

The Man Booker Prize

This week, and the following, we will feature the work of two Booker Prize winning novelists, Ian McEwan and Richard Flanagan. The Man Booker Prize was instituted in 1969 with the goal to "promote the finest in fiction by rewarding the very best book of the year" and awarded the prize to the best original full-length novel in the English language by a citizen of the British Commonwealth or Ireland. The restriction on nationality was removed in 2014.

The Booker Prize, unlike the Nobel Prize, is considered in literary circles as the "best book of the year" award.

The list of past recipients of the award includes "Midnight's Children" (Salman Rushdie), "English Patient" (Michael Ondaatje), "Disgrace" (J.M. Coetzee), "The God of Small Things" (Arundhati Roy), and "The Inheritance of Loss" (Kiran Desai).

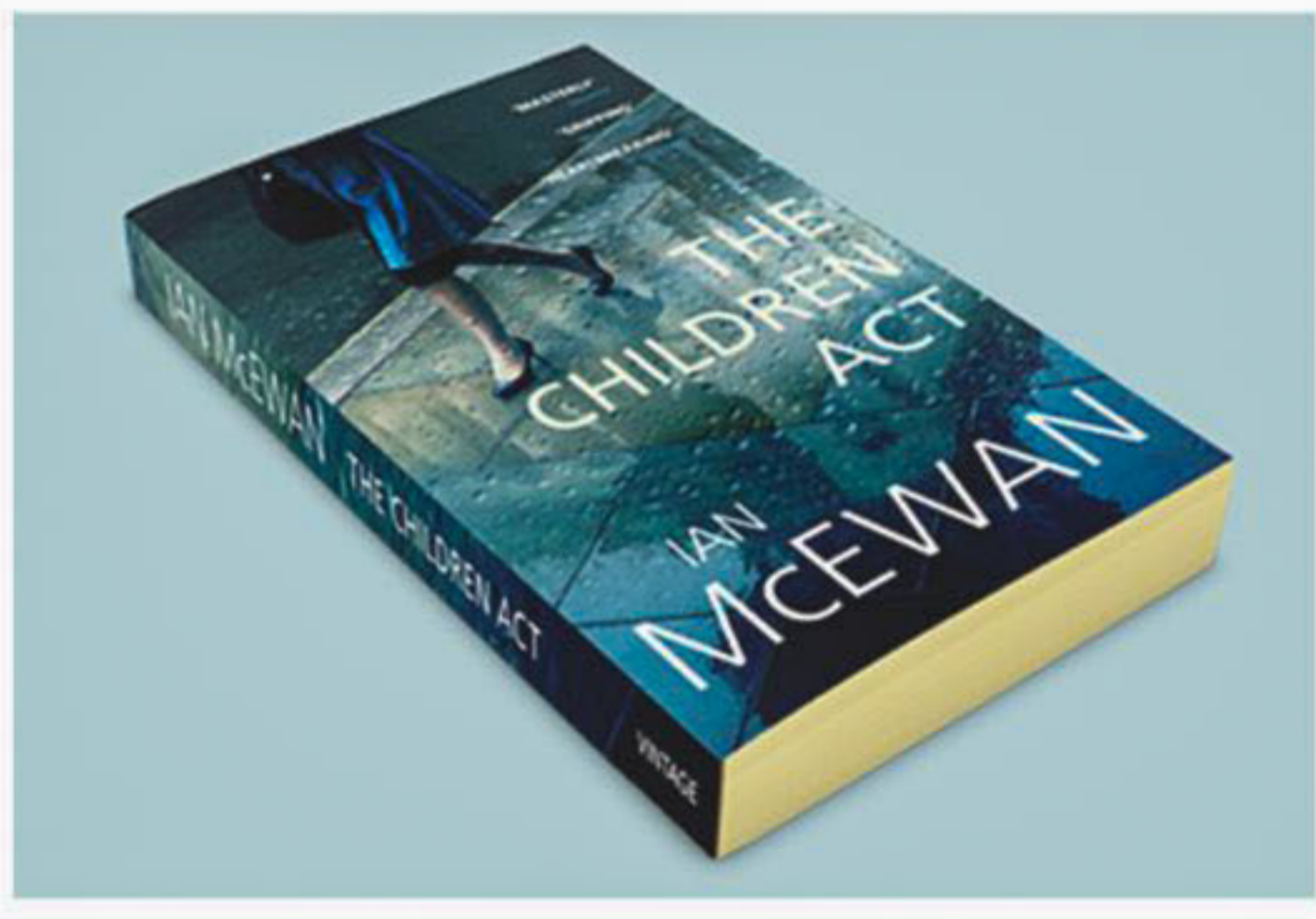
The Children Act

By Ian McEwan

Reviewed by Shibli Jabir

THE British novelist, Ian McEwan is a prolific writer and best-selling author of fifteen books. The book under review, "The Children Act", came out in 2014, and profiles the domestic and professional life of a middle-aged childless couple as they struggle to balance work and leisure in twenty-first century London. The book is an easy read, although some of the details the author interjects in the narrative and relates to medical procedures and the British legal system, particularly as it pertains to family law and minor children, are sometimes a little tricky to navigate through. However, overall, the reader will find this short volume fun to read as well as a good introduction to this intelligent and versatile writer.

The principal character Fiona Maye is a judge of the High Court and has been married for over thirty five years to Jack, a professor of ancient history. One day, out of the blue, Jack informs her that he is having an affair with a younger woman, and seeks her blessings. The excuse for this affair is the lack of passion, particularly sex, between them and he believes that the infidelity would strengthen their marriage. She obviously kicks him out of the house and goes about her own busy life which involves adjudicating several high-profile cases and preparing for a concert she is participating with another Barrister at the Inner Temple. At the end, Jack decides to come back, abandon his girlfriend, and seek forgiveness from Fiona. However, McEwan wastes no sympathy for Jack, when he writes, "She inferred from his evasive but morose remarks that in the statistician's bedroom he had not passed through the gates of paradise." They ultimately reconcile but not before she has her own short affair with a young man who was her protégé.



