

Syed Badrul Ahsan explores the life of a statesman and a landscape of literature

A modern-day philosopher-king

RESIDENTS do make a difference, especially in countries governed through parliamentary democracy. For Indians, a rather good feature of their country's constitutional politics has been the presence in Rashtrapati Bhavan of men held in great esteem both at home and abroad. There have been Rajendra Prasad, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Zakir Hussein, V.V. Giri, Shankar Dayal Sharma and others. And, of course there has been APJ Abdul Kalam, the soft-spoken, self-effacing man who put India on the world's scientific perch. And then he went on to serve, with dignity and aplomb, as India's president.

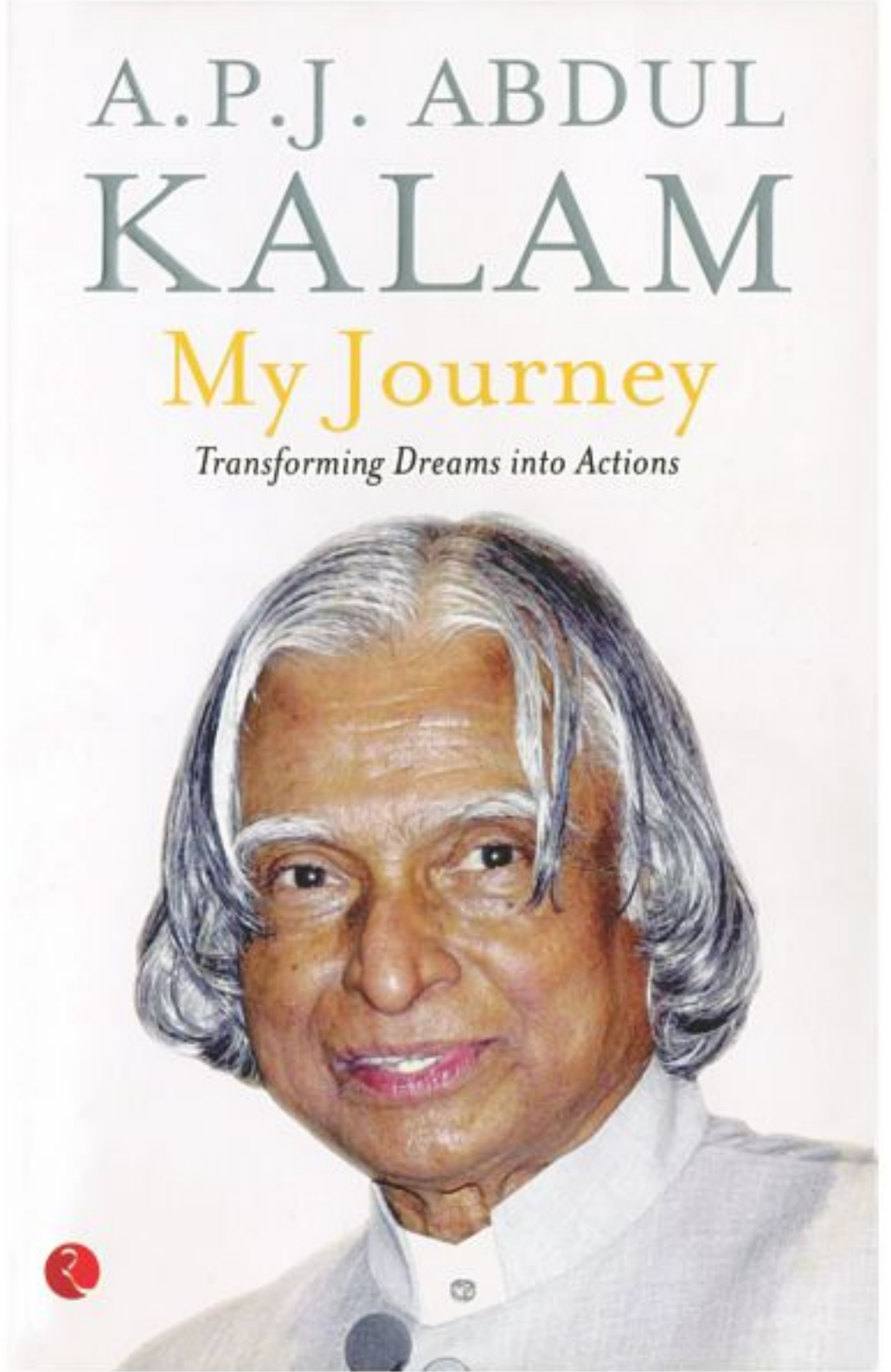
Avul Pakeer Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam has always been emblematic of humility, with his feet firmly planted on the ground. And that humility, his ability not to let grandeur of office get in the way of his natural demeanour, all of that gets to be revealed yet once again in *My Journey*. It is a tale of simplicity, of the rise of a man to public renown from the grassroots. Kalam's background is Rameswaram in Tamil Nadu, in that properly and literally humble sense of the meaning. The charm in the story is Kalam's unwillingness to conceal his past, a characteristic one does not quite find in many others who have risen to great heights in the subcontinent. Not for Kalam a reference to roots that do not define him, that do not exist; not for him a resort to pretension. He presents his case as it is.

