

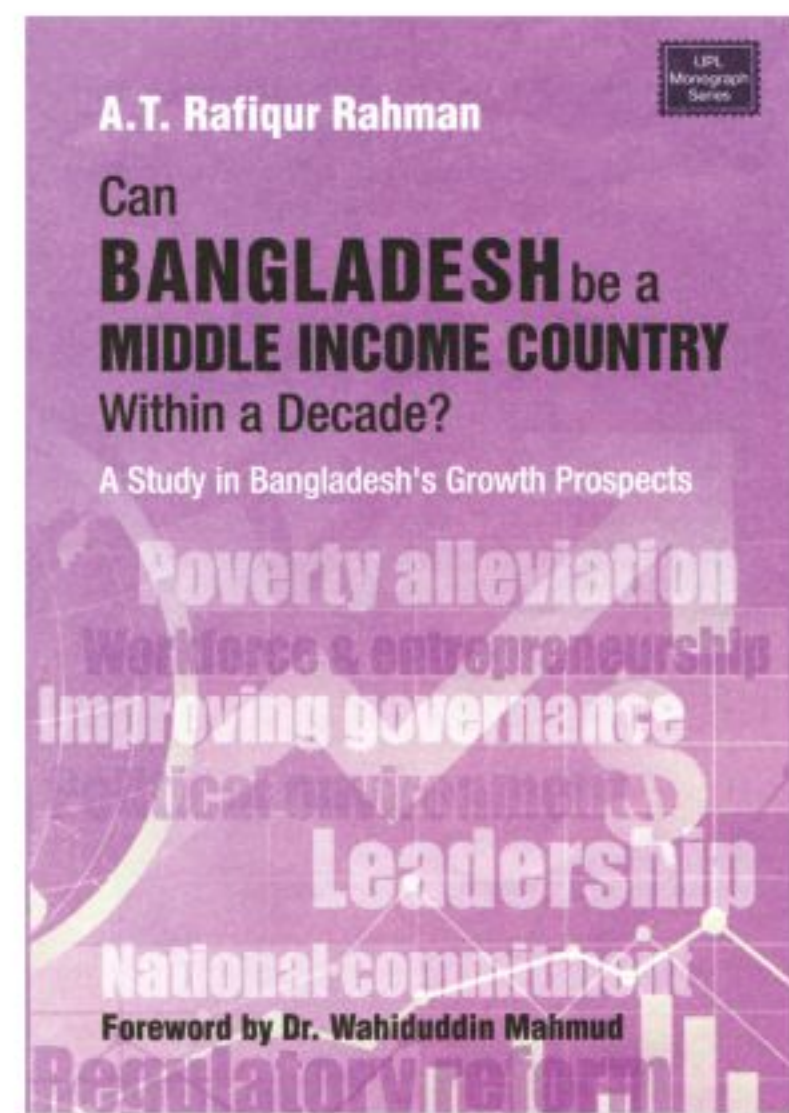
# A Pollyannaish outlook

## Shahid Alam asks who will clean up politics

In the Foreword to a monograph turned into a slender book, *Can Bangladesh be a Middle Income Country Within a Decade?*, Wahiduddin Mahmud makes these pertinent, as well as realistic, observations: "Bangladesh faces enormous challenges in alleviating poverty and achieving high, sustained and equitable economic growth. Nearly a third of its population lies under the official poverty line, and hunger and malnutrition are widespread. The country has to tackle several growth-retarding factors: poor governance and a high level of corruption, underdeveloped infrastructure, large-scale tax evasion and a low tax-GDP ratio, extremely high population density and the associated scarcity of land and natural resources, a low-skilled labour force, and vulnerability to natural disasters including the threat of the adverse effects of climate change." And proceeds to pose this profoundly probing query: "While the governance environment may have been barely adequate thus far to cope with an economy breaking out of stagnation and extreme poverty, are we nearing a tipping point beyond which it may increasingly prove a barrier to putting the economy firmly on a path of modernization and global integration?"

