

BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

# An intellectual debt WORTH REMEMBERING

A review of 'Our Debt to the Four Professors' (Prothoma Prokashon, 2023) by S. Nazrul Islam

**The crucial roles they played in the movement for autonomy only gave way to their determination to fight for the liberation war, in any capacity possible. Mosharaff Hossain had been part of the planning cell in the provincial government in Calcutta.**

JAHANGIR ISLAM

The history of Bangladesh's conception is incomplete without recognising the multitudes of sacrifices and labour that academics and intellectuals had poured into their aspirations for Bangladesh, often at the cost of their own safety and livelihood. In S. Nazrul Islam's *Our Debt to the Four Professors*, we find a primer that does some justice in acknowledging the determination and hard work of four professors who played pivotal roles in Bangladesh's making and subsequent development.

S. Nazrul Islam is a distinguished academic himself, who had taught at various universities and had been chief of research at the department of Economics of the UN. He makes good use of his expertise in constructing what he terms a "treatise on the socio-political history of early Bangladesh." Indeed, as one reads through the book, they get a unique sense of how the nation in its early stages grappled with the myriad of problems that it inherited, some due to its geography, and others due to international realpolitik, such as when the country had to take debt liability for some of Pakistan's international debt, regarding projects undertaken before independence.

The four professors here are the economists Nurul Islam, Mosharaff Hossain, Md. Anisur Rahman, and Rehman Sobhan. Interestingly, we get a glimpse of their ideological similarities and differences regarding each other quite pointedly through the author, who reflected in his preface that he had the "good fortune of knowing and interacting" with all of them. We are gifted an inside look of how these intellectuals grappled with the prevailing political sentiments of the time, such as the impetus for nationalisation and for socialist principles.

The earlier sections of the book recount how the professors had been instrumental in the makings of

