

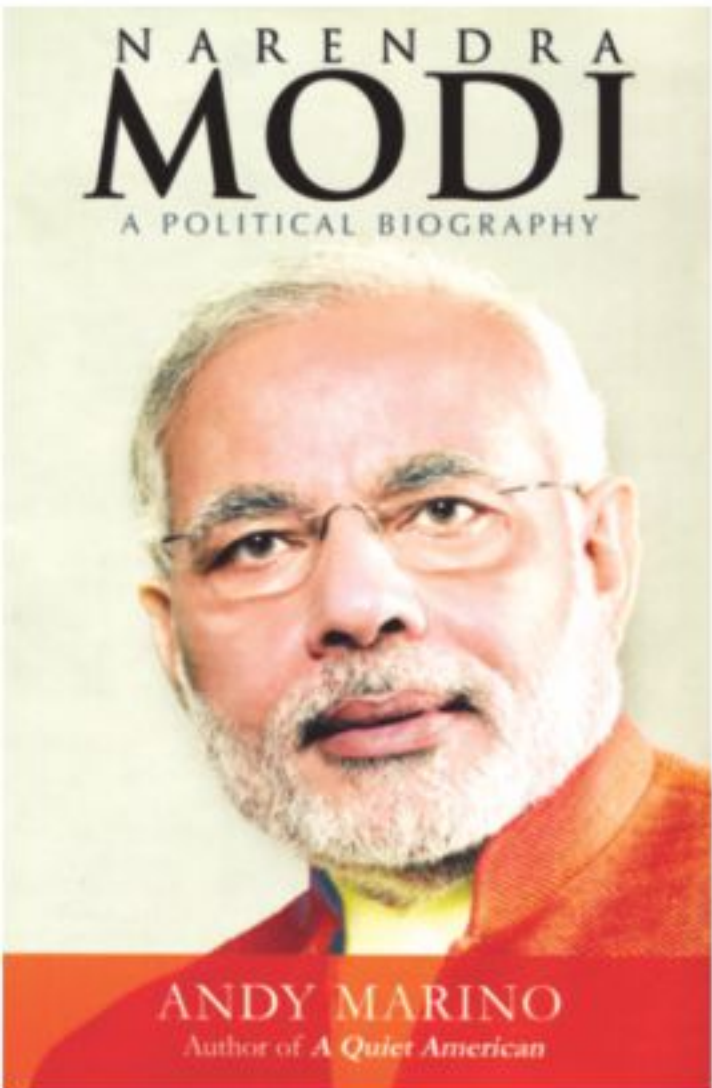
READINGS

Reviews from Syed Badrul Ahsan

A calm about him . . .

A plenitude of books is out there this season. In an unusual age when Baishakh takes its own sweet time to free its traditional showers to soothe the earth, when the temperature goes up to clearly intolerable levels, it is only reading that you can go back to, reasonably safely.

You begin with Andy Marino's biography of Narendra Modi. The work is a rather friendly portrait of the man who has just taken over as India's new leader but whose reputation, in the eyes of many, remains suspect. When you consider that men as eminent as Amartya Sen have publicly made it clear they have no reason to voice support for Modi, it is the Gujarat riots of 2002 that you must go back to. To what extent was Modi responsible for the carnage that followed the killing of 59 Hindu pilgrims in Godhra is a question that may never be answered. A few weeks before the results of India's general elections were made known, the British weekly journal The Economist made it clear in one of its editorials how Modi was exonerated of all culpability vis-à-vis Gujarat 2002 through his administration ensuring that all evidence relating to the troubles be removed, a reality which clearly had the courts in a bind. The judges found no evidence of Modi's involvement in criminal conduct. The evidence was not there. Not many people were satisfied with the explanation.



