

Volume 23
Number 2
Year 2021
ISSN 1529-0905



Journal of BANGLADESH STUDIES



JOURNAL OF BANGLADESH STUDIES (ISSN 1529-0905)

Volume 23, Number 2, 2021

PRINTED IN THE USA BY BANGLADESH DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE (BDI)

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FROM THE EDITOR

This issue comes in the year of Bangladesh's 50th anniversary of independence as a nation. Although we have not dedicated the issue entirely to the 50-year anniversary of the liberation war, nonetheless there is remembrance and emphasis in the articles and reviews chosen for our December 2021 publication.

This year, Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI), our parent organization, gave a Lifetime Achievement Award to scholar and activist Dr. Hameeda Hossain. Hameeda Hossain's speech at the virtual award ceremony, held in June 2021, begins this issue. She commences by speaking about her pan-South Asian origin, her family leaving India to go to West Pakistan, and then her resettlement in East Pakistan, which later became Bangladesh. This is not untypical of the generation that saw the separation of the region into the different states in the post-colonial period and attests to her South Asian cosmopolitan perspective derived from her heritage. Among the remarkable details of the many aspects of her contribution that we learn about, one is the extent to which she has led and persisted with the building of legal institutions for women in Bangladesh. The story of how a community of men and women, many of them lawyers, collectively worked against violence against women, setting up organizations, and helping to build laws, combining these with human rights is worth our note.

Professor Rehman Sobhan complements these accounts with the publication of his speech given at the SOAS South Asia Center at the University of London on March 18, 2021. This article focuses on the role of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in creating a cohesive political entity that became Bangladesh. Professor Sobhan became one of the four members of the Planning Commission of Bangladesh after independence and his contribution to the building of an economy in the new sovereign nation cannot be given sufficient due here, but can be recalled, and read about further through his many books and publications.

The role of the United States in Bangladesh's independence had always remained somewhat controversial and the publication of Gary Bass's book *The Blood Telegram* shed light on the machinations of the Nixon administration and the role of Henry Kissinger in determining US policy towards the state during 1971. Tanweer Akram reviews this book in a shorter article, critically unravelling the role of the US administration in the suffering and death of so many during this period.

The next article by Matt Husain looks at the later phase of events in Bangladesh, and the author investigates the relationship between the rising neoliberal state in the 1980s, and with it, the advent of a specific strand of Islamic religiosity that prevails in contemporary Bangladesh. The role of globalization in bringing this about, as well as the exclusionary practices that it creates with respect to other communities, is laid out in this article, which coins the term "the great transformation of Bangladesh" to understand this change, using a lens provided by Polanyi, among others.

The modernization and social change brought about during the last forty years in Bangladesh has also changed attitudes towards the elderly in the country. This is examined by Masudur Rahman and Sadia Afrin in the article that follows. The last article reminds us that Bangladesh's geographical location is not free from natural disasters, and looks at the vulnerable coastal area of Bhola, where many measures have been taken to create disaster resilience, and the measures that have been implemented to make this area more protected from natural hazard.

This issue has several additional book reviews, beginning with Samia Khatun's vivacious reading of Hameeda Hossain's book *The Company Weavers of Bengal*, which documents the colonization of the textile industry in Bengal by the British, and the role of this book in decentralizing historical accounts from a nation state lens to one that is local and regional. This reading of one critical historian by another is an innovative addition to the set of texts in this JBS issue. This is followed by Muaz Jalil's review of the *Good Economics for Hard Times: Better Answers to Our Biggest Problems* by Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo, a book that is highly relevant for development experiments, including field experiments, in Bangladesh. The issue ends with a review by Munir Quddus of *Corona Tale: A Bangladeshi Family's Pen War against the Pandemic* edited by Wameq A. Raza and Ahmed Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury and circles us back to the fact that the pandemic is still with us. Although we had focused on this topic in our June 2021 issue, the different variants of the virus have led to the persistence of the situation, with morbidity and mortality at high levels, and keeping us in a state of uncertainty regarding our individual and collective futures.

Farida Chowdhury Khan
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of Bangladesh Studies

BDI Lifetime Achievement Award 2021 Lecture

The Challenge of Citizenship in Building a Just Society

Hameeda Hossain
Ain o Salish Kendra
Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB)
singalipandod@gmail.com

I am truly grateful to the members of the Bangladesh Development Initiative for honoring me with their Lifetime Achievement Award. Thank you so much for making it possible to be together despite these difficult times.

I was quite surprised to receive a message from Professor Munir Quddus informing me about the award. Two of the previous awardees, Dr. Nurul Islam and Professor Rehman Sobhan, have made pivotal contributions in setting economic directions for a new state. The third, the late Professor Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, a leading educationist, was also a part of the government at critical times. Unlike these three previous recipients, I have not been a public figure. Nor have I been involved in making high level policies that shaped the state. But, along with them, I have been a witness to cataclysmic political changes in South Asia, resulting in the formation of three independent states, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. And, I have seen how citizens can propel change and work for social and economic justice even when they have no official responsibilities.

Professor Quddus' invitation to give a lecture stirred me to look back and reflect on how citizens have worked together to make our society more open and democratic, and to create a space for equal participation for all and to respect human rights. This is what I will speak about today, drawing mainly on my own experiences at various times with diverse groups of citizens - of academics, feminists, and artisans.

The making of states in South Asia has been marked by violence from the start - brutal violence at that. In 1947, the independence of India and Pakistan erupted into massive communal violence on both sides. Scenes from Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*¹ remind us of that inhumanity. The genocide by the Pakistan army in the 1971 war of independence in Bangladesh came as a culmination of years of discrimination and repression.

These experiences had an enduring impact on people's lives. They demanded a humanitarian response from the community. How did we as citizens respond to this need?

I can recall two formative experiences. The first is from 1947, when I was about 11 years old, and living in Hyderabad, Sindh. I was recruited by my grandmother, Ghulam Fatima Shaikh,² to help look after refugees. They were arriving in trainloads to the new country of Pakistan, leaving their homes in India. We cared for them in an improvised hospital and sheltered them afterwards. Together with fellow students, we also tried to assure safe passage for those who were leaving Sindh for a refuge in India.

The second experience I want to mention is from 1972. There, again in the aftermath of the Liberation War, many helped with the post-war physical needs of survivors, and their emotional trauma. Such support was particularly necessary for women survivors of sexual violence who needed a humanitarian response. I volunteered to help in the Women's Rehabilitation Center set up by Begum Sufia Kamal and Badrunessa Ahmed.³ Maleka Khan was then in charge. We talked with young women who had been raped by Pakistani soldiers, and had taken shelter in the Center, because their families would not, or, did not take them back. They demanded sympathy and support, and justice for the crimes committed.

In 1972, I met with many women who were affected by the war. I heard their stories about survival during the nine months of the conflict. On visits to a village in Kushtia and to Mirpur, in Dhaka, I met women whose husbands or brothers had been killed in the war. They had lost their only financial support and were traumatized. With a few friends, we encouraged them to form self-help groups. We helped them market their beautiful handmade products through *KARIKA* (which I will speak about later), so that they could live independent lives. The women belonged to

different communities and different religions, but they found solidarity in working and marketing their products together.

These experiences guided me at other times to respect diversity, and not to discriminate between peoples of different religions, castes, ethnicities or genders. These experiences also strengthened my belief in nurturing a secular society.

I will turn now to my experiences in Dhaka from the 1960s, and my recollections of how citizens organized to work for social and political change.

First Impressions of Dhaka

In 1958, I came back from Wellesley College in the US to my parents' home in Karachi, then a large commercial city. I had ambitions of a career in research and writing, and started a day job, first at a research institute, later as an editor at the Oxford University Press. I also wrote for *Outlook*, then a progressive current affairs magazine. Martial law had just been imposed and political activities were prohibited. So, there was little space for citizens to express themselves.

In 1963, I took a short break from work to travel to Dhaka, to visit Khursheed [Erfan Ahmed], my sister. Khursheed and Erfan's home was a popular meeting place for many people who were engaged in the political discourse and more actively in political movements. Among others, I met Rehman Sobhan and Kamal Hossain there.

I found Dhaka in a state of political ferment, with demands for autonomy gaining popular support. As I witnessed how ordinary people joined the political movement in the then East Pakistan, I was drawn into the discussions amongst different groups. In the Dhaka University there were academics and professionals propounding their ideas of a new state. A cultural movement had drawn in folk artists and crafts persons. And women's groups engaged with the national movement were also identifying with the struggle for their rights.

I feel it is important to share my experiences in Dhaka in the 1960s because they tell a story of how citizens came together to resist controls and worked for a more egalitarian society in many different ways.

My first visit to Dhaka University was very exciting. On a casual visit to the Teachers' Common Room, I found teachers and students involved in debating the possible constitutional arrangements for implementing the Six Points program announced by the Awami League.⁴ At these informal discussions, I listened to Professor Abdur Razzaq, Professor Anisuzzaman, Dr. Khan Sarwar Murshid, Professor Salahuddin and several others, expound on their vision of democracy and secularism, nationalism, and human rights. Professor Abdur Razzaq was at the center of the debates. What I found particularly remarkable was how easily and regularly they were able to communicate with political leaders. Politicians then were more open to the ideas of academics and involved citizens.

I found myself engrossed in these discussions. I was thrilled when Dr. Murshid, a senior professor in the English Department, invited me to assist in editing a volume of his periodical *New Values*. This journal of humanist thought had, over 17 years, published a wide circle of writers from across South Asia including Abu Sayeed Ayyub, Ahmed Ali, A.K. Brohi, M.N. Roy, and Zillur Rahman Siddiqui. My work at *New Values* became a political education for me. I met scholars who were deeply involved with their society, including those who participated in labor movements and in the Language Movement, such as Kamruddin Ahmad. Rehman Sobhan and Kamal Hossain were also involved.⁵

In 1965, after I married Kamal, I came to live in Dhaka. I got to meet many women and men who were politically active. I was most impressed by their determination to work for change.

Rehman and Kamal used to meet with a small group of friends. They engaged in long political discussions. Erfan Ahmed, Zeaul Huq (Tulu), and Mueyedul Hasan were generally present. Mosharaf Hossain and Badruddin Umar used to join them intermittently on their visits from Rajshahi. Some of us from this group decided that we needed to reach a wider public, so we applied for permission to publish a weekly magazine. In November 1969, we published the first issue of *Forum*, a political weekly. Rehman was the executive editor; Kamal was the publisher, and I took on the responsibility of being editor. We worked out of a small garage behind our house in Circuit House Road (this garage has now become part of the building housing the Press Institute of Bangladesh!).

Forum's influence was far more than suggested by its low circulation. We were able to run articles by well-known economists and journalists, from across South Asia and beyond. They included Neville Maxwell and Joan Robinson from London, Kumari Jayawardene from Colombo, Mueyedul Hasan and Rehman Sobhan from Dhaka,

Mazhar Ali Khan from Lahore, M.B. Naqvi from Karachi, and others. *Forum* became a bold voice for a democratic, secular transition in what was to become Bangladesh. Analytical articles from economists, such as Anisur Rahman, argued for a socialist economy. Political commentators proposed constitutional changes for regional autonomy. In our first editorial, titled “In Search of Freedom”, *Forum* affirmed a belief in “fundamental changes in our institutions ... to liberate the energies of citizens and to give them a stake in society”. But these ideas were not acceptable to the establishment. In two instances we were summoned by the military officer at the Information Department and warned not to write about politics. I’d had an earlier experience of the limits to free expression when I.H. Burney, my editor at *Outlook*, a progressive weekly magazine in Karachi, informed me that he’d received a warning from the authorities about my article “Polygamy Outvoted.” But in both cases, we went ahead with the publication of the articles in question.

Forum was forced to close down after the Pakistan Government’s military operation on 25th March. Our editorial in the last publication before the crackdown was titled “Options for a Sane Man”. It warned that in the absence of a peaceful settlement, the people would be pushed to a point of no return. And indeed, within nine months, we became citizens of the new nation of Bangladesh.

Working with Artisans

In 1972, after the end of the war, it was obvious that there was much to be done in independent Bangladesh. I had been fascinated by Bengal’s rich cultural traditions since I first came here in the 1960s. I had toured many villages in 1963 and did so again in the early 1970s, meeting rural artisans, and discovering their traditional crafts. *Shilpacharjya* Zainul Abedin and Professor Razzaq had been my entry to understanding visual arts in East Bengal. I remember being surprised then that the craft products made by village artisans were not to be seen in Dhaka. Instead, East Pakistan had become a market for goods from West Pakistan. A few of us came together in the sixties and set up an outlet in a garage in Dhanmondi. We called it *Arunima* and projected it as an artisans’ center. Through *Arunima* we helped several crafts persons reach out to urban markets at their own initiative, and not beholden to middlemen or trade agents. Weavers, potters, and others, who had never been outside their villages, were encouraged to introduce their wares to Dhaka. This was an example of what we expected from autonomy for East Pakistan.

After independence, under Zainul Abedin’s advice and leadership, I persuaded some friends to join me in setting up a crafts marketing cooperative in Dhaka. *KARIKA* was the first initiative owned and run by artisans. In particular, it welcomed women artisans. I was able to persuade some of the women I had met during my travels, and particularly a number of *Birangona*, to join the *KARIKA* cooperative.

The Struggle for Women’s Rights

My awareness of the “woman question” began in the early 1960s, when I read about women such as Begum Shamsunnahar Mahmood and Begum Shaista Ikramullah⁶ raise questions about the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961. After I came to Dhaka, I met Nurjahan Murshid, Rokeya Rahman Kabeer, and Razia Khan Amin, among others. They were very visible in neighborhood meetings and also in public rallies where they voiced women’s demands.

For example, I remember that during an episode of communal violence, Rokeya Rahman Kabeer challenged the men and insisted that women activists join peace processions alongside the men. In the 1960s, the *Nari Sangram Parishad* campaigned across the country on the Six Points program. At the same time, they were pressing their demands for equal opportunities for women in education and employment. By 1970, the *Atto Rakkha Samitis* and *Sangram Parishad* came together to form the *Mahila Parishad* under the leadership of Begum Sufia Kamal. Maleka Begum and later Ayesha Khanam worked as her assistants. In addition to reforms in family laws, the *Mahila Parishad* raised women’s demands for fair representation in public institutions. They demanded a number of reserved seats to which women could be elected through direct voting. Initially the reservation was for 15 seats, which was raised to 30 seats after 1975. But, instead of direct elections, the representatives were nominated by their party or party leader. Begum Sufia Kamal was outspoken in her defense of women’s rights and, in particular, she promoted notions of a secular society, which would not be subject to religious orthodoxy. After she came to Dhaka in 1947, she played a leading role along with Lila Nag to prevent communal attacks on Hindu women through the neighborhood committees.

