

Anisuzzaman's Autobiography: Kaal Nirobodhi and Amar Ekattor

Reviewed by Salahuddin Ayub



Anisuzzaman. [2003] 2008. Kaal Nirobodhi. Dhaka: Shahitya Prokash.

I was lucky enough to wind up in Chicago, the same city—"city of big shoulders" (Sandburg)—where Anisuzzaman, my great teacher and mentor, once lived, lectured and celebrated Thanksgiving at a large, quintessentially American, farm in rural Illinois (Geneseo).

He hung out with funny guys like Edward Foy, formed lifelong friendships with such luminaries as Edward C. Dimock and Ronald Inden, watched all the Hollywood classics that came his way, met Buddhadeva Bose in Bloomington (Indiana), and endured the torture of translating Sudhindranath's air-tight prose into English at the request of Edward Shils (p.389-90). His home was the

historic "International House" (located exactly eight blocks down from Barack Obama's redbrick Georgian house on 51st street and Greenwood Avenue). He, of course, lived here half a century ago, well before many of us were born, but Western cities do not change as much as do their Eastern counterparts.

I was thrilled to be offered an academic position in Chicago—a city associated with literary icons like Carl Sandburg, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, and John Dos Passos and is home to modern disciplines like sociology or literary movements like Harriet Monroe's "Poetry" (1912) magazine. Naturally, when my order for Anisuzzaman's two-part autobiography (Kaal Nirobodhi, [2003] 2008, and Amar Ekattor, [1997] 2008) was delivered in my mailbox, I quickly flipped to the chapter (pp.379-409) on the windy city, as it is called on this side of the Atlantic, before sitting down to begin at the beginning and read through to the end.

Like the rest of the autobiography that would consume my weekend, the intensely precise, yet nuanced and panoramic, account-packed with suggestive anecdotes and happy memories—of his life in Chicago (from October 16, 1964 to August 10, 1965, to be exact) is absolutely fascinating. What strikes me most is the fact Anisuzzaman, who has by all accounts played a major role in all great events that have shaped the making of Bangladesh since the fifties, happened to be present right here in America's heartland during the heyday of the civil rights and antiwar movements, a time of monumental change, challenge, and renewal.

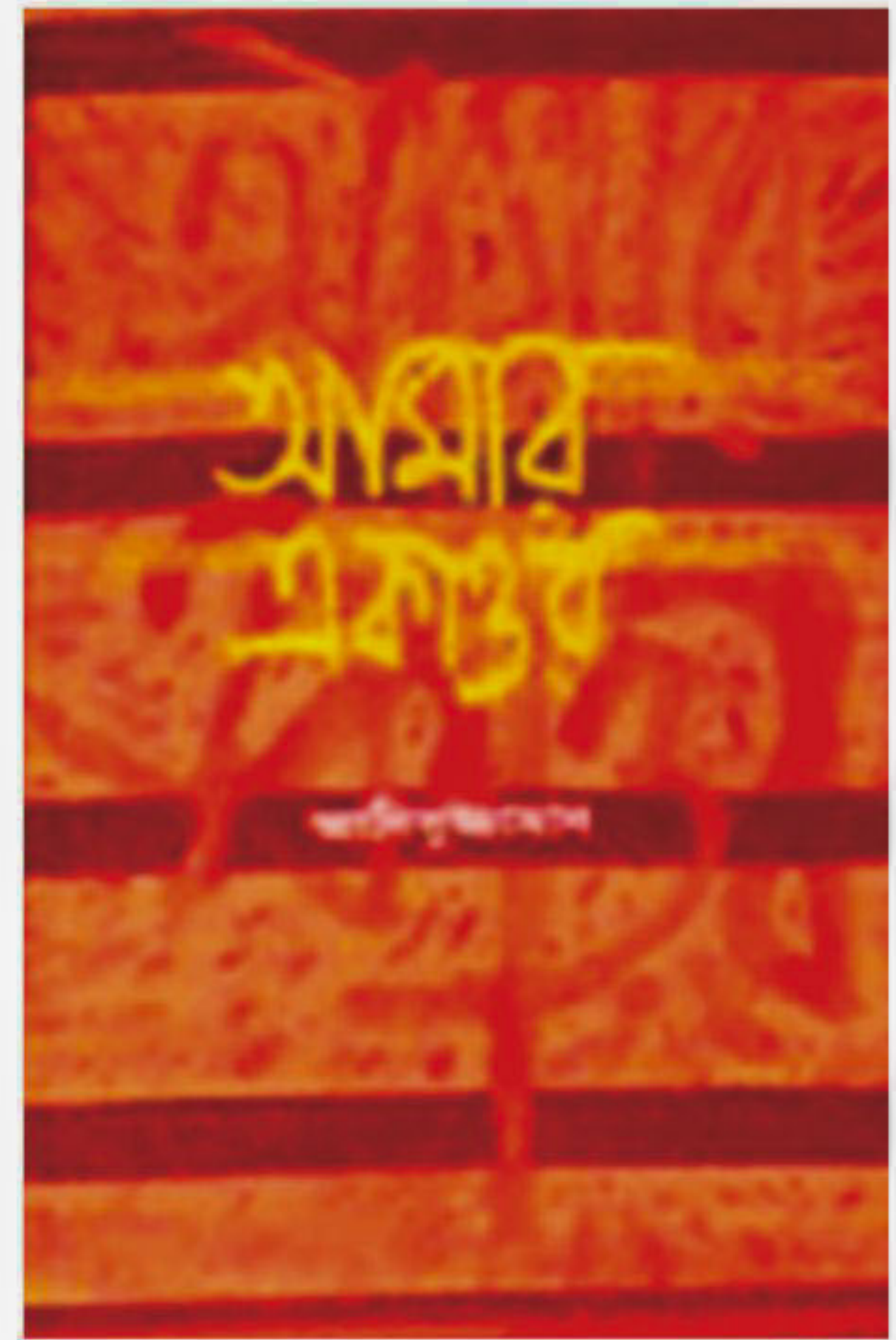
When he arrived, the landmark Civil Rights Act—hailed by the New York Times as the "most far reaching law since Reconstruction days" and "most sweeping civil rights legislation ever enacted in this country"—had just passed (July 2, 1964) and Dr. King's "I have a dream" speech was, observes Anisuzzaman, "on the lips of everyone except racists" (p.399). Anisuzzaman did not, however, come to the University of Chicago to write a dissertation for a second doctorate. Bengali Literature and the Muslim Mind (1964), his doctoral dissertation, had been published in Dhaka shortly before he was due to fly to the U.S. Before that, he had sold copyright of his Bengali Muslim Periodicals, 1831-1930 to Bangla Academy for a flat sum of two thousand taka as he was packing things for his long trip overseas (2003: 374).

