

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Is there a way out of the ethno-political cauldron in India's far-east?

“As I traversed this vast terrain, I realised that the region involves hundreds of political and historical ramifications. The ethno-political churn, as Sudeep calls the political situation, is combustible and has always remained so since the 1940s. Ethnic groups with some clout derived from their ‘demographic heft’ have their own rebel groups that, by default, are pitted against rebel groups of other ethnic persuasions.

RIFAT MUNIM

Ever since I read *The Bengalis: A Portrait of a Community* (Rupa Publications, 2017), I have been on the lookout for nonfiction books written by Sudeep Chakravarti. What attracted me towards his approach to nonfiction is not only the vast array of research materials he brings on the table but also the way he combines research with creative nonfiction and then tells the story in his uniquely flowy yet punchy manner. But when Sudeep's *The Eastern Gate: War and Peace in Nagaland, Manipur and India's Far East* landed on my desk, I was faced with a dilemma. While *The Bengalis* and *Plassey: The Battle That Changed the Course of Indian History* (Aleph Book Company, 2020) fall well within my areas of interest, I can't quite say the same about this one.

It was the lingering taste of *The Bengalis* that made me skim over the first few pages of *The Eastern Gate* (Simon & Schuster, 2022). After describing why this region is India's gateway to realising its eastern ambitions, Sudeep cuts to the chase, stating that the Naga peace process is central to establishing peace in Nagaland and Manipur, and “to a lesser extent, to Arunachal Pradesh and Assam.” His aim is to look at options for working out a viable peace deal which does not rise and fall in sync with the government's “Look East” or “Act East” policy but which sees “things from the perspective of this region”.

Throughout the book, between sections of a chapter, there appears in italics what Sudeep calls in a note at the very beginning “a ‘dispatches’ element”, which weaves into the narrative “news breaks ... information and messages received and exchanged, notes, and thoughts as preparatory to writing ...”. This element adds a unique flavour to the book, often assuming a satiric tone, the kind of which I have yet to encounter in a nonfiction work of intense deliberation.

As the first chapter begins with a mysterious arms dealer who displays to the author a collection of various weapons, Sudeep's prowess in narrative nonfiction becomes evident. His narrative is as detailed as a journalist's, as thorough as a researcher's, and his storytelling is as literary

as a fiction writer's. From the mysterious dealer, Sudeep takes us into the bowels of Moreh's dark underbelly. Moreh is the conduit for arms, drugs, contraband, and other smuggled products to flow between India and Myanmar and China.

While sharing details of interviews with security personnel about the narco trade, he writes: “They pointed to the involvement of at least a dozen rebel groups of all ethnic persuasions such as Naga, Meitei, Kuki, and Zomi, active in Manipur; and that of the political, bureaucratic and security

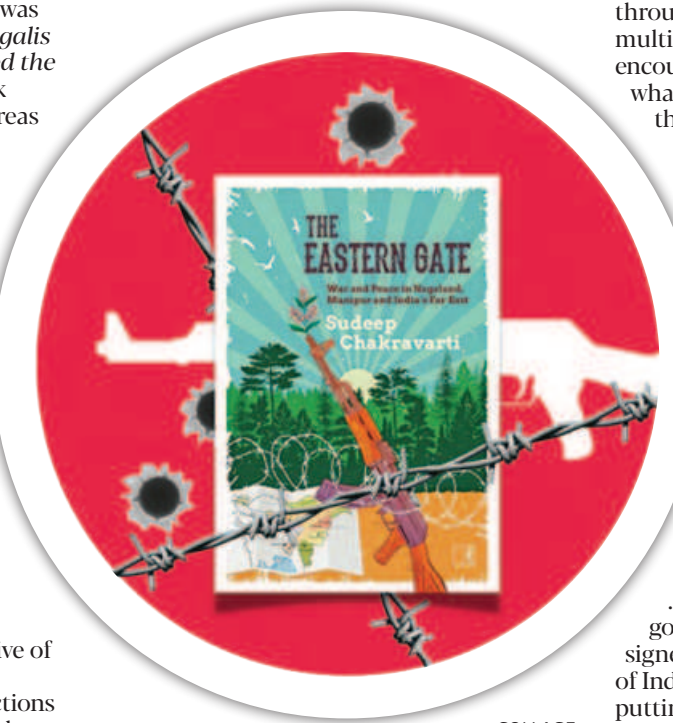
Council of Nagaland (NSCN), especially with the NSCN (I-M). In many cases, one ethnic group has several factions that are fighting each other to a bitter end. Consider the deadly battles between NSCN (I-M) and the breakaway faction NSCN (K).

