

Identifying a crisis of identity

Shahid Alam scythes through a work on Bangladesh's political complexities

A nation, in one scholar's reasonably comprehensive characterization, denotes "people whose common identity creates a psychological bond and a political community. Their political identity usually comprises such characteristics as a common language, culture, ethnicity and history. More than one nation may comprise a state, but the terms nation, state, and country are often used interchangeably. A nation-state is a state is a state populated primarily by the people of one nationality." Essentially, nationalism is a state of the mind of those who feel they belong together as a nation. Bangladesh is an old nation embodied in a new nation-state. Khan Md. Lutfur Rahman, however, in *Nation Building Problems in Bangladesh: A Socio-Economic-Political Perspective*, states at the outset: "Bangladesh is a new nation with multiethnic and multi-religious plurality of population." Halfway through the book, though, he acknowledges that "The Genesis of the nationhood of Bangladesh has a pretty long history. Its history stretches back to the ancient period." Rahman's book is similarly uneven in quality, some insightful analysis coexisting with some incoherent material and the occasional sloppy research work.

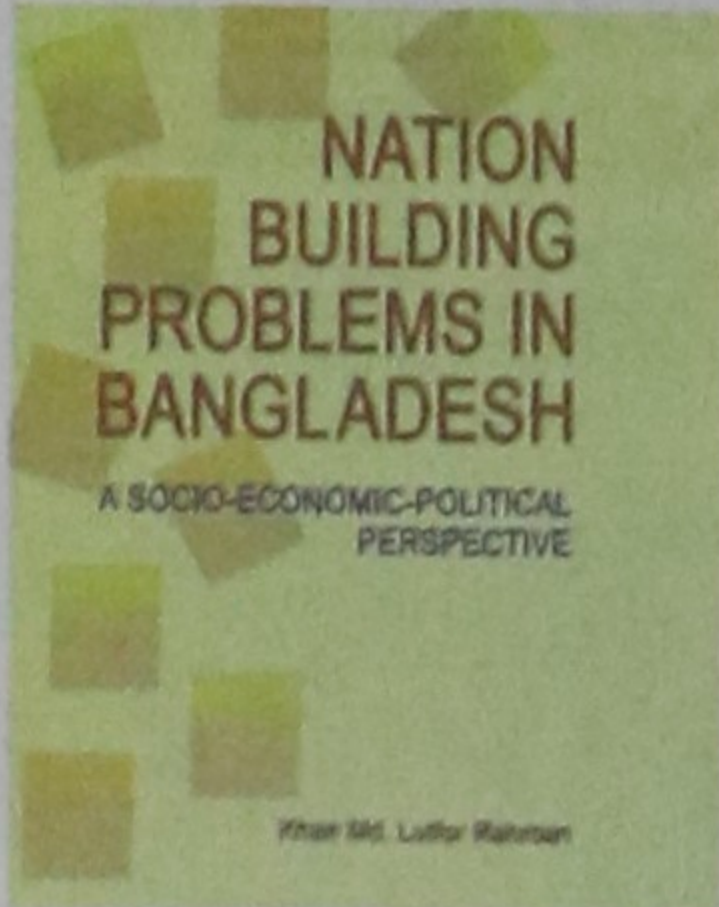
For a subject matter as momentous as nation building problems in Bangladesh, a more compact authoritative work was in order. One might be bewildered in trying to figure out how a largely ethnically, linguistically, and religiously homogenous population is still searching for national integrity and identity thirty eight years after having emerged as a sovereign independent nation-state. The author progresses along his stated objec-

tives: to find answers to the questions of whether a cohesive society is possible through dealing satisfactorily with the problems minorities face, what the problems are in fixing national identity, whether national unity cannot be achieved by closing the gap between the rich and the poor, how the caretaker government could be made more efficacious in holding free, fair, and neutral election, and how the legitimacy of governance could be ascertained. The answers provided are lopsided in incisiveness and virtue.

