

essay

The Limits of Modernity: The End-of- the-Century Perception of Asian Art

by S Manzoorul Islam

THE *fin-de-siecle* or the end of the century perception in the 1890s in Europe was coloured by a radical awareness of the future which stemmed from a new understanding of one's place in the universe.

Coming at the end of a century marked by conflicts of various kinds (between tradition and technology; science and religion; the individual and the society), this was an essentially relativistic and secular awareness that led to a vision we now call modernism, but which was in essence an attempt to liberate oneself from naturalistic and deterministic ideologies that dominated the 19th century thought; and displace the whole frame of reference held so sacrosanct by the artistic and literary establishments. To quote Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, modernity's quest was:

To objectify the subjective, to make audible or perceptible the mind's inaudible conversations, to halt the flow, to irrationalize the rational, to defamiliarize and dehumanize the expected, to conventionalize the extraordinary and the eccentric, to define the psychopathology of everyday life, to intellectualize the emotional, to secularize the spiritual, to see space as a function of time, mass as a form of energy, and uncertainty as the only certain thing. (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976:50)

If modernism's agenda here seems to cluttered, it is not because too many — or all of the — projects were proposed at the same time, but because in that heady age and time one liberating thought led to another, so that the whole project appear as a set of inter-linked aspirations. What these aspirations defined however, was the basic desire of the mind to reach — if not to level — the ground between the contradictions that the 19th century lived so happily with. The 19th century's valorization of social norms and disciplines at the cost of individual freedom, and its construction of an 'absolute' truth at the cost of plurality of experience, for example, created contradictions that were only — if ever — philosophically and mystically resolved, despite that century's obsession with precise and accurate observation as its preferred method of inquiry. If we look closely enough, this precision versus mysticism by itself becomes another contradiction. In contrast, modernism began with a series of questions that the individual — and not the society at large — raised in a fragmented, alienated and incomprehensible world. Not that the individ-

ual always got his answer — or even waited for one: since the landscape before him, marked by a breakdown of the familiar concepts of time, space and history, was constantly changing and shifting, like the wasteland of T. S. Eliot, and he was expected to be constantly on the move. But raising the questions themselves were well worth a try.

The spirit of the 1890s was quite succinctly captured by Hugo von Hofmannsthal who wrote in "Gabriele D'Annunzio": "Today, two things seem to be modern: the analysis of life and the flight from life ... Modern is the dissection of a mood, a sigh, a scruple; and modern is the instinctive, almost somnambulist surrender to every revelation of beauty, to a harmony of colours, to a glittering metaphor, to a wondrous allegory." (Quoted in Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976:71)

That was in 1893, when flight from life was exemplified by the mood of decadence — in literature (Wilde, e.g.) or art (the pre-Raphaelites, e.g.). But the same "flight from life," when coupled with the powerful and inviting phrase "analysis of life" — produced an artistic *tour de force* that took us through the symbol, the metaphor, the allegory as well as form, colour and space that ultimately proved to be a recharting or restructuring of life. By the year 1900, modernity's search for meaning had crystallized around expressionism, realism and symbolism. All three movements began as a new means of analysing life, each providing an incentive to explore the human situation while taking care that the expressive elements are properly dehumanised. Thus the despair and morbidity inherent in expressionism did not completely smother the feeling of joy and abandonment, but their expressions were neither heightened nor muted, but left to shape themselves out. This autonomy of art — its power to shape itself out — was a reflex of the dehumanizing principle that modernity cherished so much. Art did not bog down to one or several expressive modes, but had an infinite number of possibilities to manifest itself. Realism's dimensions, for example, when freed from particularizing emotions and sentiments ('dehumanized') become architectonic (as in Cezanne) and then geometric (as in cubism). Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "analysis of life" and "flight from life" principles have been at work here: the "flight from life" part was enacted by a desire to ascend to another phase of life, a more refined one perhaps; and the "analysis" part opened new avenues for expression. Herbert Read found in

the works of Mondrian, Gabo and Ben Nicholson the example of a "flight" from reality as taking place from a "discredited reality to create a 'new reality.'" (Read, 1952:36)

