

RE-READINGS

Bengal's baul and his story

Syed Badrul Ahsan goes through Bangabandhu thoughts

MINAR Monsur demonstrated unquestionable courage when he first placed this compilation (Sheikh Mujib: Ekti Lal Golap, published by Shahitya Bilash) on Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman before the country in 1979. And it was courage because of the dark nature of the times. Bangladesh was under its earliest spell of military rule. And just how harsh the times were can be gauged from the very fact that it was General Ziaur Rahman who happened to be presiding over the fortunes of the country as its first military dictator. It was dictatorship unbridled and unambiguous and not just because politics was in suspension. That Parliament had returned, with Zia's followers in the majority, really did not matter. What did matter was the sure and steady attempts made to airbrush the Father of the Nation out of Bangladesh's history. References to the 1971 War of Liberation carefully excised Bangabandhu's name as also those of the political leaders instrumental in the formation



Andre Malraux with Bangabandhu

of the Mujibnagar government.

Far worse was the military regime's decisive move to prevent any trial of the assassins of August-November 1975 through the infamous Indemnity Ordinance, which was incorporated in the nation's constitution. Bangabandhu's murderers, rewarded by the regime through recruitment as diplomats (!) at various Bangladesh missions abroad, thus stayed out of reach of the law. And the constitution? Zia and his regime felt little embarrassment in tampering with it. The state of Bangladesh, in stark terms, increasingly resembled the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the very historical symbol of retrogression Bengalis had freed themselves of in 1971. It was against such a background that Monsur came forth with these enlightening essays on Bangabandhu. The second edition of the work appeared in 1998. And now we have the third (it appeared in 2010).

Of course, much has already been written on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and there is little question that a good deal more will be written in the times to come. But what you have here are some essays that provide the sort of insight into Bangabandhu's personality that you quite did not come by earlier. Annadashankar Roy's is a piece that reveals, for perhaps the first time, what many of us have long suspected as the truth. And the Indian scholar makes it a point to inform readers that he had promised to keep Mujib's confidence. But then, Bangladesh's leader died. And thus it is that we know of the plans Bangabandhu had been making for Bangladesh's freedom even as he waged his struggle for regional auton-

omy within the Pakistan state. In the earlier part of the 1960s, Mujib had sought Indian assistance to free Bengalis of Pakistan. Jawaharlal Nehru was not agreeable to the idea. And when did thoughts of a free Bangladesh first come to him? Mujib's answer is emphatic. It was in 1947, when Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy and Sarat Bose made a feeble attempt to stay out of Pakistan through keeping Bengal united as an independent state. The plan eventually collapsed. No one was surprised.

In Pakistan, as he rose to prominence, Bangabandhu focused on East Pakistan's severing all links with Islamabad. "Do you know what my plan was?" He throws the question at Roy. And then answers it without waiting for a response. "We would suddenly seize power. Every point in Dhaka would come under our control. We had our people in the army, navy, air force, police and civil service. But it was one individual's treachery which ruined it all. A navy officer had talked about the plan with his subordinate, who then revealed it. And we all

got caught." Annadashankar Roy asked him when the plan would have been put into effect. Bangabandhu laughed and told him, "I won't tell you."

Ataus Samad recalls his flight with Bangabandhu to Dhaka from Delhi on 10 January 1972. There were others on that historic journey back home --- Dr. Kamal Hossain and his family, Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, diplomat Faruq Chowdhury. Mujib, says the veteran journalist, recited verses from his favourite poets in a state of euphoria. Then, turning to his companions, he said with satisfaction: "The country is free. My goal has been attained. Now I can wrap myself in a shawl and go on a trek through Bengal's haats, fields, riverbanks. I will talk to my countrymen and listen to their tales of happiness and woe."

Ataus Samad, with that hint of sadness, reminds us that such was not to be. And yet if Bangabandhu had indeed been able to put his dreams into reality, things might well have been different.

