

A marvellous debut novel, but the author's last one

'Babu Bangladesh!' by Numair Atif Choudhury could go down in history as a defining piece of literature on the volatile nation

SANDIPAN DEB

ONCE in a rare while, a debut novel appears unannounced and hits you on the back of your head like a truncheon and leaves you stunned. Such a book is *Babu Bangladesh!* by Numair Atif Choudhury, which, if I may say so, could be the *Midnight's Children* for that tumultuous nation. And it comes with a tragic backstory—soon after completing its final draft, Choudhury died last year in a drowning accident in Japan.

Bangladesh had a horrifyingly bloody birth in 1971, with the then West Pakistani military carrying out a systematic genocide of millions, ethnic cleansing of Hindus, and rapes of hundreds of thousands of women. The nation is still haunted by that holocaust, and has had a history of stable disequilibrium. The word “secularism” was expunged from the constitution in 1977, but was restored in 2010; Islam, made the state religion in 1988, remains so. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and almost his entire family were assassinated in 1975. A series of military coups later, General Ziaur Rahman came to power in 1977, only to be assassinated in 1981.

Since then, Bangladesh has seen another military dictatorship, and a fractious and often-violent democracy. The constants have been rampant corruption, the seemingly unstoppable rise of Islamist forces, persecution of minorities, the acquisition of power with the help of foreign intelligence agencies, the military as an extra-constitutional power centre, and regular natural disasters by way of cyclones and floods. Yet, its economy has performed remarkably well in the last decade, and it could overtake Pakistan in terms of per capita gross domestic product this year.

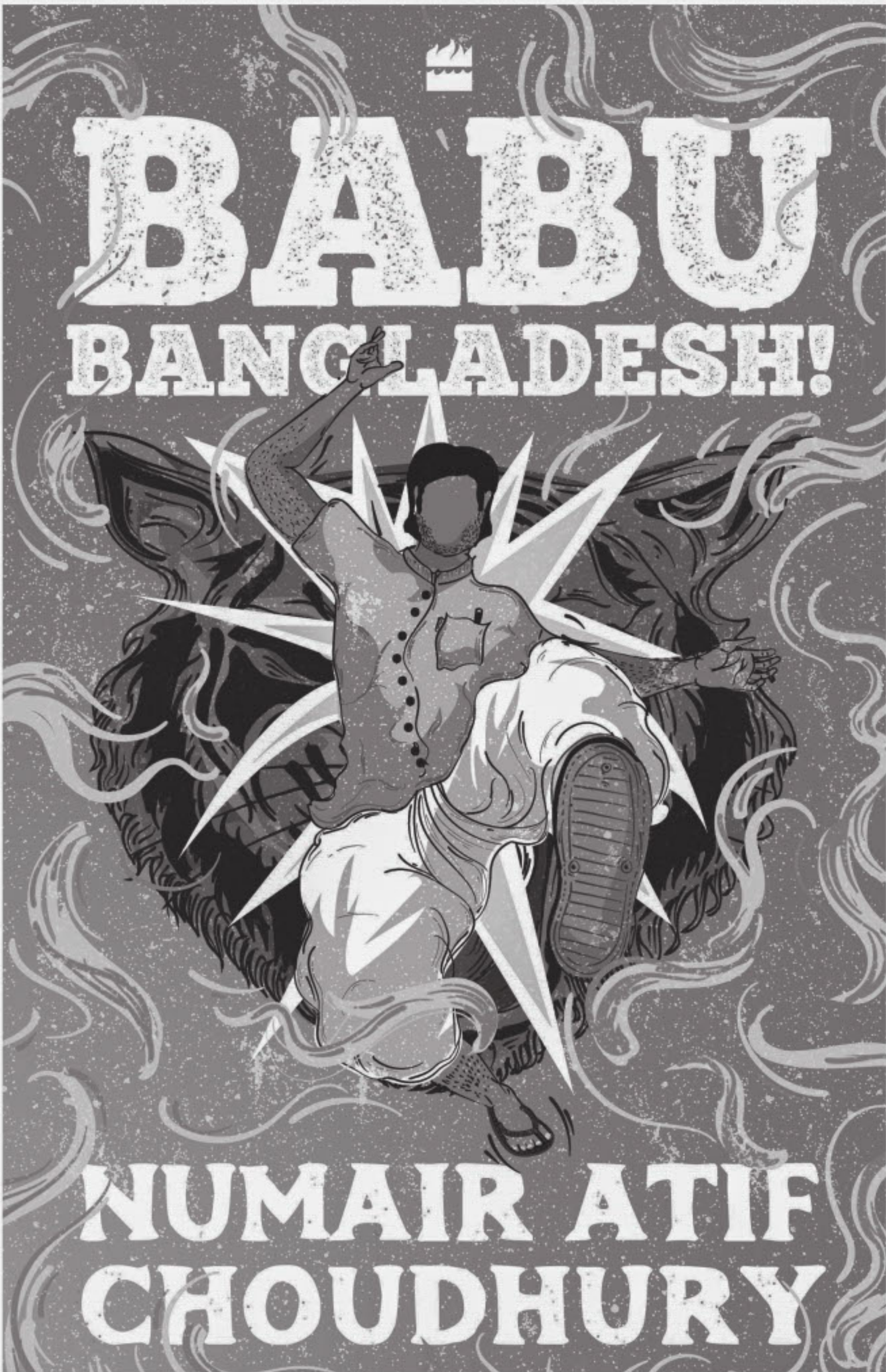
Choudhury chronicles all this, but the story of this anguished nation can perhaps only be told faithfully using the device of magic realism, and that is what *Babu Bangladesh!* does, written from the vantage point of 2028. Choudhury's hero is conceived by two freedom



