

Keeping heritage in focus

Shahid Alam goes through a historico-literary landscape

HERE are books, and, then, there are good books. Ironically, there are books that live for the moment, as it were, getting lapped up by millions of readers within a short span of time, and, when the euphoria of popular reading dies down, go into oblivion. In a similar vein, so many good books have to be content (if not exactly contented) with a limited readership, but often endure long after the last of that readership has passed over. Several turn into classics; many are regarded as great by scholars and erudite readers alike. Such is often the fate of esoteric material, especially in comparison to popular works that are quickly forgotten after having entertained a vast array of readers of a specific period in time.

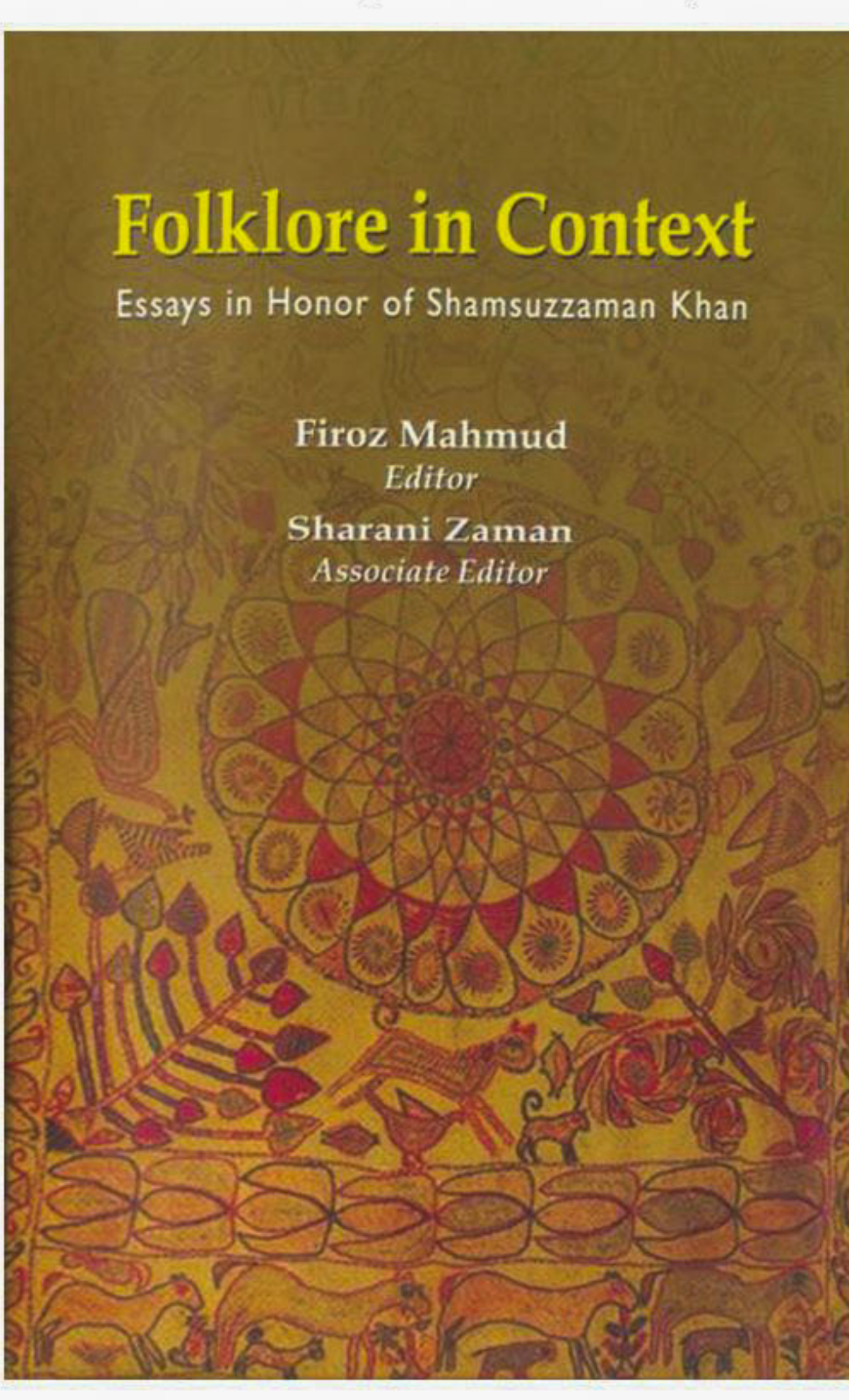
Folklore in Context: Essays in Honor of Shamsuzzaman Khan, edited by Firoz Mahmud, is one such monumental work. As the subtitle spells out, the essays honor Shamsuzzaman Khan, an unobtrusive, dedicated scholar of culture, and the pioneer of contextual and innovative folklore scholarship in Bangladesh, whose pithy, simple, but crucial, message is that, in Mahmud's words, "folklore needs to be studied more seriously" ("Preface"). 32 authors from nine different countries, including such luminaries as Amartya Sen, Margaret Mills, and Henry Glassie, have contributed to the anthology. 32 articles have been divided among 13 self-explanatory (content-wise) sections: Introduction, Cultural Impact on Civilization, Esoteric Folklore, Oral History and Discourse in Folklore, Folk Literature, Jewish Folklore, Urban Folklore, Performance Folklore, Folk Culture, Folklife, Folk Art and Material Culture, The Role of the Museum in History, Culture and Heritage, and Folklorist Study in Bangladesh. Barring a very few unremarkable efforts, the quality of the essays generally has been good, with some standing out for their rich scholarship, presentation, and capacity for inducing deep thought in the reader. Although a few articles deal with Bangladesh, others offer glimpses into other countries' folklore and/or conceptual analysis of a critical underpinning of a nation's culture: its folklore tradition.