And the case is simple, to the point: while Kalam and his siblings had a happy childhood, the bigger truth was that the family was constantly engaged in a struggle for a respectable livelihood. His father was the imam of the small local mosque, besides selling coconuts to make ends meet. At one point, he went into the business of building boats to use as ferries for people, usually tourists, travelling to and from Rameswaram. And those boats, to the elder Jainulabdeen's intense sadness, were systematically claimed by tidal surges, leaving the family scraping again and again for a decent existence. It always clawed back to normal, somehow.

The extent of the poverty APJ Abdul Kalam grew up in, and then out of it, comes through a narration of two instances in his life. First, as a schoolboy, and between studying the Koran and attending classes in school, he made it a daily affair (thanks to a cousin) running to the local railway station, picking up the bundles of newspapers thrown out of the train window and distributing copies to local subscribers. That was his way of supplementing the family income. Second, after he had once devoured a number of

chapattis, which his mother was serving him, his elder brother called him aside and berated him on his insensitivity to the fact that it had not occurred to him to remember that he had also consumed the chapattis meant for his mother and grandmother. For a long time after that, Kalam wallowed in shame. It was a stinging lesson for him, enough to make him understand the dire straits poverty could put people into.

And yet for Kalam, indeed for the people of Rameswaram, life was far removed from what it



My Journey
Transforming Dreams into Actions
A.P.J. Abdul Kalam
Rupa

was in the north of India. As the struggle for independence intensified, with a concomitant rise of Muslim separatism, the elders of Rameswaram, among whom was Kalam's father, made sure that communalism did not get in the way of the life of the community. This resolve was disturbed only once, and then quickly restored. It so happened that a new teacher arrived at the school where Kalam and his friends, Hindu and Christian and Muslim, were students. On day one of his class, the new teacher wished to know Kalam's name.

When that became known, the teacher asked Kalam, a boy who had always shared the first bench with his Hindu classmate, because of his good grades, to move to the back of the class. He did so, with tears in his eyes. His Hindu friend too was filled with tears. When the matter became known in the village, the elders summoned the new teacher, told him in no uncertain terms that in Rameswaram caste, creed and colour had no place. A chastened teacher changed his decision. Kalam went back to the front bench.

For the rest of his life, Kalam made sure that he stayed on the front bench. For his achievements in life, he remains grateful to his family, particularly his mother, his sister Zohra and his mentor and later brother-in-law Ahmed Jalalluddin. Observe the fondness with which he remembers those who showed him the path to light:

Of his father, Kalam notes:
"As I walk wherever my life has led me, I often think of my father Jainulabdeen. In my mind's eye I see a simple man, who, even when he was of a great age, continued to walk every morning to his coconut grove."

