

Women Empowerment in Bangladesh of the Forest, Tree & Grassroots

AUTHOR: MANZURUL MANNAN

REVIEWED BY DR. IMTIAZ A. HUSSAIN

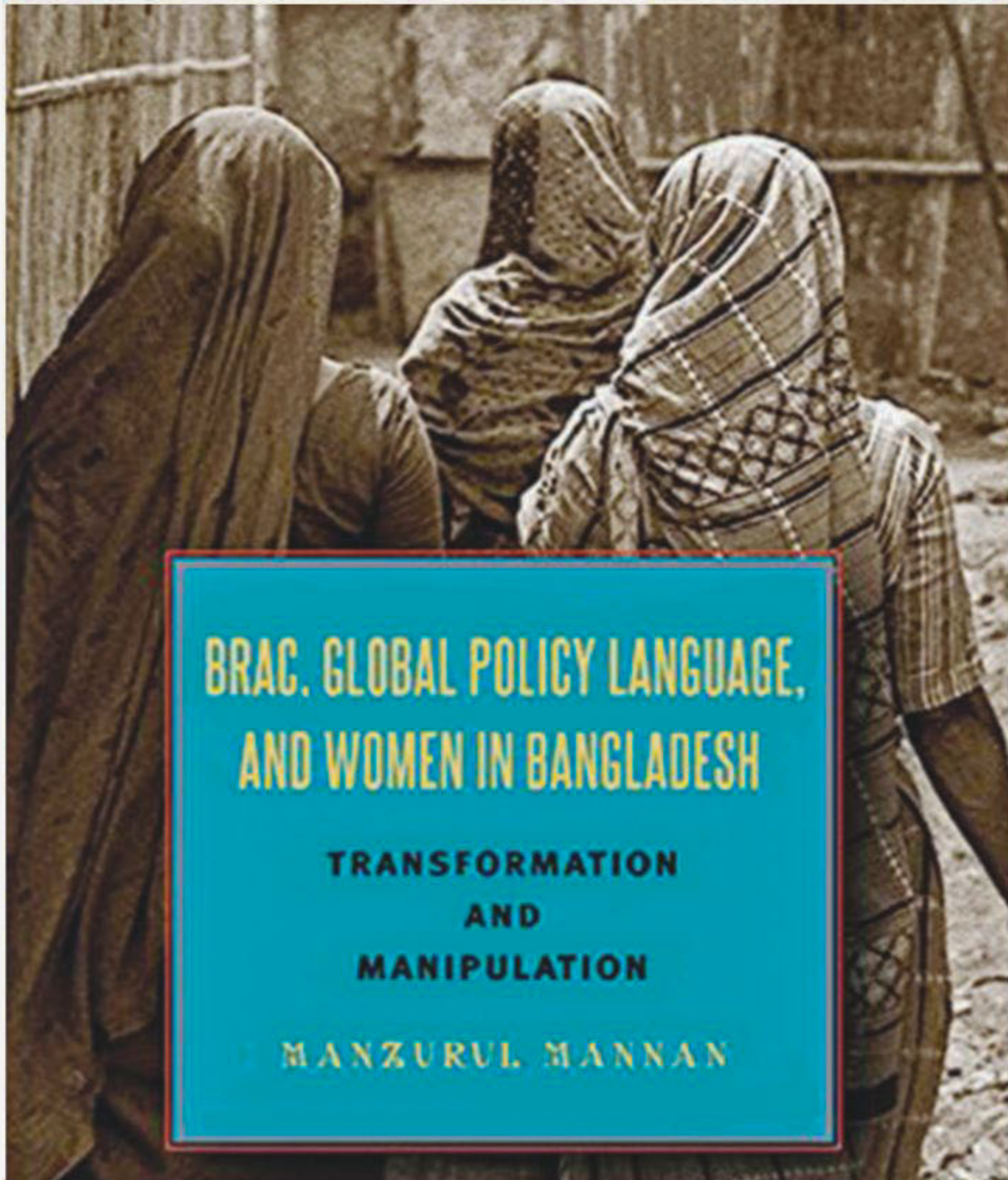
State University of New York Press, 2015, pp.379

THE issue of emancipating women raises obvious questions: Is there a final point; indeed, is the starting point similar across countries; can diverse groups within any country reap benefit simultaneously? Hillary Clinton claimed her 2008 presidential campaign had "cracked the [gender] glass-ceiling," then, in 2016, how "the sky [had become] the limit" for women. Is the sky also the gender limit in Bangladesh, where a woman has been prime minister, leader of the opposition party, current speaker, and recent foreign minister, while also scaling Everest and making ready-made garments (RMGs) upon which the country has thrived for a quarter century?

