

Ecological thinking in Prof Razzaq's 'Bangladesh: The State of the Nation'



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I came across the lean book, *Bangladesh: The State of the Nation*, in the early 1990s. I was a young architect then, also aspiring to be a writer. Little did I know about the full depth of the author, Professor Abdur Razzaq, at that time. A scholar but without much writing, a political thinker without being political, a teacher who went on to inspire a troop of teachers, Prof Razzaq, as I gradually have come to know, was truly an illuminated person, a "philosophical architect of Bangladesh," according to Md Mizanur Rahman, and the "Bengali Socrates" as both Badruddin Umar and Prof Rehman Sobhan noted at different times.

Now, through heading the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements, and being linked to the Gyantapash Abdur Razzaq Foundation, I have come to know more of his work and thinking, as well as his colourful life.

Since the 1960s, Prof Abdur Razzaq wielded considerable influence on the academic and literati circle of his time, or as some would argue—the Bangalee Muslim middle class thought-machine. His grasp of the political evolution of India, as well as of Bangladesh, was cogent and original. Some have described his "mythical presence" among critical Bengali intellectuals who would become distinguished figures, including Dr Kamal Hossain, Prof Rehman Sobhan, Ahmed Sofa, and others. Many would regularly visit Prof Razzaq's home for a word of advice and guidance, and endure his quirkiness. Wearing a lungi and crumpled kurta, with his legs up on the chair, he would welcome his visitors with a sly smile and a wry response.

The reason I picked up *Bangladesh: The State of the Nation* was to find a theoretical frame for writing about the state of contemporary architecture and urbanism in Bangladesh. I wanted to articulate my architectural thinking within larger social and cultural orientations, especially the idea of Bangladesh. What is the nation? What are its constituents? But most importantly, what are its materialities?

I was looking for works that would support my own conceptual orientations. At that time, there were not many writings in the fields of sociology, cultural critique, or philosophy in Bangladesh that hinged the idea of the nation with the production of architecture and urbanism. Architecture then, and sadly now, continues to be treated as a technocratic, engineering, or utilitarian practice, or at best an aesthetic endeavor that decorates our homes. Unfortunately, most architects toed those lines, busy as they were receiving commissions and projects, and practicing architecture largely as a commercial or corporate enterprise. Only the architect Muzharul Islam reminded us of the larger responsibility of architecture, whether as an inherent part of cultural production or a fundament for nation-building. In a presentation to the architects and planners of Pakistan, at a conference in 1968, Muzharul Islam made it clear that the responsibility of the architect should reach out to larger national goals, especially in the context of Bangladesh, where planning every square inch matters. Well, then, we should have a clear conceptual understanding of those square inches.

Prof Razzaq would clarify that in his lean book, providing for a locational ethic for building and planning. Published in 1981, along with a Bangla translation, the book *Bangladesh: The State of the Nation* is based on Razzaq's Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury memorial lecture, delivered at Dhaka University a year earlier.

There were two parts to the book. The first part of the book is strikingly titled "The Nation: Identity and Ecology," in which Prof Razzaq seeks a concordance between the identity of the Bengali nation and the sum of what constitutes as geography, landscape, and climate. Prof Razzaq adopted the term ecology for the latter. I consider it striking because Prof Razzaq brings up the term

"ecology" at a time when it was not yet in vogue. While the notion of ecology has a long and ancient lineage in European thinking, it evolved from the realm of botanical geography to its proliferation in many fields by the twentieth century, especially as the science of an ecosystem. (At the memorial of Prof Abdur Razzaq last November, Mofidul Haque noted the uniqueness of the use of "ecology" in Razzaq's writing at a time when the term was hardly practised in Bangladesh. In the Bangla translation of the talk, "paribesh" is adopted as the translated term for ecology. I find that inadequate. "Bastutantra," which is gaining traction as ecology, is perhaps a better candidate.)