Expressionism, realism and symbolism were three different ways of looking at reality, but with varying degrees of emphases on the location, context, contour and essence of that reality. The 19th century believed in order and centrality of experience — the 20th century on disengagement of that order and the individuality of experience. It was inevitable therefore that more abstracted ('disengaged') and more personalized expressions would follow, and a process of transmutation and transformation of these newer experiences into tangible presences in art would set into motion. Thus the content and style kept changing — at a speed that seemed to rival that of the fast changing world of science and technology. Cubism, constructivism, formalism, supermatism, surrealism, superrealism/automatism — all the movements in art of the twentieth century have addressed man's changing conditions — his clash with the forces outside and inside himself, his uncertainty and chaos, his existential crises as well as his inherent romanticism, his static frame of mind as well as his evolving energies and expectations. These movements have been fundamentally aesthetic, not ideological. Modernism, seen both as a process and outcome of these movements, has been liberating. It has created an ethos that enabled man to "perpetually engage" himself "in a profound and ceaseless journey through the means and integrity of art." (Bradbury and McFarlane, 1976:29)

Yet, after years of modernity's progress, some clear signs have emerged to indicate that what Jürgen Habermas described as "the project of modernity" had exhausted some of its possibilities and outreached the aims it set for itself. This exhaustion and over-extension is a ground on which modernity/modernism is being questioned, but the signs were there all along — if one only looked closely. The dehumanization principle, for example, always entailed frustration since it confronted the self's desire to project itself. If modernity's desire was to create a mirror-image of itself, as Hugo von Hofmannsthal indicated, then dehumanization frustrated it. The 19th century centrality, order and control, against which art in the 20th century revolted, was present in one form or another in its productions. Thus analytical cubism, according to Herbert Read "is an

attempt to reduce the images given in visual perception to a schematic or structural order" (Read, 1952:93). Constructivism pursues a non-figurative expression, but the technical method it employs (the materials) finally subjects it to the dimensions of these materials. Even surrealism, an activity meant to be "fundamentally disturbing and essentially impure" (Read, 1952:39) finally expropriated many of the romantic elements which were linked to the grand desire of man for a cosmic rather than worldly and temporal order.

It would indeed be wrong to assume that modernity proposed breaking down of all control or order, since every art has its own order — however imperceptible or interiorised this becomes. I am not proposing that somehow, along the march of modern art across this century, this order became overbearing — although too much emphasis on this order, which is another name for the inner logic of the art work — appear to breed a certain mannerism. What I am pointing out is the omnipotence that modernity gradually came to possess in the region of thought — it began to cultivate an ideology and a philosophy that inflated its own notions, sometimes out of proportion. Towards the end of the last century, modernism became synonymous with eurocentricity; modernity's project became an attempt to impose the grand narrative of the west on other cultures; and the metropolitan discourses became the authorised versions to be replicated across the periphery's geography.

The project of modernity, in recent years, has laid itself open to serious charges of misappropriation — involving the individual, history, race and gender, to further its own cause, besides facing interrogations for complicity with colonialist enterprises. What began at the turn of the century as a pious mission to counter the "western bias" in art, now known as the Bengal School (led by E.B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore and others) is itself being scrutinized for its complicity with colonialist design. Complicity, perhaps, is not the best word here — maybe Bengal School was itself a victim of a colonialist enterprise rather than a complicit party. In whatever way we describe the movement though, we cannot ignore the fact that it was practicing a form of orientalism that the west decided to be the best representative of 'native' Indian art — thus protecting the eurocentric practice of modern art from the contamination of the margin's artists.

