

Book Review

A Vision and Strategy for Bangladesh

Bangladesh: Promise and Performance presents an intellectual stocktaking of the country's past and present

The articles in the book, written by some of the best known scholars on Bangladesh, is an attempt to analyze how the country has performed in the three decades since her independence. The essays illuminate the critical debates that have defined Bangladesh's politics and policies since her birth: the identity question; the issue of democratization and community and people's participation; challenges of economic growth, human development, poverty alleviation; social transformation and the empowerment of the underprivileged groups, and the role of civil society and effective governance in fostering democracy and development.

The volume is designed to serve as a standard text book for courses on Bangladesh and South Asian Studies. The articles are grouped in four parts. In part I, Introduction, Rounaq Jahan provides an overview of the key arguments of the book and a brief political history of the country. In part II, titled Politics two articles by Anisuzzaman and Willem Van Schendel analyze the identity question. A third article by Zarina Rahman Khan describes the various experiments of decentralization by different regimes. In part III, titled Society, four articles examine different aspects of social change. Abu A. Abdullah cites three examples of modernizing changes; Stanley Kochanek traces the evolution of business power; Harry W. Blair focuses on the role of the NGOs in the democratization of the polity and Shelley Feldman presents a contrasting view of the NGOs, highlighting their limitations

and contradictions. In part IV, titled Economy, three articles review the performance in the economic sector. Azizur Rahman Khan analyzes the macroeconomic trends; Binayak Sen examines the issues of growth, poverty and human development and Kirsten Westergaard with Abul Hossain describe the changes in a specific village over a period of three decades. Part V of the book contains an article by Rehman Sobhan providing a forward looking vision for Bangladesh in the new millennium.

A discussion meeting on the book was held at the Centre for Policy Dialogue on October 21, 2000. Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman of the Centre moderated the discussion. Professor M.M. Akash reviewed the articles dealing with Politics; professor Nasreen Khundker reviewed the articles grouped under Society and Professor Mustafizur Rahman reviewed the articles concerned with the Economy. Many of the authors participated in the discussion. Following are the three reviews on the three sections of the book read out by Professors MM Akash, Nasreen Khundker and Mustafizur Rahman.

By Professor Nasreen Khundker

Continued from earlier issue

The section on society consists of four papers. I will briefly comment on each of these papers, before stating some overall conclusions.

The paper by Abu Abdullah titled Social Change and Modernization describes

some modernizing trends in Bangladesh society. The three examples he gives are:

the adoption by farmers of HYV and certain changes in tenurial relations (from share-cropping to fixed rent) and labour contracts (more wage labour),

the "re-negotiation of purdah" by women to allow them to work in garments factories, and

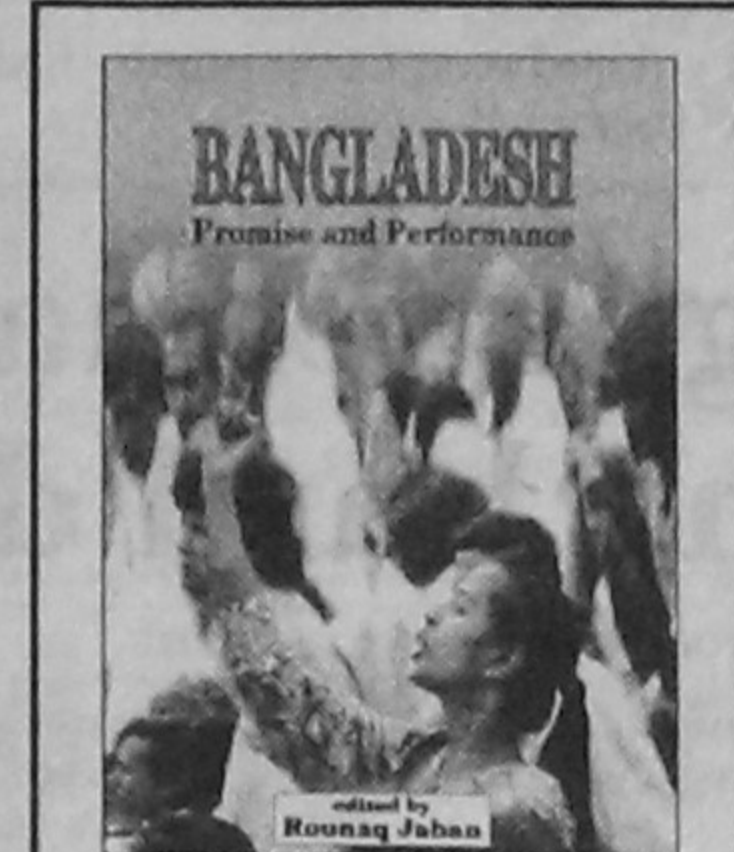
behavioural changes leading to fertility decline.

