

Continual Quest for Knowing and Understanding Bangladesh

AUTHOR: ABUL MAAL A. MUHITH
University Press Limited

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

REVIEWING a book that traces the history of Bangladesh from ancient times in just over 400 pages has been, for me, a formidable experience, especially since a great deal of material has been covered within those pages. Almost as a fiendish twist, for a fairly lengthy portion, the book is as much a Reader's Digest version of Indian history as it is of Bangladesh. However, when one considers the subtitle of the book, A Subcontinental Civilisation, one can acknowledge the title's relevance. The author has, not without reason, subsumed Bangladesh as an integral part of the subcontinental civilization. History of Bangladesh: A Subcontinental Civilisation has been written over a period of twenty-two years by Abul Maal A. Muhith, a former high civil servant and currently Finance Minister of Bangladesh.

Chapter 1 ("Indian Civilisation and Bangladesh") lays down that, "Modern-day Bangladesh is just four decades old, but Bengal has always been an integral part of the subcontinent." While details about the history of this region is (sic) sketchy at best, this much is known: "Prehistoric Bengal was not a unified country at all and various parts were known under various names at different times.... But part of Brahmaputra basin also is the eastern part of Bengal from pre-historic times." Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah, of Iranian origin, is credited with finally establishing the name of Bangla when he declared himself the Shah of Bangala in 1342. That marked the beginning of close to three centuries of independent sultans in Bengal. Mughal emperor Jahangir finally ended the independence of the sultans in 1611.

In Chapter 2 ("Medieval India (490-1526 AD)", Muhith showers accolades on the Hosain Shahi dynasty in Bengal and compares it favourably in terms of advancement with that of the rest of India: "In Bengal the modern age possibly began in 1493 with the golden age of the secular Hosain Shahi dynasty.... In India as a whole the modern age was somewhat delayed and it began with the Mughals in 1526." The author further extols India of the medieval period: "The Middle Age

in Europe was the age of darkness and superstitions. The orthodox and ritualistic Popes ruled the world of thought and learning where the spirit of inquiry was ruthlessly banished. In India on the other hand, it was a glorious period of imperial patronage and excellence in arts and literature and to an extent sciences as well." And, as if to underscore the cycles of history, soon after, the West came out of its medieval funk to embark on a period of dominance that continues to this day, while India, and notably Bangladesh, for long have stayed in the doldrums of underdevelopment, with India having shown signs for some time of becoming a significant global economic power and progressing noticeably in the areas of science and technology.

In an obvious reference to a longstanding subcontinental problem, Muhith notes how, for various reasons, Kashmir has become a central player in India from the seventh century. Regarding Muslim rule in Bengal, the author brings up some important issues. He establishes a crucial aspect of the Bangladeshi ethos: "Secularism is a historical inheritance of Bangladesh" ("Chapter 12, "Assertion of Bengali Nationalism in Pakistan"). Critically, this was strongly influenced by the fact that a "large influx of saints and Sufis into Bengal was responsible for widespread conversion of local people to Islam." This region was largely spared the influence of the strict Wahhabi brand that has taken hold of large swathes of the population of Pakistan. In fact, the Muslim rulers of north India placed Bengal in their sights only at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and Islam in this region was not proselytized by the sword at all. And, by the time the British raj was established in India, nearly half of Bengal's population were Muslims.

Muhith dwells at length on the rise of Bengali nationalism, and the centrality of Bangla in that phenomenon. He recounts the Pala period that was marked by the flourishing of Bangla language and literature, to be followed by the Sena era that saw a resurgence of Sanskrit and the neglect of Bangla. He is of the view, and not a few would be inclined to agree with him, that the seeds of Bengali

nationalism were sown during the freedom struggle of India against the British Raj and in the partition of Bengal, which aroused in the people an understanding of the Western concept of the nation-state. In fact, he asserts that modern nationalistic feelings were fomented more vigorously in Bengal than in other parts of India, and that Bengali nationalism had also had to do with the secular state system initiated by Alauddin Hussain Shah in the fifteenth century, and continued by the Mughal Nawabs. Secularism is a long