Anisuzzaman's judicious recounting of these events, delivered in masterly, measured prose, illuminates as much the formative years of the rising young star as the cultural politics and clashing intellectual currents of that moment (i.e., post-1952 East Bengal). The personal com-

mingles with the collective in this extraordinary autobiography, so that Anisuzzaman's personal tale ceases to be personal, becoming instead an exuberant saga of a yet-unborn Bengali nation emerging triumphantly out of tumultuous conflicts and a hundred obstacles.

The first part of Kaal Nirobodhi ([2003] 2008), especially the first two chapters ("Before Birth" and "Awakened"), are important as a definitive historical record of a time long past, spanning from 1466-67 (i.e., the construction of an ancient mosque in Bashirhat, 24 Pargana district) until the morning of August 15, 1947, when Anisuzzaman, with his mother, little brother, and physician father, left Calcutta and arrived, shortly after dark, in Khulna—a neat, picture-like, squeaky-clean city (p.115). They were greeted by his khalu in the soft light of kerosene lamp and ushered into a two-room thatched earthen house (p.112). As he rose up from bed the next morning, the little boy—now a little over ten years old—found himself to be not in the familiar, one-story, Park Circus flat, but in "some other place" down south in East Pakistan. From that time forward, the narrative takes a new turn as does his life in the new country. We know the history of our nation only in the abstract and are quick to dismiss or take offense if anyone asks about, say, the dates of past events we are so passionate about. It doesn't have to be that way. Read this gripping, splendid autobiography, return to it often, and keep it handy at all times. If you take this little advice seriously enough, you will have, on one hand, fewer excuses to skip legitimate questions and, on the other hand, infinitely more dates and details than you will ever need to back up your argument on television, talk shows, or in a book that you set out to write without doing the requisite homework. Why did it take us so long to make the case for the 1971 genocide? Why is our liberation war referred to as an India-Pakistan conflict in Western history books? There are, of course, many reasons, one tied to the other in a complicated way, but one of them is this: We have a lot of poets, bloggers, and talk show hosts, but only one Anisuzzaman.