The author expends the maximum number of pages on "Minorities of Bangladesh and Their Alienation" (Chapter 1), followed closely by "Religious Symbolism and Problems of National Identity" (Chapter 2). Khan makes a particularly sharp comment: "In Bangladesh the minority problems have been suppressed through constitutional practices and minorities have been alienated from the body politic." As a result, "centrifugal feelings of the minority communities are thus created which destroy the centripetal forces." This is very true, although one may justifiably feel that the author apportions disproportionate blame on the majority populace, in the process giving the impression that this factor is the major culprit in preventing national cohesiveness.

Khan identifies a vexing identity crisis bedeviling Bangladesh: the one between secular ideals and religious ideology. He traces the genesis of the issue that grew out of a non-issue, and comes down hard on the side of a secular identity as exemplified by Bangali, as distinct from Bangladeshi, nationalism. Actually, this controversy should not even exist, as we are Bangalis as a nation as well as Bangladeshis in terms of nationality. Some of the author's

arguments in this regard are confusing and/or fallacious. For example, try to figure out this sentence: "Citizenship labels are determined by the constitution of the state, but nation is a nationality that has acquired independence." Or, in order to prove that the identity of Bangladeshi nationals should be Bangali, he stretches logic to ridiculous length to draw parallels with UK nationals being called English or Britons, US citizens Americans, those of Sri



Nation Building Problems in Bangladesh: A Socio-Economic-Political Perspective
Khan Md. Lutfur Rahman
The University Press Limited

Lanka Ceylonese, and so on. Well, unless I am mistaken, the citizens of Sri Lanka are known as Sri Lankans, while it would be a mouthful to call those of the USA United States of Americans, and UK is also known as Great Britain, and hence its nationals are usually called British (Briton is quaint, and rarely used, while the term English is properly used when referring to the people of England, a constituent of Great Britain).

Khan also has this to say in "Nationalism: Conflicts in Political Perception" (Chapter 3): "Joy Bangla" is the appropriate slogan for this country (which it could be, and a view that the author has every right to hold), and rejects the alternative "Bangladesh Zindabad" because "Zindabad" is not a Bangla word, and which is used in Pakistan as "Pakistan Zindabad". This is a curious argument because "Awami League" is also bereft of any Bangla word ("Awami" being Urdu and "League" English), but no one (and certainly not the author) seriously thinks of the party as being anything other than being representative of the Bangali nation as well as the nation-state of Bangladesh! And, regarding the popular notion of Mohammad Ali Jinnah being the originator of the two-nation theory (Khan names Sir Saiyad Ahmed Khan, Allama Iqbal, and Chowdhury Rahmat Ali as earlier proponents), two figures in British Indian history, one rather obscure, and the other quite prominent, both Hindus, had also advocated that theory. In fact, the first thought of dividing India on communal lines was put forward by Bhai Parmanand Chibber in a small booklet in 1923, followed in 1924 by five articles by Lala Lajpat Rai that were published in *The Tribune of Punjab* (cited in *Military Plight of Pakistan*, Volume I, Col. M.N. Gulati, Manas Publications, 2000).