to find resolutions to disputes that arise during marital squabbles, divorce, and religious beliefs of parents. In the case of a family that refuses to allow blood transfusion for their leukemia-stricken son Adam due to the injunctions of their religious denomination known as Jehovah's Witnesses, Maye decides to visit Adam, who is seventeen and a minor under the Children Act, before she rules on the hospital's appeal to administer transfusion. The exchange between Adam and Maye at the hospital is one of the finest chapters of the book. She sings to him lines from Yeats's "Down by the Salley Gardens."

Here is a snippet towards the end of the visit and after she gets up to leave.

(Adam) Stay just a tiny bit longer. Please! (Fiona) Adam, I really do have to go now. (Adam) Then let me have your email. (Maye) Mrs. Justice Maye, Royal Courts of Justice, the Strand. That'll find me.

The judge is so impressed by Adam's wit, intelligence, and musical talents that she decides in favor of the hospital and against the wishes of Adam and his parents, and Adam is saved. And, now the storyline takes on an interesting twist. While the judge is on a judicial tour, Adam stalks her and shows up at the residence where she is staying. He tells her that he has given up on his own family and wants to come and stay with the judge. She bids him to leave but not before they exchange a kiss. Let me quote from this magical encounter.

"Lightly, she took the lapel of his thin jacket between her fingers and drew him toward her. Her intention was to kiss him on the cheek, but as she reached up and he stooped a little and their faces came close, he turned his head and their lips met. ... She let go of his lapel and said again, "You must go."

There are many words to describe McEwan's writing style: melodic, translucent, and lucid. He avoids writing long sentences and understands that the average reader is often hard pressed for time and wants to be able to pick up where he/she left off. The other quality is his ability to bring to life the principal characters in their emotions without cluttering the narrative with long conversations or non-linear threads.

