

REVIEW ARTICLE

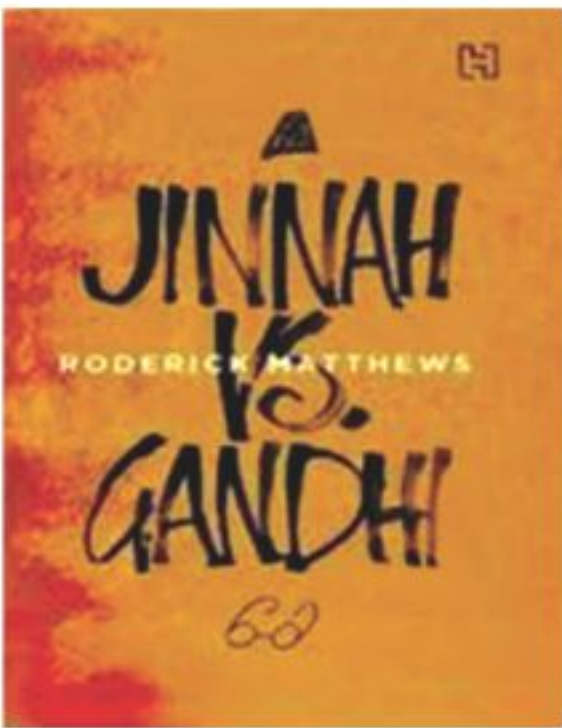
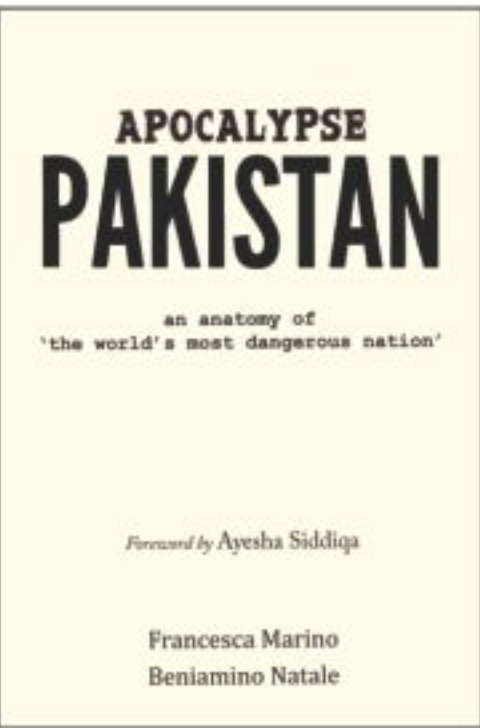
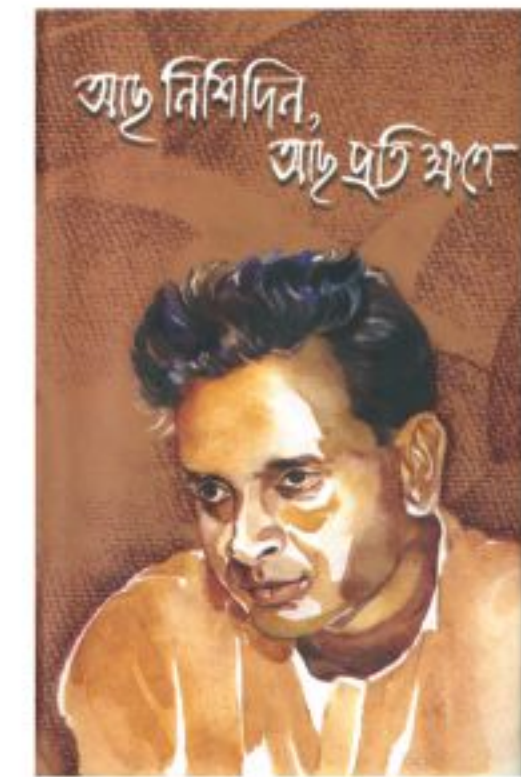
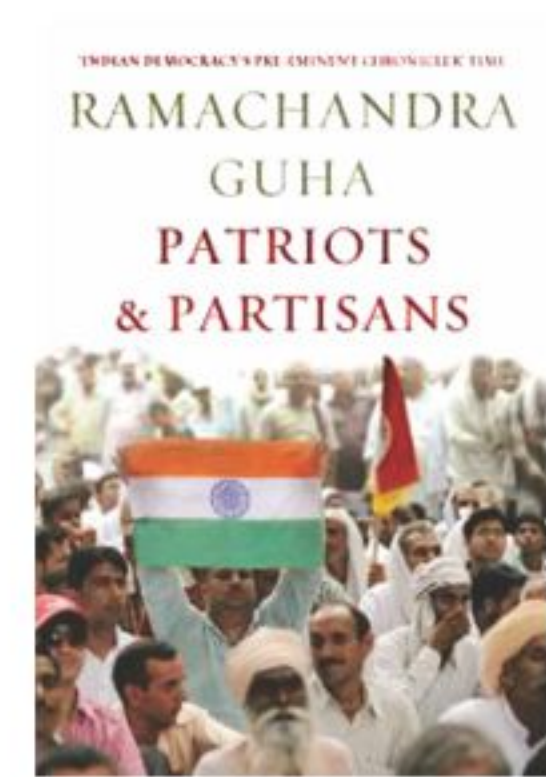
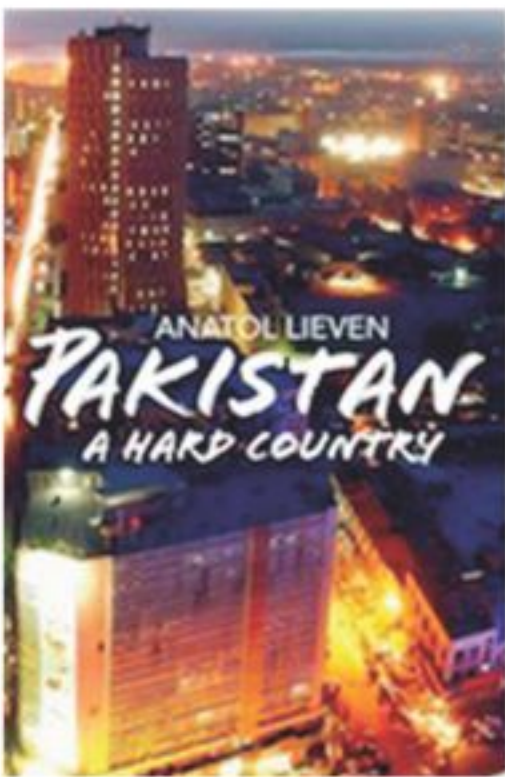
Reading, in this season of remembering