Khan Sarwar Murshid moves off into a different field, the better to focus philosophical light on Bangladesh's founder. He recalls Andre Malraux's trip to Bangladesh in 1973 to receive an honorary doctorate from Rajshahi University. The French intellectual, who had been engaged in the Spanish civil war and had played a leading role in Charles de Gaulle's resistance to the Nazis, offered to lead a brigade against the Pakistanis in 1971. In Rajshahi, he reflected on the lonely struggle that men like Gandhi and Mujib had led against their oppressors, on the historic changes they thus brought about. Murshid sums it up. In Malraux's intellectual assessment, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was part of a historic procession of victors. The procession fell into a pattern: Mujib-Gandhi, Gandhi-Nehru, Nehru-De Gaulle, De Gaulle-Malraux.

The sheer plenitude of essays in this compilation should be cause for joy. Read on. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in his elemental nature --- as politician, as bard, as revolutionary --- comes alive once again.

SYED BADRUL AHSAN'S 'FROM REBEL TO FOUNDING FATHER: SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN', WAS PUBLISHED BY NIVOGI BOOKS, DELHI, IN 2013. HIS FORTHCOMING WORKS ARE A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHITTA RAJNAN DAS, SUBHASH CHANDRA BOSE AND SHEIKH MUJIBUR RAHMAN AND A BIOGRAPHY OF TAJUDDIN AHMAD

