BOOK REVIEW: NONFICTION

CHARTING the south's path

Review of 'Apostles of Development: Six Economists and the World They Made' (Penguin Viking, 2025) by David C. Engerman

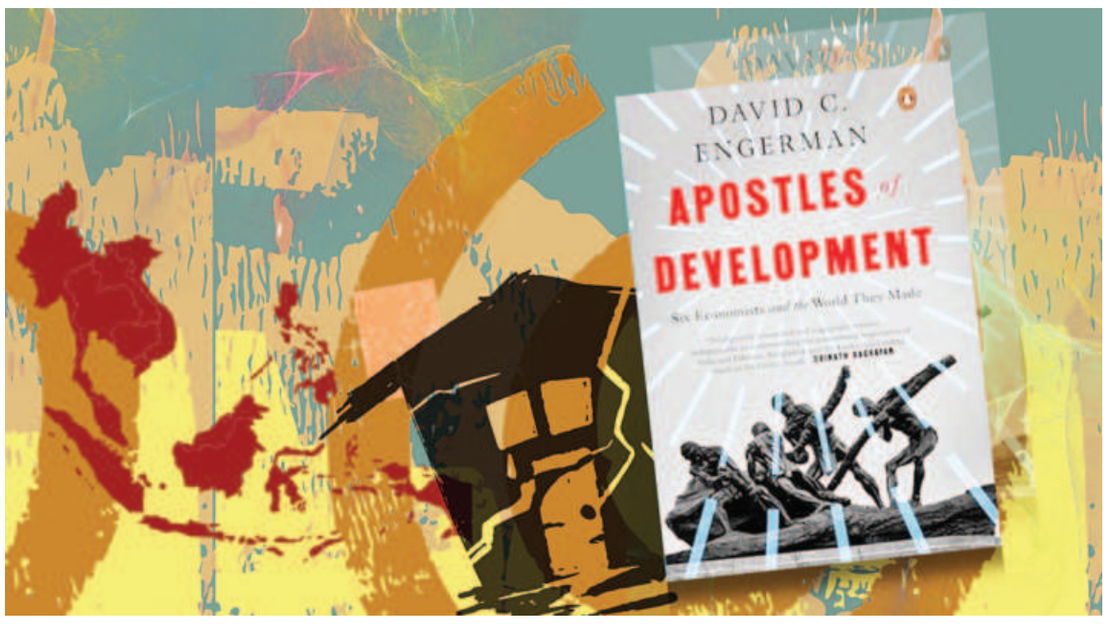

ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

TANIM AHMED

The Apostles of Development is about the struggles to solve the problems of poverty and inequality. The book looks at international development through the lives of six protagonists—"apostles," as the author David Engerman calls them. It examines the context and circumstances that spurred these six central figures to devise or promote the solutions they did. Engerman chose Cambridge University as the common ground for his apostles, all of whom hailed from South Asia. Born in the early 1930s, they were too old to be called 'Midnight's Children'—referring to those born at the same time as India's independence—"they were perhaps 'Midnight's Teenagers,' coming of age in the tumultuous 1940s," writes Engerman. All six studied economics at Cambridge in the mid-1950s, forming a unique constellation made up of Amartya Sen, Manmohan Singh, Mahbub ul Haq, Lal Jayawardena, Jagdish Bhagwati, and Rehman Sobhan. It is through their biographies that the author seeks to explain poverty and inequality, showing how together they went on to play crucial roles in shaping efforts to improve quality of life and promote economic development in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

Engerman writes, "They were all men, providing living evidence of the gap in opportunities between men and women in their time and place. They came of age in a tumultuous decade that saw the exhilaration of military victory and of independence, tempered by the bloody Partition of British-ruled India into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu-majority but secular India."

A history professor at Yale, the author notes that his protagonists "gravitated to twin problems in economics: poverty and inequality." He writes, "Their performance there established them as trailblazers; five of the six earned first-class honors. For three years running, the South Asian economics students collectively held the Economics faculty's Adam Smith Prize—with two others winning honorable mentions."

