

# In The Light of What We Know

By Zia Haider

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Reviewed by Ali Ahmed Ziauddin

POVERTY OF THE POST COLONIAL ELITE

ZIA Haider's 'In The Light of What We Know' is a recent addition to the long list of post colonial literature by a host of post colonial authors. The first impression of a post colonial reader is that of sheer delight. Wow! Here is one of us equally apt in the art of modern storytelling that we definitely learned from the west. If literature is the expression of what is inexplicable in science than a novel is the most intricate form of that genre. It captures the authors world, his/her times and surroundings. And as Zia in his engrossing book clearly narrates, each novel in some ways is autobiographical, reflecting the experiences gathered from the school of life. Of course, it has to be beefed up with much more narratives, which then provides the reader a wide space to speculate. The reader is invited to share the journey of the author rummaging through their life with a rainbow of imagination as entertainment.

After reading carefully what comes out is a sad reflection of a grieving soul through a haze of pedantic discourses on mathematics, finance, philosophy, history, and what not, who feels utterly lost, and is in desperate need of an anchor. But what is left in suspended animation, is he seeking sympathy or making us aware that he is not alone in his journey? It's an affliction suffered by all the elites across the post colonial world whether among the Diasporas or the domestics. A novelist in essence is a social scientist without admitting it, but with an added advantage of growing wings of imagination. And Zia has taken full advantage of that scope.

In spite of acquiring an elitist education in Oxford, Harvard, and Yale by the sheer dint of his intelligence Zafar, the protagonist in the fiction longs for respect from Emily, an upper class English lady, the love of his life with all the right connections needed for career upliftment. But if it's respect he seeks most, does it mean he suffers an inferiority complex or passing a judgment that the door which opens into the inner circuit of a struc-

tured established order of the western societies is shut for outsider no matter how deserving and aspiring? No easy answer.

The book is a brilliant critique of western societies governed by an oligarchy, but also a savage indictment of the elites across the post colonial world in general but the ones in South Asia in particular. It's a peculiar situation. To the western elitist mind the post colonial world is still etched in a rather hazy Orientalist time warp. It's somewhat reminiscent of the Romans in the declining days of the empire. They called the ferocious Germanic tribes barbarians, and tried to destroy or subdue them for centuries but failed. Finally when the latter became the masters of Rome the Romans were similarly condescending and needed several centuries to internalize the invaders. To the Mughals the Europeans were a bunch of uncouth, unscrupulous banyas (traders). And to the Brahmins all foreigners were Mlechhas (untouchables). To the Chinese the entire outside world was inhabited by barbarians. So if the westerners have an arrogant attitude towards the ex colonial people they are at least not alone in this trait. Hence, when the crunch comes; both the narrator and the hero even with the best of qualification and the right social and professional connections are still immigrants, therefore expandable.

But what about the elites in the post colonial world, why are they permanently trapped in the catch up syndrome? It is for the same reason the so called conquering barbarians chose to adopt the religious-cultural practices of the vanquished Romans. This puts the elites in a lasting conflict with the rest of the post colonial people. Although it's essentially a class conflict but appears in multiple forms and dimensions. A host of literary giants of our times from across the ex colonial world have drawn

attention to this issue. Yet it simply refuses to go away.

Most of the post colonial elites are groomed within the framework of a colonial

new colonial masters in their own countries whether out of fancy or insecurity; the common people feel alienated. And such diverse perceptions travel with the migrants as well. Not being treated as equals in the host countries they respond in a variety of ways, anger and bitterness are the two most common. Hence, Zafar is so angry with himself, and the narrator is so lonely. Macaulay must be having a hearty laugh in his grave.

There is another far more compelling and disturbing reason for Zafar's disillusionment, thus his wandering in a way of soul searching. As a war baby he is at a loss, where does he really belong. Although he was born in Bangladesh he doesn't quite feel at home here and considers it to be a land of dead ideas. He doesn't feel very welcome in UK either, where he grew up and studied. And he definitely isn't comfortable working in America. His spiritual loyalty is as rootless as his physical self. His suppressed anger reaches a boiling point when he comes across a series of warmongers, self seekers, and mercenaries from both the west as well as from the ex colonies in war ravaged Afghanistan pretending as do-gooders. And he snaps. One wonders why. He is so close to constructing a happy family life, yet, he finds the distressed call for dignity more overpowering. And that's what gives the novel its life. Everyone has a story to tell, but not everyone has the ability to articulate and give it a shape. Zia Haider definitely has that gift.

