

A good, though not a great work

Shahid Alam goes through a sapper's tale

Memoirs can be a tricky proposition for a reviewer to undertake. Usually those written by influential political figures, particularly great statesmen and women, or by soldiers who had led, or participated in, great or lesser military campaigns, or by famed sportspeople, or great figures in the artistic world attract attention. More than a few people would be interested in going through autobiographies of, for example, Nelson Mandela, Winston Churchill, Marshal Georgi Zhukov, General Heinz Guderian, Lord Laurence Olivier, Marlon Brando, Sir Don Bradman, and the like. Not more than a handful, however, would take the trouble of reading the life stories of those who do not fall in any of the lofty categories just mentioned.

Majid-ul-Haq decidedly does not fall in the lofty class. Yet he was a senior military man, high civil bureaucrat, and a political figure who served as a cabinet minister in the government of Bangladesh, in that order of professional occupation (politics in Bangladesh, as in many other countries, is a serious occupation), but did not reach the lofty heights that distinguish the truly outstanding achiever from the rest. Mind you, as a capable officer in the engineering wing of the Pakistan army, he accomplished some admirable feats, which he describes in his book. The title, Unknown, Unhonoured and Unsung could be perceived as self-deprecating, or as an expression of self-pity, but either of those would not quite be to the point. It might more cogently be viewed from the author's paraphrasing of a history professor's outlook: "...history, written by an official or professional historian, only gives a general overview of the time he writes about, comprising mainly of a preferred section of society without which the details or characteristics of the yarns that make up the whole fabric are ignored and given too broad a treatment." True, but such is the nature of constrained pithiness and ruthlessness in the selection of topics/people to be covered that is the lot of the dispassionate historiographer.