II

It has been shown by critics like

Edward Said that even the rationalisation of modernity was more than a self-validating method of inquiry: it was a complacent post-Enlightenment readjustment of cultural representation, power, morals, authority and forms of production. The post-colonial world finds modernity to be self-limiting in many cases, particularly when it comes to the world-view it proposes. This world-view is thoroughly eurocentric, even at this day and age. Considered against the perspective of these limits of modernity, Asian art is seen to be an emerging force that can both question and transcend these limits. Asian art already has its own agenda — although in keeping with the multiplicity of its varied components, and the multicultural nature of its composition, there is no centralised list, nor should there be one. However, as individual countries pursue their own nationalistic agendas while working within the larger fold of modernism, they are confronting the lacunae and the blind spots of modernity as far as it relates to the western art practices. Thus we see in Asian countries a fierce emphasis given on national identities, local colours, folk and indigenous traditions, and the styles practiced by generations of artists while the modernistic canvas is adopted, adapted, expropriated, subverted, recreated — to allow the local vision to develop its own form and meaning. Japanese and Indian art of our time have even gone as far as to propose their own form of modernism where the emerging realities challenge the master-inscriptions of the west.

The other development in Asian art that is taking up the case of modernity's limitations, and enlarging its scope is postmodernism. I shall be using the term postmodernism with some caution here, since it already has been both seriously misunderstood and, in some cases, summarily rejected. The one definition of postmodernism I would like to use here is both descriptive and evaluative, and has a relational function, and, like modernism, has to be understood in the context of what had gone before. Postmodernism, according to this definition, is both historical and ahistorical: it situates itself in time yet denies that time. It is a state of mind as well as a sociological and cultural phenomenon. It denotes "either a continuation, or radical break with, dominant features in an earlier modernism — or the movements of the *avant-garde*" (Selden et al, 1985:201). Postmodernism emphasises the local and the particular cultural values, which is also something that is pertinent to my views in this paper.

Where postcolonialism questions the dominant meanings and attitudes of modernity on the ground that maintained a complicit silence about (or a passive encouragement of) colonialism, postmodernity gets into the very ontological roots of modernity. Implied in postmodernity's questioning of modernism is the fact that by its very terms of reference and the logic of its existence, modernity has to move out (along with all its luggage, including colonialism). John Frow writes: "The temporality of modernism requires its own obsolescence" (Frow, 1991: 141). Postmodernism however, has not been a replacement of modernism, it has not been a complete break with the modernist past either, but a cultural phenomenon of the late twentieth century that questions and resists modernist attitudes, and proposes and entire series of new alternatives. Thus the post-modern "paradox, ambiguity, irony, indeterminacy, and contingency are seen to replace modern closure, unity, order, the absolute, and the rational" (Ashcroft, et al 1995:ix). The votaries of postmodernism celebrate the postmodern moment as a moment of release from the authoritarian dominance of modernism. Leslie Fiedler suggests that the new sensibility of postmodernism will deride the pretensions of Modernist art, and will produce a "certain rude magic in its authentic context" (Fiedler, 1975:365). Whether considered a period, a cultural condition, a cultural logic, a project, or a movement, however, postmodernism does not lend itself to any rigid periodisation — and one reason for such a freedom has been its ahistoricity.

III

The end-of-the-century perception verges on the optimistic, since it stretches its vision into the future. There is a regeneration in Asia's economy, politics, and culture, and a concurrent drive to search for its ontological, social and cultural roots. Asian art reflects this drive in shifting away from a past of uncertain and muddled perceptions about art clear and self-assured understanding of not only art but its mission, and its place in today's world. A reverse orientalism in the 80s had given it the strength — now it is ready to take on the world with its own form of modernism, post-modernism or whatever other label we give to the unique spirit of creativity that marks Asian art today.