As the “dispatches” demonstrate, Sudeep knows this terrain as intimately as one knows their hometown. Just like a master storyteller unravels the different interconnected stories in a novel, layer after layer, Sudeep unpeels the issues underlying the multi-layered conflicts in this region. As Sudeep walks the reader through this region, political ramifications multiply, and it is only likely that they will encounter missing links. At this juncture, what I found to be most remarkable is that Sudeep consciously does away with a chronological approach; he rather combines dispatches, interviews, creative nonfiction, analyses and research in a non-chronological way that provides all the missing links in addition to making one want to know more about the future developments.

Ultimately, it all boils down to the Alternative Arrangement and the Framework Agreement. Alternative Arrangement (AA) is a “demand by several Naga tribes under the umbrella of the United Naga Council ... to be delinked from the administrative ambit of the government of Manipur to deal ... autonomously with the central government in New Delhi.” The FA was signed in 2015 between the Government of India and the NSCN (I-M) with the aim of putting an end to conflict with Naga rebels and finding a solution to ending “an uneasy ceasefire with I-M signed in 1997”. It wasn't long before it became obvious that the FA was one more piece on the region's “game of chess”.

Sudeep's book, which combines several disciplines with a creative approach, marks a rare achievement in the genre of nonfiction. Whether one is interested in partition history or this region's geopolitics or more particularly, about the Northeast, they will have to consult this book, which, most definitely, will provide them with all the details, data, perspectives, and analyses they perhaps need to know.

Rifat Munim is a writer, editor, and translator based in Dhaka.



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

establishments. All feed off the narco economy. All want to control it. All find some accommodations, find a level.”

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BOOK NEWS ULAB English department to launch Literary Salon on Saturday

STAR BOOKS REPORT

In an initiative that is first of its kind, the Department of English and Humanities at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh is launching the ULAB Literary Salon on Saturday, May 14. The series of monthly events, open to the public, will include book launches, readings, discussion sessions, and sale of books at discounted prices.

“The ULAB Literary Salon will be a first of its kind literary platform in Dhaka to bring together writers, readers and publishers from Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia in a setting that is both informal and engaging”, the university said.

The first event, on May 14, will comprise a poetry and *adda* session by the father-daughter duo of Professor Shamsad Mortuza and Arshi Mortuza. Author, poet, and academician, Dr Shamsad Mortuza is Pro Vice Chancellor of ULAB and Dean of the School of Humanities at ULAB, as well as a columnist for *The Daily Star*; he will be discussing his poetry collection, *Barkode*, which explores “the craft of writing poetry, quotidian experiences in a world crowded with video games and porous cybersecurity, and the experiences of studying English in the UK while being a person of color”.

Arshi Mortuza teaches English at Southeast University, Dhaka and has completed her graduate studies in English at ULAB and Queen's University, Canada. Her poetry collection, *One Minute Past Midnight* (Nymphaea Publications, 2022), explores “the tricky waters of mental health, adolescence, relationships, and the complicated relationship with beauty they bring”.

Popular bookstore Bookworm Bangladesh is partnering up with ULAB to offer the books for sale.

The event is to be held at ULAB's Dhanmondi campus on Satmasjid Road. Further updates will be available on the ULAB Literary Salon Facebook and Instagram pages.

BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Zahid Newaz's 'Shutrodhor': A journey into our time

SUMAYA MASHRUFA

Shutrodhor (Abishkar Publication, 2021) starts with the disappearance of Anwar Ali. The sky-blue shirt that he wore on the day of his disappearance ends up at Rosario Automatic Dry Cleaners, linking the owner of the dry cleaner, Rosie, with Anwar Ali's son, Saikat Hassan. The story that starts with a mystifying air, evoking endless possibilities, ends with a heartbreaking reality we find ourselves getting strangely accustomed to.

Rosie has almost a similar story to tell. Her husband had suddenly disappeared one day nearly 30 years ago. She remembers the ache and hardship that she had to go through while bringing up her only son. The struggle was indeed colossal for her, so much so that she scarcely had any time to look for her husband, let alone unearth the people who had their parts to play in his disappearance.

After all these years, when she meets Saikat, a son looking for his father who has disappeared in much the same way, she instantly feels connected to his grief and refuses to stay on the sidelines any more. She decides on doing whatever she can to help Saikat find his father.

The search for Anwar Ali becomes a journey to unveil the truth. The truth that peels like an onion, revealing with each layer the political reality of our time. At one point, Rosie recalls her son commenting on how capitalism takes people away from their roots and provides them with new roots. Rosie, the mother who walks the earth on her own terms, defies the push to relocate and holds onto her grief, her old house and her old memories.

