

# FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

AUTHOR: MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

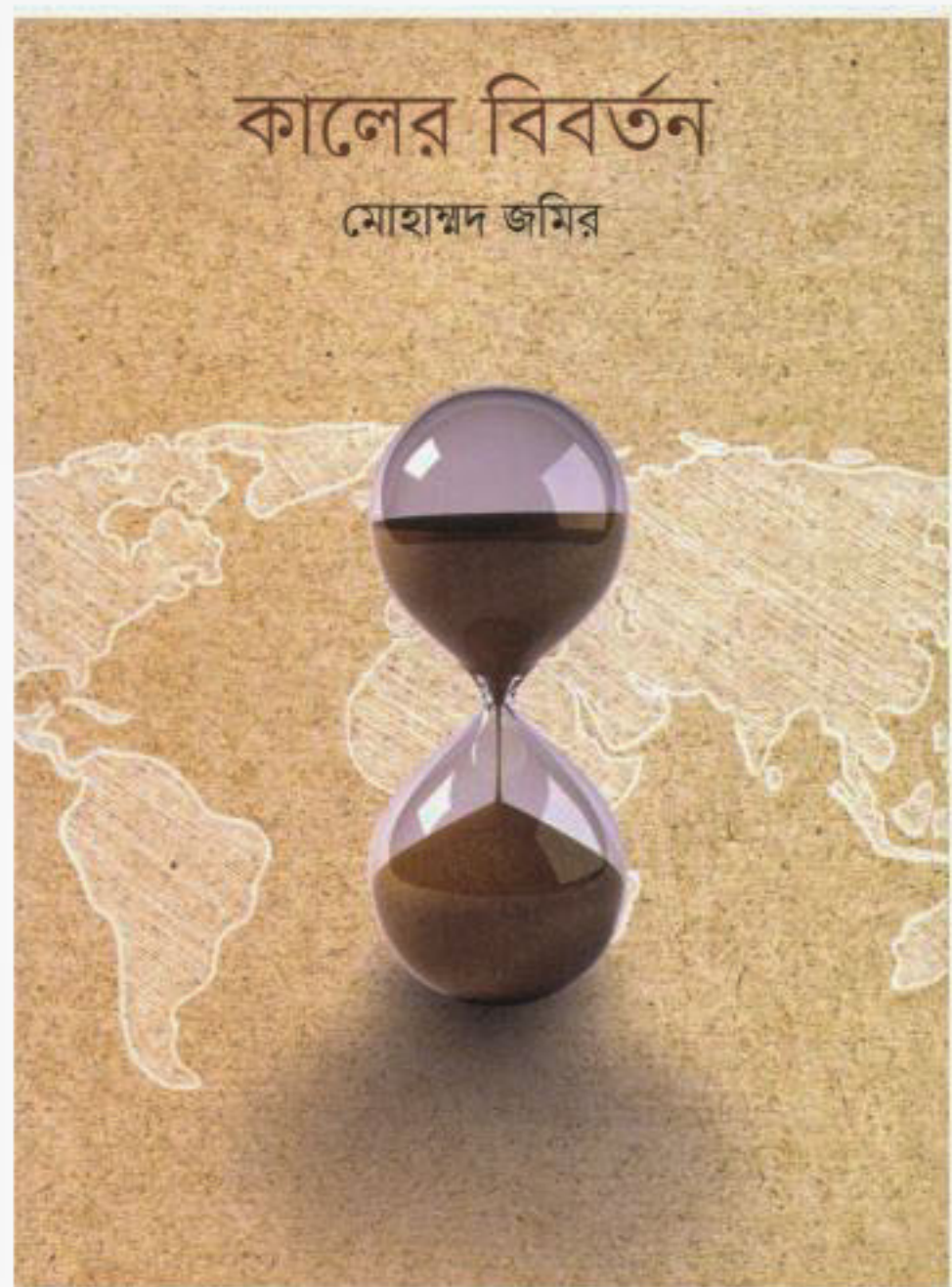
REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

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MUHAMMAD Zamir has worn, and continues to wear, different hats. A former career diplomat, he continues to foray occasionally into Track II diplomacy, has studied law, is a perennial fixture on the TV talk show circuit, is a prolific writer in both English and Bangla in the local print media, and is an adjunct faculty in the Media and Communication department of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB). The two books of his under review, *Kaler Biborton* and *Resilient Bangladesh*, consist of articles written in various print media between 2012 and 2015, with the former containing 88 articles, and the latter 89, thereby bringing about a nice symmetry between the two volumes. They expound on a variety of subjects, from Bangabandhu, to politics, to foreign relations, to governance, to cultural issues, to right to information, media and law, to war crimes trial, to education, to economic issues, to water resources, to the RMG sector, to foreign investment, and environment. Now, that is a wide gamut of topics that has been covered.