SYED BADRUL AHSAN

IN this season of victory, it is the intense moments of sadness, going back more than four decades, that come back to remind you of the enormity of commitment and involvement Bengalis went through in 1971. Only a couple of days ago, it was the memory of some of our best citizens, those we knew up close as well as from a distance, we brought alive once again in our collective national consciousness, for all the right reasons in the world. And if you have before you the stories that come associated with men like Professor Ghyasuddin Ahmad, it is the darkness of a soon-to-end war you go back to. The academic was one of scores seized by the al-Badr goon squads of the Pakistan occupation army on the eve of victory, never to return home alive. None of those abducted by the assassins, shadows of whom we spot in the mayhem on our streets launched by their successor generation in these times of what is clearly a twilight struggle, came back home. They were compelled to go the way of all flesh because the goal of the killers was simple: leave the new state of Bangladesh impoverished in the dawn of its freedom.

In *Achho Nishidin Achho Protikhone*, edited with love and care by Anisuzzaman, Farida Banu, Dr. Rashiduddin Ahmad, Hamida Banu and Atiqa Botul Khanam, you get not just the story of an individual but the history of a nation as well. Professor Ghyasuddin Ahmad was not your ordinary academic. There was political belief in him, an emotion which clearly informed people of the concerns that assailed him as a Bengali. Those concerns necessarily touched on the future of the Bengali nation; and particularly after 25 March 1971, he believed --- as so many others did --- that there was only one road that lay open before the nation. And that was liberty. It would be tortuous, it would be uncertain, it would be dark and peopled by evils of a sundry nature. But it would need to be traversed. And that was what Ahmad did. He paid the price for doing so. Everyone kidnapped by the state of Pakistan in those final desperate moments of an oddity born of a spurious two-nation theory paid the price.

