

| BOOK REVIEW |

# CAPTURING THE PAST: BANGLADESH MARITIME HISTORY BY GHULAM M. SUHRAWARDI

SA MANSUR

The publication of this book fills a void in a section of Bangladesh's multifaceted commercial and social history. Without improvement of maritime transport, it can be assuredly stated, trade and indeed civilizations in various regions of the world would not have developed. This book, in effect, opens the window to a world which was always in existence but was often ignored especially as a topic of research and study, over the centuries.

Author Ghulam Suhrawardi has attempted to connect Bangladesh's inland maritime history with that of ancient international trade. While trade between what was then India and the ancient civilizations like Rome, Egypt, Babylon and rest of the world developed into a seaborne maritime system between ports in Southern India and the Red Sea; sea routes to Bengal was in the north and hence did not fall in the path of the traditional ocean going vessels.

Evidence of a Chinese naval expedition headed by Zheng He (1371-1433) during the Ming dynasty appears in some historical notes, but other than that, most trade via sea lanes were opened in recent history when the Europeans were competing to inaugurate their trading posts in India. Bengal was naturally chosen as it was further away from the central power base in Delhi and was easier to capture and control. Thus Calcutta (now Kolkata) became the first major seaport that served both the British military and their merchants.

Though basically they came to loot and plunder the wealth of Bengal but while collecting wealth and resources they also built a political superstructure and a transport system to facilitate attainment of their goals. Many scholars still debate whether the intrusion of the British into Bengal was good for Bengal or India as a whole. When the colonists left in 1947,

