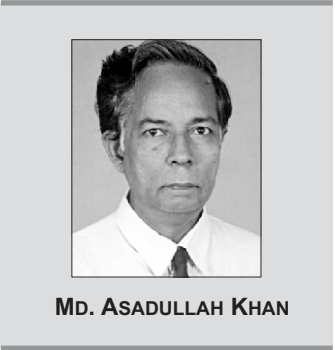


Dhaka city environment: Count down to catastrophe?



WITH total security blanket on one side, roads cleared of pedestrian and traffic movements and sidewalks and adjacent buildings decorated and illuminated, Dhaka had gone mad for hosting the 13th SAARC Summit that went off smoothly in mid November. During the short interlude the dignitaries stayed here, a normally drab Dhaka turned ecstatic with the ruling party high-ups enjoying the dance of light and shadow themselves only. In fact, the vast populace of the city had no share or had no idea of what was going on in a virtually walled city -- made so by the law enforcers. People only feel that if the ruling party could commit themselves to development activities in the country in the way they did to make the SAARC summit a spectacular show, many of our leaders would have qualified for national award! Sadly, it was not for us citizens that they worked so hard or spent so much money. Street vendors selling odd things or the homeless with their pathetic bedding of plastic sheets and waste cardboard were pushed away from human sight. Most comforting at least for some days, the garbage heaped around the street corners were swept away as an army of City Corporation workers and other agencies moved in for the beautification work.

The magnificent sight of the city that looked like a newly-wed bride's necklace at night was a rare spectacle. But behind the euphoria, aura and bonanza lay hidden the suffering and woes of the vast populace living in the bigger area of the city. If this transformation was achieved to ease the suffering of the city dwellers living all around, people would have hailed it and given our leaders a standing ovation.

It happened all the time in the past and it continues to happen now as well. In villages and towns, bereft of the most basic services, let a VIP from the government show signs of arrival and roads suddenly appear where there were dirt tracks, pucca buildings even materialise out of thin air and even reliable power supply becomes mysteriously available. Once the VIP disappears after making his inspection, or laying foundation stone or shedding crocodile tears or accusing the past regimes for all the ills, everything goes back to normal squalor once again. Why should it? If the government can work so hard for

VVIPs of other countries, or even for ministers in the country who are supposed to serve the people, then why can't it do the same for the commonman? Perhaps, because we have allowed our VVIPs in the country to develop an inflated sense of their own importance by allowing them to think in VIP terms. Perhaps, because we are used to living in the Third World, third-rate conditions, we expect no better. Or, more probably, because we have

embarrassment for the government. It is unfortunate that the present ruling coalition so vocal in its condemnation of the past regimes for their alleged role in different shady deals, is also seen to be allowing its party functionaries to collect funds in the most sleazy fashion. It looks bad, very bad indeed even if the LGED minister has assured the World Bank that the guilty would be punished. Visibly, there is a feeling of disgust and disenchantment about

thrown into it at will. Because of the excessive toxic effluents drained into this lake fishes of different varieties cultured there are dying everyday. Despite complaints lodged with the Environment directorate no remedial measure to stop this menace has been taken. Most of these dead fishes laced with toxins like cadmium and chromium might have gone to market without anybody's knowledge. It is not a pretty sight: poisoned lakes, fouled river, murky air and so

residential quarters and apartment blocks. Alarmed citizens know they are being slowly poisoned but seem helpless. Often activists or even high officials fired by ideas, social and ecological concern act as catalysts and can nudge the government or agencies concerned to come up with solutions. It so happened in Nainital in the Uttaranchal province of India. Naini lake, prime attraction of the tourists considered a summer resort was dying with silt and refuse

overwhelming. Excavators donated by the lake conscious businessmen and trucks provided by the Truck Owners' Association to take the silt away made the tough job easier. Nainitalians danced not only to the rhythm of silt lifting excavators, they also danced to the redeeming tune of the district magistrate who was there at wintry midnight supervising the clean up operation. The lake was salvaged through public participation and Aradhana Shukla was called the Lady of the lake.

