

BRAC THROUGH INSIDER LENSES

EDITED BY MAHABUB HOSSAIN, SHIB NARAYAN KAIRY AND ABDUL BAYES

REVIEWED BY SHAHID ALAM

DRIVING Development: A Story of BRAC's Evolution and Effectiveness, Mahabub Hossain, Shib Narayan Kairy, Abdul Bayes, eds., United Press Limited.

In an (expectedly) ever-changing world, particularly galvanized by the introduction of the Internet and its manifold applications, one can expect and anticipate that changes will come about in various aspects of human existence. In Bangladesh, as its point of origin, the NGO BRAC has striven to be an agent of change, but it has also had an impact on countries and societies outside the borders of its origin. Several current and former BRAC staff members (39 in number) have written on different BRAC activities and issues it deals with. The result is *Driving Development: A Story of BRAC's Evolution and Effectiveness*, edited by Mahabub Hossain, Shib Narayan Kairy, and Abdul Bayes. Looking at an organization through insider prisms has both its advantages and disadvantages. While one may get insights that one would not normally get from the outside, the negative aspect would be the likely extolling of the organization and its activities beyond its merits; in other words, glossing over the unfavourable facts. Both are on show in *Driving Development: A Story of BRAC's Evolution and Effectiveness*.

Mahabub Hossain extols the virtues of an organization that he once was an Executive Director of: "BRAC has expanded to become one of the largest nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in the World, meeting needs of the marginalized people in a holistic manner through multifaceted development activities." Although rather grandly put, there is much truth in the statement. And then goes on to discuss the vision and mission (how quaint those two buzzwords!) of the NGO: "BRAC's overall strategy has been to support the government to (a) improve the livelihood of the poor, and (b) minimize the effect on the poor of external shocks, such as natural disasters." Critics, though, have pointed out shortcomings in the outcome of its stated objectives, which are:

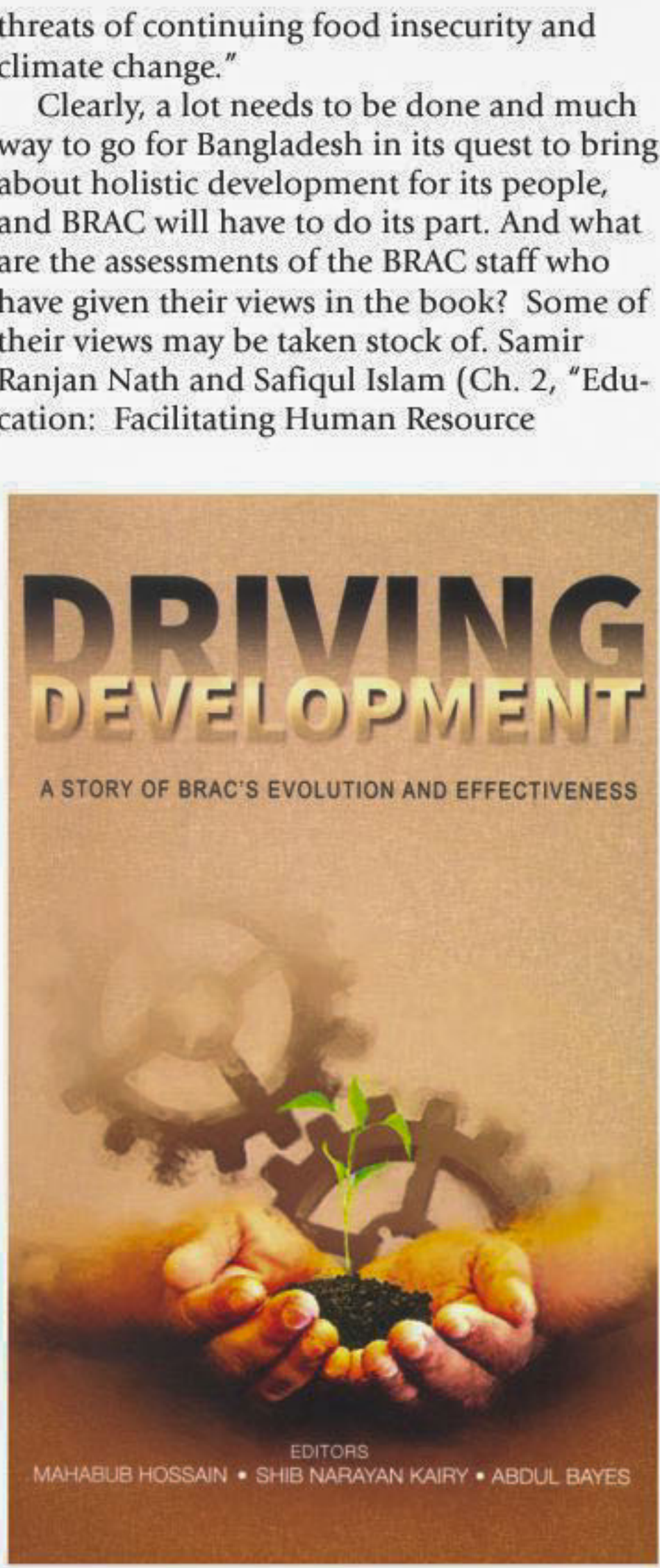
"Work with the marginalized people, especially women, children, and ethnic minorities; Promote human rights, human dignity,