In this work, therefore, it is the world of Professor Ghyasuddin Ahmad --- and by extension the world of every other martyr we remember in the gathering darkness of winter --- that is explored by some of our living scholars and historians and, of course, by Ahmad's grieving family. Salahuddin Ahmed, Serajul Islam Choudhury, Nilima Ibrahim, Sardar Fazul Karim, Naimuddin Ahmed, Mokammel Haq, Razia Khan, Sonia Amin, Mofidul Haq, Kazi Madina, Rashid Haider and a whole panoply of intellectuals come together to pay tribute to a man who touched the lives not only of his pupils but also that of his larger nation. Published by Shahitya Prakash in December 2006, the work is certainly a rich, ready



reference for students of Bangladesh's history. It is a book you can always go back to, if historical truth is what you uphold.

The end of the year is also a pretty good time to reflect on the books that have been read in the preceding months or those that are being read or those that will be read in the days and weeks to be. Last year Nazrul's *Bandhonhara* was launched in its English translation in Dhaka, to much acclaim. It surely goes to the credit of The Reading Circle that it undertook this rather gigantic task of going for the translation. Something, as they say, is always lost in translation. But then there are translations that hold your attention, that are indeed riveting. This translation of *Bandhonhara* promises to be one work that could make a difference. I am yet to read it and when I do, I know that old bug, the urge to review, will take hold of my imagination and I could actually end up doing a critique of the work.

Essay matters

Which reminds me. I have in hand a copy of Ramachandra Guha's relatively new work, *Patriots & Partisans*. Now, Guha has always been a fascinating writer and has proved to be exceedingly brilliant in dealing with a diversity of topics. A few years ago, recovering from an ailment, I whiled away the days going through his coruscating work on the history of cricket and the stars who have given that particular shine to the game through the decades. I have never been a cricket buff. Indeed, sports have always been my Achilles' heel, for the fundamental reason that there is hardly a game which I understand. Despite all such inadequacies, though, I did manage to go through the entirety of that fascinating work on cricket. I am not sure I understand cricket better as a result of that reading, but it was certainly enlightening going through the stories of the players and commentators who today are legends in the history of the game.

Guha's new book, the one I have in

hand, is of course on a political level. Basically a collection of essays on a diversity of subjects, the work is a revelation of a liberal mind at work. More significantly, it is a hint of the objectivity that writers must pursue if they mean to be taken seriously. Ramachandra Guha gives you his take on Hindutva. He calls this particular chapter on the topic 'Hindutva Hate Mail', which ought to be a broad hint of where he means to take you. There is too the quite saddening write-up on India's first prime minister, one that Guha titles 'Verdicts on Nehru: The Rise and Fall of a Reputation'. The tenor is one of Nehru being studied on the larger canvas of history. Guha's sympathy for Nehru is unmistakable. The Nehruvian concept of society, of socialism, of diplomacy --- all of these are put under the scanner. And among those peering through the scanner are politicians, such as L.K. Advani, whose politics has generally been at a far remove from that of Nehru. In this one chapter, you tend to observe Nehru through the prism of a lifetime. Even the Mountbattens are pulled into the picture.

Before we move on, though, we must not fail to read the especially exhilarating chapter, 'A Short History of Congress Chamchagiri', in this eminently readable work. If Guha has been kind, even deferential, to Nehru, he makes it clear that he does not have a similar opinion about his descendants. Dismissive of Rajiv and Sanjay Gandhi and even Rahul Gandhi, he is seemingly willing not to touch Indira Gandhi. But you get a trifle worried when Guha informs you that Nehru had no wish to see Indira Gandhi as his political successor. If that was truly so, how does one explain the fact that in the late 1950s Indira Gandhi served as president of the Indian National Congress for a year? Nehru may have disapproved of Indira's role here, but, again, he seemed content to go along with it once the reality came to pass.