Under the circumstances, the neglect of the sensitive issue of Bengali nationalism, anchored on its language and secular outlook, foreshadowed the eventual end of Pakistan. "Pakistan, within months of its birth, became a divided nation." Muhith elaborates on his statement: "In the separated wings of Pakistan nationhood did not develop at all. In political thoughts the two regions were vastly different. While the eastern region was for democracy and the society had a measure of egalitarianism, the western region was dominated by feudal landlords and committed to authoritarianism." The 1952 language movement embodied the essence of Bengali nationalism and showed just important is Bangla to the Bengali ethos: "But the Language Movement continued till Bangla was recognized as a state language in the Pakistan Constitution on March 23, 1956. It was the success of this movement that stirred Bengali nationalism and could be credited with laying the foundation for the nation-state of Bangladesh."

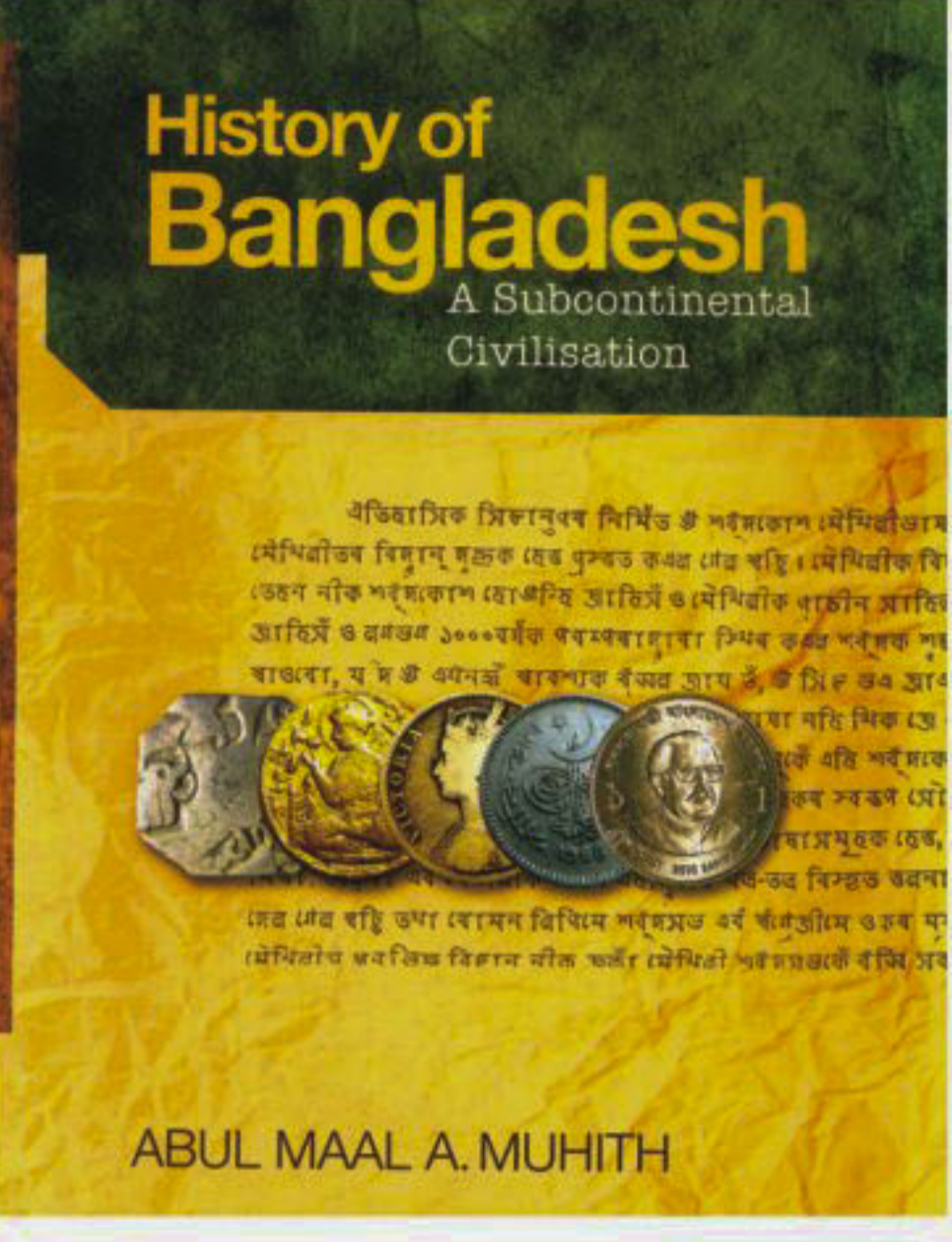
Muhith then moves chronologically through the events that led to the appropriate title of the sub-section of Chapter 14 ("Bangladesh Autonomy Movement and Pakistan's Last Phase"): "March 1971: Pakistan's Last Chapter". The author leads up to that chapter by reiterating that Awami League's Six Point Programme provided a mechanism for a confederation of Pakistan. He then concentrates on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's landmark 7 March 1971 speech in which he "called for independence...but at the same time extended an olive branch to 'peaceably settle the differences and coexist as brothers'." This was likely Bangabandhu's finest hour where he displayed great sagacity as a constitutionalist at heart who also had the utmost interest of the Bengali nation in his heart. That is why, in that speech, "he stopped short of a unilateral declaration of independence that would have been tantamount to the absurd situation of a cessation call by the majority population of a nation. Instead...Sheikh Mujib invited General Yahya to a dialogue for the resolution of the