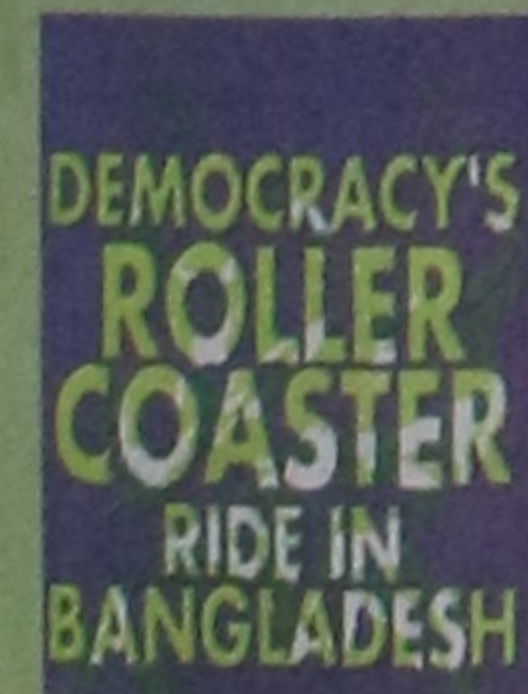
There are other confusing, contradictory information in the book. After stating that all the promises of Jamaat-e-Islami "could not persuade the majority voters in any election to vote for it which proves that their voting behaviour is secular," Khan almost immediately comes up with, "Good relations between Bangladesh and India by solving the outstanding problems between the two countries may also

inspire the people to cherish secular political ideal." Surely, the majority of the Bangladeshis cannot exhibit secular voting behaviour and simultaneously get inspired to become secular by India's example! As the author's graphics show, Jamaat-e-Islami progressively received less and less share of the percentage of popular votes in the 1991, 1996, and 2001 parliamentary elections, an admirable pattern attesting to the innate secularism of the average Bangladeshi.

Whether, in the author's view, closing the elite-mass gap (and it seems to be growing with each passing day) will actually facilitate nation building in Bangladesh is a matter open to debate, but the irrefutable fact is that such a chasm exists. Comments cited in the book, like "Pakistan's 22 families had become Bangladesh's 2000," or, "The number of Bengali multimillionaires was only two in 1975, it became two hundred by 1981" eloquently attest to that unwelcome phenomenon. "Elite-Mass Gap: A Stigma of the Nation" (Chapter 4), nonetheless, is one of the better-written segments of the book. The one following, "Legitimacy Crises: A Handicap in Nation Building" (Chapter 5) is, to say the least, disappointing: one-dimensional, in places, incoherent, often confusing, and reading more like demagoguery than a scholarly research work. *Nation Building Problems in Bangladesh: A Socio-Economic-Political Perspective* has its moments, but generally disappoints as a solid scholarly endeavour on a plague afflicting Bangladesh almost from the day it emerged as a sovereign independent nation-state.

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AT A GLANCE



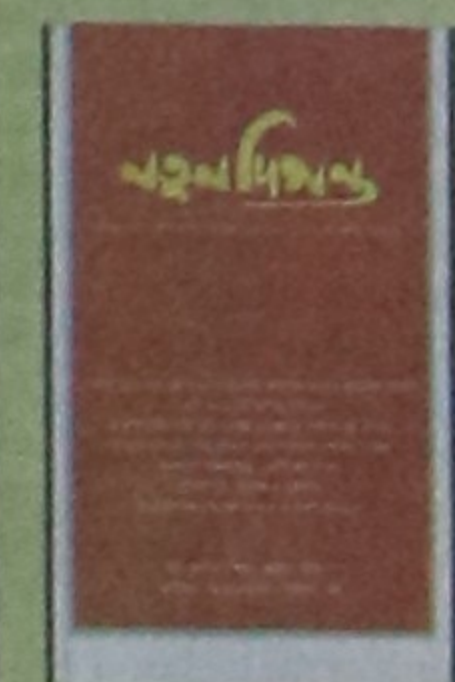
Democracy's Roller Coaster Ride in Bangladesh
Moazzem Hossain
The University Press Limited

There is the feeling that the earlier part of the twenty-first century, or these past nine years, has been a lost period for Bangladesh. In this collection of articles, the author argues with good reason why the country has failed to make strides in the economy or even in politics. Indeed, politics may have been the cause behind this atrophy.