and gender equity; Foster development of human potentials of the staff and the people that BRAC serves; and Ensure that the programmes are socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable."

Given the number of unpredictable variables in human nature and society involved, it may be expected that there would be a gap between the expectations from goals and the reality of outcomes, but the quest of a plausible dream cannot be a futile endeavour.

One of the more notable achievements of Bangladesh since independence has been its economic growth. From 3.5 per cent per year during the early 1990s it has gone up to over six per cent in recent years. More impressive has been in human development. Reducing population growth significantly from the early years of independence, achieving food security, eliminating gender disparity in secondary schools, improving adult literacy (whatever may be the quality of education), increasing attendance of children in primary schools, and reducing the under-five mortality rate and infant mortality are significant achievements that Bangladesh can justifiably be proud of.

But the world moves on. So many improvements wait for their realization. The government and NGOs, including BRAC, have done their part in the achievements that have come, and will have to lead the way, at least for some time now, in those that will purportedly follow. Hossain details some of the pitfalls that could, and do, hamper development: "Poverty, inequality, and exclusion continue to be manifested in the areas of healthcare, education, financial inclusion, and access to other opportunities; and a high unemployment rate of the educated youth threatens peace and order. There is an increasing burden of non-communicable diseases.... The disparity in the access to quality education between rural and urban areas and across socio-economic groups has been growing and has been singled out as the most important determinant of growing income inequality.... The burden of poverty continues to transport from rural to urban areas through migration. The development challenges have been further exacerbated by



Development") take a critical look at the education sector and offer a few suggestions. One of the more noteworthy ones is that BRAC should consider increasing its teacher training programmes. This is important because, maybe, a vicious cycle may be broken in the process. Flawed teaching at the high school level sends up deficient students to the college level, and then on to the university level where it is quite possible to find some teachers, who themselves are found wanting in certain respects of pedagogy,

teaching future college and school teachers, and the whole cycle is repeated. They also stress on co-curricular activities, and suggest replicating the quality improvement and other experiences of non-formal education to the mainstream schools. Syed Masud Ahmed, Kaosar Afsana, Akramul Islam and Faruque Ahmed (Ch. 3, "Reaching Healthcare to Grassroots") marvel at the noted success in the vital health indicators in spite of a "weak, low-performing, and pluralistic health system", and urge the application of research in developing a better health system, following the positive experience of the BRAC health programme. Hashina-E-Nasreen and Kaosar Afsana (Ch. 4, "Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health"), while acknowledging the decline in maternal mortality rate, are dissatisfied at the slow progress in reducing neonatal mortality. They propose a social and technical package to ameliorate the situation.

Barnali Chakraborty and M Raisul Haque (Ch. 5, "Nutrition Interventions for Improved Child Health") are disappointed at the current state of nutrition in the country. They suggest that intervention in the nutrition sector should be coordinated with agriculture and health programmes. Mahabub Hossain and Shib Narayan Kairy (Ch. 6, "Microfinance: Financial Inclusion for Employment Generation") take up one of the key elements of BRAC's operation: microfinance. After having noted that microfinance is now a mature industry in Bangladesh, they extol BRAC's microfinance programme that "have diversified their portfolio over time by providing relatively large size loans to small entrepreneurs, mostly men, the so called "missing middle" who do not have access to credit from formal financial institution but are disqualified to receive poverty reduction loans." Mahabub Hossain, Anindito Bhattacharjee and Narayan C Das (Ch. 7, "Challenging the Frontier of Poverty Reduction: Targeting the Ultra Poor") take on a challenging area, and urge that, for sustaining gains in improving the livelihood of the extreme poor, relief or the government's safety net programme should be used for development.