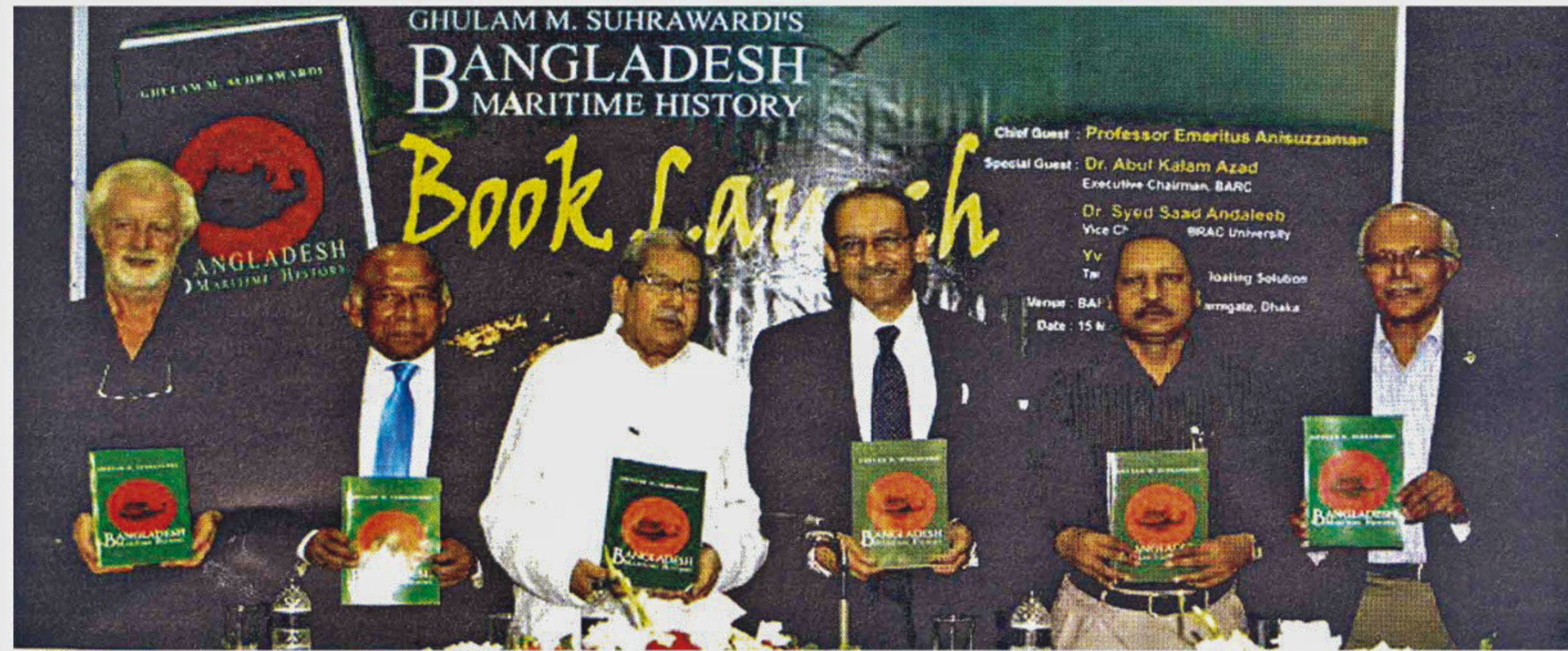


PHOTO: COURTESY

the Indian sub-continent was divided along religious fault lines further restricting the free flow of inland maritime vessels that traditionally plied in the region of Bengal and Assam. Bengal obviously included West Bengal of India and present-day Bangladesh. This division was an immense blow to the traditional inland maritime system that had functioned for centuries.

This well-researched book also opens the door to further discussion and incision into the subject. It may be possible to save the old riverine system if the Indian and Bangladesh governments take up the matter seriously and let Mother Nature choose the path of forward movement. A political solution can be developed into a robust system if these two countries consider trade more than political landmines.

In that perspective Bangladesh Maritime History is a point to start an insightful discussion to reconnect the ancient riverine system that existed between old Bengal and Assam and other neighboring provinces. This will not only

ensure peace for the region but also encourage tremendous cooperation in exchanges of people and goods. A good river transport system can not only enhance economic development but, as a dividend, also enlarge cooperation between the peoples who were geographically connected for centuries.

While the book unbolts the door to discussions and planning, it does not cover a detailed micro-level analysis. Consequently a much deeper study is essential before the political establishments of Bangladesh and India can embark on a plan that would benefit the peoples of the region. The rivers exist as they did for centuries, but they need to be nurtured and developed rather than creating barriers for nations in the downstream. For the benefit of a greater number of people, the rivers should be allowed to flow like they have done for millennia; damming and diverting water can and will only hurt the people.

Maritime History of Bangladesh in a short and snappy style provides much useful background information about the

role riverine transportation has played in the history of the land since time immemorial. More importantly, this book also provides an opportunity to initiate a discussion on the future development of the sector for the benefit, not only of the people of Bangladesh, but also for the entire region. Readers and researchers engaged in utilizing this efficient and cost-effective mode of transport will find the book a platform for further understanding of the subject.

The production quality of the book must be noted, too, while the photographs used immensely raise the utility of the book as well as further an appreciation of transportation via the rivers, canals and channels. Illustrations and photos of the varied types of boats, used over the centuries, by themselves will open a different arena of life for any reader or enthusiast. This book obviously is not only for those who have expertise in this sphere but is sufficiently informative and entertaining even for those who rarely took any interest in the subject dealt with in Bangladesh Maritime History. ■

## HERITAGE

In 1958, an attempt was made to present the lives of fishermen of Bangladesh through a 35 mm reel. Inspired by the famous novel *Padma Nodir Majhi* by Manik Bandopadhyay, Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz wrote a screenplay which tip-toed around the hardships of life on the river. This screenplay was the first venture between the two halves of what were then a geographically-divided Pakistani state and also the first story to be based on East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. After the pre-production, director A J Kardar decided to name this project *Jaago Hua Savera* (The Day Shall Dawn). What they didn't know is that this film will later on be counted as one of the greatest classics in the South Asian region.

Though this film is officially a Pakistani production, majority of the unit included Bangladeshis, namely actors and music directors. This was the debut film of legendary actor Khan Ataur Rahman, who mesmerised the audience across the globe by portraying his character Kasim. Kardar also hired Jahir Raihan to assist in direction – for who the film, also, was a successful entry into the world of cinema. Famous German cinematographer Walter Lassley also worked in the film as the director of photography. The 87 minute-long film was completed within a year and was released in 1959.

This film was the first step to break the so called commercial treatment of cinema and opt for a realistic approach. Much like Manik Bandopadhyay's book, *Jaago Hua Savera*, was raw and filled with the harsh realities of a river-centric life. It served as

# RIVERS IN REEL

APURBA JAHANGIR

PHOTOS: ARCHIVE



the perfect example of why cinema is cross cultural.

