

# THE LIGHTER SIDE OF HISTORY

AUTHOR: MAHBUB ALAM

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

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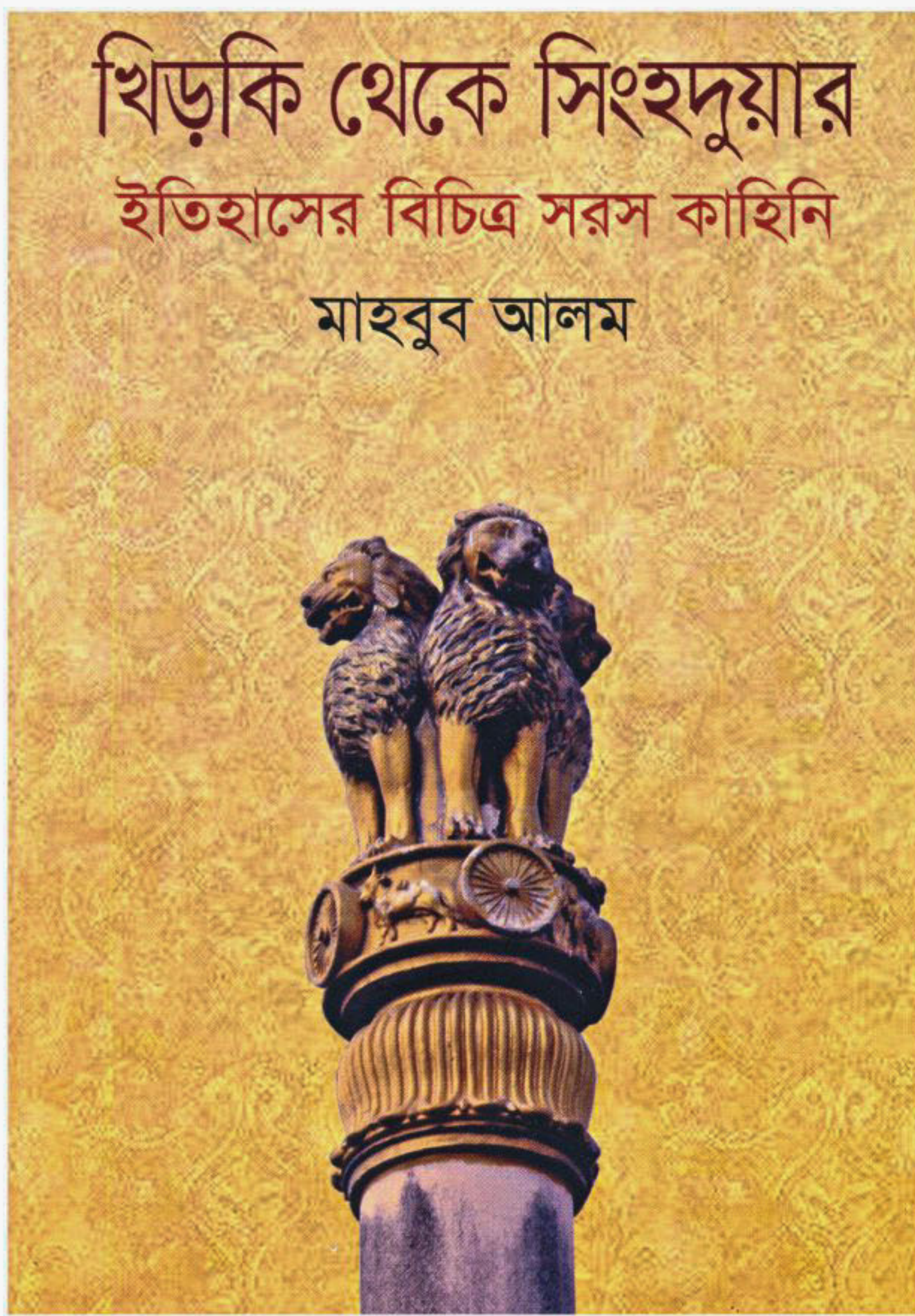
I am not sure if I can call it the lighter side of history, or, more appropriately, history off the beaten track, the conventional track having been well-worn by academics, noted historiographers, and mainstream pundits from various streams of study. Whatever it is, it certainly makes for entertaining reading. Mahbub Alam, a former career diplomat and an alumnus of Dhaka University's History department, has written just such a book, *Khirkhi Theke Singhoduar*. Ten historical accounts are presented with care and pleasing style of writing. As the author declares, he has endeavoured to bring to light those events that are often kept in the shadows of history, and usually as footnotes. Interestingly, though, once one has gone through the accounts, one may have cause to ruminate over just how vital some of them might have been to the larger events that they have been a small part of.