Along with Uttara lake, Gulshan and Baridhara lakes have the same tale to tell. Could there be some one from the industrial conglomerates, business community and public leaders who would come forward to save these water bodies, the essence of life in a polluted city? With land grabbers filling up the lakes for commercial interest on one side and pollution and effluents discharged into them at will, these water bodies are almost dead. So is the story with rivers Buriganga and Shitalakha flowing by the twin cities Dhaka and Narayanganj. Rarely does anyone living in Dhaka or its satellite towns realise it has rivers like Buriganga, Shitalakha and the magnificent lakes. If a city has a memory, the Thames would be always a part of London's eternal psyche. For Paris so would the Seine be. For Toronto, the lake Ontario, for Chicago the lake Michigan. And for New York, the Hudson river with its slow, deep-throated underflow. Alas! not for Dhaka though the river Buriganga still exists and flows by it. Shockingly, in absence of clear foresight, vision and proper planning, Dhaka city has turned into a cluster of apartments and markets. With the last remaining open spaces and water bodies fast disappearing due to illegal encroachment and wilful destruction, the city has become a concrete jungle with hardly any space for breathing and walking.

Happy at a time when grabbing of wetlands, rivers and lakes is the mantra of wealth creation, the media is jolting the government to take a hard look at the havoc they have wrought. The recent move to grab a part of the Gulshan lake is a case in sight. As the RAJUK chairman said in an interview with The Daily Star recently that with water body protection act passed in Parliament RAJUK's no objection certificate obtained in 1995 and building construction approval in 1997 would not hold water and be annulled by the court. But it is the general public who have to wake up and resist such sinister designs.

being dumped into it for a long time. Efforts to salvage the lake came to a grinding halt as the estimated expenditure, as the govt. file spoke stood at Rs 42 crore. Happy for Uttaranchal, Aradhana Shukla, 37, an IAS officer posted as district magistrate in Nainital authored a little revolution within six months of her posting there. Through her untiring efforts and missionary zeal, the famed Naini lake got its beauty back.

Aware of the fact how difficult it would appear for the government to stake so much money in one lake recovery project, she invited public participation. The district magistrate as a folk heroine could be sighted at lakeside even at midnight guarded by one gunman only. Faced with a bewildering problem, she thought she could do something. So she reached out to the people and the response was



A section of polluted Uttara Lake

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

Half a century of political experiences

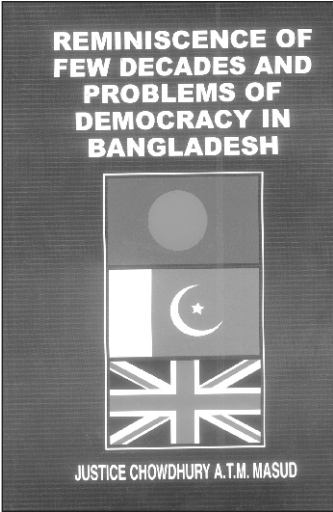
BOOK REVIEW

Reminiscence of Few Decades and Problems of Democracy in Bangladesh

By Justice Chowdhury A.T. M. Masud

Published by Academic Press and Publishers Library, House 55, Road 8A, Dhanmondi R.A., Dhaka-1209

Price Tk.350.00, Pages 158



HARUN UR RASHID

THE release of the book in September of this year, authored by Justice Masud, a former Justice of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court and Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh, is timely as the contents of the book describe, among others, the problems of democracy in Bangladesh.

During the 34 years, political misjudgment and misplaced priority of national issues have an adverse impact on democratic traditions in the country. Justice Masud has recorded his personal views on events from 1940 to 1991, a period that has impacted in various ways on Bangladesh's history.

The significance of the book lies in the fact that Justice Masud has viewed the events from his varied and rich career, first as a student leader (General Secretary of the Assam Provincial Muslim Students' Federation) in the 40s, second as a successful Advocate of the Dhaka High Court during Pakistan days and third as a Justice of the Supreme Court (both in the High Court and Appellate Divisions) and finally as the Chief Election Commissioner (1985-90) of Bangladesh.

His views are stimulating and often provocative. The issues raised lead to bigger questions as to why some of the events had occurred after emergence of Bangladesh. In the preface of the book, the author has stated: "In this book, I have touched many points but did not discuss those in detail. I am leaving it for future scholars and thinkers who will discuss these factors in historical perspective."

The author has dealt with the issues in 11 Chapters. All the Chapters are well structured and compact. The author has written in an easy style and avoids jargons to explore all aspects of political events in the country

Although the book is autobiographical in character, it weaves around author's experience

and perceptions on events that occurred from 1940 to 1991 and thus covers three periods under British, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The past cannot be separated from the present and that is why understanding of past events provides appreciation of the current political situation in the country.