The difficulty of reviewing such a range of important areas is that, because of the nature of newspaper op-ed and feature articles, they are constrained to be short in length. In this situation, they cannot, and should not, be expected to contain detailed in-depth information and analysis that may be found in well-written academic journal articles and books. And, because Zamir's topics are wide-ranging and disparate, and compiled in two different books, the bells of formidable challenge perform toll loudly for the reviewer. Fortunately, as a saving grace, many of the articles are found in both the Bangla *Kaler Biborton* and the English *Resilient Bangladesh*. Not a few seem to be a translation of one to the other language, while a smattering bears heavy doses of repetition from a previous piece.

Bangabandhu is discussed in three articles of *Resilient Bangladesh* and one in *Kaler Biborton*. Besides the panegyrics to the Father of the Nation (and the quibbling on the issue should be brought to a close, if for nothing else than to acknowledge the reality that, before 1971, he was the only political figure in East Pakistan who symbolized in himself the hopes and demands of almost the entire

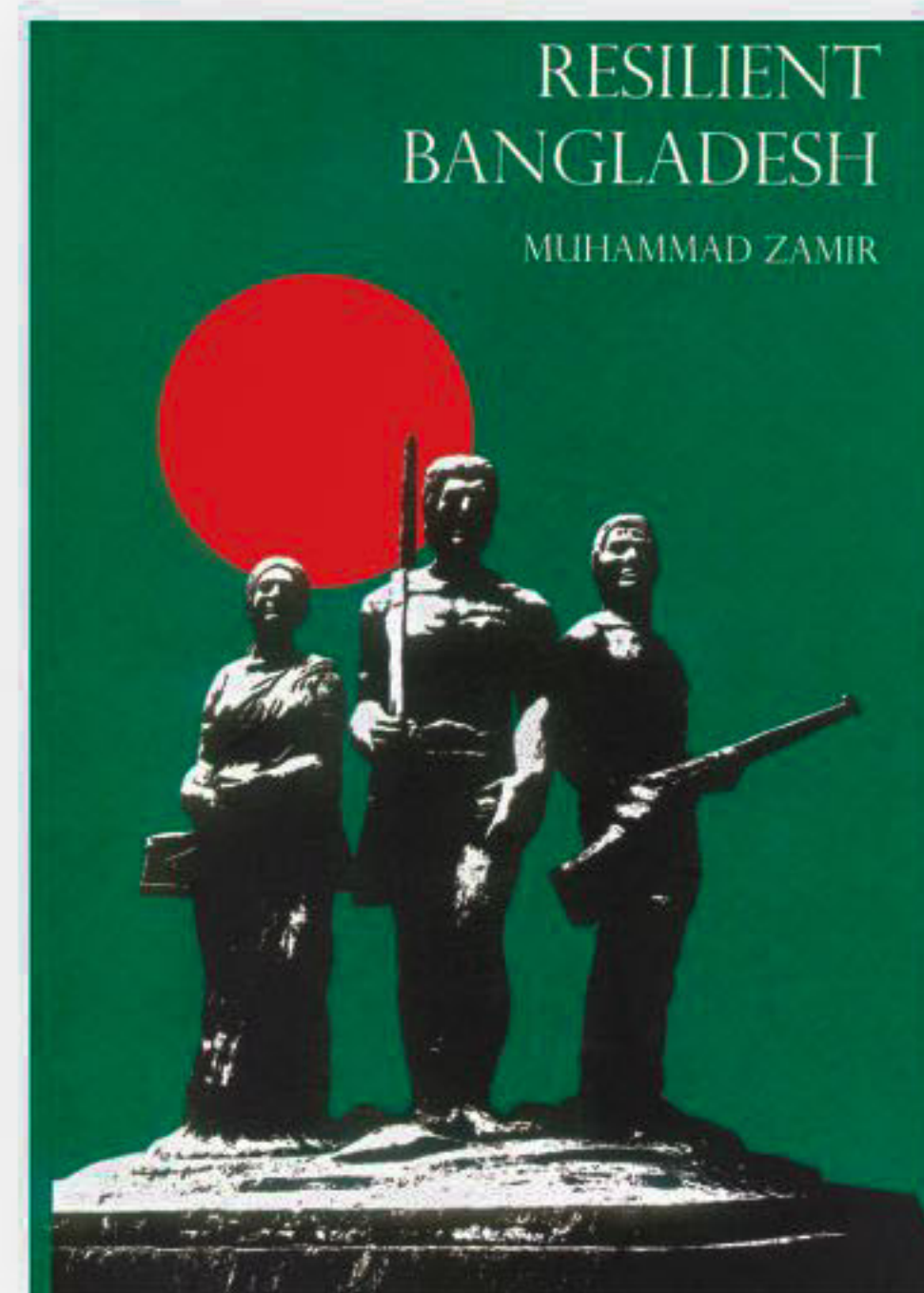


Bengali nation, and had the charisma to galvanize the people around him on the idea of Bangladesh), important issues on the conduct of international relations in a nation-state-based international system are mentioned. Zamir notes how Bangabandhu achieved a signal success in being able to persuade India to withdraw its troops from the territory of Bangladesh, and equally his sagacity in agreeing to participate in the 1970 general elections in Pakistan in spite of the promulgation by Yahya Khan in 1969 of a Legal Framework Order that did not mention anything relating to autonomy or the Six Points. Bangabandhu simply adhered to the Constitution. He was a constitutionalist at heart.

To take up the issue of the reality of international politics. Zamir notes how Bangladesh "was determined to maintain fraternal and good neighborly relations and adhere firmly to the basic tenets of non-alignment, peaceful co-existence, mutual cooperation, non-interference in internal affairs and respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty." Wonderful idealism, but quite removed from reality in the practice of international relations where self-interest of a nation-state is paramount. Non-alignment was a sham in reality, peaceful co-