Mahabub Hossain, M Sirajul Islam, Sudhir Chandra Nath, M A Saleque and Mokarram Hossain (Ch. 8, "Agriculture for Food

Security") praise BRAC's programmes in the agriculture sector for improving the lots of the poor and marginalized farmers with its engagement in poultry and livestock activities, fisheries, and crop production. In another important area, Nepal C Dey, Tahera Aktar, Siffat E Rabbi and Babar Kabir (Ch. 9, "Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Disaster Management") warn against overfishing of ground water beyond its normal recharge for irrigating dry season crops as it would become a major environmental issue in rural Bangladesh. Mohammad Rafi, Kazi Nazrul Fattah, Sharin Shahajahan Naomi and Anna Minj (Ch. 10, "Community Empowerment and Local Governance") praise BRAC's Community Development Programme as it has evolved to "institutionalized and organized approaches to achieve people's self-reliance and decision-making power within the community...." Sheepa Hafiza, Rumana Ali and Mohammad Rafi (Ch. 12, "Gender Justice and Women's Empowerment") justifiably feel proud that, "Due to the substantial NGO movement in Bangladesh, particularly scaled-up multi-faceted development interventions of BRAC, women in Bangladesh have traveled a long distance down the path of empowerment."

Shib Narayan Kairy (Ch. 15, "Governance, Transparency, Enterprises and Financial Sustainability") drives home his point that, "BRAC has been following a policy of zero tolerance towards financial corruption. All employees are constantly reminded of the zero tolerance...and actions taken if the allegation in the adoption of corrupt practices is proven by an investigation team." Salahuddin Ahmed (Ch. 16, "Reflections on Drivers of BRAC's Success") takes a critical look at some of BRAC's practices, and offers this piece of advice: "The leadership should seriously consider the issues of succession, not only at the topmost level but also at the other levels." Not a bad advice for the continued success of an organization like BRAC. For those wishing to learn about BRAC's activities in different areas of development, *Driving Development: A Story of BRAC's Evolution and Effectiveness* would be a useful book to have and peruse.

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

A girl's struggle against CHILD MARRIAGE

AUTHOR: SHAHAZADA BASUNIA

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REVIEWED BY BAYEZID DAWLA

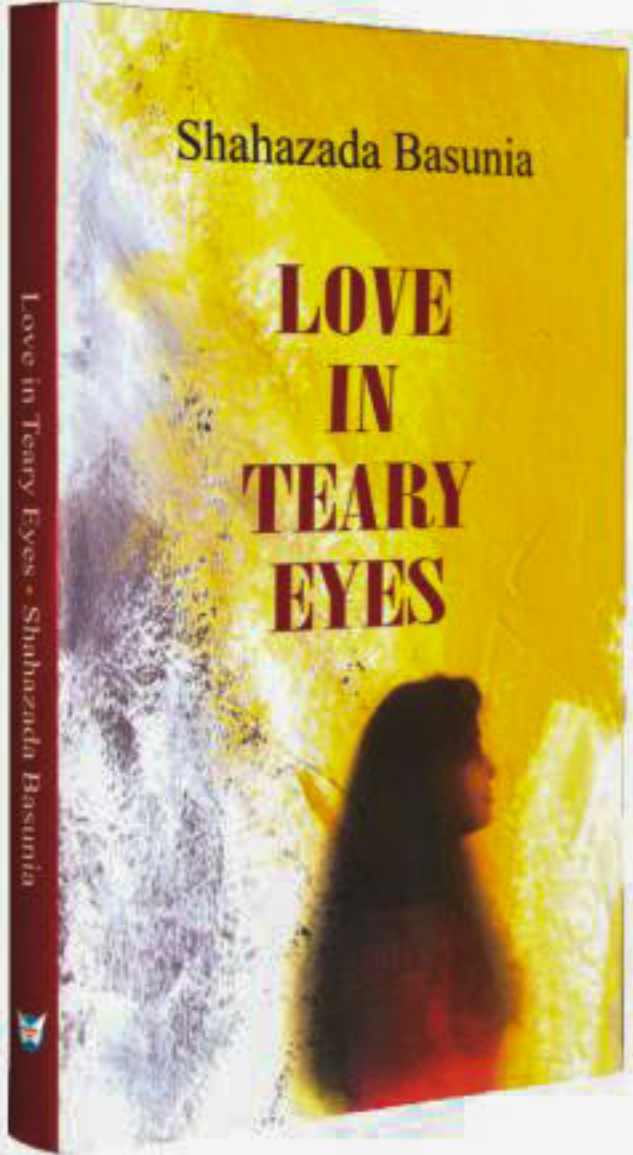
LOVE in Teary Eyes' is a novel by Shahazada Basunia depicting the love story of Aurnob and adolescent Tripti who revolted against the social taboo of child marriage. Aurnob, a university student and Tripti, an adolescent school-girl, find good friends in each other and fall in love—a relationship of common understanding, trust and shared commitment to combat social ills, especially the curse of child marriage.