The book would have richer in contents if the author would have expressed his views on issues he described in chapters that discuss higher judiciary. For example, his views on (i) increase and reduction of age at different times for Supreme Court judges, (ii) the bifurcation of the Supreme Court into High Court and Supreme Court with two Chief Justices and (iii) the establishment of six permanent benches of the High Curt Division outside Dhaka, would have beneficial for readers.

Another rare event the author describes is that the then Chief Justice had to assume the position of the Chief Martial Law Administrator of an unconstitutional government. The views of the author as the retired Justice of the Supreme Court would have been appropriate as to whether the Chief Justice should have accepted the position of CMLA.

Nevertheless, the core message of the book is not distracted by silence of the author on the issues relating to higher judiciary. Drawing on a wealth of his experience for over six decades, the book is an insightful work and challenges readers to come up with answers to the issues raised in the book. It deserves wide readership and I commend the publisher APPL to make the book accessible to readers.

Finally, it has been my immense pleasure to have been asked to review the book as I have met with Justice Masud for the first time in 1962 when I returned from London and joined the Dhaka High Court Bar.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

Learning how to hope

JONATHAN ALTER

NEW Orleans in December is cool and dry, and the 20 percent that wasn't flooded seems normal enough. But the pictures don't even begin to convey the scope of what 17 days of standing water will do to the delicate ecosystem of a metropolis. More than 50 million cubic yards of debris have already been picked up, including 100,000 useless refrigerators -- that's 34 normal years of garbage in just three months.

Every day brings more mounds of tangled possessions and sundry junk, the stuffing of a city. I rode with a nonprofit group called Share Our Strength past the thousands of abandoned cars and handwritten we tear down houses signs at intersections that still have no working stoplights; past the still-mysterious levee breaks and reopened Wal-Marts; past mile after eerie mile of homes and stores that for a moment look habitable enough,

until you see the thick layers of dust and mold and grimy water lines four or six or eight feet up, a sure indication that the place is a total loss.

So the gutting of New Orleans has begun, but not the renovation. Why build anything yet? The place is on hold: gumbo limbo. Residents and their insurers are all waiting to see if the federal Army Corps of Engineers (responsible for the faulty levees in the first place) will fulfill its promise and at least minimally secure the city by the time the urricane season begins again next June. The original estimate was that two-thirds of the city's 450,000 people would return and one third would stay away. Now those numbers have been flipped, though no one actually has a clue why.

The housing situation is a scandal. Of the 73,000 trailers

needed, only 14,700 have arrived. And the trailer parks, while peaceful now, have the frustrated feel of future Gaza Strips. I toured "Renaissance Village" -- a Baton Rouge trailer park with 1,600 people (the largest so far) -- which FEMA fobbed off on a subpar subcontractor. It still had no place for the residents to even pick up their mail, much less any real services. FEMA remains a disaster area, trashed in every conversation. One prominent Louisianan recalled how, just after the storm, physicians from Doctors Without Borders were told they could not give treatment to moaning victims lying on the tarmac at Louis Armstrong airport because the doctors were not FEMA-certified.

But amid all the heartache -- the still-raw feelings that can lead to tears in an instant -- a few tiny rays of winter sun are slipping through. Newly created institutions like the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps and the Louisiana Recovery Authority are beginning to cut through the chaos to supervise better and plan rationally. About three months later, President Bush finally appointed a federal coordinator, Donald Powell, who doesn't

have the clout that a big name would have brought but whose background in banking is appropriate to the tangled reconstruction challenge. Most encouraging, the hurricane blew away the New Orleans school district, a cesspool of corruption and neglect that made local schools among the worst in the country. With the entrenched bureaucrats and eachers-union hacks scattered to the winds, the state legislature took the opportunity to strip them of all their power.

This offers what Tony Recasner, the principal of the New Orleans Charter Middle School,

calls a "magic moment" for major change. Almost all the schools that will begin reopening in 2006 (mostly in the fall) will be charter schools, where everyone works on one-year contracts (full accountability) and the principal can actually run the school. "This gives us an opportunity to fix each school as it comes back on line," says Recasner, who already has an impressive track record of academic achievement in his school. "We get to create something from our own imagination and ask: what is this going to be?"

