

REVIEW ESSAY

Of reading, in the nocturnal hours

Syed Badrul Ahsan has thoughts to share with readers

There are all the books you need to read. And yet there is little time or a lack of space or an absence of the sort of solitude you need to lose yourself in if you mean to read. The hours of the day are lost dealing with a thousand mundane worries, which leaves you with the silence of the night. That of course presupposes the thought that you are a nocturnal animal, you are not among those who must hit the bed soon after dinner, you are indeed one whose day begins sometime after midnight. If the night is your friend and you its

influenced the political course of events in Pakistan. He feels Air Marshal Asghar Khan could have made a good defence minister under his father, but that would have disappointed General Musa, the army chief. About Asghar Khan's politics, Gohar is unambiguous: 'Asghar Khan's sense of timing with regard to his political moves has been consistently flawed'. About Bhutto, here is Gohar's take on the man: 'He started using provocative language even on international platforms and started behaving in an irresponsible and objectionable manner. He was working fast in the direction of becoming another Krishna Menon or Subandrio. Demagogy became his stock in trade.'

In a way, *Glimpses* is a journey back in time, assuming you are one of those keen observers of Pakistani politics. Gohar Ayub Khan inhabits that particular phase when Jinnah's Pakistan collapses in 1971 and is swiftly replaced by a state administered in desultory, often chaotic fashion by its ambitious politicians and soldiers, symbolized of course by the likes of Bhutto and Ziaul Haq.

Books on India have been legion in recent years. The degree of interest westerners have shown in the country can often be quite baffling but understandable all the same. In the past, men like John Kenneth Galbraith have expounded on the virtues of a land that left a deep impression on them. There was too William Shirer with his reflections on Mahatma Gandhi. These writers are but a small part of the huge group that has consistently, and insistently, chosen to comment on India as they saw it. And do not forget that there were too such writers as Ruth Praver Jhabvala. Before she died recently, Jhabvala wrote extensively on India. It was love of India at the beginning. At a later stage, she appeared to be getting tired of the country and wished simply to be out of it, with even memories of it erased, if possible.

Ian Jack, he of Granta (once upon a time), writes of Jhabvala in his gripping collection he calls *Mofussil Junction: Indian Encounters 1977-2012*. Mrs. Ruth Praver Jhabvala is not an Indian. She tried to be one once and eventually realized the futility of her attempt. These days, frankly,

enlightening sense of the meaning. The titles of the articles should be enough to propel you into a reading of the contents. Here's a pick: *Gandhi's Rich Friend, G.D. Birla; George Orwell in Bihar; Clever Calcutta; R.P. Gupta, Writer and Collector; The Young Benazir; The Sanjay Factor; Two Cheers for Tagore; Mrs. Gandhi: A Star Is Reborn; Naipaul's Long Shadow; A Good Funeral; Night Trains; Under the Knife in Patna and After Rajiv; What?*

The work is certainly a page-turner. Observe these captivating lines from *Under the Knife in Patna*:

'In Patna I went to a hotel, then to the law courts, then back to the hotel. In the evening I ate chicken and pineapple in the hotel's Chinese restaurant. In the night I awoke with pain in my stomach. For several hours I wrongly blamed the chicken and pineapple, though the pain was stubborn rather than nauseous.'

In *Sham Lal, Intellectual and Landlord*, Jack has this to say of the home of a man he certainly admires:

'Books covered most of the walls. Sham Lal had been buying books since the 1930s, though he had never been a bibliophile. He read the books he bought, talked about the ideas and the fun they contained, and almost accidentally acquired a private library which, in its range and intelligence, is the finest I have seen. Pretty well all that mattered in twentieth-century literature and politics was there.'

Finally, here is a sad comment on the post-Indira Gandhi assassination riots in the essay, *Mob Rule in Delhi*:

'Further on, we saw some Hindu youths setting fire to a small factory which made furniture. A Sikh woman was waiting at the door as the flames cracked through the roof. We asked the youths what they thought they were doing. 'Setting fire to Sikh furniture,' they said, puzzled that such an everyday occupation needed an explanation.'

Read the book, if you can get your hands on it. And don't blame it if sleep does not come to you.

The sadness inherent in departures from cities you love to be in is sometimes minimized by the books you get to buy at airport bookstores as you prepare to board your plane. At Heathrow, at Indira Gandhi International, at Netaji, the mind gets to be in something of a free fall and almost hurls toward depression as the inevitability of departure looms before you.