Of his mother, he reports thus:
"Many years ago, I wrote a poem called 'My Mother', which began with these lines:
*Sea waves, golden sand, pilgrims' faith,
Rameswaram Mosque Street, all merge into one,
My Mother!*"

Kalam goes on, a little later in the narrative:
"One of my earliest memories is of eating with my mother, sitting on the kitchen floor. We ate off banana leaves. Rice, aromatic sambar, home-made pickles and coconut chutney were the staple foods. Her cooking was deceptively simple and till today, I have not eaten sambar that balances the tart and the spicy tastes as delicately as hers did."

Of Zohra, here is what he has to say:
"Like my mother, Zohra lived out her life in Rameswaram. She was as efficient, cheerful and upright as her and the two of them together symbolize for me the resilience and resourcefulness of the ordinary Indian woman. This woman is a person who cannot be cowed down too long by her circumstances."

My Journey, at the end of it all, is the story of a modern-day philosopher-king. It dispenses wisdom, from a man who left his village to explore the world --- without losing sight of the simple home, the speeding train, the coconut groves and the old storms speaking of the fury of the gods. Years after childhood left him, he remembers the warmth of his mother as he let his head rest in her lap.

A feast of literary delights

READING literature, and reading of it, energises the sensibilities. That, of course, is a cliché. And yet when studies of literature happen to be undertaken in societies where English is not the local or national language, there is something of the exciting which comes into the whole exercise. *Bengal Lights*, a new journal that seeks to serve up delights in English language literature as they are produced in Bangladesh, does that. An observation of the Spring 2013 edition of the journal brings before you not merely the fact that there is indeed a wide landscape of English language writing in this country but also the reality of the various facets of writing --- fiction, poetry, non-fiction, et cetera --- underlying such writing.

