

An agenda of reforms

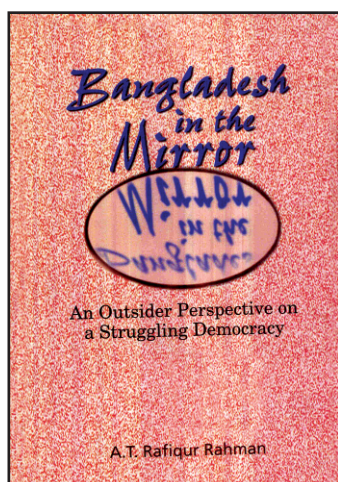
Atiur Rahman appreciates a work which he believes hits the shelves at an appropriate moment

THE work is a timely publication indeed. Bangladesh is certainly now at a crossroads. A new window of opportunity has been opened since 11 January 2007 which may one day turn out to be a watershed in Bangladesh history. The newly placed caretaker government led by Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed has not only been able to stop the impending bloodshed that would have taken place due to one-sided election forced by confrontational politics, but also has created new opportunities for crucial electoral and other related reforms. The Chief Adviser is apparently bent upon creating a level playing field for all participants of the election. He wants to bring back sanity and transparency in all arenas of governance. People in general are appreciative of the courageous steps taken by the government. However, more farsighted ones feel that reforms have to be a continuous process and one must prioritise even amongst the on-going and planned reforms. If the CTG wants to undertake all the reforms under the sky at one go it may be overwhelmed by the burden of the tasks. Hence the prioritisation. Also there is an inherent limitation of a non-elected government, however, popular that may be. It can not be sustainable in the long run. Yet, people want this government to succeed in many areas without being controversial. So it has to ride a very tight rope. The biggest challenge for the government is to complete the entire process of reforms related to electoral system first and that too within a reasonable short time. It can certainly take necessary preparatory measures for undertaking other institutional measures as well. But those too have to be focused on the attempt at creating level playing field for all participants of the for the coming election. Yet another challenge for the government is to clear the mess created by the immediate past government in almost all the sectors.

Additionally, it has also been able to appoint credible commissioners in both the commissions. Now is the time to initiate necessary actions so that the country can

move towards a fair, healthy and credible election. People now want to see them in action. The final end is to hold a credible election and provide the country with a functional democracy. Also people want that old ghost of mindless confrontational politics does not overwhelm the ultimate goal i.e. just democratic governance. For the latter, the nation has to be committed for more far-reaching reforms which may not be possible in the short term. However, necessary preparatory measures can surely be taken to start the ball rolling. If CTG can inspire the political parties to undertake reforms on their own there will certainly be a new scope of optimism for sustainable democracy and just governance. Some actions are already visible in major political parties to distance themselves from the corrupt elements who have been netted by the low enforcing agencies.

Professor ATR Rahman's book deserves to be seriously read in this new context. Professor Rahman too believes that Bangladesh is at a crossroads and therefore must undertake reforms and improvements for the future development of Bangladesh. Simultaneously it must also remain regionally and globally focused. Although Professor Rahman is quite critical about the failures of governance in Bangladesh, particularly due to confrontational politics (he calls it 'Andolon' politics), yet he is proud of its manifold achievements. According to him, "Bangladesh has survived with a reasonable record of success in providing for its people food security, a minimum health safety, almost universal primary education, free expression and press, global recognitions as a pre-eminent peace-keeper, and a democratic framework for politics and governance" (P. XV). He is also appreciative of his people for their personal struggle for a better life for themselves and their children both at home and all over the world. Yet he is saddened by the obvious truth that his country has not been realising its full potential. He strongly feels that Bangladesh is being lacking a well organized vision and as well as institutions, procedures and rules to realize the same.



Bangladesh in the Mirror: An Outsider Perspective on a Struggling Democracy
Dr. A. T. Rafiqur Rahman
The University Press Limited
Dhaka.

We may have many ideas, leaders and organizations. But we still have no institutional framework in which we all can come together and contribute towards its progress. In the backdrop of the conflictual reality the author perceives "the need to enhance our fragile democracy and its institutions through reform and retirement in order to strengthen our capacity to consider and implement an approach that can deliver the future" (P. XV). Prof Rahman correctly feels that we have spent too much of our time and energy fighting obsolete issues and thus got bogged down with past practices. As a result we have failed to take a forward-looking approach of nationbuilding. Hence it is high time that we take up institutional reforms and make ourselves capable of dealing with future challenges, in both the medium and long terms. For that matter the state must support its citizens and their reformed institutions to develop progressive policies and programs to realize our dreams.

