

A Changing Society: Observed through Three Generations

BOOK REVIEW

Title : A Family in Transition
Author : Mohammad Afsaruddin
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Reviewed by
Prof Muhammad Anisuzzaman

Sociology at the Dhaka University but never wholly severed the umbilical cord of his rural roots. His English and American education has produced an urbanity of outlook in life, yet he nurtured an abiding affection for the day-to-day practice of Islam. He seems to have the two values intertwining in him a symbolic existence — if not always in synergistic interplay.

His sons have adopted the Western way of life in all its modern gadgets and consequences. The daily life of the author's family is changing. Individualism growing out of Western education led to nuclear families. The author's sons wear dresses that are in fashion, appreciate modern values, are liberated from popular beliefs and superstitions, and at the same time alien to rural life and atmosphere. Entertainments have changed markedly. For the author radio or television was enough, for his son, videos and foreign films serve the purpose. The author used to ride rickshaws, his sons are owning and driving cars. Food items are different for both from *chira*, *muri* to cakes and coffee. Kin relationships and kin behaviour are feeble for them. The author does not elaborate how feeble the relationships have become these days. Compare it with what the author's father used to do asking relatives and even neighbours if they needed any household items before going to the market places.

Not only family life styles, the larger society has changed considerably. The author perceptibly notes these changes, and their effects on the

Bangladesh society — birth, education, marriage, children, employment, festivals, sickness, death and ceremonies connected with those social manifestations to add new dimensions in their interaction with modern connotations of life. The author reflects on these and on many other related aspects. Politics, economy, administration have not escaped his penetrating attention. His father and uncles, grandfathers and their kinds supported the Congress, the Khilafat Movement, Non-cooperation Movements based on secularism. Yet they changed after the Lahore Resolution and the demands of the Muslim League for a separate home land for the Muslim. The author turned a staunch supporter of Pakistan. The same man used in his student days to appreciate the Communists and other leftist party manifestoes. The same man again became an ardent supporter of Bangladesh as he was disillusioned with the Pakistan rulers. All these changes of mind — the author maintains — are a matter of historic necessity. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Sahrahwardy, A K Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and Ziaur Rahman — all rose to meet the challenges of their times.

Although he says that he has never indulged in politics, the author has been a keen observer of political events and developments in the country. Some of his friends are now "seasoned politicians" of Bangladesh whom he had occasions to assist in some ways or the other. Oil Ahad, K G

Mustafa, Sadeeq Khan, Abdus Samad Azad were among his close friends.

Missing from his observation is the politics of Dhaka University both of teachers and students that a reader would have expected from a sociologist sharing his entire life and time with the University.

His reflection on the Bangladesh society, its moorings and values followed Western norms and preferences — while maintaining that "We should proceed towards progress on the basis of only what is ours". Yet the reader can notice that the "Generation gap is almost inevitable between my generation and my son's generation, because we still nurture the values and ideas of our father's generation.... This may appear as a contradiction. While the author informs his readers that his youngest son now living in the USA hopes to marry and the initiative for it is completely his own. He does not expect the author's role in it, he notes with caution that competitiveness is the general feature of the life of the present generation. "Life has become almost mechanical and money-centred. Because of modern men's lack of moorings with social and cultural values and traditions of our society and because of their indifference to the spiritual

aspect of life, they have grown alienated from our generation. He attributes all these to "the bankruptcy of the Western thoughts, ideologies and the moral vacuity of the world". He concludes — rather amphibiously, given his exhortations of the Western education, science and technology throughout the book — that "throughout its three generations of history, his family marched ahead along time without ever shunning (sic) the ways of Islam". At any rate, the end leaves a reader with a happy note that "we are heading towards a moral discipline", albeit not specifying how.

Thus, the author completes his saga of three generations of his father, his own and that of his sons and their times — thereby providing a much needed introspection of the Bangladesh society and its values vis-a-vis Western ideas and institutions. He renders a valuable service of bridging the past and the present, and pointing to the future — thus furnishing with a beacon that the contemporary Bangladeshi youth needs so much today. Here an abiding influence of Professor A K Nazmul Karim (Bangladesh's pioneer sociologist who initiated such sociological analysis) on the author, (the former's students, colleague, the evaluator) can be noted. The late Nazmul Karim challenged the Bangladesh sociologists to comprehend our society in terms of its social moorings. It would not be an overstatement to say that Professor Afsaruddin has responded to the challenge — forth rightly as a sociologist should, adding an autobiographical tinge. The reviewer feels an obligation here to refer to the noted American Sociologist who argued, "It is now the social scientists' foremost political and intellectual task... to make clear the elements of contemporary uneasiness and indifference, and thereby to enable us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society...." (C Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, New York, Grove Press, Inc. 1961).

But the manual's publisher, Misa Ochiai, denies the accusation that people who read the book commit suicide.