The first three chapters (in "Introduction") are devoted to Shamsuzzaman Khan, one written by the editor, and another by his daughter Sharani Zaman, the associate editor of the book. We come across a person hailing from Manikganj, arguably the richest district of Bangladesh in terms of folklore, who has devoted most of his professional life and beyond to the scientific collection of folklore items, developing theories around it, and, probably more significantly, in M. Shahinoor Rahman's words, "motivated the new scholars to think about folklore beyond the so-called airtight boundary of the study of folklore" (Ch. 3,

"Shamsuzzaman Khan: A Multidimensional Personality"). He has relentlessly pursued the notion that folklore is dynamic; not static, stuck in some imagined vortex of time. Therefore, he wrote in 1994: "With the passage of time...folklore now includes, not only the folk art, folk craft, folk architecture, folk costume, folk dance, folk music, folk medicine, folk custom, Mith (sic) Ritual, Superstitions, Festivals, and folk belief but the daily lives of community people, computer and xerox loves (sic) and many other emerging items." In effect, folklore plays, as Khan maintains, "a tremendous role in shaping and sharpening national culture and identity." And the way that Khan has profiled the folklore of Bangladesh, it leaves no doubt about this country's fundamentally tolerant (of different faiths), secular, and Sufi tradition, besides his own broad secular outlook: Bangladesh is blessed with an "excellent social situation based on humanism and secular thought.... Mainly four streams mingled in this social thought process --- tribal anthropomorphism, Buddhist nihilism, Hindu vaishnavism and Muslim sufism." Religious fanaticism turning the country back to medieval times just does not fit the average Bangladeshi's psyche.

We learn that William J. Thomas, a British scholar, first coined the term "folklore" in 1846, and that, after much debate with alternative rendering of the term in Bengali, has now generally been accepted in usage in this language in Bangladesh. Mahmud (Ch. 1, "Shamsuzzaman Khan: Pioneer of Contextual and Innovative Folklore Scholarship in Bangladesh"), drawing on history, has critically explored various facets of folklore, and provides an account of how Rabindranath Tagore, between 1880 and 1910, when he became active in both nationalist and folklore movements, saw the possibilities that folklore could play "in creating both a national and regional identity, and in bridging the widening gap between urban and rural dwellers", and promptly launched himself on a mission of collecting Baul songs, folk ballads (palligiti), dramas (jatra), and fairytales (rupkatha) from different parts of British Bengal.