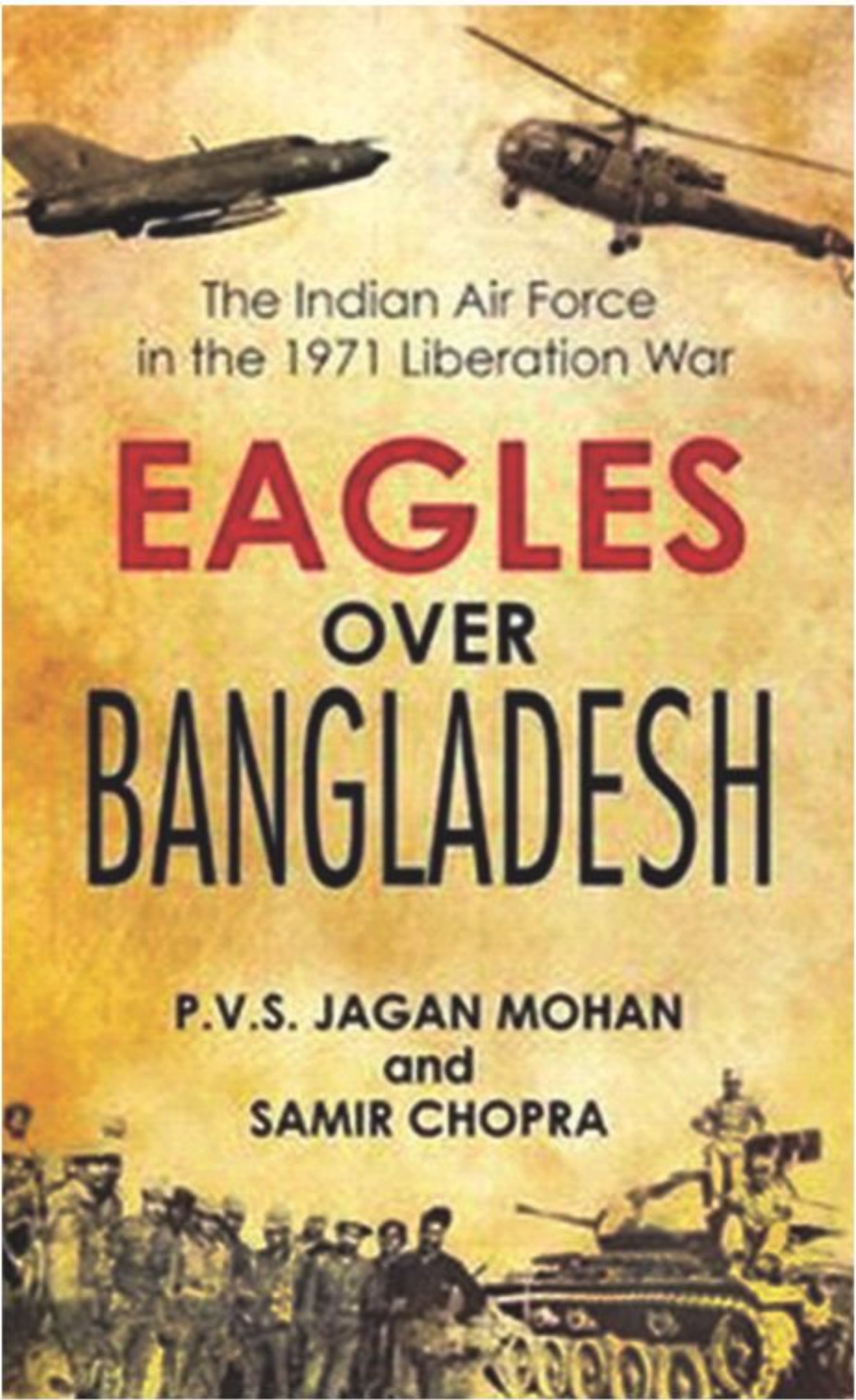
Narendra Modi  
A Political Biography  
Andy Marino  
HarperCollins Publishers India

That apart, Marino's story of the emergence of Narendra Modi as a national figure in India is a necessary read, for it traces the gradual, well-calculated rise of a politician who has had little reason to feel embarrassed about his beginnings. Modi's fascination for the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) goes back a long way, when he was a mere eight year-old. One would have thought, given the principle that individuals change with time, that they slowly discard the radical beliefs of youth and go for