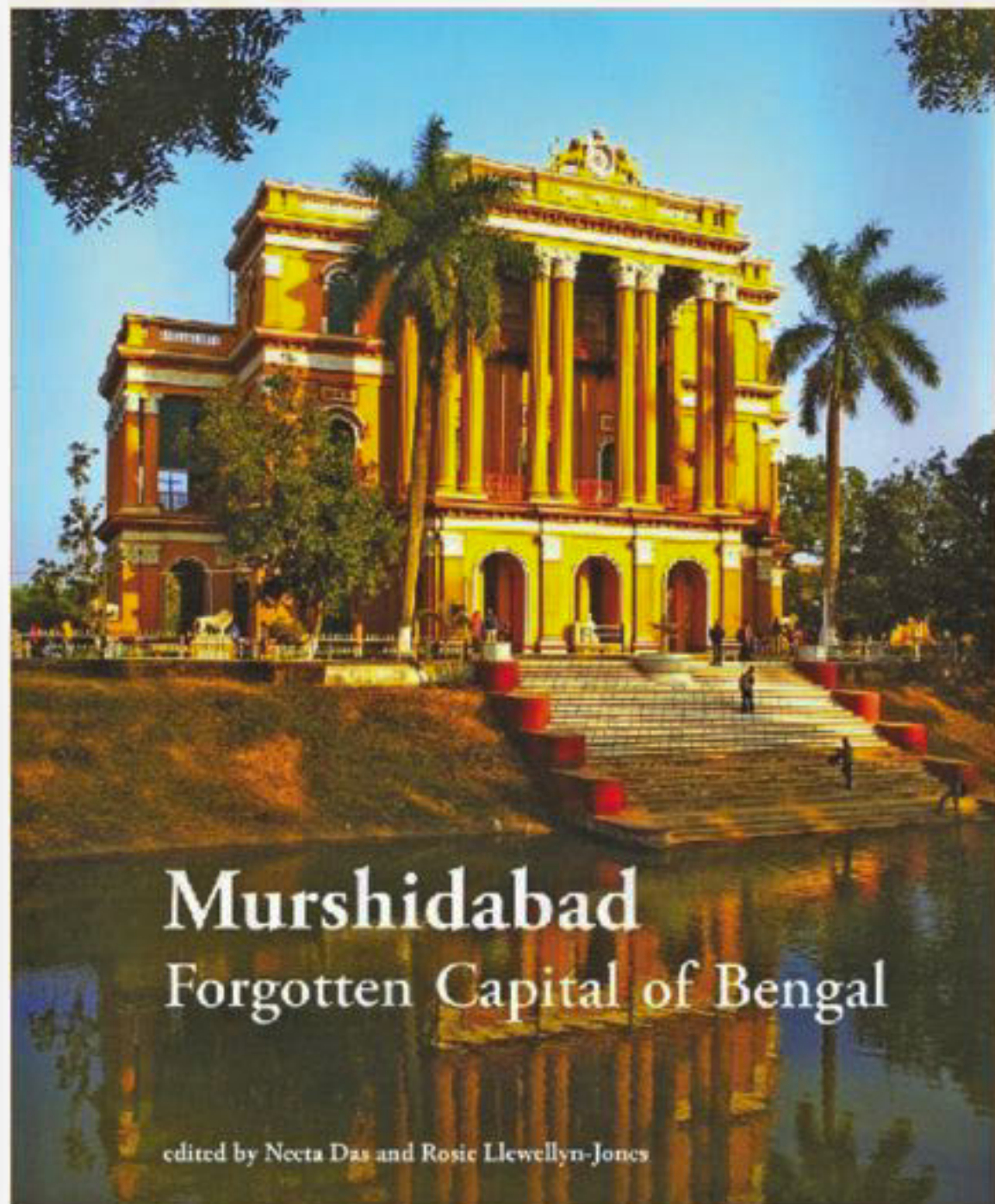
The story of an old city

Charles Greig travels through history

IF you ask any foreign traveler who has just arrived by jet in Delhi or Mumbai if a visit to Murshidabad is part of their itinerary, a look of bewilderment crosses their face. Indeed, just a few even venture east of the holy city of Benaras on a whistle stop tour of Calcutta and perhaps to the World Heritage site of Konarak before returning to the beaches of Goa and the comforts of Rajasthan. Only the most intrepid venture into Bengal itself to visit the once glorious capital of Murshidabad. In contrast, many Indians visit the city but most are either day-trippers from Calcutta on the briefest of visits of pilgrims for the various religious festivals and they usually stay across the river in Azimganj or further south in Berhampore. Part of the reason for this neglect must lie with the paucity of material written about this historic place. One can only hope that this splendid book, published by Marg, will encourage its readers to spend time in this still beautiful, if decaying, city situated on the banks of the Bhagirathi river. Even more important, one hopes that an interest by travelers and others will lead to the careful conservation of some of the fine palaces, *rajbaris*, and motivate local craftsmen to relearn and develop their ancient skills -- for without them part of Bengal's heritage will be lost.

As we have now come to expect from Marg, this book is exceptionally well presented - carefully laid out with clear typescript and a wealth of excellent illustrations -- both of historic and contemporary images. It is divided into three sections with carefully researched essays on the people of Murshidabad, the buildings --- both religious and secular --- and finally three chapters on the historic arts and crafts of the city and its environs. Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, in her two chapters, gives an intriguing and informative account of the rise and fall of the Muslim rulers of the city and separately the buildings that were inspired by their patronage and their successors. One learns fascinating details. Who would have expected that the true founder of Murshidabad --- Murshid Quli Khan --- was born a Hindu? He was then sold as a boy to a Persian nobleman who converted him to Islam, and subsequently he ascended in the service of the Mughals to become the Diwan of Bengal, a remarkable meteoric rise

at a troubled time in India. It was he who moved the provincial government from Dacca in the east to Muxadabad, as the city was formerly known, in about 1703. Rajib Doogar's essay on the Jains in eighteenth and nineteenth century Murshidabad is an elegantly written narrative of this remarkable community. Manikchand, a Jain from Marwar, was not only an immensely powerful and trusted banker (he was granted the title Jagat Seth --- Banker to the World --- by the Emperor Farrukh Siyar for his services) but also, as deputy diwan, supervised the revenue collection for Murshid Quli Khan and established a Mint in the city. It was from the profits of the latter that much of his wealth derived. His successors, through their influence and money, were the 'kingmakers' in the city, facilitating the rise of Alivardi Khan and perhaps more importantly the defeat of Siraj-ud-daula at Plassey in 1757 and his replacement by Mir Jafar. Ironically, within a few years that event brought about their own decline as the British rapidly assumed power in eastern India. The second wave of Jains, the Sherwali Jains, arrived from Rajputana (today Rajasthan) after 1765. They were initially bankers but gradually expanded their power to become influential zamindars.