From the 1970s onwards, women activists throughout the nation began to connect with the growing international women’s movement. I attended the UN Women’s conferences in Mexico in 1975 (where I was invited

by Judith Bruce⁷ to participate in a panel on crafts), and Nairobi in 1985. These meetings introduced me to feminists from other countries, many of whom, such as Devaki Jain and Kamla Bhasin, have remained close friends till today.

In Mexico I was able to engage with leading crafts persons such as Jasleen Dhamija of Delhi, who had set up crafts institutions in India under the leadership of Srimati Kamladevi Chattopadhyay. I learned much from this meeting and was able to retain contacts between such groups in Bangladesh, India, and Mexico. At Nairobi, women were now raising the issue of legal rights. It was as an outcome of these discussions that women's groups in several countries were encouraged to set up legal aid support groups. Bangladesh, too, was one of them.

Along with others, I was able to link up with networks across South Asia and beyond. This is how I became involved with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development. A regional network, it started to systematically look at women's legal rights and at how existing legal frameworks discriminated against women. My first task, under Nimalka Fernando's advice, was to write a report on the network's activities. Later I was inducted onto its Regional Council. Devaki Jain invited me to a meeting of Development Alternatives for a New Era (DAWN), in preparation for the Nairobi conference. DAWN was one of the first feminist organizations to project the voices of women from the Global South onto a global platform, and to provide a feminist analysis of the development framework. Involvement with these international networks helped to strengthen our national movements. For example, after Bangladesh ratified the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1984, I participated in a committee led by *Mahila Parishad* and others to submit shadow reports. These reports contributed to the CEDAW Committee's assessment of Bangladesh's compliance with its international obligations. After the Mexico Conference, new groups, including development organizations across Bangladesh, took up the cause of equal opportunities for women.

In the 1980s, in protest against the growing violence against women, many of us campaigned together under the banner of *Oikkyobodho Nari Samaj*. At the same time, we were involved in the movement against General Ershad's autocracy and military rule.

In 1995, the rape and murder of Yasmeen, a domestic worker, by four policemen led to a nation-wide movement by women's groups. Some of them campaigned for legal reforms under the banner of *Sammilito Nari Samaj*. At the time I was with *Ain o Salish Kendra* (ASK). Barrister Amirul Islam, then on our Executive Committee, took up the case, while we campaigned for recognition of domestic work. Eventually the four policemen were convicted, and the court's final judgment was an important landmark on securing accountability for custodial rape.

The frequent reporting of gender-based violence, in turn, prompted women to file individual complaints. In addition, our collective campaigns to ensure prosecution of the perpetrators and protection for the survivors led to the enactment of laws in support of women such as the Dowry Prohibition Act in the 1980s, or the *Nari o Shishu Nirjatan Daman Ain, 2020* [Prevention of Oppression against Women and Children, 2020]. Special Tribunals were set up for the cases of violence against women and children. They were seen as a process for deterring violence on women and ensuring accountability.

Defending Human Rights

I think my most meaningful work in promoting women's rights and human rights has been during my association with ASK. A few of us, including Salma Sobhan, Khursheed Erfan Ahmed, Barrister Amirul Islam, F.H. Abed, Justice Subhan, and I (among others) started this organization in the early 1980s. It soon expanded, with young lawyers, most of whom had been Salma's students in the Dhaka University Law Faculty, joining us. We initially worked out of a garage in Dhanmondi which was lent to us by Nurjahan Murshid.

At ASK, we started with a focus on mediation to help people resolve problems within their families or in the community. Those who brought complaints to us included women trying to secure maintenance or protection from violence. Workers also came asking for help in industrial disputes.

At this time, some of our founder members, and young lawyers, were active in the movement against Ershad's military rule. We started receiving complaints regarding violations of rights by state authorities. These included cases of arrest and detention. Some of the young lawyer members carried out investigations into these incidents. We published their report under the title of "Lawless Law Enforcement".

One day I received a call from a friend who said that bulldozers were demolishing the shanties of families living in Taltola, a slum in Gulshan One (now a park across from the Shooting Club). We immediately contacted our

lawyers. A petition was filed by Tahmina Rahman and moved by Barrister Amirul Islam. The High Court's order made it possible to stop the eviction process, but only after a little child had been bulldozed to death. Subsequently ASK filed several petitions for the protection of slum dwellers. We gained favorable directions from the High Court that there should be no eviction without resettlement or rehabilitation of slum residents. We await government policies and programs in drawing up such plans in defense of the right to shelter. Our campaigns in defense of the right to shelter have continued unabated.

These experiences challenged us to rethink ASK's goal as defending rights, and not only resolving disputes informally. We moved ASK's work from problem solving to addressing more structural issues, claiming rights, and demanding changes in the system. We often obtained the help of senior lawyers such as Kamal Hossain, Aminul Huq, and Amirul Islam to argue public interest petitions. Their support, and the justice of the cause, enabled us to win recognition from the Supreme Court of the right to shelter, and protection from custodial torture. After a particularly long running set of cases, the Supreme Court also declared illegal the practice of issuing so called *fatwas* that imposed penalties on women.⁸

ASK, therefore, expanded its work: to make citizens - women and men - aware of their rights, to investigate and document violations, and to conduct research into human rights issues. This was followed by action, through public campaigns and advocacy and through public interest litigation. Thus, ASK became a human rights organization, with a special emphasis on promoting women's rights.

As ASK's mandate for the defense of human rights expanded, I took on its research and advocacy portfolios. I followed many of the cases in which ASK was involved and wrote about them in ASK's *Bulletin* or in daily newspapers for dissemination to the public. I edited ASK's annual human rights report, which was in demand by organizations in Bangladesh and outside. We undertook research on topical issues. In the early 1990s, when the *Gono Adalat*⁹ was called by Jahanara Imam, and there was rising public demand for the trial of war criminals, we decided to assist the process by collecting oral histories from survivors. One of the first persons we talked to was Ferdousi Priyobhashini. We formed a team with Meghna Guhathakurta, Suraiya Begum, Hasina Ahmed, Shaheen Akhter, Shameem Akhter, and Sultana Kamal, among others, who took these interviews. These were later published in the original Bangla as *Narir Ekattor*¹⁰ and in translation into English as *Rising from the Ashes*.¹¹

We obtained quite a few important judgments on a range of issues for individuals across the country. In particular, I remember a news report on how a young domestic worker, who had her throat split by her employer, was in a hospital. Fortunately, she survived but her speech was badly affected. ASK arranged for a doctor to look after her and she was ultimately able to speak again. We also took legal action. The Court appointed me as her legal guardian and this responsibility ended only when she became an adult. She lived in the ASK shelter for many years. We arranged for a very experienced criminal lawyer, Advocate Zahirul Islam to travel to Sherpur to argue her case along with ASK's staff lawyer, Advocate Nina Goswami. I also went with them a few times. The case continued for many years, but we were not able to secure a conviction for the employer. ASK kept in touch with the young woman who went on to work in a garment factory, and to live independently for some time before she married.¹²

I also remember Limon, the young boy who was shot in his leg, by a RAB personnel while he was grazing cattle. Although the RAB officials admitted he had been shot mistakenly, they filed two criminal cases against him. ASK intervened. His mother also filed a case against RAB regarding the shooting. Limon had to have his leg amputated. ASK filed his case in court and looked after him. Khushi Kabir and I, accompanied by others, went to attend court hearings in Jhalakathi. We participated in a discussion at the Jhalakathi Press Club and visited Limon's mother to honor her courage in seeking justice. After his studies at the *Gono Bishwabidyalay* [People's University], Limon went on to become a lawyer, but is still waiting for justice.

The fire in Tazreen Garments and the collapse of Rana Plaza devastated the lives of thousands of workers including many women. Some changes have been put in place to ensure safety, but the struggle for compensation for workers and accountability for such deaths continues. These cases point to the impunity of the powerful which has enabled them to escape justice.

In following the above cases, I came to appreciate that legal rights have to be understood in terms of people's lived experiences, not merely as exchanges between lawyers and judges in courts. I knew little of the law when I first started with ASK. But as I was involved in its work over the years and met women such as Ferdousi Priyabhashini, who told

us of her experiences of sexual harassment in 1971, or Taslima Akhtar, who continues to fight for workers' rights, I was reminded of the critical importance of citizens' activism in defense of human rights.

It is gratifying to see that some of the work we have done together has led to institutional change. This in turn demands a response from the community. For example, a criminal case against an *Imam* and others for penalizing Nurjahan Begum with a *fatwa* in 1993 started legal action that, some twenty years later, resulted in a judgment holding such *fatwas* unconstitutional. Community members can now report such incidents to the police or local authorities to take action. To give another example, complaints of sexual harassment in a university ultimately contributed to the Court's directions to set up institutional mechanisms as deterrents to further harassment. On May 1, 2009, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh issued a set of guidelines to prevent any kinds of physical, mental, and sexual harassment of women, girls, and children at their workplaces, educational institutions, and in any public places.¹³

As I recall these incidents and experiences, I realize that there are many challenges ahead which call for collective action. It is likely to be a difficult struggle. The history of resistance over the years shows how citizens have confronted authoritarianism and repression. Today there are many different groups raising their demands for justice and equality. We need to recognize the diversity of these voices and movements – whether they are women or third gender, ethnic or religious minorities, workers and self-employed and, above all, citizens demanding freedom from violence. We need to work together with everyone, without exception, to promote a democratic culture and respect for rights.

Endnotes

¹ Singh K. (1956). *Train to Pakistan*. India: Chatto & Windus.

² Shaikh G.F. (2011). *Footprints in Time* (Husain R., Trans.) Pakistan: Oxford University.

³ The Rehabilitation Center was set up for women survivors of rape in the 1971 war. It was located in New Eskaton Road Dhaka. Women were provided training and employment opportunities.

⁴ The Six Points Program announced by the Awami League in 1966 was for autonomy of East Pakistan.

⁵ Many of these articles have been republished by the Bangla Academy in a volume entitled *New Values for a New Generation*.

⁶ Both were members of the Parliament in the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan.

⁷ Director of The Population Council in New York.

⁸ *Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust and Ors. v. Government of Bangladesh and Ors.* 63 DLR (2011) 1; *Tayeeb and Ors. v. Government of Bangladesh and Ors.* 67 DLR(AD) (2015) 57.

⁹ Lit. People's Court.

¹⁰ Akhter, S., Begum, S., Guhathakurta, M., Hossain, H. & Kamal, S. (Eds.) (2001). *Narir Ekattor o Juddhoporoborti Kottho Kahini* [Women's 1971 and post war stories]. Dhaka: Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK).

¹¹ Akhter, S., Begum, S., Guhathakurta, M., Hossain, H. & Kamal, S. (Eds.) (Zaman N., Trans) (2019). *Rising from the Ashes: Women's Narratives of 1971*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.

¹² Thanks to Advocate Nina Goswami.

¹³ *Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association v. Bangladesh* 31 BLD (HCD) 31.

The Role and Vision of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the Making of the Bangladesh Nation State

Rehman Sobhan
Center for Policy Dialogue
rsobhancpd@gmail.com

Introduction

New nation states traditionally emerge out of a prolonged historical process where both political circumstances and a variety of heroes and character actors play a critical role. In this article I argue that, while a number of important figures left their footprints on the journey to Bangladesh, it fell to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to emerge at the right time and in the right place, to play the role of torch bearer who led the Bengali people to their journey's end. In this defining historical role, he drew upon those various forces that serve to make up a nation and wove them together to form the intricate and durable fabric of a nation state that could withstand the most savage assaults to tear it asunder. Such a heroic task demanded great political skill, an impeccable sense of timing, a capacity for inspirational leadership, and a people who were made ready to move forward with Bangabandhu to take that historical process to its conclusion.

When we attempt to deconstruct the actions of a leader in giving direction to the historical process, it is no less important to also understand the process through which such a leader gives direction to the struggle. In the case of Bangabandhu, we observe that his own deeply held values influenced his actions. But, his actions and experience, in turn, were no less important in shaping his values. Bangabandhu's awareness of the need to forge a sense of identity within the people he wished to meld into a nation, his exposure to the vicious forces of communalism which were ruthlessly deployed to undermine his people's sense of identity, the importance of democratic mobilization on a mass scale to sustain the struggle against military oppression, and the need for broadening his vision to include not just the quest for a nation state but to also construct a just society, all came together to shape his vision. When Bangladesh eventually emerged as an independent state, Bangabandhu ensured that his vision, derived from both belief and experience, would be incorporated into the founding principles of the national state. Nationalism, secularism, democracy, and socialism eventually served as the four pillars upon which the Bangladesh state was to be constructed and were accordingly inscribed in our constitution.

This article is structured around four themes:

- The quest for national identity
- Democratizing the struggle
- The emergence of the Bangladesh nation state
- A vision for Bangladesh

The Quest for National Identity in Bangladesh

Competing National Identities in Bangladesh

Bangladesh emerged out of the state of Pakistan, which was born in 1947 to provide a homeland for the Muslims of the Indian sub-continent. Within the state of Pakistan, the people of East Pakistan found themselves in a peculiar dilemma. They had become part of Pakistan by proclaiming their Muslim identity, but at the time of the partition of India in 1947, 22% of the population of East Pakistan were Hindus, who expected to enjoy all the rights associated with a shared Pakistan nationality that were available to the majority Muslim population. Thus, having acceded to a Pakistan state defined by its religious identity, the political coherence of the polity in this region demanded that it recreate itself as a secular state where religious identity was no longer acceptable as the basis of national identity. This point was well recognized by Jinnah in his famous speech before Parliament, proclaiming Pakistan's secular character and defining religion as a personal matter, having nothing to do with the affairs of state.

However, the issue of the position of religious minorities in Pakistan applied largely to East Pakistan since West Pakistan had solved its own dilemma by “cleansing” itself of its own religious minorities. Also, since Pakistan had already come into existence based on religious identity, this could not be an available foundation for nationalism in East Pakistan. This was consistent with the logic of the Lahore Resolution which, in effect, sought regional autonomy for the North West and Eastern provinces of India, and not religious autonomy for the Muslims of India. Thus, in post-1947 East Pakistan, the national identity which came to the surface was defined by its territorial separation both from India and from West Pakistan. Since the fight for Pakistan was built around the demand for autonomy of the two Muslim majority states of North West and Eastern India, this demand for autonomy remained the central driving force of Bangladeshi politics throughout its tenure in the Pakistan state.