Emerging Issues in Bangladesh Economy
Edit Rehman Sobhan
The University Press Limited



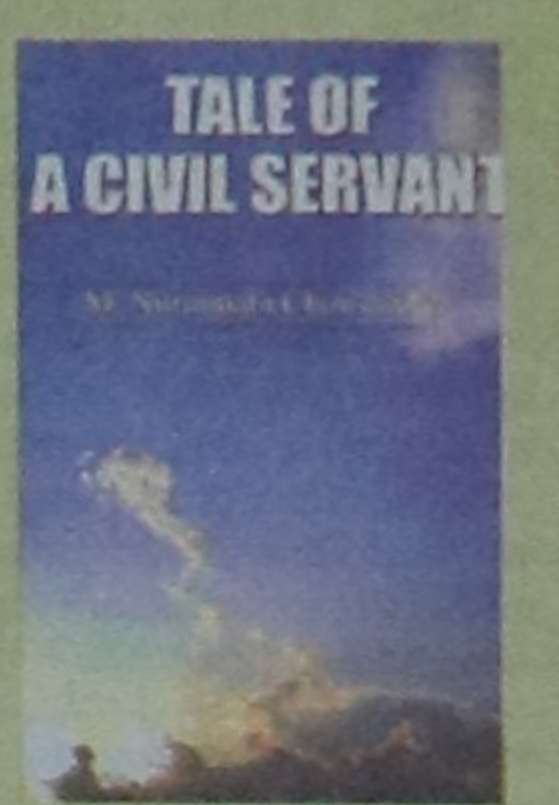
Once again, the focus is on the economic state of the nation. In this incisive and yet difficult compilation of articles, the issues that today affect the nation's economy—and that is a direct consequence of certain global factors—are dealt with comprehensively. Policy makers and others in government have a point of reference before them.



Notun Diganta
April-June 2009
Samaj Rupayon Oddhoyon Kendra

The focus, as always in this profoundly produced journal, is on history and society. There are the emphases on developments through the decades insofar as the growth of the Bengali historical consciousness is concerned. An added feature in this issue is the translation of an article on Tagore by H.S. Suhrawardy, written in 1941.

Tale of a Civil Servant
M. Nurunnabi Chowdhury
Hakkani Publisher



Chowdhury has had an eventful career as a civil servant, beginning with his induction into the Civil Service of Pakistan in the early 1960s. In these memoirs, he recounts not only the rigorous discipline he went through preparing for that kind of career but also the political and historical events he, like so many others, was to be witness to over time.

Innocence caught in the darkness of prison

Farida Shaikh is moved by the story of a 'spy'

THE Sahitya Akademi met in Delhi under its president Sunil Gangopadhyay and approved the Sahitya Akademi translation Prize 2008. In the Urdu category Tihar Kay Shab-o-Roz, translation of Iftikhar Gilani's memoir *My Days in Prison*, was selected for the Sahitya Award.

Iftikhar Gilani, Delhi bureau chief of the Jammu-based daily *Kashmir Times*, was arrested on June 9, 2002, after a raid by Income Tax officers at his home. He was booked under Sections 3 (spying) and 9 (attempt to abet the commission of offence) of the Official Secrets Act (OSA), read with Section 120-B of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) relating to sedition. The charge was that he had leaked sensitive information about the Indian army to Pakistan. Charges were also brought against him alleging that he had circulated pornographic material.

The charges under the OSA were based on a document found as a text file in Gilani's personal computer. The file, titled 'Forces' and running into five pages, contained information about the strength of the troops and paramilitary forces deployed in the operational area of the Northern Command in Jammu and Kashmir. The opinion of the Directorate-General of Military Intelligence (DGMI) was sought and it said on June 14 that the "information... is prejudicial to the security of the country and has serious ramifications on our operational plans in J&K".

The data were several years old and were part of a publication titled 'Denial of Freedom and Human Rights (A Review of Indian

Repression in Kashmir)'. It was written by Dr. Nazir Kamal and published by the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, in January 1996.