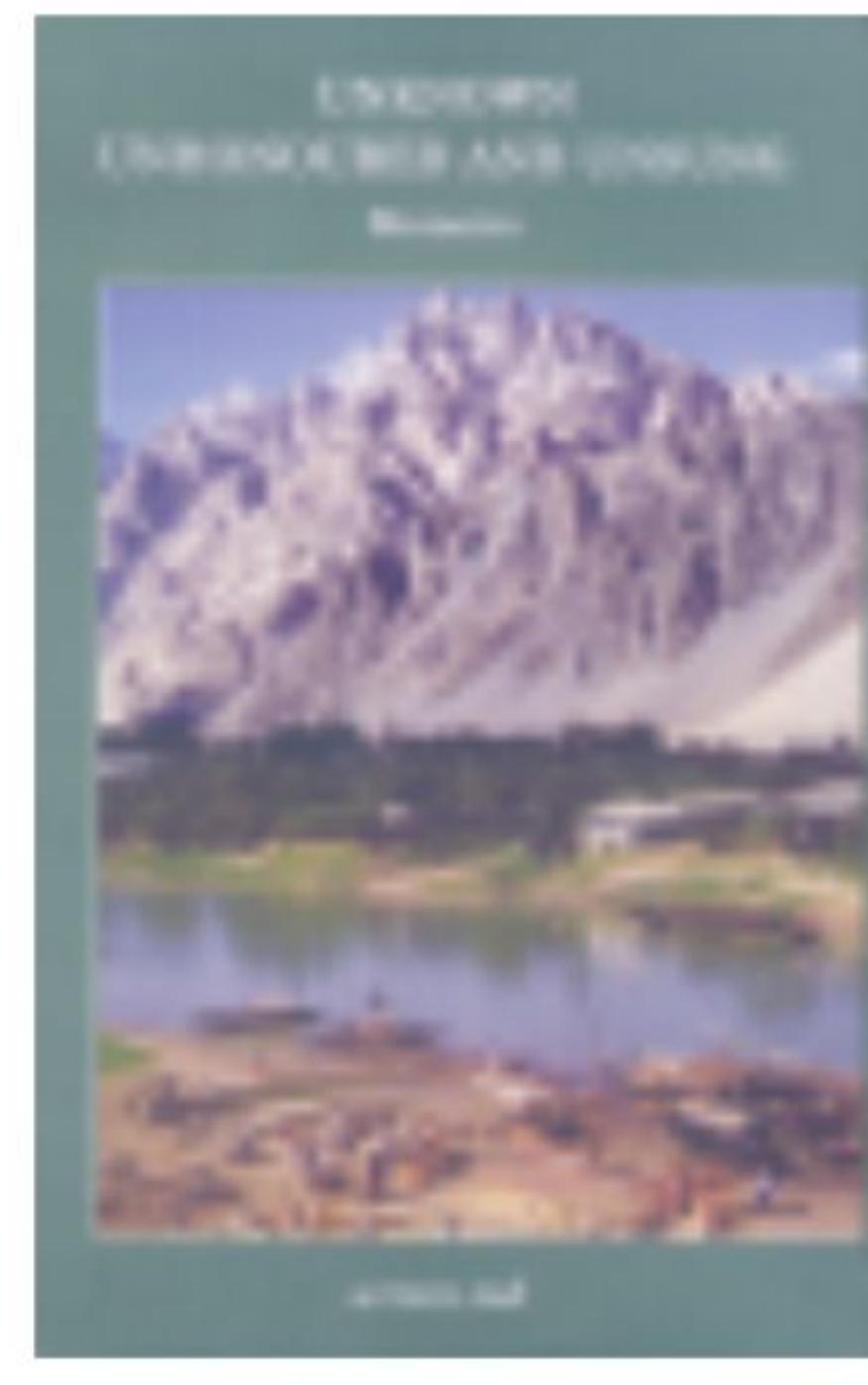
Thus, Majid-ul-Haq's book is the autobiography of a man who will not appear in the annals of history except, probably, in a small section or as a large footnote in Bangladesh's political history, but as a pleasant reading, it is worthwhile taking time out to sit back and go through it at one go. The first volume begins by paying tribute to the memory of his father, an official in the employ of the British raj, through his educational progress, enlistment in the British Indian army as an officer-cadet and getting commissioned in the successor Pakistan army, his marriage (now there is an enthralling and amusing account of his travails before getting

hitched to an accomplished lady who displayed character traits that seemed to be a good mix of traditional, modern, and postmodern!), and military career up to his vital involvement in the building of the Karakoram Highway.

As with memoirs, there are a number of references to family, friends and acquaintances. Of great interest to me is his account of the quintessential Bengali mother, for whom even the grown-up and established son remains a child. Let Haq narrate his mother's reaction on his returning home from his Dehradun Indian Military Academy (IMA) break: "My mother's first comments were how thin I had become, blaming the food we ate and also the hard manual labour outside in the sun. I tried to explain to my mother that I could not have become darker than what I was before. Without any pretensions, I told Amma that had my face been handsomer and skin fairer, she would have been pestered by parents of girls desiring to be my in-laws! Whatever explanation I gave, Amma was not impressed at all. Then I realized how parents, particularly mothers, think their children to be more handsome than anyone else!" Delicious! And how disarmingly candid!

Haq had interesting school and college mates, and, in one case, a very famous one. In high school, it was Mukesh, and he needs no introduction to Indian music aficionados. At Shibpur Engineering College, his classmate was Sharif-ul-Alam Imam Ahmed, later on the husband of Shaheed Janani Janahara Imam and father of Shaheed Shaf Imam Rumi. At Shibpur, he hints at having had a soft corner for the Comintern (Communist International, India chapter), while at IMA, he was deeply struck by IMA doyen General Chetwood's speech at the Academy, part of which is engraved on its dais:

"The safety, honour and welfare of your country come first, always and every time. The honour, welfare and comfort of the men you command come next."