'What have I done?'

Reading about politics gives you the kind of energy that often refuses to burn out. And when such reading happens to relate to particular countries, the energy seems all the more pronounced. There is Anatole Lieven's *Pakistan: A Hard Country*. If you have been going the endless turmoil Pakistan has been muddling through, you might get a sense of this absolutely thought-provoking work. It traces the history of Pakistan's politics and the key actors in the drama that has been playing out as tragedy and farce and comedy or a combination of all three since the country's eastern wing went its own way to become Bangladesh in 1971. Lieven wonders --- and that is something that will complement your thoughts --- how East and West Pakistan, separated by more than a thousand miles of Indian territory, with such a yawning gap in culture, even thought of being a single state. People in West Pakistan never considered the Bengalis of East Pakistan Muslim or Pakistani enough to be treated fairly, either in the political or economic sense. The break that occurred in 1971 therefore had to come.

And then Lieven moves on, to a critical assessment of the troubles that assail present-day Pakistan from a whole range of directions. The feudal nature of its politics, its industrial base, the dominance of the Punjab in nearly every sphere of life and, of course, the role of the military in nearly every area of socio-political activity are the issues Lieven focuses on. Pakistan has for a very large number of people around the world been in a state of relentless decline, sliding into nearly a failed state, which is something that not many Pakistanis will agree with. You only need to go through *Apocalypse Pakistan*, from Francesca Marino and Beniamino Natale. Published by Niyogi Books, the sub-heading of the work nearly says it all: *an anatomy of 'the world's most dangerous nation'*. When you observe the fragile nature of its politics, the weakness of its institutions and the battering it has been getting from both the Pakistani Taliban and American drone attacks, it is that old question asked by Tariq Ali years ago --- 'Can Pakistan Survive?' --- which ominously raises its head once again. At this point in history, you cannot quite say that Pakistan will go the way of the Soviet Union, but you are pretty sure that it will wobble through, at least in the foreseeable future. And here is again cause to remember Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Even after so many decades have gone by, you cannot but be amazed by the man. There was not much of emotion in him and it did not occur to him that, like Gandhi and Nehru and Azad, he needed to wage a struggle to have the British colonialists out of India. His insensitivities to the sufferings of millions of Hindus and Muslims remain the stuff of bad legend. But if there was any regret on Jinnah's part about the damage he and his Muslim League had caused to the country, to both Muslims and Hindus,

it comes through in Kuldip Nayar's recently published memoirs, *Beyond the Lines*. The story comes from Mazhar Ali Khan, who told only his wife Tahera about it, making her promise to keep it within her. Years, many years, later, Tahera Mazhar Ali would spill it out to Nayar: Jinnah, surveying the sordid scene of refugees moving to India and Pakistan in the early days of Partition, is for the first time horrified by the enormity of what has happened. "What have I done?" That is what escaped his lips. He said nothing more.

Two men

There have been innumerable books on Partition and there will be more. Sixty five years after the departure of the British, you still come across serious debate on who or what could have been responsible for the tragedy. The burden of guilt falls, for the most part, on Jinnah. But there are also those who fervently believe that Nehru has to share part of the blame. What if he had not made those incendiary comments on the Congress' attitude to the Cabinet Mission Plan? What if Jinnah had been offered the position of independent India's first prime minister? Should Mountbatten and Radcliffe not have been pilloried for the manifest damage they did to generations of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who had inhabited India for centuries? And why did Gandhi not insist, a little more assertively than he did, that India stay as one indivisible country? These are questions that will be asked long into the future. And the answers will always be a muddle, all of them betraying agitated states of mind in those expected to respond to the questions. And while you reflect on it all, consider reading Roderick Matthews' engrossing work on Partition. He calls the work *Jinnah Vs. Gandhi*, a title which gives you a fairly good idea of what the writer means to talk about. In simple terms, it is a comparative study of the personalities and politics of the two men who played pivotal roles in the shaping of an India moving toward freedom as well as vivisection in the later part of the 1940s. As you read through the book, two questions always pop up before you, as they pop up before the writer. First, how did Gandhi, trained to be a barrister in England, end up wearing homespun cloth and becoming a man of the masses? Second, how did Jinnah, a modern man happy in emulating the English in his profession and social dealings, decline to being the founding father of a state based on the narrow concept of religion?