Numair Atif Choudhury

fighters as Bangladesh's war of liberation begins in March 1971. Growing up, he is fascinated by the mysteries of the Sangsad Bhaban, the sprawling National Assembly complex in Dhaka, designed by the legendary Louis Kahn, and acknowledged worldwide as an architectural marvel. Babu becomes obsessed with its secret geometries, the hidden nooks and crannies, and the whispered stories about the peculiar goings-on there—people behaving irrationally, strange visions, unearthly entities lurking in the shadows. Some very bizarre things transpire, involving an Islamist terrorist attack, which cannot be explained by reason.

Babu Bangladesh! is divided into five sections—Building, Tree, Snake, Island and Bird. It charts Babu's life from his birth to his baffling disappearance in 2021, after a vast sum is stolen from the ministry of culture and distributed to impoverished painters, writers, musicians and artisans, leading to a cultural renaissance. Strangeness abounds. A banyan tree on the Dhaka University campus becomes a symbol of Bengali resistance, and Pakistani soldiers have meltdowns as they try to destroy it. Snake-worshipping indigenous people, steadily being driven out of their forest habitats by rapacious business interests and military men, weave their primeval magic. Could an enigmatic man from an ancient Yazidi tribe actually be the avatar of a bird-god? An island appears overnight in the sea, containing mind-



Cover page of the book “Babu Bangladesh!” by Numair Atif Choudhury.

boggling secrets, and then, disappears.

But, as the novel's nameless narrator tries to reconstruct Babu's story, he discovers that, as in the case of Bangladesh, truth itself is a *trompe l'oeil*. Versions of events differ radically, and each witness swears by what he or she saw. There is photographic proof of what Babu found on the island, but there is also credible evidence that the island never existed. Even the author's first memory of Babu delivering a historic election speech is contentious—was it really Babu? Babu displays enough human weaknesses, yet some eyewitnesses ascribe superhuman powers to him. Choudhury leaves every contradiction and puzzle unresolved, saying only this about his investigation of Babu's life: “At times we have whirled beautifully, but at other moments we have tumbled over our heads. That is perhaps the very best one can say of our journey.” But who or what is he really talking about? Himself? Babu? Bangladesh?