The author aptly describes our inner strength for such a transition. "We have a creative, caring and industrious culture; our institutions should provide a framework for achievement, individually and collectively" (P. xvi). The author

points out three sets of institutional and structural reforms. First, replacing gradually Andolon (movement) politics with responsive and responsible government based on functioning political institutions. Obviously, holding of free and fair elections and improving the functioning of parliament and its committees is his top priority. Simultaneously, he is in favour of autonomous local governments at district and upazila levels. The political governments failed to install these vital local governments despite a High Court ruling. He has also suggested that the political parties be registered and operate within the legal framework. They too need to be transparent and accountable if democracy is their professed goal. The candidates have to declare assets and other related information if they want to compete in elections. He is also in favour of declaring assets by senior bureaucrats once he/she is promoted to senior positions.

People, according to Professor Rahman, have the right to know whom they are voting for and who are administering public services to them. At the same time all organizations including educational institutions, community organizations, professional and business organizations must help strengthen a culture of transparency and accountability. The second set of reforms relate to governance and administrative systems. We must adopt measures to simplify, consolidate and refresh our institutions and procedures. People and parliament should be given detailed information about government agencies, their specific services, and their regulations. He also wants to introduce semi-autonomous commissions for service delivery in the areas of police, local government, education and health. Relevant directorates which are not functioning properly can, therefore, be abolished to make room for the more dynamic commissions. Anti-corruption commission which has been recently reorganized is an example of now an institution can rise up to people's expectation provided it gets the right leadership. I am sure Professor Rahman must have been dreaming of simi-

lar commissions in all those areas.

Before we go all out for such reforms, as indicated by Professor Rahman, we should first review government rules and regulations and dispense with those which sap the energy of the people. Red tapism is indeed the biggest culprit. Hence the need for e-governance.

The third set of targeted reforms suggested by Professor Rahman in this book includes measures to restore people's faith in the judiciary, to improve public order and to promote human rights. There is, therefore, an imperative of establishing human rights commission immediately. The separation of judiciary from executive, which has just been effected was also high in the agenda of Professor Rahman's reform list. He has provided detailed prescriptions on how to improve institutional capacities in Bangladesh in his concluding chapter. The suggestions encompass all aspects of governance. Starting with ensuring safety and security of the nation including that of individuals and their properties, the author also provides in-depth policy suggestions on promoting economic growth with employment for the young and educated, establishing and promoting politics of stability and compromise and finally reforming governance in lines with democratic values, structures and processes. Recent Bangladesh is the best example of how the non-compromising postures of contending political parties can lead to a stalemate which can only be overcome by a forceful external intervention.

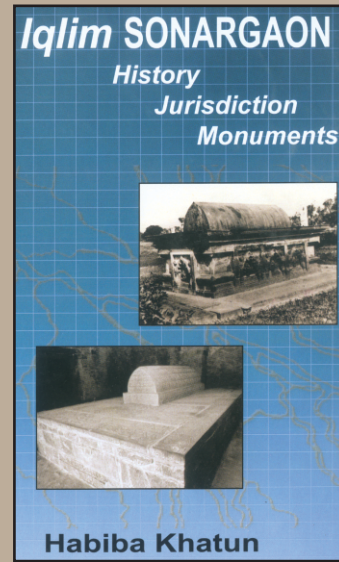
Each and every sub-theme has been further elaborated and appropriate policy directions have been made by the author. In the epilogue he has been saddened by the confrontational politics and urged all parties to be more compromising. He finally put a lot of hope on the voters who if can vote will help find the right type of leadership in the next election. In between a lot of water has flown through the Ganges and Brahmaputra and Bangladesh is again at a critical cross-roads. Many of the reforms that Professor Rahman dreamt of are already in the process of implementation. In particular, the election commission

has been totally reorganised and it is preparing itself to undertake major reforms in our electoral system so that democracy is firmly rooted in Bangladesh. The Representation of People Order 1972 is being reviewed by the Election Commission for further improvement. Simultaneously, the Anti-Corruption Commission has also been reorganised and it has already started showing its teeth. The new chairman of the ACC has already promised to remove the curse of corruption from the nation's forehead. Hopefully, this CTG will take similar moves in reforming the Public Service Commissions and other regulatory commissions as well so that these institutions too can rise up to the occasions and provide desirable public services to the people who have been duped earlier.

