

# The Narrow Road to the Deep North

Author: Richard Flanagan

Reviewed by Shibli Jabir

THE book under review, “The Narrow Road to the Deep North” by Richard Flanagan, received the Man Booker Prize in 2014. The award citation on the Booker website acclaims it as “a love story unfolding over half a century between a doctor and his uncle’s wife”, but it is more than that. For some readers, the book which might evoke the flavor of another outstanding Booker winner “English Patient” by Michael Ondaatje, weaves an elaborate story of love, hardship, and bravery during Second World War in South East Asia. Dorrigo Evans, a Tasmanian doctor, finds love in the arms of Amy, his uncle’s young wife, whom he had met two years earlier. But, soon he is sent overseas to join the Allied efforts to push back the Axis forces rising to the rank of colonel in the Royal Australian Army, and in 1943 captured by the Japanese in Java. As a POW, Dorry as he is known to his friends, was shipped to the jungles of Thailand where he works in the Burma railway project, the “Death Railway” as it was known, and, a major segment of the book describes in details the conditions in the POW camp, the treatment meted out by the Japanese captors, and the dreams and aspirations of the POWs.

Flanagan, an Australian who had written five previous novels and has received several international honors, writes lucidly and imbues his narrative with references to Japanese haikus and Tennyson’s “Ulysses”. The research that preceded this semi-historical project is impressive, particularly on the pre-WWII Australian and Tasmanian society, conditions in the jungles of Siam, Japan’s rule of Manchukuo, advances in medicine, circumstances facing the soldiers returning from the front in Japan and Australia, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to the Booker website, his father who “died the day Flanagan finished The Narrow Road to the Deep

North, was a survivor of the Burma Death Railway”.

The title of the book is taken from an identical one, a travelogue by Basho Matsuo, a 17th century Japanese haiku poet credited with the development of the modern haiku form, who walks from Tokyo to the northern reaches of Honshu on foot. The novel has three interesting threads: The love life of the protagonists, the minute details and operational struggles of building a rail-road through dense monsoon forest during the Second World War, and the evil effects of the war on the various warriors: Japanese, Australian POWs, and the sole Korean. The judges for the 2014 award describe the book as “a harrowing account of the cost of war to all who are caught up in it.” We can follow the life of Dorry from his childhood to his final days, but what makes this novel beyond the pale of ordinary is the great pains the author goes to bring alive the ecstasy and agony of a man in love, although the stylistics is at places a little cliché. For example, in describing Dorry’s disappointment in losing Amy, Flanagan writes, “He had stolen light from the sun and fallen to earth.”

For romantics, the book has many memorable passages, though, and each of them offers us a peek into the passion that Dorry nurtured both during the war and his long and distinguished career as a surgeon after. When

Dorry was in the POW camp, a letter from his wife only brought him closer to Amy. “What, he wondered, was this desire to be with her, and only her, to be with her night and day, to hang off even the dreariest of her anecdotes, the most obvious of her observations, to run his nose against her back, to feel her legs wrapping around his, hear her moan his name, this desire overwhelming everything else in his life?”

We get a similar vision in the mental state of the young doctor. “When he looked at patients they were just windows through which he saw her and only her. Every cut, every incision, every procedure and suture he made seemed clumsy, awkward, pointless. Even when he was away from her he could see her, smell her musky neck, gaze into her bright eyes, hear her husky laugh.” Ironically, the lovers, separated by the war, were destined to live their lives separately after the war ends owing to two interesting twists. Dorry was informed by his wife Ella in a letter he received in the POW camp that the pub that his uncle operated with his young wife, Amy, was burnt and both of them perished in the fire. She, on the other hand, survived and felt let down when Dorry came back to Australia as a war hero, but made no efforts to get in touch with her.

We see the power of “abhiman” a Bengali word that we take so much pride in but which does not have a literal equivalent in English. The sentiment of abhiman, or pique, is very aptly woven into Amy’s state of mind after she learnt that Dorry had survived the war rather than die as a POW as she had heard from her husband Keith when he was alive. As he rose to fame and his professional star kept on rising, she felt hurt and let down by him. She felt a strong sense of abhiman. She asks, “Why, why, if he had been alive, had he not come back to find her? ... And whenever she came close to writing a letter, making a phone call, she saw before her the huge obstacle of his rejection of her in never having sought her out, in not having come back for her after the war, as he had promised. ”

After almost two decades of the end of the war, at the height of the Vietnam War, when the Americans were flocking Sydney on leave, the ill-fated lovers meet for a few minutes on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. She was there with her two young nieces her suburbs for sightseeing, while he was walking from his hospital to visit a friend living on the other side in Kirribilli. “It was when he drew himself up from the side rail and resumed walking that he first glimpsed her in the distance, momentarily stepping out from one such bar of slanting darkness into the light.” Ironically, this magical moment on the bridge, and the plight of the soldiers while building the railroad, might evoke the memories of “ Bridge on the River Kwai”, a movie based on a novel by Pierre Bouelle and captures the efforts to blow up a strategic bridge by the British on the same railway project.