The lifeline of a novel is its storyline. Unless it can captivate the reader it has all the chances to end up in the gutters. What makes a novel draw the reader's attention? It's literary skills, prose, research, structure, and not the least, plausible but intricate weaving of plots and sub plots. A little bit of mystery adds to the suspense of keeping the reader on

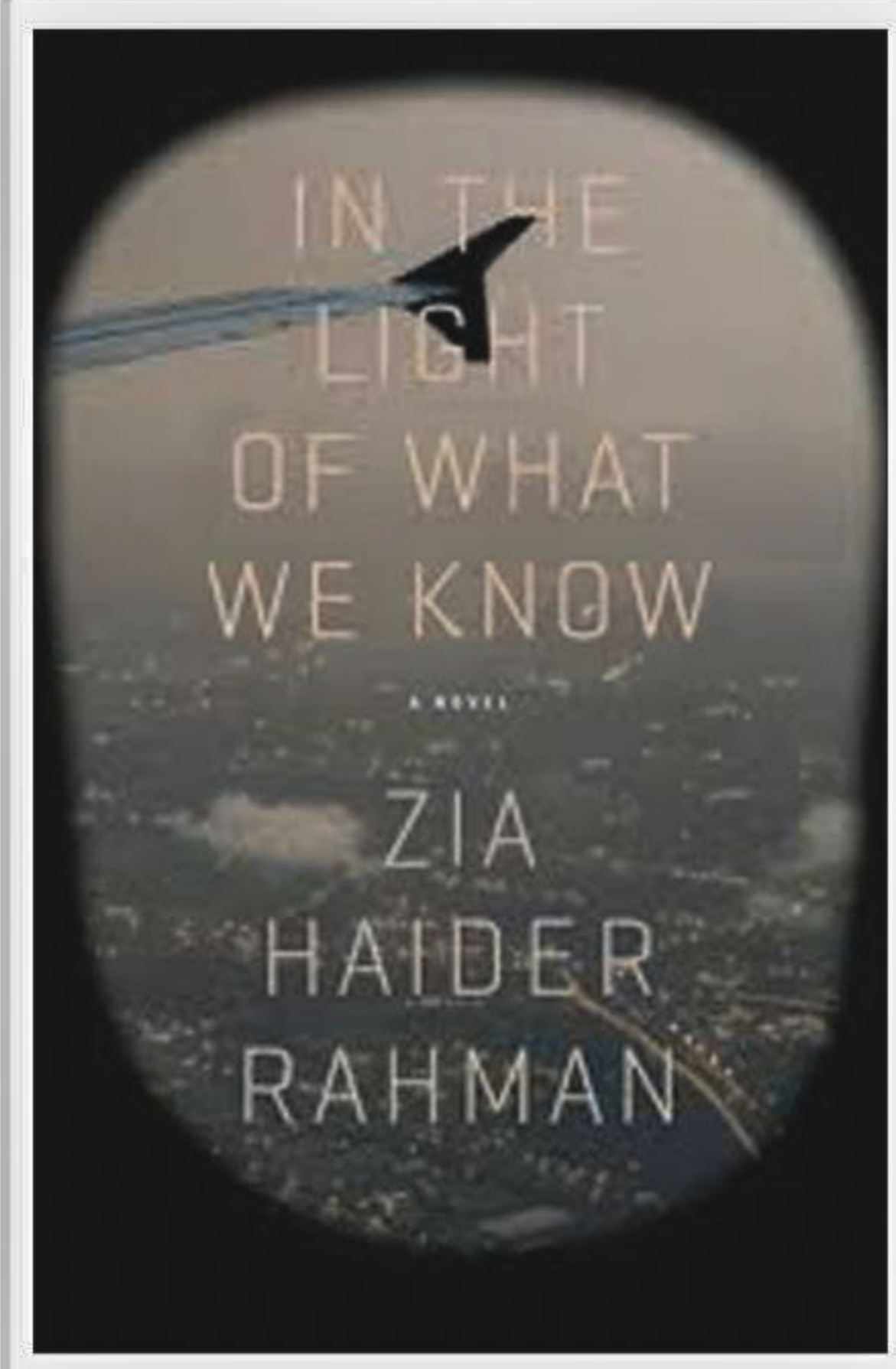
tenterhooks. But as Mark twain had pointed out long ago, if 'civilisation is the multiplication of unnecessary necessities' than some of the novels even by renowned authors is the weaving of unnecessary necessary words, and plots and sub plots. 'In The Light of What We Know' belong to this group.