As noted by Professor Rahman the political parties should also review their structural and human deficiencies, and start appropriate reforms so that politics becomes once again an honoured engagement. The bad coins were almost driving out the good ones from Bangladesh politics. Suddenly, things have started moving in the opposite direction. Professor Rahman must have been quite happy to see the change in political wind in Bangladesh. However, we must also remember that democracy cannot be made sustainable by wholesale undermining of the politicians. We must give full support to the honest and well-meaning politicians and yet despise the corrupt and godfather-like politicians. Again, we should also remember that politicians alone have not created this mess. The vested interests also include corrupt and opportunistic bureaucrats and businessmen. So reforms have to focus on all these groups as well. Again the governance system has not been functioning to stop this slide. Hence the reform. Policy makers would do well to read this significant book by Professor ATR Rahman and make best use of the well laid out reform proposals included in it.

Dr. Atiur Rahman is Professor of Development Studies, Dhaka University, and Chairman, Unnayan Shamannay.

At a glance



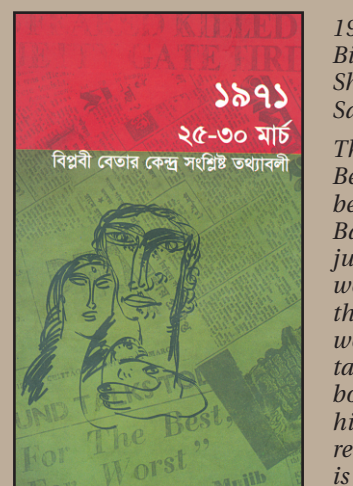
Habiba Khatun

Iqlim Sonargaon
History Jurisdiction
Monuments
Habiba Khatun
Academic Press and
Publishers Library, Dhaka

Habiba Khatun takes us down a historical path that reveals itself layer by layer. The place of Sonargaon in Bengali history remains significant, but the author here comes forth with much of the information about the background of a place that has become part of legend for us. Iqlim, meaning a port as well as city, promises gripping reading.

Zahir Raihaner Choloচিত্রা
Potobhumi Bishoy O
Boishishito
Anupam Hayat
Dibyaprokash

Zahir Raihan became synonymous with the history of Bengali film-making long before he got caught up in the armed struggle for Bangladesh's liberation in 1971. In this work, Anupam Hayat examines the life and times of a man who was at once a movie maker and political activist. His disappearance soon after liberation remains a tragic mystery.



1971: 25-30 March
Biplobi Betar Kendro
Shongshishito Tothyaboli
Samaj Anushilon, Chittagong
Those of you familiar with Belal Mohammad's story of the beginnings of Shwadhin Bangla Betar Kendro will take justifiable interest in this new work. Chances, however, are that readers may spot in this work elements that may not tally with those in the earlier book. But as part of national history, the present work could reveal things new. That is what is so tempting about it.

Not entirely about being a CEO

Syed Nadeem Ahsan is impressed by the answers to a number of questions in a work he thinks is seminal for individuals aspiring to management careers

WINNING, the international best seller by Jack and Suzy Welch, is an astounding masterpiece drawing on Jack Welch's decades of experience in business administration. It talks about business and work in such nitty gritty details that no other management book ever published comes close to being compared. In fact, Winning unlocked this flood of questions as students and professionals poured their hearts out with questions on subjects ranging from leadership, global competition, building teamwork, on tough bosses and even careers. In the book, Winning: The Answers, Jack and Suzy Welch set out to answer seventy-four of the more relevant of these questions.

The book covers almost every single question that may arise in a person's mind, whether studying, or already in the workforce. It vividly throws light on some of the

issues that every single one of us has sometime or the other has had to grapple with. It really serves as a mentor for those of us who have not been lucky enough to seek out that "perfect mentor/s". What makes the reading so much wonderful is not the fact that it revolves around the experience of one of the greatest business leaders of our times. It is rather the candour and simplicity of the answers to questions which oftentimes a person growing up in the business world may have given up as having no solutions at all. It makes very insightful and in-depth reading with the chapters organized around areas that are crucial for any business.

