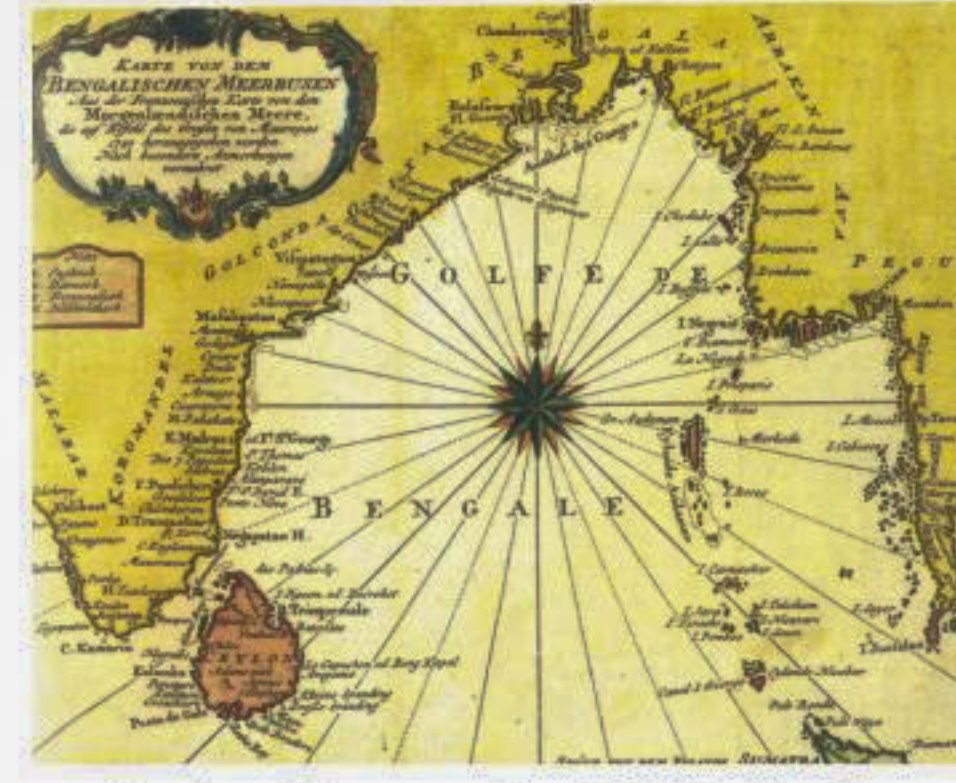
The editors' preface contains this flip side of globalization as it urges greater regional cooperation: that such cooperation could be "the most effective way to present a united front by the non-western nations against a possible downside of globalism --- economic exploitation of the Third World by some advanced countries." Just "possible"? Really? They also call South Asia "the most dangerous subcontinent of the world." I did not know there was any other geographically recognized subcontinent in the world. A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed brings up a particularly reprehensible and inherently dangerous phenomenon that has crept in, or has been allowed to creep in, Bangladesh's traditionally tolerant Sufi-inspired Muslim society: "the backward-looking and reactionary movements like the so-called wahhabi and farazi movements" who are "the progenitors of the present-day exponents of the fundamentalist or radical Islamist such as Jamaat-e-Islami (sic) and...militant out-fits(sic)...." On the subject of Islam and Muslims in India, he observes with deep insight: "...the coexistence of two distinct trends in Muslim thought, religious and secular, have deeply affected the subsequent development of the Muslim community. This dichotomy is noticeable in the national consciousness and political development of the community." The process of pervasive Islamization of Bangladesh reached its climax under President H.M. Ershad with the ironic outcome that, as Ahmed constructs, Bangladesh became "more Pakistani than Pakistan".