existence is often an uneasy state of being brought about by wariness of each other, mutual cooperation occurs when it suits the self-interests of the parties concerned, while respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty often hinges on the whims of the great powers. If this assessment sounds cynical, then it has to be remembered that cynicism usually underlies the nation-state-based international system (the UN, in matters of great security issues, almost invariably looks towards the permanent Security Council members for salvation).

Zamir recalls the contribution of Simon Dring of the Daily Telegraph (London) and Sidney H. Schanberg of the New York Times in exposing to the outside world what was being unleashed by the Pakistani military on the Bengalis. Their and other reports eventually led to The New Statesman to issue this famous statement: "If blood is the price of people's right to independence, Bangladesh has overpaid." Zamir observes in this context: "This



international interest in what was happening in Bangladesh ultimately helped in the achieving of an independent Bangladesh." Several pieces are devoted to international politics. In

*Kaler Biborton* he welcomes the victory of the moderates in Iran, and prognosticates that, in future, the media, while still remaining subject to censorship, will play a crucial role in helping bring about a change in the country's political culture.

Zamir has a perceptive comment on Bangladesh-India relations: "It has been a roller-coaster ride for Bangladesh-India relations.... This has been particularly so in the context of expectations and actual achievement on the ground." The author places much importance on this country's relations with China, now a global economic power, and believes that Bangladesh can learn from that country on how to progress towards becoming a high middle-income country. Zamir is adept in the area of right to information, media, and law. He is seriously interested in the digital world, and notes with satisfaction (likely based on a sense of trepidation) that the 2013 informal meeting between the Presidents of China and the US underscored the increasing importance of the technological superpowers following a regulated and coordinated adjustment in the paradigm of digital growth. "This was stressed because cyber-attacks can lead to devastating effects on economic growth and also national security." In such a complex world, Zamir accepts that a modicum of surveillance is required to protect innocent people from crime and terror. He also advises media persons to realize that freedom to receive information and use such information have to be undertaken in a responsible manner. One would have thought that this basic tenet of journalism would be inculcated in media professionals.