The reviewer lives and works in Boston, USA.

## Gresham's Law Syndrome and Beyond: An Analysis of the Bangladesh Bureaucracy

Author: Akbar Ali Khan

(The University Press Limited, 2015)

Reviewed by SHAHID ALAM

Invoking an economist to analyze Bangladesh's bureaucracy

THE book's title is eye-catching all right. Gresham's Law Syndrome and Beyond: An Analysis of the Bangladesh Bureaucracy, written by Akbar Ali Khan, a former senior civil servant, academic, economist, and a student of history. The author has used all these qualifications to good advantage in composing this book in which, Khan explains, he “seeks to analyse the roots of Gresham's law syndrome in Bangladesh” (Chapter 1, “Prolegomena”). Nine more chapters, logically arranged, round up the business end of the book. The topics contained within each chapter are similarly structured in a rational pattern that sees each one of them flowing seamlessly into the next. That makes the book rather easy to follow for the fairly knowledgeable reader, although some of the subject matter for not a few of them would be, I suspect, an arduous exercise to work out.

Gresham's law in economics, for those in the know, predicts that bad money eventually drives good money out of circulation, and this is likely to happen when authorities do not differentiate between the 'good' and the 'bad'. However, Khan extends the law to cover other areas, like the bureaucracy: “The law is valid not only for money market; this is equally relevant to personnel administration.” And with equally deleterious results for a country's institution or organization. How? “A strong nexus of community of selfish interests is established between opportunist politicians and dominant bureaucrats. This creates a vicious cycle which perpetuates the grip of the bad and wicked on administration.” Khan contends that the idea of modern bureaucracy, based on merit, and being legal and rational, is incompatible with the idea of Gresham's law syndrome, but, nonetheless, asserts that many developing countries, including Bangladesh, display many of the features of the syndrome.

Khan displays a strong sense of history when he observes that, although the tradition of the British rule was continued by the post-colonial rulers in East Pakistan and Bangladesh, “much of the transplanted institutions turned out to be isomorphic mimicry”. The institutional dysfunction is exemplified by two phenomena: unusually low rank of government effectiveness, and decline in governance. “This has created a situation where bad employees dominate the good.” In terms of the Gresham's Law Syndrome, the author identifies the following symptoms manifesting themselves: erosion of confidence in the recruitment process; diluting merit in recruitment by a pervasive quota system; politicization of promotion; inability to punish delinquencies and reward the efficient; inappropriate compensation; and deprofessionalization through inappropriate structure. These and other issues are discussed in detail in Chapters 3 through 8, while Chapter 9 provides a plethora of prescriptions to remedy the ills of Bangladesh's bureaucratic system.

Khan evinces a sound sense of history in Chapter 2 (“Historical Roots of Civil Service in Bangladesh”), where he traces the historical roots of Bangladesh administration during the ancient and medieval periods. While he concedes that the bureaucratic system of Bangladesh appears to be a legacy of the British raj, he qualifies his contention with the observation that it is not a total clone of the raj, as it incorporates indigenous elements. However, the British were so successful in their experimentation with the civil service in India that the system was replicated in Great Britain itself with the implementation of the major recommendations of the Northcote-Trevelyan Report in 1854. The British, though, could not halt the phenomenon of corruption that was rampant in both ancient and medieval India (including Bengal).

Even though the members of the elite Indian Civil Service (ICS) by and large remained above corruption, they “coexisted and compromised with corruption” as a matter of exigency. By tolerating, and even encouraging, bribery/corruption, which Indians had been familiar with from ancient times, they were taking recourse to a cheap tool for exercising control over a restless population. In fact, to cite an example from Khan, during the raj, corruption was so pervasive among the Indians in PWD (Public Works Department) that it was familiarly known in official circles as “Plunder without Danger”! When Pakistan was created, its elite cadre (CSP) failed to emulate the ICS in terms of its tradition of incorruptibility as “a symbiotic nexus was established between grand and petty corruption.” That unhealthy tradition continues in Bangladesh.

