

A Journey to the Roots of Identity

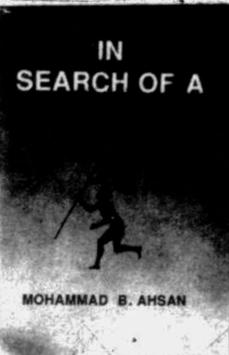
BOOK REVIEW

IN SEARCH OF A NATION — a comparative study on history with a quest for the root, status and future of the Bangladeshi nation, by Mohammad B Ahsan.

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Reviewed by Md Mahub Hassan.



Revolution; in USA, the American Revolution; and in USSR and China, the Communist Revolution. As in today, their past is characterised by distinctiveness in patterns of stages of development. In all the countries, material and ideological developments did not come in the same pattern. Interestingly, flourish in these countries in different arena is observed to be the influence of earlier developments in the form of localised changes in other areas.

The Design of History is a comprehensive study of the developments in economic, social and political order through ages in the global perspective. In thought and action, man tends to follow a better and upward line, thus replacing the old by the new. The motion of history starting with a change in a specific area acts as an early signal of history for bringing change in different societies gradually

leading to a world order. And it involves a long complicated process. From a complex network of events and ideas in the world history, the author discovers a manifest reality of mankind. According to him, liberal democracy and free market economy are the highest forms of society achieved so far and all the societies of the world are fast coming under its cover. And he foresees the creation of a supra-national states on the basis of economic, political and military cooperations to which nation-states are likely to surrender their sovereignty while retaining their national identity.

In 'History of Bangladesh', the writer gives a brief chronological depiction as well as economic, social and political implications of events in different ages starting from the 4th century AD up to the achievement of an independent sovereign homeland.

From ancient time to the beginning of the modern ages, through the process of steady evolution, some changes in society, culture and administration took place but the British conquest accomplished over the centuries what previously remained unattainable. Relatively permanent consolidation of India, introduction of modern science and technology, political awakening and growth of nationalism brought an actual radical change in socio-economic-political sphere of India. In the final stage, India was able to win freedom but at the cost of her unity — creation of two states on the basis of religion. And after a course of bitter relationship and sanguinary liberation war, the birth of

Bangladesh as an independent sovereign state became a reality, making her worthy of searching for political and economic self-determination.

In 'Bangladesh: Hitherto and Henceforth', the writer shows the study of history does not say much in favour of Golden Bengal image in ancient and middle ages as described by our nationalist historians. However, in different phases, this country observed wonderful practice of justice, consensus of people (e.g. selection of Gopal as king in 8th century AD) and some other qualities of a modern democratic society. On the other hand, "While the larger force of history was shaping some other nations to accommodate liberal societies, the national sentiment amongst the Bengali people had not been even seeded." And also, the signs of a democratic society are absent to a great extent still today.

The author argues the establishment of democratic values and development of free market economy as well as adjustment of population will come inevitably as natural course of history. In this context, he also finds it crucial to settle the question of our national identity, the failure of which may even threaten our independent existence.

'Growth of Nationalism' is a short analysis of the impact of nationalistic spirit in the evolution towards modern national states. Whereas nations rediscovering their origin and identity, such as the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Ukrainians, Croats, Bosnians have moved to secessionism, collective concern in areas like economics and defence have led West European nation states to form community of states like European Community.

The book deserves special attention for its uniqueness — first attempt ever to make a comparative study of the history of Bangladesh. One has every right to differ with the author, but the approach will undoubtedly supply materials for thought to the conscious readers.

Kachi-Kanchar Mela Attains an Enviably Position

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

THE central Kachi-Kanchar Mela, children's largest organisation in Bangladesh, will be celebrating its 36th founding anniversary on 5 October. The three-decade continuation of an organisation in Bangladesh without much governmental patronization deserves appreciation. During this long period many organisations were born, but some of them had natural death. A few other children's organisations like Mukul Fauz or Khelaghar are not that active as they were one decade back.

The Kachi-Kanchar Mela, with meagre resources, is still surviving and offering services for enlightening a million illiterate destitute children and also children of middle class families because of the total dedication and sincerity of the Director of the Mela, Rukunuz-zaman Khan, who is popularly known as Dadabhai.

