

## BOOK REVIEW

# Focus on Immunization

By A K M MAZHARUL ISLAM

The 'Near Miracle' Revisited. Social Science Perspective of the Immunization Programme in Bangladesh. AMR Chowdhury, KMA Aziz and Abbas Bhuiya (Ed.) 1999. Het Spinhuis, Amsterdam 138 pp.

**T**HIS book succeeds in painting the picture of the immunization in Bangladesh. It is probably the first of its kind to cover the issues of immunization from the social science perspective. By using qualitative methods of investigation the authors have convincingly demonstrated some of the cultural aspects of the immunization programme heretofore not addressed. The Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) in Bangladesh was initiated in the early 1970s which generated intensive programmatic attention and donor support in 1985 when the government responded to UNICEF's call to immunize 80 percent of the world's children by 1990. Since that time the EPI programme has been supported by strong social mobilization and communication activities, and multi-partner support from donors and non-government sources. An increase in the rate of coverage from 2 per cent in 1985 to 61 per cent in 1998 has been acclaimed as a 'near miracle' although it is still below the target of 80 per cent coverage.

This book highlights that though it is important to achieve target coverage rate, it is perhaps more important to sustain the progress so far attained. In this regard it is essential to understand the roles of culture,

socio-economic factors, cultural barriers, ethnocentric approaches and intra-household dynamics as they influence people's response to medical innovations like immunization. A greater understanding of prevailing beliefs and practices about disease prevention might further assist programmatic efforts to increase community acceptance and thus can support immunization. This book is a document to identify the important role of social science research in identifying social structural barriers and opportunities, and ensuring sustained EPI coverage in Bangladesh.

In this book, the authors identify the jargon terminology that is used for the six immunizable diseases and their respective vaccines. The perception and knowledge of mothers/guardians', their beliefs and practices about the traditional means of preventing vaccine preventable diseases (VPDs), as well as immunization as a prevention to those diseases are the central focus of the book. It also highlights about the reasons for not getting immunized and dropping out, the relationships between demand for immunization, and socio-cultural and economic factors.

Immunization coverage, maintenance of cold chain, political commitment and financing of the EPI, constraints and prospects of development and production of vaccines from national and international perspectives are also discussed elaborately. This book also provides a unique historical background of the immunization programmes in Bangladesh including the National Immunization Days (NIDs).

## The 'Near Miracle' Revisited

Social Science Perspectives of the Immunization Programme in Bangladesh  
Editor: A.M.R. CHOWDHURY  
K.M.A. AZIZ  
ABBAS BHUIYA

One of the important aspects about the book is that it not only covers the plain land areas of rural and urban Bangladesh, but also covers the remote and hilly areas like Chittagong Hill Tracts, the tea gardens of Sylhet and the water isolated 'haor' areas of Bhairab. This book warns that there is hardly any reason to be optimistic if the question comes for the target of reaching 80 percent coverage for the country.

The authors argue that the achievement of 86 percent coverage for BCG shows the capacity of the existing health system. It shows that the access of the population to immunization services is high in the country. But for various reasons the drop out rate is also high. Moreover, immunization sessions in 10 per cent of the cases did not take place at all, and DPT vaccines and immunization cards were constantly in short supply.

Authors further argue that success would mostly depend on how the cases of side effects are dealt with and how the information about it is disseminated. Referring to the coverage rates of China (95%), the authors state that missed opportunities and dropouts can be minimized by the national registration of every birth. Bangladesh do not have a minimum birth registration system. They further suggested that the child registration system in China or 'immunization contract' can be replicated for Bangladesh. This book suggests that the 'pockets of low coverage' in different areas would require special attention from policy makers. In this connection the unacceptably low rate of coverage in Chittagong Hill Tracts, tea estates, haor areas, urban slums, floating population are mentioned.

The authors urge that if the EPI success is due to social mobilization efforts, then the future sustainability will depend on continuing them, while simultaneously strengthening the wider national health services. The delivery of health services (not just EPI) to currently unrecalled popu-

lations needs to be improved. The authors demand the need for political commitment for the sustainability of EPI. The refusal to call off hartals on NIDs indicates the vulnerability of the commitment of political leaders. Political commitment apparently did not run very deep or very long. The authors strongly emphasize that the GoB has to make long term budgetary reservations for the EPI.