Amartya Sen (Ch. 4, "An Assessment of the Millennium"), an illustrious son of Manikganj, has written a brilliant essay dissecting history to dispel myths and highlight truths that are at times mired under myriad half truths and outright falsehoods. He poses the question to



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himself whether there is any validity to hard-line Hindu activists who maintain that "the pre-Muslim period was the era of purity of the unalloyed Indian civilization." And finds the answer: "...even pre-Muslim India was not just Hindu India. Indeed...perhaps the greatest Indian emperor in the pre-Muslim period was a Buddhist, to wit, Asoka, and there were other great non-Hindu Emperors, including Harsha." And, tellingly, "It must also be recollected that nearly all the major world religions other than Islam was already well represented in India well before the last millennium." Sen's is a profound discussion, within the confines of limited space, of broad facets of culture. Talking about the impact of the West on traditional societies, he poses the very pertinent question, "Isn't there a difference between cultural contact and culture dependence?" He

elaborates on the point, which is particularly appropriate in this age of the internet and globalization: "...we may have ground to resent the import of a practice from elsewhere when it stifles or obliterates some local practice or tradition to which the regional people have reason to attach value. Each such use has to be judged, on the one hand, by what it offers (what valuable things we learn from others), and on the other, by what it may stifle (what valuable things of our own we forget as a result of outside influence)."

Ulo Valk (Ch. 11, "The Scientification of Legends as Strategy for Belief Verification") gives a delightful account of Estonian legends as a part of folklore, while Dan Ben-Amos and Dov Noy (Ch. 13, "Numbers as Meta-Language in Jewish Folklore") provides a fascinating study of the links between numbers and legends in Jewish folklore. Nabaneeta Dev Sen (Ch. 12, "Chandrabati Ramayana: Lady Sings the Blues when Women Retell the Ramayana") studies Sita's travails from a gender perspective. It is an interesting and instructive piece. Abhi Subedi (Ch. 15, "Folk Fetish, Fiddles and Metropolitan Visitors") provides much more than a glimpse into fetish culture in Nepal, and, based on his discussion, concludes that "...folk and urbanity are not distinct phrases of development." Lala Rukh Selim (Ch. 29, "Novera Ahmed and Her Sculptures: Evaluations in Different Contexts") draws a sympathetic picture of the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of a truly pioneering woman of Bangladesh, Novera Ahmed. Way ahead of her times in the context of this country's society, Novera's story is inspiring, even if depressing in terms of societal norms and strictures.

Christina Nygren (Ch. 16, "Yatra --- Popular Theatre Moving with the Wind") writes a compelling first-hand account of a theater form that, "without support and acceptance also for the genuine rural and less sophisticated performances and venues, its continued existence seems to be in serious danger." She engages in a spirited discussion about highbrow/elite and lowbrow/popular cultures, and thus summarizes: "Lowbrow culture...is disdained by society's 'taste judges' and overlooked in the cultural section of newspapers.... Highbrow culture...tends to be regarded as the 'serious,' official culture; the kind that is often considered our 'cultural heritage' in text books and historical accounts." This is a universal perspective, which leads Nygren to pose an

intriguing question following a short narrative: "Political and economic resources are focused on getting people to see 'serious' theatre, listen to 'fine' music and read 'good' literature. Serious, fine and good for whom?" In Bangladesh, she finds that the mentality of not only of religious literalism, but equally of the highly educated and the representatives of highbrow performing arts tends to be the taunt, "Jatra dekhe, fatra loke". Such viewpoint necessarily corners Jatra, a situation that is compounded by unscrupulous organizers exploiting the situation to introduce gambling and strip dancing at Jatra shows.

Frank Korom (Ch. 18, "Gurusaday Dutt, Vernacular Nationalism, and the Folk Culture Revival in Colonial Bengal") is convinced that folk culture was used by the British raj as a part of its *divida et impera* policy. The distinguished scholar Henry Glassie (Ch. 23, "Mud and Mythic Vision: Hindu Sculpture in Modern Bangladesh"), based on his first-hand study of Bangladesh's folk tradition and culture, comes up with a profound philosophical perspective: "...in Bangladesh...images, not narratives (are) at the heart of the mythic system...in which the familiar is reversed, in which the image is central, ritual forms the prime context, and stories are cast in an ancillary, illustrative role." Amalendu De (Ch. 5, "Fazlul Huq and His Reaction to the Two-Nation Theory (1940-47)") alludes to the theoreticians of the two-nation theory from the time of Sir Syed Ahmed. He does not mention two Punjabis, both Hindus, one rather obscure and the other quite prominent in Indian history, who had actually proposed the division of India along communal lines. Bhai Parmanand Chibber did so in a small booklet written in 1923, while Lala Lajpat Rai in a series of articles published in 1924 in *The Tribune of Punjab* proposed that the Punjab should be partitioned, with the western part going to the Muslims, and the east to the Hindus and the Sikhs. He further proposed that there should be separate Muslim states in the Northwest Frontier Province, Sind, and Bengal.