In Chapter 3 (“The Structure of Civil Service in Bangladesh”), the author takes stock of changing social reality and concludes that a number of cadre services of Bangladesh are getting increasingly redundant in the age of globalization. On another topic (Chapter 4, “Departures from Merit: The Most Complex Quota System in the World”), Khan decries the situation obtaining in the

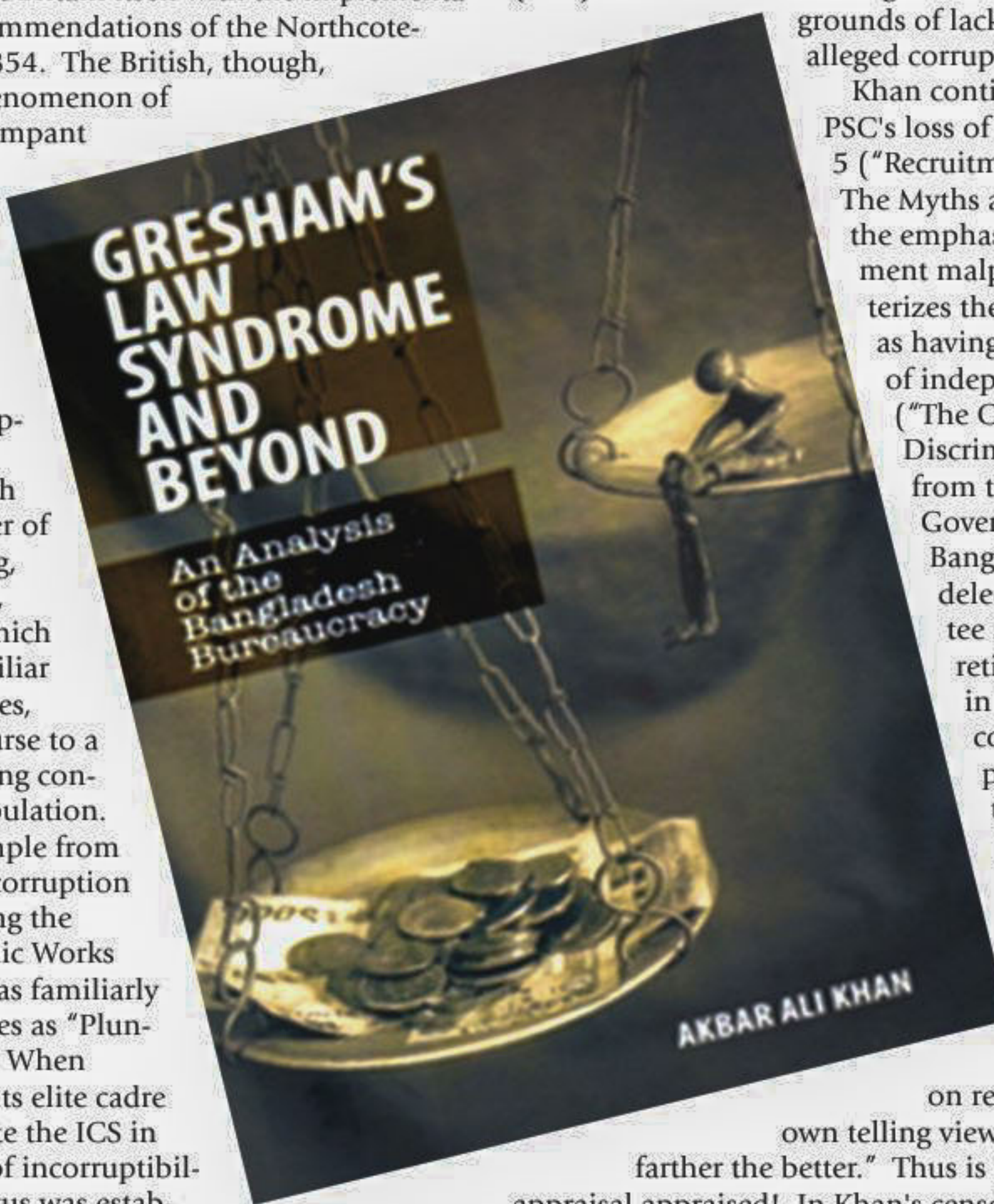
country where the government has taken no initiative to objectively assess the real impact of the quota system on the country's administration as a whole. Specifically, he is critical of the situation that the “issues involved in the quota reservation for districts and freedom fighters were highly political and emotive,” and that the “quota system continues to be a sacrosanct issue in Bangladesh politics.” In the same chapter, the author believes that, from the standpoint of the quota system, the credibility and effectiveness of Bangladesh's Public Service Commission (PSC) have