The love story opens with heroine Tripti fleeing home to escape the marriage her father arranged with a local goon named Kamrul Sikder. Kamrul lent money to her father, Rahman Sarker and established a patron-client relationship between them but the latter's repayment failure created an opportunity for the former to press for his marriage with Tripti. Tripti rejects the arrangement being a disgrace to her life, manages to flee home and finds shelter at the house of Aurnob in a neighboring village.

Aurnob and his parents welcome Tripti to stay with them in their house. Next day, Aurnob visits her parents, comes to know that Rahman and his father, Nazrul Master, were school friends, and invites the "uncle" to take his daughter back but Tripti refuses to "see the face" of her father. Rahman returns home with a broken heart.

Kamrul discovers Tripti's hideout and threatens Nazrul to give her back to him. Instead, Nazrul Master makes a resolve to teach him a good lesson and gets the girl admitted to the school where he teaches. Aurnob's summer vacation ends. The day before his return to his study, Aurnob and Tripti visit her parents and on way back at night they are attacked by Kamrul. They fight him and leave the assailant injured. Kamrul lodges an attempt-to-murder case against Aurnob. The local police nab Aurnob but the court finds them innocent and releases Aurnob from the charge.

However, Nazrul treats Tripti as a curse in the life of his son, and conspires with Kamrul to evict the girl from his house and the school. He helps the villain to kidnap Tripti from his house at midnight and also mobilizes his colleagues to expel the "bad girl" from the school. But the headmaster takes the side of Tripti and foils the evil attempts of his fellows.



This story is set mostly in two neighboring villages—Monerkutir and Sarkerpara—in Razurhat Upazila of Rangpur district, the birthplace of the novelist, indicating that the characters he has created and set to play in different grounds of actions have grown in a semi-real rural background he has known since his boyhood.

The overarching theme the novel deals with is the taboo of child marriage and gender discrimination and male violence against women, which is engineered to maintain the patriarchal social system. The heroine's escape from the matrimonial arrangement is symbolic of revolt that challenges the social convention embedded in the rural power structure as

well as the authority of money and muscle exercised by terrorist acts of villain Kamrul Sikder. The dialogical engagements of the protagonists in mobilizing "social resilience" against the unjust tradition of a social engine stimulate the rebelliousness unfolding in their consciousness and its transformational change into various forms of denial, protest and subjugation that boost up varying actions at the energetic level.

Passion governs the diverse interests and actions in the portrayal of the characters. Essentially, this gives rise to a struggle in the two passionate souls of the hero and the heroine for eliminating the stigma and taboos as well as building a society that recognizes and treats individuals with equal dignity and worth, not based on sexual discrimination. The novelist has demonstrated his craftsmanship in the delineation of passion that awakens love in the hearts of the hero and the heroine and violence in the actions of the villain.

A special feature of the novel is the functioning of the rural power structure that dominates the progress of the work and of the hierarchy that makes uses of the stigma to maintain the culture of women's subordination to men. This refers to the different interests and roles represented by the stakeholders participating in the village meeting convened by the "matbar", which focuses attention on how the social institutions work to serve multiple purposes.

The portrayal of characters is reinforced by the dramatization of conflicts (physical, inner and intra), contrast and comparison between evil and good, rhetoric and practice, and appearance and reality, which are major features of conspiracy and contradictions at the individual and social levels. The novel concludes purveying an ironic contrast with the ideological struggle and commitment overpowered by the institutionalization of the taboos and manifestation of evil forces in the "fabricated society".

The story has been narrated in lucid English, which adds much value to the brilliance of presentation and seems to encourage a wide read of the novel.