The paper was available in the libraries of the Institute of Defense Studies and Analyses, the School of International Studies, the Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Centre for Policy Research and the Indian Council of World Affairs. Gilani's friends and counsel failed to locate a copy, until after his arrest it was obtained from Dr. Shireen M. Mazari, Director-General of the Institute of Strategic Studies in Islamabad.

The DGMI in December 2002 wrote to the Delhi Police that its earlier opinion had over-estimated the sensitivity of the documents. These were easily available in the form of a published booklet, and the DGMI now thought these were of negligible security value.

Simultaneously the Home Ministry forwarded the previous opinion of the DGMI to the Delhi Police and told the court that the government considered the revised opinion irrelevant and untenable. The court noticed the contradiction in the two reports. In January the prosecution quietly filed an application in the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's court stating that the Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi had decided, in the "public interest", to drop the case against Gilani.

My Days in Prison is a gripping book. It is a first-person account. Gilani, writing like a trained journalist in his crisp, workmanlike English, presents it as a lived experience. The story is about what it actually meant

for Gilani: the indignities of a prison system that retains almost nothing of Kiran Bedi's well-meaning reforms. It is a depressing account of unnecessary, unprovoked beatings, harassment, pettiness, dishonesty and, occasionally, organized violence. Some excerpts from the chapter *Life in Tihar*:

As soon as I entered I heard murmurs from around the desk of the jail



My Days in Prison
Iftikhar Gilani
Penguin

official checking the names of the incoming prisoners.

"He has come," one official said to another. The man went inside. He soon returned and asked me to follow him. He led me to a room adjacent to the jail superintendent's office, called the "under trial office".

One Assistant Superintendent Kishan was sitting on a chair behind

a table. Ten to twelve others were in the room. Some seemed to be jail staff, while others appeared to be inmates. Assistant Superintendent Kishan asked my name. Before I had finished saying it, a Nepali staffer slapped me. It was the signal for a free-for-all. I was kicked from behind, blows rained on my back and someone grabbed my hair and banged my head against the table. Blood started oozing from my mouth. My nose and ears started bleeding too. Accompanying these blows were the choicest abuses.

"Saala, gaddar, Pakistani agent," they were screaming. "People like you should not be allowed to live. Traitors should be hanged straight away."

That was Gilani's initiation in the ways of the Tihar jail, beaten until he fainted. And when he regained consciousness, he was made to clean the jail toilet with his shirt and then wear the soiled shirt for three days.

This book is an important read because the law that made Gilani's imprisonment possible, on such flimsy evidence, still exists. Gilani does not write on self-pity nor on long emotional exposition of his days in prison. He puts his personal ordeal into a wider perspective, aware that he was not alone in his suffering. The last chapter, *The Law and its Misuse*, is on the OS Act 1923 and its relevant provisions under the Indian Penal Code, a less used legislation, with no safeguard against its misuse.

Gilani's charge sheet consisted of 225 pages, attached photocopy of his telephone diary to show his close connections with the Pakistan High

Commission, attached e-mail to the deputy executive editor of the Nation on the arrangement of his, editor's, stay in Agra during the upcoming visit of President Pervez Musharraf as proof of Gilani's Pakistani connection. Details of the bank accounts of Gilani and his wife and other financial transactions were also attached to uphold the amount in the charge sheet when the search in his home found only 3450 rupees.

Gilani calls OSA 1923 "draconian", an expression meaning "excessively harsh" or "severe". Actually, it is worse than that in the way it makes concessions to the prosecution, reducing its burden to prove charges in court, leaving enough loopholes for dishonest officials to pitch completely innocent citizens in jail. The language, as so many have repeatedly pointed out, is wide enough to leave room for frame-ups.

Gilani ends his book with a hope: All conscientious citizens of the country are waiting for this course correction by the government.

In the foreword, Siddharth Vardarajan labels Gilani's story as 'arbitrariness of power' and 'a chronicle of sheer viciousness of Indian state', a glaring shortfall in the fourth estate towards elimination of injustice; the legal and administrative power of the government's national security apparatus to frame an innocent citizen.