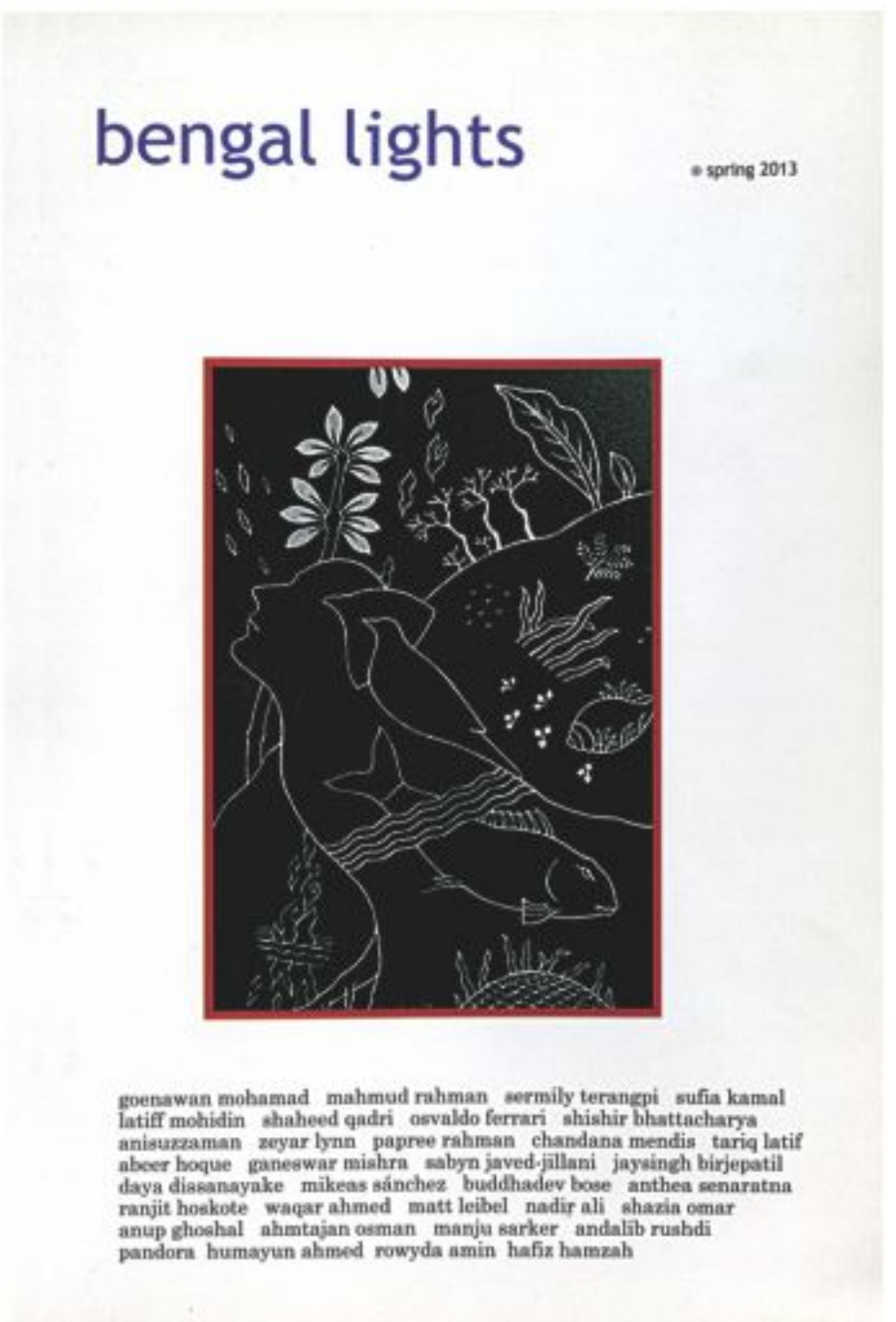
Bengal Lights is surely a bold venture, in the sense that it seeks to present readers with write-ups they have not had in a long time; and yet these writings, or their kind, might run into impediments at some point. One would certainly not wish for such a circumstance to occur, but given that in the past attempts at creative writing in English in Bangladesh --- recall such gallant attempts as *Form*, published by the Department of English at Dhaka University --- have at particular points floundered, there are reasons for worry. That worry can certainly be offset by a regularity of publication where *Bengal Lights* is concerned. The Spring 2013 edition of the journal, based as it is on a richness of quality, offers one that certain reassurance that *Bengal Lights* will go a long way in satisfying the literary curiosities of the English-speaking section of Bengalis on this side of the old Bengal.

The issue under study comes with a remarkable offering of fiction. Among those who have contributed to the journal are Sabyn Javed-Jillani, Shazia Omar, Mahmud Rahman, Waqar Ahmed, Anthea Senaratna and Abeer Hoque. For art, who do you go to but our very own Shishir Bhattacharya? And then, surely, is that delightful world of poetry coming from Jaysingh Birjepatil, Ranjit Hoskote, Rowyda Amin, Tariq Latif, Daya Dissanayake, Matt Leibel and Akila Seshasayee.

A particular attraction of *Bengal Lights* happens to be the translations into English of works written originally in Bengali. There is something close to a feast here --- in the form of Papree Rahman's *A Cloudless Night*,

An Eclipsed Moon; Humayun Ahmed's *Eyes*; Nadir Ali's *Mangta The Sarangi Player*; Manju Sarkar's *My Dear Countrymen*, Chandana Mendis' *The Gift* and Andalib Rushdi's *The Great Leader's Piles Surgery Day*.

