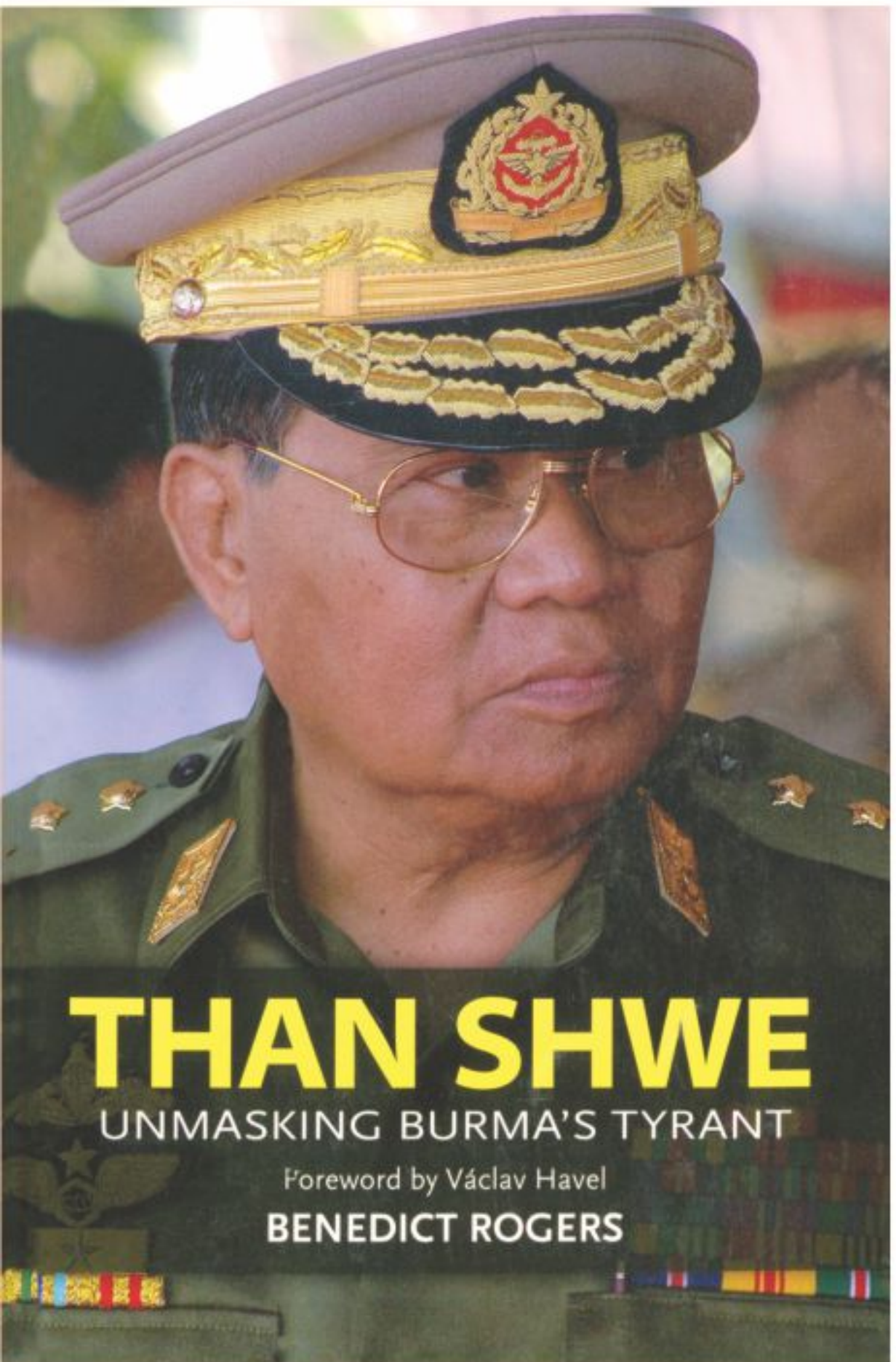


# The story of a dictator

Shahriar Feroze explores the life of a brutal ruler

LET'S begin with a fact about the Burma's former military dictator Than Shwe. According to specialists in palmistry, most people have three "skin creases" in their palms. The top line crease across the palm is the "heart" line, indicating compassion; the middle is the "head" line, representing intellect and career path, and the third is the "life" line, relating to health. A photo of Than Shwe taken on Armed Forces Day, which was published in *The Myanmar times* in 2007, clearly shows him waving with his palm outstretched having only two lines – a head and a life line, and no heart line.