He also gives some definition of "modernity" in terms of efficacy as opposed to fatalism, innovativeness, readiness to adopt economically advantageous behaviour against traditional norms, etc.

One cannot deny these changes, especially in the eighties. But his analysis begs some questions, e.g. why is it the poorest who are undergoing such changes in behaviour, as with garments workers, poor farmers, poor rural women (contraceptive use, micro credit)?

I would argue that this is due to survival needs under very difficult economic conditions, even though it implies response to economic opportunities. I have found micro enterprises to be similarly innovative and adoptive.

Further question that needs to be asked is what happens when expectations of minimum survival options are thwarted e.g., with environmental degradation in rural areas (use of STW and fall in water level; use of fertilizer and loss in fertility of the soil), or failure to improve living condition in cities or working



Bangladesh: Promise and Performance
Edited by Rounaq Jahan
Dhaka UPL and London Zed Book 2000

The book, 389 pages long, is a collection of twelve articles, ten of which were presented at an international conference on Bangladesh titled Bangladesh at 25 which was held at Columbia University in New York in December 1996. The editor of the volume, Rounaq Jahan, organized the conference in collaboration with the Centre for Policy

condition in factories for garment workers?

Innovativeness for micro enterprises is not rewarded with higher economic profits. It is often a means to be forced to stay ahead of the market (survival strategy).

Stanley Kochanek's paper: The Growing Commercialization of Power in Bangladesh is basically a historical account of business associations as part of civil society in Bangladesh, and the role of the business community in its efforts towards organized collective action in its favour rather than procuring individual benefits. The growing power of the business elite is

expected with the growing role of the private sector in the economy. However, the process seems to have been less effective due to conflicts of interest between traders and industrialists, small and large business, partisanship, etc., the latter being a pervasive feature of society.

Not too much can be gleaned from the paper. It also raises, a pertinent question: How will the rise of business to power affect the development process in the future and how is it affecting it now? (e.g., in terms of growing inequality, unequal access to education and health with marginalization of the public sector, etc.).

Harry Blair in his paper Civil Society, Democratic Development and International Donors, basically argues for donors to support Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) like environmentalist and women's groups to counteract the influence of the business community and to make the state more accountable.

CSOs are thus an element in the democratization process of the country. Again a relevant question is: To what extent are they independent (from donors) and able to represent the public interest? Democracy is not tension free, and there are counter reactions and backlashes. There is also equal ground for interventions by less progressive donors e.g. Islamic countries.

Shelley Feldman in her paper NGOs and Civil Society-Unstated Contradictions: links the NGO movement with economic liberalization

and privatization of social relations and changes in production relations from home-based agriculture using family labour to more diverse household survival strategies involving individual family members.

She mentions social control exercised by NGOs, where mobilization is largely functional, to execute different programmes. I agree with this thesis. More research is needed on what types and extent of control is exercised by the NGOs over family life and its implications for loss of democracy?