Manzurul Mannan's incisive and enriching book posits a critical picture. His "ethnographic" analysis of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), inquires if the purpose of "the largest transnational NGO [non-governmental organization] in the world," was "benign" (to "empower poor women in social transformation"), or "manipulative" (to create a "poverty enterprise" out of "developmental pursuits," p. 35). Since his measurement yardstick, "global policy language" (GPL), is the BRAC/NGO instrument for "managing and exploiting the 'third world'," Mannan's conclusion finds the "manipulative" prevails: "the disempowerment of the poor sustains the development process," and that "poverty in Bangladesh has not decreased," though "the nature of poverty itself" has changed (295).

Behind a theoretically sound, empirically rich, and methodologically compact research lies a Bangladesh just entering a middle-income bracket, doubtlessly with women paving the way. Is this a paradox or interpretive problem?

Mannan's GPL triptych identifies the "West"/"North" (281), where "the culture and dynamic of the development organizations originates" (43), the "South"/"rural"/"traditional Bengali culture" (129), where development means "interventions." His first three chapters elaborate the corresponding tensions: (a) "western" equality confronting Bangalee "hierarchy," (b) "development anthropology" against "anthropology of develop-



ment," and (c) past values battling present materialism.

Chapter 4 challenges BRAC's organization claim, Chapter 5, coaxes a "hybrid culture" from that triptych, and Chapter 6 pits researchers (such as Mannan is in the book) against NGO managers (what he was, no less at BRAC, beforehand). They highlight two of Mannan's literary contributions: evaluating NGO engagements "through the lens of anthropology of organization"; and coining "development-scape" to rival the extant "ethno-scape," "techno-scape," "finance-scape," "media-

scape," and "ideo-scape" approaches (10-1).

The next three chapters elaborate how women village organizations challenge male-dominated "samaj" (Chapter 7), moral versus immoral microcredit interpretations (8), and the NGO-religion incompatibility (9). Logically concluding a "hybrid culture" is unstable (ch. 10), Mannan's women-based construction of poverty in a society described as male-dominated is eye-opening. His book finds local religious and political leaders reacting to a new village dynamic called women empowerment, caused single-mindedly by foreigners, as if

to take rural womenfolk away.

Far more interesting to students, scholars, and conscious citizens is Mannan juxtaposing BRAC's shifting "organizational" imperatives (p. 151), from developmental (between 1972 and 1990), to institutional (1990 to 2000), to market (2000-the present), against the segmented Bangladeshi NGO experience (p. 69), from gestation (1971-5), through consolidation (1975-90), towards globalization (1990-present). Bouncing off two other sequences might have helped: (a) Bangladesh's shift from war, socialism, and famine until 1975, to military rule, Islamization and privatization by 1990, then democracy and neo-liberalism thereafter; and (b) globally, the shift from war and economic stresses during the Cold War years of the 1970s and 1980s, followed by the 1990s neoliberal emergence and regionalization, before a conjunction of Islamic restlessness and terror-infusion from 9/11 took over.

When our poverty was at rock-bottom in the 1970s, the "west" and not any socialist country, save India, came to our rescue. Our women were far freer than he found them in his research, so free that they engaged in the liberation war alongside males without any "moqtab" intervention; and the absence of today's Islamic constraint means Mannan's "traditional Bengali culture" carried far softer tones than his triptych admits.

Softer interpretive hues riddle anthropological studies of social transformation. For example, John Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" also targets organization-based exploitation, like Mannan's BRAC analysis. Though fictional, it expounds the realities of Oklahoma's Dust Bowl family-farms being converted into California's seasonal factory-farm workers in the 1930s. Even when not analyzing modernizing organizations, other "genuine anthropologists" (author's term, p. 164), also reduce tensions to merely the tradition-modernity transformation. Laurence Wylie's "Village in the Vauluse," as well as "Behind Mud Walls" in Karimpur, North India, by Charlotte and William Wiser, show how 20th Century social transformation is inescapable but "benign" when seen over the long-haul (30-odd years).