Unknown, Unhonoured and Unsung, Vol. 1
Major General (rtd.) Majid-ul-Haq
writers.ink

Your own ease, comfort and safety come last, always and every time."

I have quoted these lines from the book more to highlight Bangladesh's political culture over the last few decades. The exchange of the words "first" and "last" in their respective lines would speak volumes about the political (as well as many other) mindset.

Haq provides two fascinating accounts of his encounter with the arcane world --- one involving a naked fakir and the other a really striking one with an astrologer. The latter engagement obviously left a deep and long-lasting impression on the author. At least some readers, like many of Haq's young audiences, might be inclined to think of him as a spinner of yarns when he mentions that, in his school days, a kilogram of mutton cost about 25 paisas, and a kilo of milk around six to eight paisas. Except that he was only recounting facts. However, economists will tell you that, for a variety of reasons, the phenomenon is not an uncommon occurrence across different eras.

Regarding personalities that he came across, Haq has thoughtful observations and comments. Probably the most arresting is with regard to the Pathans. When the writer was posted to the Pakistani Pathan country of Mardan, Brigadier Loring, the Brigade Commander of the 3rd Armoured Brigade of the Pakistan army (which had retained several British officers in its early years), offered him this sterling piece of advice: "Young man, be careful when you go out. Do not make any effort to look at and appreciate the beautiful face of any young damsel. Should you do so, a bullet will make a clean hole in your skull before you realize it. The tribals have their own code of conduct and are a very proud people." The British had fought the tribals on enough occasions to be acutely aware of their code! In this context, I am reminded of a recent CNN news documentary on a sharp firefight between the Taliban and the US special forces. At its end, an American officer declared that he and his fellow-soldiers

admired the resilience and toughness of the Taliban (really Afghan Pathans) and that the two sides had mutual respect for each other. That, of course, did not mean that the Americans would not kill the Taliban, he added!

He also touches upon a particular piece of British magnanimity. Although Haq had pulled off a difficult task successfully, Pakistan army C-in-C Gen. Douglas Gracy and Engineer-in-Chief Maj. Gen. W.L.D. Veitch congratulated the battalion CO Major Pennington. Whereupon, Pennington protested, "Sir, I do not deserve this congratulation, this is Majid's due." On the other hand, he also recalls the days of the British raj when many of their establishment entrances displayed tablets reading "Dogs and Indians not allowed."

On a different subject, Haq, in effect, concludes that Ayub Khan had rigged the 1965 Pakistan presidential election to defeat his opponent Miss Fatima Jinnah. He elucidates, "...in a dictatorial regime with military power or 'money-muscle' democracy rigging is a style for political existence." This observation has universal relevance. The author, however, is all praise for the East Pakistan governor in the early 1960s, Lt. Gen. Azam Khan, who shunned the colonial style of administration and earned the respect and admiration of the Bengalis. His popularity with the Bengalis probably caused Ayub Khan to have serious heartburn, and he removed Azam from his post. Azam guessed the reason for his dismissal, and said so. Haq quotes him, "People must realize that Pakistan is like a shaheen (eagle) with two wings...both the wings will have to be equally strong or else it will fail to perform. With this conviction in my mind, I had been hammering this point on the powers that be to take appropriate action fast. Perhaps, that has been the reason of displeasure with me!"

Haq injects his lucid narrative with a few profound observations. Taking into consideration that usually one believes his/her generation to be better than the ones following, there is still much merit in his contrasting of the military personnel of his day and those of today: "They (his course mates) were more understanding and sincere and less materialistic than today's breed. At that time we found them to be much less arrogant than what we see today!" He might as well be commenting on the latter-day generation in general. Unknown, Unhonoured and Unsung will, at the very least, offer the reader an easy and enjoyable read.

