

A quick journey through time

Farida Shaikh quite enjoys the march of history

The book is a journey through time, the past sixty years of Bangladesh; a combination of pictorial presentation in harmony with written words to familiarize the curious reader with major aspects of the country's contemporary history. More accurately it is not '... history of the six eventful years; it is rather an objective account of the events that shape the destiny of a whole nation as precisely as possible.'

This journey through time, a colonial era (1947-71) followed by a period of nationhood (1971- onward), is the workmanship of eight distinguished writers of Bangladesh. The eminent editorial team of three, two of whom are writers in this volume, have succinctly covered the issues and challenges Bangladesh has faced. However, a reader is likely to have an unsettled feeling upon reading the postscript before the end chapter --- the eventful year 2006-7 in this otherwise fine book. Background information of the writers would have added a reader friendly quality to this publication. It is heavy and uncomfortable to hold.

Karunangshu Barua, a rising publisher with a difference, initially conceived this work. He came into the publication scene in 2003. The book with the thematic cover, design and layout in blood, sacrifice, tears, pain and pathos, speaks of despair and dreams etched elegantly in black. An earthly background with crimson signifies sovereign Bangladesh, with the time span of six decades in green denoting the nature and youthful quality of the country. It is beautiful art work by S. Bhattacharjee, S. Hazra, Nurul Kabir and Bablu Hasan.

Bangladesh: Six Decades 1947-2007 is a narrative that unfolds with a hundred and eleven photo reproduction. It is a chronicle starting with legendary photojournalist Margaret Bourke White's *Vultures feeding on corpses lying in an alleyway after bloody rioting between Hindus and Muslims*, p.16. The images seem to scream on the page! Equally stunning is Amanul Huq's picture of *Shaheed Rafiquddin Ahmed's skull blown off by a bullet*. The photo by Prof. Rafiqul Islam: *Students of Dhaka University hoisting a black flag on top of the Arts building as a protest against the killing of students on 21 February*. Azizul Haq Shahjahan covers Governor A.K. Fazlul Haq and Prime Minister Shahid Suhrawardy. Aftab Ahmed's picture shows protest against Ayub Khan. Rashid Talukdar's black and white photos show Sheikh Mujib being taken to court at the start of the hearing of Agartala Conspiracy case and angry students hoisting blood stained shirt of Shaheed Asad. From the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting comes, vis-a-vis December 16 1972, *Atrocities committed by the Pakistan Army on the dreadful night of 25 March 1971*. On the cover of Time, December 1971, is *The Bloody Birth of Bangladesh*. And thus the images are revealed, one upon the other.

Upon the departure of the British colonial power in 1947, the Indian subcontinent inherited a 'legacy of hatred.' India became a secular state built on democratic principles while Pakistan, founded on religious politics, quickly morphed into a military oligarchy. Its western wing became the seat of power.

The suppression of Bengalis began in

1948; first the mother tongue, then marginalization in military and civil services, then in matters of policy making and monetary matters. While the west prospered the eastern wing began to sink into poverty. The year 1952 ushered in the language movement, gave birth to Bengali nationalism, secularism and socio-cultural freedom.

Amid the stunning and rare collection of photographs, the reader is often lost in this maze of the pictorial pathway, like a labyrinth that does not connect the

meeting prior to partition of three key personalities --- Lord Mountbatten,

Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru. It is a sad story of the breakup, the inequality, injustice and hardships faced by ordinary people, with all the uprooting, lost identities and journeys into the unknown. The year 1952 contained the germinating seeds of a runaway nation. The challenge to the idea of nationhood and the fallacy contained in the two-nation theory becomes obvious. Bengalis love their mother tongue. Dr. M. Shahidullah countered the argument for Urdu through suggesting that, as Bangla was the language of the majority, it should be the state language.

Professor Dilara Chowdhury, in *Quest for Regional Autonomy 1952-58*, notes that '...the very movement of of Pakistan... contained the genesis of Bangladesh', p.29. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 was a map for a constitution of independent states in Muslim majority areas. It was '...a charter of East Bengal's freedom... It was this quest for autonomy and self-rule that eventually blossomed into a full-blown liberation war in 1971.' The decolonization of Asia and Africa after World War II gave rise to diversified nation-states, with federalism being seen as a way to nationhood by strong leaders. For Pakistan, this was problematic as '...it was a classic case of being a nation only in hope.' Separated by a thousand miles of Indian territory, religion was the only bond between the two wings of the country. Pakistan's experiment with federalism eventually was to fail. Martial Law was imposed in 1958, and general elections scheduled

for 1959 were cancelled.