If he was not so alarmed at the BRAC/NGO-induced poverty, Mannan might have noticed how RMG wages and migrant remittances were also changing the village landscape softly, as in Vauluse and Karimpur.

Women emigrants have not faced similarly hardened "moqtab" and "samaj" reactions upon returning. In evaluating a concurrent International Labour Organisation report, Arafat Ara acknowledges how these women need "moral rehabilitation" and "socio-economic support" (Financial Express, August 28, 2016, p. 8), they face no qualms "to best utilize their remittance through savings and investment," that is, to deepen the cash nexus of a modern society in barter-based traditional society. "They come back with skills and experience," the report continues, "which they can then utilize in the domestic employment market." Writing on the same issue Hasnat Abdul Hye noted how the more positive aspect of BRAC-type engagements helped the country to take "the baby steps of the first generation of women entrepreneurs" (p. 4). Since these are "now a reality," he adds, "both in the rural and urban areas," women still stand on their two feet, vindicated, not vanquished, from crossing many fundamental transformational thresholds. Their "acquired valuable experience," he says, and "confidence," overcame the "many obstacles and disincentives that impede their progress".

Development is not just about adding up the "parts" that make the "whole," meaning taking anthropological, economic, political, social, and all other inputs and interpretations together, but also ensuring the "whole," that is the big-picture, portrays more than the sum of its "parts." Mannan's novel anthropological approach fulfilled the former with panache, but to conquer the latter requires defusing his filters. True to his profession, Mannan digs deep; but the deeper he goes, the more the shape, size, and future of the "forest" of Bangladesh development gets obscured by "grassroots" intricacies: we learn of the "scape"-based nitty-gritty details, that is, the "trees" in this parlance, but cannot, and should not, subordinate the big-picture to them.

The reviewer is Professor & Head, Global Studies & Governance, Independent University of Bangladesh.

A Tribute to Indira Gandhi

AUTHOR: DR K P MATHUR

REVIEWED BY PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

Konark Publishers, New Delhi, RS. 595

INDIRA Gandhi was one of the most charismatic public figures. She was also probably the most enigmatic and intensely private in her personal life. Several books have been written on her, most of which deal with her as a politician and administrator and her politics and policies. But when a hard-bound book "The Unseen Indira Gandhi" (Konark Publishers, Price Rs 595) came my way, my curiosity was immediately aroused because it is written by Dr K P Mathur who was her physician for two decades till her assassination in October, 1984. Surely, Dr Mathur was one of the persons who saw Indira Gandhi from the closest quarters in India and abroad during some of the most tumultuous events including the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971.