The reader's excitement rises as he or she goes deeper into the world of delights encompassed in *Bengali Lights*. The section on non-fiction says it all. Buddhadev Bose's *Purana Paltan*, Anisuzzaman's *An Afternoon With Shakti Chattopadhyay* and Ganeshwar Misra's *Take A Dip In Chandan Tank* reinforce the notion of why literature has consistently



Bengal Lights
Spring 2013
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

been a fundamental underpinning of societal existence, especially in Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Bengal Lights opens a new portal to literature in Bangladesh, for the world beyond Bangladesh's frontiers to experience and savour. The journal could well be a precursor to the coming of newer offerings from the Bengali creative mind before a global audience. That is a hope. And a prayer as well.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN EDITS STAR BOOKS REVIEW AND STAR LITERATURE.

The life of a music maker

Pallab Bhattacharya is delighted reading a new Burman biography

THE legendary Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa had once said that those who have not seen Satyajit Ray's films have not seen the sun and the moon. Taking a cue from that, one can safely conclude that those in the Indian sub-continent who have not loved Sachin Dev Burman's music have no ears. Few in the subcontinent have not heard and enjoyed the music of Sachin-karta as he is popularly known in his home state of Tripura. So when a new book on the musical genius of Sachin Dev Burman comes out, it is bound to generate interest and curiosity. But what makes *S D Burman: The World of His Music* (Rupa publication, New Delhi), which is an elaborate account of the journey of the musical maestro and how his music developed the way it had, a special one is that its author Khagesh Dev Burman himself is a member of Tripura's royal family, to which Sachin-kara belonged, and who knows the inside out of that family and its members down the centuries.

While Sachin Dev Burman had penned his autobiography *Sargamer Nikhad* in 1970 which was published by *Desh* magazine, this is possibly for the first time that the music director-singer's biography is available to us in English, which is in fact translated from the Bengali original, Khagesh Dev Burman's *Sachin Kartar Ganer Bhuwan*.