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The poetic and the prosaic More than a travelogue is what Sania Aiman reads

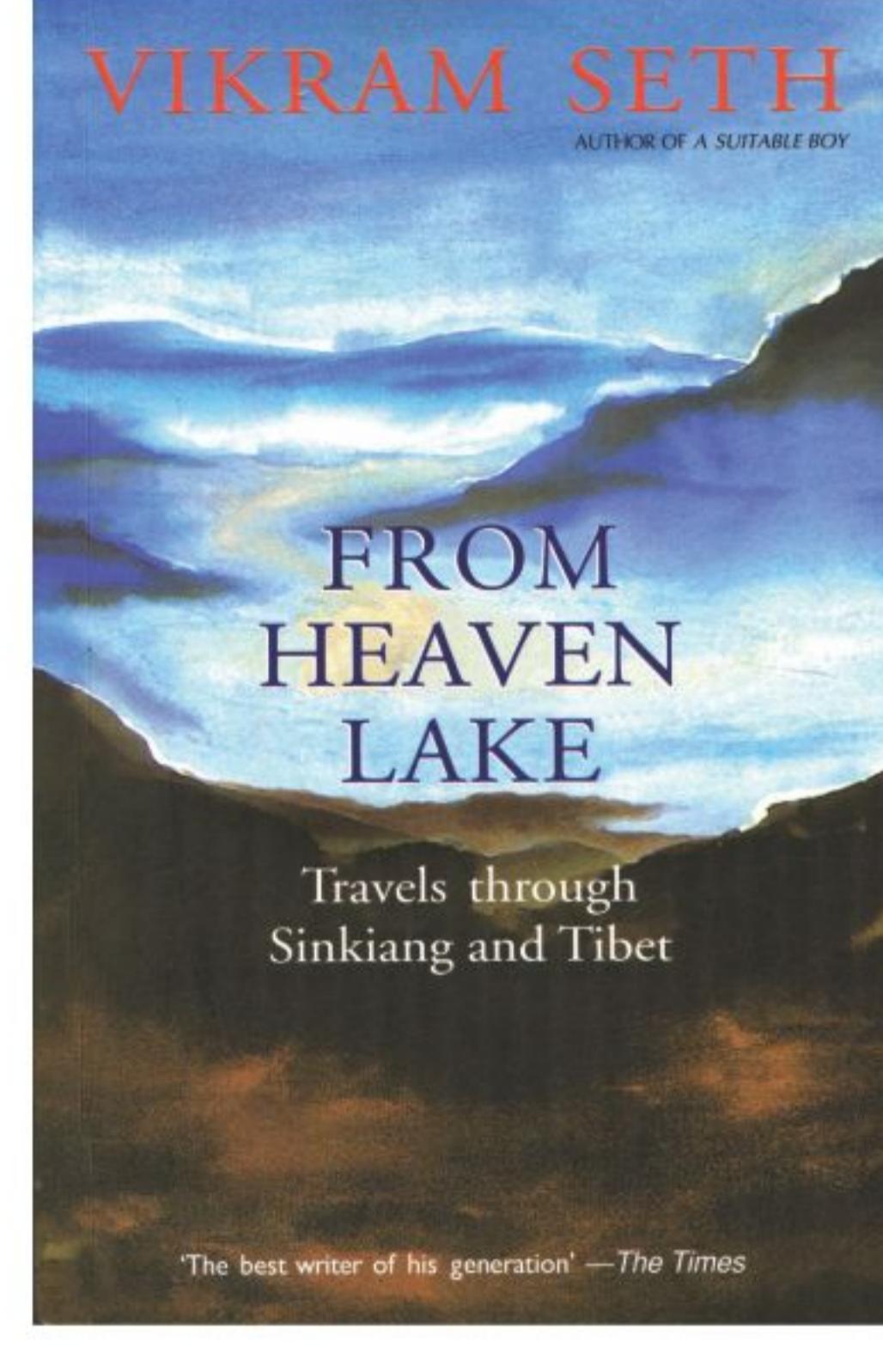
The idea of reading an account of another person's travels did not attract me until I read Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake*.