While Engerman finds it difficult to settle on a favorite, he admits that Singh must have been the most successful. "It would be hard to contest Dr. Singh's reforms, which had been in place even before he became the prime minister." Having served as India's finance minister in 1991 and later as prime minister between 2004 and 2014, Manmohan Singh—the trader's son turned refugee, as Engerman introduces him in the early chapters—had the enviable pleasure of seeing his reforms take shape and bear fruit. Describing the former Indian premier, Engerman writes that he was "born in a poor village in what is now Pakistan, [and] became a bureaucrat's bureaucrat—a role that suited his retiring demeanor."

Each of Engerman's six apostles achieved much in life, so when asked whose journey was the most exciting, Engerman says, "I'm hard-pressed to think of any who didn't. They're all so different, both in personality and in career and ideas. I would say that Lal Jayawardena was probably the least satisfied, from some of the things I read about him in his final years." One of the six economists—and perhaps the lesser known in Bangladesh—Jayawardena, a Conversazione Club member at Cambridge, was born to an upwardly mobile Sinhalese family in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). He served his country as both an economic official and a diplomat, and is remembered for establishing a UN development think tank and for being an architect of the modern Sri Lankan economy—an honor that lost some of its luster after the economic meltdown in the summer of 2022."

> **"I imagine there are economists who would say I have not read up sufficiently, and I'm sure that's the case. I wish I had deeper knowledge still. I did have the privilege of spending a semester at Yale taking courses in development economics. But I would never pretend that I understand enough. I definitely had a hard time working my way through some of Bhagwati and Sen's writings."**

"There is a certain degree of satisfaction from steering a major government into a new set of policies," Engerman said of Singh, adding, "Or steering a large and cumbersome institution like the World Bank into a different perspective, as Haq did," referring to Mahbub ul Haq's tenure as the World Bank's policy planning director and his role in reorienting the Bank's approach to poor countries.

"The ambitious Pakistani Mahbub ul Haq lived two professional lives," writes Engerman. He explains that Haq was commended internationally for redefining development at the World Bank and for formulating the Human Development Index, while also being criticised for his service under military dictatorships in Pakistan.

"I think they all would have defined excitement differently. For Sen and Bhagwati, they were mostly writing for academic journals, shaping ideas and pointing to new ways to analyze events. But in the sense of excitement as in being part of a movement for a cause, Professor Sobhan is probably the most exciting."

Engerman says Sobhan was the most active of the six. "In fact, he did not shy away from it but actually dove into it, returning home in the late 1960s while studying at the London School of Economics. His instinct was to rush home, which says something about his engagement."

The author describes Jagdish Bhagwati as a "prolific economist of international trade at Columbia University with a chip permanently implanted on his shoulder," while about the Nobel-winning Sen, he writes, "one of very few in the uniquely Indian category of 'VVIPs' when he returns home—but more regularly commutes between Harvard and Cambridge universities."

As for Rehman Sobhan, Engerman calls him "Bengal's golden youth," writing that he "was born into the English-speaking upper crust of Bengali society, [and] became an 'ideological Bengali,' devoting himself to East Bengal—a place he had rarely visited, with a language he didn't speak."

Being a professor of history and global affairs, Engerman admits he had to study extensively to understand the work of his subjects, which was not easy. "I imagine there are economists who would say I have not read up sufficiently, and I'm sure that's the case. I wish I had deeper knowledge still. I did have the privilege of spending a semester at Yale taking courses in development economics. But I would never pretend that I understand enough. I definitely had a hard time working my way through some of Bhagwati and Sen's writings."

The author especially recalls Sen's work in welfare economics and social choice theory, which he found highly abstract. "On the other hand, I feel I had a lot to contribute as a historian. I feel like I still have something to offer. But I don't offer critiques. The purpose of a historian in this is not to critique economic ideas but to understand where they came from and where they went."

Beyond the historical context through which to view these policies, Engerman's book also shows how these economists shared a common goal but could not agree on the paths to reach it. The differences become most apparent in the disagreements between Mahbub ul Haq and Rehman Sobhan, and in the debates between Bhagwati—a champion of free trade—and Sen, which, many say, occasionally transcended civility.

When asked what he hopes readers will take away from the book, Engerman says, "I am hoping that it makes at least two arguments. One is to situate development as a Global South project—and this comes, I think, from reading a generation of historians, mostly based in the Global North, writing histories of international development and saying that they were northern ideas."

This is an excerpt. Read the full review on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature's websites.