Here are two samples of his elegant prose from his reconstruction of the gradual path to reconciliation between Fiona and Jack. "Toward the end of the meal, when they had exhausted the safer topics, there came a threatening silence. Their appetites were gone, their desserts and half the wine were untouched. Unspoken mutual recrimination troubled them. Still on her mind, his brazen excursion; on his, she presumed her overblown sense of injury."

And the last line, "They lay face-to-face in the semidarkness, and while the great rain-cleansed city beyond the room settled to its softer nocturnal rhythms and their marriage uneasily resumed, she told him in a steady quiet voice of her shame, of the sweet boy's passion for life and her part in his death."

The reviewer lives and works in Boston, USA.

The Goa Connection

By Bappaditya Chakravarty

New Delhi: Sanbun Publishers, 2014

Shahid Alam reviews the novel and calls it SLICK THRILLS

THROW into a pot cooking up fiction a dash of intrigue, a pinch of cloak-and-dagger and gore, a soupcon of sleight-of-hand connection of the dots, a hint of James Bond-like characters and not-so-femme fatales, and a potpourri of villains, and you end up with a...thriller! Well, at least spaghetti thriller, if you allow me the liberty to indulge in an analogy to the more commonplace term "spaghetti Western". Bappaditya Chakravarty has written just such a book in The Goa Connection.

In my younger days, I devoured the works of the master writers of the generic thriller, people like Ian Fleming, John le Carre, Alistair MacLean, Frederick Forsyth, James Hadley Chase, Len Deighton, Robert Ludlum, Tom Clancy, among others, and have been rather spoilt in only being satisfied with works of their standard. The Goa Connection does not match that standard, though it has its moments.

The action begins on 14 July 1939 in North Goa with the murder of Joachim Brunel, a Belgian national, who was "an engineer and a geologist --- a rare combination." His killer offers this theatrical (also, considering the situation, rather comical) parting shot to his dying victim (who, with the demise of his wife, was now all alone): "I am sorry to leave you like this, but you have to go. You do not have the right to be at the end of what you have begun. Very sorry...rest in peace, Monsieur Brunel." And thus begins the saga of a bewildering (sometimes making it difficult to keep track of the events being narrated) array of incidents and individuals in far-flung places of the world. The reader is taken through (not in chronological order of occurrence) India (Delhi, Kolkata, Jaipur, Mumbai, Mussoorie, besides Goa), Ostend, London, Port Said, Cairo, Alexandria, Mersa Mutruh, Beni al-badr, El Sallum, Athens, Brussels, La Roche, Zeebrugge, the Arabian Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, and the North Sea. There is also a brief tangential reference to Islamabad, home of the trouble-creating ISI. And all centering on the discovery of rare minerals (vital for state-of-the-art advanced strategic weaponry) found in Goa, and the dastardly deeds done by diverse bad guys to get their dirty hands on them.