She emphasizes utilitarian relationship between members and the organization, and between members with no real solidarity. There is some truth in all of this but it raises further questions. It underplays:

the efficacy of NGOs in terms of service delivery, conscientization, and channeling of resources;

The extent of countervailing power provided, unless they fail as in the case of Gono Shahajja Shangstha (GSS) when, such social tinkering may be damaging;

Nature of the state and political parties and can they act on behalf of the poor/disadvantaged?

To sum up: what do these papers say?

They analyze the changes occurring in contemporary Bangladesh society in the context of the new global (neoliberal) order. The conclusion is that Bangladesh society is now more pluralistic, with more players such as NGOs, and business organizations,

influencing politics and other outcomes. The consensus seems to be that the state and political parties lack accountability and are dysfunctional. Bangladesh is also probably a more modern state as Abdullah argues.

There are some unstated conclusions:

The overarching role of the World Bank, IMF, WTO, in shaping macro policies;

Business and political parties aligning to these interests;

Marginalization of the interests of the poor, workers, small business etc.;

Pluralism leads to more tension and does not negate the dominance of richer groups.

Loss of voice of other groups such as trade unions.

My own conclusions are as follows:

NGOs may still be the more progressive forces;

Need more analysis as to why political parties are in this state? Is it because of the dominance of the "neoliberal" international actors that they cannot find an independent role representing the public good, beyond realising short-term economic benefits for its members? Is it due to the influence of a preponderant materialist philosophy and decline of traditional values or a socialist/welfarist ideology, brought about by globalization? We need to think more about these issues.

Professor Nasreen Khundker is Associate Professor of Economics at Dhaka University

Poems

Telegraph to the sky

By Sandile Dikeni

Stay with me when the sun rises from a western sky with silver spears lashing at earth and our youth when the eastern horizon hangs smoke as celebration to a fading dream will you take my blistered hand to a kiss? That journey between reflex action and conviction where moments flash from substance to emotion and where we count seconds as instinct we live in time where we are against time and impulse rules over us as undirected, unselected factor we live cliché as fact and fact is cliché to the one beat of change

Will you stay with me When I have no more hallelujahs To your name And instead offer dahlias to your anonymity when my knees refuse to bend at your beauty but my eye of growth raises an altar to your soul that power that dreams awake the Brazilian forest or in its strength of wish reawakens our dead at Kassinga, Biafra or wherever your heart lives among the innocent dead unaware that their heads are facing downwards. Nowadays They don't hang you by the neck till you die. They dangle you by the feet till the blood comes to the brain. It's a high feeling that makes you reach for sky but touch earth as limit as ecstasy of reaching some end because some journeys are so long and much longer when you live in a dream forest called poetry. Stay with me.

They say It is not by bread alone that we live I know It is by poetry alone that we survived With poetry dancing on our tongues we wiped the blood from our mouths we charmed our torturers we dangled freedom bliss from our shackles we made music out of sirens we made homes out of prisons

we redesigned parliaments out of corrugated iron we petrol bombed our angry past we blasted our martyrs out of our brains and we made shrines out of their graves we weaved forgiveness onto our T-shirts and with last remaining droplets of blood we tried to paint peace on angry dark skies we silenced our solitude we mated our humility with our anger with hammers and chisels we punched hope deep into our hearts we swam, we danced and we played water games in our tears and now, now we wave flags so bright sometimes brighter than our future but stay with me

Stay with me when the jungle has no tree when the wind has no breath when the rain has no sea the desert has no sand the stars have no eyes to see God has no mercy and the devil is making barbecue out of the land Now, will you stay with me?

Stay, so that we sing songs from experience we sing ideas from consciousness and let's cultivate destiny from the barrenness of this, this history. Stay with me.

Shall you? Please?

Sandile Dikeni is a South African Journalist.