The topics are quite appropriately divided into six sections, under the headings of Global Competition, Leadership, Management Principles and Practices, Careers, Privately Held and Winning and Losing. Global

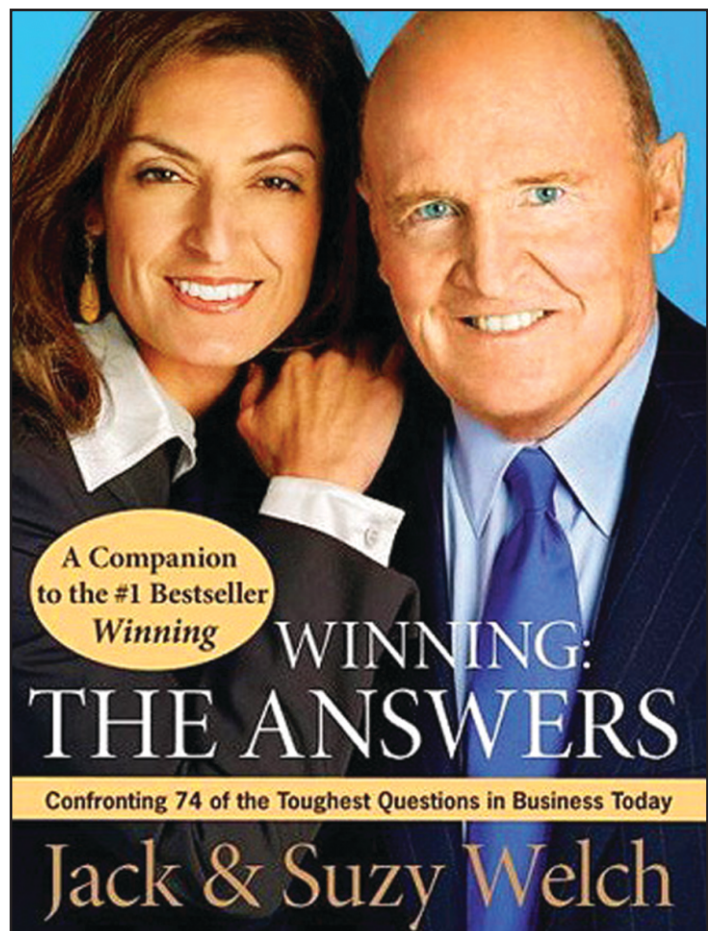
competition is something that has touched even the most conservative of companies today. As a result, management professionals and students all over the world have hundreds of queries on global competition. In this section, Welch gives his perspective on burning issues like whether to go into China or on growing fears of China tearing your business down in your own country.

Then comes one of the most interesting and elusive of all concepts, Leadership. It begins with the age-old question of whether leaders are born or made. Then it goes on to discuss such issues as what to do when you suddenly find yourself thrust in to lead a team, the pros and cons on being a tough boss or working for one. Building trust and overcoming resistance to change. Then the chapter shifts on to the more orthodox business practices relating to management principles and practices. This section talks about getting the right people on board. Welch's hallmark candour in everything from talking to subordinates to your boss, to hand it out straight from the beginning so that there are no surprises for either party in the end, is remarkable. A piece on the real job of HR which everyone in the world seems to be either not empowered with or not doing what he or she is actually supposed to do. Another interesting perspective is on the usefulness of hiring consultants for the company as they seem to affect employees as well as employers and always raise questions of the consultants' effectiveness as well.

The last three sections talk about careers, family owned businesses and what winning and losing mean. Some light is thrown on whether an MBA is a must. Or do people with MBAs wield an unfair advantage over others? In family owned businesses, being an outsider and whether you are ready to give it all you have got, knowing someone from the family will get the raise perhaps without doing anything at all, is an interesting question. Lastly, what is winning? It certainly is not making a huge pile of money. It is different for different people. It can be dedicating your life for the disadvantaged, basically doing something that lights up your heart. It really doesn't have to be about becoming a CEO.

All in all, it is a wonderful, purposeful read. It can be treated as an individual read and not as a sequel to the first Winning. It does answer questions that all of us have asked ourselves at one time or the other in our lives.

Syed Nadeem Ahsan writes from Washington DC, USA.



Winning
The Answers
Jack & Suzy Welch
HarperCollins Publishers India.