crisis. He did not fully trust the military junta, however, and so asked the Bengalis to prepare if necessary for a struggle for independence." His prudence and sagacity later served Bangladesh's cause as being just in various countries during its liberation war.

Muhith details how, on 26 March, M.A. Hannan read out from the Chittagong Radio station Bangabandhu's wireless message calling for Bangladesh's independence, and how, on 27 March, then Major Ziaur Rahman read out the declaration again over the radio, proclaiming "on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the independence of Bangladesh." The author talks about the absolutely decisive role played by the USSR and India in Bangladesh's liberation struggle, as well the geopolitical realities of the Cold War during that time. Liberation was achieved and Bangladesh became a sovereign independent nation-state.

Muhith ends his narrative with the assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975, and the tumultuous events of its aftermath. They all proved tragic for the future direction of liberal pluralist democracy in Bangladesh. Bangabandhu was a towering figure and Bangladesh could find none of his stature to follow him. That has had the sad and unwanted effect of having the nation sharply divided against itself along political-ideological lines. Yet this country has so much potential to go further than it has as a reasonably united nation. History of Bangladesh: A Subcontinental Civilisation is a notable tour de force of Muhith. It is a rather compressed account of largely chronologically arranged history that would likely leave many readers scrambling for the Wikipedia or a standard encyclopedia, but this is a book worth going through for tracing Bangladesh's genesis from way back to the Pundrabardan civilization in and around Bogra, and the Brahmaputra civilization of Wari-Bhateshrwar near Dhaka and in neighbouring Vikrampur.

The reviewer is an Actor and Professor and Head, Media and Communication department, IUB.



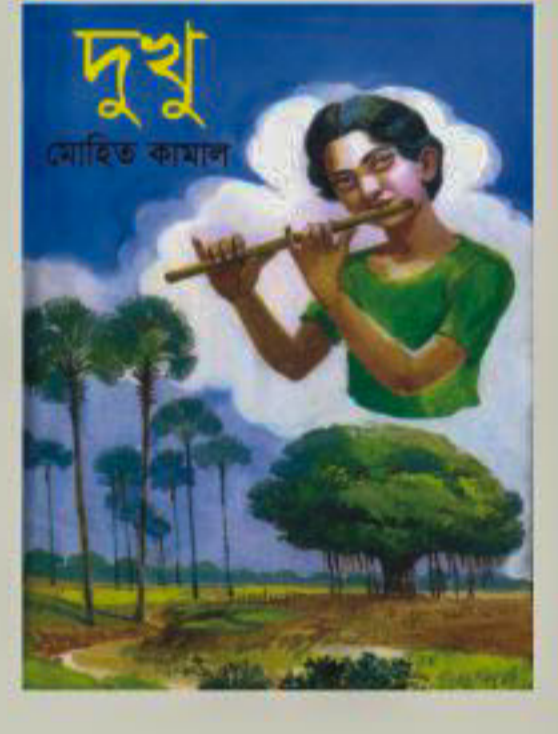
tradition of the Bengali nation. The author elucidates: "Nationalism in Bangladesh owed a great deal to the growth of a syncretic Bengali society imbibing influences from original Paganism to Islam through Hinduism and Buddhism that received strong stimulus during Muslim rule in Bengal.... British rule...and Christian missionaries...also left their mark on the open society of Bengal.... Absorption of each other's secular ideas and practices was the basis of this syncretic rather than composite society."