What I also found striking in Prof Razzaq's paper, was how he articulated identity not simply as a political notion but also, and perhaps in an essential way, in geographic terms. This is what is glaringly amiss in many later commentaries by his associates and acolytes.

Prof Razzaq begins his essay with what he describes as a catalogue of "unflattering facts" about Bangladesh—by which it was described and known around the world. The nation that he was writing about, was the most densely populated place on earth with the lowest per capita income at that

What is significant to me, reading Prof Razzaq, is the location of the nation. Few Bangalee intellectuals, in articulating the national polity, talked about geographic factors. Although Prof Razzaq would proclaim that 'the nation in Bangladesh is a nation because it intends to be a nation and nothing else,' and find its language as 'the most abiding product of the genius of a people,' he is also unequivocal about the fact that '... the nation has to have a habitat.'

time. ("It is probably the most densely populated 55 thousand square miles on earth.") And, yet, as Prof Razzaq mentions categorically, Bangladesh has three resources: land, water, and people. The problem of our too many, the so-called population problem, is not a problem to him; it is perhaps a resource boon that is only now being realised.

Raising the question of a greater and lesser identity for a nation, Prof Razzaq makes an argument for why Bangladesh is poised to be a nation in the subcontinental polity. Arguing that there is a "strand of thought developed in the subcontinent which has glorified in losing itself in a greater identity," but that is not for Bangladesh. As Prof Razzaq notes, Bangladesh, or Bangalees of this region, twice rejected being part of a larger identity, once in 1947, and again in 1971. This is what makes Bangladesh uniquely identifiable and distinct from its cousin in West Bengal. He writes: "West Bengal is a victim, perhaps a willing victim of the siren call of Indian civilization." I am reminded of Milan Kundera's dilemma, although in the context of the identity of a writer, between an affiliation for the big nation and an obligation for the small one, in his essay "Weltliteratur."

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PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

discourse of the Bangalee nation, but by overlooking the geographic and ecological question, and eventually the matter of habitat and habitation, which perhaps is a far more original condition than language. (Did we, at a primordial time, first start to speak or build?) It is at that critical juncture of topics, Prof Razzaq proposes that "geographical factors influence life, but they do not do it automatically."

Habitat suggests the spatiality of a nation, that is, the physical territorial scope, and this is where the question of ecology emerges. Prof Razzaq is quite clear in proposing "to take the geographical, natural facts of life in Bangladesh, facts which may be said to have direct bearing on the state of the nation." In that enumeration, rivers are the most important fact.

The character of Bangladesh and its people is dominated today, as it has always been, by the river system and the water it carries. The shifts and turns of the river have been momentous facts for the people, greater than political and governmental upheavals. At the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements, we are dedicated towards understanding the dynamics of land and water. Prof Razzaq would have been immensely pleased at our work on the river Padma—*The Great Padma: The Epic River that made the Bengal Delta* (2023), the book in which I was able to assemble scholars and writers from many fields, including Amitav Ghosh, to relive the imagination of the great river that defines the nation and the land. (I imagine handing over a copy of the book to the professor. Wearing his crumpled kurta and lungi, and that sly smile, he would perhaps invite me to a cup of lemon tea and bakarkhani, and in his inimitable Dhaka accent say, "Bhaloi kaam korsen.")

Razzaq's ecological notion rests on an understanding of the reciprocity of land and water in Bangladesh (although I have written elsewhere that in Bangladesh, land is borrowed from water). He describes the annual accretion and erosion of land and how that impacts a considerable portion of the people of Bangladesh. He makes it clear by noting that the land available for use varies enormously from year to year, and that is a gift of rivers. "The relative abundance of new land each year," Prof Razzaq writes, "is the result of the activities of the unique river system of the land." Here is the punchline that he delivers in the second part of his talk, "Land and water, these are the two resources that the nation in Bangladesh has."