After its release, the film did really well with the critics. Director Allauddin Kabir considered this as the stepping stone towards realistic cinema. The film was entered into the 1st Moscow International Film Festival where it won a Golden Medal. It was also selected as the Pakistani entry for best foreign language film at the 32nd Academy Award.

Though *Jaago Hua Savera* roamed around a quite few festivals, it was a box office flop in the country. Cinematographer Lassley, in an autobiography, wrote that there were a lot of difficulties communicating as the crew members were either Bangla, Urdu, or Panjabi speaking. Alamgir Kabir in his book 'Films in Bangladesh' wrote that the use of both Urdu and Bangla dialogues can be one of the reasons for its failure in

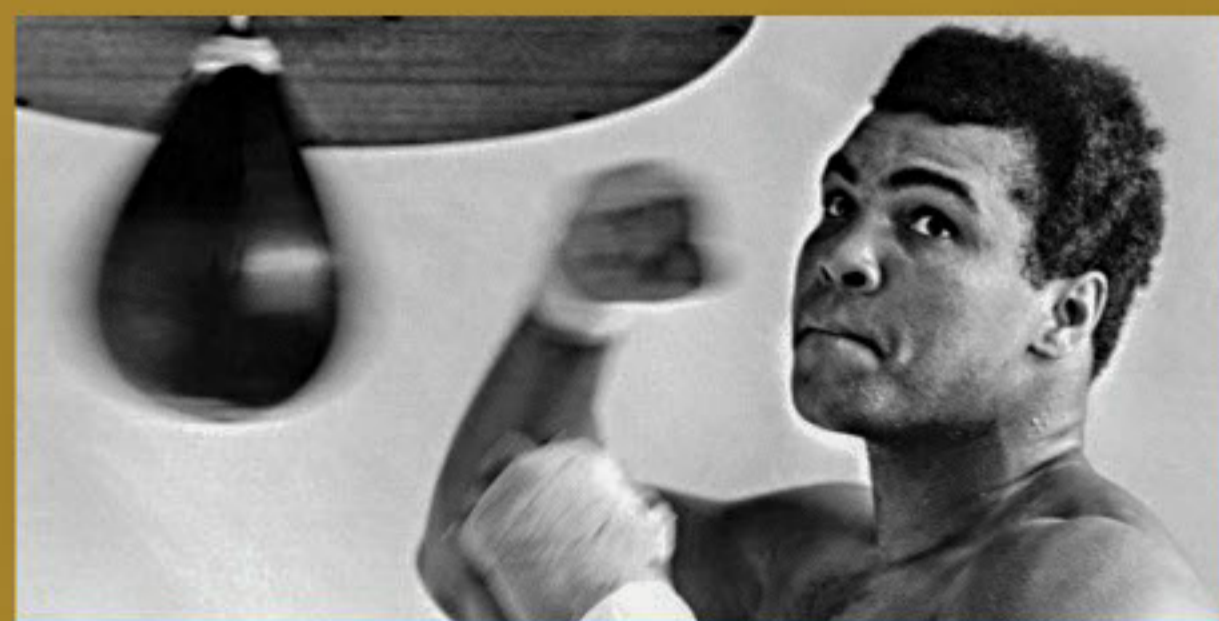
the box office. For not having a proper restoration policy, the reels of the film were lost for some time and the audience here could not get a hold of the film.

In 1990 this film was again recovered from a film lab in Australia by film researcher Jakir Hussain Raju. In a *Prothom Alo* article, he said that while doing research for his PhD, Raju brought the film in Melbourne University. The

screening at the Melbourne University was filmed and was then brought back to Bangladesh. In 1997 a screening was held in Dhaka, organised by the Film Society.