Answers to these queries will elude you, at least for now. Which is when you might try a different tack. Go to Jeremy Seabrook and Imran Ahmed Siddiqui's *People Without History: India's Muslim Ghettoes*. You feel the pain of these people as you read of the dismal lives they lead, in places like Beniapukur, Tiljala Road and Tangra. The communal politics of the 1940s, of the Muslim League's obduracy and the Congress' indifference (toward the end) has stymied the future of these people.

Vanishing forests and exploited workers

Audity Falguni studies the pain and agony of loss

Critiques of Policies and Practices

The Case of Forests, Ethnic Communities and Tea Workers of Bangladesh  
Philip Gain, Lucille Sircar, Shamimul Islam  
Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD)

LEAF Storm, the first novel by widely acclaimed author Gabriel Garcia Marquez, depicts the pain of native South Americans and the indigenous Red Indian people in the city of Arakataka, Colombia, against the backdrop of commercial banana plantation by the US based United Fruits Company. The novel narrates brutal oppression by the multinational company of local plantation workers and grabbing of their own land and forest resources for the sake of earning cash.

The novel reflects conditions in today's Bangladesh when commercial pineapple and banana plantations get expanded in the Modhupur sal forest, depriving the indigenous Garos and Koch people of their own land. Besides commercial fruit plantation, our government has actually established plantations of alien and exotic species like rubber, acacia and eucalyptus in the Modhupur sal forest (*shorea robusta*) with loan grants from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank (WB), causing severe consequences for ethnic communities.

It is owing to the "forest policy" prescribed to our government by large international organizations like WB or ADB that around 217,790.3 acres of land from 83 Mouzas in three hill districts were classified as reserved forests between 1990 and 1998 by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF). It turned thousands of indigenous people homeless and landless overnight. Sangthuima (age 24) and Thusangma (age 20), two Khyang sisters in a remote village in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), thus had almost all of their three acres of cropland and even their homesteads notified as

reserved forests which they actually inherited from their father Teng Hla Prue. The land is still recorded in his name. They have implicitly become illegal on their own land. Around 2,343 Khyang people (according to the 1991 census report) were the worst affected by the reservation.

*Critiques of Policies and Practices: The Case of Forests, Ethnic Communities and Tea Workers of Bangladesh*, jointly authored by Philip Gain, Lucille Sircar and Shamimul Islam, endeavors to offer policy critiques in two areas, namely forests and indigenous peoples and tea plantation workers.

Of the two large articles of the book, the first one, "Policies and Practices Concerning Forests and Ethnic Communities of Bangladesh" by Philip Gain, shows us the politics of "Forest Department" and so-called "Forest Policies" formulated by different international agencies which often tend to curb or reduce the access of indigenous communities to their birth place, i.e., the forests. In the words of the author himself: "It is the governments, international financial institutions (IFIS) and companies, which are profiteers from plantations, try to establish that plantations are forests. They blame growing population, migration of landless people to the forestland, conversion of forestland to agriculture . . . for the destruction of forests. They deliberately make no mention of underlying factors that really ruin the forests and cause misery to the forest-dwelling indigenous communities."

The author then discusses the categories (reserved forests, protected forests, privately owned forests and unclassified state forests-USF) and types (hill forests, sal forests and mangrove forests) in Bangladesh. We come to learn that reserved forests include the *Sundarbans* (man-

groves) in the southwest (601,700 hectares), the CHT region in the southeast (323,331 ha) and the Modhupur tracts in the north-central region (17,107 ha). Again, three-fourths of the CHT are unclassified state forests or USF.