been significantly undermined on grounds of lack of transparency and alleged corruption. Khan continues on the theme of PSC's loss of credibility in Chapter 5 (“Recruitment and Training: The Myths and Reality”), with the emphasis being on recruitment malpractices, and characterizes the constitutional body as having only the trappings of independence. Chapter 6 (“The Challenges of Discriminating the Good from the Bad: Appraising Government Executives in Bangladesh”) contains this delectable piece of repartee as recounted by a retired cabinet secretary in India: I still recall a collector gushing full-page celebration of the personality of his probationer, a prospective son in law. The report concluded with the prediction, “he will go far.” His Commissioner on review, recorded his own telling view cryptically, “The farther the better.” Thus is performance appraisal appraised! In Khan's censorious view, the “mechanism for identifying the poor performers and the incapacity of the government to punish delinquents has rendered the Bangladesh Civil Service into a sanctuary for inefficiency and corruption. On the contrary, meritorious performance in Bangladesh Civil Service goes unrecognized. Performance is rated on the basis of vague and imprecise personality traits. This has rendered performance appraisal process into an instrument of cronyism.” Chapter 7 (“Compensation in Bangladesh Civil Service --- the Imperative for a New Paradigm”) dwells on the

touchy issue of the pay structure of the bureaucracy. In his view, the salary structure has created a “congenial environment for Gresham's law syndrome” with the outcome that the bureaucrats have lost their incentives to excel at the jobs. Therefore, the best and the brightest no longer opt for jobs in the bureaucracy, preferring to go for the vibrant private sector instead. At this point Khan offers a puzzling observation. He deduces from the large number of candidates in the 34th BCS examination in 2013 that the market does not regard the compensation in the Bangladesh public sector as being poor. One would be tempted to look for explanations elsewhere other than the pay package (which is generally lower than, for lack of a better word, “comparable” jobs in the private sector). It could be that, for many Bengalis, the “prestige” of being a civil servant still outweighs anything that the private sector could offer. Or, that there is job security and post-retirement benefits in government jobs. Or that, they could not get lucrative private sector jobs, especially in the face of competition from the contemporary pool of the best and the brightest who do prefer the private sector. Or, it could be, as Khan has referred to a survey regarding preferences for civil service jobs, that the avenues for aggrandizing oneself outside of honest means exist in the government/public sector.

In “The Vicious Circle of Politicization” (Chapter 8), the author digs deep into a phenomenon that has arguably contributed to the Gresham's law syndrome: the politicization of the bureaucracy. As Khan persuasively argues, “The depoliticization of bureaucracy is an essential precondition for administrative reforms to rid the civil service (of) Gresham's law syndrome.” As the title of Chapter 9 (“Strategies for Reforms”) indicates, Khan offers all manners of prescriptions to remedy the malaise that has afflicted the Bangladesh bureaucracy, in effect, to rid it of Gresham's Law Syndrome. There is a plethora of suggestions, something that is rather common in social science writings in Bangladesh. Many of those he has suggested have been articulated in various books and journal articles by a number of Bangladeshi academics. Hardly anyone doubts their sincerity in proposing them, but, as they say, the caravan of inertia and sameness rolls on. Just when would the policymakers, politicians, and bureaucrats, and indeed, much of the general citizenry, would stop, take stock of the bad situation, and do something positive to improve it, is anybody's guess. Till that happy scenario comes about, I am afraid, we will be left with being stuck in a situation prior to Khan's musings in “Beyond Gresham's Law Syndrome” (Chapter 10). The long-dead British economist certainly seems to have cast a long shadow on matters other than economics.

The reviewer is an educationist and actor.



## Accelerate (XL R8)

by John P. Kotter

Building strategic agility for a faster-moving world

BASED on the award-winning article in Harvard Business Review, from global leadership expert John Kotter.

It's a familiar scene in organizations today: a new competitive threat or a big opportunity emerges. You quickly create a strategic initiative in response and appoint your best people to make change happen. And it does—but not fast enough. Or effectively enough. Real value gets lost and, ultimately, things drift back to the default status.

Why is this scenario so frequently repeated in industries and organizations across the world? In the groundbreaking new book Accelerate (XL R8), leadership and change management expert, and best-selling author, John Kotter provides a fascinating answer—and a powerful new framework for competing and winning in a world of constant turbulence and disruption.

Kotter explains how traditional organizational hierarchies evolved to meet the daily demands of running an enterprise. For most companies, the hierarchy is the

singular operating system at the heart of the firm. But the reality is, this system simply is not built for an environment where change has become the norm. Kotter advocates a new system—a second, more agile, network-like structure that operates in concert with the hierarchy to create what he calls a “dual operating system”—one that allows companies to capitalize on rapid-fire strategic challenges and still make their numbers. Accelerate (XL R8) vividly illustrates the five core principles underlying the new

network system, the eight Accelerators that drive it, and how leaders must create urgency in others through role modeling. And perhaps most crucial, the book reveals how the best companies focus and align their people's energy and urgency around what Kotter calls the big opportunity.

If you're a pioneer, a leader who knows that bold change is necessary to survive and thrive in an ever-changing world, this book will help you accelerate into a better, more profitable future.