Ambassador Fakhruddin Ahmed ("SAARC --- Its Evolution, Growth and Prospects") identifies President Ziaur Rahman as the author of SAARC, besides recognizing a key factor impeding the regional organization's fulfillment of its ascribed objectives: that it has not yet succeeded in removing distrust among some of its member-states. Zillur R. Khan ("Ideology and Internal Dynamics of South

Asian Regional Cooperation") points out a major stumbling block that has not made regional cooperation easy in Asia: such cooperation "has not been able to maintain a balance of politico-economic, and military



edited by Zillur R. Khan & Meghna Guhathakurta



Regional Cooperation & Globalisation
Bangladesh, South Asia and Beyond
Eds Zillur R. Khan and Meghna Guhathakurta
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interests of member states". This trend could also be noticed in the most successful regional cooperation body in Asia: the ASEAN. Khan also comes up with a highfalutin model (probably only of interest to purveyors of the esoteric, but not to the average interested reader) to explain the relationship between the ideologies of regional cooperation and regional stability: RCI---RA---RR---RL (1+P) = RS. A footnote spells out the abbreviations, and the reader will just have to get the details from the book. Such modular exercise may give one an

added aura of great scholarship!

Kamal Hossain ("Bangladesh and South Asia: Challenge of Regional Co-Operation in the Twenty-First Century") ends his short piece with the general premise underlying the creation and operation of SAARC: "A shared commitment to the goal of sustainable development for the benefit of the peoples...could...be served through multi-layered, multi-dimensional regional co-operation". Rehman Sobhan ("Mediating Political Conflict in a Confrontational Environment: The Experience of G-5") recounts a chastening experience in confronting an abysmal state of political culture obtaining in the country, characterized by virulent political partisanship, intolerance of opposing viewpoints, winner-take-all and winning-at-all-cost mentality, and mirror imaging of each other by the major political parties. He recalls, when acting as a mediator in 1995: "The insistence of the then PM, Begum Khaleda Zia, to have a member of her party head a caretaker government, and the refusal of the AL to accept anyone but a non-party person to hold this sensitive office were driven by (the) climate of suspicion and emerged as the principal stumbling block to an agreement".

Syed Anwar Husain, in the course of giving his views on Bangladesh's foreign policy endeavours ("Bangladesh Foreign Policy: A Framework for Consensus Building"), underscores the imperative of having a healthy political culture: "...there cannot be satisfactory consensus either in domestic politics or foreign policy, unless a positive change overtakes our political culture". How true! But how frustratingly far from realization! Husain makes another critical observation: "...of all the forms of government, democracy makes heaviest demand on the quality of leadership". Liberal pluralist democracy in Bangladesh is a long way from being satisfied with the returns from its demand!

Ambassador Tariq Karim ("Quo Vadis, Bangladesh?") dwells at some length, and with much perspicacity, on the worrying rise of radical Islamism in Bangladesh. He traces its encroachment into the country's body politic from almost total obscurity courtesy outright and disguised military dictatorships that found it convenient to espouse their own right-wing

ideology to distinguish themselves from the constitutionally secular country and its generally devout, but tolerant, Muslim population. Hamid H. Kizilbash ("SAARC: Security Concerns and Regional Cooperation") while revealing himself to be a pacifist espousing non-violence as a way of life a la Mahatma Gandhi and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, is also a pragmatist. He draws attention to what might be the key factor in South Asian inter-state relations: "...threat perception and the way in which it influences the behaviour of states in South Asia have made this region distinctly inhospitable to move for regional cooperation". He is clearly skeptical about SAARC in the prevailing environment: "South Asia's profile suggests more problems than promise of regional cooperation". Kizilbashponders on one ramification of this situation: "The subcontinent continues to be open to manipulation by outside powers as long as they make intelligent use of the contradictions existing between the various members of the South Asian community". He does touch upon a rarely-identified channel that can be used to guard against the spread of misperceptions, creation of negative images, and the propagation of ethnic and religious hysteria: the media.

Ranabir Samaddar ("Empire, Globalisation, and the Political Subject") offers an erudite conceptual discussion on globalization and its moving force: the United States of America. He terms the current American domination as its Empire, but asserts that it is not going to be around with that appellation for much longer: "...we can see the danger to the Empire --- a danger represented by the political subject who has seen the absence of the critical space between sovereignty and the form of political organization, and has turned the absence into its advantage". Abul Kalam ("Interfacing Bangladesh-Japan in a Globalizing World: The Guiding Framework") does not establish any coherent and meaningful interface between Bangladesh and Japan in a globalizing world, but, nonetheless, *Regional Cooperation & Globalisation: Bangladesh, South Asia and Beyond* is a worthwhile, if, at times, laborious, read.

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