Hironpur, where Anwar Ali used to live, becomes a microcosm of the country that we live in—the country which at the age of 50 is passing through a precarious time.



Anwar Ali wrote continuously about the issues that plagued the people; he wrote against the powers that were because he was certain that it was his democratic right. He was a one-man army. When Rosie goes to look for him, Saikat expresses his worry about the repercussions of ruffling the feathers of politicians; in response, she rather nonchalantly tells him that surely they can't kill them. To a reader living in this time and age, Rosie's response may sound a bit too implausible. Or maybe not, maybe a little bit of courage is all that one needs to defy and challenge the rampant acts of irregularities and injustices.

Though the flap in the book says that it is a tale of a surrealistic land, Zahid Newaz's novel is rooted in reality. When Márquez was speaking to journalists in western countries after the release of the English translation of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it bothered him a little—and he found it amusing too—that they took the book to be completely magical. As Salman Rushdie later said in a tribute to Márquez, the reality of this part of the world doesn't work like that. Sometimes, using metaphors and magic is the only way we can tell our stories. But that doesn't make it less real, and if anything, the story becomes more alive.

Near the end, Rosie asks a fellow companion who accompanies her on this journey, “Would we just go on like this?” and the answer comes, “Yes, for now.” After that, she sees an endless procession of sky-blue shirts fluttering in the air.

Upon finishing the book, I also said, yes, for now.

Sumaya Mashrufa is a writer and she hopes to tell the stories of people who quite forcibly live in her head. In her spare time, she takes pictures creating a visual diary of this time.

OPINION

Reading tips for a full-time working mom

SARAH ISMAIL BARI

As I wrote in “Motherhood—the story of a transformed reader”, my essay for Daily Star Books on International Mother's Day on May 8—motherhood changed every aspect of my life that I had naively believed was robust and full-proof, including my self-imposed, semi-pretentious reading habits. What motherhood taught me was to give myself grace, unlearn everything I knew about myself as a bibliophile and embrace the empathetic reader in me. Now, as a token of this new allyship that we have formed with each other, dear reader, I shall bestow you with some unwarranted everyday tips for how to be an effective bookworm in the post-motherhood stages of your life—or any stage for that matter, we do not discriminate in this space.

Start easy, punchy (and short if necessary): And gradually build up your focus and reading prowess. There are no brownie points for picking up a flowery 800-pager that Google tells you is part of the 100-books-you-must-read-before-you-die club.

Recommendation: *Such a Fun Age* (2019) by Kiley Reid is unassuming, beautiful and important. Kelly Reid writes about race, class, and privilege set against a solidly entertaining plotline with very relatable characters.

Ditch the blocker: There's no shame in abandoning a read that just is not doing it for you. My standard rule is now 50-70 pages maximum, and if the author has yet to make a solid case for their book, it's hasta la vista from me baby.

Read multiple mediums and genres simultaneously: Before you come at me with “I dedicate my soul to a single read at a time”, hold your riot sticks and hear me out. I hear you because I used to be you, but the time and “ideal-



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condition” crunch attached with the insanity of motherhood has taught me that you need multiple formats of reads at your disposal to switch between whatever suits your situation and mood best at the time.

Hence, I suggest a read-kit which should include: one paperback; at least one digital format book on a device that has a battery-life longer than Queen Lizzy's reign and fits in a diaper bag; one audiobook (highly recommend *Daisy Jones & The Six* in that format), one non-fiction (self-development/memoir), one snappy graphic novel/book of poems or a genre-bending read of your choice (optional), and one beautiful hardcover classic you will never read and eventually place pompously on your rustic bookshelf.

Limit social media on your phone by setting up app timers: Enough said. However, share your thoughts on your reads on whichever medium you prefer. It helps you build an encouraging community.

Get yourself a LED Neck Reading Light: This is probably the most useful

tip I can give you as a mommy-reader. Often the only time we get to ourselves is once our little ones have gone to bed. If you have a co-sleeper, or a partner who goes to bed earlier than you, the neck reading light is a wonderful device to keep you reading late into the night and wake up with panda-eyes. Get yourself a concealer while you are at it.

Set yourself up for a Goodreads Reading Challenge: Start conservative, and once you have picked up momentum, go hard on that challenge. I started with a goal of 12 for the whole year. I just finished my 25th (this tip may or may not have been to flex that reading stat).

Final words of wisdom: Do not be a snob and wait to make yourself cosy in your special reading nook with that insta-worthy armchair and a steaming cuppa—no one cares! Read anywhere, in any scenario, every chance you get. Happy reading!

Sarah Ismail Bari is a full-time corporate slave, overtime mom, part-time reader, and a chronic daydreamer.