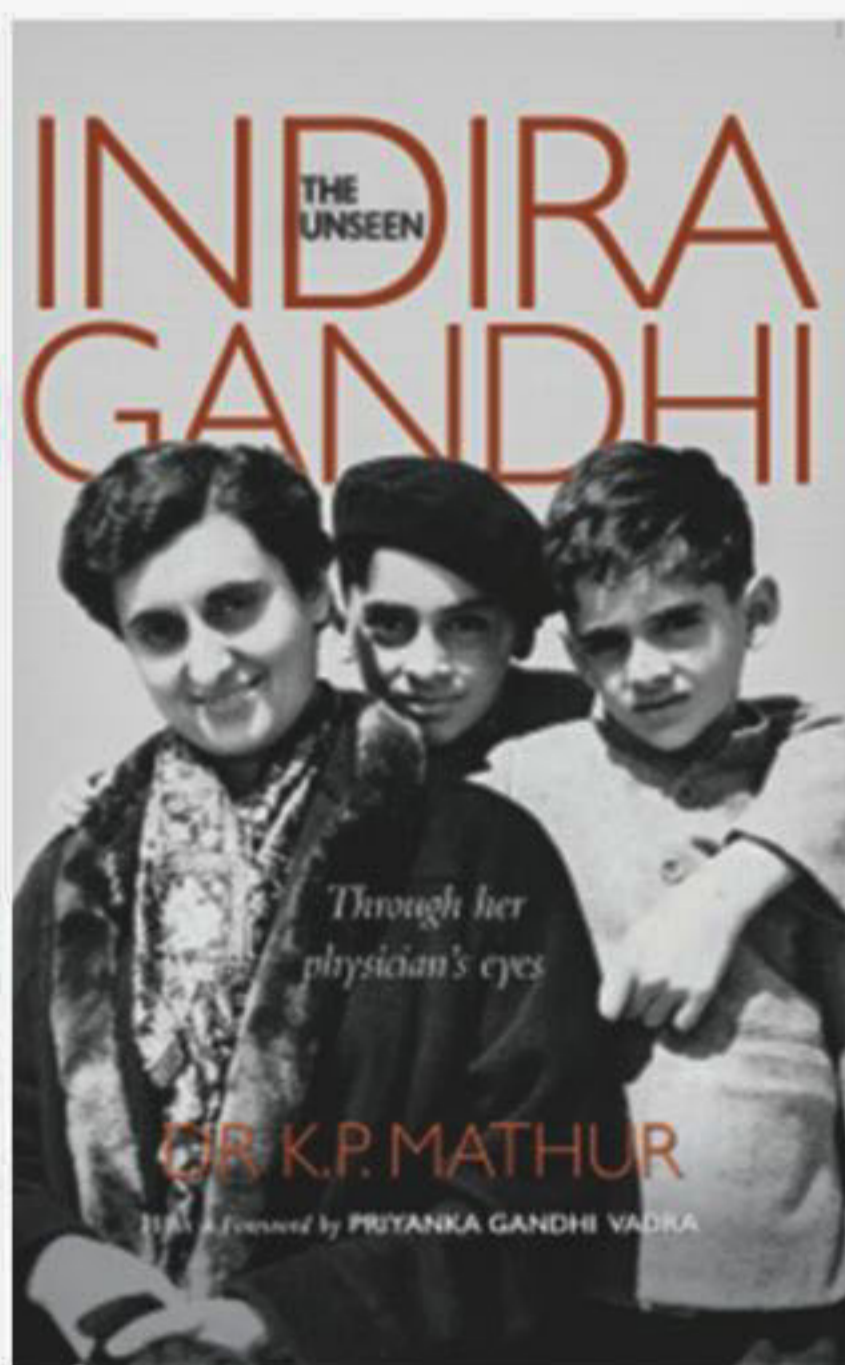
In his just-released 151-page book based on twenty years he spent with Indira Gandhi, Dr Mathur, now 92, introduces the readers to her as a public figure, astute politician and as a doting mother, grandmother and mother-in-law. Dr Mathur's credentials to write a book on Indira Gandhi as a public figure and as a human being gets a ringing endorsement from none other than a key member of the Nehru-Gandhi family Priyanka Gandhi Vadra who says in her two-page Foreword to the book that "for all the years of my grandmother Indira Gandhi's Prime Ministership and the brief interlude from 1977 to 1980, Dr K P Mathur was a part of our household. His place in her household gives him the unique perspective of being an insider while also being able to see things from an objective distance."

Since the independence of Bangladesh was the most glorious achievement of Indira Gandhi's political career, it was only natural that Dr Mathur provides a full chapter "Bangladesh Faceoff" (six pages) on the Liberation War, bringing out how she was moved into tears by the first-person narration of Pakistani troops' atrocities on Bangladeshi women at refugee camps in West Bengal, Assam and Tripura and how she evolved as a Prime Minister who maintained her composure in the face of one of the biggest crises India went through.

As refugees from Bangladesh poured into camps in India during the Liberation War, Indira Gandhi, the book tells us,

"took the situation in hand and made a number of trips to Assam, Tripura and other places where the bulk of these refugees had crossed over for food and shelter." Indira Gandhi, according to Dr Mathur, could understand Bengali language and "thus she could converse with the refugees and understand their problems. Finding a sympathetic ear, the hapless refugees narrated their tales of woe. With tears in their eyes, the women narrated in detail how they had been molested by the West Pakistani army personnel in 'mufti' (civilian clothes), hiding their identity.

"After hearing them, at one stage, PM



(Indira Gandhi) had tears in her eyes also...PM decided to go the whole hog to assist in their liberation movement by supporting the Mukti Bahini and in other ways," recounts the book.