Than Shwe's sinister conduct as Burma's military dictator is devoid of any compassion at all. Benedict Rogers needs to be commended for unmasking a tyrant, who not only ruled Burma for nearly two decades but also put in place



Than Shwe  
Unmasking Burma's Tyrant  
Benedict Rogers  
Silkworm Books  
Chiang Mai, Thailand

inhuman schemes for suppressing opposition to him. The story of general Than Shwe is narrated against the backdrop of a transforming Burma, and how a postal clerk – turned – mediocre soldier managed to occupy the top seat of a country once labelled as a pariah state.

This reviewer does not recommend *Than Shwe: Unmasking Burma's Tyrant* only for those interested in the story of the ruthless dictator, but also for those who wish to be briefed about the country. In this work, you also get an overview of Burma's culture, ethnicity, politics, economy, history and, of course, its controversial but brutal and efficient military known as *tatmadaw*. It is an attention-grabbing read because the rise and rule of the dictator is portrayed in light of Burma's social-political-economic-military conditions. However, the

reclusive and xenophobic character of Than Shwe is analyzed, it is through a focused reading of the book that the reader is expected to understand how endlessly difficult it was to collect and compile information from reliable and firsthand sources about the man.

The book, in eight chapters, begins with the birth and childhood of Than Shwe. Even very basic of information about him is riddled with opinions. The beginning of his military career is also a subject of controversy. Than Shwe is clearly portrayed as one who maintains a low profile throughout his entire life, that is, until till he gave up power. He tends to be seen as being sullen, humourless and rather withdrawn, a hardliner, skilled manipulator and an opponent of the democratization of Burma. He is reported to have marked national holidays and ceremonies with messages in state-run newspapers, but he rarely talked to the press.

It is Shwe's leadership that has been criticized for violence and human rights abuses. Amnesty International described human rights violations in Myanmar as "widespread and systematic. As many as a million Burmese have allegedly been shipped off to jungle gulags, or rural slave camps, and forced to perform manual labor during his tenure at office. Free speech was unheard of, and dissent at any length was not tolerated by his regime. In 2007, mass demonstrations were led by crowds of Buddhist monks, popularly known as the saffron revolution, but they were put down by security forces that killed, beat and detained hundreds. There were persistent rumors that thousands of monks and others were rounded up and summarily executed and their bodies dumped in the jungle."

In other words, it is Than Shwe's crimes against humanity, nepotism, illegal financial gains and corrupt military practices that draw readers' attention and are described in several of the chapters intermittently. More officially, Than Shwe's crimes against humanity began with an ordering of the execution of some 59 civilians living on Christie Island. When the local commander on Christie Island initially hesitated to kill the civilians, fearing the commander who had given the order was drunk, he was told the instruction came from "Aba Gyi" or "Great Father" – the term used to refer to General Than Shwe.

Another noteworthy aspect that has been covered in the work is the Burmese military's support for and protection in fostering its infamous drug trade and cultivation. Like Afghanistan's, a big part of the Burmese economy is closely dependent on drug trafficking. Though an open secret, from drugs to development projects, banks to construction deals, indeed in almost everything it is the members in the upper echelons of the *Tatmadaw* who call the shots. Besides, this work on Than Shwe is also the first ever account of the ruthless dictator's rise through the ranks of the army, his training in psychological warfare, his strange faith in astrology, his elimination of rivals as seen through the insights of Burmese army defectors and global diplomats. Even now it is believed that Shwe still pulls the strings of the government when needed.