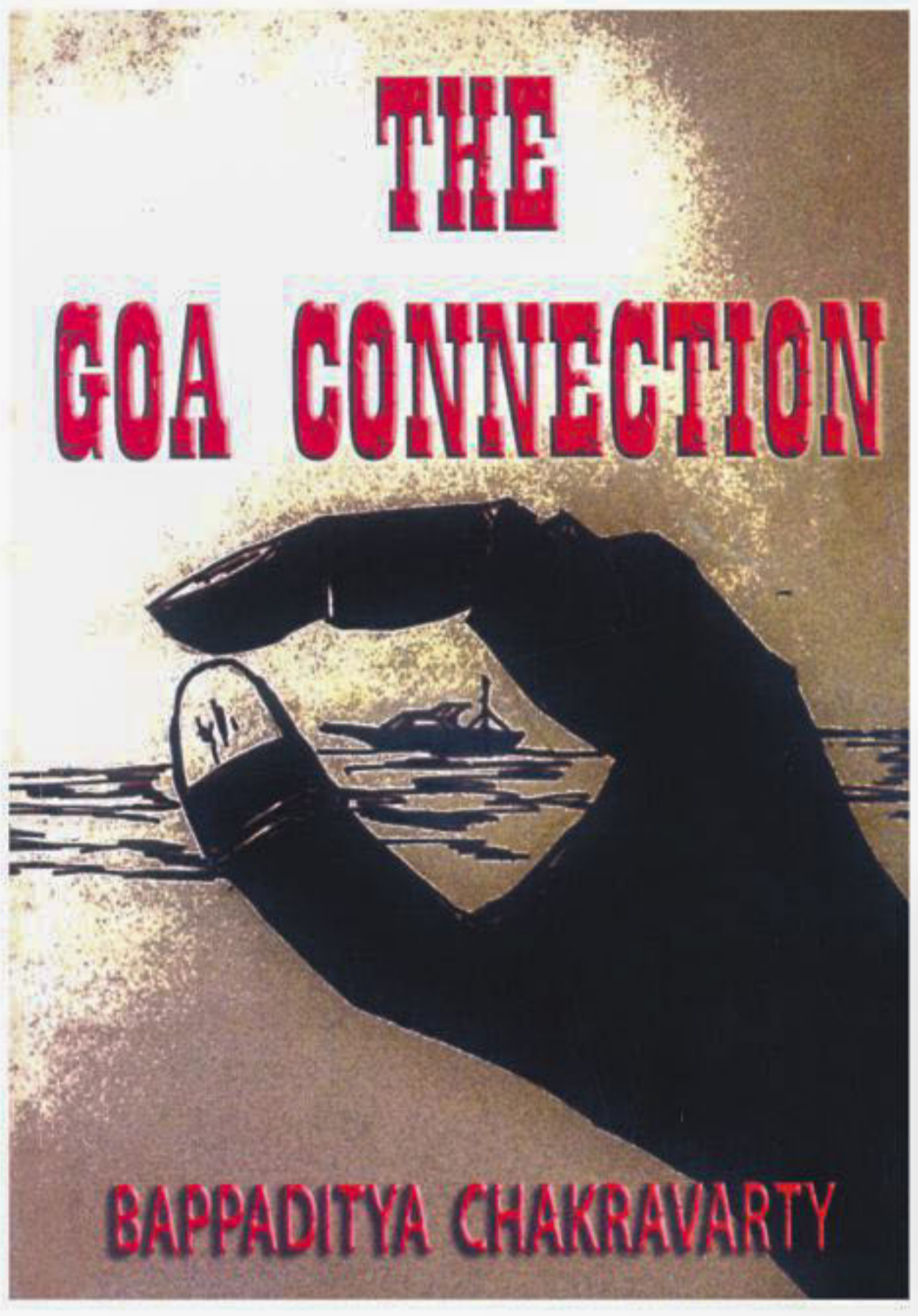
To confront such an array of villains (adept at double-crossing each other as well), along comes the debonair, but steely, Rudra Sengupta, who had served in India's special forces, to confront arch-villain Radovsevic (a Croat), his principal henchmen, Pieter Reicht (a former South African soldier) and Ivan Petrov (a Russian who was with the KGB and its successor organization FSB), and a host of other bad guys and girls. He was temporarily employed by India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, but was really an undercover secret service agent working under the direction of Brigadier (retired) Paramjyot Singh, a formidable crusty spymaster with an immense and impressive reach to the top spy agencies of the world, including the UK, the US, and the major continental European countries. Singh's outlook on life is summed up by Chakravarty: "The Brigadier never wished anyone luck. Those who were unlucky never succeeded in anything; not in war, not in politics, and certainly not in Rudra's profession." Rudra was a Bengali, "Tall and fair-complexioned. A square face, hair cut short, perhaps a little unruly."