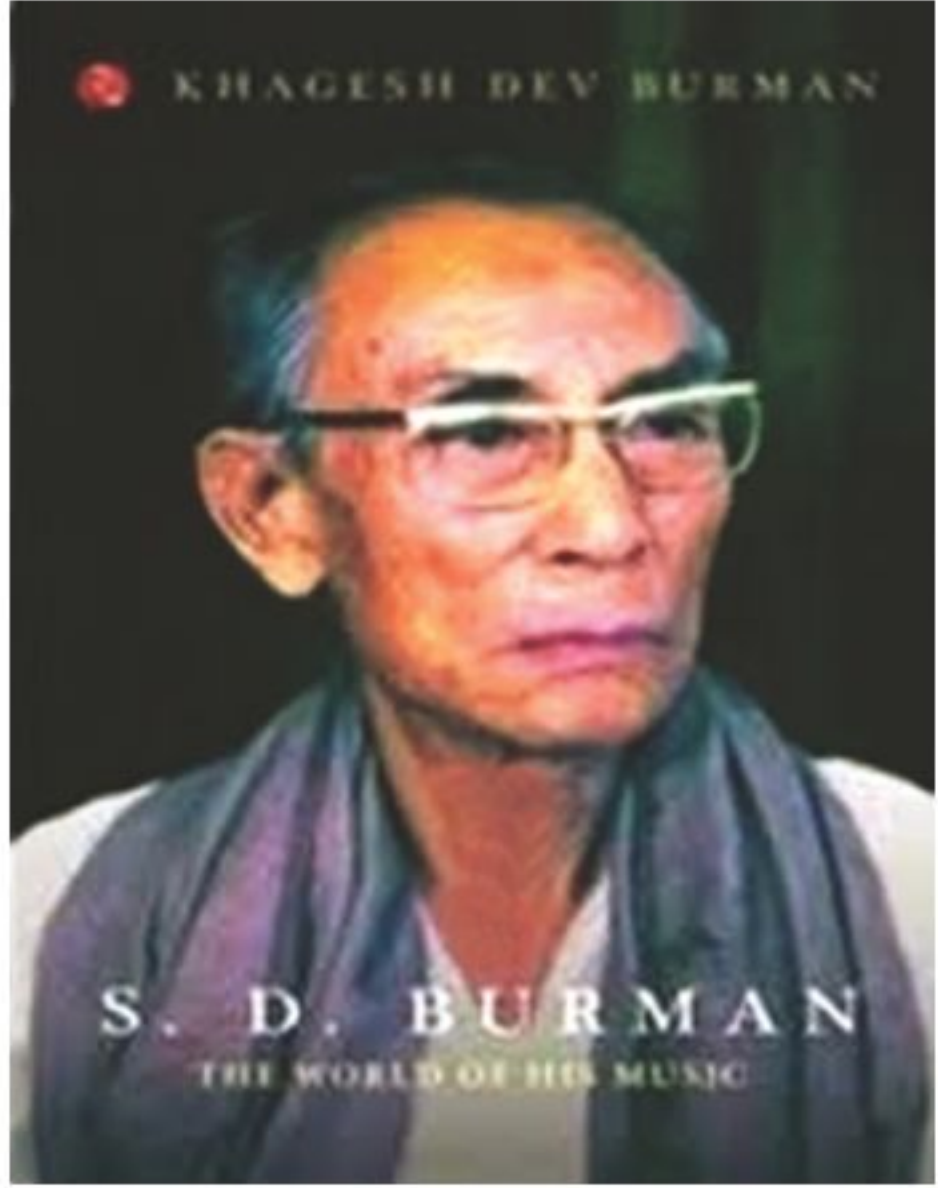
Sachin Dev Burman's father Nabadwdip Chandra Dev Burman as a member of Tripura's royal family and mother Nirupama Deve a Manipuri princess representing the core of Vaishnav culture. Nabawdip Chandra could have become the king of Tripura but betrayal, or a "cruel twist of fate", as the book's author says, deprived him of the throne and was exiled to the fringe of the kingdom—Comilla now in Bangladesh. However, what was a loss to the Tripura royal family was a huge gain for the world of music because it was in Comilla that Sachin Dev Burman was born on October 1, 1906. Sachin karta spent the first eighteen years of his life in Comilla, where he studied in Yusuf School and did his intermediate and graduation from the Victoria College while all his brothers studied at St Paul's School in Darjeeling.

The importance of Comilla and the topography of the then East Bengal in shaping Sachin Dev Burman during his formative years as a child and as an young man is beautifully summed up by Khagesh Dev Burman when he states in the book: "It can be said without a trace of doubt that had he not been born at Comilla, there would have been no Sangeetacharya Sachin Dev Burman". Sachin was the youngest of the nine siblings—five brothers and four sisters. Nabawdip Chandra, as the book's author tells us, himself was a man of arts, "an expert painter and sculptor and a skilled sitar player possessing an excellent voice that could mesmerize listeners". Nirupama Devi was also steeped in artistic ambience of Manipuri music and dance.

The royal family of Tripura not only patronized art and culture but many of its members were "successful artists in their own right"

and Sachin's father used to organize musical soirees at home which were attended by all his children. But his stay in Comilla made Sachin Dev Burman break free from the palace culture—not totally though—"to create a separate tradition through the folk music of rural Bengal". It was during his stay in Comilla that Sachin Dev Burman was "deeply attracted to folk music's rural roots, its melancholia and spontaneity", according to the book.

It says the "cultural ambience of Comilla in those days played an important role in the development of Sachin Dev Burman's musical faculties" as it was the "nerve centre of music and drama in the area, boasting of a number of institutions and personalities to further the cause of music and culture". The Young Men's Club in Comilla was frequented by Sachin Dev Burman and it was a meeting point of musicians, lyricists, poets and writers including Kazi Nazrul Islam who later became a close friend and associate of Sachin karta.