A.M.A. Muhith discusses a twelve-year period in *Under Military Rule: 1958-70*. After Ayub Khan took over as president, Iskandar Mirza went into exile in Britain. Nearly 500 politicians across the country were arrested, among them Maulana Bhashani and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. More details come under this section: martial law and its background, Ayub's constitutional arrangements, Ayub's reforms and economic strategy. In 1962 came the Sharif Commission Education Reforms aiming to make Urdu compulsory and Arabic script envisaged for Bangla.

The subsequent sections on the 1965 Kashmir war and the Six Point programme show the isolation and vulnerable security position of East Pakistan. The government 'unearthed' the Agartala Conspiracy Case, detaining Sheikh Mujib under the Defence of Pakistan Rule. Mention is also made of the mass upsurge and the fall of Ayub, the elections of 1970 and their outcome. Also mentioned are the twenty-two families controlling the industrial wealth of the country. In the financial sector, 80% and 97% of insurance and banking respectively belonged to these families.

In *War of Liberation: 1971*, Muhammad Zamir discusses the elections of 1970. The emergence of Sheikh Mujib as the symbol of Bengali nationalism and Bhutto's 'continued obduracy' are noted. *The Mujib era: 1972-75* by Mohammad Farashuddin covers the Rakhi Bahini, famine of 1974, Bangabandhu's address before the UN General Assembly in Bangla, et cetera,

are taken note of. In *Under Zia and Ershad: 1975-90*, Meghna Guhathakurta discusses 'militarization' under General Ziaur Rahman. The political party he formed drew its strength from the military. Institutionalized corruption prevailed. In May 1981 Ziaur Rahman was assassinated, and some months later martial law was declared. The end of the Ershad period saw the polarization of political parties on the superficial ideological ground of 'Bengali versus Bangladeshi nationalism' which was further reduced to the ridiculous level of a quarrel between two personalities, 'two ladies.'

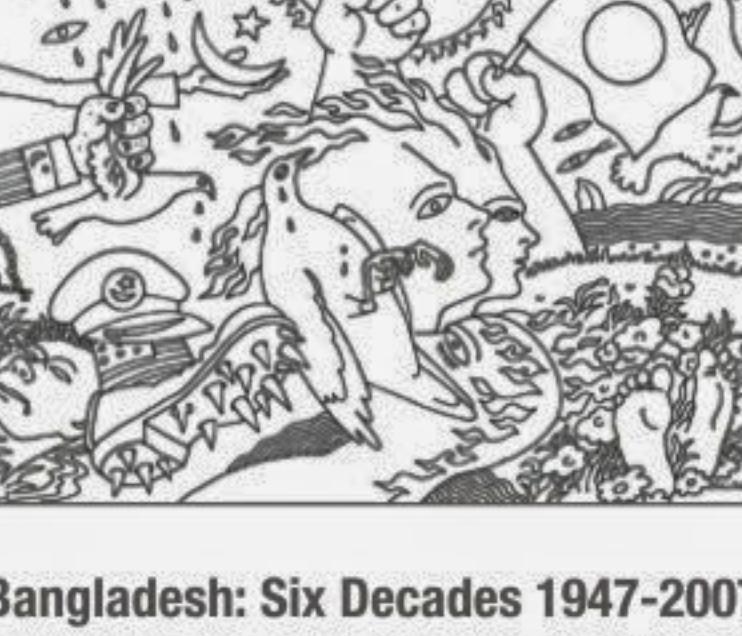
Towards a democratic polity: 1991-2006 by Ataus Samad discusses the restoration of democracy in the country. *Postscript* by the editors covers the years 1996-2006, taking into account the caretaker government of Justice Habibur Rahman. The Awami League returned to power after a lapse of 21 years. A coalition government was formed.

Syed Badrul Ahsan's *The Eventful Years: 2006-07* is an action-packed view of the country. Included are events that highlight the swearing in of Sheikh Hasina for the second time as prime minister of Bangladesh. Then there is mention of the 2007 arrest of Sheikh Hasina and Khleda Zia.

Six Decades is highly recommended for all reading rooms, conference and seminar halls. It ought to have pride of place at college libraries, and will be appropriate at airport passenger lounges. A focus on the distribution of the book is most urgent.

Farida Shaikh is a critic and member of The Reading Circle

BANGLADESH: SIX DECADES



Bangladesh: Six Decades 1947-2007
Eds Anisuzzaman, Mohammad Zamir,
S. Manzoorul Islam
Nymphaea Publication

narrative with the embedded pictures. Dates are missing. The captions appear to have been put in hastily and are small. There is no listing of the photographs. The reader feels immensely the absence of a photo editor in a rich collection of photographs that this work presents.

The opening chapter, *The Turbulent First Years 1947-52*, is by Anisuzzaman.

The first picture of the book shows a

meeting prior to partition of three key personalities --- Lord Mountbatten,

Mohammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru. It is a sad story of the breakup,

the inequality, injustice and hardships faced by ordinary people, with all the

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