The writer has attempted to obtain as much information as possible through travelling in Asia, Europe and America. Even so, the biography cannot be regarded as an impartial one. But, then again, Rogers admits that when faced with evidence of the crimes over which Than Shwe has presided, one cannot remain completely dispassionate. And do not forget that Benedict Rogers is a human rights advocate too. The cover photograph of Shwe as dictator in uniform matches the subject. The black and white photographs in the book could have been more informative with better captions.

SHAHRIAR FEROZE IS CURRENT AFFAIRS ANALYST, THE DAILY STAR

# The charm in recitation

Alamgir Khan draws attention to new poetry

**B**RITTER *Opaare Jhumko Phul* by Kamrul Hassan Monju is a collection of his articles, interviews and reviews on recitation. The work was published by Shrabon Prokashani quite some time back.

Kamrul Hassan Monju has apparently had a significant effect through bringing about a palpable change in Bengali recitation. His ideas regarding the subject of recitation are radical and ought to be far-reaching. His theory about recitation is based on a dialectical materialist outlook vis-a-vis arts and literature. It in many ways follows Bertolt Brecht's ideas about theatre. Through a recitation of poems he interprets the changing world in a new way, thus pushing it toward further change. Monju does not confine himself merely to what the poet has said. He rather goes beyond, to the source of the materials behind the poet's perception of the world, even to the point of denying the poet altogether, thus making the recitation of the poem his own forte, completely independent. The poet's creation is just a launching pad for his own art, 'voice painting' as he calls it, to open up a new horizon in the universe of the human mind. He has his guru, however, for this theory of recitation and its application as a performing art, who is none other than Tariq Salahuddin Mahmud.

Monju is a theorist and practitioner of the art of recitation. But he is confined by no rigidity of grammar in this endeavour. His commitment is to the real world we live in and are constantly trying to change. To him recitation is an art form which requires a very sensitive mind and deep intellectual exercise. It is connected with all other art forms and can never go beyond politics, social science, philosophy and other intellectual endeavours. In his view, recitation is knowledge by another name, not simply a passionate utterance of written words.

Monju's idea on recitation is that real recitation happens when the performer can let the audience forget about his presence and so-called charisma and magnificence and instead draws them into the world that the artiste endeavours to present to them with his or her voice painting. In this painting, voice is an instrument in the hand of the brain behind it. The final product of the artiste is the product of the artiste's mind, pushing the charisma of the voice towards invisibility. He, however, does not brush aside the significance of the voice. And to him recitation is not mere mechanical brain work. It is the combination of both. And, moreover, it is to consciously bring out the artiste's sub-conscious perception of the poem.

His recitation of Sukanta Bhattacharya's poem 'Lenin' is made in the form of a political speech being delivered. Both criticism and praise have been heaped on it. Yet it is no doubt a performance one can hardly forget. For its making, Monju had to study the background of the Russian revolution and watch 'The Communist', a Soviet cinema. He had to grasp the socio-historical background and meanings of the words in this poem. He believes that recitation of any



Britter Opaare Jhumko Phul  
Kamrul Hassan Monju  
Shrabon Prakashani

poem calls for this depth of effort.

Monju is disappointed that in Bangladesh recitation workshops have turned into a sort of factory for producing mechanical recitation artistes. He thinks it is not enough to teach learners to correctly pronounce words by just pointing to their places of utterance in the mouth; it is rather necessary to teach them to look at and learn intimately the reality in society and in one's life.

He has discussed the dialectical relationship between the poet and the recitation artiste. He thinks punctuation marks, rhythm, etc., are barriers for a recitation artiste, which he must overcome to free his creation from the fetters a particular form wears. Monju thinks recitation can stop the moral degradation of our society. He is in favour of freeing recitation from the dominance of Dhaka-based artistes.