In "Bileti Shaheb, Bangali Bibi", the author portrays a complex mix of noblesse oblige of the British Raj during Queen Victoria's reign, the number of fawning Bengalis going all out to please raj high-ups for social climbing and/or substantial material benefits, vicious character attacks by Bengalis on those Bengalis going after such largesse, the bold stand taken against the raj by a section of the print media, and the promulgation of a repressive Act by the British. It all began with the visit of then Crown Prince Edward (since, because of her advancing years and the great distance she had to travel by sea, his mother Queen Victoria declined to pay a visit to the jewel in the crown of her empire) to India in 1875. To partially meet the cost of this visit, the British resorted to "voluntary contribution" from the Indians in exchange for bestowing titles such as "Rai Bahadur", "Khan Bahadur", and the like. While several educated Bengalis protested against such disguised extortion by writing to the newspaper Amritabazar Patrika, others lost no opportunity to garner titles.

Matters came to a head when, to matters the desire of the Crown

Prince to visit the interiors of a respectable Bengali household, Jagananda Mukhopaddhay, a government solicitor of Kolkata High Court, obliged. And all hell broke loose, notably among the educated and conservative Bengalis of Kolkata. Such reaction eloquently portrays the customs and traditions of those times that looked severely askance at the women of respectable Bengali Hindu families being presented to outsider males, particularly foreigners. Writers, poets, newspapers like Amritabazar and the satirical *Bashantak*, and other people had a field day over several months mocking Jagananda, denigrating his efforts as a ploy to garner a prestigious title. Nonetheless, Alam also brings out the double standard of these critics who, while lambasting the hapless solicitor, did not forget to extol the British raj! An unwelcome outcome of the vitriolic reaction to Jagananda was the promulgation of the Dramatic Performance Control Act of 1876 in reaction to a number of plays that satirized, or were purported to, the British rule. The final straw that pushed the British to take that measure was the farcical-satirical drama "Gajadananda". Alam's verdict: "A controversial regulatory act was promulgated around an insignificant satire, whose effects continued after the British had left this country" (loosely translated from the Bangla by this reviewer).

The story of William Makepeace Thackeray, grandfather of the famous English novelist of the same name, is fascinating. He was Sylhet district's (much larger then than it is at present) first collector, and is representative of the enormous wealth accumulated by a number of adventurous Englishmen, most of whom came from modest pecuniary background back home, through dishonest means in India. In those early years of East India Company rule, not only its employees, but also judges, preachers, and military personnel had the right to engage in private business. This they often did by crooked means, and the rot was so widespread that it reached even the highest levels of the administration.



In this age of complex computer-aided design, it is wondrous to ponder how, hundreds or thousands of years ago, people constructed massive structures of stone that have withstood the test of time. One of the great rulers of India, Emperor Asoka, had constructed his imposing stone pillars more than two thousand years back, and more than one and a half thousand years later, Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq had found two of them (one from Ambala, Rajasthan, and the other from Meerut), uprooted, and had them transported long distances over dry land and waterways to be trans-

planted and vertically erected in Delhi. It must have been a massive undertaking, and, the amazing aspect of it all was that the monuments remained intact amidst the lowering, hauling, and erection. Firoz Shah, like Asoka, carried out numerous beneficial activities for his subjects' welfare.

"Shaheb-Dhora Bangali" portrays sycophantic Bengalis who, for social climbing purposes, slavishly attended to the whims and needs of the British. They tried to ape the mannerisms of their colonial masters, tried to appease them whenever and wherever the opportunities presented

themselves, and supported their money-making enterprises like indigo cultivation and salt importation. However, these Anglophile toadies, in Alam's words, were neither welcomed into English society with open arms, nor could they fully integrate into the local society. To the English, they remained "blackies" and "natives". They learnt the English language, at times with hilarious outcomes. Alam provides one example: one such Bengali lawyer, who had learnt English, was arguing a "right of way" case in front of an English judge. He wanted to say that the disputed pathway always had unrestricted access to all. What he actually said was, "It is a case of promiscuous intercourse, my lord." Prompt was the judge's riposte: "You are a born idiot, babu."