Hill forests include tropical evergreen or semi-evergreen forests (640,000 hectares) in the eastern districts of Chittagong, Cox's Bazar, Sylhet and the CHT. But severe deforestation has taken place in the hill forests largely owing to dam, pulp and paper mills, woodlot and agro-forestry, rubber plantations, teak monoculture, cash crops, militarization, settlement, slash-and-burn cultivation, etc. According to Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation (BFIDC) and other sources, about 9,000 ha of hilly land were distributed to 418 individual outsiders for commercial rubber plantation in Bandarban and Khagrachari Hill Districts.

The moist or dry deciduous *sal* forests (122,000 hectares) have been exhausted to a great extent because of cash crop plantation and plantation of other exotic species. According to some appalling statistics about the state of the Modhupur forest given by the Tangail forest office, out of 46,000 acres in the Tangail part of the Modhupur forest, around 7,800 acres have been given over to rubber cultivation, 1,000 acres to the air force, 25,000 acres have gone into illegal possession and the Forest Department controls only 9,000 acres (*Published in World Rainforest Movement (WRM) Bulletin 75. Extracted from: "Modhupur: A stolen forest, robbed Adivasis," by Philip Gain*).

Readers of the book will surely find the second article of the book, "The Case of Tea Workers in Bangladesh", by Lucille Sircar and Shamimul Islam with Philip Gain, to be more human interest oriented. The article begins with the "captive" situation of 87,534 registered and 20,065 non-registered tea workers in 160 tea estates of Bangladesh. Most of the 160 tea

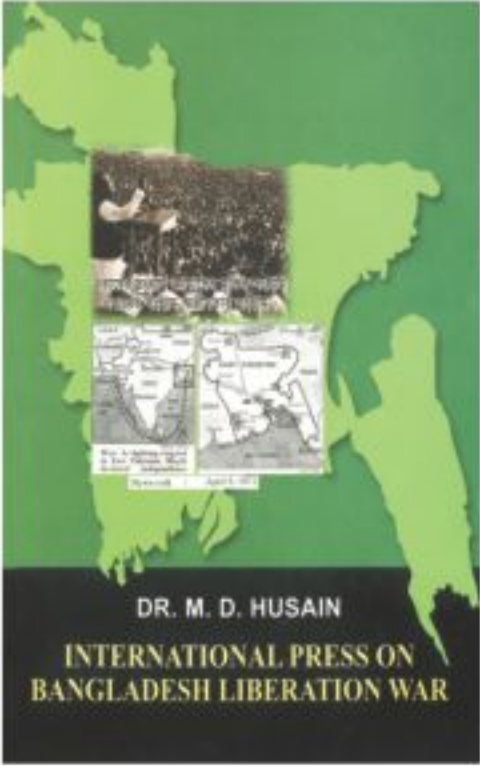
estates in Bangladesh are located in Maulvi Bazar, Hobiganj, Sylhet and Brahmanria districts. In 1854, when the tea workers (Santals, Oraons, Munda, Gonds, etc.) from different states of India first arrived, they each signed a four-year contract that eventually obliged them to stay on at the tea gardens for generations. Tea plantation was introduced by the British colonial lords mostly in Surmah Valley of Sylhet in 1854.

Although tea is an important export item in Bangladesh and in the fiscal year 2004, the country exported 12.3 million kilograms of tea valued at US\$ 15.8 million, tea workers persist on their lives with the daily income as low as Tk. 28 (less than half of one US dollar) per day. They are in most cases denied of their rights to appropriate housing, medication, education and drinking water. Despite the provisions of the Tea Plantation Labor Rules 1977 that make it obligatory for the owners of tea gardens to provide standard housing to each tea worker, the housing status of the tea workers did not improve much over the decades.