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A dream-come-true for Torontonians Bengali Literati

REVIEWED BY SURAJIT ROY MAJUMDER

IT is not the story of any Scrutiny or of any F R Leavis or L C Knights. It is actually the truth about BLRC Literary Journal, published by Bengali Literary Resource Centre, Canada, hitting the stand. A dream... dream... dream... since August, 2015, and finally a dream-come-true, a reality with a 'bang' (and not just a 'whimper') on December 3, 2016. And yes, in the editorial line up you are going to see Subrata Kumar Das and Sujit Kusum Paul et al instead of Leavis or Knights.

A dream, as defined by great APJ Abdul Kalam, is not anything that comes in your sleep; rather it is something that drives your sleep away. BLRC Journal is definitely a realest and longest dream in the Kalam sense for its team members who dreamed it for longer-than-a-year period surely with no Guinness thing in mind.

Bengali Literary Resource Centre has already been a truth and 'BLRC Sahityo Potrika' is now a fresh truth. It is outstanding in several aspects. One, it is born with a huge bang because Toronto Poet Laureate Ann Michales was the Chief Guest to witness and honour the birth event on December 3, 2016 which marks this as a mega event in Toronto's cultural arena. Two, it is going to be the first regular literary journal published by any of Toronto's diverse diaspora. Three, it is bi-lingual to bridge between the mainstream and the Bengali speaking writers in Canada. Four, it succeeded to bring Bengali speaking Canadian writers from coast to coast under one umbrella. Better see what the bi-lingual editorial of the inaugural issue says:

The message of sharing a Canadian writer's (Margaret Atwood) literary award with a Bengali colleague (Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury Tutul) has undoubtedly elevated the proximity between the two shorelines of these two literary globes which have already been connected in one straight line with two Nobel Laureates from both the sides in the span of exactly one hundred years - Rabindranath Tagore in 1913 and Alice Munro in 2013. These two occurrences are really propagating the extract of an intellectual flyover between the Canadians and the Bengalis. [Parentheses mine]

Enough is covered about the conceptualization, birth, growth and maturation of the BLRC Literary Journal in this English editorial.

Beginning from the front cover to the back, you must not miss the tangible touch of the artistic acumen brushed by its intellectually bankable board of editors. The front cover itself stands out as a compact painting in watercolour clearly depicting two vibrant galaxies in close proximity representing the mainstream Canadian intelligentsia and the rising Bengali diaspora which BLRC is going to bridge between. You



can value it as a perfectly balanced piece of art designed in the fool's cap frame of the cover.

Beyond the cover, you have ample scope to wonder how the editors could collect as many as sixty nine writings contributed by all Canadian Bengalis for the inaugural issue of a literary journal and that too in a foreign country like Canada. Venturing even a tiny little mag may appear outrageously challenging here. Imagine the volume of optimism, courage, patience, labour and above all, the commitment of the team behind. Immensely laudable and thankworthy.

To mention the range of writings: 'here is God's plenty'. Altogether thirty one Bengali prose writings are there and you can relish from structural analyses of contemporary North American poetry in search of ennui and alienation to some diachronic studies of linguistics through a host of articles on subaltern history of Bengali music and film, on Chinese Nobel Laureate Mo Yan with a bonus Bengali translation of one of his short stories, an excellent review on 'A Thousand Farewells' by Nahlah Ayed, pieces on our war of independence and language movement, on women issues and homosexual issues as well as issues on immigration to mention just a few. The number of short stories are twelve and those of the poems are eleven and the writers are mostly contemporary some of who are already very well known in the Canadian Bengali community, let alone Bangladesh and West Bengal with their publications. A special section of reviews of BLRC published books includes recent publications by Akbar Hussain, Dilip Chakravarty, Shekhor E Gomes and Sujit Kusum Paul. The English section containing eight pieces includes an interesting article on Margaret Atwood, a few poems and a purely academic article on Pedagogy with others.

So happy reading!

Now back to Scrutiny, I must confess that 'BLRC Literary Journal' little matches the epoch making British journal edited by Leavis that set the modern trend of literary criticism in English literary world. But you also must agree that if the former does not match in magnitude with Scrutiny, it at least matches in attitude. Because as expected by both the guests and the commoners in the inaugural ceremony, 'BLRC Literary Journal' is going to be a trend setter in Canadian literary publications for sure, in near future as Scrutiny did with its first appearance in 1932. For our beloved Bangla language, Bengali literature and Bengali culture it is a Himalayan great expectation to applaud. Let us keep our fingers crossed!

The reviewer lives in Toronto, Canada.