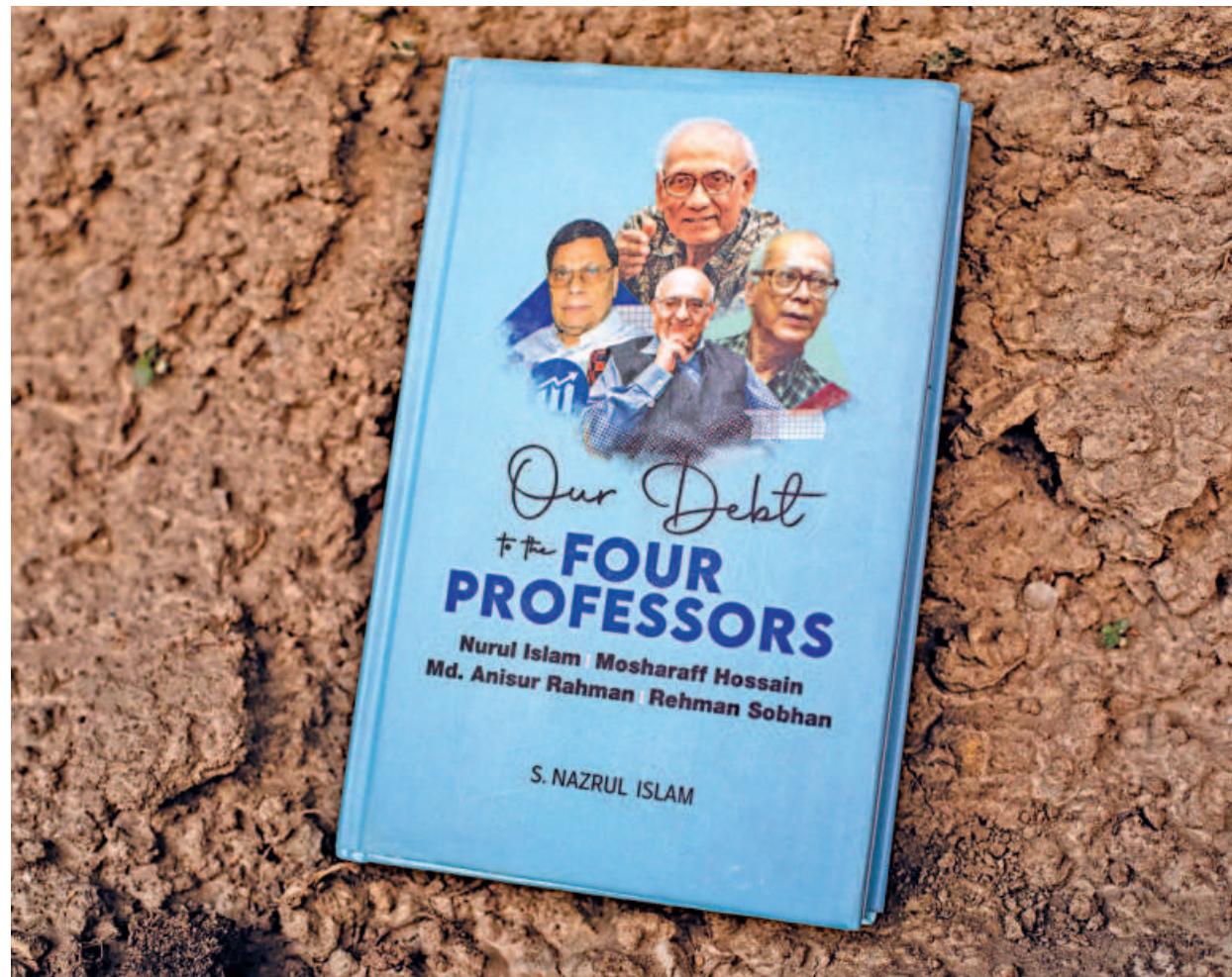


PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

the idea of the two economies in erstwhile Pakistan. With Professor Nurul remarking: "The labor from East Pakistan could not thereby participate in and benefit from the expanding employment and income opportunities created in West Pakistan through higher rates of investment, financed, to a great extent, by savings siphoned off from East Pakistan."

The crucial roles they played in the movement for autonomy only gave way to their determination to fight for the

liberation war, in any capacity possible. Mosharaff Hossain had been part of the planning cell in the provincial government in Calcutta. Rehman Sobhan had been instrumental in swaying the international community toward the idea of an independent Bangladesh. When he returned in the August of 1971 in India to present his reports, the cabinet had thanked him, designating him "Envoy Extraordinaire, in charge of Economic Affairs." The book is full of interesting

information: Rehman Sobhan, during his return, realises that the Mujibnagar Government was headquartered in 12 Theater Road in the same house where his maternal grandfather, Khawaja Nazimuddin (who would later go on to become Prime Minister of Pakistan) had stayed during his stint as Chief Minister of Bengal.

Post independence, all four of the professors had worked in the Bangladesh Planning Commission, where Nurul Islam held the chair of

deputy chairman. The academics' resilience in working through the bureaucracy and navigating through the ministries and often challenging party-leaders is well-documented in this book. Nazrul Islam notes how they had to be given ranks (Professor Nurul was given the rank of a minister, while the other three were provided the rank of state-minister) because the bureaucrats at the time were not willing to accept the authority of outside experts.

The book also chronicles the ideological wrangling that the young nation was embroiled in. The different factions of politics such as those espoused by some in the then ruling party as "Mujibbad" and the "Scientific Socialism" of Sirajul Alam Khan clashed with each other and the professors often had to traverse through these ideas while making policy.

Nazrul Islam's book ends around the time of the 1975 assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which had a profound effect on all four personalities, as they had often worked closely with the leader. The author makes a fascinating observation about how Nurul Islam and Rehman Sobhan's relationship with Bangabandhu had opposite dimensions. The former was "ideologically somewhat distant but personally closer", while the latter had close ideological ties but was personally distant from the leader.

*Our Debt to the Four Professors* is remarkably important at a time like this, when the country is reevaluating and revamping many of its historicity. The achievements and sacrifices of all who had made the country a better place to live in surely should be documented and this book does a splendid job at celebrating the extraordinary individuals who had left an inevitable mark on Bangladesh for the better.

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# Regional cooperation and the challenges Bangladesh faces

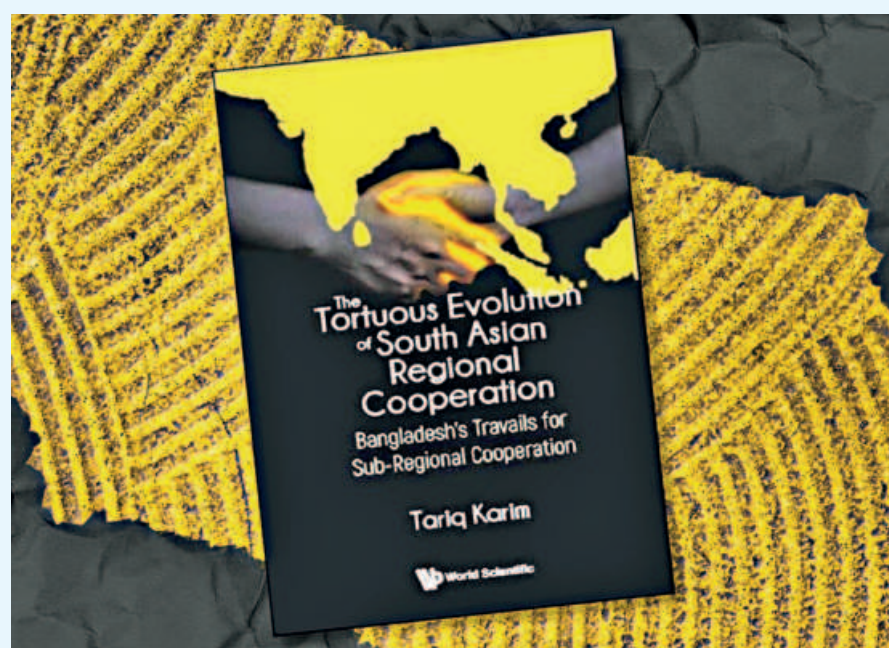
Review of 'The Tortuous Evolution of South Asian Regional Cooperation: Bangladesh's Travails for Sub-Regional Cooperation' (World Scientific Publishing Company, 2025) by Ambassador Tariq Karim

FAISAL M. RAHMAN

Bangladesh is currently going through turbulent times as it tries to find its way out from dictatorial political rule towards an uncertain future. During the past decade, Bangladesh did achieve significant economic progress, but it came with increased economic inequality, unparalleled corruption, and loss of personal freedom. The past government tried to manage a tough balancing act with India around 80 percent of its border, China being its biggest foreign investor, USA still the biggest market for Bangladesh products, and Russia building its first nuclear power station.

With 170 million people and an ambitious young population with the highest participation of women in the workforce compared to all its south Asian neighbours, Bangladesh's path for the future theoretically belongs in emulating successful models for regional cooperation. Theoretical modelling and reality are two different things. In that context, Ambassador Tariq Karim's book on regional cooperation is a timely publication for the current and future policy makers as well as students of politics and economics.

Ambassador Tariq Karim is intimately familiar with the regional cooperation matrix having served as High Commissioner to India, Ambassador to the United States, South Africa, and Iran. A career diplomat, he is also considered a distinguished academician having taught at University of Maryland (where he served as Distinguished International Executive), George Washington University and Virginia International University. He is currently associated with Independent University of Bangladesh (as Director of the Center for Bay of Bengal Studies) and National



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University of Singapore.

The book has an interesting history and perspective on how colonial South Asia went from most to least integrated "overnight" after the Second World War. The integration was forced upon the colonies of Great Britain to serve its mercantilist objectives. Great Britain also managed to do this by meticulously planting the seeds of "divide and rule" both among the colonies and within the colonies. It is, therefore, not an accident that the newly independent countries with their new elites and new institutions quickly became each other's enemies and instead of regional cooperation there were more regional conflicts.

The last section of the book deals with

the immediate past in which Ambassador Karim had a front row seat and had input in shaping the various models and experiments to bring about regional cooperation and integration among the countries within and surrounding the subcontinent. He notes correctly that the new elite and leaders in the newly independent countries deliberately deepened the divide by focusing on the differences and, particularly in the case of India and Pakistan, became each other's sworn enemies. While EU and ASEAN countries were setting their differences aside and enlarging their spheres of influence by admitting new members, the two largest powers in the subcontinent embarked on shutting down "connectivity

with each other, whether in the realm of trade and commerce" or people-to-people exchanges.

Ambassador Karim, clearly an advocate of regional cooperations, puts forward several new propositions in his book—uniting along environmental and ecological challenges or common fear of nuclear war with its devastating consequences. He also suggests fewer countries should try cooperation on narrow issues. Both the EU and ASEAN evolved to their current successful model in stages. In this context, Ambassador Karim also cautions about the "India factor" (the overwhelming size of India with its billion people, huge industrial base, and clear military superiority) and suggests that India needs to be more magnanimous toward its smaller, weaker neighbour partners.

Among other interesting insights in this fascinating book, Ambassador Karim suggests that SAARC operationally could be a success if it organised along three distinct sub-regional groups—A) Bangladesh, Bhutan, the contiguously located Northeastern states of India, West Bengal, and Nepal (BBIN); B) middle zone comprising of Southern India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka (IMS); and C) a western sub-region comprising of West and Northwest, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (IP). His logic being: What is of immediate interest to one sub-region may not necessarily be of interest to the other region.

The book notes a number of examples of bilateral cooperation between India and Bangladesh in terms of railway and road connectivity, but those initiatives have also been criticised as being one-sided and disproportionately favourable to India. These criticisms would be less credible if such bilateral successes could be broadened to include land-locked

countries like Nepal and Bhutan.

What is interesting and what sets this book apart from a pure academic exercise is how Ambassador Karim discusses operational challenges and provides a framework of how regional cooperation can work. He advocates a Bay of Bengal Community focusing on common environmental and ecological challenges. Such regional cooperation is a matter of survival for the millions of people who live on the coasts of treacherous Bay of Bengal.

The book has one of the most extensive annexures sections which includes original charter and various declarations from SAARC summits as well as documents on the bilateral trade between Bangladesh and India. Those are useful templates for future initiatives and policy makers. The most important ingredient remains a non-quantifiable factor—trust. Trust must be nurtured by the political leaders instead of fuelling suspicion or overt attempt of domination if regional cooperation has the possibility of success. To use an overused adage—it must be WIN-WIN for all parties.

This book is a "must read" for all South Asia watchers, whether they be academics or practitioners. The publishers have reportedly arrived at an understanding with UPL on making it available soon in Bangladesh.

This is an excerpt. Read the full review on Star Books and The Daily Star website.

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