Dr Mathur's book reminisces in detail how Indira Gandhi faced the crisis triggered by Pakistan's declaration of the 1971 war on India leading to India's joining the Bangladesh Liberation War and her evolution as a mature leader and statesman just five years after becoming the Prime Minister. For instance, the book

says, when West Pakistan attacked India on December 3, 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was informed about it when she was addressing a public meeting in Kolkata where "she started her speech with 'aami Bangla bujhte pari. Bolte pari na', immediately endearing herself to the crowd". On her flight back to New Delhi on that day, Indira Gandhi "during the flight was cool and composed as ever, her mind was obviously occupied with strategy of the war, the future course of action and also the announcement she was due to make on radio that night," says the book.

On landing in Delhi, she held a cabinet meeting to decide the future course of action, addressed a special broadcast to the nation. "Completely unruffled by the events, she sat in her office till well past midnight," says Dr Mathur in the book. A day after the war broke out, Indira Gandhi remained cool and was changing the bedcovers on a 'diwan' when Dr Mathur walked into her house. "I had the occasion to see PM herself changing the bedcovers on the diwan," Mathur says in his book. "It was the day after the Bangladesh war had started and she had worked late into the night," says the book. "When I went to see her in the morning, I saw her engaged in the exercise of dusting. Perhaps, it helped her release the tension of the earlier night," says the book.

The calm and composed Indira Gandhi during the Bangladesh Liberation War and the 1971 India-Pakistan war stood in sharp contrast to the nervous Indira Gandhi soon after she took charge as prime minister in 1966, the book says in the chapter titled "First Steps at the Helm" immediately preceding the chapter "Bangladesh Faceoff".

"During the first year or two of her becoming PM, she used to be very tense — a bit confused and not sure of herself. She had no advisors and was almost friendless." She would also get stomach upsets in the early days of being PM, which I believe was the result of the same nervousness", according to the book. The two above-mentioned chapters in the book are aptly placed one after the other highlighting how Indira Gandhi evolved as Prime Minister.

The book has a total of 21 chapters

focussing on several facets of Indira Gandhi's personal life—her lifestyle, reading habit, food preferences, daily routine as PM, holiday schedules as also some of the most debatable issues like India's first nuclear test in May 1974 and imposition of Emergency when she was in the top post and her relations with foreign leaders including British Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher.

Dr Mathur takes readers on a journey during which Indira Gandhi comes out as "a pleasant, caring and helpful person" who shunned aristocratic lifestyle and was simple in living and eating food, who treated servants in her household well, addressing each one by his or her name. "Nobody was shouted for," that after Rajiv-Sonia marriage, Indira Gandhi "was very keen that Sonia should get into the social and cultural life of the country" and that she described Sonia as "bahurani" while speaking to others in the house.

Describing Indira Gandhi as an understanding and non-interfering mother-in-law", Mathur says Indira Gandhi took an immediate liking for Sonia. "PM and Sonia took to each other in no time... Sonia very soon took over the responsibility of running the (Gandhi) household." One of the most engrossing chapters in Dr Mathur's book is the one that discusses Indira Gandhi's "strained" relations with her Parsi husband Feroze Gandhi. "Feroze Sa'ab was rumoured to have a glad eye and this was always a matter of strain in their relationship," says the book.

According to the book, Indira Gandhi at times recalled her happy days with Feroze Gandhi, especially her holidays with him in Pahalgam, a picturesque tourist resort in Kashmir, and how once her husband fell off a horse while dismounting. Whenever she narrated such incidents, she would break out laughing... It appeared as if she was talking of an estranged friend in whose company she had enjoyed many moments of genuine happiness," says the book.

Overall, "The Unseen Indira Gandhi" will be of immense interest to readers who want to know more about her up close and personal through the eyes of her physician.

The reviewer is an occasional contributor to this page.