"The book is read by people who have no intention of killing themselves," she says. "It indicates how naturally people treat the theme of suicide in Japan."

Hara Kiri Guide is a Bestseller

A do-it-yourself guide to hara kiri is a bestseller in Japan. Suvendri Kakuchi of Inter Press Service reports from Tokyo.

In the old days when samurais still roamed Japan, ritual self-disembowelment was the honourable option for warriors faced with the shame of defeat.

Later, toward the end of the Pacific War, kamikaze pilots dove their explosive-packed Zeros into the funnels of US warships, blowing up the enemy vessels and themselves.

Now a bestselling Japanese book presents ways to commit non-combat hara kiri or suicide, describing in detail routine methods like pill overdose to extreme procedures like freezing and even self-immolation.

It also lists ideal places where to kill oneself — such as a dense wooded area at the foot of majestic Mt Fuji, where police authorities have uncovered numerous suicides in past months.

Published in September, *The Complete Manual of Suicide* has already sold 170,000 copies. Police say five bodies were found near Mt Fuji on Oct. 19 alone. Two of the dead carried the book, which includes a detailed route through the forest.

Although the site had been a 'favourite' among would-be suicide victims before, officials say the number of bodies found there by late 1993 was unusually high — 33, or an increase of 60 percent since the previous year.

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Indeed, sociologists say the

Japanese consider death as a way of preserving one's honour. About two decades ago, for instance, famed author Yukio Mishima disemboweled himself after a failed military coup.

Just last October, rightist leader Shusuke Nomura walked calmly into the office of the *Asahi* newspaper, bowed low in the direction of the Imperial Palace, then shot himself in the abdomen with two handguns.

Sociologists say the death of 58-year-old Nomura, who was clad in the traditional kimono and carrying the rising sun flag used by now defunct Imperial Army, can be classified as a 'protest suicide'.

Apparently, he had felt ridiculed by an article in the *Asahi*, and viewed suicide in the newspaper's premises as a way of regaining his honour.

Suicide manual author Wataru Tsurumi says most Japanese are "not embarrassed or ashamed in taking their own life", in contrast to the stigma associated with those who choose to die by their own hand in the West, or even to those who help others die like the suicide doctor of the United States, Jack Keovorian.

"I treated the subject very seriously because I want the Japanese to realise that death is an option they all have when they feel they have come to the end of their lives," Tsurumi told IPS in a telephone interview.

Aside from advising readers on the methods and places to commit suicide, Tsurumi also crams his book with cartoon illustrations on how to do it.

Publisher Ochiai says the book is being snapped up by both young and old because most Japanese are unhappy

with their lives. Loneliness and the strain to keep up with the fast-paced world runs deep in the lives of many people, especially those in the big cities, she says.

But many sociologists say those who do commit suicide in Japan do so because they were unable to bear pain usually brought on by illness.

They add that more than half of those who kill themselves in this country choose hanging over other methods. Says Yukio Saito of the Japan Help Line: "I expect that it's easier to find rope."

Official figures also indicate that even before Tsurumi's book came out, self-inflicted deaths in recession-hit Japan were already on the rise.

Suicides among children 14 years or younger increased last year by 2.2 percent since 1992, according to statistics. Most of these were attributed to strained relations with friends and family and poor academic performance.

The total number of suicides in Japan by late December 1993 was pegged at 22,104, a rise of 4.8 percent from the previous year, with most of the victims middle-aged men.

One of the most publicised cases was that of a 32-year-old company employee who had been burdened heavily with debts.

Authorities found him, his wife and their four children — the youngest of whom was only seven months old — dead in their car one day last June. Forensic experts ruled their deaths as carbon monoxide poisoning.

Explaining why the children were included in the family death pact, sociologists say Japanese tradition holds parents responsible for their offspring.

Wrote the father in the suicide note: "I feel sorry for the children, but we are taking them with us."

Dark Victory Seeks to Chronicle the End of a Golden Age

Kevin J. Kelley writes from Washington

The IMF's warning



DARK VICTORY will not be among the party favours distributed at this year's celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the World Bank/International Monetary Fund.

Indeed, this new book published by Pluto Press, London, is an unrelenting unsparing attack on the twin financial institutions established in 1944 at Bretton Woods in the United States.

Author Walden Bello, director of the California-based Institute for Food and Development Policy, seeks to discredit the structural adjustment programmes that the Bank has foisted on an increasing number of developing countries.

In just 115 pages, *Dark Victory* strives to present nothing less than a unified theory of global politics during the last 15 years. The book is both overly ambitious and glaringly incomplete.

In a couple of detailed case studies, it convincingly refutes the Bank's claims that structural adjustment does produce long-term benefits for countries that follow the prescribed austerity regime.

Bello contends that structural adjustment has utterly failed in every single instance. The evidence presented in the book does not come close to supporting so sweeping a claim.