Zamir dwells at length on a thorny issue in the West, and, indeed, in much of humanity: Islamic extremism. While he readily endorses the commonly held view in much of the world, including in Muslim-majority countries, that the misplaced enthusiasm by some perverted individuals "to insult another's religious beliefs unfortunately causes more sorrow and harm than sanctioned by any faith.... governments in the West have to take the initiative to persuade the media not to lump together Islam's cultural and religious aspects with political issues." Zamir believes that the media, which has a mighty hold on the Western psy-

che, has helped create an environment where many in the West have started confusing Muslim communities there with radical Islam. In the event, "a theft by an Asian Muslim is then no longer just another incident. It becomes a societal and ethnic indictment." The author then goes on to offer this piece of advice: "Muslims also need to help this process of engagement through internal introspection. They have to act and speak responsibly, upholding their values and professionalism in an informed way."

Zamir has written a fair amount on a particular scourge bedeviling Bangladeshi society: corruption. It is widespread, and as an ameliorative device, he brings together the media and good governance. He calls for effective investigative journalism as an essential tool for a corruption-free society and accountable governance. Similarly, the author brings together the use of digital devices and terrorism: "One hopes that we are able to evolve a suitable and effective cyber security mechanism to ensure that terrorists do not gain the upper hand and affect Bangladesh's national security. If that happens, it will not only retard our economic development but will also drag us to the path of being a failed state. Extremism can never be the key to resolution of any problem."

Zamir has a reflective piece on the very antithesis of violent extremism: Sufism and Bangla Folklore. And to think that Islam in Bengal was influenced by Sufism. Part of this article is devoted to Lalon. The author nears the end of *Resilient Bangladesh* with thoughts on the War Crimes trial. A companion piece has been included in *Kaler Biborton*. He reasons: "The process undertaken by the Tribunal to address serious crimes from the past must be viewed as being above politics or any particular party's political agenda. It is a purely juridical issue." Both *Kaler Biborton* and *Resilient Bangladesh* contain largely interesting, informative, and instructive little pieces. They will not satisfy those who want in-depth, analytical scholarly exposition, but will gratify those who are perfectly content with what they will have just read.

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

## Bangladesh: Reform Agenda for Local Governance

AUTHOR: TOFAIL AHMED

REVIEWED BY DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

Dkaka: Prothoma Prakashani, 2016

LOCAL government is a constitutionally mandated system in our country. Article 59 of our Constitution calls for elected local government bodies at each administrative unit. According to our Constitution, there must be elected bodies at each rural (Zila, Upazila and Union Parishads) and urban level (City corporations and Paurashavas) administrative unit to ensure a democratic system in the country.