The book includes Monju's write-ups on Shambhu Mitra, Tariq Salahuddin and Naren Biswas. His reviews of some recitation productions by others as well have brought out his insightful ideas on the stage presentation of recitation in Bangladesh.

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# Between myth and reality

Waheed Nabi takes readers through the past

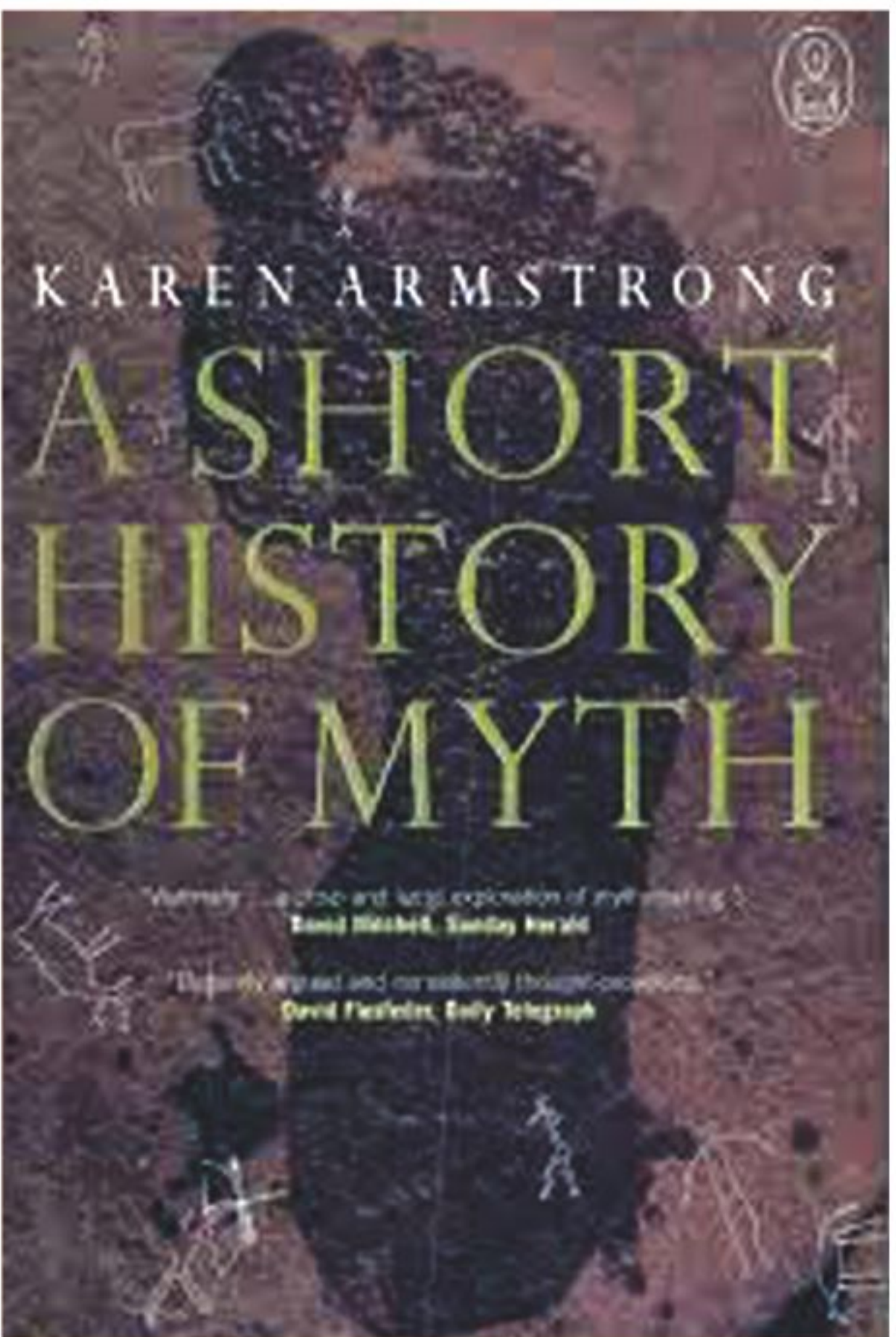
**A**CCORDING to the Oxford dictionary, myth means -- 1. a traditional narrative involving supernatural or imaginary persons and embodying popular ideas on natural or social phenomenon; 2. such narrative collectively; 3. widely held but false notion; 4. A fictitious person, thing or idea; 5. An allegory.