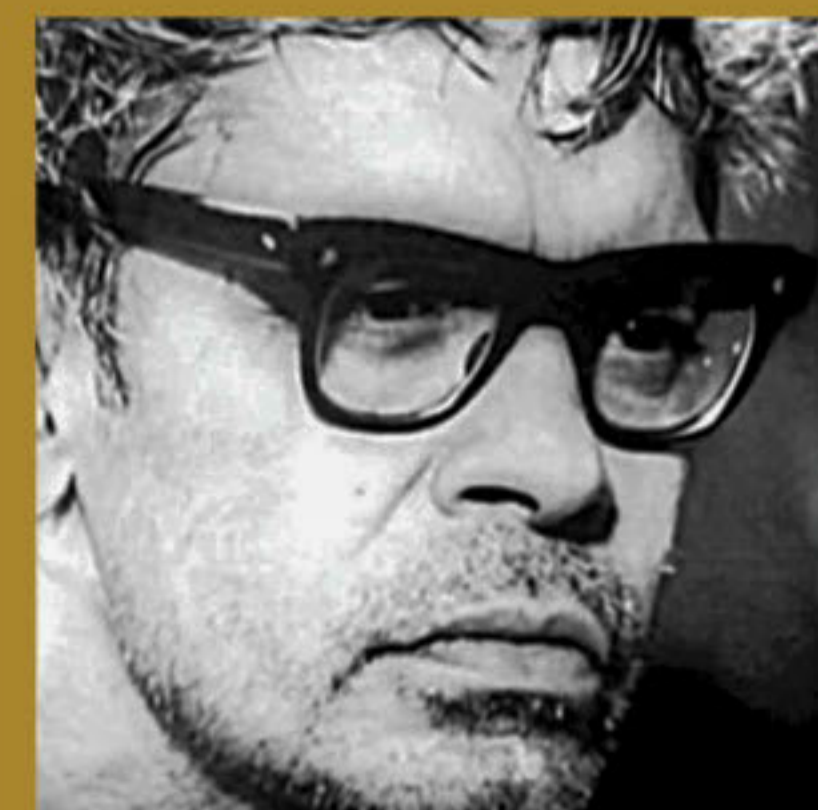
Recently Cannes Film Festival screened *Jaago Hua Savera* in the Cannes Classic category. As there was no other celluloid copy, the film was digitally restored. The initiative was taken by Anjum Tasir, son of the film's producer Nouman Tasir. ■

## PEARLS OF WISDOM



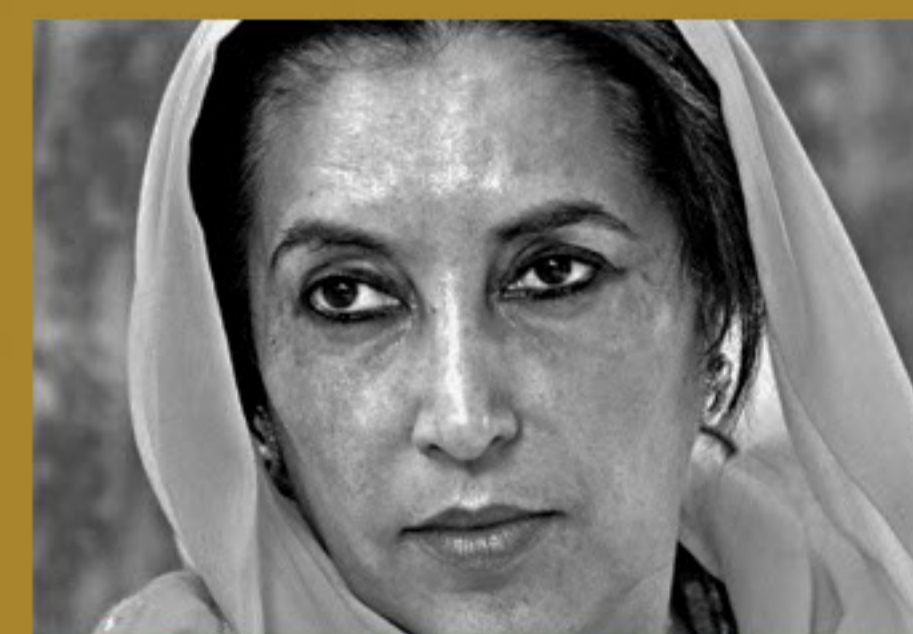
"I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING AND I KNOW THE TRUTH, AND I DON'T HAVE TO BE WHAT YOU WANT ME TO BE. I'M FREE TO BE WHAT I WANT."

MUHAMMAD ALI  
American professional boxer



"TAGORE ONCE SAID ART HAS TO BE BEAUTIFUL, BUT BEFORE THAT IT HAS TO BE TRUTHFUL."

RITWIK GHATAK  
Bengali filmmaker and script writer



"MILITARY HARDLINERS CALLED ME A 'SECURITY THREAT' FOR PROMOTING PEACE IN SOUTH ASIA AND FOR SUPPORTING A BROAD-BASED GOVERNMENT IN AFGHANISTAN."

BENAZIR BHUTTO  
13th Prime Minister of Pakistan