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BOOK REVIEW: FICTION

Fragments of memory and regret

Review of 'Breaking Dreams' (Bengal Publications, 2025) by Niaz Zaman

LAMIA SULTANA KAKON

The proof that Dr Niaz Zaman is an amazing writer lies in the fact that she knows exactly how to wound you with four words: "You are too late." As a retired professor of English from the University of Dhaka and recipient of the Ekushey Padak—one of Bangladesh's highest literary honours—she's spent her career translating the untranslatable: the ache of women who lived and loved in wartime, who survived Partition, who buried their dreams beneath duty. Her 2025 collection *Breaking Dreams* isn't just another book of stories. It's 12 confessions from women across generations, eight of them previously published, now gathered like letters found in an attic—each one a small devastation, each one impossibly true.

Each story cracked open something in me. I found myself identifying with women who were much older, who had witnessed different wars, different losses, different kinds of silence—and yet, their questions were mine too.

With every ending, I exhaled a sigh I didn't know I'd been holding. "What if?" became a motif in my head filled with threads of thoughts. Sometimes they whispered, sometimes they screamed. After finishing each story, I caught myself reaching for my phone, texting or calling someone, asking: "Will you remember me how I am now, even after 20 years?"

It wasn't about the characters anymore. It was about me. And them. And all the selves we lose and carry and bury along the way.

One story from the collection, "The Letter", explores the futility of confession when it arrives too late. It's everything she couldn't say when it mattered. This isn't a story of love fulfilled—it's about missed cues, dignity mistaken for indifference, and affection buried under social roles. The ending was a quiet catastrophe for me. "You are too late." I almost closed the book here, not because I was done, but because that single sentence had already gutted me. It's not angry or cruel—it's just true. A life unlived, love never named, loss unacknowledged until it was no longer changeable.

ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

"Breaking Dreams" takes memory and reshapes it into fiction with surgical grace. Where "The Letter" is about love unspoken, this story is about love remembered in fragments—through war, separation, marriage, migration, and dreams. It's an elegy not just to a man, but to a version of the narrator that might have been. The story begins in a surreal frame—a dream set in Lahore. But it's quickly ruptured: "And the dream breaks." This line isn't just a transition; it's a mission statement. Everything after becomes a series of broken dreams: literal, metaphorical, historical.

"My Friend, My Enemy" reads like a diary-turned-letter, covering over 20 years, two wars, multiple cities, and a love that mutates from possibility to ghosthood. The brilliance lies in how Zaman tells national trauma through personal memory. She's crafted a story not just about two people, but about two countries that were once one—stitched by love, split by history.

"Recommendation Letter for Iqra Islam" was personally interesting to me. Even though I never got one, I had several chances to ask Dr Niaz Zaman for a recommendation letter for myself. But I never found the courage, thinking maybe I was not quite qualified yet to ask her for something like this. Then I read this story and I remembered a book reading session I once joined, where the author herself said the number of recommendation letters she writes regularly made it almost inevitable that she would one day write this story for Iqra Islam. I felt how the name Iqra itself was so symbolic. In Arabic, Iqra means "read." What an amazing choice of word!

"The Collaborator's Daughter" forces you to sit with discomfort—to understand that collaboration isn't always monstrous but often born of fear, and that its price is paid by the children, by daughters like Ratna. The prose is clean, but its directness makes the emotion sting harder. Moments of tenderness slip through like light through cracks, making the tragedy more acute.

"My Grandmother's Secret" is a multi-generational spiral that takes its time before turning the mirror inward. The delayed revelation isn't a plot twist—it's a recontextualisation of every detail that came before. You find yourself re-reading lines, and everything hits differently after the final page. But "My Grandmother's Crazy Poet" starts hitting from the beginning. It opens with the scent of loss but pulls us into the lifeblood of memory. The brilliance lies in the double vision of two women, two voices-one voice remembering, another finally confessing. The chain at the story's end is more than jewelry; it's a metaphor for life interrupted, repaired, and passed down.

These stories share a remarkable craft. The endings are emotional rather than plot driven, and that's what makes them unforgettable.

Breaking Dreams isn't just a gathering of stories; it's a mirror of time. Its characters examine our conscience. In just a few words, there is a festival of fireflies here. Sometimes it is the light of memories, sometimes the darkness of forgetfulness. At times they also act as moral examiners or a timeless witness to human existence.

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