the pragmatism of middle age, Modi would go beyond his fundamental Hinduism insofar as his politics was concerned. That he has not is a remarkable circumstance. He has simply moved on from the RSS to the larger network that is the BJP in, one might suggest, a pretty unobtrusive manner. Shrewdness has helped. He believed, with millions of other Hindus, that the Babri Mosque needed to be removed. But he was careful to stay away from the actual moment of fanaticism when that moment came. Marino, who has had access to Modi over a long period spending hours talking to him, travelling with him as he toured Gujarat --- does not stay confined to dealing with Modi's political Hinduism. He traces the roots of Modi's rise to the chief ministership of the state, of the diligence that he brought into his work for Hindutva. Lal Krishna Advani was impressed. And it was on Atal Behari Vajpayee's instructions that he took charge of Gujarat as chief minister. Thereafter he went on winning elections, to a point where the road to Delhi opened up for him. It did not matter that his former mentor Advani and leading BJP personalities like Sushma Swaraj were not well disposed to the idea of a Modi government at the national level. What did matter was the so-called Gujarat model of development that Modi and his acolytes were carefully placing before the rest of the country. If Gujarat could make progress under Modi, all of India might do the same. That has been an argument implicit in Modi's politics. Andy Marino brings it all into focus: "What he has attempted to do over the past twelve years in Gujarat is remove government from people's lives and replace it with governance."

It was just as well, then, that Narendra Modi was officially presented to Indians as the prime ministerial candidate of the Bharatiya Janata Party in September 2012. The writer remarks on the complex as also simple nature of the man. "He can be decisive, firm, unyielding. And yet he has a calm about him that enables him to surmount crises with dispassionate meticulousness, even detachment."

There are, as you may well imagine, a fairly good number of reasons to read this biography.

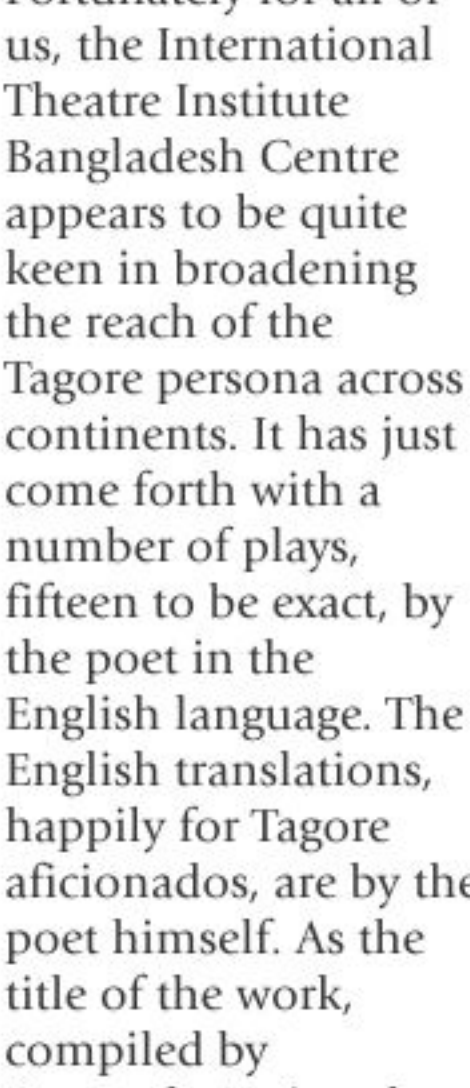


Eagles Over Bangladesh  
P.V.S. Jagan Mohan, Samir Chopra  
HarperCollins India

Rediscovering Tagore, Digging deeper roots in English

ONE keeps discovering, and then rediscovering, Rabindranath Tagore. For Bengalis, he has always been a point of cultural reference. For those outside the frontiers of Bengal, and especially since he became the recipient of the Nobel for literature a hundred and one years ago, Tagore has been an object of veneration, to a point where his poetry has meshed with his philosophy to catapult him to Olympian heights. And yet it is equally true that the degree of popularity and academic acceptability Tagore ought to have been privy to in global literary circles has in large measure not been there. When you consider the spontaneity with which literary people like Neruda and Marquez and even Llosa are read around the world, you tend to wonder why Tagore has not made much of an inroad among readers in the West, despite the awe in which they hold him.