Welcome year 2001

By Maj. Gen. Z A Khan (Retd)
Bright and glowing new sun will greet, The shining morning of promise to plead For serenity of souls that was wrought By trifles of gains and pleasure unworth. The by-gone year felt unprecedented tremor Which violently rocked the age old order And subjected millions to shameless servitude Freedom from which had cost lives of multitude. Its now time to honour the slain Whose raw guts and blood threw in disdain Those that forfeited our right to heaven In this bountiful world a sigh of relief. Smile oh gracious doer of right For days ahead will map in delight A clean new world without boundary Which will witness no mean and quandry.

Contemporary Sri Lankan Poetry

Translated by Susil Sirivardana from original Sinhala

Encounters

By Ravindra Hewavitarane

1
When they dig wells and strike water
I satisfy my own thirst

When they explore new paths of life

I encounter my own self

2
The speaking water

Of an ancient waterway

Flowing through sculpted rocks

Invites us to history with fine voice;

Rustling thoughts of grandeur like a giant cliff

Driving a quest for the experience of history

Vishva Mitra

By Parakrama Koddituwakku

Through ancient pathways of continental Asia
We are travellers walking together
Animal skins
On our feet
The headgear and turbans, many hued
Signifying tribal heritages

Through endless padayathras
Echoing loudly mantras-vedas
The pilgrim reaches holy ground
Home to myriad gods and Buddha
A single sacred territory
Was the vastness of Asia

Seeds sown
By those intrepid pilgrims
With devotion to the earth
Could not remain
Unfructified

Whether the Lord Buddha
Whether the Son of Christ
Whether the Almighty Allah
All of them collectively grace the Hindu Sabha

God is everywhere
God is within
God is love
The Family of Asian Humankind
Which nurtured all cosmic life
Makes us Vishva Mitras

Under the shade of the Great Tree
Seated on the earth
The mind touching
The constellations and the stars

He visioned the universe

That vision
Abandoned desire
Forsook attachment
Reached the inner being
Attaining union with God

Will the human hand become a small missile today?
And human head become a merchant bank?
Will the human heart become an information network?
And the human frame become a robotic lever?
Will the human eye probe maya?
Is there a method
To vanquish this universal virus?

The human spirit
Which sheltered God
Through ancient pathways
Is this but not a journey
This path we are walking
Leading, to a new millennium?

All musics of Asia were composed
With the svara mandala of the India Oceans
If we unite to sing one common song
Will not the India Oceans
Roar out in triumph

Let me be a traveller
Let me be a devotee:
And on that magnificent pilgrimage
May you too become a Vishva Mitra!

(Specially composed for the SAARC Writers' Conference)

One of our own

Stop
Stop
Stop the battle!

Lord Elara,
Dismount your elephant and come forward!
Your Highness, Dutugemunu
Offer a seat, to Lord Elara!

From tree to tree she moves
Tapping the rubber trees
Extracting the white sap
And bringing the latex
Is Sarawathie
Smiles on her lips
The smile of Elara

With aching fingers
She plucks the tea
Wet with dew and mist
Yellow eyes wide open
Perspiring black beads
She gazes, silently
Her nose-ring asparkle

Is Nithyakala Elara's Sister

Saraswathie Nithyakala

Together we bathed in the same spot in the Menik River
Together we worshipped in the same pilgrim band at Adam's Peak
Together we studied in the same class at school
Together we ate vade in the same Thosa cafe!

Somadevi, the office lass
Was vouchsafed an address
At Kataragama
By Sivalingam.....!

Elara fighting Dutugemunu
And Gemunu the supreme victor!
Elara's corpse aloft his elephant!

Stop clapping
Stop clapping
Stop clapping
For whom is the applause?
Who has a tear
One single tear
To offer
To that name?

He who died then
Was one of our own
One of the family
Of our own household!

Fear

By Shamim Azad

The clod blooded sound of my work
Was melting into ocean-ful of tears.

Stripped bare naked for all to see
The devil's syllable is creeping
Creeping in my head
Which is
Upsetting
Enveloping
Terrifying
Disappearing
And, drowning.
"Look at me, I'm quivering like a lamb."