Dark Victory is also tendentious in its insistence that the US is solely and wholly to blame for global injustice. According to Bello, US President Ronald Reagan — with assistance from British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher — launched a worldwide "rollback" offensive on taking power in 1981.

Ecological Spiritualism

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looking back to the Vedic times of *tapovana*, he also proved himself to be a successful man of actions. Shantiniketan itself is an effective test-case for Tagore's reflections and discourses on environment. In his "A Poet's School", Tagore maintains: "...today the idea of *tapovana* has lost all semblance with reality and faded into the realm of legend; in a modern poem it would be merely 'literary' and an anachronism, unless re-made under modern conditions of life (italics mine)". Indeed, through the *asrama* of Shantiniketan, Tagore re-makes the idea of *tapovana*, being fully aware of the modern conditions of life. It needs mentioning that Tagore's re-making of the idea of *tapovana* is tailored to the making of man, an ideal man. Tagore in a number of places makes it

clear that the making of an ideal man calls for the building of an ideal environment, and the latter again requires ideal education — fact, all these three are dialectically inter-linked.

The education policy that Tagore himself formulates for the *asrama* clearly stresses the need for training students in the midst of nature and learning from nature itself — reading nature as a highly dense, potential text replete with spaces. Looking backward, one can now see that what has today come to be known as 'textuality of nature' was already considered by Tagore in his own way. It would not be outrageous to say that the Derridean hint that 'the world is text' was, perhaps in a different context, taken up earlier by Tagore in his idea of *Vidyakata* which constitutes one of the learning grounds at

the *asrama*. The emphasis on sense-training, as already indicated, is yet another significant aspect of the education-policy formulated by Tagore.

In fact, at the *asrama*, Tagore activated a grand union of physical environment, human environment, spiritual environment, and cultural environment. During Tagore's times, the *asrama* was full of sky and earth and air; it was full of poetry, drama, dance, rituals and season-celebrations; it was full of the lush green, full of trees, plants and creepers. What is today known as afforestation programme was periodically undertaken by Tagore himself at the *asrama*. Even the architecture of Shantiniketan, given the harmony it maintains between visible, constructed forms and spaces left in and around, is environmentally sound. In fact, one can say that Tagore was trying to build Shantiniketan like a poem or a musical composition. It was

not that Tagore was not at all aware of the forces of disintegration pervading modern life; but, then, he was always involved in a struggle for restoring peace and harmony through taking both inward and outward environment of man into account with commitments and convictions which are love made visible. It is here where Tagore distinguishes himself from the common run of environmentalists busy zooming in on the physical aspects of environment and ferreting out the details of absences.

Now, it is evident that Tagore is not only an environmental visionary and thinker, he is also an environmental activist. And his activism impressively ranges from planning through management down to implementation. Last of all, it needs mentioning that Tagore's spiritualism is never asceticism as such, but always activism animated by love for man and nature.

have actually suffered as a result of the country's declining self-sufficiency in food production, brought about by a structural adjustment measure that cut government price subsidies for fertilizer.

The Bank was seeking to re-order Ghana's economic priorities with the aim of boosting cocoa exports. This export-driven growth strategy, designed to enable Ghana to pay off its foreign debts, failed to produce significant relief, Bello finds.

The emphasis on increasing cocoa exports also led indirectly to serious environmental problems, he adds. When cocoa prices began dropping on international markets — due partly to Ghana's over-production of the crop — World Bank advisers sought to spur overseas sales of the country's timber resources in an attempt to bolster foreign exchange earnings.

Ghana's tropical forests have consequently been ravaged, to the point where the once-lush country could be completely denuded of trees by the year 2000.

Bello then cites the verdict of Ghanaian economist Charles Abugre to the effect that structural adjustment has resulted in greater economic inequality and a rise in absolute poverty.

Dark Victory is much less convincing when it tries to discredit structural adjustment in Indonesia and Costa Rica. Indeed, Bello is reduced to describing Indonesia's apparent social advance as "one of the great mysteries of our time."

Dark Victory could have been a valuable antidote to the cheery self-evaluations being offered by the Bank and IMF on their anniversary. —GEMINI

A majority of Ghanaians

Shantiniketan

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participated by Santhal tribals, Baul singers, students, teachers and a large number of traders and craftsmen from north-eastern parts of India. The fair provides a glimpse of



India's rich cultural heritage. Its memory lingers for a long time in the mind of a visitor.

The author is a freelance writer and photographer. Courtesy: India Perspectives



Basant Panchami celebrations

Farringtons

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University level. I am grateful to my parents for having chosen Farringtons to prepare me for the higher levels of my academic pursuits. Wherever I go from here, I am certain that Farringtons would always have a special place in my mind and I

would always find it a delightful experience to revisit Farringtons.

The writer is a Bangladeshi student studying in Kent who is just about to finish her "A" level and enter BA studies in Cambridge University.