There is a delightful piece on the wonderful qualities of the mango, almost revered by the Mughals, and much appreciated by the British. Apparently, and this is subject to other opinions, the "Langra" was discovered by an Englishman, as was the "Fazlee" by another, who also named it. Another, on the humble jackfruit, laments the relative inattention given to it in Bangladesh by scientists who, on the other hand, have devoted much time and energy to expanding on the varieties of, and improving upon, the qualities of the mango. Another trivia of history, but, nonetheless, infinitely satisfying to the inquisitive, is a curious connection between Bengal and the United States in the early nineteenth century. In September 1833, the American ship "Tuscany" docked in Kolkata harbour and unloaded what remained of a cargo of ice slabs, obviously meant to ease the hardship faced by the British in hot and steamy Bengal, while making a neat profit in the process. It was the brainchild of Boston entrepreneur Frederick Tudor. Interestingly, following tradition, for a long time, many Bengali women shunned using the "foreign" ice, fearing losing their caste, although those Bengalis educated in English lost little time in making use of its benefits.

Interesting, too, is the piece enti-

led "Deen Mohammader Dhaka". Deen Mohammad was born in Patna and had stayed in Dhaka in the late eighteenth century. He then sailed for Ireland, got married there, and lived in Britain for 70 years. He wrote "The Travels of Dean Mahomet" in an epistolary style, and is probably the first book published by an Indian writing in English, and certainly the first Indian work to be published in Britain. His stated objective was to familiarize his country to the Europeans, although he never returned to the country of his birth from Britain. Regarding Dhaka, he described its wealth, its Nawabs, industry, society, boat racing on the Buriganga river, Lalbagh fort, and the foreigners who visited, or lived in, the city. In the book he emphasized that the Indian civilization and culture were age-old.

"Forashi Shomrater Dorbare Tipu Sultaner Teen Rashtroodot" evokes a bygone era of pomp and peasantry, affected mannerisms, and some famous names in Indian, indeed world, history. Tipu Sultan, who eventually lost his kingdom and life to an alliance of the British, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and the Marathas, himself wanted to forge an association with the French, who had just fought on the side of the Americans in their war of independence against the British. Accordingly, he sent three ambassadors, all of high lineage, to Paris to negotiate a favourable treaty with the French. The travails of the three from India and in France speak eloquently of the traditions, customs, and mannerisms of the ruling upper class of the day, along with the different approaches of the Indians and the French. An interesting bit of information was that the Indians offered Bengal to the French should a proposed alliance between France and Tipu Sultan defeat the British in battle. In the event, the French rejected such an alliance, and the French Revolution that followed removed the French monarchy, and led to the eventual rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. The rest, as they say, is history.