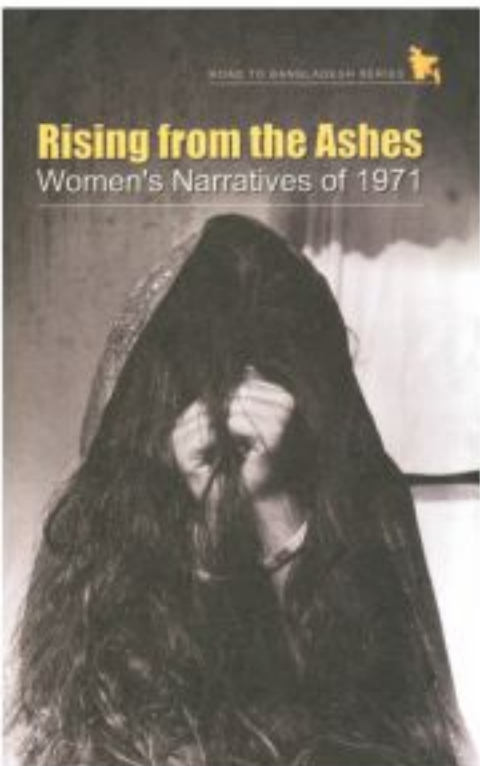
Working conditions, particularly for women employees in tea gardens, are deplorable. Women are mostly employed as tea leaf pluckers because they have more "skilled and nimble fingers than men." 3 It is granted that a person plucks at least 23 kg leaves and gets 28 taka. If she or he fails to pluck that much the supervisor will not accept his or her attendance. But if one plucks more than that he or she gets an additional pay of only one taka per kg of tea leaves. Again, adolescents and children get only ninety and eighty percents of adults' wages. Parents often prefer sending their children to work in tea estates rather than to school because work brings extra cash for the family. Wednesday is the weekly payday.

AUDITY FALGUNI WRITES ON AND CRITIQUES DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

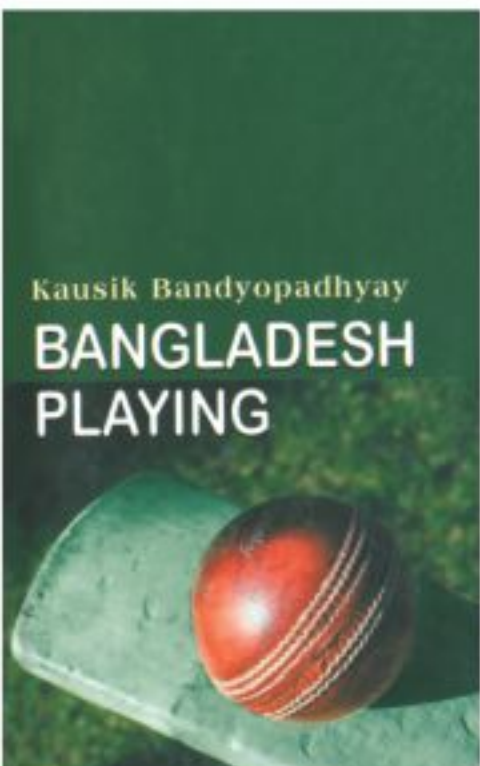
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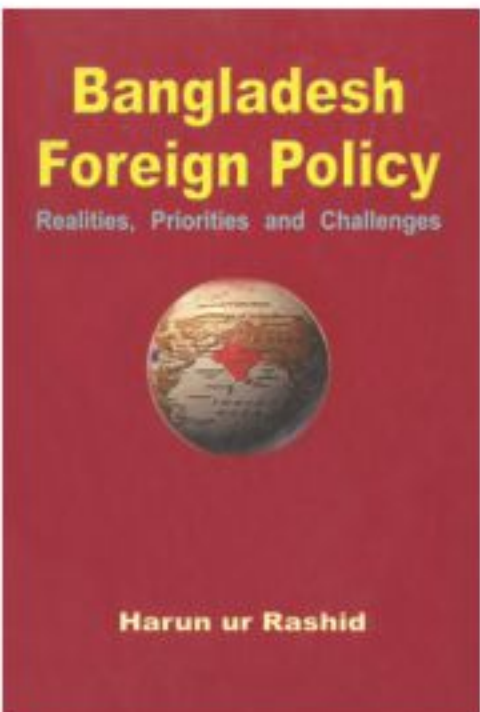
International Press on Bangladesh Liberation War  
Dr. M.D. Husain  
Professor Publications, Dhaka