It could very well be that the reader will find Mahmud's words the most thought-provoking in the entire book. The author, A.T. Rafiqur Rahman, a senior academic and development specialist, proclaims that he was driven to write the book after having witnessed Bangladesh's development initiatives in recent years, particularly for achieving higher economic growth

while simultaneously reducing poverty. In his own words, he "focuses on the MIC status for Bangladesh under the World Bank ranking." The author is hooked on the idea that the coveted MIC (middle income country) status will allow Bangladesh to boost its self-confidence and earn other countries'



**Can Bangladesh be a Middle Income Country Within a Decade?**  
A Study in Bangladesh's Growth Prospects

A.T. Rafiqur Rahman  
The University Press Limited

respect as it will be able to shed the demeaning connotations associated with a low income country, a category to which it belongs. While some low income countries indeed carry "the image of midgets and panhandlers", as the author observes, so do more than a

few MICs. It seems to be a trivial reason for a country wanting to be classified as a MIC, even though the elevated status might be bordering on the dividing line between low income and middle income classification.

Furthermore, and Rahman acknowledges this caveat, the World Bank (WB) ranking might not tally with other evaluating institutions' assessments.

The author studies the progression of five Asian countries (China, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam) and an equal number from other continents (Ghana, Guyana, Mauritania, Sudan, and Zambia) from low income to middle income status to speculate on an approximate timeframe when Bangladesh will be able to make the same transition. For the record, WB's 2011 report places Bangladesh, with a per capita GNI (gross national income) of US \$770, firmly in the group of 36 low income economies. All countries with a GNI per capita of \$1025 or lower are classified in the low income cluster. Of the South Asian countries classed as MICs, Sri Lanka has a GNI per capita of \$2580, India 1410, and Pakistan 1120 (using the Atlas method).

Based on his comparative study, Rahman concludes that Bangladesh can graduate to the MIC group by 2032. However, if the country can sustain the 6.7% of GDP growth that it achieved in 2011, it is likely that it could get there by 2018. And, at this point, he puts on particularly rose-tinted glasses: "There are high expectations that the strengths of the Bangladesh economy, including a confident private sector, growing improvements in education, skill training and other human development conditions, a dynamic youth group

and an energetic and enlightened civil society sector, may be able to overcome the political tensions and conflicts and keep the country focused on economic and social growth." The only thing is that the dysfunctional political culture overwhelms the strengths of the country's economy, and the civil society is often a part of the debilitating hardened political partisanship characterizing the country. Then there are the sobering realities, some of which is beyond Bangladesh's control. The global economy is slowing down. Already WB has forecast a 0.4% reduction in GDP growth for the country in 2012 from the 2011 figure of 6.7%. India's has been cut down even more glaringly to 4.9% and China's to 7.8%. The interesting point about China is that it had itself set the rate at 7.5%! On a speculative point, is there any guarantee that, if and when (really more a matter of time) Bangladesh breaks past the benchmark of \$1025, will WB shift the threshold of MIC to a higher level? Furthermore, it might not always be a good idea to draw on parallelism with the experiences of other countries to predict one nation's future.

One might also question the wisdom of constantly checking with other countries to ascertain Bangladesh's situation. It is not necessarily a bad exercise; often, in fact, instructive, but a better option might be to concentrate on taking on and successfully completing one's own project, and not to always bother about what others are doing. The stark reality is that Bangladesh is considered to be a member of the least developed countries (LDC) by other international institutions, like the Economic and Social

Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations, using their own criteria to arrive at their conclusions. Using ECOSOC data, Nations Online has determined that Bangladesh and Bhutan (a country which, incidentally, is classified as a MIC by WB), along with eight other Asian nations, fall into the LDC group. The three criteria used to arrive at this conclusion are: (1) low income based on a 3-year average estimate of GNI per capita (under \$750 for inclusion, above 900 for graduation); (2) human resource weakness based on nutrition, health, education, and adult literacy; and (3) economic vulnerability based on instability of agricultural production, instability of exports of goods and services, economic importance of non-traditional activities, merchandise export concentration, and handicap of economic smallness.