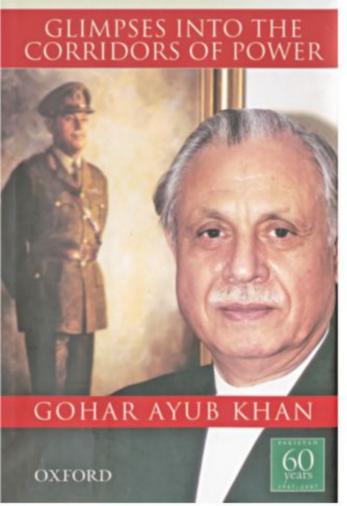
Not long ago, as I prepared to depart from Delhi IGI (at least for a while), it was Sharmila Tagore's moving remembrance of her husband that had me push my melancholy aside. The book was a commemorative volume on the recently deceased Mansur Ali Khan. Titled *Pataudi: Nawab of Cricket*, it brings together cricketers of various generations together in tribute to the man who, despite an eye being damaged, went on to make a good niche for himself in a game played by gentlemen. Sharmila Tagore sets the standard. Listen to her speak of her man:

'Tiger has not gone away; he continues to fill my life. He is around for me in many ways I did not expect. He may not be with me when I sit down for a meal or next to me when I put my feet up for a movie, nor do I see him when I wake up in the morning. Yet he is here. Much as I feel deprived, I do not feel alone.'

How do you measure such love between man and woman? Again it's Tagore you go back to:

'I had loved Tiger for forty-seven years, was married to him for almost forty-three. We didn't make it to fifty. But it was a memorable partnership; certainly an enriching one for me.'

You move on, to equally moving reminiscences of the Nawab. Farokh Engineer talks of how laughter was a bond between him and Pataudi; and Bishan Bedi will tell you that despite being born with a silver spoon in his mouth, Pataudi was one of the boys. Pataudi's death pushes the non-cricketer Naseeruddin Shah back into his boyhood, where keeping scrapbooks filled with cricketers' photographs was almost a consuming pastime. Under Pataudi's picture was the caption, 'The new Captain of Oxford, the Nawab of Pataudi, on his way to a century against arch-rivals Cambridge.'



Glimpses into the Corridors of Power Gohar Ayub Khan Oxford University Press

ally, welcome to some happy reading. And here's how you could start. Remember Gohar Ayub Khan of Pakistan? At one point of time, in stages, he served as a member of his country's national assembly, became speaker and also its top diplomat as foreign minister. And then in came General Pervez Musharraf, to decree that all candidates for election to parliament must be graduates. Gohar Ayub Khan, it turned out, had not done his bachelor's. And so off he went, out of politics. Some years ago, he came up with a work you can rightly refer to as his memoirs. He called it *Glimpses into the Corridors of Power*. The title is quite a misnomer, given that the writer, as the son of Pakistan's first military ruler Mohammad Ayub Khan, has always had a front-row seat in power. It does not really matter that his father was forced to quit office in March 1969. Since the early 1970s, Gohar Ayub has been part of Pakistan's politics in his own right.

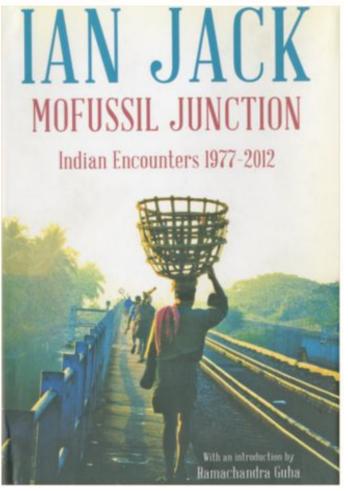
And this work shows you how. There are all the interesting snippets you get from him. The writer speaks of Ayub Khan's heart attack, a mild one he suffered as he hosted the visiting King Hussein of Jordan. By late January and early February 1968, there were two more heart attacks, much more severe than the first one. Pakistanis did not know of their president's illness. You and I know why they did not, for the Ayub era was one of intense censorship in the country. Despite this illness, the president could not transfer, even temporarily, his powers to National Assembly Speaker Abdul Jabbar Khan.

Gohar Ayub tells you that the army commander-in-chief, General Yahya Khan, refused to have the speaker take over. Yahya's argument was that the presidential illness could not be revealed to the nation and instead some other excuse would need to be invented. And the solution? It was given out that Ayub Khan was suffering from pulmonary embolism, a clot in the lungs.

The field marshal would live for six years after that. He would die in 1974, a time in which his one-time protégé turned bitter enemy Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was in power. Nearly everyone who was anyone in Pakistan at the time attended Ayub's funeral. Bhutto missed out, but a few days later turned up with his wife Nusrat at Gohar Ayub's residence to offer his condolences. In the course of his conversation, he told the writer that he was unable to attend the funeral because of the security forces' concern about his safety. Knowing Bhutto, one understands how the man could manipulate things, always in a way that would have him be the centre of the universe.