To ensure the sustainability of EPI, the government has to be committed to wider socio-economic development for the whole country. Immunization may provide a cost-effective means to reduce the risk for children and pregnant mothers, but on their own they are no guarantee of good health. The only way the health of the nation can be assured is by improving socio-economic conditions. Poverty needs to be reduced and environmental changes such as the provision of proper sanitation, housing, and improvements in nutritional status are necessary, not only to eliminate the conditions in which diseases foster and spread, but also to enable children physically combat ill health.

The book, though have a ground-breaking role, is not without flaws. Some readers may find some chapters oversimplistic and sweeping. Nevertheless, even people unsympathetic to the book's note on the vacuum of political commitment should find it worth reading.

The writer teaches anthropology at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology.

## FICTION

# An Asian Encounter with Romanian communism

By MOHAMMAD AMJAD HOSSAIN

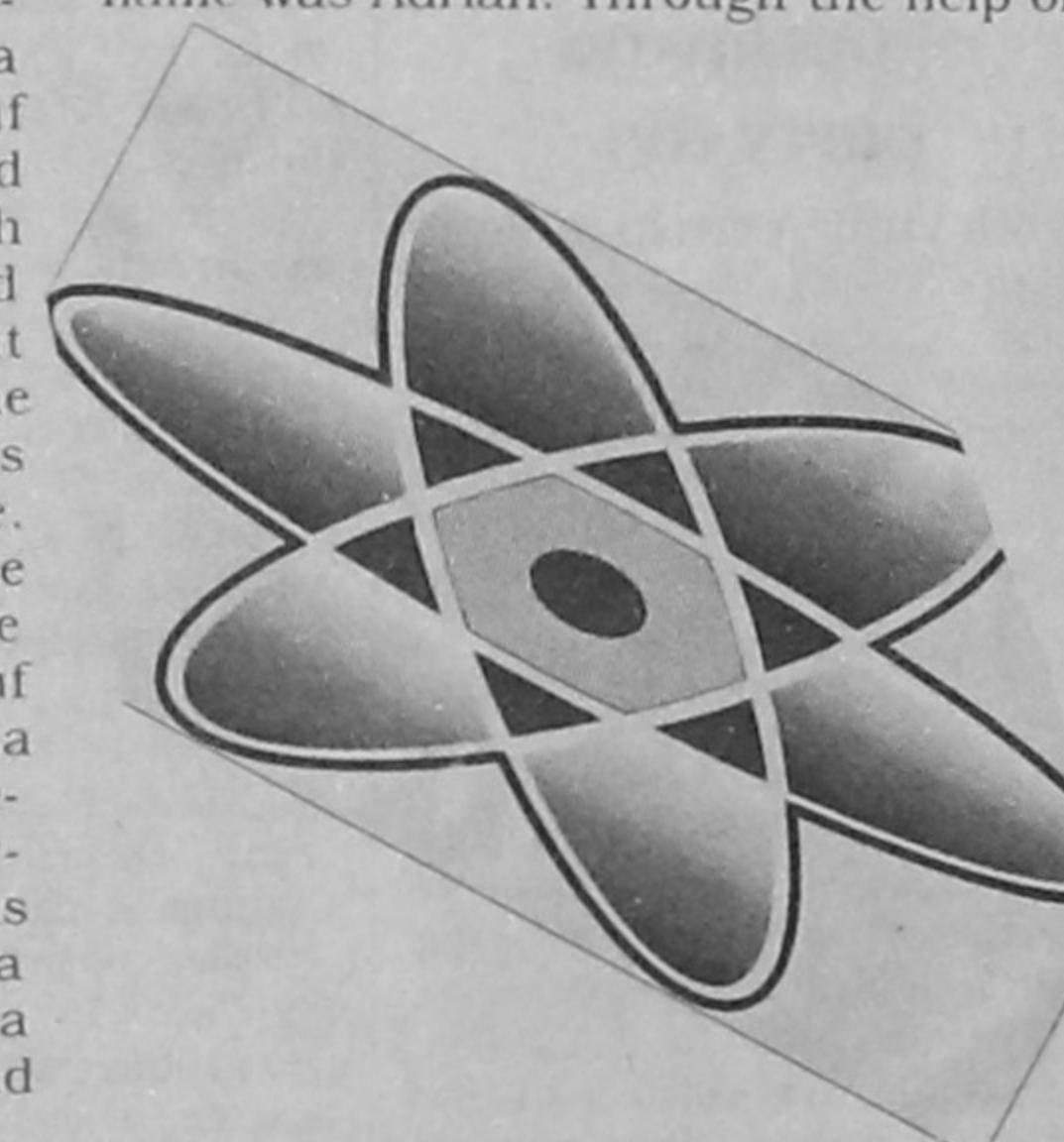
Continued from last week

IT was officially encouraged to produce more children, whether legitimately or illegitimately. This made no difference as a woman was entitled to receive more benefits from the government, including long maternity leave and less tax.