At the outset of the book, Anisuzzaman quotes Saratchandra insisting on a cardinal principle of great writing. The person who cannot discriminate and yields to the temptation of "saying more," is the person who cannot write. One must leave out a great deal, says Saratchandra, economize on words and sentences, and be ruthless in removing the superfluous. All of these requires, thinks Saratchandra, long experience, staunch discipline, and much self-control. Every page and paragraph in this two-part autobiography lives up to this cardinal principle. Anisuzzaman has neither invented, nor



Anisuzzaman. [1997] 2008. Amar Ekattor. Dhaka: Shahitya Prokash.

substantially deviated from, the tradition of autobiographical writing in Bengali. But he has perfected the genre as its great master, establishing a new standard against which all current and future autobiographical works will be assessed and judged. If that sounds like hyperbole, get a copy of the book today and judge it for yourself.

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The 'Baromashi Tapes'

Raina Moinuddin finds the novel unique in its presentation and narrative technique

MOST rural based fictions deal with the social and traditional elements found within the ethnic atmosphere of the land and its people, their life style and related conflict and complexities. The usual plot unveils a series of events inspired by incidents involving people from different levels and walks of life unraveling beliefs and trends that reflect the society. The technique usually used follows a set format that divides the plot into its different areas of activity.

'The Baromashi Tapes' (Twelve Monthly) by Dr. Niaz Zaman, is a novel depicting the traditions and social atmosphere of rural Bengal and sketches images of a poor agricultural society with its modern complexities of financial struggles and relationships leading to the intricacies of conflicting lifestyles resulting in human suffering and negative trends.

'The Baromashi Tapes' takes the well-known folk genre of the Baromashi, the twelve-

for a rice based dish of rural Bengal which depicts a memorable event or a present occasion narrated in details by the wife. There are references to specific traditions or cultural rituals that bring forth the colours and tones of Bengali folk lifestyle vividly. For example, the first chapter begins with the recipe of plain steamed rice, 'bhaat' that opens the plot into a detailed account of the husband's trip (in this case, Malaysia). The simplicity of rural life and thinking is reflected in the narration of the trip and the humour reflected in the main character, Md. Kamaluddin, as he narrates his experiences in a strange land.

Other chapters project Bengali months to introduce a new occasion or event in the life of the female protagonist as well as to introduce the main fare/ meal which is an integral part of the month and relates to some occasion in the life of the narrator and others that depict a mood or a memory. The narrator is the main protagonist, Sakina, who tells her story of her life with

a sweet simplicity that brings forth images of a simple, somehow romantic, and obedient young girl of our rural society in contrast, again, to a number of such young girls who are lured by modernity and the material gains of urban society to create the contrasts and define them as naïve yet mature enough to escape from one incident to another while attaining their desired ends.

While the novel is an account of a naïve young girl's life who accepts her newly-wed husband's separation only in order to achieve a better future for all of them and expresses her faith in that, there are many references to folk beliefs and rituals which illustrate the rich culture and lifestyle of rural people as yet to be untouched by many intricacies of modern life which are fast developing around them. References to garment workers, manpower agents, drug peddlers and 'bidesh' introduce the modern aspects depicting the changing face of Bengal in rural areas in recent times.

Some traditions mentioned in the story may not be as clear to the reader who is not familiar with them, however, it makes interesting reading for those who are. The story is uneventful but it reflects the many complexities of a society which is fast becoming familiar with advancing times and changing values. It serves to bring home the problems and conflicts which are rampant and their rising and far reaching impact on the simple people of rural Bengal.

Niaz Zaman, in her acknowledgement of people and material that helped to create her 'slim volume', has described the many inspirations that created different elements of the plot: the people from all walks and intellects of life who contributed to the story which helps the reader to connect the references in the story to concrete realities.

The book is an entertaining read for those who like simple stories of real life and simple people with their ordinary desires, fears and errors, devoid of complex and horrifying tales of suburbia that are dished out as fiction today.

1971 — A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh

Shahriar Feroze reviews a book which portrays the stellar international cast that shaped the origins and outcome of our struggle for freedom...

IF an author had spent some 74 pages out of a 358 page book on preparing the list of notes, bibliography and acknowledgements, then he must have done some form of serious research. Yes, Srinath Raghavan has done a commendable task by writing 1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh. May not be for the first time, but to understand the emergence of Bangladesh through a wider international context never appeared so cohesive and systematically organised. However, 1971 is a narrative about the most significant geopolitical event of the Indian sub-continent since the partition in 1947.

Beginning with a couple of chapters on the historical background of animosity, discrimination and socio-political and economical conditions between the two wings of Pakistan, the writer, from his viewpoint opined - why the creation of Bangladesh was not 'predestined' and more of a product of a combination of events and contingency. Whatsoever, his book, though praiseworthy a task, cannot be taken as a final geopolitical analysis. Why, because if you cautiously follow the course of actions that resulted in the creation of the two wings of Pakistan, then flaws and prejudices while drawing its boundaries are starkly noticeable. Culture to politics; language to traditions; politics to mannerisms almost nothing except a common religion had only tied the two wings. If it was the religious knot that only mattered, that too was practiced from separate socio-cultural norms. After more than 6 decades it appears that the creation of Pakistan was meant with the intention to collapse - it was only a matter of time. Nevertheless, your choice to agree or disagree with this reviewer is always open.