There are different evaluators, but the inescapable fact is that, whoever it is, Bangladesh remains at the lower end of developing nations. Becoming an MIC would be wonderful, but should not become an obsession that loses sight of tackling serious social, economic and political issues that usually do not benefit from WB's panacea of growth, growth, and more growth. Bangladesh has performed relatively well in human development (although some of the reports in 2012 have not been encouraging), but, ECOSOC still classifies it among the LDCs because it is beset with some serious problems it needs to overcome. And it usually banks heavily on a single industry for its economic well-being when the chances are real that some factor could undermine it, and the

country will find itself in a tight situation. We can be thankful for the inventiveness and adaptability of the average Bangladeshi to come up with remedial solutions.

Rahman, thankfully, does not give a plethora of suggestions on how to hasten Bangladesh towards becoming an MIC because "offering a long list of suggestions from his past experience" has "limited usefulness". However, he has some puzzling observations, bordering on naivete: "National leaders have good intentions for the country and convey the hopes and aspirations of the people when they talk about the development goals and plans for the country. But they have not been able to implement the necessary political, administrative and anti-corruption reforms..." Oh, really! And, pray, who is responsible for implementing the reforms? And for cleaning up the mess of dysfunctional politics? By the way, just who was responsible for creating the mess in the first place? Rahman does have one solution: bring back retired and retiring Bangladeshi expatriates in developed countries as well as the interested younger ones, but provide "a more professional environment and less partisan ways of work" for them. Of all the nakedly self-serving suggestions! Enough said. One would not lose much, if anything, by not having read *Can Bangladesh be a Middle Income Country Within a Decade?*

PROFESSOR SHAHID ALAM IS HEAD, MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION DEPARTMENT, INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH (IUB).

# Of lost countries and fleeting dreams

## Kazi Shahidul Islam examines the pains of a writer

Chinua Achebe, known as the father of modern African literature, has again come to the limelight, at age 82, with his long-awaited memoir, *There Was A Country: A Personal History of Biafra* - a fusion of history and experience, poetry and prose, centred around the brutal three-year (1967-1970) Biafran war that nearly destroyed his nation. Today those studying English literature at universities across our country, even in any other part of the world, must know that Achebe's debut 1958 novel, his magnum opus, *Things Fall Apart*, delineating the collision between British colonial rule and Igbo society, remains a landmark work 54 years after its release. It has sold more than 10 million copies and has been published in numerous languages all over the world. For those who know the writer of *Things Fall Apart*, this new book will emphasize and elucidate certain intricate fuzzy details in the circumstances of his already well-known life. For the reader with meagre knowledge of Achebe's life, fragments of which he has so far revealed through his numerous autobiographical essays, these details in this memoir will acquire a new life.

During the Biafran war, the pivot of this book, Achebe acted as roving cultural ambassador for the Biafran Republic when the south-eastern area tried to split from Nigeria in 1967 for reasons political. More than one million people died during the conflict in fighting and from famine, with photographs of starving children from Biafra becoming synonymous in the media with the conflict.

It is a sheer wonder that Achebe has been silent about his preponderant war experiences for over forty years. In all of his writings until now, he has never addressed the details of his experience during the Biafran war, in which he was caught up with his young family - except occasionally in