The argument now before us, therefore, is simple: Tagore must move out of Bengal, on both sides of the divide, and expand his acceptability, in other words his readership, around the world. One way of doing that is to employ the English language in making a gift of him to non-Bengali students and researchers of global literature. Fortunately for all of us, the International Theatre Institute Bangladesh Centre appears to be quite keen in broadening the reach of the Tagore persona across continents. It has just come forth with a number of plays, fifteen to be exact, by the poet in the English language. The English translations, happily for Tagore aficionados, are by the poet himself. As the title of the work, compiled by Ramendu Majumdar, makes it clear, the plays are "in his own English version." It is once more a sign of the versatility which defined the Tagore personality. A poet, short story writer, music maker and artiste, Tagore was in a very significant way the embodiment of the cultured human personality. His knowledge of English was remarkable, one reason being the general, historical inability of poets and novelists to have a grasp of languages other than their own. It was a hurdle Tagore was able to leap across easily, as his translations of the Geetanjali poems were to make evident.



Fifteen Plays of Rabindranath Tagore  
In his own English version  
Compiled by Ramendu Majumdar  
International Theatre Institute  
Bangladesh Centre

The plays that you encounter in *Fifteen Plays of Rabindranath Tagore* are certainly those you have read or heard or seen performed at some point in life. But when you read them in this compilation, you are quite inclined to ask if these plays, or some of them at least, could not be staged in the language in which we get them here. Ramendu Majumdar will, of course, know better. To what extent it is possible to have actors, Bengali-speaking ones of course, deliver the dialogue in the English language is an issue he might as well mull over. A whole new ambience might be set into motion should steps be taken toward presenting these plays on stage here in Bangladesh as also in West Bengal.

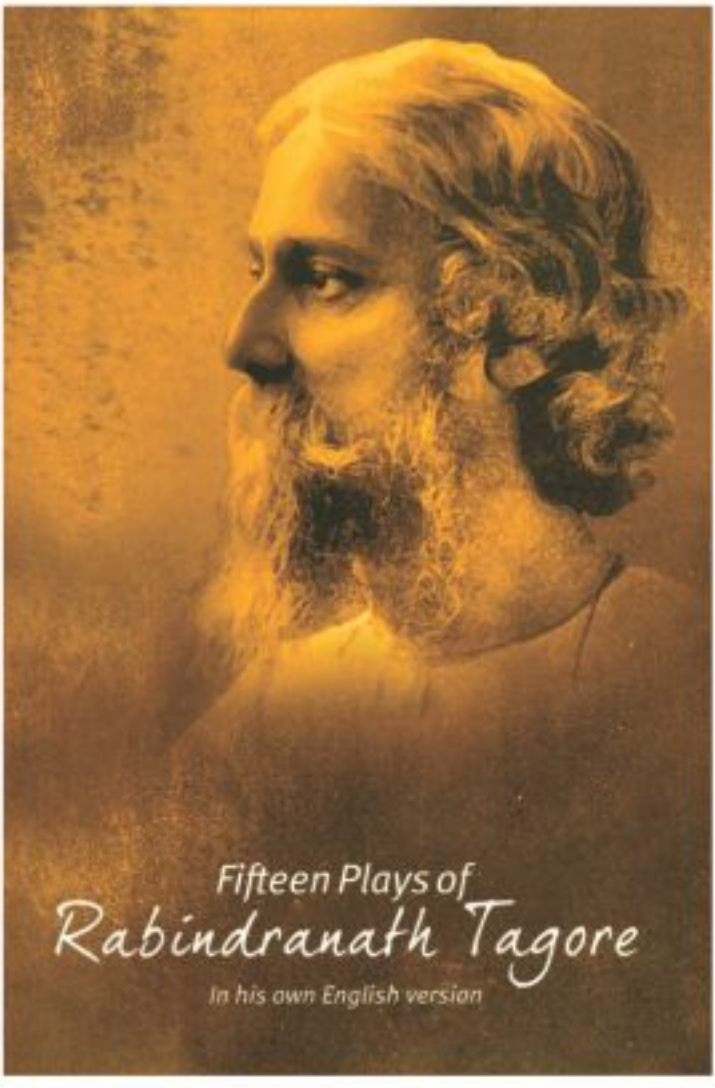
Meanwhile, here is a glimpse into what Ramendu Majumdar offers in this compilation of Tagore drama. You get plenty here. Observe:

Sanyasi, The King and the Queen, Sacrifice, Chitra, Malini, The King of the Dark Chamber, Autumn-Festival, The Cycle of Spring, The Trial, The Waterfall, The Car of Time, Red Oleanders, The Dancing Girl's Worship, King and Rebel, The Crown.