Occasional spelling errors indicate editorial oversight, while there is an amusing howler in Perveen Ahmad's "Bangladesh Kantha Art in the Indo-Gangetic Heritage" (Ch. 27). The script talks about "defecation of the tiger", which is a very normal occurrence, but in the context of the paragraph, the proper word should have been "deification"! Actually, a few lines down, the proper spelling has been used. *Folklore in Context: Essays in Honor of Shamsuzzaman Khan* is rich in varied aspects of folklore, and discussed with much erudition by a bevy of competent scholars.

SHAHID ALAM IS AN ACTOR, WRITER, EDUCATIONIST AND FORMER DIPLOMAT.

New perspectives on the Rebel Poet

Nashid Kamal reads an in-depth study of Nazrul

NAZRUL Jeeboni (in Bangla) is a lifetime's work by Professor Rafikul Islam, who is well known for his contribution in the field of research on Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. It is a chronological treatise on the life history of the poet and includes various chapters of his life and explains the background during the creation of each and every literary piece that the author could collect with authority and dependable evidence.

In doing so, the author embarks upon a lifetime's journey of reading almost everything that has ever been written on poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. This includes works by Poet's friend Comrade Muzaffar Ahmad, his companion and legendary singer Abbasuddin Ahmed, biographers Abdul Kadir, Ziyad Ali and closest friend Shailajananda Mukherjee. The first edition of this book was published in 1972. Since then the author has been able to bring in some valuable additions and brought out the new comprehensive edition in year 2012.

The author has spent many years of his life making the first Nazrul bibliography for which he spent time in Kolkata, Sylhet and many other libraries, the totality of these journeys appear in the new volume. The beauty of the book is that it uses exact texts from the write-ups of other writers, researchers, journals, magazines, notes and comments, thus adding first hand experience for those who have not read the above-mentioned references. Moreover, with the quotation of exact texts, the style of each author has a self explanatory effect on the reader, the Bangla language evolving from a very Sanskritized writing style to modern Bangla writing, including change in spellings.

This increases the volume of the book and makes the reader go through eighteen chapters of Nazrul's life, some of which could be shortened.

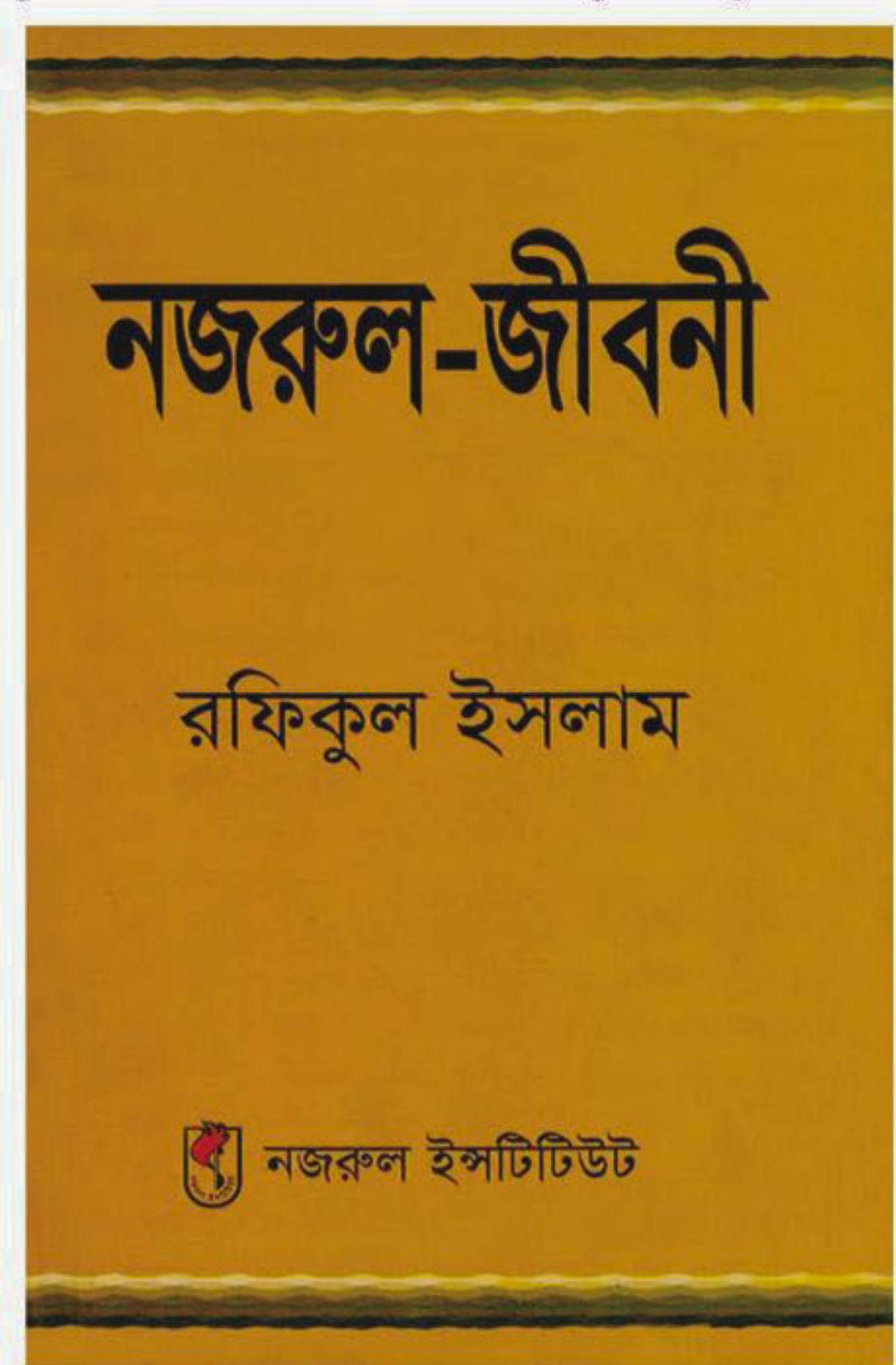
However, the book is rich on its own merit, the reason being that, although it is illustrated with generous quotes from other people's books, Professor Rafikul Islam adds his own notes, comments, insights and conclusions, including his unique adjectives to describe all the events in Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's life. This part is sometimes critically absent from the books written by many authors whose research compilation is perfect, but their personal contribution to the subject is inundated by quotable quotes, or frankly speaking, completely absent.