Gohar Ayub Khan's book is not free of blunders. And he clearly appears to be forgetting facts in his narration of history. Speaking of the round table conference called in Rawalpindi in 1969 by President Ayub Khan, the writer notes: 'A round table conference was organized in Rawalpindi to which Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was brought under parole. Yusuf Haroon (who belonged to the influential Haroon family) received Mujibur Rahman at the Chaklala airport and took him straight to the GHQ to see General Yahya Khan. Yusuf Haroon wanted General Yahya to pressurize Mujib into softening his opposition and tell him that the army would back Father.'

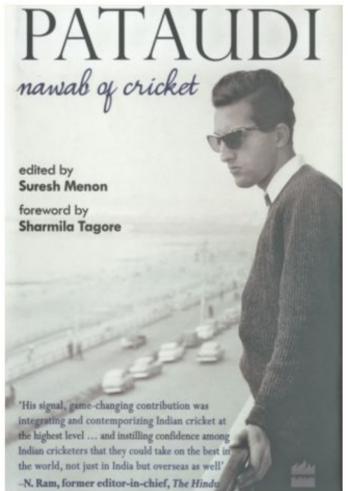
The writer gives no details of how he came by such patently wrong information. The history of Pakistan and of Bangladesh records nothing of the sort. The truth is that Mujib refused to be freed on parole and only flew to Rawalpindi on 23 February 1969, a day after the Ayub regime had withdrawn the Agartala conspiracy case and released all accused under it unconditionally. *Glimpses* is an interesting read, especially when the writer discusses the various personalities who have over the years



Mofussil Junction Indian Encounters 1977-2012 Ian Jack Penguin/Viking

she cannot stand the place.' Jack writes in 1980, which now seems like a time lost to the ages. But the beauty of Ian Jack's stories here is the facility with which he moves through the years, indeed with the love he brings forth for India. Ramachandra Guha's introduction gives you a pretty good idea about the reason behind Jack's obsession, if you will, with India. His grandmother was born in Meerut and his father was an admirer of Gandhi. In this work, as in his overall imagination, the part of India that Jack takes deep interest in happens to be Bengal. Observe Jack's poignant statement about a place which has for ages exercised such a powerful hold on thoughts about India: 'Intellectuality is what matters in Calcutta.'

*Mofussil Junction* is one of those works you should be reading on a rain-driven day at home, for it brings to you not just glimpses of Indian history but also the culture which went into the making of that history. And one essay you simply cannot afford to miss is Jack's reflections on one of India's prominent gadflies. In *Nirad Chaudhuri, Mischief-Maker*, you will perhaps rediscover all those thoughts which once put you off Chaudhuri because of his pretensions yet which kept you glued to his criticisms of nearly everything in the country he had abandoned for Oxford. Ian Jack speaks thus of Chaudhuri: 'He has never managed to conceal his delight in learning or in himself. Step inside his house and you risk perpetual bombardment by heavy cultural artillery: salvos of grand opera on the gramophone, followed by readings from Ronsard and Pascal, interspersed with light machine-gun fire in the shape of recitations of the best years for claret or the highlights of the Peninsular Campaign, sometimes (an odd finale) the songs of Johnny Cash. It can be a numbing as well as a stimulating experience.'



Pataudi Nawab of Cricket Ed Suresh Menon HarperSport

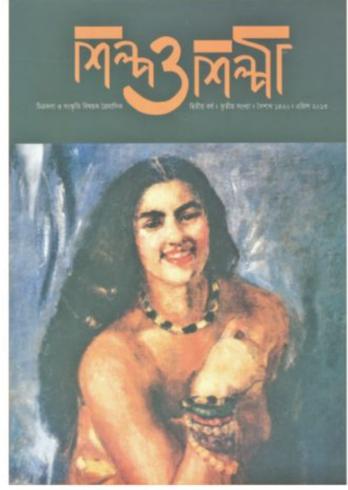
I have never been into cricket, at least not much. But this volume, as also an earlier one by Ramachandra Guha on legends in the game, has been educative. The tributes to Pataudi by such men as Mike Brearley, Abbas Ali Baig, Ian Chappell, Sunil Gavaskar, Rahul Dravid and so many others have been of double benefit: they have brought to me the idea of the importance of being Pataudi --- and they tell me I should not have said goodbye to cricket when I did, which was in grade seven.

Mudar Pathery has the last word here. In the *The Many Pataudis*, he makes the heart burst in you:

'And ... we wept when he was lowered into the grave, not because he played for India and how we would miss him on TV, but because he was ... well, the last of a kind - the bridge between the medieval and the modern.