Olga became a vocal protagonist for the cause of womenfolk and she was elected vice-president of the Romanian Women's Association. She was full of profound satisfaction for being able to remain engaged in social activities. Olga was also instrumental in sponsoring a fund raising campaign for the orphan children in cooperation with the United Nations organisation, UNICEF. She came to visit Rouf to persuade him to buy a ticket

to her parents' house. Rouf said that he would try his best to find time to visit her parents.

Establishing contacts with people, organising meetings at different levels and attending official dinners constituted part of Rouf's daily activities. In his six-day stay in a hotel, Rouf had developed a friendship with a young man at the reception counter whose name was Adrian. Through the help of



Adrian, Rouf learnt the interesting tricks of the money market. There were two kinds of exchange rate on the market. The official rate was 9 Lei (The name of the Romanian currency) to one Dollar, whereas unofficially it was transacted at 40 to 60 Lei to one Dollar. The official exchange rate remained static and was never devalued. It seemed to be an artificial rate when one considered the black market rate. On Adrian's advice, Rouf was immensely benefited in terms of exchange of money. In the six months he had been in Bucharest, Rouf had visited many places in and around the city.

During the time of the communist regime, religious practice was not active as it was closely monitored, controlled and circumscribed by the state machinery. The government had provided subsidies to some religious groups, but actions by central and local authorities, which abridged basic religious rights were a continuing source of concern. Rouf had been to Calderusani Monastery to see for himself the nature of practicing religious rites. It was a wooden monastery which had been set up in the seventeenth century. Rouf found to his amazement a few elderly Romanian women who were offering prayers imperceptibly in the church. Founded by the ruling Prince Matei Basarab in 1636, Calderusani Monastery contained a collection of medieval art objects and a few early paintings by the renowned Romanian painter, Nicolae Grigorescu.

with the Romanian language, which has its origins in Latin. All of a sudden, his eyes focused on the second row where Carmen was seated. After the opera was over, Rouf met Carmen and exchanged pleasantries. She also availed of the opportunity to invite



for fund-raising. Rouf obliged as part of his religious obligation to offer money for orphans, poor relations and distressed human beings.

Rouf met another woman by the name of Manuela, who also shared the same views as Olga as far as the life of married women were concerned. Manuela, being intelligent and a fairly highly-educated woman remained a spinster. She never felt like marrying a man in Romania although she served under the male-dominated workplace. The main reason given by Manuela was that she was one of the few women who refused to give birth to a child to serve Ceausescu and his clan. The behaviour of her father might have contributed to her decision to remain a spinster. Her father, who is a lawyer, is living with a woman who is not the mother of Manuela. She is inclined to believe in natural things. Her favourite place is the open air nude club in Bucharest.

One day Carmen informed Rouf that she was interested in paying a visit to Pakistan and wanted to know the requirements for granting a visa. While talking on the telephone, Rouf extended an invitation to Carmen to visit his office for a discussion about the matter. She was delighted to accept his invitation.

After severe snowfalls during the previous few days, the roads had become slippery and except for the main thoroughfares, snow was not removed by the authorities as this incurs heavy expenditure and was part of the austerity measures undertaken by the com-

## BOOK REVIEW

# Who is Smiling Now?

By ROBERT ANDERSON

Continued from last week

By the time of China's first nuclear bomb in 1964, the U.S., Britain and Canada (and perhaps France?) thought there was a credible (if too expensive) capacity for India to build a bomb, as Bhabha announced in 1964. But as with his estimates on the completion of reactors and the contribution of atomic energy to the energy economy, Bhabha exaggerated (sometimes deliberately) the speed and efficiency with which it could be done. After all he was expected to show something positive for all his big budgets. Perkovich shows why it would take twice as long as Bhabha claimed, even had he not suddenly been killed in 1966. There were some ingredients, including plutonium, but there was no design knowledge, or basic equations, and no possession of explosive lenses for the bomb itself. Even then Indira Gandhi would probably not have authorised tests in 1967, 1968, or 1969 if Bhabha had lived, or so we can speculate from Perkovich's evidence. When she did, in late 1971 or early 1972, it took scientists another two and a half years to achieve it.