This surely is a rich collection. The affluence associated with Tagore's works is captured by Majumdar in the introduction to the work:

"Rabindranath Tagore wrote more than sixty plays --- both short and full length ones. They can be classified as verse, musical, allegorical, social, comical plays and dance dramas . . . He continuously revised his own plays and translated or reworked them into English."

This work deserves a place on your table and a high perch in libraries around the country.



Fifteen Plays of Rabindranath Tagore  
In his own English version  
Compiled by Ramendu Majumdar  
International Theatre Institute  
Bangladesh Centre

FOR scholars in Bangladesh, Ali Anwar's was a voice of erudition in the enumeration of the Bengali cultural heritage. This work is a pointer to the high intellectualism Anwar brought into his assessment of the issues, as he saw them, that needed to be deliberated on. And he deliberated, for years, in a manner that was as purposeful as it was unobtrusive. There was something of the refreshingly old-fashioned about his approach to the study of history and cultural tradition. He was not content to read about history and culture in a pedestrian manner. What fascinated him, for which he remains a recipient of collective gratitude, is a digging into the roots of things.

It is the results of that digging which we spot in *Shahitya Shongskriti Nana Bhabna*. The sheer scale of thought Ali Anwar brings into his assessment of aesthetics is a powerful argument why this collection of essays needs to be gone through. Think of the essay, Bangali *Shongskritir Bhitro O Bahir*, where the writer delineates two aspects to the Bengali personality . In the first, he places the individual Bengali's thoughts, beliefs, values and aestheticism. In the second, he dwells on the social structure and collective aspects of Bengali life, its relation to architecture, technology, ceremonies and the like. That is a hint you have of what you could be encountering in the other essays put together in this compilation.

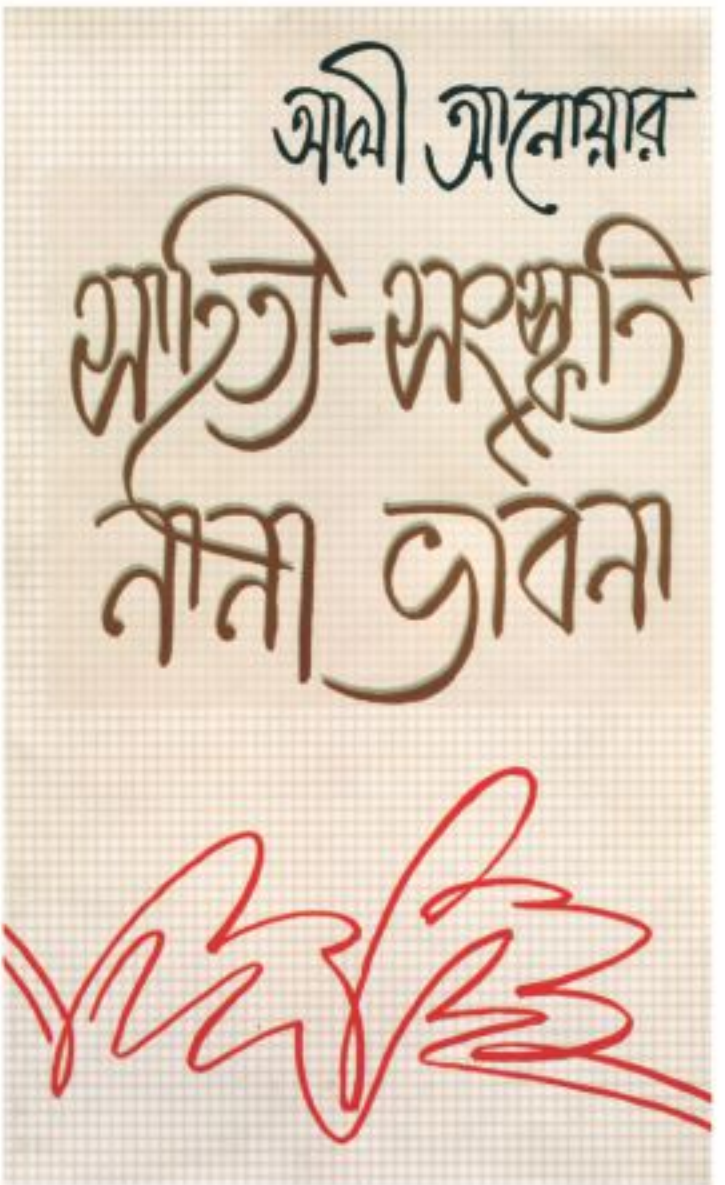
A particular attraction in reading Ali Anwar is the sure-footed manner in which he juxtaposes the traditional with the contemporary. He may give you Rabindranath, but he takes care not to fall behind the present. Which is when you find him busy inquiring into the relevance of Pablo Neruda's poetry in such well-informed write-ups as *Prashongo Neruda* and *Pablo Neruda: Kobi Hoyo Otha*. That literature and politics may quite be removed from each other and yet may be inextricably linked is a thought he brings out well in *Shahitya O Rajniti*. In his own times, indeed in ours as a whole, he finds in Waheedul Haque the embodiment of modern Bengali aesthetics. His tribute to the polymath is moving.