But on this count Zia Haider will find himself in the good company of master storytellers like Maugham, Marquez, or Pamuk. For example why did Maugham have to drag 'Of Human Bondage' over six hundred pages? Marquez, in his famous 'Love in the time of Cholera' tells a great love story, which perhaps could have been said in half the length without losing the reader. And Pamuk is definitely trying the reader's patience in his acclaimed 'Museum of Innocence'. They undeniably leave the reader spellbound but never a lasting impression like several works of Sarat Chandra or Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyaya (Two Bengali novelists from early 20th century)

, they remain permanently etched in ones heart but rarely exceed two hundred pages. Or for that matter Marquez's 'Of Love and Other Demons'.

Finally, one must appreciate the authors' amazing skill of blending life and art. At which point Zia blends into Zafar and then switches back to himself is at times quite difficult to distinguish. If the author's brief life sketch is any indication, the book is neither entirely an autobiography nor a complete work of fiction. The message that comes across through a lot of personal tragedies, emotions, mysteries, and the circumstantial evidences is that the post colonial order whether in the ex colonies or in the industrial world is faltering and disorder is the new order. The governing principles of the socio-economic order are fast eroding and losing human touch. The societies that are dependent on this edifice are collapsing, and families disintegrating.

The reviewer is a Researcher & Activist aliahmedziauddin@gmail.com



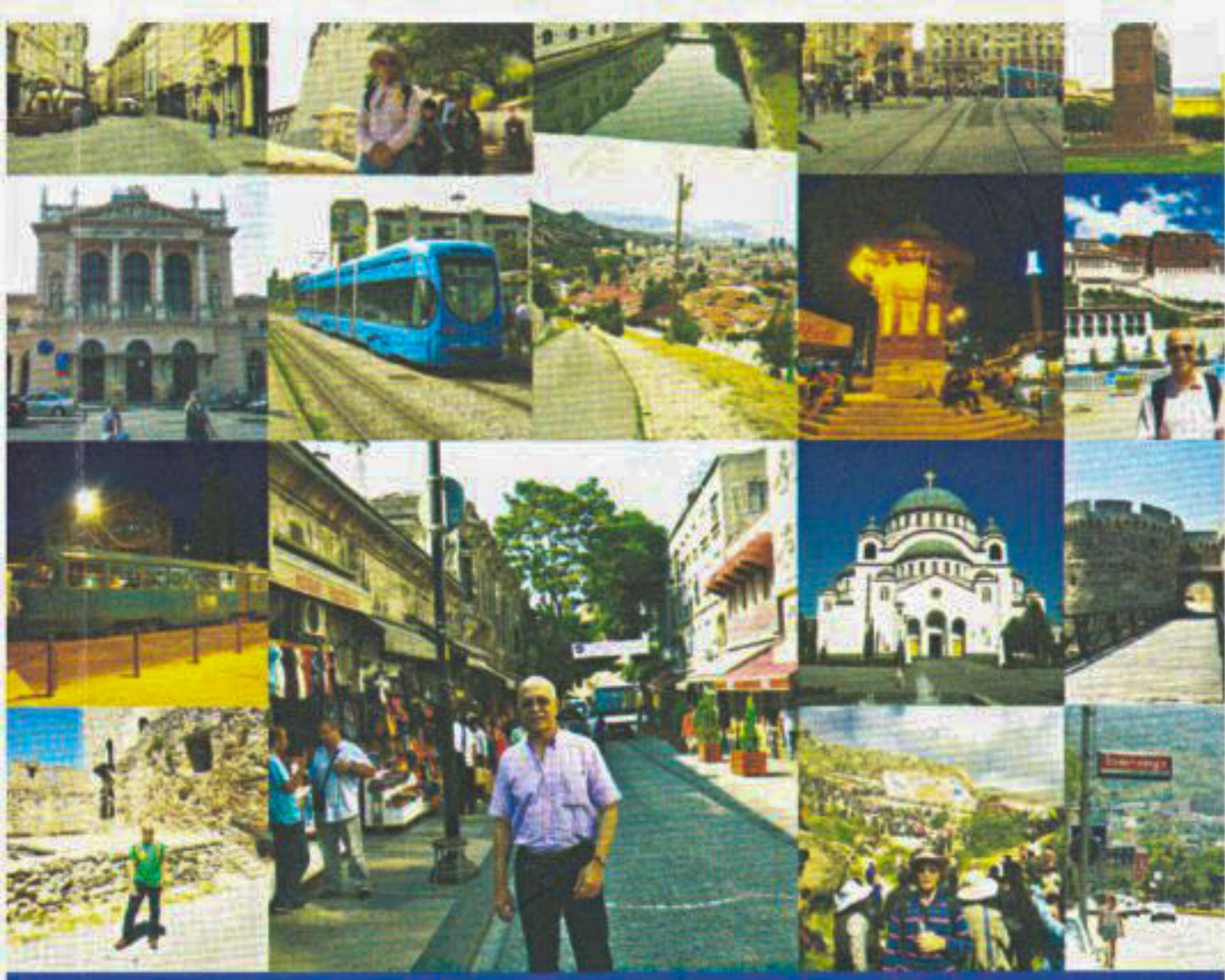
paradigm. Their entrenched privileges simply don't match with the vast majority, deprived of any privilege. Thus, the gap between the two entities widens, creating conditions for permanent instability in all the avenues of state and society, affecting all segments of the population. While the elites pretend to be the

## Travel Adventures in the Balkans and Tibet

By Akhter Matin Chaudhury

Academic Press and Publishers Library

A revealing review of the travelogue by Sohel Rana



### Travel Adventures in the Balkans and Tibet

Akhter Matin Chaudhury