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



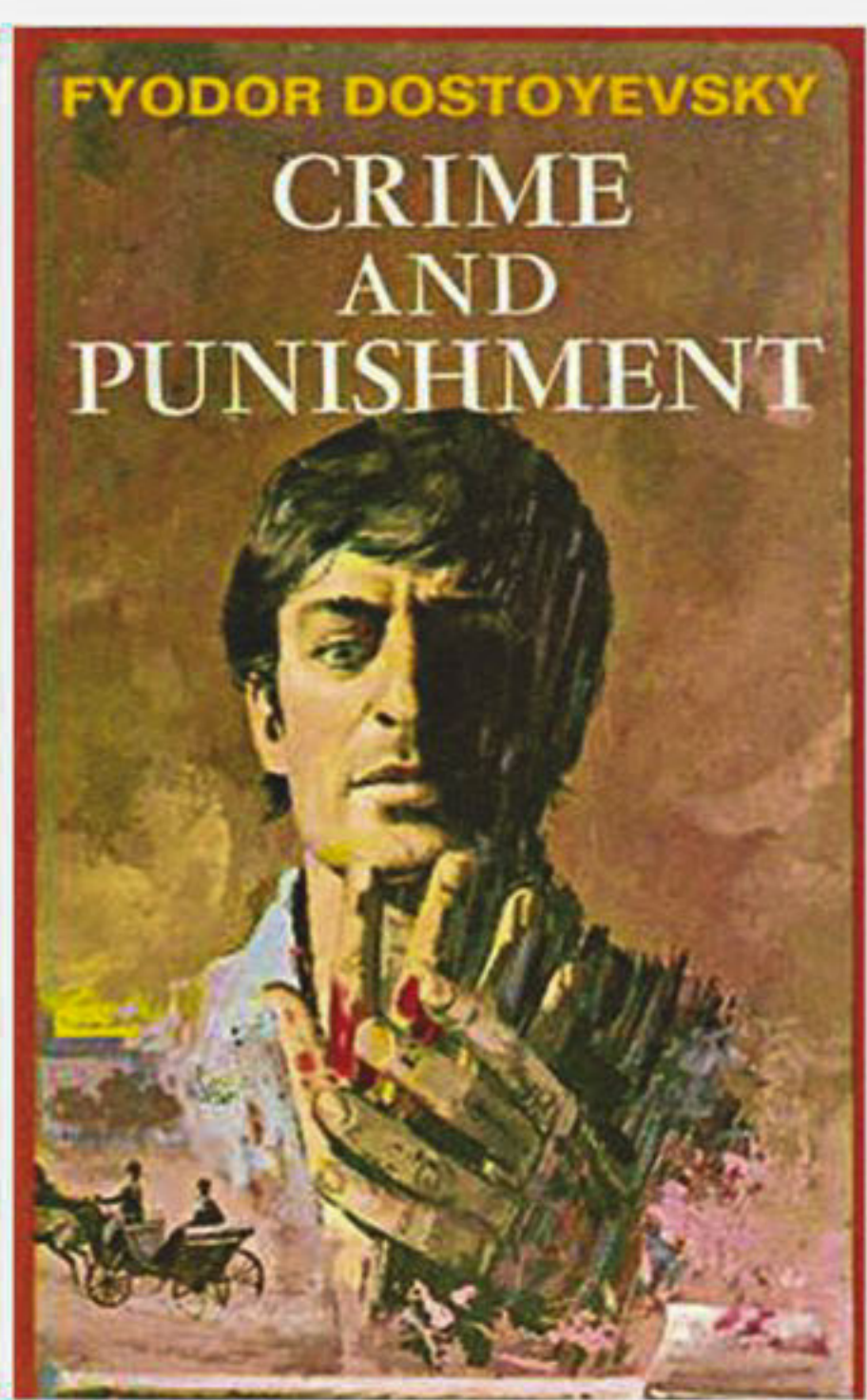
## A Fugitive's Pendulous Mind

AUTHOR: FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

REVIEWED BY MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

FYODOR Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* is perhaps one of the best books for a transparent understanding of 19th century Russia through the eyes of an absconding murderer. This monumental novel speaks of the phenomena that can persuade people to commit crimes, the inner torment that forces people to burn with a feeling of guilt and the ultimate expiation offenders go through while playing cat and mouse with their conscience.

Raskolnikov, a Russian young man grew up in Saint Petersburg with a cynical attitude towards the people and institutions around him. His contempt to society arose from the widespread social discrimination that prevailed across his hometown. Class inequity, poverty, hunger, exploitations plagued Saint Petersburg during 19th century and Raskolnikov also got victimized under these untoward circumstances. The dehumanizing effects of social injustice took away love and pity from Raskolnikov's heart and gradually turned him into an oddball. He viewed everything and everyone with disdain and suspicion. One day he had a quarrel with his landlady over house rent and killed her on the spur of the moment. He committed another murder shortly as a result of which he had to go into hiding to escape the vision of Russian police force. He moved away from one place to another constantly to keep out of the reach of policemen. However, an intense feeling of internal self-indictment nagged him all the time never allowing him to forget the crimes he had committed. He oscillated like a pendulum between two thoughts—whether he should keep on running away days after days or surrender to the cops. It shows Raskolnikov was not at all a hardcore, insensitive criminal. He committed crimes being instigated by a sense of dismay, a sense of being cornered all the time. For this reason, he had a divided mind—one of a lawbreaker and another of an ethical man. In course of time he got introduced to a call girl named Sonia. He found some commonalities between Sonia and him. Sonia belonged to the repressed and exploited class of society, a feature that disoriented Raskolnikov too. Sonia could not talk about her profession independently. Likewise, Raskolnikov could not unfold his criminal records. They both got inclined towards one another because of these similar