Themes other than literature people the book, a sign of the idea that in Ali Anwar modernity was an all-encompassing thought. Note the article *Upodrutro Manush O Oshohaye Manobotabad. Or Shirin Ebadi'r Utopia Bibhrom O Bastobota*. There is too *Bigyan Shikkha, Bigyanmonoshkoto O Bigyane Srishishilota*.

Ali Anwar's fundamental idea is one of reminding people not only of their indigenous cultural tradition but also bringing them in touch with heritage as it has shaped up around the globe over millennia. And with that comes his interest in the world around him, the quotidian world that often comes in the way of our reflections on the idealism we need to sustain ourselves. An observation of the subjects covered in the work, as already alluded to, remains testimony to Anwar's contributions to the growth of the Bengali cultural consciousness. It is just too bad that our interest in the man has never been of the kind that would make him a household name.

By bringing this work out into the public domain, Bengal Publications has certainly done a splendid job of unlocking the door to thoughts we had by and large neglected to delve into. The sheer depth of thought in Anwar is revealing of the measure of the man. That he was a scholar, that a thinker lay behind the writing is what Bengal has most powerfully brought to the fore. And we are left somewhat richer in our estimation of our fast depleting scholar class than we were before.

This compilation is a powerful articulation of an aesthete's thoughts. It is especially students and people interested in the cultural background of Bangladesh, indeed its history, who will find it a source of much needed information. It needs to be read in the calm which descends with a longish spell of Baishakh rains.



Shahitya Shongskriti Nana Bhabna  
Ali Anwar  
Bengal Publications Limited

Reliving annus mirabilis

NOT much of fiction is to be had on the Bangladesh Liberation War in the English language. Indeed, the paucity of works in English, and not just in fiction but in the realm of political history and biography as well, has been glaring. Where writers in India and Pakistan, or of Indian and Pakistani origin, have in the past couple of decades carved a special niche for themselves in the English-speaking world, those in Bangladesh have clearly fallen behind.

Given such unpalatable realities, it is quite cheering to have before you a work of fiction, based on the War of Liberation of course, in excellent English. The work comes from Masud Ahmed, who by way of profession is a senior civil servant. Obviously, in this bureaucrat there is that dash of the literary that, had he not been part of the bureaucracy, would have marked him out for a high perch in the world of subcontinental literature in English.

The 1971 war being a defining moment for all Bengalis, Masud Ahmed appears to be informing his audience of the critical role the conflict played in a formulation of the modern Bengali ethos. If before the initiation of genocide by the Pakistan army the Bengali was societally prone to intense bouts of poetry and music, in the course of the war he witnessed, despite himself, the rise of a revolutionary within his being. That is the unvarnished truth about the war. In this work, Ahmed brings together in brilliant parallelism the fictional and the political in his telling of the tale. But, again, one cannot really be a stranger to the story Ahmed weaves here. The reason is pretty simple: millions who experienced the horrors of 1971, as also the period preceding the sharp and swift breakdown of the state of Pakistan in what till the end of March was its eastern wing, certainly relate to the tale Ahmed now gives us.