Within a united Pakistan, from the first day of its new nationhood, Bengalis found that their commitment for regional self-rule, as demanded in the Lahore Resolution, had been usurped by the central government of Pakistan. Had this central government been a democratic one, allowing the demographic majority of the Bengalis within the Pakistan state to be reflected in the shared exercise of political power at the center, the lack of the promised provincial autonomy for East Pakistan may have proved more politically tolerable. However, the denial of autonomy for this province, in practice, meant the exercise of central power by a non-Bengali dominated ruling elite drawn from the feudal classes of West Pakistan, allied with a military and bureaucratic elite from which Bengalis were virtually excluded.

This denial of shared power at the center for Bengalis, as well as their demand for provincial autonomy, was compounded by the assault on the cultural identity of the Bengalis and was associated with the proclamation by Pakistan’s first Governor General, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, of Urdu as the single national language of Pakistan. Urdu was a language of certain provinces of India, where it was spoken by both the Muslim and Brahmin elite. Urdu was, in fact, the mother tongue of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, derived from his birth in Allahabad; ironically, Mohammed Ali Jinnah could barely speak Urdu, and could neither read nor write the language. This quite fallacious association of Urdu with a Pakistani identity recreated a sense of Bengali identity for the Bengalis of the new state. They felt that this ethnic identity had been subordinated to their Muslim identity.

Bangabandhu engaged himself in the struggle for establishing Bangla as a national language as early as the beginning of 1948. He was part of the movement which persuaded Khawja Nazimuddin, the first Chief Minister of East Bengal, to commit to the Provincial assembly of East Bengal that Bangla would be used as one of the state languages for purposes of administration. This initiative by Bangabandhu preceded the arrival and declaration by Jinnah, on the occasion of his first and only visit to East Pakistan in March 1948, that Urdu would be the national language. Bangabandhu was again actively involved in resisting this *ex-cathedra* declaration by Jinnah on the issue of language.

The Denial of Democracy and its Economic Deprivation

Political domination and cultural subordination of Bengalis was compounded by the denial of democratic access to the economic opportunities being created by the Pakistani state. In the 1950s and ‘60s, the state provided the dynamic of development in most recently independent countries, including Pakistan. A West Pakistani dominated central government used its monopoly of power to channel state resources and to manipulate economic policies, which served to accelerate the development of West Pakistan at the expense of East Pakistan. For example, a national import policy was used to channel East Pakistan’s export earnings from jute, the country’s principal source of foreign exchange receipts, to finance the industrialization of West Pakistan. In return, the Eastern province was to serve as a protected market for manufacturing exports from West Pakistan. Within East Pakistan itself, the exercise of administrative power was monopolized by non-Bengali bureaucrats and deployed to promote the growth of a non-Bengali business elite who came to dominate the modern economic sector of this province. It should here be kept in mind that from the earliest days of Pakistan, business activity in East Pakistan in relation to exports, internal and inter-wing trade, banking, insurance, and eventually private industry, had come to be dominated by non-Bengalis.

This denial of political rights and economic opportunities to the Bengalis of East Pakistan provided the dynamic of the demand for democracy and self-rule for that territory, constituting the central motivating force of Pakistan’s politics for the 24 years of its existence as a unified state. To sustain this denial of democratic rights to Bengalis demanded a projection of a Pakistani identity that would supersede a Bengali identity. It was argued that an economically and politically strong West Pakistan, ruled by an enlightened elite, should be tolerated by Bengalis in the name of Pakistani nationhood. To mask this usurpation of the spirit of the Lahore Resolution, the Pakistani ruling elite had to revive the notion of Pakistan’s religious identity. Virtually from the first year of Pakistan’s existence, this

elite maintained that the assertion of a Bengali identity was un-Islamic as well as anti-Pakistan. The reality of Pakistan's politics was that its rulers have always been driven by secular appetites for power and wealth, while religion has provided a convenient smokescreen behind which democratic rights of the people were subordinated.

The political struggles of the 1960's in East Pakistan were thus driven by four key goals. They are the:

- restoration of democracy, whereby Bengali people could share power in the central government through drawing upon their demographic majority through the franchise
- realization of self-rule through the acceptance of the principal of autonomy for East Pakistan
- channeling of resources appropriated by the central government towards the development of East Pakistan
- recognition of *Bangla* as an integral part of the culture of East Pakistan and as one of the two national languages of Pakistan.

These four political themes had a territorial base located in this Eastern province. Thus, the concept of democratic assertion coalesced with the notion of a separate identity for Bengalis. The physical separation between two wings of Pakistan had inspired the idea that Pakistan was a state where two economies, even two societies, co-existed within one polity. However, as the political aspirations of the two regions of Pakistan began to diverge, the notion of two polities also began to assert itself in the consciousness of Bengalis. A Bengali identity, associated with language and culture, within a state with differentiated economies, polities and societies and located in a country geographically separated by the landmass of India, established a unique sense of separateness amongst the Bengalis in Pakistan. This has few parallels in any other state encapsulating multiple national identities. Much of the political struggles of the people of East Pakistan, starting from the Language movement of 1952 to the democratic movement of the 1960s, were driven by these four salient concerns of the Bengalis of East Pakistan.

Bangabandhu and the Shaping of a National Identity

This emerging sense of distinctiveness between the people of East and West Pakistan did not automatically evolve into a sense of national identity because the Bengalis of Pakistan still thought of themselves as Pakistanis. A major political effort was necessary to weave together these various notions of separateness within the consciousness of Bengalis into a sense of shared nationhood. A number of historic political figures such as H.S. Suhrawardy, *Sher-e-Bangla* Fazlul Haq, and Moulana Bhashani had already played a vanguard role in the political struggles of the people of East Pakistan, but the catalytic act of political entrepreneurship needed to forge a sense of nationhood for Bengalis was provided by Bangabandhu. From the period in 1966 when Bangabandhu launched the *Six Point Programme* to the defining two-year period from March 1969 to 1971, in the course of an election campaign of unique historical significance, Bangabandhu played a dominant role in the struggle for self-rule for Bengalis. In this task, he was reinforced by the dedication of his senior colleagues, younger activists in the Awami League, as well as other secular political forces, including individuals within and outside politics. All these forces were brought and had to be held together by Bangabandhu during the two-year political campaign; it had to ensure that any division among Bengalis could not be used by the Pakistani elite to deflect the demand for self-rule for East Pakistan.

Democratizing the Struggle

The Six Point Programme for Autonomy

Identity has to be consolidated through a process of democratic struggle. In this case, the mobilization around the demand for Bangla as a national language played a critical role in the national struggle. However, Bangabandhu recognized that it was around issues of the people's livelihood that the sense of deprivation rankled most deeply. Deprivation was made visible in the disparate levels of living between the people of West and East Pakistan. It was also visible in the disparity in levels of development resulting from the inequitable allocation of public resources in favor of West Pakistan.

Bangabandhu played a critical role in institutionalizing this growing sense of deprivation. In focusing on the issue of economic deprivation, Bangabandhu could draw upon a body of work on issues of regional disparity, presented both as academic papers and more popular presentations, by a group of Bengali economists, mostly associated with Dhaka University. Some of these economists had already propagated the idea that Pakistan should be

conceptualized as a state with two economies, with unique problems that should be addressed through a high degree of devolution of policy making, and resource mobilization, to the respective regional governments. Bangabandhu drew on these arguments regarding disparity and devolution in preparing and presenting his historic *Six Point Programme* before the people of Pakistan in the spring of 1966.

Here, again, timing was critical. Pakistan provoked and fought a war with India in the last quarter of 1965, and narrowly saved itself from military defeat by signing a peace treaty with India brokered by the USSR in Tashkent. During this short war, East Pakistan was left completely defenseless and was informed by Foreign Minister Bhutto that its defense had been outsourced to China. This was a fiction in 1965, and proved so again in 1971, with more fatal consequence for Pakistan. But Bhutto's message confirmed to the people of East Pakistan the longstanding duplicity of the argument of Pakistan's ruling elite that East Pakistan's export earnings were being used to build a strong Pakistani army that would assure East Pakistan's defense by destroying the Indian army in the West during any military confrontation.

The *Six Point Programme* provided the constitutional parameters for complete autonomy for the two regions of Pakistan. Four of the *Six Points* focused exclusively on the devolution of economic power. The *Six Points* reflected, for the first time, a formal recognition by a major Bengali political leader that political co-existence between East and West Pakistan, even within a democratic central government, was not a feasible political option for the people of East Pakistan. Only through a devolution of political power, policymaking, and administrative authority as well as command over economic resources, could the two provinces of Pakistan hope to survive within a single nation state.

Interesting to note, the *Six Point Programme* had a historical precedent in the *Cabinet Mission Plan* of 1946, based on a political mission sent by the Labor Party government, which had been elected to power in Great Britain in 1945. This mission offered a constitutional formula for post-independence India to resolve the Congress-Muslim League conflict which had stalemated negotiations for India's independence from British rule. The *Cabinet Mission* presented a constitutional formula before India's political leaders, based on a devolution of central power to three component regions of North West India, Central, and Eastern India. The *Cabinet Mission* plan was based on a recognition of a separate political identity dividing the Muslim and Hindu community in India, and thus chose to devolve power to the regions where each of these communities was respectively in a majority. This formula was initially challenged by the Congress Party because of the extreme degree of autonomy to be ceded to the regions and was subsequently repudiated by the Muslim League.

The partition of India, leading to the emergence of Pakistan as a separate nation state, thus originated in a breakdown in the constitutional negotiations over the extent of devolution under a prospective federal constitution in an independent India, and not because the Muslims were determined to proclaim themselves as a separate nation state. Ironically, Pakistan again broke up and East Pakistan emerged as a nation state, initially because of the reluctance of Pakistan's ruling elite to accept a new devolutionary federal constitution for Pakistan based on the *Six Point Programme*.

The *Six Points* were projected by the Pakistani leadership as a thinly veiled blueprint for secession by East Pakistan. Strangely enough, the Pakistani leadership, including Bhutto, never engaged in any serious dialogue with the Awami League regarding the implications of operationalizing the *Six Points*. They attempted to have such talks in the last few days of united Pakistan. The more substantive concern of Pakistan's ruling elite originated in their reluctance to relinquish their absolute power to rule Pakistan.

The attempt to suppress the mass political mobilization that the *Six Point Programme* brought about throughout East Pakistan in the summer of 1966, led to the arrest of Bangabandhu, along with most of the Awami League high command. He was later charged with inspiring the infamous Agartala Conspiracy and tried for high treason. Bangabandhu was kept in jail for over two years. It took a mass political uprising in both wings of Pakistan, culminating in the downfall of Ayub Khan, to obtain the release of Bangabandhu and his colleagues.

The failure of the Roundtable talks with the opposition leaders of Pakistan eventually compelled Ayub Khan to hand over power to General Yahya Khan at the end of March 1969. In turn, Yahya Khan had to seek a political accommodation with the opposition in both wings of Pakistan by promising national elections. Even though Pakistan was to be governed by Martial Law until the promulgation of the new constitution by the newly elected parliament, this arrangement was accepted by Bangabandhu. He was confident he could win an overwhelming mandate from the people of East Pakistan to frame a constitution based on the *Six Points*.

The Role of the 1969-71 Election Campaign in Forging a National Identity for East Pakistan

It was the election campaign of 1969-71 which came to play a decisive role in forging a sense of national identity for the Bengalis out of the separateness which underwrote the *Six Points Programme*. It was believed that such an overwhelming electoral demonstration of support would persuade the military *junta* of Pakistan that rejecting and suppressing the universal demand of the people would jeopardize the very foundations of the Pakistan state. This turned out to be a prophetic assumption on the part of Bangabandhu.

To build an overwhelming democratic mandate behind *Six Points* demanded total support from the people of East Pakistan, manifested in the polling response of the voters. Historically, all attempts to resist political domination by the Pakistani elite had been frustrated by divisions amongst the political leaders of the Bengalis in the country. Bangabandhu sought to go over the heads of his political rivals in the region and seek a comprehensive popular mandate for his *Six Points*. To build this popular unity, it was necessary to forge a common identity for the Bengalis. The main message of Bangabandhu's political campaign after March 1969 was to persuade Bengalis that not only were they separate in their social, political, and economic life from Pakistan, but that the Bengalis of East Pakistan were one people who should vote together to proclaim the right to live a separate life from West Pakistan.

The construction of this mass unity required a focus on identity politics, as well as a capacity to project this identity into the consciousness of every villager, and not only the urban masses in East Pakistan. It was not enough to build this shared identity within an urban, educated middle class, who had hitherto been the principal reference point for political activity in East Pakistan. It was essential to persuade the masses of people across the nation that all Bengalis were being politically oppressed by a Pakistani ruling elite. The key message, encapsulated in a political poster put up by the Awami League workers in every village in East Pakistan, *Purba Bangla Shoshon Keno* (why is Eastern Bengal a wasteland), itemized in simple language the statistics of disparity (and oppression) between East and West Pakistan. The role of the Awami League as a party should not be underemphasized in the delivery of this simple message to the Bengali people. Bangabandhu's message to the voters did not automatically land on their doorstep but required large scale party organization and dedicated work to carry the message of Bengali nationalism into the consciousness of every household of Bangladesh, rural and urban. The role of Tajuddin Ahmad, General Secretary of the Awami League and the right hand of Bangabandhu, as well as of other key figures and dedicated workers in the party should be recognized in this process.

From a Political Leader to a National Icon

Over this two-year period, Bangabandhu emerged as the unchallenged leader and the embodiment of the national will of the people of "Bangladesh". During this period, he graduated from being the leader of a political party into a national icon for the Bengalis of "Bangladesh". Wherever he went, the entire population of the area, men and women, old and young, assembled just to obtain a glimpse of this near mythic figure. Without his presence, the Awami League would have still won the election, but it was Bangabandhu who ensured the overwhelming support of the voters for the Awami League candidates because his person transcended his party and came to represent the aspirations of all Bengalis. This emphasis on the role of Bangabandhu should not detract from the growing receptiveness of the people to his message of self-assertion over a long period of time, and the groundwork of other Bengali leaders and activists in building this popular consciousness.