Choudhury was obviously a reader with a wide and wild appetite. *Babu Bangladesh!* teems with arcane information from mythology to archaeogenetics, geomancy to microbiology. Quotations introducing sections range from the Satapatha Brahmana to Stephen King. It is a marvellous book, an enthralling combination of imagination, intelligence, erudition and empathy. It is deeply serious, yet playful; rooted in the soil of Bangladesh, but with arms outstretched towards the azure. And now that we know that the author will write no more, the last line of his only novel will resonate eerily forever: “Farewell, my friend.”

Till date, *Babu Bangladesh!* has been published only in India. But this book should reach readers worldwide.

Sandipan Deb is former editor of 'Financial Express', and founder-editor of 'Open' and 'Swarajya' magazines. This article was originally published in Livemint on July 14, 2019.

Behind every woman is another woman



Farida Begum

INTERNATIONAL Friendship Day is celebrated on July 30 in many places. The day was first proposed in 1958 in Paraguay by Dr Artemio Bracho of the World Friendship Crusade as “World Friendship Day”. The first attempt to commercialise friendship as a holiday goes back to 1919 when American entrepreneur Joyce Hall introduced the first Sunday in August as a new holiday. The greeting card industry, such as Hall's Landmark Cards (later Hallmark) advertised and valiantly argued for a Friendship Day. Their efforts were in vain though and by 1940s, the greeting-card holiday had all but died out. The movement for a friendship day was revived in the 1950s and by the 1960s, it became much more widespread as it was linked to popular cultural symbols. To mark the 10th anniversary celebrations of International Friendship Day, The Beatles released their hit song “With a Little Help from My Friends” in 1967. More recently, in 1998, Winnie the Pooh was chosen as the Ambassador of Friendship at the United Nations by Nane Annan, the wife of then UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

Friendship is one of the deepest and most intimate relationships shared

among people, so it is hardly surprising that Friendship Day is widely celebrated with gusto in South Asia.

Personally, I became drawn to the role played by Bengali women's sociality in my quest to understand the social history of Bengal. Therefore, I study women's friendships in 20th century Bengal to argue for an alternative understanding to the male-dominated history of the region. I centralise women's voices and experiences of everyday life to understand their connections with other women during a tumultuous century of harmony and violence to examine the impact of women



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI ISTELA IMAM

forgotten by histories. I am primarily utilising Bengali memoirs and oral history interviews conducted in Kolkata and Dhaka to write about ordinary women's every day and personal interactions with other women.

Among Bengalis, friendship is almost ritualistic in its importance, especially in women's lives. Historically, Bengali women's friendships can be traced to the concept of *shoipata*, whereby women gave each other special nicknames that bound them together à la the fictional friendship explored in Rabinranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali*. In Tagore's story, the young widow Binodini befriends Ashalata and the two friends refer to each other as “chokher bali” or “sand in the eye”. As late as the mid-20th century, famous women like Bina Das wrote about friendships that continued such intimacy of treasured nicknames for their friendships. While writing about her friends at Bethune College in her memoir *Sringkhola Jhongkar* [The Rattling Chains], Bina Das mentions a friend who she says used to refer to each other as *Chokher Jhol*, or “Teardrop”.

The friendship between Kalpana Dutta and Pritilata Waddedar, Bengal's other revolutionary women, deserves more recognition. They went to school together and used to play badminton when Pritilata was a class ahead of Kalpana in Chittagong. Kalpana's writings tell us that the girls took part in Girl Guides to learn the methods

of the British. Even at a young age, they bonded over their awareness of the injustice of being subjects of the British Empire. Their friendship began in their school days, but that connection continued long after and was crucial in helping them become two of only four female leaders in Suriya Sen's revolutionary group. In her reminiscences, Kalpana writes fondly of Pritilata and the time they spent trying to undermine the British. Kalpana says the two used to discuss strategies together in Pritilata's room. The connections created by the young women have solidified in their names being forever linked as heroes of Bengal. The female revolutionaries who met and were inspired by each other show the centralities of female friendships in allowing them to carry on their passions and quest for justice.