My attention has been drawn to the presentation of some key features of Nazrul's early life, his birth, growing years, his family life which have been mentioned here and some clarifications have been made with adequate research techniques. As a Fulbright scholar, Prof Islam went to Cornell University, USA, for his masters degree but he was promise-bound to Prof Abdul Hye (of the Bangla department) that he would return to Dhaka University to work on Nazrul for his PhD. Learning 'research methodology at Cornell University paid dividends. How many of us keep our promises and come back to serve the nation and work on the life history of Kazi Nazrul Islam? I am reminded of the poem by Sunil Gongopadhyay --- *keu kotha rakheni*.

The beginning of poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's arrival into this world is marked with some debates. The poet himself had mentioned in places that he was born in April,

when there was a huge storm and his birthday was a few days before that of Rabindranath Tagore. Professor Islam clears this confusion by observing that while the poet was alive and well, 25 May was observed as his birthday. Hence, this should be the correct date.

Professor Rafikul Islam writes that Kazi Nazrul Islam's family arrived in Churulia, West Bengal, from another part of India, i.e., Hajipur in Patna. The Kazi title was bestowed on them by the British government; and looking at seven generations earlier the poet's great great grandfather's name was found to be engraved in pots and



Nazrul Jeeboni
Rafikul Islam
Nazrul Institute

pitchers as 'Kazi Khebaratullah'. The poet was not born to an impoverished family, as is the common belief. His father still owned more than forty *bighas* of land when the poet was born. He was fond of gambling and subsequently lost all his property to this game. Nazrul's mother Zaheda was well known as a charitable person. As Nazrul reached the age for primary schooling, his father passed away and the family had also lost its wealth.

Under such circumstances there was obviously a struggle for existence but Nazrul was never the imam of the mosque near his homestead (hardly a mosque actually). Nazrul had a very sweet lilting voice and some-

times when the imam was absent or indisposed, Nazrul or *Khepatara* would be asked to recite the azaan. Neither was his father Kazi the *khadim* of the mosque; he was too busy looking after his property and also playing cards (pasha). Even after his father's death, Nazrul's mother retained the strict discipline of the household and Nazrul never joined the *letto* group, nor did he stay out night after night at theatrical events. He wrote well and was asked to write *letto* songs. In fact, he wrote not only for his own village but also for the *letto* groups of the neighbouring villages!