On 5 October in 1956 this organisation came into being formally at the residence of octogenarian poet Sufia Kamal. 'Kachi-Kanchar Asar', a page for the children, was dedicated in the Bengali daily *Ittefaq*.

Since then Kachi-Kanchar Mela has grown to its present stature as a result of the inspiring leadership of Dadabhai over the last 36 years. It has expanded its activities all over Bangladesh. Presently it has 250 active branches. Some of the branches have their own office buildings in the countryside. Initially the activities of this organisation had been confined to holding literary seminars, poetry recitation competition and cultural shows. Cultural shows are held mostly on National and Bengali New Year days. In mid sixties music and painting classes were opened, apart from library. Slowly and gradually the strength of the library has increased. It has over 3000 books for children. It is indeed a success story. Probably no other children's organisation has ever made any attempt to organise such classes and library for the children. It may be noted that painting and music classes are conducted twice a week without fees. The Mela encourages poor and middle class families to send their children to these classes. These classes provide opportunities for informal education for the children to expand their qualities of mind.

Constitutionally Kachi-Kanchar Mela is designed to promote social and cultural activities of the children. The salient points of the constitution of the Mela are: to encourage children to know culture, literature, science and art; to build up healthy body through sports and games; to build up character of the children to help them become true citizens through honest and just means; and to make a pledge to eradicate illiteracy and narrow-mindedness and to serve the cause of humanity. Neither this children's organisation has been affiliated with any political party nor it follows any political jargon. Basically it is socio-cultural organi-

sation for the children. It has been registered with the Ministry of Social Welfare.

The trend of Kachi-Kanchar Mela is to uphold the old tradition and values of the country. As the part of their programmes central Kachi-Kanchar Mela had introduced traditional 'lathi khela' (play with

from organising symposium on important national events like Language Movement, Independence Day and Birthdays of Rabindranath Tagore and Nazrul Islam as well as Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin and Palli Kabi Jasimuddin, who are the pride of this nation. Central Kachi-Kanchar Mela sponsors painting



Children in painting class at Kachi-Kanchar Shilpa Bitan.

sticks) and 'bratachari' (kind of folk dance) which are on the wane.

To make them aware of modern technology Central Kachi-Kanchar Mela used to hold science class every weekend for the children but the science class has been suspended for the time being because of shortage of fund. Apart

ing competition and exhibitions.

Since 1964, children of Kachi-Kanchar Mela are participating in painting exhibitions at home and abroad. It is possible the single children's organisation in Bangladesh which bagged large number of international awards (gold, silver and certificate), in painting

Within a span of three decades the Central Kachi-Kanchar Mela and its units have attained prestigious position in spearheading the children's movement in the country.

Children of Kachi-Kanchar Mela participating in the music class.



Children of Kachi-Kanchar Mela participating in the music class.

'As a Method of Analysis, Marxism is as Valid as Ever'

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DS: With the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe the general impression people have is that the Marxist analysis of history was all on the wrong track. Do you think Marxist thinkers will be able to re-interpret Marxism to suit the modern times and will history move towards the form of society that Marx envisioned?

DM: I think as a method of analysis of history, Marxism is as valid as ever. If you want to understand what is happening in the Soviet Union or anywhere in the world, the best way still is to adopt the Marxist view, that the key to the movement of society is the understanding of the economic forces at play in that society, and see other bits of society like religion, politics etc. as fundamentally determined by economic forces and to some extent class interest.

I don't think whatever that has happened in the recent past has done anything to undermine that.

It never seemed to me that the kind of Marxism that was instantiated in the Soviet Union was a very accurate reflection of Marx's own ideas. Certain interpretations of Marxism in the Soviet Union appeared to me more as blocks towards understanding and acceptance of Marxism. And in as far as they have disappeared, to that extent the block along the road has disappeared.

That is how I see it, but this is seen by most people in the world to be a great setback for the Marxist project. And poli-

tics, as Machiavelli said, is more about appearances than reality, about what people think than what is the case.

But the most important point I think is that the success or otherwise of the whole socialist project depends upon what happens to capitalism.