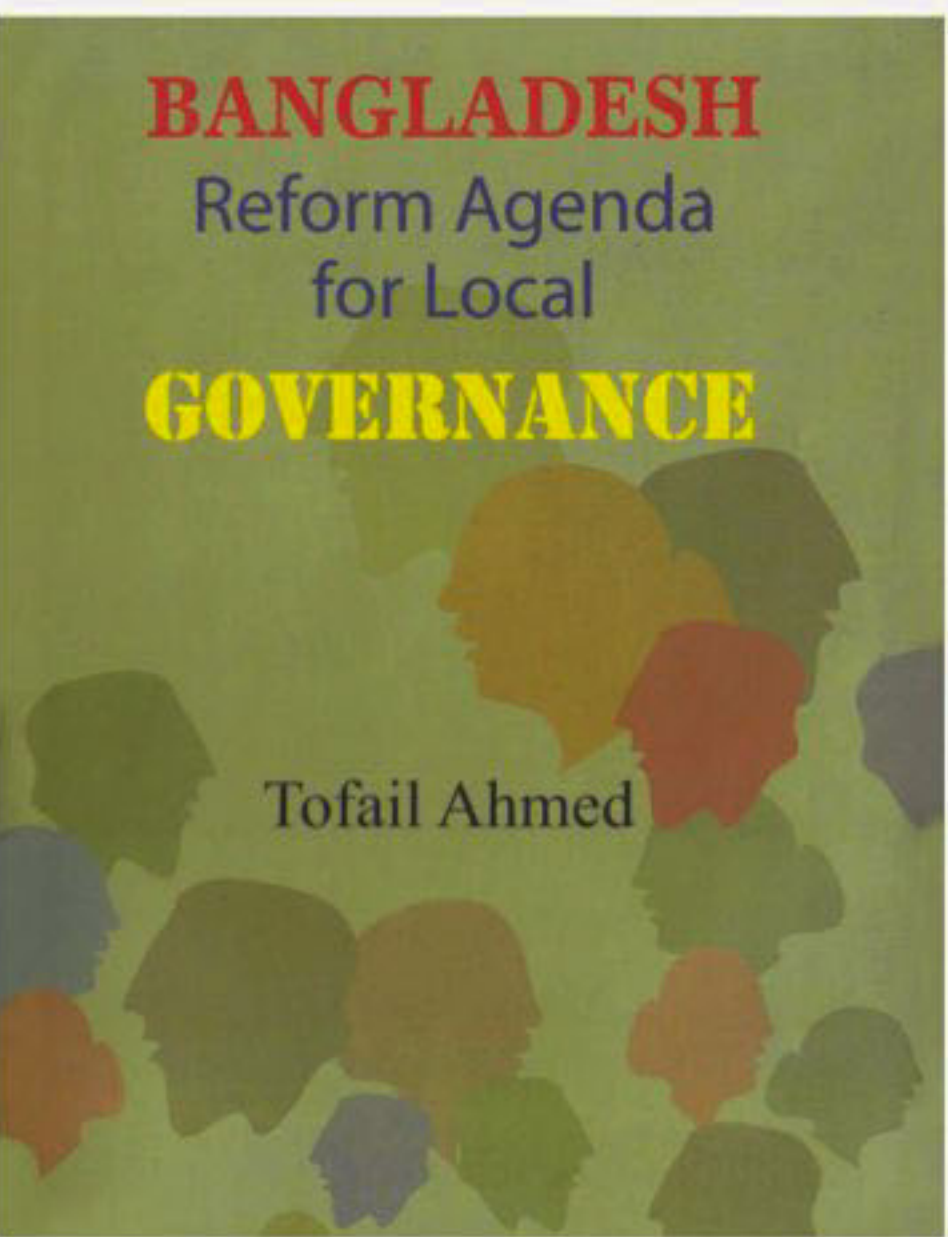
Article 59 of our Constitution mandates the local bodies the function of 'the preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development.' Despite mandating such important roles, our local government institutions are involved in very limited activities. For example, the elected representatives of Union Parishads, the biggest local bodies closest to the door-steps of the people, perform rather routine functions. They spend most of their time on (a) conducting salish (mediation of disputes), (b) building some infrastructure, and (c) distributing social safety net schemes. These activities make limited differences in the lives of the people. Professor Tofail Ahmed, the foremost local government expert of Bangladesh, sought to remedy this void in his new book by proposing a package of reform for our local government system. 'The LGIs,' he argued, 'have immense potential to play a more effective role in accelerating economic and social development, especially in sustainable poverty reduction and in achieving the national goals in different social and economic sectors such as education, health, nutrition, population, water and sanitation, agriculture, dissemination and adoption of technology towards Bangladesh's journey in becoming a middle income country within the stipulated time' (pp. 20-21).

This is a rather small book, with five chapters and 142 pages. It begins with framing the issues and problems (Chapter 1), and then goes into strategic issues, such as local economic development, service delivery, local governance and rural-urban interface (Chapter 2). Next Chapter (5) reviews four policy documents - Vision 2021, the 2008 election manifesto of Awami League, the perspective plan (2010-20) and sixth five-year plan - to set the stage for the proposed reform package. The actual reform package is outlined in Chapter 4, which constitutes the heart of the book. The book ends with a conclusion (Chapter 5), which includes some recommendations and an implementation matrix.

The reform package focuses on institutional, functional and financial aspects of LGI. Institutional reform includes a proposed 'framework law', which recommends the parliamentary system in LGI with indirect elections as opposed to the present system of direct elections for all powerful may-

ors/chairmen. The electoral reform includes a proposal to adopt a rotational system of representation for reserved seats for women. Professor Ahmed also argues for constitutional reform for streamlining the functions of LGIs and updating and modernizing the arcane and often contradictory legal framework prevailing in our local government system.

Suggested functional reforms include re-organization of field administration and functional vis-a-vis expenditure assignment. Financial reforms focus on LGI finances and the need for revenue transfer and tax sharing. The reform package also includes a proposal to integrate national and local plans, requiring devolution of financial resources. These are much needed and much talked about reforms, and hardly anyone will argue against them. Professor Tofail Ahmed deserves thanks for clearly articulating and integrating



the reform ideas into a package and inviting others to contribute to the discourse to further illuminate them.

It should be noted that while the reform of the local government is necessary for overcoming the prevailing governance crisis in the country, it is not sufficient for moving the country forward at a rapid rate. For Bangladesh to become a middle income country in the shortest possible time, we need reform of the field/local administration along with the local government reform. In fact, both must be done simultaneously to create an integrated set up under a single command, as is mandated by Article 59 of our Constitution.