S.D. Burman
The World of His Music
Khagen Dev Burman
Rupa

Sachni and Nazrul would often be seen together at Kandirpar or around Talpukur, Ranidighi and Dharmasagar areas of Comilla and the two would often meet at the Young Men's Club "where they would punctuate the animate conversation with impromptu duets" and "curious onlookers would assembly to listen to them". "There is no doubt that Nazrul's advent in Comilla inspired Sachin's experimentation with music and had a salutary effect on his music, elevating it to a different level", says Khagesh Dev Burman, adding that it is surprising that Sachin sang only four songs composed by Nazrul, including "meghla nishi bhorey" and "kuhu kuhu koelia". After tracing Sachin Dev Burman's life in Comilla between 1906 and 1924, the book segments the rest of the chapters into three parts—from 1925 to 1931 and 1932 to 1944 in Calcutta and from 1944 to 1975 in

Bombay. In his first days in Calcutta, Sachin missed Comilla very much, especially the cooing of birds, splashing about in a pond, kirtan at daybreak and bhatiyali songs and the company of fakirs and Vaishnavas, says the writer, adding, though, that he also had a strong desire to listen to Hindustani music and learn from ustads. He became a disciple of famous singer Krishna Chandra Dey who persuaded Sachin to give up his love for tennis for the sake of music. Sachin then went to take training from Ustad Badal Khan Saheb who was K C Dey's guru. The pursuit of music was so important for Sachin that he spurned an offer to become the prime minister in the court of the then Tripura king Maharaj Bir Bikram to take the place of Sachin's father who died and the scion of the royal family took to giving tuition in music to make a living.

During his stay in Calcutta, Sachin came in contact with some of the legendary names in music world—Zamiruddin Khan, Bhishmadeb Chattopadhyay, Sailen Dasgupta and Girijashankar Chakravarty and developed close associations with some big names of cinema and music at that time—B N Sircar, Nitin Bose, Debaki Bose, Pramathesh Barua and K L Saigal. Sachin's composition of songs in Bengali failed to create much of a sensation in Bengal and his ambition to make it really big as a music director took him to Bombay where he set up an immediate rapport with Dev Anand, Guru Dutt and Navketan Films. The book tells us how Sachin Karta unearthed the talents of singing legends like Hemanta Mukhopadhyay, Kishore Kumar, Aasha Bhonsle, Manna Dey and Geeta Dutt.

The book also dwells on the relationships between Sachin Dev Burman and his composer-son Rahul Dev and rejects speculations about a rift and hostility between them due to competition. However, the book does acknowledge that Rahul had "ghost-composed" some of Sachin's popular compositions in the late fifties and sixties. While acknowledging differences of opinion between father and son, the writer, however, insists "his father was Pancham's idol". The book is replete with interesting anecdotes from Sachin Karta's life. For instance, how Sachin was "terribly upset" with the kind of music Rahul Dev Burman gave to the popular number 'dum maro dum' in the Dev Anand-Zeenat Aman-starrer *Hare Rama Kare Krishna*.

The 291-page book has a list of all the Bangla and Hindi songs whose music was composed by Sachin Dev Burman. It will come in handy for music scholars as well as lovers of Sachin's work, which has delighted millions across generations. The English translation of the Bengali book by the author in collaboration with S K Ray Chaudhary never falters and makes it worthy of a book lover's collection largely because it is presented in a manner suited for laymen and music experts alike.

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA IS A SENIOR INDIAN JOURNALIST BASED IN NEW DELHI.

BOOK choice

Godhuliguchchho
Pias Majid
Shuddhashar

Ekjon Farida Hossain
Ed M Rafique
Shilpatoroo Prokashoni

Nirbachito Roosh Kobita
Muhammad Habibur Rahman
Badhon Publications

Blossoming Roses
Z.A. Khan
Hakkani Publishers

Photography Dictionary
Sudepto Salam
Amar Prokashoni

Why am I afraid to tell you
Who I am?
John Powell
Zondervan