Questions around Indian secularism

Masihur Rahman talks about a work that raises some serious questions about the future of an India once shaped by Nehru

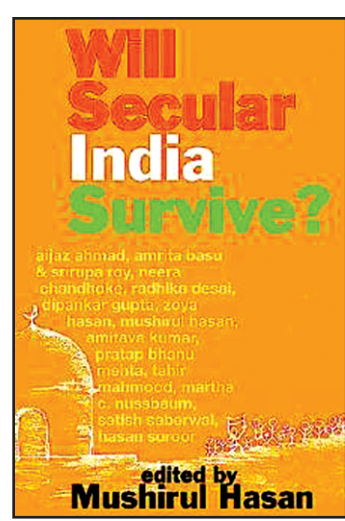
THE book edited by Mushirul Hasan deals with the rise and implications of Hindutva in the politics of India. The contributors are Indians at home or abroad; the only exception is Martha Nussbaum who is a Professor of Philosophy and Law at a US university and has an interest in the philosophic implications of the issues of equity, quality of life, and so on.

Secularism is entrenched in the Constitution of India and had been defined in politics by 1964, thanks to Nehru and the Congress Party. The Constitution guarantees free exercise of religion and non-discrimination on grounds of faith. The electoral victory of BJP in 1980-90s shows erosion of secularism. The society has grown insensitive to communal violence as is evident from the electoral victory of BJP under Chief Minister Narendra Modi who had been implicated in the Gujarat pogrom. Much more disconcerting is the way the left and secular regional parties joined the BJP bandwagon.

Satish Saberwal observes that the perception of the past is not fixed; the elements from the past can be selected to construct new narratives and identities. Put differently, the sense of the current identity influences the construction of the past; democratic commitments will find in the past its historical roots while fundamentalism will find only its negation. All these tendencies can be seen in the study of history in India today.

Saberwal follows mainly the colonial narrative which maintains that the Hindu-Muslim divide predates the British rule. The Hindus and the Muslims had shared space only in the public sphere during the Muslim period. When the British rule came, the Hindus accepted the new ways of life: say commerce, administration, military organization, and western education. The Muslims sulked away and concentrated on preserving a truly Islamic life under a non-Muslim government. That accentuated the sense of separateness; the social arrangements had hardened irreversibly by the time of the independence movement.

In line with the Marxist view of history, Radhika Desai argues that Hinduism with its caste system developed during the colonial period as a social organization for extraction of the surplus. The caste system varies across regions and does not go back to the Vedic times. It is a pleasant contrast to



Will Secular India Survive?
Edited by Mushirul Hasan
The University Press Limited,
Dhaka.

the apologetic view of the caste system. In contrast, Sabarwal, an apologist, maintains that the caste system disciplines the members to its internal code and facilitates cooperation.

Mushirul Hasan focuses on the reconstruction of history under the ideological influence of Hindutva and BJP's official policy. The Muslim period has been purged and denigrated while the ancient period has been glorified, often blurring the distinction between myth and 'factual history'. The mythologized history presents India as a Hindu-space, not an inconclusive liberal democratic state.

Pratap Mehta, Neera Chhabdhoke and Martha Nussbaum believe that secularism can be situated better in the context of democracy. Mehta emphasizes individual liberty while Chhabdhoke does equality. Nussbaum takes a more comprehensive view: the core meaning constitutional democracy is respect for the individual person, liberty and equality; it is not simply majority voting. There is circularity in their argument: secularism and democracy eroded correlatively; therefore, both need revitalization together.

Hindutva rose because of the decay of the liberal political values hypothesizes Aijaz Ahmad. Authoritarianism emerged in 1970s under Indira Gandhi; the Nehruvian principles namely democracy, secularism, socialistic economic development, and independent foreign policy also have been abandoned. India has

since moved closer to the Western powers diplomatically and embraced liberal economic policy. Indian nationalism is now defined by default, so to say in terms of 'ethnicity, race, religion or some other primordial particularities which are divisive'. Anti-imperialism and social and juridical equalities have ceased to define Indian nationalism. The BJP, aided by the Hindu fundamentalist social movements, grew in the vacuum left by the end of Congress hegemony. The regional parties could not fill in the gap nor did the CPM which remained confined to West Bengal and Kerala.

Ahmad is insensitive to the economic implications of politics. The minority Congress Government led by Prime Minister Narashima Rao took the first critical steps towards liberalization which has lifted India from the Hindu rate of growth (3-4% annually) and the Licence Raj which bred corruption. India has since accelerated growth. Quite plausibly, economic stagnation, failure to address poverty and inequality, and corruption bred frustration, which drew people to BJP and Hindutva for deliverance. From this perspective, the new economic policy can deliver India from Hindutva.