Enter the two young women, both Bengalis in their mid-twenties from Kolkata, and both, through force of circumstances, about to get entangled in a dangerous game of international cloak-and-dagger. Shushmita Mitra was a geologist, and Sharmila Chatterjee was a chartered accountant, and they were childhood friends who had together engaged in "many escapades". They were (not at all unexpectedly) very attractive and looked good in Western attire. The two, carrying some papers from Shushmita's thesis supervisor, Professor Mitra, for delivery to his friend Professor Deshmukh of Bombay University, go off to Mumbai and get to be a house guest of Shushmita's uncle Mr. Chowdhury, a senior officer in a major bank, whom she is visiting for the very first time. And find time to inadvertently involve him, her aunt, Sharmila and herself in a harrowing series of events that placed them in serious danger of their lives. They were saved on more than one instance by the ever-vigilant Rudra, who seemed to dispatch the villains with extreme prejudice within precisely two minutes. The two-minute timeframe comes up on numerous occasions.

The author also uses a no-nonsense catchy device from the popular old TV series "Mission Impossible": Rudra is told by Shukla, another agent: "Digital reorder. Open with your code. Will self-destruct after you put it off."

Other hackneyed expressions found in thrillers from the US and the UK are invoked by Chakravarty. For example, there is this (really inane and irrelevant in the context of their utterance by the protagonist) in a couple of places: "Hope we do not have to meet again." Back to the story. Halfway through the book we are introduced in quick succession to Vijay Upadhyay, Rudra's sidekick and a tough guy himself, and Derek, a Canadian merchant navy officer, who later on joined Rudra along with his senior officer John McAllister, a Scotsman, to fight and defeat the bad guys, and who justifies his credentials as a fighting man with this gem: "Once shot a grizzly too." Wow! In spite of occasionally using Western phrases as if to make his book appear to be a thriller in the classic master Anglo-American writers' mold, Chakravarty lets slip an instance of fairly typical South Asian penchant for self-pity when he has the hard, tough Rudra tell Shushmita: "if I had been a philosopher I would have said that people like me are the last living examples of the outsider. We don't belong to ourselves, and we don't belong to the world."

To the author's credit, he did not make Shushmita and Sharmila anything resembling the Bond girls. Highly intelligent and industrious, they often use their presence of mind to outwit the villains, although both evince veiled and not-so-veiled romantic interests, in Derek and Rudra, with Sharmila going for the Canadian (reciprocated). Eventually, the multifarious villains, who are



drawn from multiple countries across the world, get their comeuppance at the hands of the good guys and women from India, Britain, other European countries, North America, and Arab countries. In the process of building his story, though, Chakravarty fairly frequently takes recourse to constructing convenient connection of events, of people fortuitously being in the right places at the right times, of offering fitting solutions.