Now, according to Marx, in some of his moods at least, capitalism is a very long-term force in society, it will last as long as it is capable of increasing the forces of production and it still seems capable of doing that.

After all, feudalism lasted a very long time, and capitalism as a way of organising society has only been with us for about 200 years, which is quite short in terms of time in history.

The one thing that does give me cause to think that capitalism might not be a viable method of organising social and economic life in the medium-term, is the whole problem of environmental politics and ecological questions.

If it is the case that the industrial revolution — whether capitalist or socialist it doesn't really matter — does produce noxious ecological effects, and if it becomes sufficiently large and dangerous, which it isn't at the moment, then it's going to demand an economic and political form to control this.

And the one economic form which cannot cope with it is capitalism, because it is market-oriented, liberal individualism. It does demand some sort of control, and it doesn't have to be of the Left, it could be of the Right.

Of the economic forms that are around at the moment, so-

cialism seems the most promising way in which it might be possible to control ecological threats of that sort. But that does depend very much on how the world economy evolves.

DS: The Chinese seem to have adopted a two-track approach, whereby they have opened-up a private sector in the economy allowing competition and foreign investment, while keeping the one-party, pyramid-like structure of political power. Which way do you think they are heading? Are they likely to ditch socialism altogether?

DM: No, I don't think they will do that. I think it will be too difficult, and it will cause too much social disruption. Talking to people in China, I found that the state-owned enterprises are extremely popular, because they provide cheap goods, and there are all sorts of large stores where things are highly subsidised.

People don't want those privatised, because the would push prices up.

There are incipient sectors in China which are non-agricultural, were things look very much like capitalist relations, which I take to be when you actually employ people and as a result of their labour make a profit. I think you've got employ wage labour in a certain manner for it to be capitalist.

I think the Chinese say to themselves in a rather pragmatic way, that there are all sorts of roads to communism, there is a Chinese way just as there was a Russian road.

Evidently, to increase the forces of production at this particular juncture, they needed to make use of the market, and market is not necessarily anti-socialist.

And of course, a lot of Western socialists are thinking along these lines at the moment, and debating the notion of market socialism and how socialism could use the markets in order to foster the genuine aims of socialism.

And an interesting point is that it does not seem to me that the liberalisation of the economic forces in China will bring along with it liberalisation of the political superstructure. In fact, I would be very surprised if there was a collapse of the Chinese regime or indeed the ideology in the next 10 or even 15 years.

The main point is that the shops are full, there are no queues and everybody has enough to eat, and there is a certain sense of material well-being and progress, albeit starting from a very low level. That means the people do not have the economic reasons for the kind of despair that led a lot of people in the Soviet Union to think that a fundamental change of regime was necessary.

DS: When you look at China, do you see her playing any role in promoting Marxism worldwide? Or do you see her being like anything other state, seeking to increase national power and influence?

DM: More the latter, I think. But the Chinese do have a splendid opportunity to create a kind of society which mixes certain market principle with their strong commitment towards egalitarianism.

With other legacies of socialism like full employment, full housing etc, they could make an example of a decent society. I don't know whether this would act as a beacon to other Third World countries which might then choose to go along the Marxist road.

If I had to make a choice, I'd say that China would act as a state among other states in South-East Asia, and not be keen to promote Marxist ideas. And that has actually been true of China throughout its history. It does consider itself to be the center of the earth, and everything else in the world is rather distant to people sitting in China.

They have conducted their foreign policy in terms of national interest and not in terms of ideology. If you look at their involvement in Africa in the 1970s, they supported all

sorts of movements which were effectively right-wing, and not left-wing at all.

Movements like UNITA in Angola, and in Latin America right-wing dictator General Augusto Pinochet of Chile was a fine chap for them. The important thing was that those movements opposed the Soviet Union.

So, I don't think China sees herself as having that kind of world mission. It would be a splendid idea if they did, but that is very unlikely. They don't see themselves in that way, unlike the Soviet Union, which in many respects did look at itself in that way.

The Soviet Union wished to export socialism, it encouraged all sorts of movements across the world to fight in this particular direction, and she was fairly consistent in supporting left-wing causes.