Murshidabad  
Forgotten Capital of Bengal  
Eds Neeta Das, Rosie Llewellyn-Jones  
Marg Foundation, India

They left a rich legacy of late buildings in the city and across the river.

Neeta Das is an admirable architectural historian and her chapter on the religious buildings is a model of its kind --- concise, accurate and informative --- it hopefully will provide as impetus to restore some of the crumbling buildings she describes with such care- how long will the beautiful but deserted and overgrown Futi (Broken) Mosque survive if not conserved? When I myself visited it last year, locals did their best to dissuade me from venturing into the interior as they feared that, if falling masonry didn't crush me, a snake bite might kill one!

The final three chapters of the historic arts and crafts of Murshidabad are invaluable as a source for those interested in India's cultural heritage. At its zenith, vast areas of land outside the city were given over to mulberry cultivation for the production of silk. Tussar silk embroideries and woven silk saris from Murshidabad were famous throughout the subcontinent and rivaled some of those produced in Benaras. Even today there survive within the city a few weavers producing striking dyed silk, an art that needs to be encouraged and

nurtured. Jerry Losty's impressive survey of Murshidabad painting looks first at the sumptuous Mughal inspired paintings of the great eighteenth century nawabs and then the gradual transformation of the style to cater for European taste, following the ascendancy of the British. To me, the Mughal-inspired paintings of the period up to 1765 are superior to any other provincial Mughal School paintings done elsewhere in India in that period.