The total support of the Bengalis of East Pakistan for Bangabandhu was manifested in the election of December 1970, when the Awami League not only won 167 out of 169 seats contested from East Pakistan but also 75% of the popular vote. More to the point, the party won large pluralities in virtually every constituency where it was successful, thereby minimizing the contribution of such events as the cyclone of November 1970 in determining the size of the majority votes.

The Election of December 1970 and its Implications

The political outcome of the December 1970 election had given the Awami League an absolute majority in the National Assembly of Pakistan, as well as total control of the Provincial Assembly, and had clearly demonstrated that the voters of East Pakistan had unreservedly endorsed the *Six Point Programme* of the Awami League. The election had proclaimed to the world that Bengalis had forged a collective national identity, and that they had invested Bangabandhu with total authority to realize self-rule for Bangladesh. Thus, what had originally been a political

demand for constitutional autonomy had culminated in planting the seeds of a nation state in the hearts and minds of the people of “Bangladesh”.

These far-reaching implications, which had arisen out of the election campaign and its outcome in December 1970, were not fully appreciated by the ruling elite of West Pakistan, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Neither Bhutto nor Yahya had foreseen the decisive electoral victory of the Awami League, having been comprehensively misinformed by Pakistan’s Intelligence agencies about the facts of political life in East Pakistan. Both, however, recognized the threat to the bastions of power that had dominated the Pakistan state since 1947, implicit in the overwhelming electoral victory of the Awami League in East Pakistan and the authority commanded by Bangabandhu over the people of that territory. Both Yahya and Bhutto deluded themselves that the election results were an urban, middle-class phenomenon, fueled by Bengali sentimentality and influenced by the adverse reaction to the November 1970 cyclone.

Until both Bhutto and Yahya met Bangabandhu in Dhaka in early 1971, they believed that, like previous Bengali leaders before him, he could be persuaded to compromise his *Six Point* demand through inducements of power sharing at the center. The West Pakistani leaders failed to recognize the seismic changes which had been registered in the self-awareness of the people of East Pakistan between March 1969 and March 1971. They did not realize that as a result of the elections in December 1970, the *Six Points* had become a minimalist demand for a constitutional solution to the unfolding political crisis in Pakistan. As a consequence of this new-found sense of nationalism in East Pakistan, voices were being raised after the elections, even within the Awami League, for full political independence.

Yahya’s conspiracy with Bhutto, forged in their historic meeting in Larkana, in January 1971, occurred after Yahya’s visit to Dhaka and meeting with Bangabandhu, and put in motion the forces which culminated in the emergence of Bangladesh as a nation state. Bhutto’s sudden rhetorical assaults on the *Six Point Programme*, shortly after he met with Bangabandhu in Dhaka at the end of January 1971, suggested that mischief was afoot. A series of one-on-one meetings between Bhutto and Yahya in February, further elevated Bengali apprehensions of a conspiracy. Yahya’s decision of March 1, 1971, to, *sine die*, postpone the inaugural National Assembly session scheduled to take place in Dhaka on March 3, 1971, was viewed by all Bengalis as the end result of the conspiracy to deny them their democratic mandate registered in the elections of December 1970.

The Emergence of the Bangladesh Nation State

From Non-cooperation to Self-rule: March 1971

Bangabandhu’s response to the decision by Yahya to postpone the Assembly session was to call for a political mobilization throughout East Pakistan through a program of non-cooperation. The popular response in Bangladesh to his call registered a measure of support which remains without precedent in the history of democratic and liberation movements. The non-cooperation movement was spontaneously joined not only by the people of East Pakistan, but by the administrative and judicial machinery, the forces of law and order, as well as the business community. The non-cooperation movement eventually graduated into a formal shift of allegiance of the machinery of civilian government in East Pakistan away from the central government of General Yahya Khan to the authority exercised by Bangabandhu over the region. Eventually, the entire machinery of the state, which was located outside the military cantonments of East Pakistan, unanimously came forward to pledge their loyalty to the leadership of Bangabandhu.

This recognition of Bangabandhu’s assumption of power in East Pakistan was formally recognized by the Pakistan military, which was then ruling the province, and the country. Lt. General Yakub Khan, the then Chief Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) and Acting Governor of East Pakistan, declared in his letter of resignation dispatched to Yahya Khan on March 5 that,

“The control of the administration had now passed on to Shaikh Mujib who was now de facto head of government and controlled all public life. I am convinced there is no military solution which can make sense in the present situation. In consequence I am unable to accept the responsibility for implementing a mission, namely a military solution, that would merely lead to large scale killing of unarmed civilians and would achieve no sane aim, it would have disastrous consequences.”

By March 5, 1971, Bangabandhu had found himself to be the unchallenged ruler of East Pakistan, with the entire machinery of administration there behind him. In no other independence movement has such a shift of loyalty emerged prior to the formal recognition of national independence.

Bangabandhu's historic declaration of March 7 was, therefore, not only directed as a call to action for the people, but also as a message to Yahya that Bangladesh was now *de facto*, independent. When Yahya Khan finally flew into Dhaka on March 5 to initiate negotiations with Bangabandhu, he would no longer be dealing with a subject, but with an equal who also enjoyed the advantage of having a democratic mandate.

The non-cooperation movement was so total and pervasive that the economy and infrastructure of East Pakistan nearly collapsed, with life threatening consequences for the people of the region. Thus, it was necessary for Bangabandhu to escalate the movement from non-cooperation to self-rule in order to restore economic activity and maintain law and order.

Bangabandhu had to establish a rudimentary policymaking apparatus that could take decisions about the selective revival of the economy and establishment of administrative authority. A small cell was established, where a number of Bengali professionals met every day with bankers and bureaucrats to discuss a variety of operational issues. These included steps needed to restore banking operations, revive exports, pay salaries of public employees, collect public revenues, and resume the public distribution of fertilizer and the operation of tube wells in the largely agrarian economy. It was also essential to keep the transportation system within East Pakistan functional. Suggested administrative action to be taken in the name of the Bangabandhu regime were communicated every day by Tajuddin Ahmad and Kamal Hossain to a team of Bengali bureaucrats, who had been elected by their colleagues to liaise with the Awami League and act as conduits for transmitting the orders of Bangabandhu to the administration.

Many *ad hoc* problems of an administrative, political, or commercial nature which needed urgent resolution were directly presented to Bangabandhu at his private residence in Road 32, Dhanmondi, which, in effect, became the seat of authority in East Pakistan during March 1971. Delegations of businessmen met with Bangabandhu and selected colleagues to seek emergency decisions about how they should run their business during this period. The machinery of law and order was restored as the police began to take orders from Bangabandhu and to work in cooperation with Awami League political workers to restore a sense of security to the people of East Pakistan. While there were instances of persecuting non-Bengalis, the general law and order situation during March was remarkably stable, and Bangabandhu periodically declared that non-Bengalis should be extended appropriate and full protection.

The Emergence of a Sovereign Bangladesh

By March 15th, a functioning *de facto* administration and political authority began operating under the direction of Bangabandhu and under the administration of key Awami League leaders. However, it is arguable that Bangabandhu's authority was not just *de facto* but could be termed legal since his leadership enjoyed electoral legitimacy. This exercise of political and administrative authority by Bangabandhu over the entire geographical area what was to become Bangladesh was more than enough to meet the criterion for sovereign recognition by a foreign government.

This exercise of authority by Bangabandhu throughout the territory was projected before the world through a large contingent of the international press who were present in East Pakistan to cover what appeared to be the emergence of a new state. Bangabandhu was, at the same time, communicating with government leaders who were believed to exercise some leverage over the Pakistan government, to seek their assistance in persuading Yahya to accept the logic of the democratic process in East Pakistan. The world press regularly projected Bangabandhu's message to the ordinary people of these countries so that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, during March 1971, became one of the most globally visible personalities in the *Third World*.

When Yahya Khan arrived in East Pakistan in mid-March to resume political negotiations for a constitutional solution to the crisis, Bangabandhu was not only sovereign in the region, but commanded more authority in his own territory than Yahya did in West Pakistan. If such negotiations between Bangabandhu and Yahya had been carried out on the basis of the political realities which prevailed on the ground in East Pakistan, a peaceful solution to the political crisis might have emerged. Such a solution may have ended in a loose confederal arrangement which may have eventually led to a peaceful parting of Bangladesh from Pakistan.

Political rationality had, unfortunately, long since been abandoned in the negotiating arsenal of the Pakistani leadership. Yahya, goaded by Bhutto and some of the *hawks* in the *Junta*, persisted in his delusion that a show of force would bring these middle-class Bengali leaders to their "senses", or that some of them would come forward

over the dead bodies of their colleagues to seek a compromise with the military. The *Junta* did not believe that the Bengalis had the political cohesion, courage, tradition, or military capacity to sustain a war of national liberation. Until the end they could not comprehend that a nation state had been forged within East Pakistan during March 1971, and people there would be willing to fight spontaneously to protect their sovereignty. In their mind, both Yahya and Bhutto believed that the worst that could happen is that Pakistan would leave Bangladesh as scorched earth, where the Bengalis would have to pay in fire and blood for their presumptions of sovereignty. As part of his own fallback position, Bhutto believed that if Yahya could not survive the loss of Bangladesh, then he (Bhutto) would emerge as the new *Shahinshah* (ruler) of what was left of Pakistan.

As it transpired, Yahya used the cover of political negotiations to move troops into East Pakistan to build up enough force to suppress the forces of Bengali nationalism. Following Yahya's instructions, such a military option had already been drawn up by the Chief Martial Law Administrator in East Pakistan as early as in the first week of February. This plan was then known as *Operation Blitz*. This act of force was put forth as a reassertion of the political authority of the central government of Pakistan over a province of Pakistan. But by the time Yahya gave his final orders to General Tikka Khan to launch *Operation Searchlight*, an updated version of *Blitz*, his military code word for committing genocide on Bengalis on the night of March 25, 1971, it was Pakistan which was the usurper of authority from the democratically established sovereign state of Bangladesh. Thus, the armed assault of the armed forces of Pakistan on the Bengali people was seen as an act of military aggression by one sovereign state on another. This was how Bengalis viewed the assault on their sovereignty, and indeed how much of the world viewed the military aggression against East Pakistan.

During the month of March 1971, East Pakistan's sense of national consciousness evolved into an awareness of their sovereign status through the assertion by Bangabandhu of the right to self-rule. Thus, the concept of national consciousness, which was essentially an abstraction, consolidated itself through a political process which culminated in the emergence of an independent Bangladesh.

By March 25, 1971, Bangladesh was already a sovereign state in the minds of its citizens. The proclamation of independence by Bangabandhu on March 26th in response to the military assault on the Bengalis ordered by Yahya Khan, was a juridical act recognizing a *de facto* and legitimate authority. The post-liberation debate over who declared independence of Bangladesh is thus a largely irrelevant debate. It is self-evident to anyone that the operative issue is not who declared independence, but when Bangladeshis asserted their own independence, which they did during the month of March in 1971.

Bangabandhu and the Legitimacy of the Liberation Struggle

The legitimacy derived from the unchallenged authority of Bangabandhu was crucial to the sustainability of the liberation war. At the time that independence was formally declared on March 26, 1971, Bangabandhu commanded what almost no leaders of independence movements have commanded during their phase of struggle with an imperial authority, the freely given and overwhelming electoral mandate to speak for Bangladesh. Such a mandate was not available to Gandhi, Nehru, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Ben Bella, Nkrumah, Nyerere, or even to Mandela, all of whom obtained full electoral legitimacy only after independence. In the eyes of the world, Bangabandhu had already exercised *de facto* authority over the territory of Bangladesh when he proclaimed Bangladesh's independence. It was this universally recognized authority that persuaded Bengali judges, bureaucrats, and diplomats to extend their support to Bangabandhu and for Bengali members of the armed forces of Pakistan to break their oath of service and pledge their allegiance to the liberation of Bangladesh.

When the people of Bangladesh took their message to the international community after March 1971, they had no difficulty in commanding support from ordinary citizens across the world, even when their governments remained lukewarm in their support of the sovereignty of Bangladesh. It was this popular groundswell of support for Bangladesh's liberation struggle, and against the genocide of the Pakistani army, that compelled some national governments to demand restraint from the Pakistan government.

Today the genocide unleashed by Yahya and the Pakistani Army would have been condemned by many governments and there would have been a global outcry for the trial of Yahya and Tikka Khan as war criminals. In 1971, most governments, with rare exceptions, still believed that a state, however weak its popular legitimacy, could massacre its own citizens with impunity. Thus, in 1971, Bangladesh needed to invoke the support of the people of these countries who would, in the normal course of their lives, have never heard of Bangladesh. The global campaign of Bangladeshis could also reach out to the elected representatives of many countries to exercise pressure on their

governments to stop the genocide and cut off aid to Pakistan. That people around the world took notice of the atrocities inflicted on the people of Bangladesh, owes in no small measure to global recognition given to Bangladesh during March 1971 and the visibility and stature of Bangabandhu as the unchallenged leader of Bangladesh.

The Unique Basis of Bangladesh's Nationhood

The emergence of Bangladesh must, thus, be understood as a unique historical event, where a nation emerged out of an intensive process of political mobilization, evolving through successive phases. The final phase of the emergence of Bangladesh was the most difficult because it required that a sense of national identity be brought to maturity within a sovereign state. This demanded an extraordinary leader who could be accepted by all Bengalis as the symbol of their nationhood, such that they could not only be persuaded to proclaim their sovereignty, but also remain united and willing to defend it.

At the same time, the emergence as a sovereign state required the complete involvement of the people of Bangladesh. Thus, the consolidation of a sense of national sovereignty in the minds of the people of Bangladesh was not the skin-deep process one associates with formal declarations of independence where ordinary people find one day that white-skinned rulers have been replaced by brown *sahibs*. In the case of Bangladesh, national sovereignty was inculcated into the consciousness of the masses through a deliberate political process. It was the mass character of this consciousness building that provided the underlying strength to the nationalist movement and gave enormous strength to the assertion of national sovereignty during March 1971 by Bangabandhu and the people of Bangladesh.

During March 1971, Bangladeshis at all levels, drawn from all faiths and social backgrounds, participated in the mobilization, repudiating the authority of Yahya Khan. In every village, a sense of Bangladesh's sovereign status took root and people became psychologically prepared to defend their sovereignty. In many places, villagers spontaneously came forward to interdict communications with the cantonment which might be used by the Pakistani army to move troops and participated in moves to deny supplies to the cantonments.