things. Raskolnikov made confessions to Sonia about his misdeeds. Sonia sympathized with him. In the meantime Raskolnikov made friends with another man who was a cop under cover. Sonia, on the other hand, advised Raskolnikov to hand over himself to the law to get rid of his inner sense of condemnation. Committing a crime is wrong while hiding a crime takes away mental peace—that is one of the vital points to be picked from this novel. The blood-spattered images of the murder victims haunted Raskolnikov and made life too troublesome to lead.

At the end of the novel we find Raskolnikov surrendering to the police. He received a penal sentence for eight years. Though the sentence of imprisonment first shocked Raskolnikov, later on he came to realize that he had been unconsciously waiting for an institutional punishment. So, the sentence by the court pacified him to some extent. Crime never pays and no crime ever goes unpunished—these two maxims are strongly asserted through the ordeal of Raskolnikov. Some more angles of *Crime and Punishment* should also be addressed. No one is a criminal by birth. Rather hostile circumstances

and social deprivations spoil the moral sanctity of people and make them criminals like it happened to Raskolnikov. Sonia plays a highly noteworthy role in this novel by lightening the heart of Raskolnikov through listening to him with a benign approach. Moreover, Sonia told Raskolnikov about the importance of state law to prosecute and reform criminals. Sonia being a whore is neither recognized nor respected by society but she still speaks in favour of socio-legislative principles. It is an implication that a beautiful heart dwells inside Sonia. We should not judge whether people are good or bad in terms of their social status. Sonia earns money working in a red light area but she turns out to be a law-abiding citizen as the plot of *Crime and Punishment* proceeds.

Punishment is inevitable once a crime is committed. When a criminal ducks away from the clutches of law it does not mean he has got rid of punishment. If his mind keeps on burning with the flames of penitence, this is a severe punishment too and we find Raskolnikov suffering from this self-imposed penalty while running around as a fugitive. Fyodor Dostoyevsky attached importance to the idea of

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high moral force by making Raskolnikov feel acutely repentant for the murders he committed. At the same time, the novelist upheld the supremacy of state-regulated law through Raskolnikov's imprisonment. In this way Fyodor Dostoyevsky illustrated a unique confluence of moralistic and legislative norms.

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## Still struggling after 1971.....

Edited By: HARUN-AR-RASHID

REVIEWED BY RAHFAT SALMAN ABIR

Publisher: Muktoदेश

MAR Harun-Ar-Rashid is a renowned author, economist, researcher and columnist. A graduate of Accounting he has written on a wide array of social and political causes/issues. The author has published 40 different books so far as a social novel, research papers, stories and so on.