Attached to the old economic policies, Ahmad is too shy to admit the benefits of the new economic policies.

As to the Gujarat pogrom, Amrita Basu and Srirupa Roy offer an economic interpretation. Gujarat had experienced extensive de-industrialization and massive unemployment. BJP and the Hindutva social movements could easily mobilize the unemployed and the poor. Basu-Roy recommend strong measures by government to suppress communal politics and social movements, despite aversion in principle. Dipankar Gupta recommends 'hard secularism' to confront Hindutva which is very similar. 'Soft secularism' which refers to analysis, protest, etc. does not work. Gupta's analysis which draws on a variety of philosophic sources such as Kant, Laclan, Foucault, Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela has a remarkable breadth of scholarship, though largely eclectic. Basu-Roy and Gupta ignore one critical fact: BJP-led government employs state power and indulges communal violence to promote Hindutva.

Martha Nussbaum notes that government policy has not been efficacious in addressing the

problems of the religious minorities, though it has been effective in case of the backward classes. Pratap Mehta holds the 'party model policies' responsible for the failure, which entails that restrictions on certain practices of a religious minorities be balanced by concessions to the same group (e.g. ban on cow slaughter and concessions to the Muslims). This strategy cannot retain credibility with all minority groups. Disentangling religion is more coherent and a better option but not politically pragmatic as is evident from BJP's electoral success.

A different answer is given by Tahir Mahmood, a law professor and former Chair of the National Minorities Commission. The Commission can be so constituted as to make it 'a party of harmony' which moves in step with the government of the day and is too weak to discharge its constitutional role. The rights of the religious minorities also can be stretched too far: for example, army personnel growing a long beard; Hindus as minority in a state where non-Hindus constitute the majority. Mahmood and the Supreme Court did not think so, however.

More critically, there is a conflict between protection of minority religious rights and public policies to remove their disadvantages. Religious rights are negative: citizens can exercise free religion provided they do not encroach on the rights of others. Public policies for affirmative action entail interventions by government. The problem is made worse when there are diverse interpretations claiming equal authority and theological views bearing on personal and social life say family planning or the madrasa syllabus pertaining to the Muslims.

The Muslims have a large share of the population (12.6) but their shares of the all-India civil service cadres (2.0-2.8) and parliament seats are relatively small and declining. Zoya Hasan's argument assumes that the shares should be more or less proportionate to the population size. Representation in civil service cadres should be related to the strata from which recruitment is made: educated middle class, professional, etc. Mushirul Hasan's statistics show how the Muslims women in particular lag behind the other groups in education. The reasons are ambivalence towards secular education and preference for

madrasa education, particularly for girls. The failure to reconcile with the modern life seems to engage the Muslims more tightly in the romanticized past.

Relationship between representation in the elected offices and the population size can be closer but not identical. The Muslims are a minority in India; if votes are influenced by any communal considerations, they can win only in the small number of constituencies where Muslim population outnumber the non-Muslims.

Amitava Kumar's simple narrative shows the unity of all religions at the level of spiritual and psychological needs. People belonging to different religions and countries (Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims from Pakistan and India) get solace at the tomb of Baba Sheikh Brahm located at the border. The story makes the communal conflicts look unnecessary and trivial. Religion, however, defines also different population groups which fight for shares of the earthly goods.

Suroor Hasan reflects on how the identity as minority stereotypes a person which is an indignity (in Kantian sense). The members of the minority community suffer a sense of identity deficit or crisis, which they try to overcome through developing affinity with others having the same identity. The affinity-identity construction reinforces stereotype.

The book deals with only the Muslims as a minority group. Discussions of other religious minorities such as the Parsees, the Christians, and the Sikhs would have made the book more comprehensive and provided a comparative perspective on the problems faced by the Muslims in particular. The readers also miss discussion of how fundamentalism in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India impact each other.

The annotated bibliography on secularism in India is very informative.

The book was compiled before the general election in 2004. The victory of the Congress and the secular-left coalition government indicate the defeat of Hindutva, perhaps for the present. Consolidation of the secular forces is imperative, including the regional parties. The menace is down but not out!

Dr. Masihur Rahman, a retired civil servant, has served as Secretary, Economic Relations Division, and Chairman, National Board of Revenue.