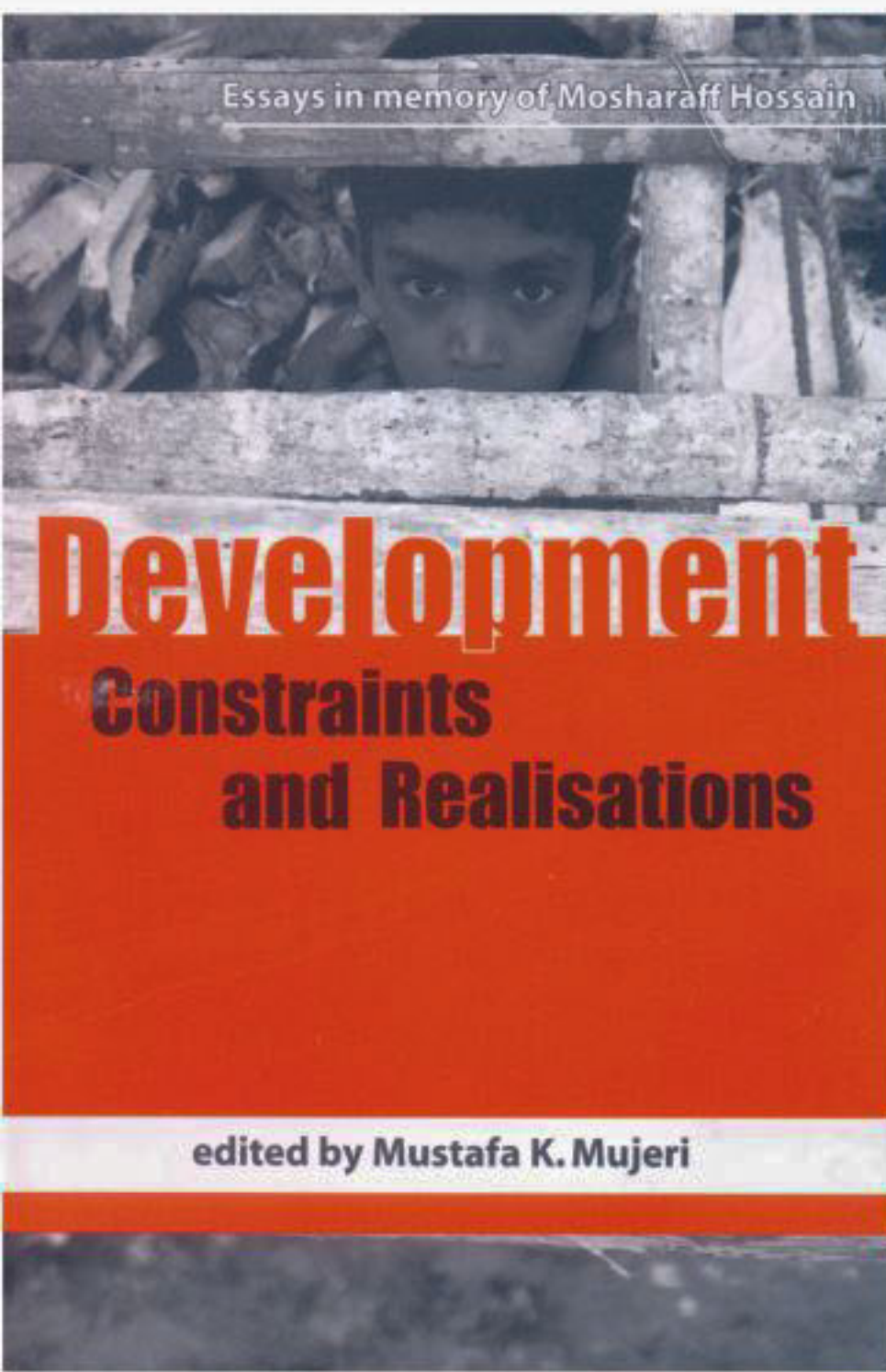
Murshidabad also was home to perhaps the greatest of all the Company School painters, Sita Ram. He worked for the Governor General, Lord Hastings, for a few years after 1814. His water colours with their vigour animated figures and clever atmospheric effects, recalls the work of arguably the greatest European landscape painter to visit Bengal --- William Hodges. He painted at least one oil of the Katra Musjid on his visit to the city in 1781.

The last chapter, by Pratapaditya Pal, looks at a subject that is today highly contentious --- ivory carving. It is uncertain when

the craft was introduced into Murshidabad and to nearby Cossimbazar and Berhampore. It seems probable that it was revived by Murshid Quli Khan. Certainly by the second half of the eighteenth century, the ivory furniture produced there is the finest that was made anywhere in the world and much still -- chiefly the superb suites of chairs and settees sent by Mani Begum to Warren Hastings. The tradition of high quality ivory carving continued long into the nineteenth century with the production of both religious objects for Indians and carvings and chess sets done for Muslims and Europeans. Perhaps one of the more surprising facts is that most of the ivory is African. Back then elephants were in abundance. This is a craft that should and can never be revived now that elephants are such an endangered species but the formidable carving skills could be turned to wood or even stone. This book is a real joy to read and look at. Both Marg and the editors must be congratulated for this groundbreaking survey of an almost forgotten, but captivating city.

The book is a Marg Foundation publication, India, 2013.

CHARLES GREIG IS AN EMINENT BRITISH ART HISTORIAN AND SCHOLAR. COURTESY: WAQAR A. KHAN



Development Constraints and Realisations  
Mustafa K. Mujeri, ed.  
The University Press Limited

A number of people going through *Development Constraints and Realisations*, edited by Mustafa K. Mujeri, Director General of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), might find Rehman Sobhan's panegyric regarding Mosharaff Hossain more interesting than the rest of the essays (including three more encomiums) in the anthology. The book is a collection of writings on development issues (mostly related to Bangladesh) in honour of the late Professor Mosharaff Hossain, who taught in the department of Economics, Dhaka University, before he retired, and who was a member of the first Planning Commission of Bangladesh. Twelve chapters constitute the bulk of the book, and they expound on varied topics ranging from rural development to food security to agriculture, and others. Some of the writings is pedestrian, some distinctly more erudite than the others, but the book as a whole does justice to the memory of a scholar, freethinker, activist, and one who, in Rehman Sobhan's estimation, had "missed his true vocation in life, as that of a behind the scenes political master mind."