HARDLY travelogues are written in English here in book form that deserves a review. But Travel Adventures in the Balkans and Tibet is a different package altogether. The iconoclastic writer cum adventurer shakes off the shackles of life and finds time to travel and discover the world. His style is that of a short story writer. When one reads these opening lines in the prologue of the book, "Soft, but audible murmurs of passages from the Quran, recited by devout Muslims, mingle with smoke rising from oil lamps. Ostrich eggs placed just above them are fixed to large cast iron rings suspended from the ceiling. The evening is pleasant, fanned by a gentle cooling breeze wafting in from the Bosphorus," one cannot keep it down but feels the urge to read on.

The book has been divided in to two parts: Balkans Express and Lhasa Chronicles. In 2012, he went on a short tour of six Balkan countries (European Turkey, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia and Croatia) in eight days (Around the Balkans

in 8 Days!). In the first part he has written about that travel experiences in the rough but beautiful Balkans.

Balkan Express

In the 13 episodes he has brilliantly described the places, the cultures and the works of architectural beauty he came across and the people he met. His Balkans adventure started in Istanbul during a hot summer in July 2012. Basically he went there for his Company meeting and decided to leave for London after that for his annual holiday. So he decided to pass through some Balkan countries instead of simply flying to London. At the end of the first part (From page 77 to 90) the author has inserted some photographs of some places, people and architectural view (The Blue Mosque-Istanbul, Turkey; The Grand Bazar-Istanbul, Turkey; Sophia Train Station Concourse-Bulgaria; Alexander Nevsky Cathedral- Sophia, Bulgaria; A statue of Alexander the Great in Skopje, Macedonia; Mother Teresa's birthplace; Mother Teresa Museum, Macedonia; The Central Square, Skopje, Macedonia; Belgrade Train Station, Serbia; The monument of Slovenia's greatest poet-Ljubljana, Slovenia; Ljubljana University etc.) in the Balkan countries. These photos have made this book more attractive and informative for the future travelers. He also gave some practical and necessary travel tips for them.