All through this period there was a rich interplay of individual and party political positions on how this nuclear capacity should be used.

Perkovich shows how divisions within the Congress party used the bomb as a rhetorical device (but seldom spoke about the cost of atomic energy), and how the Jan Sangh/BJP moved from the shadows into the foreground skilfully using, among other things, the bomb. There was a complex interplay among politicians, their top administrators, scientists and the military, as Perkovich shows: but it is not a unified picture, by any means. Unfortunately we do not yet have analysis of how this interplay worked in various states and regions, nor studies of the local society and economy surrounding these huge nuclear projects, as we do now have in all the other 'nuclear' nations (including the secret Soviet nuclear cities), except China. There is a vast opportunity for scholars in India if they turn their attention responsibly to this subject, in spite of its difficulties. Those who have already done this are opening new windows.

Where Perkovich excels is where he discusses U.S. strategic and military relations with India, and the effects of global American nuclear policies on India. Nuanced and exceptionally well informed, relying on ground-breaking interviews and rare documents, he provides a 50-year history of U.S. objectives in the region, the hopeless U.S. attempt to back Pakistan and India equally while cooling their desires for bombs and conventional weapons, and the shallow U.S. grasp (at the top) as to why India might be preparing to achieve nuclear weapon status, that is, what a bomb might mean in India. Even with a surrounding scholarly and analytical community second to none, U.S. policy makers appear un-

able to understand South Asia, notwithstanding their internal administrative and tactical disagreements. Hinting at Indian duplicity in this ambiguous nuclear environment, Perkovich mirrors it with U.S. duplicity that had since 1965 contemplated 'approving' an Indian bomb in order to keep an influence on its deployment, and to shape the conditions of its use. Even after the 1974 test, Henry Kissinger feigned mild disapproval of the first nuclear test, and later feigned 'concern' about its consequences. Zbigniew Brzezinski was 'sympathetic' in the late 1970s, says Perkovich, to keeping India's nuclear option open for purposes of U.S. interest in regional security. Reading his close account of U.S.-Indian discussions in the late 1990s gives me an eerie sense of *deja vu*, based on my reading of thousands of secret documents from the 1950s and 1960s. But he does not provide the readers with a view of French or Russian relations with Indian nuclear history, because he cannot: those countries have closed their files as tightly as India has, and we have so little evidence to work with. Even Canada has not yet declassified all its files from 1947 up to 1970.

The book concludes with a thoughtful assessment of what Indians have gained and lost in the acquisition of nuclear weapons, and in resembling other nuclear states. The conclusion is a very thoughtful essay about the thinking the nuclear powers have done (or not done) in the more than 50 years since the bombs dropped in August 1945 in Japan. What Indians lost, says Perkovich, was a set of illusions about nuclear weapons, science and technology, and their roles in Indian history. Some Indians had eagerly or reluctantly adhered to these illusions, and some non-Indians, including Americans, had actively participated in promoting them. He then critically examines four illusions inherent in some U.S. international relations theory and nuclear non-proliferation on policy, namely that concerns about national security decisively determine the efforts to acquire nuclear weapons (they do not); that non-proliferation is 'the flip side of proliferation coin' (it is not, because reduction of insecurity has not inhibited India's weapons builders); that democracy facilitates reductions on the spread of nuclear weapons (it has a more variable effect in different countries, and democracy actually makes it more difficult in India to 'unproliferate', to use Perkovich's term); and finally, that disarmament that occurs mutually and equitably among nuclear powers is not a prerequisite to achieve non-proliferation in other, less-powerful states such as India. To the latter, 'the grandest illusion of the nuclear age', Perkovich responds that 'India's connection of its nuclear policies to those of the major powers' is no more dubious than many of the arguments proffered by the nu-

## POEM

### Be Men

By FARDEEN CHOWDHURY

Evolution marks its hollow deeds in us, the untold breach souls kept out of reach of children and preachers

Slumber day! Cloak us in freedom, this static speech forgiveness we beseech yet this world scoffs to teach us.

Would you bathe us in regret, wipe us dry with apology, cool us with reconciliation? If we were dogs, would you be men?

This ceiling of earth too much for sorrow to leak through and reach ears, to leech remembrance from the casual human.

This cold, cold closet houses our spirits and we thank thee for thy prayer better late than ever.