We wept for an age and its graciousness. And then we wept for ourselves.'

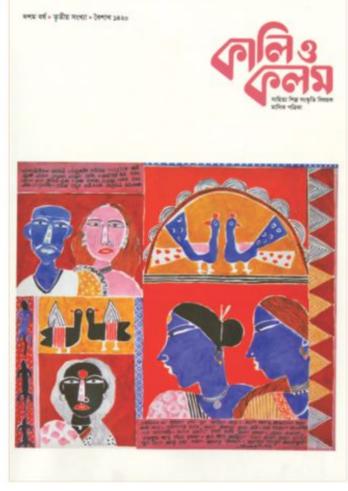
Our eminently respectable Abul Hasnat does us proud. On his watch, the journals *Shilpo O Shilpi* and *Kali O Kolom* have turned out to be two of the foremost culture-related journals in the country. Bengal Foundation, which has in these



Shilpo O Shilpi Baishakh 1420 ICE Media Limited

past many years being doing excellent work in such fields as music, has been performing equally well with these two journals. Obviously a strong editorial board led by Professor Anisuzzaman is there; and with Abul Hasnat in charge, quality is assured. We have seen evidence of that.

The Baishakh 1420 issue of *Shilpo O Shilpi* is verily a collector's item. For



Kali O Kolom Baishakh 1420 ICE Media Limited

readers who have for years yearned to come by a good work on Amrita Shergil, this issue of the journal offers an incisive article on the artist's birth centenary from Andaleeb Rushdi. And there is an equally thought provoking write-up on Ganesh Pyne from Abul Mansur you would be well-advised to read.

A particular charm in reading *Shilpo O Shilpi* lies in the many strands of intellectual thoughts it offers readers, to a point where a broad cultural dimension opens up for all. How would you respond to such a write-up as the one by Ahmed Khaled on the question of national identity in movies produced in Trinidad and Tobago?

In the Baishakh 1420 issue of *Kali O Kolom*, the horizon only expands. The essay on Komolkumar Majumdar, man of letters, takes you deeper into Bengali cultural tradition. And what did Rabindranath Tagore think of the younger literary figures --- Jibanananda Das, Sudhindranath Dutta, Buddhadeva Basu, Bishnu Dey, Sanjay Bhattacharya, Samar Sen --- around him? Abdul Mannan gives you the details.

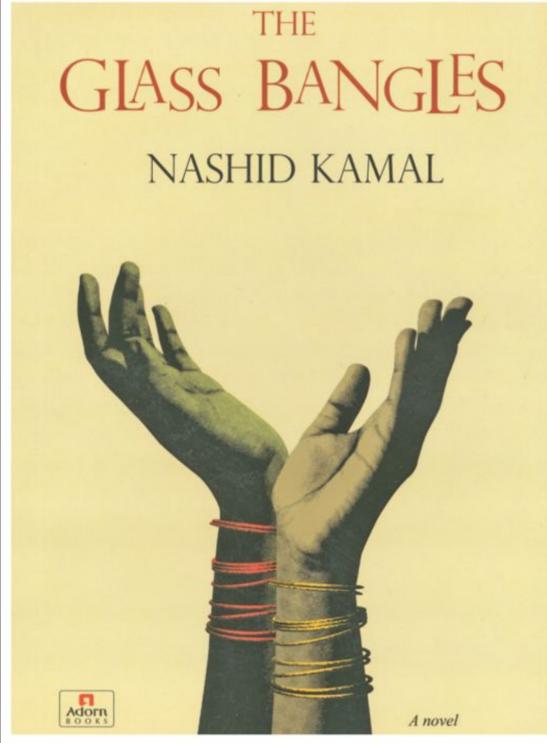
Read about Chinua Achebe, Jamal Nazrul Islam and Ganesh Pyne here. And then there's more. You will emerge from the experience a wiser individual.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN'S COMPARATIVE STUDY ON THE POLITICS OF C.R. DAS, SUBHASH CHANDRA BOSE AND SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN WILL BE PUBLISHED IN INDIA EARLY NEXT YEAR.

BOOK REVIEW

Charm, cross-cultures and the human struggle

Rummana Chowdhury reads a tale straddling East and West



The Glass Bangles Nashid Kamal Adorn Publications

Dr. Nashid Kamal, scholar, musician, educator and writer, has produced her first novel, *The Glass Bangles*. The setting of the book meanders around Sylhet, Bangladesh and London, England. The protagonist, a young, naive woman named Sheila has an arranged marriage to a Bangladeshi man who is visiting from the UK. Familial pressures put Sheila in a situation where she has no choice in the matter. Her initial fears about marrying a stranger are put to rest after her first few nights are spent with Manna as a newlywed in which she finds him to be handsome, charming and worldly. Soon after their first week together as a couple, she falls in love with Manna and he leaves for London, promising to write to her regularly and sponsor her as his spouse as soon as possible so that they may continue their life together abroad.