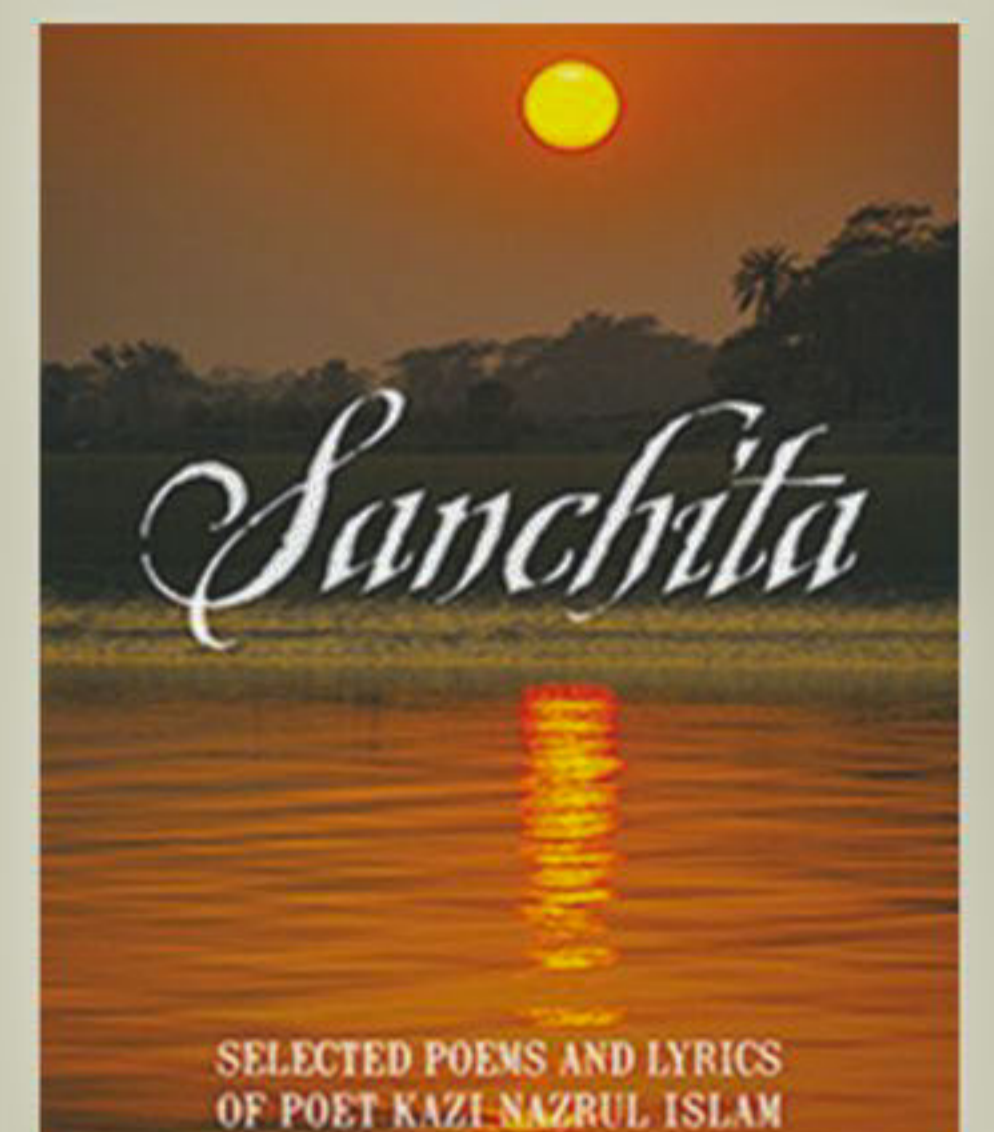
Nazrul's Immortal Works

REVIEWED BY PROF. MUSTOFA MUNIR

Published by: Outskirts Press Inc., Colorado USA on May 19 2015.

Distributors: Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble worldwide

THE resourceful poems and lyrics in this anthology uphold human dignity, religious harmony, truth, beauty, pain and love. His poems validated the philosophy of human values and social justice. The superb poetic excellence is manifested in every page of this book—a



"Within thee lie the wisdom of all ages and scriptures, O my friend, open thy heart, all scriptures are there!"

masterpiece of literature. Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam captured the theme of love and humanity in the poems that readily demonstrated his feelings for mankind, his rebelliousness against injustice and his emotion as a lover in concrete and sublime form.

He urged the mankind to put an end to all differences and hindrances that exist in the religion and society and bring them to one confluence of equality. As he wrote: "Within thee lie the wisdom of all ages and scriptures, O my friend, open thy heart, all scriptures are there!"

The reviewer is the translator of 'Sanchita' - an anthology of poems of Poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. He was a teacher in colleges for many years. He writes poems and short stories.