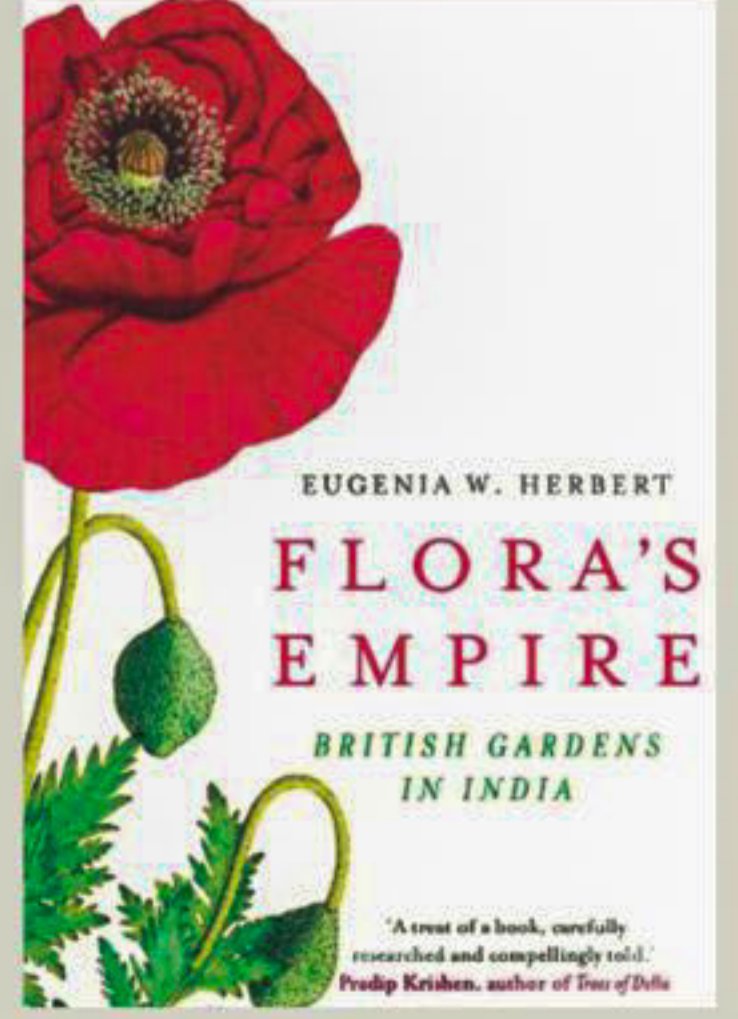
To take a few examples. Professor Mitra apologizes to Sharmila and Shushmita for not being able to send them to his home from his office because "the bloody driver had taken unauthorized leave." And, of course, they promptly ran into a dicey situation almost as soon as they hit the street. Then, while being held prisoner aboard a ship, even though their other personal belongings, like iPod, flash-drive, etc., had been confiscated by the bad guys, a large needle, their credit cards, and a small pair of scissors were miraculously overlooked! These came to great use for the women soon after. There are also some snide remarks about blacks in the form of black prostitutes in London. The Goa Connection will not give the reader a taste of well-constructed, taut high standard thriller, but will satisfy those for whom a pastime in going through a spaghetti thriller will do just fine.

The reviewer is an Academic and Actor.

Flora's Empire: British Gardens in India

By Eugenia W. Herbert

In this deeply researched yet wonderfully readable history of Britain's 'garden imperialism' in India, Eugenia W. Herbert draws on a wealth of personal accounts and period illustrations, many of them little known, to track the evolution of imperial ideas of governance through colonial gardens. The British created gardens in India not just out of simple nostalgia or homesickness, but also to put a visible stamp of 'civilization' on an alien, untamed land. Colonial gardens changed over time, from the 'garden houses' of the East India Company's nabobs modeled on English country estates and the hill station gardens where English flowers could be coaxed into bloom to the neat flowerbeds, gravel walks, well-trimmed lawns and hedges of the Victorian sahibs. Every Government House, Civil Lines bungalow and cantonment was carefully landscaped to reflect current ideals of an ordered society. The British also made India part of the global network of botanical exploration and



plant collecting and developed tea gardens and opium poppy plantations to fill the coffers of the Empire. More than sixty years after the British left, their garden legacy still lives on, reflected in the design of municipal parks and IT campuses and in the tastes and practices of countless Indian home gardeners who take pride in their green lawns and flowerbeds full of English flowers.