It will be quite an injustice to limit the narrative to being only an account of travel through China's Nanjing onwards to Tibet and then on to Delhi, and look upon its as a mere travelogue. Seth pulls you into the journey, taking you along for a wonderful and interactive ride, bringing alive the surroundings and the people he meets.

The journey is an engaging description of how Seth, as an Indian student in China in the 1980s, suddenly desires to and, eventually, gets permission to visit Tibet along his trek from Nanjing to Delhi for the summer vacations. Beginning in Turfan, he took possibly the most unconventional route, through the exotic sounding Xian, Urumqi, Antioch, Yarkhand, Kashgar, Chengdu, Germu, Dingri and Qinghai, then on to the more familiar Lhasa and Kathmandu, finally to arrive home. People of different areas, over the stopovers that they made, had different stories to tell, showcasing differences in culture, expectations, reservations and implications.

The stories of an old Uighur who could not write to his son, and of a son who could not write to his own child, due to a government experiment with the Arabic script of the Uighur language into Latin, is an eye-opener to how short-lived policies can have long term effects on the lives of common people.

Little tidbits of knowledge keep the reader engaged, for example, the beauty of the underground storage of water for irrigation in the desert-like Xinjiang, in formations called karez. The writer discerns the difference in Buddha's demeanour and effect, on the faces of huge statues that scare, others that appear benign, simply due to the sculptors' moulding of Buddha's face. Seth points to the spiritual scar of the common man caused by the wanton destruction of places of worship held in



From Heaven Lake
Vikram Seth
Daily Star Books/Penguin India

some value. Such an event is brought to attention by the poignancy expressed in some Chinese poetry written on the charred walls of a burnt-down temple in Dunhuang:

"This day Zhi Xiong came to the old temple. He came from far away with no other intention.

Than to see the ancient temple

And he saw it and wept."

The familiarity, adaptability and no frills attitude that the student Seth carries are translated into his writing. He seems to have this irresistible urge to jump into water bodies of all types that he comes across, which are blessed

edly clean and calming to the frazzled nerves of the hitchhiker.

Hitching on to a truck to Lhasa, he spends a large part of his journey in the company of the truck driver Sui and two other people. Their sometimes easy, sometimes uneasy camaraderie that develops despite the language and racial differences are a testament to the equalizing qualities of hardship suffered by travellers together.

Seth tries to describe his experiences with an open mind. Many Han are said to be prejudiced against the minorities, especially the Tibetans, and their cultures. But some do not differentiate, like Sui, and judge people from a narrow point of view. However, a chance encounter with Norbu and his family in Tibet leads Seth to see a more cruel side of the Chinese cultural revolution and the persecution of Tibetans that it caused. On many occasions, Seth gets warm and kind behaviour from strangers because of his being an Indian and singing popular Indian songs, knowing a bit of the Arabic script, and simple good manners.

From Heaven Lake is a gem of a travelogue, full of information, even though it might seem dated at times and somewhat redundant due to China's leaps of growth and change in the past two decades. The political or economic commentary is not very deep, Seth having travelled as a wanderer rather than as an analyst.

But what will enthrall readers, irrespective of their predilection for one type of writing or the other, is his narrative whose literariness is steeped not only in his penchant for lucid details but also in infusing it with a language that combines the poetic with the prosaic in a manner unique only to Seth. This book heralds both the poet and the novelist in Seth, and rightly so.

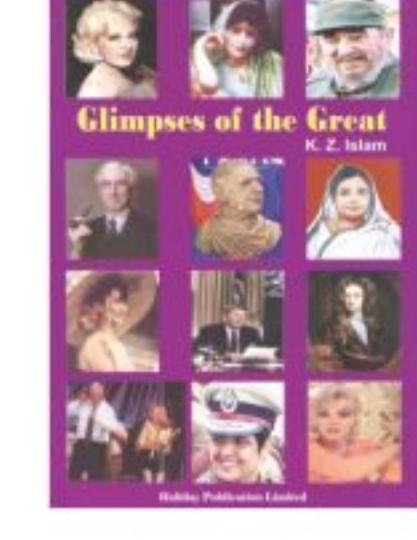
Sania Aiman is pursuing her master's degree in economics at Dhaka University.