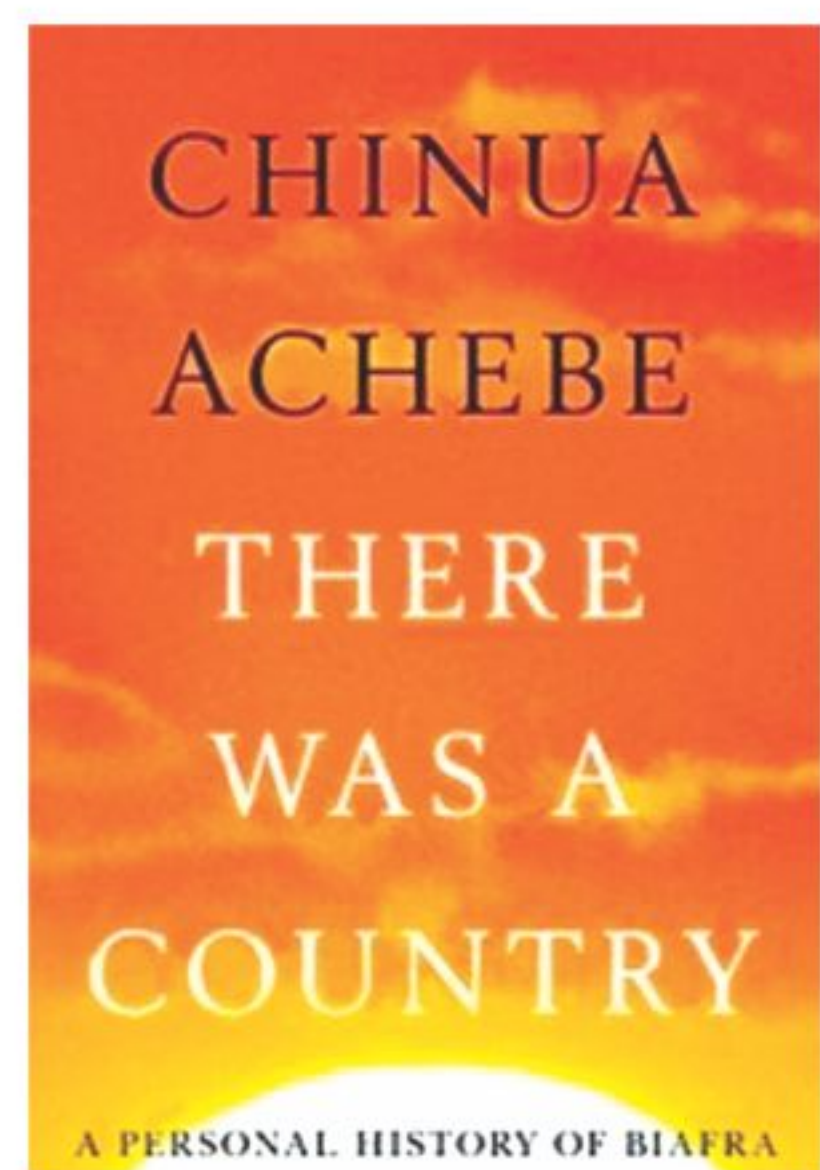
his poetry. Again, Chinua Achebe appears as a more bizarre African writer when we find him getting his books published in Britain. Asked in an interview why he had offered *Things Fall Apart* to a British publisher when it depicted the difficulties and cultural contradictions which the people of his country have suffered from as a result of the colonial presence of the British, he gave a comprehensive answer through drawing the reality of a blooming enthusiastic writer hailing from a corner incessantly sabotaged.

"In those days one had very few avenues to get published.....we had very few choices. My first novel was rejected by a number of publishers before providence led it into the hands of Alan Hill at Heinemann after Donald McRae, another Heinemann executive with extensive experience in Africa encouraged Heinemann to publish the novel with a powerful recommendation: 'This is the best first novel I have read since the war.' In many ways, without the intervention of Alan Hill and Heinemann, many of the writers from that generation may not have found a voice."

Allen Lane, Achebe's UK publisher described the memoir as "a distillation of vivid observation and considered research and reflection. It relates Nigeria's birth pangs in the context of Achebe's own development as a man and a writer, and examines the role of the artist in times of war." Along with a bold introduction in the very beginning, the book consists of four major parts, each having stories with individual titles chronicling the events of the civil war. It seems like a deliberate and highly thought, and well-wrought structure corresponding with the four Igbo market days *Afo*, *Nkwo*, *Eke*, *Orie* (Oye) and the general four elemental structures of Igbo life and experience on which the balance of that world revolves and is

consecrated. At every beginning, there is a cause resulting in events he was part of as a witness. In between his experiential bits, Achebe has also inlaid eight poems dubbed '1966', 'The First Shot', 'Biafra 1969', 'Air Aid', 'Mango Seedling', 'We Laughed at Him', 'Vultures' and 'After a War'.