Target 3 Billion

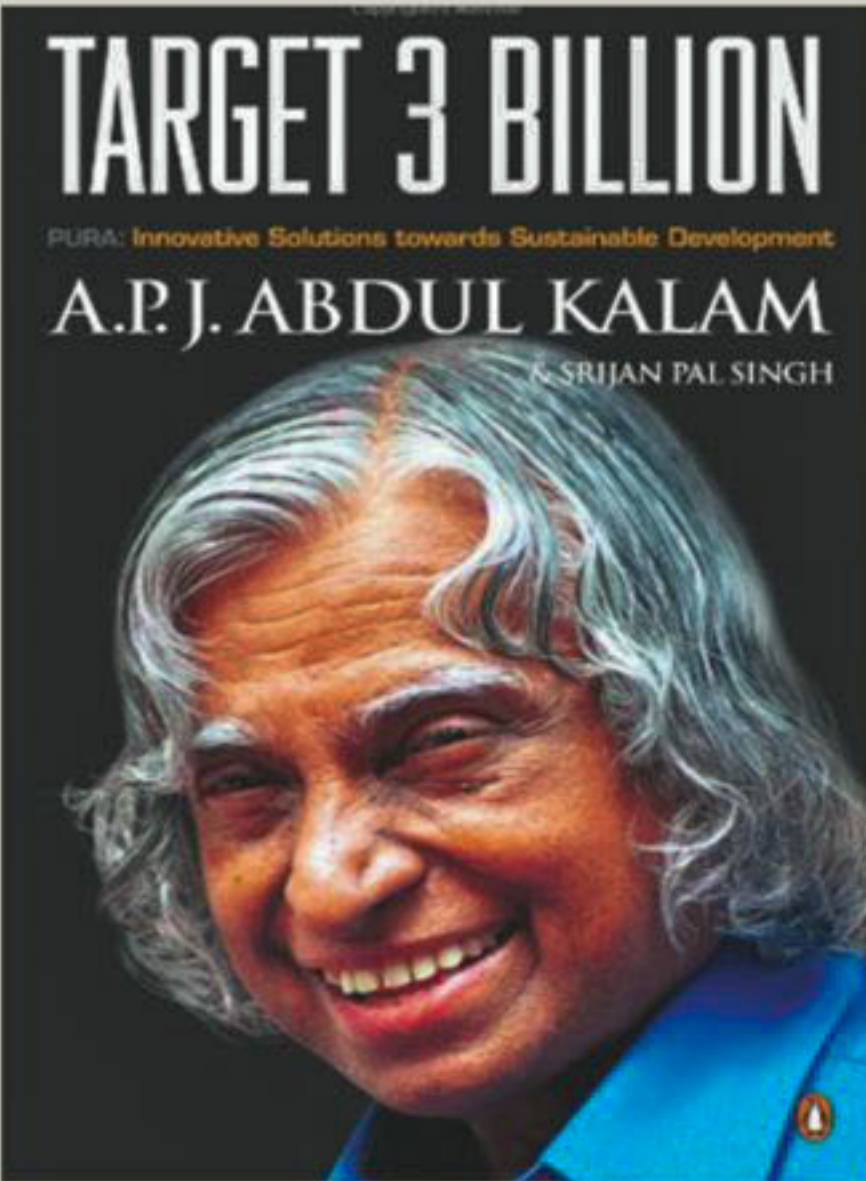
Innovative Solutions Towards Sustainable Development

By APJ Abdul Kalam & Srijan Pal Singh

Target 3 Billion: Innovative Solutions Towards Sustainable Development talks about the 3 billion people across the globe who live in villages and are often deprived of basic resources. The authors explain how the global model of development has failed to eradicate poverty.

India's 750 million people living in villages constitute the world's largest rural population. Target 3 Billion: Innovative Solutions Towards Sustainable Development integrates the challenges and opportunities of the present human civilization. It elaborates on providing Urban Amenities in Rural Areas (PURA), a sustainable and environment friendly system that will uplift the rural masses. Instead of relying on government subsidies, Dr. Kalam says that entrepreneurship with community participation can empower villagers. PURA is a blend of people, technology, entrepreneurial spirit, traditions and skills. Readers will come across many examples throughout the book which demonstrate how PURA can change the lives of millions. Some of these include Seed Club at ChitrakootPura and Warana Cooperative Sugar Factory.