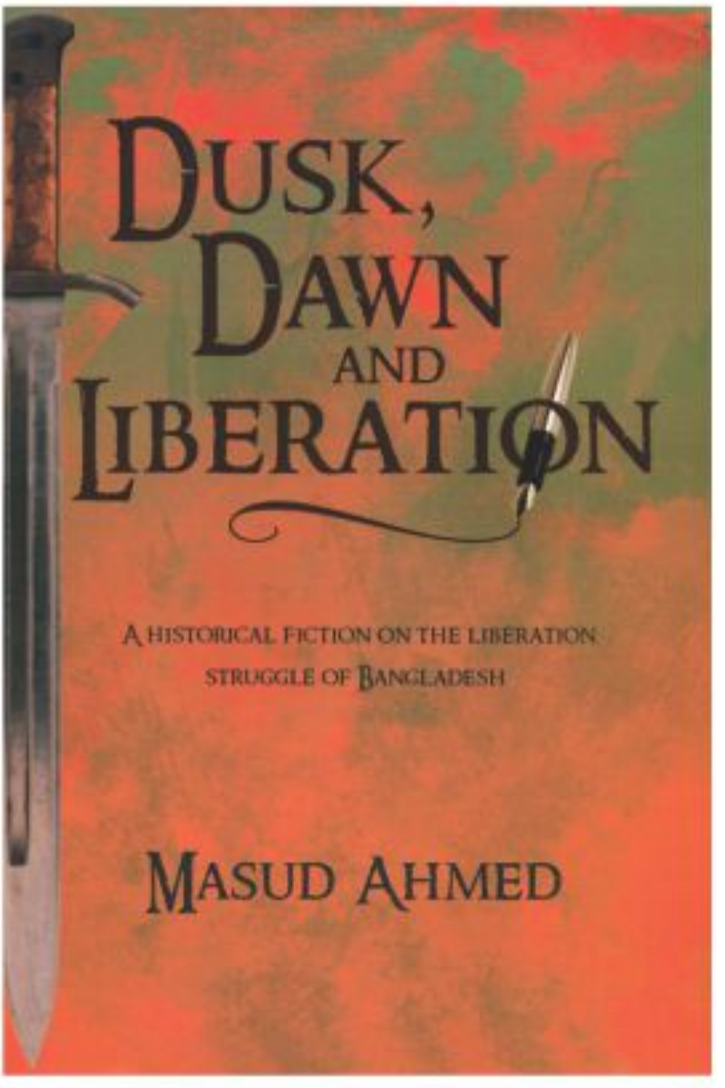
And what does Masud Ahmed give us? It all comes in a package of history as we have lived through it. The conspiracy forged by the military and politicians in West Pakistan, the rising militancy of the Bengalis under the undisputed leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the long months of agony under Pakistani military occupation and, eventually, the dawning of freedom. What comes through pretty much patently in the work is the homework the writer evidently did before he embarked on writing his story. Unlike so many other writers of historical fiction in Bangladesh, he has steadfastly maintained a record of the times, to a point where in the episodes when he highlights the army, he is clear about the details of the battalions and regiments his characters belong to.

There are all the images of inebriation among some of the leading actors in the story. It is not difficult to understand that the President here is the hardly-ever-sober Yahya Khan. And if you study the character of the Nabab, you could easily guess that the man is no other than the arch conspirator Bhutto. So what Ahmed does in this historical novel is present his story from two particular angles. In the first, he portrays the junta and its henchmen whose collusion have led to the crisis in Bangladesh. In the second, it is the people, in internal exile as well as waging guerrilla war against the occupation army, who come alive. The writer puts it in perspective:

"In spite of the daily possibilities of death, bullets and suffering, Asad never forgot a certain issue. Still he had never raised it so far because the purpose of coming here was to take training and fight the enemy. . . the scene, the air, the blue sky and the total environment took his mind to Tagore's unforgettable lyric

'O my Bengal of gold,  
I love you  
Forever your skies, your air  
Set my heart in tune  
As if it were a flute . . .'"

Read on. And live your annus mirabilis all over again.