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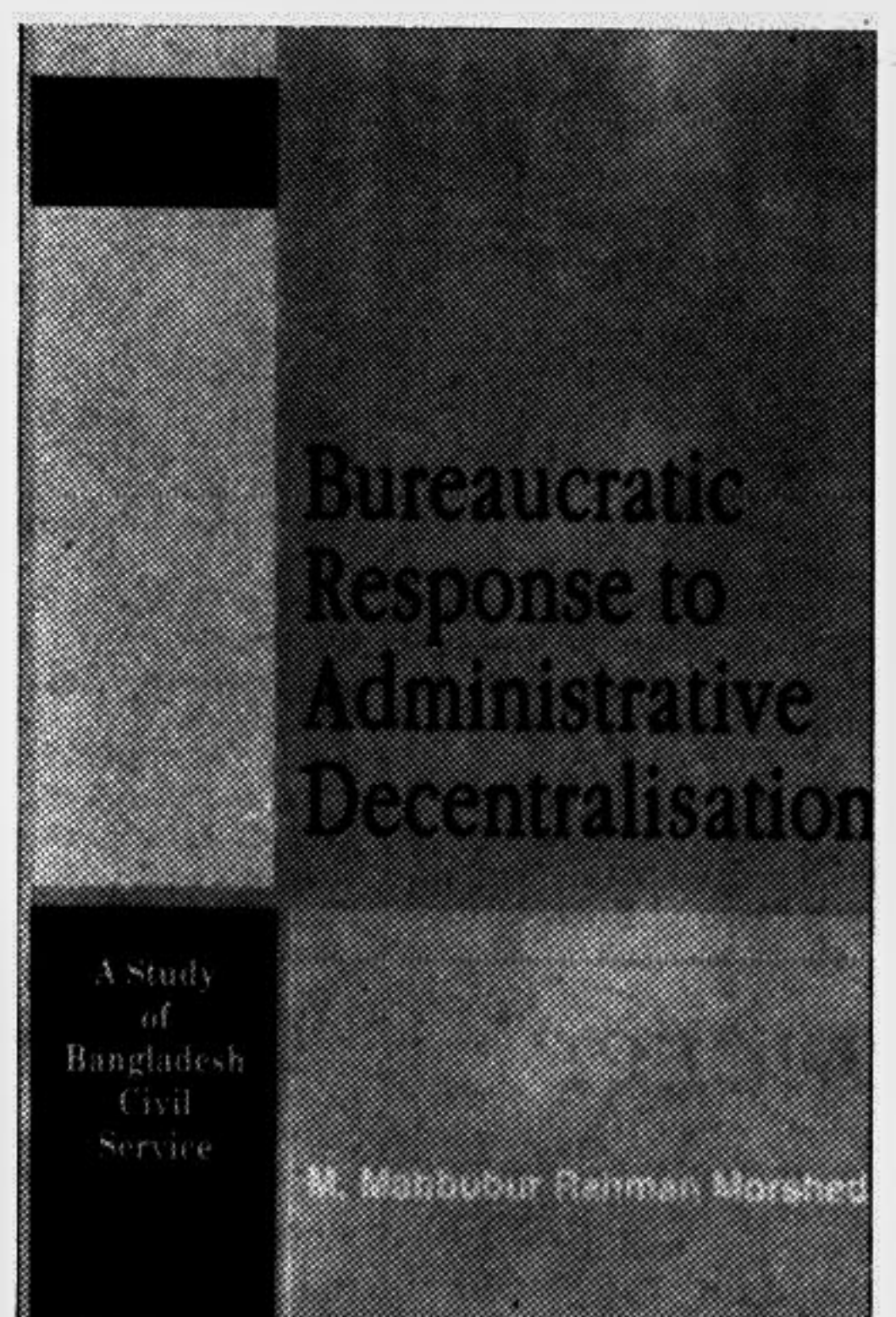
book review

Administrative Decentralization in the Era of Good Governance

by Fahimul Quadir

GOOD governance has become the key word in any discussion of democracy and development in the global political economy. With the failure of structural adjustment programmes to solve fiscal and financial problems of the developing world, the donor community has begun to shift their focus from traditional macro-economic agendas to a variety of political issues such as corruption, accountability, public sector reform, democracy and human rights. The World Bank, for instance, views good governance as an essential part of promoting what it calls "sustainable and equitable growth" in developing countries. Considering developing world's myriad macro-economic problems as a crisis of managing the political realm, it emphasizes the need for improving the structure of development management. The lack of good governance, the Bank believes, not only destroys the ability of a country to develop an enabling environment for rapid economic growth and social progress but it also intensified people's sufferings.

At the heart of concept of good governance is public sector management (PSM), which seeks to develop an administrative system that is decentralized, efficient and responsive to the demands of the people. Accordingly, both the Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are offering help to developing countries to undertake projects that are designed to reform, among other things, civil service. Developing countries are asked to adopt policies which would eventually enable them to establish an appropriate administrative mechanism and or



Bureaucratic Response to Administrative Decentralisation: a study of Bangladesh Civil Service
by M. Mahbubur Rahman Morshed.
Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1997. pp. 238. Tk. 300.00.

structure for achieving the goals of economic and social development.