It's mainly the geopolitical events related to our liberation war that appeared as the absorbing feature of the book. To be precise, chapters 4 to 9: India's contribution and role from the very beginning of the military crackdown in East Pakistan, international response to the crackdown; geopolitical strategies played by Soviet, American and Chinese governments, and Pakistani military junta's repeated failures to justify their heinous acts clearly outlined how the breakup of Pakistan had become a defining moment in shifting of geopolitical strengths. Spellbinding was to follow how Nixon and Kissinger dealt with the Bangladesh cause. Not only had the White House pathetically failed to deal with the breakup of Pakistan, but lacked both vision and strength to gauge the reality in Pakistan. While reading, the US leadership seemed to act out of sheer anti-Indian sentiments instead of well timed and real-politik lines of action. More Nixon depended on Yahya the more erratic Yahya had grown.

Like facts it's also a book about decoding myths. The author explained facts behind the Cold War equations, which eventually led the Soviets to form a military pact with India. As explained in the book, the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation did not have an easy birth. Raghavan tells that, it was initially proposed by the Russians in 1969 in order to strengthen their position against the increasing Chinese influence. And the Indian interest was because it wanted to prevent a Soviet entente with Pakistan, but mounting unrest in the then East Pakistan, one way or the other favored India to ink the deal with the former USSR.

Apart from geopolitical events the book is also the tale of India's relentless diplo-

bits and pieces about the activities and some key functionalities of the Mujibnagar government is presented in a scattered manner. Also, on the subject of Indian military operations in the east, the author re-defined Indian goals to be modest and had commented that 'capturing just a certain part of East Pakistani territory was the actual Indian plan in order to create a nascent Bangladesh government. A complete victory was never in the mind of the Indian top brass.' This is difficult to agree with and rather confusing since Mujibnagar cabinet was formed well within a part of the then East Pakistan long before the Indians had officially declared war on Pakistan. Additionally, it appears impractical to liberate a country partially while helping its freedom fighters to gain independence.

In general Raghavan, by his 1971 has attempted to portray how decolonization, the Cold War and an embryonic globalization interacted as well as intersected with the South Asian crisis in certain ways that were far from predictable. Interestingly, in the end he also stated how the 1971 crisis has a contemporary resonance well beyond the maps of South Asia. Why is it a precursor of the recent conflicts taking place in the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East? This not only makes the story of Bangladesh more accurate but also leads to a new interpretation of our Liberation War in 1971.

However, the fact is, Bangladesh came into reality by waging a full-fledged war against Pakistan. So the room for branding our Liberation War, as an Indo-Pak conflict is not only a crime but an attempt to establish distorted history. Circumstances and military provocations forced India to declare its own war against Pakistan, and that too came at a very later stage. Since the origins behind the 1971 conflict has no direct relation between India and Pakistan so the question 'why India hadn't militarily intervened earlier?' also seems rather weak.

Based on materials collected from the archives of some seven countries and innumerable declassified references Srinath Raghavan has exposed an untold global side of Bangladesh's struggle for freedom. Most of these archival materials have been made available only recently, such as the papers of the Ministry of External Affairs at the National Archives, the papers of policy makers such as P.N. Haksar, R.K. Nehru, T.N. Kaul, T.T. Krishnamachari and Jayaprakash Narayan at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. Not clear, why Raghavan hadn't used much reference from books, records and archives in Bangladesh.

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The Baromashi Tapes



Niaz Zaman

Book Title: The Baromashi Tapes
Publishers: writers.ink 2011

month song, to tell the contemporary story of Sakina and Khokon. Like the sailors or merchants of the olden days, Khokon has left his wife behind in the village and gone to seek his fortune abroad. Sakina misses her husband and reminisces about their short conjugal life together and describes the everyday events that take place around her in spite of it. Though much of rural Bangladesh seems unchanging, Sakina witnesses the mechanization, migration, education that impact village life. Interspersing Sakina's narrative, are Khokon's account of his new life and 'postcards' about life far from home.

The novel itself is unique in its presentation and narrative technique. The author presents the plot as a series of taped messages in a sort of epistolary style of narration, between a young husband working in 'bidesh' and his younger wife left behind with her in-laws to await his return and better days. There are also the chapter openings, each with the recipe