Professor Islam clears up the mystery surrounding the marriage of Kazi Nazrul Islam with young Nargis, whose original name was Syeda Khatun. She was the niece of Ali Akbar Khan, who coached her to become a worthy mate of Kazi Nazrul Islam. Female education was not commonplace in Syeda Khatun's family. There were some alterations regarding the amount of the *mohurana*. Additionally, the bride's family set a condition that even after her marriage Nargis would not leave her homestead and Nazrul would have to stay back in Daulatpur forever. The author clears some doubts about the date of a letter written to Ali Akbar by the poet on 23 June 1921, which was wrongly dated 23 July. In this letter the poet humbly apologizes for walking out of the wedding without consummating the marriage. His self professed 'bohemian' self does not mean that he should be insulted!

In the chapter on Kamal Pasha and Mustafa Kamal, the author presents details of the historical background of Turkey and the political history surrounding the participation of the Indian army in the war. That helps the reader in the interpretation of the poems written on Turkish themes. Throughout the book, the author gives the political history of India and the conditions and settings under which the poet wrote his various pieces.

The book has a chapter on Rabindranath Tagore and Kazi Nazrul Islam. The vivacious Nazrul enters Tagore's Shantiniketan premises with his customary 'De gorur ga dhuiye' (Give the cow a bath), a very funny salutation, almost to the point of rudeness. This is at a time when Tagore is the reigning poet of Bengal and his international fame is at its peak. Yet Nazrul and only he, had the gall to tell Rabindranath Tagore that the Muslims have a different way of forming the words in Bangla, they carry the Arabic/Persian heritage. He also points out that while Tagore wears a full length attire with a cap, it is acceptable. But when a Muslim does so, everyone becomes critical!

In summary, the book offers an in-depth view of Nazrul's life and his works which can be considered a textbook for those aspiring to be Nazrul researchers. I once had the opportunity to ask writer Sunil Gongopadhyay why he had named his book 'Ordhek Jeebon' (Half a Life). He replied, 'One can never divulge the entire life, it is always half that one writes about'. I feel that if Nazrul himself was to write his own life history, he would also do the same, whereas in Prof. Islam's work, I would say it encompasses almost eighty percent!

DR. NASHID KAMAL, REPUTED NAZRUL EXPONENT, IS AN ACADEMIC AND TRANSLATOR.

Secrets of the media world

Alpha Arzu reveals in a revealing work

IT'S not about a book written by a professional writer. It's about a book written by an experienced journalist who has been working with the media for decades. The book is titled *Shadhinata Amar Bhalo Laage Na*. The writer of the book is Prohash Amin, who at present is Editor (News and Current Affairs) at ATN News.

Along with two new articles in this book, the writer compiles his previous writings which were published in different print media. The book has been published by Oitijyo Prokashoni. The writer began his journalistic career in 1989 and has worked for the daily Prothom Alo, Bhorer Kagoj, Janakantha, Bangla Bazar as well as magazines like Bichinta and Priyo Projonmo. He has also worked with Ntv and CSB.

Being a journalist with thirteen years of experience behind me and also a journalism and communication student, I have hardly found journalists or academics who have written critically of themselves. In this book, I find the writer taking a hard look at the role of the media, particularly that of journalists in different emergency conditions in the country.

Though I'm not generally a book reviewer, I am really enthusiastic about writing on this work as I feel it could serve as a very good reference manual for young people planning to join this yet novel profession that we know as journalism.

This book highlights the aims of media owners—how they are using the media industry in their own interest instead of engaging in journalism. In the name of journalism, there are a number of individuals who have invested in the media just to keep a large number of powerful journalists in hand, indeed beholden to them.

The writer speaks about the role of journalists and their responsibilities through coming up with specific instances of how that role should be. He dwells in expert fashion on the relationship between humanity and journalism, the interests of the nation in juxtaposition with the interests of media owners.

Media and communication academics and experts, aspirant journalists and working journalists as well as media owners or investors should read this book for the insights it throws into the profession of journalism as a whole. It is an important point of reference for the journalism and communication sectors.

One wonders how a 199-page book could give us education or knowledge equal to a four-year graduation or diploma course or how a book helps new journalists to learn about their responsibilities, their definitive role in journalism.



Shadhinata Amar Bhalo Laage Na
Prohash Amin
Oitijyo

ALPHA ARZU IS A JOURNALIST.