BOOK choice

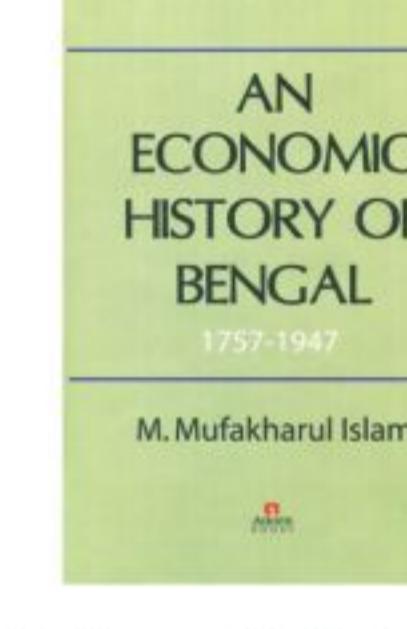
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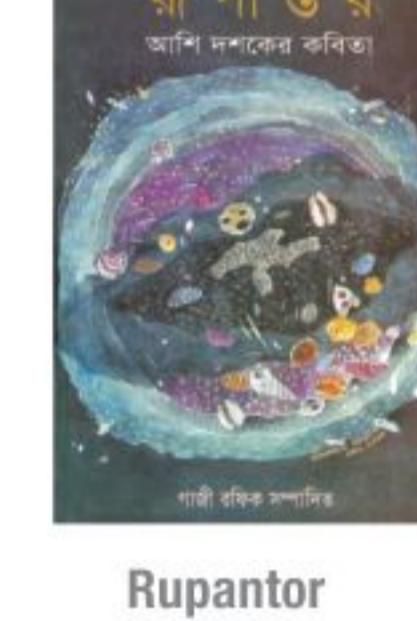
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BOOK NOTE

Bangladesh and the world

Current Affairs is an anthology of articles on contemporary issues written by former ambassador Barrister Harun ur Rashid in newspapers and newsmagazines. Most of them were published in the years 2011 and 2012.

The book consists of 337 pages and was published in February this year by Academic Press and Publishers Library (APPL), Dhaka.

Although such articles have a short shelf period, only those articles which are of relevance to the issues of today have found space in the book. The articles cover a wide range of subjects that are of importance to Bangladesh --- political, economic and strategic --- as power shifts to the Asia Pacific region.

The articles are structured into four themes --- Bangladesh, South Asia, Middle East and International Relations. They contain investigative commentaries on contemporary burning issues affecting all countries.

The article may be read individually or read together, from subject to subject. Either way, a common golden thread of shifting global geo-politics will be evident from the articles.

The author argues that no powerful

country can resolve global issues alone as countries are interconnected with one another much more than any other period in time earlier because of globalization.

Located between India and China and given the geo-political paradigm shift, Bangladesh is able to play an important role, not only with its proposed regional interconnectivity with both India and China but also with its access to the high seas of the Indian Ocean. The book also provides a glimpse into critical issues, including the challenges of Bangladesh foreign policy in relation to how Bangladesh fits in when power happens to be shifting to the Asia Pacific region.

The author is conscious of the fact that his views as expressed in the articles may not be unanimously shared by others. But he will be happy if it generates a healthy discussion on the issues covered in the book.

The book is a major contribution to the understanding of contemporary issues and constitutes a rich resource for anyone who is interested in domestic, regional and international cooperation.

CURRENT AFFAIRS

Harun ur Rashid

Current Affairs
Barrister Harun ur Rashid
Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva

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