The 'Introduction', which manifests the author's thoughts and ambitions regarding his reflective work, opens with a reference to Igbo culture, "An Igbo proverb tells us that a man who



**There Was A Country**  
A Personal History of Biafra  
Chinua Achebe

does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body." Then it goes on to inform us of the dire historical points which changed the life of the African people. It says, "The rain that beat Africa began four to five hundred years ago, from the "discovery" of Africa by Europe, through the transatlantic slave trade, to the Berlin Conference of 1885. That controversial gathering of the world's leading European

powers precipitated what now we call the Scramble for Africa, which created new boundaries that did violence to Africa's ancient societies and resulted in tension-prone modern states. It took place without African consultation or representation, to say the least." In this portion, he also delves out why the African people have been somewhat complacent with alien interference in their governments. He asserts, "Africa's postcolonial disposition is the result of a people who have lost the habit of ruling themselves. We have also had difficulty running the new systems foisted upon us at the dawn of independence by our "colonial masters".

So Achebe's conscientious search for the reasons behind Africa's predicament elicits not only the supremacy of the white conquerors, who are admittedly entitled as masters, but also the indubitable culpability of the indigenous people of the dismantled territory. In the coup de grace of his preamble, Achebe finds the stepping stones to his memoirs for his readers and reveals why he has come out with this: "I do this both to bring readers unfamiliar with this landscape into it at a human level and to be open about some of the sources of my own perspective." In 256 pages, Achebe has managed to compress 40 years of research and personal experience.

It is strange that Chinua Achebe opens his memoir with the title, "Pioneers of a New Frontier", in Part 1 not with a statement about his birth, rather with the description of his father's birth, and of his grandparents, which is followed by the author's account of the arrival of missionaries propagating a new religion, Christianity, in their land and the way his progenitor, especially Udoh Osinyi, his father's maternal uncle, greeted them, letting out a liberal

attitude and genuine receptivity to those Christians who "were expanding their footprint in Igbo land and the rest of southern Nigeria with their potent, irresistible tonic of evangelism and education." Achebe establishes the moment of his shaping in this part, which covers the story of his father's transitions, from an orphan to a missionary teacher, one of the pioneers of Christian evangelism and missionary education in Igboland in the early 20th century.

This of course is significant a significance to which Achebe pays some heed certainly, but not enough, and only in the sense of his own dialectical navigation of that new world of Christianity and the west, embodied by his parents, and the disappearing world of Udo Osinyi, his father's uncle, at the crossroads between which Achebe stands.

We certainly see a bit more of Achebe's mother in this memoir, but only just a glimpse, enough to give us, in one incident the kolanut tree incident her strength and resolve, from which Achebe claims the shaping of his own consciousness: "It is her peaceful determination to tackle barriers in her world that nailed down a very important element of my development - the willingness to bring change gently".

Achebe spends parts 2 and 3 of *There Was A Country* treating the subject of war and peace. Part 4 tackles post-war society, ending with an appendix, Brigadier Victor Banjo's radio broadcast to the Midwest during the Biafra invasion of the Midwest and the failed crossing from Ore into the West.

There is no nostalgia to these events, only a powerful sense of tragedy. We sense the deep scars of the war on Achebe in this melodic but measured narrative. The author writes movingly about the final days in January 1970: "In the end, Biafra

collapsed. We simply had to turn around and find a way to keep those people still there alive. It was a desperate situation with so many children in need, kwashiorkor rampant, and thousands perishing every week... some people said: 'Let's go into the forest and continue the struggle.' A statement attributed to Chief Obafemi Awolowo summarises this attitude: 'All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder.' This memoir is an outlet of long-suppressed truths filled with sadness - a long lament, a lament for the death of people he loved, for the death of millions he did not know by name, the death of Nigeria's dreams and perhaps mostly for the Igbo people who continue to be alienated in the land of their ancestors.

*There Was A Country* is interlaced with poetry, speaks of an uncommon time a time of innocence that quickly dissolved into the iron years of the post-colonial. The cruelty and injustice of the colonists - and sequentially of their cohorts inflicted upon the politically downtrodden people are the integral implication of the whole work.

*There Was a Country* will provide new insights into the controversial claims and counter-claims that have been spoken or documented of the Nigerian civil war and will add to the debate on the situation of Africa in postcolonial times as seen through the powerful reflections in the memoir. A continent that can produce a Chinua Achebe there is greatness there.

KAZI SHAHIDUL ISLAM IS LECTURER, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, BGC TRUST UNIVERSITY OF BANGLADESH, CHITTAGONG.