Lhasa Chronicles

In the second part he describes his Tibet journey which he named Lhasa Chronicles. He divided this section into 11 parts in which he has depicted the exciting train journey and his experiences there, visiting various places, meeting different people and viewing works of architectural beauty.

The author described four important Houses of God-Deprung Monastery, Jokhang Temple, Potala Palace and Sera Monastery. With the help of his guide Nitong, the author climbed up to the Deprung Monastery where he saw the Assembly or Chanting Hall which is lined with idols of many forms of Buddha and of Dalai Lamas. He also described annual festival, Buddha Thangka, a religious festival organized at the Monastery. He observed that the throne of Dalai Lama is displayed in Jokhang Temple. The author has mentioned seeing the Potala Palace (the highest palace in the world), its history, architectural view and the ancestors of Dalai Lama living there. Various food items, lifestyle, traditions, religious views of Lhasa have also been included in this section.

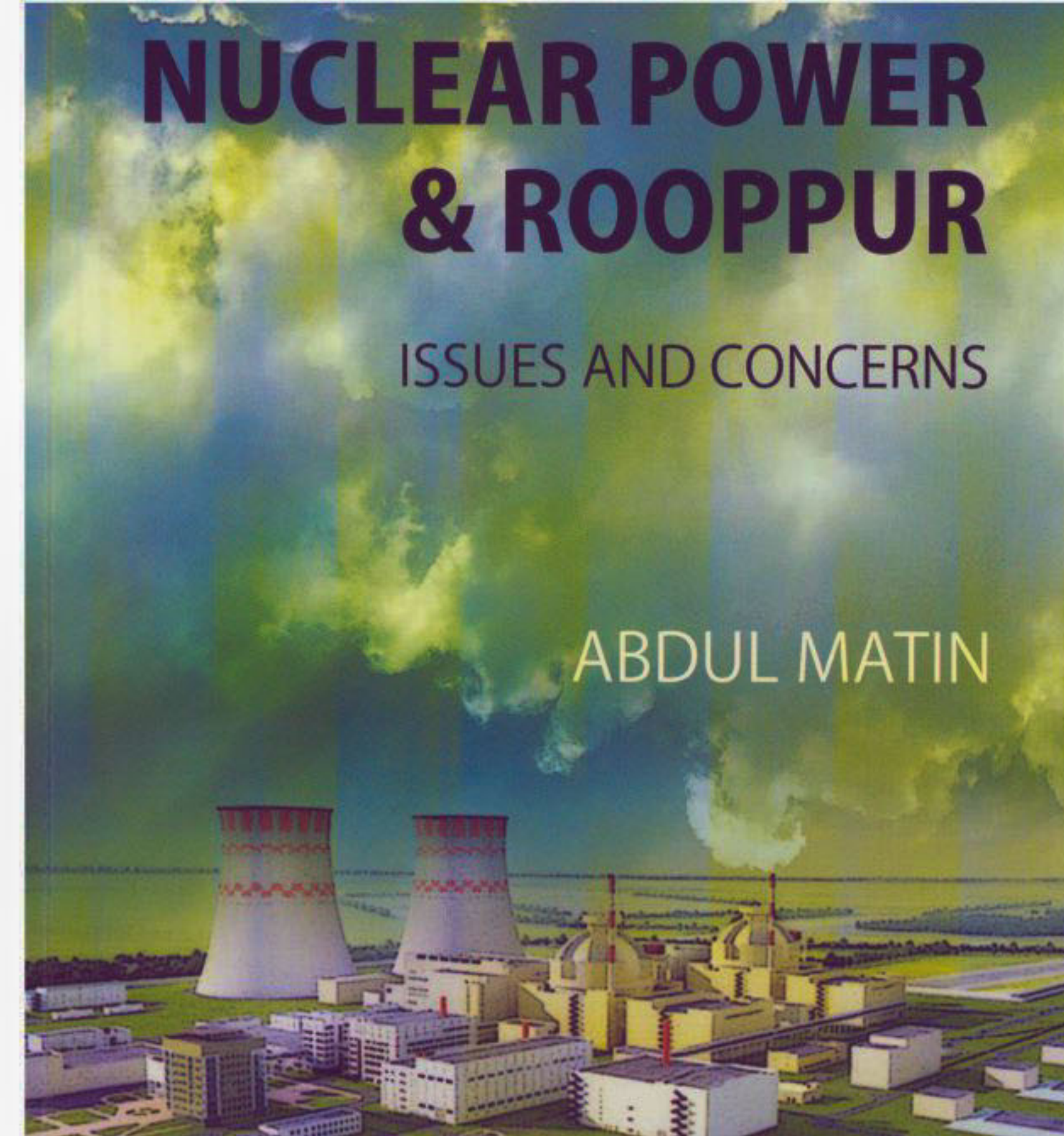
The book is available at: www.rokomari.com The reviewer is a major in English Literature and a part time reviewer.