The answer, ideally, would be a series of KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program) schools. The nearly 50 KIPP schools around the country have an astonishing record of academic success with low-income students, not with shortcuts but with a disciplined "be nice, work hard" program. While KIPP has only one New Orleans school planned and not nearly enough leaders in its pipeline yet, Recasner and the other avatars of local school reform are eager to adapt the model. The challenge is to get the right leadership in. And because the system will go from 60,000 students to about 20,000 next fall, New Orleans will have the perfect size for a true national experiment with school reform.

Randy Ewing, the chairman of the Louisiana Family Recovery Corps, says, "Our mind-set is not to return people to normal, because normal wasn't too good. Our challenge is to take them to a better life." That will take time, but it should not be seen as impossible.

Jonathan Alter is a senior writer for Newsweek.

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Woman labourers: Problem of exclusion and exploitation

MD. KUDRAT-E-KABIR

HUMAN rights abuses are more common in dictatorships or theocracies, whereas human rights abuses are rarer in democracies but what is going on in Bangladesh? In recent days some news reports on woman labourers revealing inadequate wages, high levels of compulsory overtime, denial of trade union rights, sexual harassment and verbal abuse at different sectors is a shame for Bangladesh as a democratic country. Bangladesh is also a member country of the International Labour Organisation and has an obligation to respect, promote and realise the principles concerning the fundamental rights that are the subjects of certain Conventions. Despite all the reasons the condition of woman labourers should be taken into consideration now or never.

Bangladesh as a country is ethnically diverse and socially complex. Women have been traditionally disadvantaged in this society; their access and movement are limited by social sanctions. Traditionally females are involved in household tasks including some family agricultural farm activities. Very few of them are working in GOs and NGOs. But women are contributing to the economic growth through participating in various types of economic activities, practically in all areas of the developing world. Despite the complex social sanctions, women's participation in economic activities has moved beyond household activities to many areas over the last 20 years. It is obviously a good sign for Bangladesh's economic development. Women's increasing participation in the labour force is expanding beyond the family farm enterprise to local market economy

and to global market economy as well.

Women's involvement in the shrimp sector in Bangladesh is part of the global economy. In Bangladesh, women's movement into labour market is indicated by the labour force participation rate (LFPR). The share of rural women in total employed population also rose from 9 percent to 13 percent since the late 1980s. Clearly it indicates that rural women have been involving themselves in market based economic activities at a pace that is growing much faster than that of men. But it is a matter of great regret that woman labourers work with low income and little job security and encounter various forms of oppressions like no appointment letter is given, woman labourers have very low wage compared to their male counterparts, the women cannot form any union for their rights,

there is 12-hour mandatory working for the women though they are supposed to work for only 8 hours per day, they cannot enjoy any government holiday nor any casual and sick leave (for sickness if one fails to attend the work, the day's amount is deducted from her monthly wage), only 3 days' maternity leave, no security in their occupational health.

Despite all these deprivations, woman workers are still doing their job very sincerely because they are poor; they have to maintain their subsistence. They also know that the supply is more than the demand for woman labourers and no other better alternative is available these are compelling women to do such works at low wage. Meanwhile, the shrimp traders are getting more and more powerful. Further, woman workers are working without any government regulatory control in the



Woman labourers at a shrimp farm

development or social worker but as conscious human beings.

Now, for instance, if the question is -- "What can we do for the woman labourers of shrimp processing plants?"

As a lay man my suggestions are as follows: ●All of the participating stakeholders of shrimp processing plants are more or less aware of the labour rights situation of the processing industries. There is no need to go for any further debate on the issue but to abide by the rules.

●Bangladesh Frozen Food Exporters Association (BFFEA) or any third party can initiate an effective social dialogue between the factory management and the workers to overcome any problem ensuring benefits for both the parties.

●Civil society organisations or government representatives may persuade International Labour Organization (ILO) to approach European Union (EU) and United States Food and Drug Administration (USFDA) to bring changes in policies and put emphasis on the human face of the production.

●Policy people can review Labour Laws/Code and Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Woman (CEDAW) in line with the ILO conventions and other declarations to examine the negative impact of labour policies, if any, on woman's living standards.

Now, in fine, here are the concluding remarks with a high hope that we shall overcome, we must overcome the problems and create an enabling working environment for our deprived but most important woman labourers. Let us all come forward to bring in a win-win solution to their problems.

Md. Kudrat-E-Kabir is Regional Director, ATDP-SSOQ Boyra-Khulna.