### RE-READINGS

**Dhaka University and the Bengali ethos...**  
Syed Badrul Ahsan reads of heroic men

*Bangladesher Muktiujidho*  
Dhaka O Kolkata Bishwabidyalayer Obodan  
Eds. Rangalal Sen, Dulal Bhowmik, Tuhiin Roy  
The University Press Limited

The growth of Bengali nationalism in pre-1971 Pakistan had a whole lot to do with the various struggles put up by students and teachers of Dhaka University. And that was clearly a reason why during the War of Liberation the university would be made the target of the Pakistan army's particular wrath. That, of course, is an obvious truth. But what Rangalal Sen, Dulal Bhowmik and Tuhiin Roy have

come forth with in this work is a comprehensive study of the role Dhaka University has played in the shaping of Bengali nationalistic aspirations, beginning especially with the Language Movement of 1952. That is quite a departure from the title of the work. At the same time, for all the stress on the role played by Dhaka University and Calcutta University during Bangladesh's war for liberty in 1971, information on the contributions of the latter does not much go beyond an enumeration of the efforts its academics and students made towards assisting the Bengali movement. But, to be sure, it is invaluable information, a necessary reminder to Bengalis inhabiting the people's republic of the powerful wave of support that had come their way in clearly the darkest moment of their collective life.

These are instructive essays we have

here, from individuals who have closely studied Dhaka University as it has operated through the decades. That the university has been a focal point of an assertion of freedom in this part of the world has never been in doubt. Successive regimes in Pakistan understood this truth only too well, and for the very good reason that of all the institutions of higher learning in pre-1971 Pakistan, it was only Dhaka University which identified itself, gradually and surely, with the larger canvas of Bengali political aspirations. The first instance of defiance went out from the university, back in March 1948, when an arrogant Mohammad Ali Jinnah sought to have Urdu imposed on the country as the language of the state. It was only the beginning. In subsequent years, the university would come to acquire the role of a crusading spirit. It is interesting to think that almost the

entire Bengali political set-up in the 1960s and, later, in the 1970s comprised the young men who as students had spearheaded various movements on the campus.

A wide range of subjects and themes is covered in the work. Ajoy Roy's reflections on Dhaka University as it carved a niche in tale of the War of Liberation provides an incisive account of how the university transformed itself from an academic institution into a hotbed of nationalistic activity. A similar approach is taken by Rafiqul Islam who, however, makes sure that it is a broad area he deals with. Islam records the number of casualties the university went through in 1971, in terms of the lives of teachers and students lost at the hands of the Pakistan army and then its local collaborators. A refreshing aspect of Islam's observations is the bare truth

he reveals about the collaborationist role adopted by a number of reputed academics. Syed Sajjad Hussain, Mohor Ali and Hasan Zaman come in for severe criticism, naturally and justifiably, because of their clear looking away from the genocide perpetrated in 1971. Hussain, appointed by Tikka Khan as vice chancellor in early 1971, remained indifferent to the many misfortunate students and his fellow academics were regularly subjected to by the occupation army. Sent on a trip abroad by the Pakistani junta to speak for it, he indulged in barefaced lies. The army, he told a disbelieving world, had not indulged in any atrocities in 'East Pakistan'. For himself, Islam had a narrow escape. Taken under arrest by the army, together with other teachers, he was eventually freed. But Giasuddin Ahmed, from the department of history, was not lucky the second time.

The first time he was abducted by the army, he was allowed to return home. The second time, on the eve of liberation, his fate was sealed: an al-Badr killer squad of the Jamaat e Islami seized him and murdered him, along with others, most viciously. Reports have circulated all these decades (and they do not come from Rafiqul Islam in this work) of some of those very young al-Badr elements rising to prominent bureaucratic positions in Bangladesh. Perhaps they are yet there? Perhaps a checking of the records in government ministries will yield these killers up?

The shaping of the Bangladesh nation-state through the periodic political ferment Dhaka University went through forms the theme of Abul Maal Abdul Muhith's essay. In essence, Muhith's thoughts go back to the earliest instances of student revolt and all the way through the gathering