We might also look at the monumental impact that Sufia Kamal's friendship has had on the women of Bangladesh today. In my interviews, both Khushi Kabir and Ruby Ghuznavi have affirmed that they were inspired by the words and friendships of *Khalamma*, as she was fondly known. Khushi Kabir stated that Sufia Kamal was one of the only people to encourage her rehabilitation work in the villages of Bangladesh in the aftermath of 1971. She referred to Sufia Kamal as the “bodh tree” from which all movements seem to have stemmed. Ruby Ghuznavi, who

re-introduced indigo and natural dyes in the fashion world, mentions that Sufia Kamal was a big supporter when others did not believe in the viability of natural dyes. Sufia Kamal's support of women's work and interests have allowed for massive gains for various women's movements.

Present-day Bengali women continue to stress the significance of female sociality through everyday activities that constitute “friendship rituals”. These include behaviours like walking to school together, playing after school, sharing meals, singing together, or picking flowers early in the morning. Women's casual interactions with others might be seen as one of the banalities of their lives, but over time, the banal becomes a process of socialisation that creates bonds.

Some friendships last a lifetime while others are ephemeral. Some end when people grow up, others when friends move away to different cities or countries. Friendships are not always easy, but as numerous women I have interviewed in Kolkata and Dhaka say, it is always worth it. No other relationship encapsulates the trust, intimacy, adventures, and love that good friends bring into our lives.

Farida Begum is a PhD candidate in History at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She is currently writing a dissertation on Bengali women's social interactions in the twentieth century. She is also a researcher for HerStory Foundation and the media portal taramonbd.com.

ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

JULY 26, 1953

FIDEL CASTRO BEGINS HIS REVOLT AGAINST FULGENCIO BATISTA WITH AN UNSUCCESSFUL ATTACK ON AN ARMY BARRACKS IN EASTERN CUBA.

Spanish Movimiento 26 de Julio, revolutionary movement led by Fidel Castro, that overthrew the regime of Fulgencio Batista in Cuba. Its name commemorates the attack on the Santiago de Cuba army barracks on this day. Castro eventually ousted Batista six years later.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Bravery

6 Fragrant wood

11 Visibly shocked

12 Fragrance

13 Drying need

14 Circle spokes

15 Spanish boy

17 Unusual

18 Musically choppy

22 Words of approximation

23 Delighted exclamation

27 Shakespeare's “-- Andronicus”

29 River feature

30 Newscast segment

32 Squirrel's cache

33 Bruiser

35 Sty resident

38 Infamous emperor

39 Boredom

41 External

45 Share in a business

46 Grammar topic

47 Pisa sight

48 Skater Fleming

DOWN

1 Big tub

2 In the past

3 Bar study

4 Where anyone can watch trials

5 Museum piece

6 Neck artery

7 Stretch of history

8 Extinct bird

9 Surrounded by

10 Foray

16 Yea opposer

18 Drunks

19 Journey

20 Regarding

21 Realtor's showing

24 Stopper

25 Words from Caesar

26 Simple

28 More impassive

31 Be litigious

34 Trio, e.g.

35 Nuisance

36 Wild about

37 Emulate a beaver

40 Luau instrument

42 Luggage ID

43 Nest item

44 Spanish king

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

SALES CAGED
PROVE ADELE
RACER ROMAN
ABUSES ITS
TIS NOMINEE
SAT ALANIS
ADORN
DOREMI GAB
JACKSON APE
ART NARNIA
IRATE DANES
LONER EJECT
SWEAR SATES

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott