

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Rehman Sobhan, the incurable optimist

Whether or not the nationalised industries could function efficiently became the litmus test for the efficacy of the socialist development strategy in Bangladesh. Sobhan put his heart and soul into making nationalisation a success.

S. NAZRUL ISLAM

The second volume of Rehman Sobhan's memoirs, *Untranquil Recollections: Political Economy of Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh* (University Press Limited, 2022) deals primarily with the years of 1972 to 1975, which comprise probably the most complex period of the nation's history. Titanic battles were fought over the policy direction of the country. Over a short period of about three and a half years, the epochal triumph of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman ended in a tragedy. Sobhan's memoir begins with his return to liberated Bangladesh and ends with his going to exile (at the end of December, 1975) after the coup of August 15. The heart of the story lies in the narration of his experience as a member of Bangladesh's Planning Commission (BPC).

As we know from the first volume of his memoirs, *Untranquil Recollections: Years*

election in light of the 6-point and 11-point charters; work out the implications of these charters for the future constitution of Pakistan; and finally conduct the negotiations with the Yahya team in March 1971. Following the crackdown of March 25 and the onset of the Liberation War, they crossed the border to India and made themselves available for the service of the government in exile; most of them went abroad as its envoy to mobilise international support for the independence of Bangladesh. Given this history, one can well imagine the excitement with which Sobhan and his colleagues returned to Bangladesh and how eager they were to help build the new nation.

Regarding this basic task, the four professors differed on two levels. The first was regarding their belief in socialism. In this regard, Mosharraf Hossain, Anisur Rahman and Rehman Sobhan—all had sympathies for socialism. Nurul Islam, however was the skeptic. The second was regarding the capacity of the Awami League government in implementing socialism. In this regard, the most skeptical seemed to be Mosharraf Hossain, who actually led the Planning Department of the government-in-exile, while Islam, Sobhan, and Rahman served as envoys abroad. Hossain, therefore, had the opportunity of seeing from close-quarters Awami League in action during the Liberation and hence was more aware of its limitations. Anisur Rahman had serious doubts and was not eager to join the BPC but allowed the possibility of "educating" the ruling party through their joint efforts. Islam also had misgivings on this account but could not decline Bangabandhu's invitation to help him in the effort. It was only Sobhan who not only shared Bangabandhu's commitment to socialism but also "genuinely believed that the objective conditions dictated that a process of social transformation could be carried through."

The knowledge about these initial differences helps us to understand the various *modus operandi* that the four professors adopted subsequently. For example, Rahman wanted to test the commitment of the political leadership to the goal of socialism. Accordingly, he wrote "visionary papers" and wanted the Cabinet to react to them. He emphasised the need for the leadership to practice austerity (such as riding bicycles to their offices) to set an example to the people of shared sacrifice. Unless this basic commitment issue was sorted out, Rahman was not interested in developing detailed policy papers and plans. Seeing that the political leadership was

not responsive to his broad suggestions, he concluded that socialism was not possible with such a leadership and, accordingly, was the first among the four professors to leave the BPC.

It was Sobhan who was, in his own words, the "incurable optimist," who took "Bangabandhu's statements at their face value" and worked earnestly to develop plans and policies that were necessary to follow up on those statements. He "assumed an activist role," and went "beyond [his] areas of responsibility." This of course led him into conflict with many line ministries whose officials thought that he was overstepping and encroaching into their domains.

Among the divisions that Sobhan was in charge of was industries, and given the nationalisation policy of 1972 (March), it was also the main theatre where the fate of the socialist way of development was being decided.

Whether or not the nationalised industries could function efficiently became the litmus test for the efficacy of the socialist development strategy in Bangladesh. Sobhan put his heart and soul into making nationalisation a success. He shows that the record of the nationalised enterprises was not as dismal as was portrayed by certain sections of the press. As he informs, the output of the nationalised sector as a whole by 1973-74 had gone well beyond the 1969-70 level, and by 1975-76 surpassed the pre-Liberation levels. Thus, he does not agree with the widespread notion that nationalisation failed in Bangladesh—a notion that was reinforced later by the collapse of the centrally planned economies.

It is well-known that Bangabandhu was quite welcoming to prominent intellectuals joining his party and becoming political ministers. Kamal Hossain is a prominent example. As Nurul Islam informs in detail in his *Making of a Nation*, Bangabandhu repeatedly urged him to become a political minister. We know that Islam declined the offer, because, in his words, he did not have the necessary "fire in the belly." Rehman Sobhan definitely did. He could not pursue the course, in part, because it would have required him "to become fluent in Bangla." As he puts it, "my failure to do so remains one of the most unforgivable mistakes in my life, and I have paid a heavy political price for my irresponsibility." Indeed, one wonders what a positive difference it would make for the nation if Rehman Sobhan had emerged as a political leader of Bangladesh.

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COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

Labour pains worsened by faulty healthcare

JACKIE KABIR

"My pain was so severe that I ran a fever of 104 degrees, and as I shook and trembled uncontrollably, the doctors finally performed an emergency C-section", reveals Anushay Hossain, author of *The Pain Gap* (Simon and Schuster, 2021), in the introduction of her book. A few lines later, she continues, "I am in America. I will be fine. I know I'm not going to die in childbirth in Washington DC!"

Well, that would have been our thought as well. Who would think that women could die during childbirth in the US in this era?

In *The Pain Gap*, Hossain tells us about her near-death experience while giving birth in America. After 30 hours of labour and three hours of pushing, her epidural had slipped and hence she had no anaesthesia.

While recounting these experiences, she also informs us how the word "hysteria" was first used by Hippocrates, father of medicine, the person in whose name doctors take oath before entering their profession. "The book is about the journey of learning to own my hysteria and rebrand it for the 21st century. It is the story of growing up in Bangladesh, surrounded by a staggering maternal mortality rate," Anushay writes.

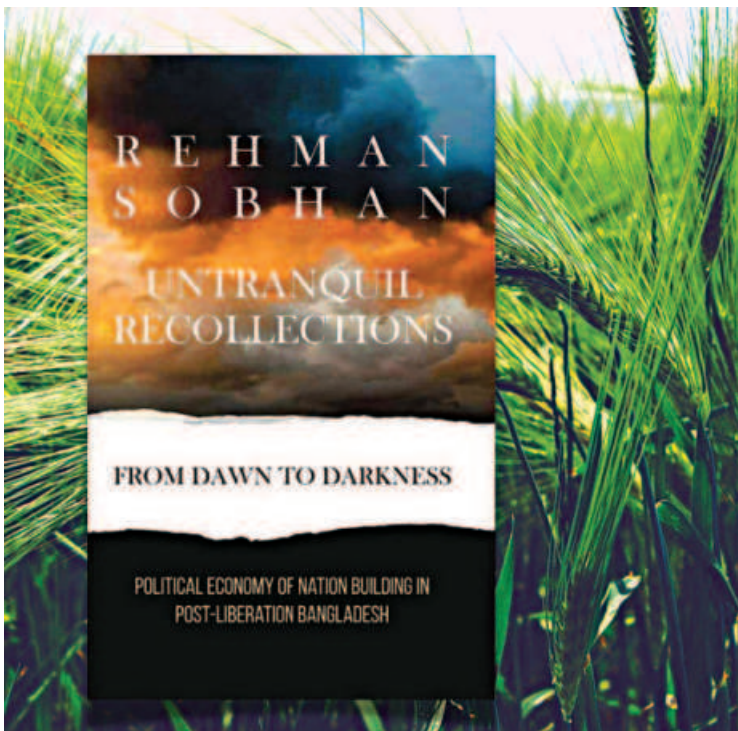
The nine chapters flow eloquently, starting from "The First Feminist I Ever Knew". The author talks about her mother, our very own Tasmima Hossain, who shaped her to become what she is today, a women's rights and human rights activist. She is also a feminist writer, political analyst and host of the *Spilling Chai* podcast. We get to know of Wasifa, who was a caregiver and cook for the author, who in the author's mind held a resemblance to Pablo Picasso's 'The Portrait of Françoise'. One has to Google the painting just to see what she looked like. At a tender age Anushay was touched by Wasifa's death at childbirth, which may have shaped her interest in working in this field. In the chapter "A Bangladeshi Girl in Capitol Hill", Hossain mentions that she had learnt a lot there as a lobbyist, such as how the Taliban banned women from workplaces and shrouded them in blue burkhas. She found a way to help the women by joining the Feminist Majority Foundation's 'Afghan Women and Girls' campaign and worked for organisations such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Violence Against Women and the International Violence Against Women Act. One of the most striking pieces of information we get from her book is that the USA, which seems to be a vehement advocate of human rights and equality, in reality does not take women patients very seriously. During her own labour, when she repeatedly said she was in pain, the doctors refused to believe her only to find that her epidural had slipped.

Hossain reminds us how the situation is even worse for women of colour, especially Black women. Studies show that Black patients are 40 percent less likely to receive medication to ease acute pain and Hispanic patients 25 percent likely. She points out that, even though women make up three quarters of healthcare workers, including 85 percent of nurses, and women of child bearing age make up 70 percent of frontline workers, pregnant women were not included in vaccine trials for the Covid-19 pandemic. This is an American perspective, we don't know what it is like in developing countries.

It has become increasingly difficult for women to deal with issues like depression and domestic violence since the pandemic, but the author, we find, has gone through some harsh experiences and seen most harrowing experience of feminist issues that had made her evolve as a new human being.

Dr. Jamila Taylor, the Director at the Century Foundation, is a policy expert and advocate in maternal health space. She has pointed out that Covid-19 has shown us how Black and Hispanic women get sick from Covid and die. The disparity in healthcare outcomes across the board is real, not just something that people working in the health equity space have harped on about for the past four decades. To this Anushay replies, when being questioned about how a book on women's health in America would make any difference for Bangladeshi women, "If human rights and health issues are not improved in America then women in the rest of the world will definitely not stand a chance".

Jackie Kabir is a writer and translator from Bangladesh. The titular story from her first collection of stories, *Silent Noise*, is being taught in BA Courses in colleges under Manonmaniam Sundaranar University in Tamil Nadu.



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

of *Fulfillment* (2015), Rehman Sobhan was one of the Bengali economists who, with Nurul Islam in the lead, developed and articulated the economic rationale for the struggle of the people of Bangladesh against discrimination within Pakistan and for national self-determination. They helped Bangabandhu and Tajuddin formulate the Awami League manifesto for the 1970

FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

LOST LOVE AND ITALIAN SUMMERS

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

On May 25, Netflix shared a teaser for their upcoming feel-good romance, *Love & Gelato*, and as an ardent reader of young-adult romance, I could not keep calm. The film is an adaptation of Jenna Evans Welch's book of the same name, published by Simon & Schuster in 2016, and is set amidst the fairytale backdrop of the Italian summer. Written and directed by Brandon Camp, the film will feature Owen McDonnell, Susanna Skaggs, Tobia De Angelis, and Anjelika Washington in lead roles. It is all set to hit the screens on June 22 this year.

The story revolves around the life and adventures

I have been a fan of this author's Love &... trilogy and am eagerly looking forward to the adaptation. The teaser of the upcoming movie further hypes my interest. The sneak peek reveals several important details, right from navigating the journal to exploring the magic of Italy behind Ren's scooter.



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of Lina, a college aspirant recovering from the trauma of losing her mother. In an attempt to fulfill her mother's dying wish and find her father, she sets off to spend her summer in Tuscany. Here, she is presented with her mother's journal which takes her through hidden bakeries, pretty landscapes, secret stories, and introduces her to Italy's infamous gelato. The old journal narrates a separate story of its own, connecting the dots between past and present. By revisiting the places explored by her late mother, Lina gets a good glimpse into her life and begins to understand her like never before.

Love & Gelato is a beautiful book that left me with a wide smile and sense of fulfillment. It has everything a young-adult romance needs—lovable characters, protagonists slowly falling in love, and cute expressions of first love. The descriptions are so vivid that it took me on a magical tour of Italy and it seemed that I was vicariously exploring the place through the journal itself.

The book manages to address grief and then transforms it into a warm, wholesome read. I particularly loved the way Welch addresses familial relationships, breaking our perceptions about ideal families. By the end of the book, Lina not only

unearths secrets about her late mother's life but also rediscovers herself as she evolves during the process.

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