And 'gentle modest man... He has told his story here with the honesty and integrity that are the hallmark of his craft as a journalist.'

Farida Shaikh is a critic and member of The Reading Circle.

Passage

Khadija Shahjahan's forbidden dreams

Khadija Shahjahan, poet, travel writer and social worker, died in London on 9 May 2009. Syed Badrul Ahsan pays tribute to her through reproducing an article he wrote on her earlier on the occasion of the publication of one of her many works of poetry.

KHADIJA Shahjahan, my friend and good soul, has a kind of laughter that brings up in you a sense of how she must have been as a child. There is sometimes that twinkle in the eyes which comes across as something of the childlike. No, I have not known her since she was a baby or since I was a child. But back in the early 1990s, when she turned up at my workplace with a poem composed by her teenage daughter, I think I saw in her the makings of a writer. In all these years that have gone by, I am happy to report that Khadija Shahjahan has done well for herself. She has been travelling, she has been writing and she has been dealing with the world in the way it should be dealt with. That, of course, means she has been spontaneous about the way she has related to it.

Khadija has just come forth with a new collection of poetry, this time in English. It is basically a compila-

tion of her earlier poems in Bangla; and the translations into English, as they happen to be, have been rendered rather remarkably by her daughter, yes, the same who was once a teenager. That is perhaps a sign of how children take pride in their parents and the other way round. In *With Love* (and that is what Khadija calls her newest offering), you will go through something of an experience, of the trajectory the poet has been travelling along all these years. Khadija's earlier works of poetry made a good deal of impression on people who have gone through them. It happened to be my good fortune to be present at the launch of one such work in London a few years ago, a point at which I realised rather belatedly that she ought to have been part of the Bangladesh Festival organised in Britain in July 1999. But then, Khadija was present at a special poetry reading session where the stars happened to be: Syed Shamsul Huq, Shamsur Rahman and Nirmalendu Goon. Around that time, Khadija travelled to the United States (she keeps doing that, seeing that she has set up permanent abode in London) to participate in a poetry festival. When she came back to London, she surprised me with the news that



she had come by a copy of Eugene McCarthy's poems. McCarthy, if you recall, was the man who forced Lyndon Johnson into renouncing any claim to a second term in the White House after New Hampshire 1968. A few days after Khadija spoke of McCarthy to me, she sent me a copy of his poems. It is one of the books I have always treasured.

But let me go back to Khadija Shahjahan's new work *With Love*. One of the earliest entries here, *Motherhood*, has something of the fascinating about it more because of the excitement the poet goes through in the first flush of mother-

hood than anything else. *I had conceived / And my life changed that very day / People swarmed to me. The sheer thrill of motherhood, of assuming the completeness of woman, is what you peer at in these lines. Prosaic? Maybe. But look for the throbbing heart beneath the expressions. But if the birth of the woman in her is what Khadija spots in the birth of her child, it is the end of life she broods on even as the twilight descends around her. In *Beside the Sea*, a woman waits in anticipation of the end of day: *The last scarlet sun rays seemed to take away / The ecstasy and emotional flurry of the day / And in my heart / I wonder why I feel so alone / Why so alone and unfulfilled / On this magnificent ocean shore? In *Yellow Rose*, Khadija the poet finds time to bore into the thoughts of another poet: *The poet walked around my garden / You say it's hot but I can't stand this cold / It's definitely not like summer back home! / Still he adjusts his chair and sits down. The sense of romance in Khadija, that element of love she has demonstrated in her earlier poetry, comes alive in the manner of a gust in the pretty evocative *You are Here*. It is the lover she speaks to:***

An appealing side of Khadija Shahjahan is her natural refusal to be part of a pattern she is not com-

fortable with. Her entry into poetry, into travelogues (she has a very readable work she calls *Europe-a Bangali Meye*), was rather late in the day, after she had married and watched the birth and growth of her children. But when in the 1990s she simply decided to be a wordsmith, it was for me a huge reason to be happy. I have watched her enjoy life with enthusiasm here in Bangladesh; and I have had cause to observe the flutter in her gaze as she pointed out the manifestations of winter beauty to me in Doncaster (she was driving beautifully, and she always does that). In Britain, she has been an activist, in that very selective manner of speaking, in organisations where she has felt she has contributions to make.