Professor Ahmed dealt with the issue of reforming the field administration in the book (pp. 62-68) and raised the important issue of creating appropriate job descriptions for the DC and the UNO. He questioned the

justification of continuing the Division as a field administrative unit, which now functions more like a 'post office'.

The proposed reforms are much needed and they should be implemented without delays. However, getting the benefits of reforms will require changing our political culture. For example, changing the electoral system of LGI to a parliamentary form should not be viewed as panacea, and such a change could even trigger horse-trading and instability in the system unless all stakeholders abide by the democratic rules of the game. Above all, this will require a guarantee of free and fair elections to reflect the consent of the voters, which could become a far cry given our experiences with recent elections.

The reform package, which would change the systems and processes, in order to be effective, should also be linked to capacity building of LGI representatives. Fortunately, Professor Ahmed delves into the capacity building issue in the book. The capacity building initiatives must focus both on enhancing skills and capability, which would in turn depend on motivation and mindset changes of individual agencies. In other words, to be effective in changing the lives and livelihood of the citizens, capacity development initiatives of elected representatives, encompassing both skills development and mindset changes, must be accompanied by reforms. The reforms will clearly create an enabling environment for the elected leaders to succeed.

Appropriate capacity building of elected representatives along systemic reforms may prepare the LGIs to embark on activities to reach their potential to improve the socio-economic conditions of the citizens. However, experiences show that they may still need a pressure group to actually induce them to plunge into the desired activities. This may require a community level organized social force or local civil society. Our own work demonstrate that when a local civil society awakens and mobilises the community, while holding the LGIs to account, better lives for citizens begin to happen because of greater effectiveness of those institutions. In other words, effectiveness of LGIs depend not on their reforms, nor on their enhanced capacity alone, but also on the effectiveness of the ground level civil society, which performs the role of watch-dog as well as mobilises the community.

Professor Tofail Ahmed wrote an important book, which should provide important guidelines for practitioners. However, it could become a bible for policymakers interested in reforms. I hope Professor Ahmed will take the initiative to publish a Bangla version of the book.

The reviewer is Secretary, SHUJAN.