In those days of March 1971, citizens were acutely conscious of the threat of a military attack by the Pakistani army in the name of restoring their authority. Even within the cantonments, preparations for an attack were visible to all Bengali members of the armed forces. The Bengali rank and file, along with their officers, had, within their hearts and minds, proclaimed their loyalty to a sovereign Bangladesh under the leadership of Bangabandhu. Some officers were already in touch with Bangabandhu, and other Awami League leaders in the cantonments and were preparing themselves for an eventual confrontation with the Pakistani army.

When the Pakistani army launched its aggression on the people of Bangladesh on the night of March 25, 1971, the entire population spontaneously rose up to resist this, despite the absence of any coordinating military direction. Two years of political mobilization by Bangabandhu had made them conscious of their identity. The events of March 1971 had made them a nation. The intense process of national consciousness building throughout March 1971 politically equipped a people with no tradition of armed struggle or even the use of arms to take up arms and be prepared to shed their blood to defend their newly acquired sovereignty.

A Vision for Bangladesh

The Shaping of the Vision

The liberation struggle had a defining impact on Bangabandhu's vision for an independent Bangladesh. The struggle had inculcated a sense of national identity into the consciousness of all Bengalis. Ironically, the genocide by the Pakistani army, which did not discriminate between Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Christian, further reaffirmed that sense of nationhood. Bangabandhu recognized the importance of sustaining this national consciousness by reemphasizing the importance of secularism, where religion could no longer be abused for political gain, and definitely not to commit mass murder.

The centrality of democracy was no less important in defining Bangabandhu's vision. But his idea of democracy embraced the inclusion of the masses of Bangladesh who had provided both width and depth to the liberation struggle, as well as the strength to withstand the might and extreme violence of the Pakistani army. In post-liberation Bangladesh, Bangabandhu accordingly envisaged a democratic order which would not be purchasable by plutocrats.

In the final analysis, all these dimensions of his vision were subsumed in his vision for a more just society. In reaching out to a mass constituency, which could draw in the working classes of the urban areas as well as the rural masses, Bangabandhu was conscious of the need to offer these new elements in his support base something more than only the prospect of self-rule. He had, at an early stage of his political journey, been made aware of how the Pakistan movement had been hijacked by a Pakistani ruling elite made up of landlords, an aspirant business elite, the armed forces, and the senior bureaucracy.

As a student campaigner for Pakistan, Bangabandhu's own concept of the struggle extended beyond the exclusively communal perception of the Pakistan state. For Bangabandhu, the struggle for self-rule for Bengali Muslims was as much a struggle of the landless peasants and emerging Muslim lower middle class against the landowning elite of Bengal, who were mostly Hindus but also included Muslims, as well as the emergent non-Bengali Marwari classes which had hitherto dominated commercial life in Bengal. Bangabandhu was determined that his political struggle for self-rule, which had come to depend heavily on the engagement and commitment of the Bengali masses, should not, as in 1947, be appropriated by an aspirant middle class, hoping to take over the business empires of the non-Bengali bourgeoisie who had dominated commercial life in Bangladesh.

Bangabandhu's Vision for a Just Society

What most people tend to overlook is Bangabandhu's life-long empathy with the common people. In his own life and his campaign at the grassroots level to organize the Awami League party, he acquired first-hand exposure to the unjust and exploitative nature of the society in which the common people lived out their lives. From his earliest writings in his memoirs and prison diaries, he speaks of socialism as a possible social order to end this injustice. For Bangabandhu, the idea of a just society was not just about ending the exploitation of the Pakistan elite, but of eradicating it from the social order of a self-ruled Bangladesh.

When I was invited by Bangabandhu to work with Tajuddin Ahmed and Kamal Hossain to prepare the Awami League manifesto for the 1970 election campaign, Bangabandhu specifically alerted us to prepare a document which would construct a more egalitarian, exploitation free, society. In response to his mandate, working with fellow economists such as Nurul Islam and Anisur Rahman, we addressed distributive issues in the manifesto through proposals for institutional interventions based, *inter alia*, on public ownership, as well as worker participation in management and rural cooperatives. The belief among Bengali progressive circles that Bangabandhu was a mouthpiece of the aspirant Bengali bourgeois was put to rest once the 1970 manifesto was published, and subsequently validated by Bangabandhu's own actions when he assumed power. Needless to say, his increasing orientation towards building a just society generated misgivings among Bengali business and bureaucratic circles who entertained a quite different vision of a self-ruled Bangladesh. But it was Bangabandhu who personally piloted his manifesto through the Awami League high command, and eventually at the historic Council meeting of the Awami League in July 1970.

Both after the Awami League victory in the 1970 election, and after the liberation of Bangladesh, the expectation was that Bangabandhu would now moderate his views. It was presumed that he would revert to the traditional role of all post-colonial leaders, who make extravagant promises during the course of the struggle, but then settle down to deploy state resources and policies to build up an elite class in the image of the social order that had been left behind.

When the same economists who were associated with Bangabandhu in operationalizing his *Six Point Programme* and preparing the Awami League manifesto were invited to take on the role of Members of the Bangladesh Planning Commission, his mandate to us remained unreconstructed. His first words to Nurul Islam and me, when he invited us to set up the Planning Commission on January 12, 1972, was that he wanted to pursue a socialist policy. Bangabandhu's vision of socialism was expressed essentially as a metaphor for his vision of a just, exploitation free, more egalitarian, society.

Bangabandhu's compulsion to repudiate the inegalitarian, unjust society he had left behind in Pakistan was made stronger through the experience of the liberation war. He was conscious of the fact that the masses had been mobilized by him to participate in the struggle for self-rule. They had paid the heaviest price by directly taking up arms in the liberation war, and as the principal victims of the genocide inflicted on the people by the Pakistani army.

Bangabandhu believed that a monstrous injustice would be perpetuated if we were to construct a society built on privilege, where the fruits of independence would largely be appropriated by an aspirant elite, while the working people would once again end up at the wrong end of the socio-political scale. There is no scope in this article for me to elaborate on how far Bangabandhu's vision of a just society was realized or was realizable. I have discussed this,

in part, in the recently published second volume of my memoir, *Untranquil Recollections: Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh*. Whatever may have been Bangabandhu's vision for a just society, his assassins' bullets drew down a dark curtain over his vision.

Contemporary Perspectives on Bangabandhu's Vision

Since August 15, 1975, society and economy in Bangladesh have evolved in a direction which remains rather contrary to Bangabandhu's vision. In recent years, the economy has indeed demonstrated robust GDP and export growth, significant infrastructural development, considerable improvement in human development indicators, and a reduction in poverty. All such developments certainly demonstrate the many advantages we have realized through our independence, and particularly in recent years. But there is little argument that, over the years, Bangladesh has emerged as a more inegalitarian society. Growing concentration of wealth has metastasized into political power, and Bangladesh's elective bodies and regulatory institutions have been subjected to elite capture. What we need to explore in the days ahead is how far our high growth and impressive infrastructure development can only be realized within the framework of a hierarchical social order, based on a privileged business elite.

Perhaps more relevant to our commemoration of Bangabandhu's centenary and for honoring his vision, is the importance of exploring what can be done to reconcile our development ambitions with the mission of the founding father to build a just society. Such a perspective could serve as one of our guiding principles to set the direction for Bangladesh on its 50th anniversary, on its path towards a developed economy, genuinely democratic polity, and a more just society.

A Critical Assessment of Gary Bass's *The Blood Telegram*

Tanweer Akram
 Citibank
 tanweer_akram@hotmail.com

Abstract

Gary Bass's *The Blood Telegram* narrates the historical and geopolitical backdrop to Bangladesh's war of national liberation, drawing on documents from U.S. and Indian archives, including the White House tapes, diplomatic cables, and papers of senior functionaries. Bass's research exposes the criminality of the Nixon Administration's tilt toward Pakistan Army's brutal repression of the Bengalis, and chronicles that, while the US diplomats in Dhaka, such as Consul General Archer Blood, were remitting real-time assessments of ongoing massacres, ethnic cleansing, and political repression to the State Department and the White House, the Nixon Administration was supporting General Yahya Khan's regime and Pakistan Army's terror campaign of repression in East Pakistan. He also chronicles the inner workings of the Indian political leaders, bureaucrats, and military officials, and the diplomatic maneuvers leading to the Indo-Soviet Treaty. However, Bass's coverage of ongoing developments in Bangladesh/East Pakistan during 1971 is limited and wanting, partly due to his lack of access to archival Bangladeshi materials and his unfamiliarity with the available materials in Bengali. Nevertheless, Bass's book is a critical and consequential work of scholarship.

Keywords: Bangladesh, War of National Liberation, massacres, Henry Kissinger, Richard Nixon, Archer Blood

"In history the man in the ruffled shirt and gold-laced waistcoat somehow levitates above the blood he has ordered to be spilled by dirty-handed underlings."

— Francis Jennings (1988, p. 215), cited in Noam Chomsky (1989)

Introduction

Gary Bass's *The Blood Telegram* narrates the historical and geopolitical backdrop to Bangladesh's war of national liberation. The author draws extensively on U.S. documents, particularly the Nixon White House tapes, materials from the U.S. National Archives, National Security Council, and Foreign Relations of the U.S. series. He also makes judicious use of Indian sources, including P. H. Haksar's papers, and the National Archives of India.

The book is ostensibly motivated by the telegrams, dispatches, and classified cables that Archer Blood, Head of the U.S. Consulate in Dhaka (then Dacca), had sent to the relevant authorities and policymakers in the U.S. Blood and his colleagues dissented from the Nixon Administration's active support for General Yahya Khan's regime when the Pakistan Army was committing brutal and genocidal massacres in East Pakistan.

Bass is a gifted writer. He tells a compelling story, rich in details. Bass gives the readers considerable background and insights about key persons in the story. This involves a large cast of characters, including Prime Ministers and Presidents, Senators and Representatives, policymakers, top-level bureaucrats, military leaders, foreign policy and intelligence officials, and other influential people from the U.S., India, Pakistan, China, the U.S.S.R., and other countries who were somehow or the other involved in the War in 1971.

This review is structured as follows. The first section provides a summary of Bass's book with selected quotes. The second delineates some limitations of Bass's work and places it in the broader literature on the national liberation and history of Bangladesh. This is followed by a concluding section. Bass's book has been published in two editions. The U.S. edition (2013) is subtitled *Nixon, Kissinger and a Forgotten Genocide*, while the Indian edition (2014) is subtitled *India's Secret War in East Pakistan*. The quotations cited in this review are from the Indian edition which cites the original archival sources in the endnotes. Bass also refers to Blood's Memoirs published in 2002.

A Summary of Bass's Book

Bass sets as his primary task to place the Blood telegram in the context of Nixon's and Kissinger's role in Bangladesh's war of national liberation. Bass's work severely castigates Kissinger's and Nixon's "tilt" that supported the Pakistani military regime during its brutal repression of the Bengalis. The Pakistan Army's massacres of the Bengalis took place while the Nixon Administration was engaged in exploring an opening to China, with the Pakistani regime trying to facilitate the process.

The Nixon Administration did not even reprimand the Yahya regime, let alone try to prevent the massacres and atrocities committed by the Pakistani military in Bangladesh, in spite of Blood's searing descriptions and honest analysis of the situation. The Administration even encouraged Chinese officials to mobilize China's troops to threaten India. Bass tried to interview Kissinger for his book, but it is not surprising that his request was denied (p. xvi).

Following the Pakistan Army's crackdown, Blood sent a cable titled, "Selective Genocide," on March 28, 1971, describing in detail the Pakistan Army's merciless massacres (Blood, 2002). Later, several U.S. diplomats signed the dissent cable that Blood sent to the State Department. Even though Bass does not name all of them, the names of the signatories are readily available from the documents that Gandhi (2002) has compiled.¹

In the cable, the dissenting U.S. diplomats wrote: "Our government failed to denounce the suppression of democracy. Our government failed to denounce atrocities." The diplomats accused the Nixon Administration of "bending over backwards to placate the West Pak dominated government." The signatories stated: "US policy related to recent developments in East Pakistan serves neither our moral interest broadly defined nor our national interest narrowly defined..." and that they deemed it their "duty to register strong dissent with fundament aspect of this policy." Archer Blood endorsed the "right of the ... officers to voice dissent." While noting that he "subscribe[s] to these views," Blood said that it would be inappropriate for him to sign the cable because he was the principal U.S. diplomat in the East Pakistan Consulate (Gandhi, 2002, Document # 8). The Blood cable infuriated Henry Kissinger and William Rogers (p. 79). As a Kissinger staffer told Bass, Blood became known for "telling in Washington what power in Washington didn't want to hear" (p. 73). Meanwhile, Blood's boss, the U.S. Ambassador to Pakistan, Joseph Farland, became an advocate for Yahya Khan and the Pakistan Army, instructing his subordinates to keep silent, and accept the fact that the Pakistan Army's repression of the Bengalis was "strictly an internal affair of Pakistan" about which U.S. diplomats would have "no comments" (p. 63). In private conversations with Nixon, Kissinger denounced Blood as "this maniac in Dacca [Dhaka]" (p. 117).

President Nixon was favorably predisposed toward Pakistan. Indeed, he bore animosity toward India from his days in the Eisenhower Administration. Bass reports Nixon as having said: "Pakistan is a country I would like to do everything for" (p. 3). In contrast, Nixon is quoted as saying: "I don't like the Indians" (p. 5), "The Pakistanis are straightforward — and sometimes extremely stupid. The Indians are more devious, sometimes so smart that we fall for their lines" (p. 214). Bass quotes Nixon's Chief of Staff as stating that Nixon had a "visceral dislike" for Mrs. Gandhi, while he maintained that "[p]eople like Yahya are responsible leaders" (p. 29). When Nixon was appraised about the massacres in East Pakistan, he remarked, "I wouldn't put out a statement praising it, but we're not going to condemn it either" (p. 64).