Target 3 Billion: Innovative Solutions Towards Sustainable Development explains how governments can use this



system for the benefit of the rural masses. Some of the chapters in this book include The Other Half of Mankind, Effecting A Social Transformation and Agriculture and PURA. The authors have posed the question, what can I do to empower 3 billion? The answers have been provided from the different perspectives of citizens, students and senior citizens.

Wavell and the Dying Days of the Raj

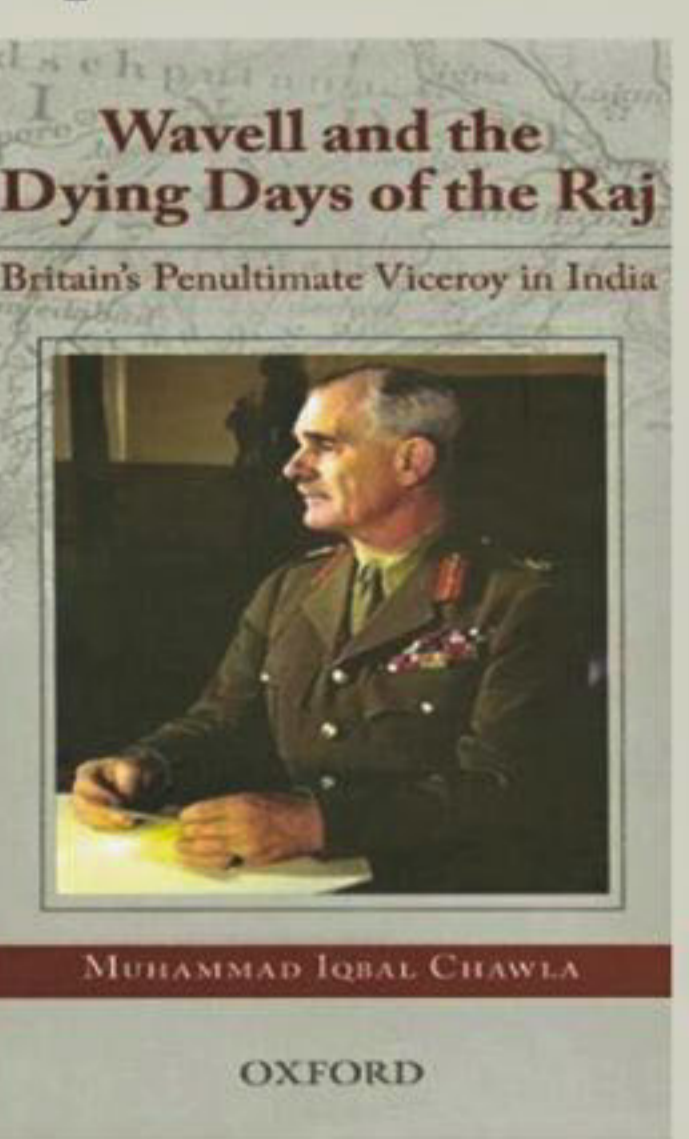
Britain's Penultimate Viceroy in India

By Muhammad Iqbal Chawla

A critical and historical understanding of Lord Archibald Wavell's viceroyalty is important for understanding the rational dynamics amongst the three leading political actors of that time, the British, the Hindus, and the Muslims.

This study primarily focuses on Lord Wavell's response to Muslim politics in India in the 1940s. The premise of this study is that Lord Wavell was against the demand for Pakistan, because he believed that India was a natural geographical unit and should be preserved as such. Therefore, during his viceroyalty, he struggled to preserve the union of India. But Pakistan emerged despite Wavell's attempts to sidetrack it.

It is important to note that although Pakistan came into being almost six decades ago it still faces the effects of the problems it inherited from the deci-



sions taken by the last two British viceroys. A reappraisal therefore of the circumstances in which Pakistan was born especially the politics and policies of that time which gave birth to Pakistan is of immense importance.

These books are now available at Omni Books