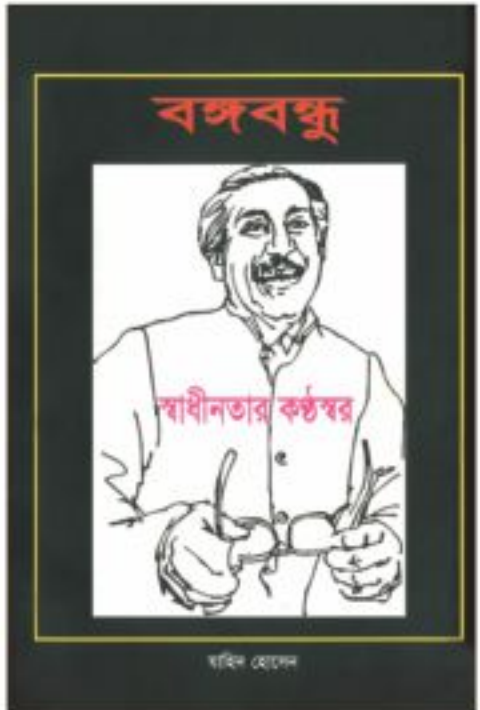
Rising from the Ashes  
Women's Narratives of 1971  
Trans Niaz Zaman  
The University Press Limited



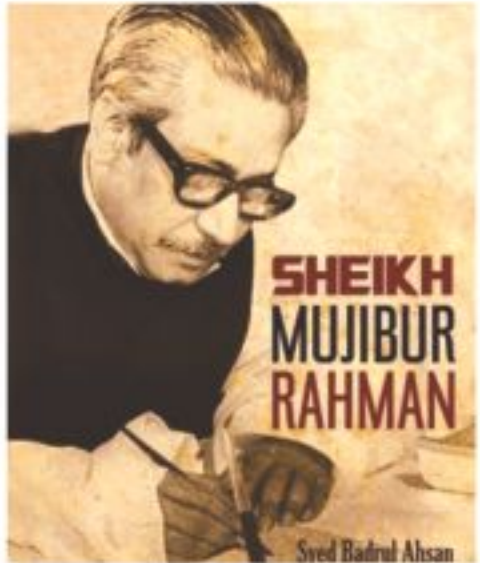
Bangladesh Playing  
Kausik Bandyopadhyay  
Publisher Ahmed Mahfuzul Haq  
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Bangladesh Foreign Policy  
Realities, Priorities and Challenges  
Harun ur Rashid  
Academic Press and Publishers Library



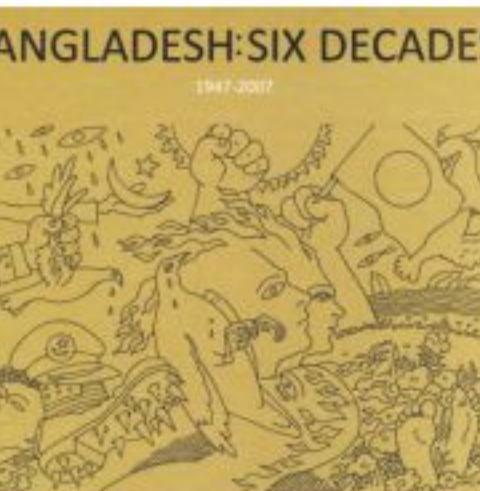
Bangabandhu  
Shadinotar Konthoshor  
Compilation Zahid Hossain  
Publisher Mosfeka Zahid



From Rebel to Founding Father  
Sheikh Mujibur Rahman  
Syed Badrul Ahsan  
Niyogi Books, Delhi



Historicizing 1971 Genocide  
State versus Person  
Imtiaz Ahmed  
The University Press Limited



Bangladesh: Six Decades  
1947-2007  
Eds Professor Anisuzzaman,  
Muhammad Zamir  
Syed Manzoorul Islam  
Nympha Publication