Kissinger lauded General Yahya Khan's Sandhurst style: "Yahya is tough, direct, and with a good sense of humor" (p. 7). Bass is correct that it was not just the personal assessments. India and Mrs. Indira Gandhi were disdained and despised in the corridors of power in Washington DC because of India's non-alignment during the Cold War era. Kissinger bluntly told his staff that "[t]he President will be very reluctant to do anything that Yahya would interpret as a personal affront" (p. 30), thus making "the case for inaction." On hearing reports about the Pakistan Army's massacres in Dhaka University, Kissinger rationalized the Pakistan Army's actions by apparently referring to the Muslim rulers of India noting, "[t]hey didn't dominate 400 million Indians all those years by being gentle" (p. 68). Kissinger was fully aware that the Pakistan Army was using U.S. military equipment, such as F-86 and C-130 aircrafts, tanks, and light arms, in the vicious repression. However, the Nixon Administration had no interest in urging the Yahya regime to uphold or honor the election results (p. 27). On April 19, 1971, ruling out putting any pressure on the Yahya regime, Kissinger declared: "[N]o matter what our view may be of the savagery of the West Pakistani troops, we would just be pulling India's chestnuts out of the fire if we take on West Pakistan" (p. 113). Nixon made his endorsement clear by scribbling in a memo: "To all hands. Don't squeeze Yahya at this time" (pp. 115-116). Bass remarks that Nixon emphasized his endorsement by underlining the word "Don't" three times. Not only did the U.S. not squeeze Yahya "at this time," it never "squeezed" him. Indeed, the Administration did all it could to support the Pakistan regime. Nixon told Kissinger: "Let the goddamn Indians fight a war." To which Kissinger averred: "They are the most aggressive goddamn people around there" (p. 143). Angry that Mrs. Gandhi was preparing to intervene in East Pakistan, Nixon remarked: "The Indians need — what they need really is a —." Ever the courtier, Kissinger added: "they're such bastards", as Nixon finished his sentence: "A massive famine" (p. 144).

When Kissinger visited India in July 1971, the Indian authorities asked him to visit a refugee camp. However, Kissinger flatly refused (p. 171). Bass provides a classic example of Kissinger's propensity for audacious duplicity when he told Indian officials that the U.S. would support India if China were to make any military threats against India (p. 163). Little did the Indians suspect that the Nixon Administration was on the way to opening diplomatic relations with China.

Part of the reason for Nixon's and Kissinger's tilt for Yahya was that the Pakistani regime was serving as a conduit for a secret channel to China. Kissinger pressured the World Bank President McNamara to have the Bank provide funding to keep Yahya in power at least until he served the Administration's purpose (p. 148). When the State Department asked the White House to suspend military shipments of equipment and spare parts to Pakistan, Kissinger refused to authorize it (p. 158). However, the Administration's support cannot be explained *solely* because of the Yahya regime's role in secret diplomacy. As Nixon told Kissinger: "Look, even apart from the Chinese thing, I wouldn't do that to help the Indians, the Indians are no goddam good" (p. 153). It is further reinforced by the fact that the U.S. continued to back Pakistan even after Yahya's usefulness as a conduit to China ended after Kissinger's secret trip to Beijing (p. 173). By mid-July 1971, Nixon had already informed the public that he had accepted an invitation to visit China (p. 175).

Nixon and Kissinger continued to support the Pakistan regime. Kissinger characterized Indians as "insufferably arrogant," congratulated himself and Yahya Khan for "[t]he cloak and dagger exercise" for the China trip. He told Nixon that "Yahya hasn't had such fun since the last Hindu massacre" (p. 177). Kissinger did not hesitate to compare Yahya to Abraham Lincoln, telling Nixon: "He will fight. Just as Lincoln would have fought. To him East Pakistan is part of Pakistan" (p. 209). Kissinger would rationalize the Nixon Administration's actions, claiming that "the best way to deter war would have been to continue arms deliveries to Pakistan" (p. 205).

Bass writes in details about Mrs. Gandhi's November 1971 meetings with Nixon and Kissinger in the White House (pp. 244-257). The Indian side saw that Nixon remained committed to Yahya regime. Revealing their visceral hatred for Mrs. Gandhi as well as their sexism, both Nixon and Kissinger referred to Mrs. Gandhi as "a bitch" or as "the old witch" during their private conversations (pp. 235-236). Kissinger would justify the U.S. position to Nixon: "Well, the Indians are bastards anyway. They are starting a war there" (p. 235).

Contrary to the Nixon Administration, Senator Edward Kennedy emerged as a vocal advocate for the Bengali cause. Kennedy went to India and visited Bengali refugee camps in West Bengal and Tripura. At a National Press Club briefing, Kennedy described the conditions of Bengali refugees as "the most appalling tide of human misery in modern times" (pp. 231-232). For Kennedy it was clear that the Bengali refugees were fleeing from "truly genocidal acts of their government" (p. 234).

The Nixon Administration understood that war was inevitable after the failed Washington meeting with Mrs. Gandhi. The CIA reported that the prospects of the Chinese acting to support the Pakistan Army was nil (p. 239), but this did not prevent Kissinger from trying to prompt China to undertake military actions to threaten India. Bass reports that Kissinger passed on classified intelligence information to Hua Huang regarding Indian vulnerability in its northern border during his clandestine meeting with Chinese diplomats (p. 263). Kissinger was confident that the Chinese would take his bait and move its troops. Bass quotes Kissinger as reporting to Nixon: "They're going to move. No question, they're going to move" (p. 306). Bass writes that "[d]espite believing that a war — possibly a nuclear war — was possible between the Soviet Union and China, Kissinger insisted on China in a spiraling crisis." Bass's assessment of the documentary record is that the Nixon Administration "was ready to escalate" (p. 308). However, it soon became obvious as the Indo-Pakistan war progressed, the Chinese had no intention of starting a military adventure against India. It was the U.S.S.R. that informed the Nixon Administration that Mrs. Gandhi's objective was solely the liberation of Bangladesh, and that she had no nefarious intention against West Pakistan (p. 309).

Besides the political cover that the Nixon Administration provided to the Yahya regime, the Administration took several concrete measures to preserve the status quo in South Asia. Apart from encouraging China to mobilize troops to threaten India, the U.S. deployed naval vessels, including an aircraft carrier group consisting of the USS *Enterprise*, to the Bay of Bengal to project power and possibly stifle Indian military initiative. The Administration also approved a covert supply of U.S. military aircrafts and equipment via Jordan and Iran to Pakistan and instructed the Saudis and Turks to transfer more aircrafts to Pakistan. The State Department officials advised the Nixon Administration that transferring U.S.-supplied weapons from its allies to Pakistan "is prohibited on the basis of legal authority" (p. 294). The Administration went ahead knowing fully that this was illegal.

Nixon undertook diplomatic actions in the UN Security Council calling for a ceasefire in East Pakistan. The Nixon Administration secretly instructed George H. W. Bush to cooperate with China in calling for a ceasefire and withdrawal of Indian troops. However, the U.S.S.R. vetoed two resolutions supported by the U.S. and China. Meanwhile the White House used its full might to label India as the aggressor, ignoring that it was Pakistan that

initiated the war and that India's military intervention was meant to prevent the genocide in East Pakistan. Nixon and Kissinger loathed India so much that they did not hesitate to take actions that risked escalating the Indo-Pakistan war into a global conflict.

Bass renders a clear and comprehensive account of inner workings of the Indian government and the diplomatic maneuvers that led to the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation. Besides drawing on Indian archives, he relies on the papers of Haksar who, as the principal secretary to the Prime Minister, was Mrs. Gandhi's foremost adviser and confidante. Bass points out that, whereas Indian intelligence assessment was that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto would strike a deal and avoid a civil war to attain political power (p. 45), Haksar presciently warned that "2½ Divisions of Pak Army is poised to decimate East Pakistan" (p. 48). Hence, Haksar urged Indian authorities to be prepared for the worst and seek military supplies from the U.S.S.R. Likewise, the Indian strategist K. Subrahmanyam was skeptical that India could avoid a war with Pakistan. He argued that if India could defeat the Pakistan Army and liberate Bangladesh, the international community would accept this as a *fait accompli* (pp. 91-92). Sam Manekshaw advised Mrs. Gandhi to postpone any military intervention until winter, which would deter any Chinese military due to the snow in the Himalayan passes. D. P. Dhar suggested the Indian paramilitary forces arm, support, and train the Bengali resistance. It did not take long for the Indian authorities to realize that Indian military intervention was necessary to stop the genocide in East Pakistan, prevent the influx of refugees, and assist the Bengali resistance to defeat the Pakistan Army. Meanwhile, Haksar urged Mrs. Gandhi to withhold a formal recognition of the Bangladesh government-in-exile while doing "whatever lies within our power to sustain the struggle" (p. 101). Haksar also knew that a central tenet of India's foreign policy was non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign nations (p. 124), but he maintained that considering the genocidal massacres that were occurring, Indian diplomats would have to argue, both in diplomatic parlance and in the court of the world public opinion, that the events in East Pakistan were no longer Pakistan's internal affairs. The influx of millions of Bengalis fleeing Pakistan Army's massacres into India made the crisis an "an internal problem for India," stated Mrs. Gandhi (p. 126). For Mrs. Gandhi, creating the conditions for the return of the refugees back to their home was a strategic priority. (Bass states that White House staff estimated that the cost of hosting the refugees amounted to between \$700 million to \$1 billion annually). Moreover, Mrs. Gandhi was also concerned that the presence of Bengali refugees in West Bengal could be politically destabilizing.

Mrs. Gandhi was never particularly keen about signing a mutual defense treaty with the U.S.S.R. But the lukewarm support for India that was evident during her tour of the Western capitals convinced Mrs. Gandhi that only the U.S.S.R. could provide the strategic cover and military equipment for India's intervention. Moreover, Dhar championed the case for a treaty. Manekshaw was obsessed with the risk of Chinese intervention but believed the treaty with the U.S.S.R. necessary to deter any Chinese threats. Finally, Mrs. Gandhi relented and agreed to an Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty. The Soviet leadership, however, urged India till the very last minute to refrain from the military option. Bass reports that amid the Indo-Pakistan war, Mrs. Gandhi dispatched D. P. Dhar back to the U.S.S.R. for additional support. While the U.S.S.R. was still reluctant to recognize Bangladesh, the Soviet ambassador in New Delhi assured the Indians that, if necessary, the U.S.S.R. would undertake diversionary troop movements in its borders against the Chinese (p. 305). Internal Indian records reveal that Mrs. Gandhi resisted any temptation to capture a major city in West Pakistan (p. 322).

Bass tellingly sums up one aspect of Kissinger when he says that "[A]n apology from Henry Kissinger is too much to expect." Kissinger has not apologized for his long list of crimes, such as bombing of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, overthrowing Salvador Allende in Chile, fostering a war in the Middle East, and supporting the military junta in Argentina. Hersh (1983) has profiled these and other crimes. Bass ends his book by indicating what happened to Archer Blood after he sent his dissenting cables. The Nixon Administration transferred him out of Dhaka. Blood never got an opportunity to serve as a U.S. Ambassador, though he served as the deputy chief of mission in New Delhi during the Carter Administration. He retired from the Foreign Service in 1982. Upon retirement he taught at Allegheny College, a prestigious liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, as its diplomat-in-residence. He waited for the U.S. authorities to declassify his cables and other documents before he published his memoirs, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh* (Blood, 2002). He died shortly thereafter in 2004, aged 81.

Some Critical Comments

Bass covers pretty much the same ground as Srinath Raghavan's (2013) earlier book. However, Bass's book is more lucid. Whereas Raghavan is an academic, Bass is a journalist, and a former reporter for the *Economist*. Bass's book has the mark of an investigative reporter. He depicts the characters and events with drama and details.

For a more complete background to Bangladesh's national liberation and its aftermath, readers can consult several works by Bangladeshis and international scholars and policymakers, many of which are rich and substantive.

However, it must be pointed out that since the Chinese archives are closed to external researchers, both Bass (2014) and Ragahavan (2013) miss an important dimension in the international geopolitical context to Bangladesh's national liberation.

Bass's coverage of ongoing developments in Bangladesh/East Pakistan during 1971 is limited and wanting. This is undoubtedly due to his lack of access to archival and other Bangladeshi materials. Although Bass makes extensive use of Indian documents, he says little about the complex and multifaceted relationships of Bangladesh government-in-exile, the Bengali resistance, and the Indian authorities. Bass does give some descriptions of the brutal massacres and crimes committed by the Pakistani Army, drawing on Blood cables, and interviews of U.S. diplomats and news reports, but he could have provided more extensive quotes and descriptions based on easily available materials in English.

Even though the Pakistani Army specifically targeted the Bengali Hindu community, the Pakistani army also committed war crimes against Bengali Muslims. To be sure, the Pakistan Army fostered anti-Hindu bigotry and an anti-India rhetoric that lent itself to the disproportionate targeting of the Bengali Hindu community, but as rule, the Pakistani Army and its allies engaged in indiscriminate use of violence and repression on the Bengali population, irrespective of religion. Bass cites *New York Times* journalist Sydney Schanberg observing the ethnic hatred of the Pakistan junta for Bengalis (p. 81).

Bass's book includes photographs of the principal American and Indian statespersons and functionaries. However, it does not have any photographs of the war victims, refugees, squalid conditions of the refugee camps, men and women fleeing the brutality of the repression, Bengali *Mukti Bahini* (freedom fighters), or death and destruction that occurred during the war of national liberation. There are no photographs of the key Bangladeshi leaders, not even of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, let alone Tajuddin Ahmed, and other key players. Tajuddin Ahmed is referred to just five times in the book, including twice in the footnotes. However, Tajuddin Ahmed's vital role in leading Bangladesh government-in-exile has been widely recognized in recent years, thanks to Hasan's (2008 [1986]) participant-observer memoirs and Ahsan's (2018) biography of Tajuddin Ahmed. However, Bob Dylan (p. 212-213), or Arundhati Ghose (the Government of India's key liaison to the Bangladesh Government-in-exile) gets more coverage than does Tajuddin Ahmed in Bass's narrative.

Bass gives a full picture of Kissinger's prompting the Chinese authorities to make some military moves. However, he provides no explanation why China did not follow through on the Nixon Administration's prompting, or Pakistani leadership's plea for material assistance and military support against India. The Chinese archives are not accessible to foreign scholars, so document-based analysis is not possible. However, at the very least, Bass could have offered some plausible hypothesis about why the Chinese chose not to intervene.

Bass did not interview many Bangladeshis. When Bass did interview a few Bangladeshis, it is not clear why he chose the people that he did. For instance, he interviewed Mizanur Rahman Choudhury, who had served as the Prime Minister of Bangladesh under General Ershad's dictatorial regime. But he was hardly a figure of any political consequence, or intellectual significance. The paucity of archival materials from Bangladesh and primary documents available to overseas researchers are probably the main reasons for this relative lack of attention to Bangladeshi materials in Bass's book.