Archaeologists have found weapons, tools and animal bones in the graves of Neanderthals, which indicate that they believed in a future world which is similar to theirs. When they became aware of their mortality they created a counter narrative to come to terms with it. The visible world was not the only reality. From their imagination it was clear that they had ideas which went beyond people's everyday experiences. Human beings invented stories which enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting. From their imagination, mythology and religion were created. This imagination helped scientists to invent new things. Myths and science helped human beings to live more intensely. The graves of Neanderthals taught us a few things, which includes fear of death and extinction. Animal bones indicate that there was sacrifice.

Myth is inseparable from rituals. Myths force us to go beyond our experiences. One day we all have to go to an unknown place. Myth is about the unknown. Myth is about something which initially had no words. Myth is therefore about silence. Myth is not the story told for its own sake, but it helps us to know how we should behave. Sometimes corpses were placed in foetal positions ready for the next world. Mythology places us in another plane which exists alongside our world. The worlds of the gods are the basic theme of mythology. People in ancient days thought that gods, human beings, animals and nature were bound by the same laws. Mythology helped human beings to cope with difficult predicaments. We want to know where we came from, but we have lost the earliest beginnings in the mist of history.

We have created myths about our forefathers which are not facts but current attitudes about customs, neighbours, et cetera. In the pre-modern world people wrote about what it actually meant and not what had actually happened. History has a chronological view. Mythology is art which points beyond history which is timeless in human history. We seek out ecstasy when we feel that we live more intensely. When we fail to find that in temples, churches or mosques we look for them in art, music, sports or drugs. Mythology does not claim to be objective. In difficult situations human beings play with different possibilities. In art we relieve ourselves from the constraints of rules. Myth can be effective as a guide. Ancient people could not leave any written report. But we can learn from indigenous people. Pygmies are still in the hunter age. They believe in myths. They think that they are in harmony with gods, nature and animals. The moon is seen as sacred, as it waxes and wanes. Trees are earthly things and so there is no point in worshipping them.

In the Palaeolithic age (20,000 – 8,000 BCE) the sky was associated with divinity. From the sky, God ruled over the heavens and the earth. But according to Karen Armstrong, myth will not work if it remains connected with the supernatural only. Mythology faded from the lives of people in the west because it was not in touch with the human beings. But height remains sacred. Moses, Christ, Muhammed ascended. The history of ascent goes back to Shamans in the hunting society.



A Short History of Myth  
Karen Armstrong  
Canongate

Human beings developed 'Logos' to function logically and scientifically. Logos look forward but myth looks back. Both myth and logos have their limitations and human beings need both. Human beings invented agriculture about ten thousand years ago. Agriculture was not gentle. There was constant battle against the violence of nature. There was drought, storm and famine. In this period the arts and invention of writing helped them to give expression to their mythology.

About four thousand years ago, human beings took another major step forward, when they started to build cities. Civilisation was great but fragile. One city tried to dominate another and as a result there was murder and destruction.

The period between 800 and 200 BCE is described as the Axial Age as it is pivotal to human spiritual development. It marks the beginning of religion. This period also sees the beginning of new capitalist system. Power shifted from the priests and kings to merchants. The post-Axial period started in the 16th century, which is characterised by the end of myths. But there has been a large difference between the first and third worlds. Even in the first world, the 'age of reason' witnessed irrationality at times, for example witchcraft.

It is an insightful book which is highly recommended.

WAHEED NABI IS A FELLOW OF THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS, UK

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