Continuing his probing perception, Prof Razzaq notes, "Water is abundant, so is silt." And, consequently, we need to be more vigilant about those two gifts of nature—water and silt. Even with abundance we need the management of water, with which we have faltered as a nation. "Do we make management of water resources the focal point of our planning effort?" he asks. At the time he was writing his lectures, it did not seem to Prof Razzaq that the government or policy-makers had realised the importance of management. There is still a lack of imaginative planning when it comes to this dual gift—water and silt.

With siltation, one encounters that mysterious and pliable land-form—the *chars*. Prof Razzaq notes how *char* lands powerfully "characterizes the practices and the

habits and thoughts of the people." He presciently points out how those lands can be sites of "experimental practices" in planning more easily than other lands. As far as he sees, nobody has taken any notice of this possibility of the "noticeable" natural fact of life in Bangladesh, and of the prospects of "experimental practices" on those pliable islands. I can briefly mention here the unsuccessful British attempts to colonise *char* areas with "bhadralok-farmers" in the 1930s, in Hatiya and riverine parts of Faridpur. Although fictional, Hossain Mia's Moyna Dwip in *Padda Nodir Majhi*

comes to mind. Daniel Hamilton's model farm in Gosaba and other islands in the Sunderbans are perhaps a rare and bold experiment in creating a cooperative community there.

Prof Razzaq also notes the status of the city—our biggest architectural enterprise and our most intense habitat, in the state of the nation. Believing in the virtues of the city, but noting that "the difference between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas will always remain," he notices an unmistakable trend in society—the drift to the city. Arguing that "civilized life is urban life," he sees

nothing wrong with the preference for an urban life. He makes a quantitative argument—the "per capita expenditure for a concentrated population on the infrastructure of a civilization is less than on a dispersed rural population." But as we are faltering in our imagination for planning habitats on pliable land, we are also stalling in receiving those "men who are determined in their preference for an urban rather than a rural life." The future of the city in Bangladesh eventually rests on a concordance among the three resources—land, water, and people.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Comic Kaplan
- 5 Twosome
- 9 Monopoly buy
- 10 Joust wear
- 12 Grill waste
- 13 "Robinson Crusoe" writer
- 14 Housetop laborer
- 16 Mamie's husband
- 17 Avenue trees
- 18 Had its premiere
- 21 Bartender on "The Simpsons"

DOWN

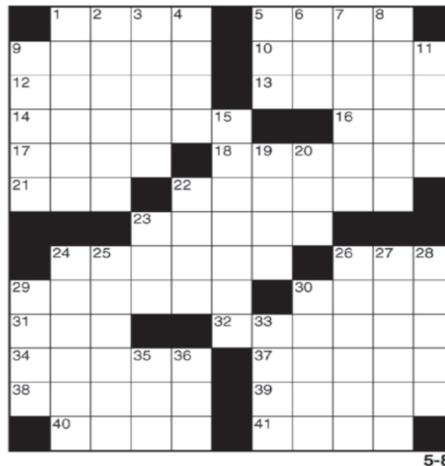
- 22 Shutter part
- 23 Social class
- 24 Shows surprise, for example
- 26 Stroller user
- 29 Bald spot cover
- 30 Prefix with sphere
- 31 Curtain holder
- 32 Boardinghouse tenant
- 34 Molecule makeup
- 37 Syrup choice
- 38 Danger
- 39 City on the Rhone
- 40 Risque

ACROSS

- 41 Russian denial
- 1 Leave the band
- 2 Not out
- 3 Complaints
- 4 Different
- 5 Small tablet
- 6 "Roses_red"
- 7 "It's just a scratch"
- 8 Michael of "Guardians of the Galaxy"
- 9 Women's quarters
- 11 Clarinet part
- 15 Farm crower

DOWN

- 19 Places
- 20 Eden resident
- 22 Valentine trim
- 23 Upper limit
- 24 Fan
- 25 Author Welty
- 26 House of worship
- 27 Eggy dish
- 28 Grows weary
- 29 Snare
- 30 Tritite
- 33 Yemen neighbour
- 35 Karaoke singer's need
- 36 Wily



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