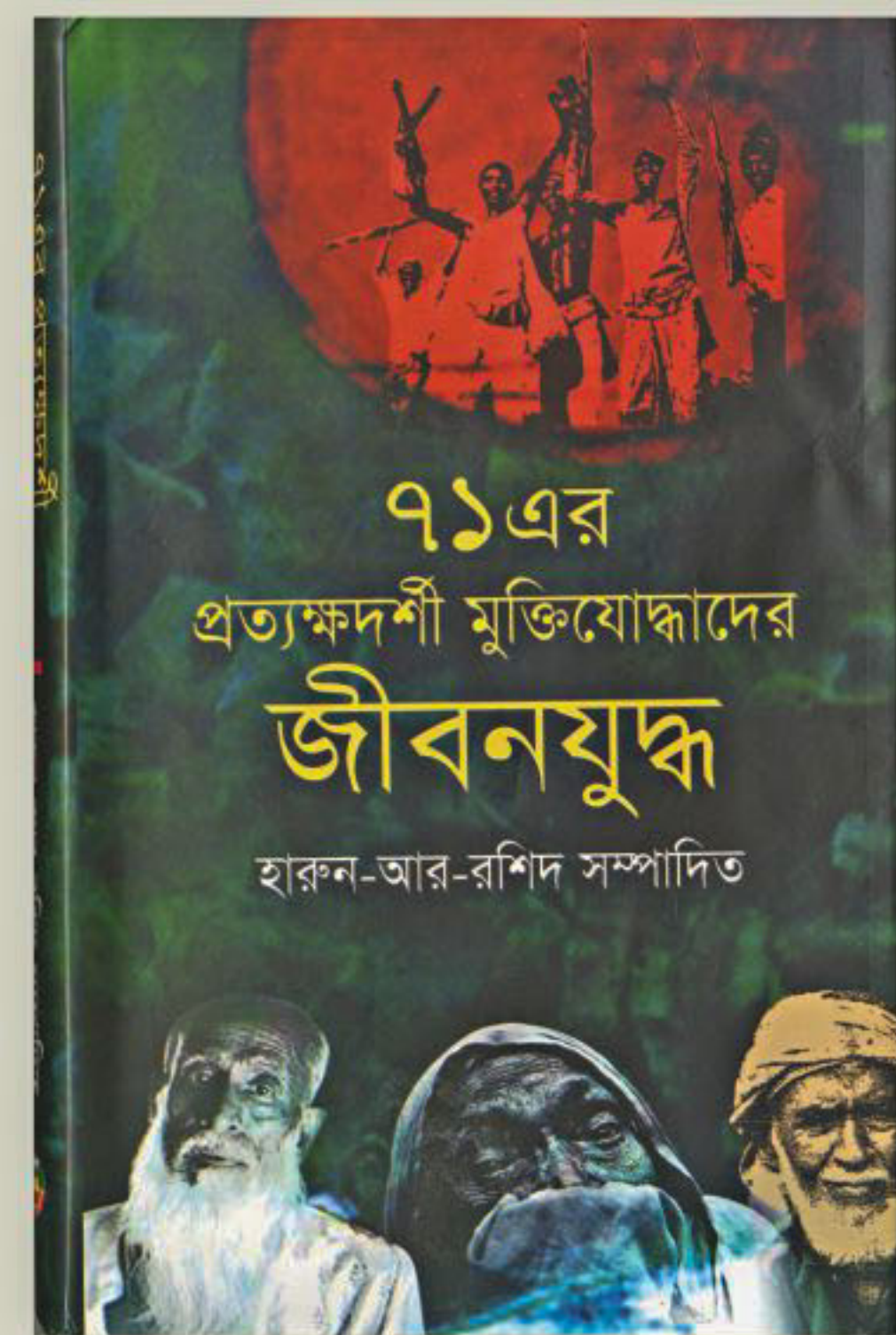
The book is a compilation of short stories, writings that try to portray the reality of those who fought for the independence of our nation are being haunted by political goons, politicians and people with ill intentions. In few of the stories the author portrays the devastating lives they are living, some by pulling rickshaws or managing a tea stall.

In this book Harun-ar-Rashid focuses on the political exploitation and manipulation that freedom fighters of our country have to face at the hands of political leaders whose only agenda is self-gain. He discusses about the need of the freedom fighters to overcome these hurdles through the development of their own establishments or platforms from where they can protest against these horrendous acts and voice their opinions of the constant struggles that many still face. In the book he emphasizes the fact that many use politics as a ploy, to cause conflict amongst freedom fighters and disrupt their unity. In this particular book he has compiled actual stories of the sufferings of different freedom fighters who are still living life without being given the respect and dignity that they deserve.

In one story, he talks about Noorjahan Begum, a widow, whose husband died fighting in the Liberation War. Harun-ar-Rashid discusses about the letter of appreciation alongside one thousand taka sent to her from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in which he thanked and acknowledged her husband's sacrifice to liberate the country.

Harun-ar-Rashid reminds readers that people took part in the Liberation war not for materialistic gains but because they felt a sense of patriotism and moral obligation towards their nation. It was on these values that the freedom fighters were born and so was a nation.

At present many freedom fighters do feel that the lack of political affiliations is one reason why many are treated indifferently or neglected. Through this book, the author clears out the misconceptions and presents the real truth regarding the current state of these glorious freedom fighters.



The reviewer works at The Daily Star.