I got fear
You got fear
We all got fear.
But I want to be loved even for my dirt.

16.8.00 Guild Hall University, London

The fiction "A Romanian Encounter" by Mohammad Anjad Hossain could not be published this week due to unavoidable circumstances.

Impression

About Death

By MA Rahman

It is the rule of Nature of anything living is to undergo changes through death. The living species in this mortal world including human beings must have to embrace the cold spell of death for its transformation. It is the process of Nature as such with the creation of life and as the day and night. The process of death means the absence of life.

But all deaths are not natural. Accidents, diseases, wars and animosities amongst men, sometimes, cause deaths, themselves. The deaths of humdrum mortals are ignoble but some deaths of some persons are noble glorious and memorable in all ages and civilizations. For their noble deeds and sacrifices for the cause of humanity we claim to be civilized, make us free from the shackles of social prejudices and colonial domination and as such we can boast of being the builders of our own destiny.

Some dates of the calendar are pinned in our hearts causing vast tragedies in our national life. We remember February 21, as the day of martyrdom for our mother tongue; March 26, as our Independence Day, the day of declaration of liberation war against the Pakistani occupation forces at the cost of the lives of our three million people. We remember the glorious deaths of our freedom fighters. The date of December 16, is our Victory Day with joy as well as pathos for those we lost in war. We remember the date of December 14, as the Day of Martyrdom of our intellectuals. On that date the remnants of Pakistani hordes killed our intellectuals at the pre-dawn of the day of our victory. Their deaths are memorable in all ages of our life. August 15, a day of vast tragedy in the annals of our national life. On that date in 1975, our Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was brutally killed with his family members by some disgruntled retired members of our armed forces along with the conspirators of our Independence. It seems to be another Shakespearean drama like Julius Caesar staged in our national life about 26 years ago. When the first bullet was shot at him the Father asked the killer, "Is it you, Mustaq?" Just in the same voice Caesar asked his friend, "Et Tu, Brute! Then fall Caesar!" (Thou too Brutus! Then fall down Caesar!). But the difference in between the two glorious deaths is the appearance of Antony in the case of Caesar while the sycophants in the case of Mujib here lies the tragedy.

The killers of Mujib once boasted by proclaiming the heinous deeds of killing, not only of Mujib but all his family members including the infant Russell. But the fools failed to kill the "Spirit of Mujib", though the conspirators are still striving for their own survival. But the "Spirit of Mujib" is bound to prevail, and which, though it may be impeded, cannot be defeated. Mujib, though dead, overstrides the world, ranging for revenge. And now Mujib's spirit is dogging the conspirators to destruction. The conspirators have no peace in their minds. They are, always, being haunted by the "Ghost of Mujib" and thus pave the way of their self-annihilation.

Another glorious death embraced Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of modern India, though the bullets of Nathuram could not kill the "Spirit of Gandhi". The ignorant Jews crucified Jesus Christ but the spirit of Jesus prevails. Socrates, the Father of all knowledge, had to drink hemlock to embrace death for the sake of truth. Newton, the scientist, was killed by the fundamentalists but his inventions prevail. All those deaths are glorious and ever memorable but the deaths of ephemeral human beings are ignoble.

"Man," says Shelley, "is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre, which move is by their motion to ever-changing melody".

Lastly, Cicero mentions the approach of death as the fourth drawback of old age. To many minds the shadow of the end is ever present, like the coffin in the Egyptian feast, and overlaid all the sunshine of life. But ought we to regard death as an evil? Shelley's beautiful lines,

"Life, life a Dome of many-coloured glass,
Stains the white radiance of Eternity;
Until death tramples it to fragments,"
Man has, says Coleridge,
Three treasures, love and light
And calm thoughts, regular as infant's breath;
And three firm friends, more sure than day and night,
Himself, his Maker, and the Angle Death."