And, on this point regarding politics, Sobhan's tribute to his old friend and colleague at Dhaka University's Economics

Development thoughts around homage

Shahid Alam takes a critical look at a new work

department and the first Planning Commission is thoughtful. Snippets of the political history of Bangladesh dot his fairly lengthy piece, including a glimpse of the fissure that existed in the Mujibnagar government that spilled over onto the nascent days of independent Bangladesh, and whose lingering effects exist to this day. Soon after liberation, "...the divisions within the Mujibnagar leadership were coming to the surface and the prospects of a harmonious process of governance did not look too bright." He goes on: "Fortunately, for Bangladesh, *Bangabandhu* returned on 10th January 1972 to a liberated Bangladesh and immediately moved to establish leadership and greater coherence in the government." More insights into the mindsets of politicians, particularly alluding to serving their self-interest, follow. The lightning rod, as it were, is Mosharaff who, while a Planning Commission member, had established a Land Reforms Committee to look into land reform prospects. However, "the idea of land reform commanded little attraction within the political regime at that time." The matter, however, did not end there, but took on a different twist.

Sobhan explains that Bangabandhu had accepted the idea of land reform, but had thought it prudent to hold off carrying it out in the prevailing socio-political circumstances. In the event, in a form altered from that proposed by Mosharaff Hossain, he proposed the introduction of land reform on a Tebagha basis during the BAKSAL phase. However, this proposal "died with *Bangabandhu* on 15 August, 1975 and has never been revisited by successive governments nor has any agenda for land reform been contemplated by successive regimes." Sobhan also informs us that both Professor Nurul Islam, then Deputy Chairman of the first Planning Commission, and Mosharaff Hossain had been offered cabinet positions by Bangabandhu when he assumed the office of President of the country, but both had declined the offer to assume ministerial office, as they had on joining BAKSAL. Sobhan's insight on this latter issue is instructive and illuminating: "At that time, many were rushing to join BAKSAL. There was considerable pressure on teachers of Dhaka University from the then Vice Chancellor, to join BAKSAL. Most teachers, including many who became subsequent critics of the

BAKSAL process, rushed to sign application forms. Mosharaff was one of the few university teachers who refused to join BAKSAL...." Nonetheless, when Bangabandhu and his family were killed, Mosharaff was horrified, and when, subsequently, the country came under military rule, he went into self-imposed exile to Oxford University.

Mosharaff Hossain's interest in land reform and rural development comes through in the article he co-authored with Just Faaland, "Structured Transformation and Rural Development" (Chapter 3 of the book). They take note of a general paradox prevailing in developing countries: "On the one hand the organization of production of modern enterprises in the developing countries' fast-growing urban industrial areas is expressly modeled on that of developed countries, and the working and living conditions of many urban residents approach those of rich countries. On the other hand, for the rural population, work- and life-styles remain largely traditional." And, how does one get around this paradox, if it can be done in the first place? Faaland and Hossain offer a broad prescription for policymakers to take up: "Fundamental political changes are...decisive for a new strategy for rural development to become a relevant and available option. Land reform legislation as such cannot resolve all these issues. The existing patterns of interaction between peasantry and rural elite, as well as those with the wider society and economy, need to be analyzed and understood before strategies for change can be formulated."