## THE LIFE JOURNEY OF A THEATRE ACTRESS

COMPILED BY SAYMON ZAKARIA

TRANSLATED BY ABDUS SELIM

REVIEWED BY TUSAR TALUKDER

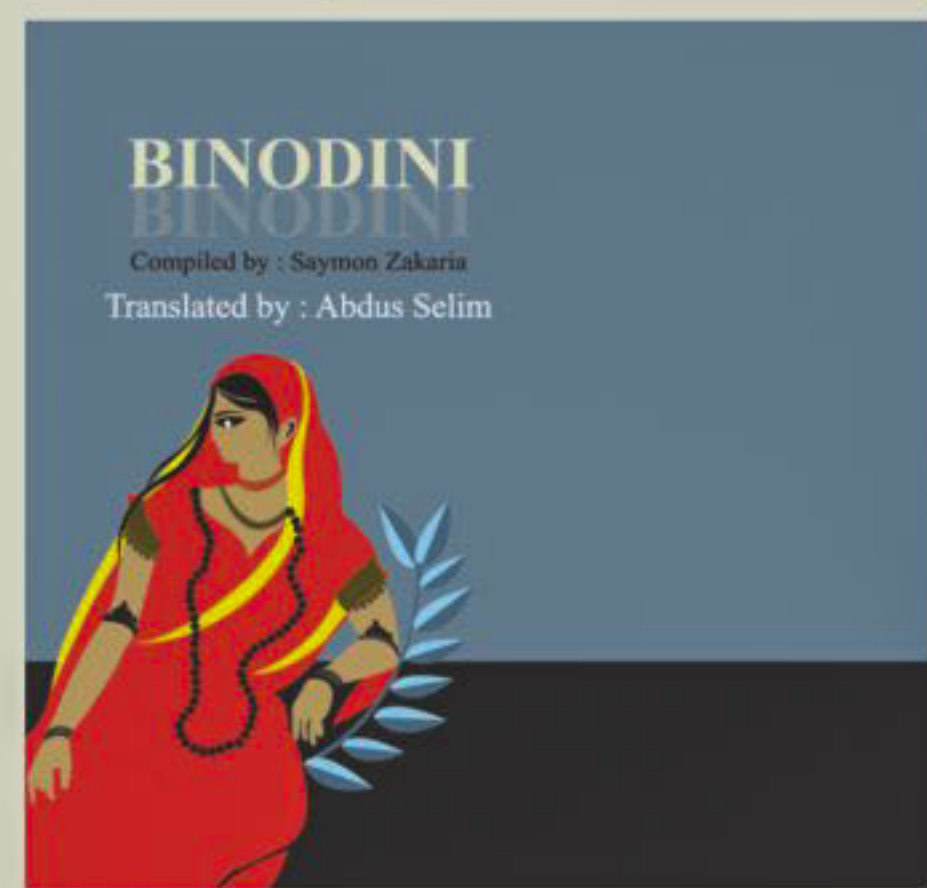
Charitrya Prokashoni, February 2016

BINODINI is the life story adapted from her two autobiographical notes titled My Story and My Stage Acting. The stage version of *Binodini* is researched and compiled by a renowned folk researcher Saymon Zakaria. Of late, Abdus Selim, who won 2015 Bangla Academy Award, has brilliantly translated the play *Binodini* in English. Let me share the story of the translator behind the translation of the play. Afterwards, the review will discuss different facets of the play. Abdus Selim wrote in his introduction to English version of *Binodini*: "Perhaps it was in August, 2015 Nasir Uddin Yousuff forwarded a mail to me that he received from Claire Pamment, a scholar in residence at Yale University. She expressed her willingness to include the play in the reading list of her students for the ensuing Fall 2015 semester if she could get hold of a translated version of the same in English. The forwarded mail incentivised me instantly and I finished translating the play by mid-September..."

The play opens with the life-sketch of Binodini. The readers will get an overall idea regarding how Binodini, born in a destitute family of Kolkata city, stepped into an unknown world of theatre. The part entitled Debut Acting informs us the brief history of Binodini's debut acting experience. Binodini felt tremendously surprised and excited after she had performed as queen on the stage many times but the memories of her first performance are unforgettable. Her feelings in her own words: "After that many a times I appeared as queen on the stage and also did many other characters but whenever I reminisce about my first stage appearance I feel as if I'm dreaming a sweet dream although it was an insignificant role of a maidservant."

The second chapter of the play titled Second Appearance describes how she played the role of princess in Harala Roi's Hemlata. Binodini acknowledged in her soliloquies that though she did not have any quality to play the role of princess, she had all longing to learn.

The next chapter analyses how Binodini and her theatre group Great National Theatre Company faced trouble while performing on a stage in Lucknow. One of the most interesting parts of the book is Binodini in the role of multiple characters of *Meghnad Badh Kabyo*. The chapter analyses her roles of Shita and Promila. De facto, the part of the book provides us with Binodini's experiences of playing different roles in *Meghnad Badh Kabyo*. Afterwards, a chapter narrates the inci-



dent of the sudden demise of Umichandbabu. The play will inform the readers the death made everyone deeply shocked. The part also brings into focus how much Binodini was indebted to Girishbabu Mohashoi, a dedicated soul for theatre. The last twenty pages of the book include the story of the pathetic end of Binodini's first love, the tales of the ups and downs of the Star Theatre, the happenings associated with Binodini's forced retirement etc.

While doing the translation, Abdus Selim has exclusively maintained the conversational tone. Moreover, he has added a chapter of annotations at the end of his English version of *Binodini* to provide both Bengali and non-Bengali readers with a full account of the connotations of Bengali words used in the play. In a word, Selim's facile diction will easily draw readers' attention to discover the unknown tales of Binodini's life. Furthermore, the review must recollect Saymon Zakaria whose research and compilation has made the play reader-friendly.

I would like to end this piece of writing quoting the last words of Binodini which were wandering in the realms of my mind after coming across the play:

"Listen up all lucky ones and turn away your faces from me! And oh the shelter giver to the orphans, God from the paradise, you too listen! Be it God or man! It's easier said than done, Love doesn't change your fate, my dear! Love doesn't change anything! Look, my cremated ashes are floating like fallouts and lamenting ceaselessly. Oh! I have no end and no beginning either! ...That's my identity.

Yours,  
Sreemoti Binodini Dasi, a mortified, rootless prostitute."

The reviewer is a critic. He teaches English at Central Women's University (CWU).