When my friends take it upon themselves to explore the universe of thought, of imagery, something of lunar charm makes its way into their world. One of these days, Khadija Shahjahan, the poet, the woman who throws her head back and laughs as she shares pieces of humour with those in her company, could be walking in the deep woods, in the fitful rain, and re-emerge with fresh clumps of verses as an offering to nature

Syed Badrul Ahsan is Editor, Current Affairs, The Daily Star.

Crime and justice

Joe D' Silva appreciates a work on policy-making

THIS is an information-packed tome on criminal justice policies in the United States. Written by a former Dhaka University graduate from the Social Studies department and now a Professor at Virginia State University, the author traces the historical, philosophical and legal development of policies relating to crime and justice. Divided into seven chapters, it defines and examines crime policy, federal intervention, policies on drug crimes, juvenile justice, sex crimes, cyberspace criminality and emerging trends.

The codes of Hammurabi, the Sumerian Code and Magna Carta, Hobbes, Freud all find their references. But in the US, it was the Bill of Rights, adopted in 1791, that gave the young nation its first document from which to draw later policies. Amazingly, policy development in criminal justice is still an on-going process, and surprisingly, most of it comes in the 20th century. This has been necessitated by changes that have occurred in society: growing and diverse population, economic prosperity, rapid technological advances, urban societies, shifts in family values, sexual liberties, compassionate attitudes, drugs, etc.

Once dictated by harshness, policies later became realistic based on reason and science. As crimes and their nature increased, so did the examination as to the basis on which they were to be drawn up.

At first a matter of the individual states, the criminal justice policies came into the fold of the federal government as society became more complex and rapid industrial and technological advances proceeded. The role of the President of the United States, Congress and Judiciary are all examined. Thomas Jefferson, the third President, emphasized that justice was to prevail in the United States. But the first President to piece together a coherent policy on crime and justice was Herbert Hoover (1929-1933).

Particularly interesting is the chapter on juvenile justice. First a matter of the states, it was not until the 1970s that it became a federal concern. Dr. Shahidullah traces the philosophical, historical and legal antecedents for setting up separate courts for juvenile offenders. Current policies take into cognizance that the

State is responsible for the welfare of the children as citizens and also for their correction.

Policies on sex crimes took into account that women and children must be protected against sexual abuse. More importantly, policies were drawn up by men and it was men who committed most of the sex crimes. That sex crimes left permanent scars in the minds of their victims was recognized. In addition to prostitution, pornography, obscenity and child abuse that are the considerations of policy, the current alarming factor is sexual offences created over the Internet.

Having brought us up to speed in the 20th century, the author in the last chapter writes about the latest consideration for policy—cyberspace crime. In a digitalized

CRIME POLICY IN AMERICA



Crime Policy in America
Shahid M. Shahidullah
University Press of America, Inc.

society, the Internet has opened up vistas for international crime on identity theft, software robbery, fraud, cyberspace marketing, child pornography, storage and retrieval of data wrongfully. The gamut of areas this applies to is mind boggling. The author's analytical mind is, perhaps, best shown here.

The book is a must-read for undergraduate and graduate students. It is as much for experts drawing up legislation on crime and justice as it is relevant in Bangladesh's context. They can rely on no less than 35 tables, with figures and dates, and over 400 reference citations. It is available in hardcover and paper back.

Dr. Joe D'Silva is a researcher and associate professor at Norfolk State University, Virginia, USA.