Dusk, Dawn and Liberation  
A Historical Fiction on the Liberation  
Struggle of Bangladesh  
Masud Ahmed  
AuthorHouse UK Ltd.

Battles in the sky

Shahriar Feroze goes back to the air wars of 1971

THE book is not only the story of the Indian Air Force's pivotal role and contribution to Bangladesh's war for independence. It is also a short saga based on actual details of two air forces of the subcontinent, one belonging to India and the other to Pakistan. The 1971 war for the Indians may have ended in about two weeks' time but not without the Indian air force emerging as a formidable fighting force that facilitated the Indian army's rapid progress to Dhaka.

But it should be made clear that the open war that broke out between the two arch rivals along the two fronts is not the centre point of the book, aptly titled *Eagles Over Bangladesh*. With a few, though sporadic, details about the air battles on the western front, the book mainly highlights the role of the Indian air force's Eastern Air Command which had its airfields scattered around West Bengal, Meghalaya and the north eastern states with headquarters in Shillong. During the 1971 war, Eastern Air Command was tasked with offensive air strikes, close support missions and supply operations.

The first two chapters of the book provide an eye-opening intro about the IAF's years between the 1965 and 1971 wars with Pakistan while giving an incisive brief on how the IAF along with its foe the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) had organised their strengths, formed and performed during the years between the wars that even takes the reader back to the post-partition days. The intro is complemented further with a touch-up of historic and dramatic stages, leading Bengalis to fight for their independence with an anecdote of the 'Kilo flight' --- formation of light aircraft --- which were manned and serviced by Bengali pilots and technicians who had

defected from the Pakistani Air Force. Thus the path for the Bangladesh Air Force was paved.

It is from the third chapter that the reader starts to get glued to the book with short but live descriptions of initial clashes and dog fights between the PAF and IAF. Knowing full well about the IAF's considerable air might the PAF, armed with a lone F-86 Sabre squadron to defend its skies in the east, was not only helpless but also lacked efficient and courageous leadership. Deployment of only a squadron of F-86 Sabre jets in the East also shows West Pakistan's clear military discrimination towards the East. The PAF, had it so desired, could have utilised its limited air strength to its full capability. Why it did not is still a mystery. However, its pilots displayed courage and efficiency in air-to-air combat during the initial period of the war, till they were neutralised in less than 72 hours after India entered the war.

Among all the battles fought in the air, it is the battle over the skies of Boyra which is perhaps the most evenly fought by the two sides. It was aerial interception combat fought between the two sides well before the Indians had come into the war against Pakistan.

This action took place before thousands of people, became one of the most enduring moments of our Liberation War and made all four Indian pilots instant celebrities in India and Bangladesh. Their pictures, gun camera images of the flaming Sabres and those of the PAF prisoners of war were widely circulated by the media across the world. This engagement marked the first time in six years (after the 1965 war) that aircraft were shot down in air combat in the Indian subcontinent, with

the state of increased hostilities in the region culminating in the creation of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh.

Chapter four provides a vivid account of a few air-to-air battles over the skies of Dhaka. Till the instrument of surrender was signed on December 16 there was only one strategic bombing campaign carried out that's noteworthy and that is the bombing of the then governor's house located near the national stadium.

Other features scattered across the chapters of *Eagles Over Bangladesh* that needs mentioning are the close cover and air support provided by the IAF, the hundreds of reconnaissance sorties flown by the IAF, the PAF's discriminatory treatment of Bengali pilots, the early days of the Bangladesh Air Force, the committed role of the Pakistani anti-aircraft gunners, repeated bombing of the Tejgaon airport runway and of course the tales of a bunch of brave Indian pilots of a time gone by.

In the end it took about 8 years of pain staking efforts for the two authors to come up with this research based book that provides re-telling and also first-time narrations of air battles held over the skies of Bangladesh. Both the writers also deserve credit for their investigative techniques to communicate with retired IAF and PAF officers besides unearthing new sources of information.

The book is a treasure-trove prepared over a period of eight years of painstaking efforts undertaken by the Indian authors P.V.S Jagan Mohan and Samir Chopra. Some of the black and white pictures of the book lead one to nostalgia. On top of everything it is available in Dhaka, within the price range of a thousand taka.

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