Nazrul Islam and Mustafizur Rahman in "Realizing the Potential of Bangladesh Villages: Looking Back at Mosharaff Hossain's Assault that Failed" (Chapter 2) take stock of one of Hossain's critical works on the rural poor from a distance in time. *The Assault that Failed: A Profile of Absolute Poverty in Six Villages of Bangladesh*, published in 1987, was Hossain's study on the reasons why the World Bank's "assault on poverty" programme, carried out from 1975 to 1985, had failed to improve the conditions of the rural poor, and offers his alternative policy recommendations. They conclude: "...while many of Hossain's pessimistic predictions did not prove true, the divergence was mainly due to external changes that were difficult to predict by him. So far as internal processes are concerned,

Hossain's analysis, by and large, has proved to be valid. Also, despite subsequent changes, Hossain's recommendations still remain relevant, though these need to be updated and integrated into a broader package of institutional reforms of Bangladesh villages."

Mustafa K. Mujeri (Chapter 5, "Re-Thinking Food Security Policies in Bangladesh") is convinced that, following the 2008 global food and financial crisis, food security has returned as a core issue in Bangladesh's policy agenda. After a fairly lengthy examination of the food security issue, he concludes: "...systematic obstacles such as poverty, inequality and other socio-economic constraints arising out of existing social divides and serious flaws in the food security policy framework stand in the way of translating the right to food into reality in the country. However, if poverty has to be reduced and the poor have to be empowered, the capability of the poor must be enhanced through ensuring their access to food. Since human rights is about development and poverty is a major impediment to Bangladesh's development, poverty reduction has positive human rights components and the lack of food has a strong negative impact on the ability of the poor to exercise all forms of human rights including the right to food."

The issue of development, to underscore the book's title, recurs in several essays. Sanat Kumar Saha (Chapter 7, "On Development") also focuses on the rural population as being a key factor in pushing forward the country's overall development pattern. He is concerned that the market forces are sidetracking a significant portion of the rural population, while noting that the burgeoning urban sector is being unable to provide lucrative employment for all. "The structural change in the short run is creating more inequalities," Saha finds, "with the rate of growth in employment lagging always behind the rate of growth in the effective labour force in the market." Ajit K. Ghose (Chapter 9, "The Challenge of Economic Development") urges that the government must play a crucial role in the development process. His is a broad prescription on what a government should be doing: "The government in a developing economy must not only make development

a primary concern but also function as an entrepreneur. It has to design and administer appropriate policies relating to trade, foreign capital and special economic zones. It must design and administer appropriate monetary policies so as to generate resources for investment in the production of food and infrastructure goods. Development requires a developmental state, which exists when the political process repeatedly throws up governments that have those concerns and capabilities."

In an otherwise rather disappointing piece, Fauzia Erfan Ahmed (Chapter 11, "Gender and Development in Bangladesh: Two Future Challenges"), proposes that gender discrimination is based both on structure and ideology. Taking the case of the Hindu community in Bangladesh, she finds that hegemonic Hindu males continue to use patriarchal Hinduism to hold on to its traditional ascendant position. Therefore, "National social change programs have reached the Hindu population but the accompanying transformative ideology which questions the Hindu religious canon is missing. As a result, traditional patterns of leadership prevail within the community."

Clem Tisdell (Chapter 4, "The Changing Structure of the Economies of China and Vietnam and Variations in Their Agricultural Sectors") offers an insight into the development efforts of countries other than Bangladesh. Contrasting the paths and priorities of the two countries in improving the agriculture sector, he states: "China's policy of promoting town-and-village enterprises kept the cost to farmers of switching from agriculture to urban-based employment low. These enterprises were a stepping stone for reducing China's agricultural labour surplus. Vietnam, on the other hand has only given attention to promoting rural-based non-agricultural enterprises more recently." The result has been major changes in the composition of agricultural production in the economic growth of the two countries. One of these has been the expansion of livestock production relative to crop production due to market demands. There are, indeed, several paths to, and priorities in, development undertakings.

SHAHID ALAM, A FORMER DIPLOMAT, IS AN ACTOR AND EDUCATIONIST