Sheila waits for this endlessly. After days, weeks and months have passed, Sheila finds herself pregnant. Almost a year later, she gives birth to her daughter Ayesha, and is hopelessly in love with Manna. But Sheila is certain that something terrible must have happened to her husband, as there has been no communication from him since his departure to the UK. Young, in love and committed to building a life for her now growing family, she bravely sets off for London, determined to find him and ensure his safety. Upon arrival in London, Sheila is shocked to find that Manna is married to another woman, living an entirely alternate life, with no interest in continuing his relationship with Sheila, not an unknown reality for many women who pursue arranged marriages in the villages and cities of Bangladesh. Shocked, dismayed, saddened but full of resilience and pride, Sheila courageously decides she must start a life of her own with her young daughter. So begins the story of living the life of a new immigrant in London. The protagonist, with all of her musical talents, cultural pride and with the knowledge of what it takes to make something out of nothing, builds a beautiful life for herself and her child, facing many hardships along the way. The author chronologically shows the lanes and bi-lanes of the social step ladders that new residents, immigrants, and Bangladeshi citizens have to face living in a strange European country. Credit must be given to Sheila, who is able to carve out an illustrious role for herself, without the traditional support of a male figure.

Nashid's writing style is spontaneous, warm, clear and enchanting. Because she was born in England, has pursued her PhD there, and has herself resided there for many years of her life, she has an in-depth understanding of the barriers and struggles that South Asian immigrants face abroad, which is clearly demonstrated in her writing. Her intricate and genuine understanding of patriarchy, class culture, racism and other related issues that immigrants face are clearly reflected in the many subplots and sub-characters that evolve interestingly throughout the novel. Some are typical Bangladeshis, while others are British. In addition, Nashid's in-depth knowledge of music seamlessly intertwined within the development of the story where she effortlessly inserts Urdu, Hindi and Bengali songs as well as relevant Bengali poetry from her personal musical journey and life.

Sheila struggles her way through day-to-day living and ultimately climbs the socio-cultural ladder of the South Asian artistic scene. As a surprise to even herself, she eventually falls in love again with a Pakistani classical singer named Jamal. Her love affair with Jamal and the ensuing community reactions to it are representative of the bitterness against Pakistan, understandably an offshoot of the 1971 war. Their ultimate separation brings the required pathos and melancholy that the storyline requires. In retrospect, the relationship between Sheila and Jamal seems a little too idealistic. Boundless transcending love is often heavenly, and this is somehow missing here.

At a turning point in the story, Sheila and her daughter Ayesha return to a new and changed Sylhet, and for that matter, an entire Bangladesh, for a two-week visit. The book manages to take the reader from the quiet scenery of a Sylhet village, to the ghettos of the immigrant communities of London, to the hustle and bustle of London city, and then to Dhaka city, where her daughter is once again exposed to the cross cultural climate of a country where the sociology, developments and dynamics of that country and its culture have undergone radical and progressive change. Like so many immigrants who are part of a vibrant diaspora, Sheila ultimately decides, after many years, that London is her home and takes her daughter back with her to continue building what is left of their exploratory life abroad, presumably for good.

Some of the language fluency in the book could have been more grammatically enhanced, and a few of the themes and choice of wording could be further explored. This is especially in context to the understanding of readers outside Bangladesh. Nevertheless, Nashid's expansive knowledge of Bangladeshi and Westernized culture intrigues the reader, who has an avid appreciation of poetry, prose and culture from the beginning. The novel starts off with Sheila having her long beautiful hair, a representation of femininity and grace in Bangladeshi culture, chopped off. Reminds us of Jibanananda Das' "Chuuu taar kobe kar ondhookar Bidishar Nisha." Her hair was chopped off in a hair salon in London to a short and bold boy-cut, which is a reflection of modernity in the West. These moments allow the reader to travel into the inner most thoughts of the protagonist, someone who is constantly internally re-inventing herself to adapt to her changing surroundings. This is a great book for readers from the east, the west and those who have travelled back and forth in-between.

RUMMANA CHOWDHURY HAS AUTHORED 16 BOOKS OF POETRY, SHORT STORIES, COLUMNS AND ANALYTICAL ARTICLES. SHE RESIDES IN TORONTO, CANADA.