TALE OF POVERTY AND POETRY

AUTHOR: MOHIT KAMAL
Publisher: Anindya Prokash

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REVIEWED BY SOHEL RANA



DR. Mohit Kamal, a renowned psychiatrist, mostly known for his psychological novels, is a patron of literature. He has authored a novel titled *Dukhu* out of his great admiration of the personal and literary life of our national poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam. In this book the author portrays the childhood and adolescent period of Kazi Nazrul Islam. The settings of this novel ranges from Churulia village of Asansol Mohokuma (Subdivision) in Burdhan district of West Bengal to Darirampur of Trishal of Maymansing district. According to the author, no novel on the early life of the poet has been written before. The author has mainly referred to the book *Keu Bholena Keu Bhole* by Shailajananda Mukherjee who has mentioned some facts from memory with the poet during their student life in Raj school of Shyarsol of West Bengal. But *Dukhu* mainly depicts the time period before his student life in Raj school. Shailajananda Mukherjee has become another main character in this novel. He also mentions some other books as reference in this novel: *Nazrul Jibani* by Rafikul Islam, *Nazrul Islam Kishor Jibani* by Hayat Mahmud and *Kazi Nazrul Islam Smritikatha* by Mozaffar Ahmed. The author believes that the relationship between the poet and his friends will surely touch the readers' mind.

Private Life of the Mughals of India (1526-1803 A.D.)

OMNI BOOKS



By R. Nath
Rupa Publications India; (2005)
BDT 800/-

PRIVATE LIFE OF THE MUGHALS OF INDIA (1526-1803 A.D.)
R. NATH



Thursday, 10 March, 2016: The Bengali edition of the book titled "The History of Lithuania" was unveiled at the International Mother Language Institute (IMLI). The book was unveiled by Chief Guest of the event, Foreign Minister Mr. Abul Hassan Mahmud Ali and the visiting Cultural Minister of Lithuania Mr. Šarūnas Birutis.

Aesthetics in Poetic Pandemonium

AUTHOR: SARWAR MORSHED

REVIEWED BY MD. MOHIN UDDIN MIZAN

DEPOETICIZED Rhapsody is, oxymoronically speaking, a poetic endeavor that aims at delineating the constantly changing modern lifestyle. Justifiably enough, the book can be called a miscellanea as it accommodates diverse literary genres i.e. poetry (rhymed or free verse), epistolary and fictional pieces within the precincts of a single book. Here, you readers are going to find out how the poet views elements of both the microcosm and macrocosm through an interesting and highly personalized lens. The realms of these poems vastly extend to encompass ecology, technology, emotion, politics, pollution, transcendentalism and so on. The ever fleeting ephemeral contemporary times and the quintessence of human psyche have been arrested in an unputdownable way.

Sarwar Morshed is not only a poet – he has been writing prose (inclusive of his columns and belles-lettres) both in English and the vernacular for over the last two decades. His prolific English vocabulary is well-known among his colleagues and students at the Department of English, Chittagong University. Apart from his academic research writings, he contributes columns to national dailies (Bangladesh) and magazines published from London and Oslo. His books have been reviewed in the leading dailies of Bangladesh like the Daily Star, Daily Sun, Daily Jugantor, Dhaka Courier and journals of international repute like Asiatic (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia). Apart from the book under discussion, he has to his credit some other amazing titles like Husam Uddiner Election Khela (2009), In the Castle of My Mind (2015) and Rendezvous with Words (2015, 2nd edition is forthcoming).