The subtitle of the Indian version of the book suggests that India's war in East Pakistan, or rather India's support for the national liberation of Bangladesh, was a secret. Actually, it was open knowledge that India was helping *Mukti Bahini* from the start. The *New York Times* reported so in print in April 1971. Of course, Indian officials denied providing military assistance to the *Mukti Bahini* and the Bangladesh government-in-exile. If it was a secret, then it was the worst kept secret of 1971.

Bass is correct in pointing out the Soviet Union's restraining and cautious role. But Bass underestimates the vital role of Indo-Soviet treaty in providing Mrs. Gandhi the room to maneuver. Mrs. Gandhi was shrewdly aware that India's military overreach could have adverse consequences. The claims of India's malign intentions of destroying West Pakistan may have been concoctions of Kissinger's imagination and Nixon's ramblings.

Bass does not speculate why the Bangladesh genocide has been largely forgotten and remains slighted in Western discourse. It is not because the scale of the massacres was small. The facts were well known. The events were contemporaneously, even widely, publicized in the Western press. Rather the repression was carried by a regime with which the United States — and the Western countries — were allied during the Cold War against the Soviet Union. It is easier and more convenient to condemn the crimes of one's enemies than one's own crimes. Hence, Western countries' crimes and the crimes of Western countries' allied dictators just do not merit the same type of coverage or attention given to the crimes of one's official enemies. Given Kissinger's and the Nixon Administration's blatant support for the Pakistani Army, it is convenient to consign the genocidal massacres to the footnotes of history, while

the crimes of the official enemies are highlighted in the headlines and titles of history. The likes of Samantha Power reflect this phenomenon. Bangladesh genocide gets only a brief mention in Power's (2013 [2002], p. 82) massive tome on genocide, where Kissinger's role is barely mentioned. Fittingly enough, Power is the 2016 recipient of the Henry A. Kissinger Prize.²

Many people remain under the illusion that Kissinger is an intellectually impressive figure. It is true that Kissinger can juxtapose polysyllabic phrases but he is without any moral qualms. He also is someone who brought the world to the brink of disaster. Hersh (1983) evinces Kissinger's pettiness, back-stabbing, paranoia, selfishness, deceitfulness, half-truths, deliberate misinformation, self-promotion, mania, dedication to undermining peace and stability, warmongering, and disregard for laws, constitution, and morality.

In the epilogue of his book, Bass devotes just two and half pages to Bangladesh, while devoting six pages each to India and Pakistan. The events of 1971 continue to have reverberations in Bangladesh politics, Bass shrewdly observes. The Awami League regime was unable to deal successfully with the post-war economy and faced a grave famine in 1974. Sheikh Mujib established a one-party state in 1975, which ended with the downfall of the regime. Sheikh Mujib and most of his family were murdered brutally in a coup. Today Sheikh Mujib's daughter is the Prime Minister. In spite of impressive progress in various social and economic areas, the quest for democracy and human rights in Bangladesh remains elusive.

Conclusion

Bass's careful analysis establishes some clear findings. First, Nixon and Kissinger were favorably predisposed toward Pakistan. This was not just because of Yahya's willingness to provide a secret channel to China. Second, Nixon and Kissinger were extremely prejudiced against Indians and Mrs. Gandhi. Third, though Archer Blood's cables provided White House detailed information about the scale and scope of the Pakistan Army's atrocities, Nixon and Kissinger chose to back the Yahya regime knowing fully that it was committing ghastly crimes. Fourth, the Nixon Administration provided military assistance even though it was deemed illegal. Fifth, though the Nixon Administration secretly encouraged the Chinese to exert its military pressure on India, the Chinese refused to move their troops. However, the Chinese leadership's strategic views and the reasons for its decisions have not been documented, but the U.S.S.R. and internal factors may have constrained the Chinese. Sixth, the Nixon Administration was willing to escalate the war by sending a U.S. aircraft carrier fleet into the Bay of Bengal, encouraging Chinese military maneuvers, transferring weapons to Pakistan through intermediaries, and threatening the U.S.S.R. Finally, the U.S.S.R. tried to restrain India, but its critical military and diplomatic support enabled Indians to undertake the military initiative necessary to liberate Bangladesh.

Despite its limitations, Bass's book is an important contribution, based on careful reading of primary documents now available in the public domain. It is a powerful and devastating indictment of the Nixon Administration's malfeasance and crimes.

Bass has done a remarkable job in exposing Nixon's and Kissinger's disgraceful roles in the perpetration of the Pakistani military regime's massacres in Bangladesh. The documentary evidence leaves no doubt that Nixon and Kissinger abetted the crimes committed by the Yahya regime and acted in violation of U.S. laws. Yet Nixon and Kissinger are still treated as respected statesmen. Perhaps the book can puncture their fabricated prestige. More importantly Bass's book deserves high praise as valuable scholarly effort to inform Western readers about the "forgotten" genocide that had occurred in Bangladesh during 1971.

Endnotes

¹ It is worth recalling the names of these U.S. diplomats who were bravely willing to stand up for human rights, though it would earn the wrath of Henry Kissinger and probably affect their career prospects in the State Department. The following diplomats signed Blood's famous telegram: Brian Bell, Robert L. Bourquein, W. Scott Butcher, Eric Griffel, Zachary M. Hahn, Jake Harshbarger, Robert A. Jackson, Lawrence Koegel, Joseph A. Malpeli, Willard D. McCleary, Desaix Myers, John L. Nesvig, William Grant Parr, Robert Carce, Richard L. Simpson, Robert C. Simpson, Richard E. Suttor, Wayne E. Swengurg, Richard L. Wilson, and Shannon W. Wilson. In a separate confidential letter addressed to the Secretary of the State, eight State Department specialists on South Asia endorsed the views expressed in the cable. These officials were: Craig Baxter, A. Peter Burliegh, Townsend S. Swayze, Joel M. Woldman, Anthony C. E. Quainton, Howard B. Schaffer, Douglas M. Cochran, John Eaves, and Robert A. Flaten (Gandhi 2002, Document # 8).

² See: <https://www.americanacademy.de/events/henry-a-kissinger-prize/>

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Islam, Neoliberalism, and Intolerance in Bangladesh: An Analysis

Matt Mustahid Husain
The University of British Columbia, Canada
matt.husain@ubc.ca

Abstract

This article problematizes the relationship between neoliberal economic policies and the resurgence of a certain kind of Islamic religiosity in contemporary Bangladesh. It reflects the findings of an empirical study based on a multi-method approach to explore the macro-cultural impacts of the relationship between neoliberalism and Islam in the country and the embedded, nuanced, and complex set of economic and political relationships that appear to fuel social inequality, engender inequitable distribution and growth, and facilitate an ongoing marginalization of minority groups, in which “othering” among the equals emerge as a cemented outcome. Empirical findings suggest that premature or unplanned applications of neoliberal economic policies based on client-patron relations are the main precursors behind these outcomes and they continue to adversely affect Bangla language, Bengali cultures, the country’s advanced education sector, and the overall ability for Bangladeshis to think critically and form and produce social relations. Evidence further indicates Bengali cultures appear to become increasingly embedded in a number of rituals in the name of Islamic principles and philosophy. The article refers to this phenomenon as the “great” transformation of contemporary Bangladesh.

Keywords: Islam, neoliberalism, Bengali cultures, state governance, client-patron relations

Introduction

This article traces the emergence and workings of the co-articulation of neoliberalism and Islamism in the domain of state governance in Bangladesh. It aims to explore how the interlinked rise of neoliberalism and religion/Islam produces the conditions for particular outcomes such as “othering” as well as violence against local secular writers and bloggers, intellectuals and critics of “fundamentalism”, gay rights activists, as well as members of ethno-religious minorities such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians. Considering the lack of scholarly literature on this topic in contemporary Bangladesh, the article offers analysis on the unique coupling of these two forces of neoliberalism and Islamism in the country and the embedded, nuanced, and complex set of economic and political relationships that have fueled socio-economic inequality, as well as an ongoing marginalization of minority groups.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Bangladesh started implementing policies of privatization and deregulation resulting in the broadening of credit and the precarization of domestic labor. Incentives included tax cuts for businesses, some of which were Indian corporations operating in Bangladesh, e.g., Airtel BD, as well as domestic family-owned corporate entities, such as *Beximco*, *Bashundhara*, or *Pran*. An addition to this category is the former chief of the army’s family venture, *IFAD Group* that, since 2009, has rapidly expanded its presence across business sectors (IFAD Group, 2021). In most cases, these neoliberal¹ policies presumed efficiency of the market and went ahead with reducing state interventions in the economy that favored the more subordinate classes (Saad-Filho, 2003). Interpreting these developments through a lens that is critical of neoliberalism, the article seeks to examine the relationship between these policies and the resurgence of a certain kind of Islamic religiosity that engender inequitable growth, and in which some communities are treated as “others” in the socio-economic system and narrative.

Until two decades ago, it was believed that religion was on the decline and held insignificant space in global politics (Kissinger, 1994). However, the influence of religion has risen to play a significant part in today’s global world and is at the pinnacle of international political agendas. Building upon this idea through a critical engagement with interdisciplinary, scholarly literature and fieldwork observations on Bangladesh’s social and economic

dimensions, this article braids Islam and neoliberalism to open up ways of seeing differently. In particular, it examines how global politico-economic structural factors and processes are in conversation with state governments and how that can lead to disparities, fuel differences, and stimulate certain forms of extremism that dangerously reinforce a belief of “clashing” religious and secular worldviews.

The pursuit of the article inclines towards studying other largely Muslim countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia. The findings spearhead the exploration of specific discoveries in Bangladesh, namely, how Islam in the country has aligned with neoliberal development, and why Islamic forces appear to attack foreigners, and non-Muslims in the nation. The article seeks answers by drawing theoretical influence from Casanova’s (1994) view that market based economic systems de-privatises religion. Gauthier (2019) argues that presently we are in a neoliberal situation in which otherwise inassimilable economics and religion collectively construct emerging phenomena. In addition, Polanyi’s (2008 [1944]) ideas of embeddedness and double movement between society, in which religion is a vital component, is used to illustrate the contested strand between Islam and Bengali² (Bangladeshi) cultures. I theorize that social relations and production appear to become embedded in Islam instead of Islam being embedded in Bengali cultures (Polanyi, 2008 [1944]). The author refers to this phenomenon as the “great” transformation of contemporary Bangladesh.

The first section of the article lays out the conceptual framework for understanding neoliberalism’s symbiotic coupling with Islamism in Bangladesh as well as briefly discusses the article’s multi-method approach in exploring the macro-cultural aspects of the relationship between policy management and a certain kind of resurged religiosity. The second section offers a comparative narrative on outcomes in regards to the roll out of Islam-neoliberalism in contemporary Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia. The last section weaves the connection between neoliberalism and Islam in Bangladesh and offers critical analysis.

Theoretical Influence

In his basic critique of neoliberalism, Barber (1996) argues that neoliberal economic theory is the force behind globalization. The author’s argument, consequently substantiated by Chang (2003) and Reinert (2007), is that globalization demands, if not rushes, economic and ecological forces to integrate; this can mesmerise developing countries because they are not necessarily equipped with market, resource, information technology, and ecological imperatives to exchange and trade as efficiently as the developed countries. These scholars point out that globalization imposes a culture of its own on a population, thus making local cultures in developing countries feel vulnerable, threatened, and reactive. In particular, Barber (1996) adds that the crises that arise from these are more than economic, and the confrontations often take on a sacred quality for locals. Barber’s critique is significant because his concerns are premised upon a logic that reveals that a failure of proper integration of the imperatives can create unregulated market forces that consequently give rise to growing parochial forces in the form of religion, ethnicity, and region, among others. So, it is no surprise that in his conclusion he claims that Islam resists neoliberalism.

Interestingly, scholars including Brown (2006), Dikecx (2006), Connolly (2005), and Gopalakrishnan (2009) explain that it is not only Islam, but other political rationalities, such as republicanism, neo-conservatism and evangelical Christianity in the western world or Hindutva in India, that can also be found in combination with neoliberalism as a “market-political rationality”. Karaman (2013) shared a significant body of literature that build upon the conjoining of Islamic values and modalities of neoliberal development in places such as Cairo (Atia, 2012) and Beirut (Harb and Deeb, 2011). In a parallel vein, this article seeks to explain how Islamism and neoliberalism as two distinct political rationalities came to resonate together in the organizational body of the state in Bangladesh.

Casanova (1994), in his explanation of the function of the two distinct political rationalities, points out that market based economic systems de-privatize religion. As he puts it: “de-privatisation [...] is the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, disruptive legitimisation, and redrawing of the boundaries.” (Casanova, 1994, pp. 65-66). Building upon these arguments, Turner (2011) and Gauthier (2019) interpret changes in religious interpretations and perspectives in relation to the outcomes of an economics-led globalization. Turner (2011, p. 278) explains that such remodeling of religion is deepened by consumerism because it converts religion into lifestyles and voluntary union, rather than belief and belonging-oriented methods. In a similar tone, Gauthier (2019) explains that neoliberalism affects religion through the political and societal stages, such as institutional and organizational levels. However, consumerism affects religion via material conditions, at the level of ethos and cultural

ideologies and practices. Alternatively, neoliberalism “impacts and shapes religion from above”, while the consumerism acts from “below” (Gauthier, 2019, p. 202). In his words,

Global-Market regime de-nationalises, transnationalises, de-territorialises, marketizes, sometimes re-ethnicises religion within a cultural environment framed by consumerism and market ideologies. The marketisation of religion signifies its transformation along (or against) the structures and dynamics of consumer and financial capitalism, in which the expression of choice is constitutive of subjectivities, identities, agencies, communities, and so forth. ... Marketisation transforms religion into lifestyles, practices, and voluntary adhesion rather than belief and belonging-oriented forms. Marketisation also profoundly modifies religious organisations and their rapport to tradition, whose former modes can be dismissed, challenged, and/or renewed. (Gauthier, 2019, p. 201)

Gauthier’s critiques highlight that neoliberalism encourages all organizations, big or small, to perceive themselves on an entrepreneurial model, and to perceive their actions as that of actors within market segments, with an obligation to brand and market themselves and their missions in order to “survive” in a competitive environment (Gauthier, 2019, p. 202). He points out that consumerism commodifies in the opposite direction, in which consumer goods offers meanings, authenticities, and identities competing for choice. As he puts it, “consumerism profoundly changes how social actors engage in religion, and how ‘religious resources’ become mobilized for producing and expressing identities and constructing meaningful lifestyles” (p. 202). Building upon this, Gauthier (2019) contradicts Barber’s (1996) views that claimed Islam resists neoliberalism. Gauthier argues that presently we are in a neoliberal situation in which otherwise inassimilable economics and religion, in particular Islam, collectively construct emerging phenomena. Such constructions render a non-commodity as a commodity and part of a lifestyle, such as knowledge, water, or life itself. Finally, Gauthier concludes that neoliberalism and consumerism are theoretically distinct processes but at the same time both are paradigmatically coextensive with complementary sets of processes.