## Nuclear Power & Rooppur Issues & Concerns

By Dr. Abdul Matin

Madhyama

Reviewed by A.B.M. Nurul Islam



IN my review (TDS, April 7, 2012) of Dr. Abdul Matin's book on Rooppur and the Power Crisis I had stated that books on technical matters are a rarity in the annals of Bangladeshi publications. Dr. Matin has taken another step to fill the void by publishing his second technical book on Nuclear Power & Rooppur.

This book is a collection of 21 Op-Ed pieces that Dr. Matin wrote in various English language dailies of Bangladesh on, as the title suggests, nuclear power and Rooppur.

However, this time he has added a section of 12 articles (Part 1 of the book) to explain to the readers what nuclear power is. This is an excellent primer on how a nuclear reactor works, types of nuclear reactors, biological effects of ionising radiations, reactor safety, nuclear waste management, nuclear accidents and lessons for Bangladesh, steps to be taken in starting a nuclear power programme etc. This is a must read for administrators, academics, engineers etc. so as to understand the basic elements of a nuclear reactor programme and its ramifications. It provides an excellent recap for nuclear professionals too.

In Part 2 of the book dealing with the Rooppur Nuclear Power Project (21 Op-Ed pieces), Dr. Matin covers issues like why we need nuclear power in Bangladesh, history of the project, site selection, issues resulting from current Russian work for the project, regulatory work, public acceptance etc. He virtually covers issues from A to Z on the first nuclear project of the country.

For example, he has stressed on the need for creating a separate organization for regulation by taking regulation out of BAEC's jurisdiction based on the well-established principle that the operator and regulator should not be the same organization. It is heartening to note that the Bangladesh Atomic Energy Regulatory Authority (BAERA) was formed in

2013.

BAEC itself is a research organization ill-equipped to implement a nuclear power programme. Dr. Matin has suggested for creating a separate Nuclear Power Corporation to deal with all aspects of nuclear power implementation in the country (except regulation). This I understand is currently in the process of materialization.

BAEC had been mentioning an unrealistically low estimate of \$ 1.5-2 billion for the 1,000 MWe reactor being considered as the first nuclear power station of the country. In the interest of transparency and public awareness, Dr. Matin by quoting from different nuclear stations of similar size built around the world, pointed out that the realistic cost would be of

the order of \$ 5 billion. It is good to note that the Government is seeking a loan of \$ 10 billion for two 1,000 MWe plants at Rooppur.

It is hoped that the people in authority will go through Dr. A. Matin's latest book and take appropriate action in the interest of the country.

Dr. A. Matin writes in simple English and has a knack of making complex issues understandable to the layman. The book, published by Madhyama, runs into 131 pages with an attractive cover and top quality printing. It is highly recommended for students, teachers, researchers, policy makers, in fact, anyone dealing or trying to understand nuclear power.

The reviewer is a former IAEA official.