The text being reviewed is a case study of administrative decentralization in Bangladesh. Based on a solid theoretical framework, the book deals with two major issues: the history of administrative reform and bureaucratic response to administrative decentralization. The author, who himself is a career civil servant, provides a detailed

historical account of Bangladesh's administrative system. Exploring the concept of "development administration", Dr. Morshed discusses the ability of the existing administrative structure to meet popular expectations and demands. Despite several attempts to reorganize as well as decentralize the system, the author suggests, the administrative structure still remains centralized. Dr. Morshed writes:

With the proliferation of bureaucratic empire from the center down to the grass-root level their hands are now more stronger than before. They are now able to exert pressure on the political authorities to realize their group interests with the support of field bureaucrats. The political authorities are dependent on the field officers specially during the time of elections." (p.66).

Clearly, decentralization attempts hardly challenged the historical domination of the country's bureaucratic

elites in decision-making.

Dr. Morshed analyses the organizational characteristics of the Bangladesh Civil Service and examines a number of important issues such as the process of recruiting civil servants and various types and methods of training public servants. Also, he looks at some major personnel issue, which have sharpened inter-cadre conflicts, on the one hand and have negatively affected the efficiency of Bangladesh's Civil Service, on the other. The author rightly argues that the present recruitment procedures are grossly flawed, failing to maintain uniform standard for recruiting different groups of civil servants. Likewise, the process of promoting officials only on the basis of annual confidential reports is proven to be improper and inaccurate. Such a system has consistently showed its inability to address issues such as merits, talents, skills and efficiency of the officers. Similarly, the cur-

rent methods of training civil servants have hardly enabled them to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for efficiently running government machinery. Dr. Morshed therefore identifies the need for devising appropriate methods of recruitment, training and promotion, making the civil service more efficient and people-oriented.

The author provides an interesting historical account of administrative decentralization in Bangladesh starting from the British colonial period. While both the British and Pakistani colonial rulers made several attempts to decentralize the administrative structure of the country, the concept of administrative decentralization got a new meaning following Bangladesh independence. In order for development to take place successive regimes undertook measures for reforming the highly centralized administrative system that continued to frustrate the hope of the majority. None of these measures, however, succeeded in, as Dr. Morshed suggests, ensuring popular participation in decision-making. The lack of commitments on the part of the country's bureaucratic and political elites hindered the process of building a decentralized, development-oriented administrative mechanism. Therefore, the hope for developing an administrative structure in post-independent Bangladesh in order to foster popular participation at the grassroots remains unrealized.

Evaluating the structure of Upazila administration, Dr. Morshed explores the prospects for what is popularly known as "bottom-up" planning at the local level. Contrary to popular expectations, the Upazila system failed to change Bangladesh's hitherto-existent centralized planning mechanism. Instead of involving ordinary citizens in

planning, the system continued to rely upon the country's bureaucratic elites. With the absence of adequate provisions for popular participation, civil servants, in general and officials from the administration cadre, in particular dominated planning at the Upazila level. The role of Upazila chairmen in decision-making was even more disappointing. As an elected representative of the people, he/she had no opportunity whatsoever to play a significant role in Upazila level planning. In other words, the system failed to introduce a people-oriented development administration/planning in the country. Identifying bureaucratic inability to positively respond to administrative decentralization, the author therefore focuses on the need for, among other things, bureaucratic reorientation through well-designed training programs. Also, he recommends that the government should allow local non-governmental organization to participate in local level planning and development activities and take actions in mobilizing local resources to decentralized administrative units.

In brief, this is a theoretically significant, policy-relevant volume that provides an exciting analysis of the structure of public administration in Bangladesh and addresses the importance of reforming the country's Civil Service. Anyone — students, academics, policy-makers and politicians — interested in Bangladesh's Civil Service would find this timely publication extremely useful.

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