DS: So, the Chinese look at their interest from a strictly Chinese point of view rather than a Marxist point of view. Would that mean a policy of expansionism or hegemonism in say, South East Asia or South Asia?

DM: I don't think expansionism, in the sense of territorial gains or building of a larger empire. I think they definitely see themselves as a hegemonic state. Therefore they wish suzerainty over the Indo-Chinese peninsula, let's say, and they are concerned about who's in power in Cambodia.

And one area about which I am concerned is Tibet. I raised the matter of Tibet with Chinese whom I thought were quite reasonable, but I didn't get anywhere. They thought whatever they were doing in Tibet was perfectly justified, no problems at all. That goes further than hegemony of course, they think Tibet is actually a part of China. I think they have probably

got quite a clear idea about where their borders lie, but they wish to control or exercise some sort of suzerainty over states that surround them, in Indo-China and South-East Asia in general.

DS: Do you think those small Marxist parties in various Third World countries or their ideologies have a future, given the present trend world-wide dominated as it is by the World Bank?

DM: I think the ideologies will always have a future, in the sense that there will always be committed people who are willing to give up a large portion of their time and energy, and sometimes even their lives to a particular ideal.

Given that the disparity between the North and the South and the general unjust economic relations obtaining between the West and developing countries, is liable to continue, these groups will always have a future.

Whether they will expand their numbers or increase their power and influence depends on the strength of capitalism, as I said earlier.

For the foreseeable future, it seems to me that the Western powers, whatever they may say about aid and that kind of thing, are going to go on screwing out of the Third World as much profit, in terms of raw materials, labour and debt-interest payment, as they possibly can.

And this will aggravate the position of a lot of Third World countries and it will get worse and worse. If it gets worse, there will obviously be a bigger role, for these Marxist parties. But because of the enormous power and influence — economic, military — that a country like the United States still exercises even though its economic power is declining, I think it unlikely that these

Danger to the Taj

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dust particles on the marble surface, while the soluble salts have gone into the pores of the marble and brought about considerable alteration.

The sandstone parts of the edifice have been peeling off and flaking. There is white efflorescence on them consisting mainly of chlorides and nitrates due to the atmospheric action. There are also algae on the sandstone, the white efflorescence on which consists of salts containing nitrosifying, ammonifying and sulphur oxidising bacteria and fungi that obviously have a damaging effect on the stone. Technico, however, has not given a quantitative picture of the damage already caused.

The Taj presents several problems not encountered by marble monuments elsewhere in the world. Foreign experts are therefore not likely to be in a position to offer all the advice and help the Indians need without making an exhaustive study either of the damage already caused or of the environmental factors at play. Nothing short of a trichromatic colour determination of the entire surface of the Taj and a microscopic study of the marble surface under vertical and inclined illuminations can

parties would, in the near future, be in a position to expand or increase their influence.

Institutions like the World Bank and the IMF are going to continue interfering, dislocating and in some cases almost destroying the societies and economies of the Third World countries for the foreseeable future, and I don't see what these small Marxist parties can do about it.

DS: Thank you Mr McLellan, for your time.

offer any real insight into the various surface features. And in the absence of such detailed scientific investigation, facile empirical solutions (such as using low-sulphur-containing diesel oil for the furnaces) will not do much good. Even the proposed creation of a dense green belt around the Taj, which will be expected to absorb the pollutants, may prove counterproductive as this may cause increased levels of carbon dioxide during nights and add to its corrosive action under humid conditions. Meanwhile, no archaeologist in India is known to have come forward to take advantage of the research grants given by the Department of Science and Technology for scientific research on archaeological materials. This indeed is a sad commentary on the Archaeological Survey of India.

If the Taj is damaged beyond repair, even in terms of money the loss to the tourist trade would be far greater than the gains from the Mathura refinery over the years. Forty per cent of visitors to India visit the Taj. According to one estimate, income from these tourists in five years time would exceed the cost of the refinery. One would like to see the ministries of education and tourism agitate against the developing menace to one of India's most cherished cultural heritages. As a perceptive writer on the subject once wrote: "In many countries, the question is whether culture and environment will survive tourism. In India the question is whether tourism will survive pollution."

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Dhaka Portait: Buriganga.

—Photo: Anwar Hossain