As this book is a diachronic collection of the poems penned by Sarwar Morshed over the last twenty years, Depoeticized Rhapsody emerges as a dazzling kaleidoscope of our times. The poems deal with issues relevant to our local and global contexts with an outstanding blending of romance, reality and humour. Let me talk about and quote some lines from the poems that touched me most.

If you start your reading journey with the 'Contents', let me presume that you will be tempted to go through and ultimately at the end of the perusal, (if you are a language and poetry connoisseur), you will be contented. The poet has written on the plight of the RMG workers ('Cry No More, Penelope'), on the social media-addiction of the new generation ('Portrait of a Bibliophile'), about the inhuman sufferings of the Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia ('Orang Bangla'), on the lip-service paid by some 'green-enthusiasts' to the environment ('Portrait of an Envirophile') and last but not the least, the lust of the global super-powers for fossil fuels ('In Praise of Hydrocarbon'), etc. Two sub-categories of poems that arrested my attention are 'Medical Poetry' and 'Poems on IR'.

In a rather anorexic volume of poetry, Mr. Morshed has extended his poetic shadow on many topics and he has consumed the task

quite wonderfully. The book has a poem with the title 'SMS' where the poet rechristens human beings as Homo Textus! In 'To Currency' how realistically he invokes money!-

You are a humanist to the core,
Brahmins can touch you and can
Kyasthas, Shudras and many more.
Christians can pocket you,
And Moslems and Buddhists and Jews
For you trans-belief travel who sues?
And in the poem 'Portrait of a Bibliophile', what a status is posted by the father warning his facebookaholic son! -

Fb, fb burning bright,
Stay not connected day and night.
Let your networking Rome in Cyber Tiber melt,
Don't poke that girl svelt.
The young readers will find some cuckooland elements in poems like 'The Physics of Love', 'Anatomical Complaints of a Lover' (highly eulogized by some native speakers of English like Barry, Moya et al), 'Yesterday's Newspaper',

Here, you readers are going to find out how the poet views elements of both the microcosm and macrocosm through an interesting and highly personalized lens. The realms of these poems vastly extend to encompass ecology, technology, emotion, politics, pollution, transcendentalism and so on.

'Wearing You' and 'Texting Tears'. The three poems that I believe will touch the readers most are 'Orang Bangla', 'Cry No More, Penelope' and 'Nineveh Lands on Nimtali'. In 'Orang Bangla', the poet presents an almost videographic picture of the ordeal of an illegal Bangladeshi worker in Malaysia who reached his El Dorado on 'Tarzan visa' -

You came here through forests dense
On Tarzan visa.
Should I call your father, police?
'Hello, Inspector Tansri Wahab'-

David Smalling considers this poem as 'a true piece of anthropological write'. In 'Cry No More, Penelope' Sarwar Morshed delineates the (s)exploitation of our RMG girls by making reference to an episode in Homer's Odyssey:

"Cry no more, Penelope, weave no more, Cease embroidering your ante-diluvium

Depoeticized Rhapsody
Sarwar Morshed

dreams
Cease weaving and weeping,
For, never will your Odysseus come.
Ye the dream-laden Penelopes
Weep and weave....."

In 'Nineveh Lands on Nimtali' written on the Nimtali fire incident that claimed 124 lives in 2010, the poet highlights the Nietzschean spirit of our people:

Elemental gourmand,
We extinguished you and the lamentation
.....
And know ye,
Hope in human breasts is a relay-race.
The name Depoeticized Rhapsody is reminiscent of the following lines from Anne Bradstreet's 'The prologue'-

My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth."

Here the poet is found expressing her incapability of writing on mighty topics like wars, captains, kings, or cities of commonwealths; she blames her ill-formed feeble brain and Muse for giving her "broken, blemished" words. But, we readers know how much skillful she is and the poem itself is Bradstreet's most intellectually stimulating one. Similarly, albeit the poet here has assumed Bradstreet's humility, after going through this book even the lay reader of poetry can easily perceive how much poetic Sarwar Morshed's craft is or how well-versed he is in writing poetry.

The reviewer is a Faculty, Department of English Language and Literature, University of Chittagong.