The last pillar of this article’s theoretical framework encompasses Polanyi’s (2008 [1944]) embeddedness and double movement between society and market that helps to explain how Islam is used as a vehicle for economic development in Bangladesh. Polanyi (2008 [1944]) argues that the entire tradition of modern economic thought is based on the concept of the economy as an inter-locking system of markets that automatically adjusts supply and demand through the price mechanism. He points out that before economists invented the free market system, the human economy, since the dawn of time, was always embedded in society. Polanyi argues that the system of self-regulating markets has subordinated society to the “logic” of the market. As a result, the self-defined “developed” [neoliberal] world now runs society “as an adjunct to the market, where instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system” (Polanyi, 2008 [1944], p. 24). This concept will help to ask if the system of self-regulating markets has subordinated Bangladeshi society to the “logic” of the market, in which identity formation and social relations are represented through consumerism, lifestyles, and voluntary unions under the overarching symbols of Islam, such as fashionable hijab, stylist beard, and brand apparels (e.g., classic kurta for men and shalwar kameez for females), rather than Islamic philosophy and inclusive-oriented wisdom.

Integrating these three theoretical frameworks: Casanova (1994), Gauthier (2019), and Polanyi (2008 [1944]) in the context of Bangladesh poses significant challenges. First, as briefly mentioned earlier, scholarly literature that connects neoliberalism and consumerism in studying Islam in Bangladesh offers considerable limitations. Second, to explore the intersections of neoliberal-Islam in Bangladesh requires a broader focus because traditionally Bengal as a region is known for its multiple *jati-shotta* or nationalities that existed in the land before the arrival of Islam as well as co-existed and evolved with Islam for the last eight hundred years (Roy, 2014 [1983]; Eaton, 1993). Acknowledging these limitations, my theoretical framework attempts to provide a critical lens to understand two seemingly unrelated contemporary phenomena in Bangladesh: absorption of wealth on the one hand, and an increase of marginalization on the other, which leads to growing socio-economic inequality and finally, drastic outcomes such as attacking the so called “others” in the nation.

Methodology

This study takes a multi-method approach utilizing interdisciplinary, historical and literature review, general communication, in particular an observational study, and qualitative data analysis. These were employed because each allows for a particular understanding of the phenomenon, but none alone allows for the whole picture to be explored.

The author observed this emerging phenomenon involving Islam and neoliberalism in Bangladesh during doctoral fieldworks in 2014 and 2016. This was a supplementary finding and not covered as the main research objective for the doctoral fieldwork. Therefore, the author could not engage with participants on the observed finding and conduct formal, recorded interviews.

The author observed urban, rural, and intersectional areas in Bangladesh. In urban areas, the author engaged with the residents in their everyday settings, including streets, retail shops, cafes, and inside their homes, and visited industrial and *bazaar* (market) areas in the city and beyond. The author was also able to engage, at times, with members of various social groups including homemakers, bureaucrats, students, educators, entrepreneurs, and media personnel. These male and female informants were based in rural and urban regions and observation data were collected through informal, general conversations, with notes taken. The author contextualized these observations according to the conceptualized framework shared above. In addition, the author collected qualitative and quantitative data from printed and electronic secondary and media sources, documents or materials produced by government, academics, businesses, NGOs, and independent film or documentary maker, as well as archival materials stored both at Dhaka University Library and the Public Library. These “gray” literatures or sources were not stored and catalogued in major sources such as prominent databases or indexes. However, they have collectively contributed to the analysis shared below.

Islam-neoliberalism in Contemporary Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia

According to Islamic scholar Tahir Zaman, most cases of Islamic responses to “the challenge of neoliberalism to date has been characterized by simply inserting Islam within a capitalist framework through a selective reading of Islamic jurisprudence” (Zaman, 2014, online). He came across examples, in particular, from Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia where the interests of conservative Islam appear to be married to powerful business interests. The author also shared his observations on the energy-propelled, autocratic Gulf states, where “an increasingly consumer-driven culture casts a pernicious shadow over social relations wherein a hierarchy of humanity fixes migrant labour drawn from populous nations in south and east Asia firmly on the lowest rung” (Zaman, 2014, online). The author argues that political articulations of Islam acknowledge the significance of class struggle in the lives of ordinary Muslims. These articulations make us aware of the potential harmful implications of unbridled competition and caution against the impulse of modernity with its unremitting drive towards acquisition and accumulation. However, since the late-19th century, and for the best part of the 20th century, capitalist forces have tirelessly engaged a proliferation of Muslim intellectuals, political activists, and movements with the burgeoning ideas of “socialism” (Zaman, 2014). Consequently, Islam’s rather reactionary responses to capitalism largely subsided.

Beginning with Turkey, the section below shares the implantation of neoliberalism in other Muslim countries including Egypt and Indonesia to better understand the relationship between domestic processes of socio-economic change and political conflict in tandem with global institutional structures and processes of capital accumulation. These macro findings are distinctive and significant but limited with respect to information on the advent of consumerism in these economies.

Gönenç (2019) explains since the neoliberal transition in the 1980s, Islamic symbols and references in Turkey became increasingly articulated in the state’s ideology premised upon the fusion of domestic, Western, and Gulf capital interests. Together, they contributed to the rise of the Islamist bourgeoisie in the country (Doğan, 2013, p. 291). “The Islamist bourgeoisie refers to certain fractions of bourgeoisie that use Islam as a system of norms and values to regulate relations between labour and capital, and intra-capital relations (Gönenç, 2019, p. 5; Hoşgör, 2015). Gönenç further explains that both the Islamist and Westernized bourgeoisie, which developed and maintained organic and dependent relations with Western capital and “paid lip service” to Turkey’s constitutional principle of secularism (Öztürk, 2011, p. 109), supported the Islamization of state ideology. The product was an uneven spatial reproduction in urban and rural areas, and within the urban sections. In urban areas, workers faced significant and suppressing deindustrialization, reduced real incomes, and curtailment of labor rights, despite some organized resistance against

the neoliberal restructuring (Atılgan, 2012, p. 351). In rural areas, while smallholders were turned into agricultural workers in their own lands through contract farming, large masses of peasants lost work as a result of privatization of agricultural state-owned enterprises, removal of agricultural cooperatives, and seizing of lands. The majority of peasants and smallholders were forced to migrate to urban areas and became a precarious labor force, often subcontracted by especially the Islamist bourgeoisie (Gürel, 2015, p. 337).

Such migration further resulted in an increase in unproductive labor in urban areas, which maintained relations with rural areas in the form of seasonal agricultural workers (Boratav, 2014, p. 72). This unproductive and/or underemployed labor was often mobilized with Islamism due to the lack of class-consciousness and organization (White, 2002, p. 233). Gönenç (2019) argues that the neoliberal restructuring of class relations was detrimental to subordinate classes in urban and rural areas, thus requiring the strengthening of political Islam to veil class antagonisms and suppress the subordinate classes. Therefore, the subordinate classes in rural and urban areas remained increasingly vulnerable to the influence of political Islam.

Compared to Bangladesh, Turkey is a unique transcontinental country that is home to a number of different cultures and ethnicities. The former is not composed of mainly one homogenic group either, considering the variety of indigenous languages spoken all over Bangladesh, along with a number of dialects of the Bangla language. One or two specific cultural groups in Bangladesh speak Urdu as well. Many of the findings from Turkey are applicable in the context of Bangladesh, such as neoliberalism giving rise to Islamist bourgeoisie, further deepening the urban-rural disparity, creating more underemployment, and making subordinate classes in rural and urban areas increasingly vulnerable to the influence of political Islam. At the same time, the country's privileged social, political groups, along with the Islamist bourgeoisie, veil class antagonisms while suppressing subordinate classes by overplaying the influence of founding fathers and political Islam.

Findings from Egypt cast a similar picture. Joya (2020) offers a critique of market-oriented economic reform policies in Egypt implemented at the order of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and a rising faction of neoliberal-oriented capitalists within Egypt's former ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). Although her critiques point out the significant role that international financial institutions (IFIs) and domestic actors played in shaping the conditions that led to the Egyptian popular uprising of 2011 and continue to influence political and social conflicts, Joya argues that Egypt's chronic socioeconomic problems need to be situated in a broader context of the country's transition toward authoritarian modes of neoliberalism in the wake of the foreign exchange debt crises of the late 1980s or early 1990s and the water-shed "structural adjustment" agreement with the IFIs. She discusses the adverse social impacts of neoliberalism, detailing the particular spaces within which citizens have been pushing back against neoliberal transformation. Joya argues that authoritarianism has been part of how neoliberalism unfolded in Egypt, which, with the financial support from international backers, reoriented the state to use its coercive power to appropriate values and public funds by forcing liberalization, privatization, and marketization. The logic driving neoliberal policies has been the premise that the growth generated from the private sector and free market-based development would achieve strong economic growth and sustainable reduction in poverty. Joya's research, however, reveals the opposite, which is a typical impact of trickle-down economics.

For example, by the end of the 1980s, economic crises forced the state to press forward with far-reaching structural reforms recommended by the IMF and the World Bank. These reforms have primarily supported capital accumulation by the propertied and trading classes at the expense of peasants, workers, and the urban poor, pushing many people into the informal economy. Growing poverty and inequality in Egypt occurred simultaneously with higher economic growth, particularly through the 2000s, which Joya argues is the normal functioning of neoliberal development strategies that result in unequal distribution of wealth. Here Joya utilizes Harvey's (2003) theory of "accumulation by dispossession," which is an extension of Marx's writing on primitive accumulation, to provide insights into how law and policy reforms, as well as changes in land tenure and trade liberalization, produced violent dispossession processes that were "necessary" to establish the conditions for capital accumulation in Egypt (Joya, 2020, p. 68).

Moreover, the author points out that the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to institutionalize an Islamic economy as an alleged third way between Western capitalism and socialism or communism. The idea of an Islamic economy signified an attempt to subordinate capitalism to a traditional body of Islamic ethics (and *shari'a*) including the rejection of the "possessive individualism" that forms the basis of Western capitalism. These include prohibition on the payment or taking of interest on loans and mainstreaming *Zakat*, a voluntary tax to finance private, religiously administered charitable programs in opposition to the welfare state, and Islamic inheritance laws that prevent the

concentration of property (Joya, 2020). However, El-Sherif (2014) argues that the Brotherhood's inclusion in Egypt's political system did not lead to its democratization. The Brotherhood also failed to either appease or successfully confront institutional power bases and the secular elites that were aligned to typical neoliberal mechanism.

Joya (2020) also examines the evolution of the Egyptian military into a dominant faction of the capitalist class with an autonomous institutional power within the context of Egypt's post-colonial capitalist development. She notes that through active engagement in the economy, the military increased its economic role in exchange for staying out of politics, instead accumulating power and wealth through strong ties to investors and major economic powers such as the United States and Saudi Arabia (Joya, 2020, p. 119). Overall, these examples evoke a broad-based discussion regarding the significant role the Egyptian state and IFIs have played in the process of facilitating capital accumulation by polarizing wealth distribution and access to economic resources. This finding is quite relevant to the discussion of Bangladesh.

Finally, in contemporary Indonesia, the most notable assemblage of Islamic and capitalist ethics is termed a "spiritual economy" (Rudnyckyj, 2009, p. 106). This concept is in contrast to the "occult economies" that treat religious resurgence as a refuge from the disruptions wrought by a global "culture of neoliberalism" (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2000). As Indonesia faced a new political economic landscape increasingly characterized by transnational competition, the state employed a top-down approach reasoning that by cultivating the religious virtues of the workforce, it could increase productivity, reduce corruption, gear towards international benchmarks, and in the process train employees for privatization of state-owned enterprises. The training sessions for this "spiritual economy" drew on a stirring and often heavy mix of Qur'anic recitations, business leadership training, Islamic history, and popular psychology. This training program, known as "Emotional and Spiritual Quotient [ESQ] Training," invokes both Islamic tradition and Euro-American management knowledge in the interest of creating a more disciplined employee work ethic (Rudnyckyj, 2009, p. 104). According to Rudnyckyj (2009), the concept of spiritual economics elucidates how two domains, religion and capitalism, are brought together to create a new ethical orientation toward oneself, one's work, and one's collectivity. "Islam is not merely a vehicle in this process, as spiritual reform is taken to both enable Islamic virtue and effect dispositions that enhance corporate productivity and competitiveness in an increasingly global market" (p. 107).

Evidence from literature review and general communication indicates that the government of Bangladesh is yet to employ a top-down "spiritual economy" approach to train its government personnel and national labor pool based on the guidelines of Islamic ethics and western professional accountability. However, a version of the ESQ initiatives used to be practiced by the personnel at the banking, medical, academic, and NGO organizations owned or run by the Islamic bourgeois. However, arguably, the state made a more than moderate attempt to break up the country's Islamic bourgeois, who was their political opponent, and this may have curtailed the rhythm of the course of ESQ expansion in Bangladesh.

A comparison of the findings from Turkey, Egypt, and Indonesia indicates that in Bangladesh, neoliberal outcomes generated an absorption of wealth on the one hand, and an increase of marginalization on the other, leading to growing socio-economic inequality. The process presumed efficiency of the market and inefficiency of the state and went ahead with outlawing state interventions in the economy in favor of the subordinate classes (Saad-Filho, 2003, p. 7). Interestingly, except for a few unrelated events of terrorism in Indonesia, the other two Muslim countries did not necessarily encounter "othering" of religious minorities as an outcome of the neoliberal process that we observe in Bangladesh. This is where the contextually specific dynamics of Bangladeshi nationalism comes into play and is explained in the following section, which begins with a discussion of the emergent consumerism in the country that was induced by economic globalization.

Bangladesh: Analysis and Discussion

Before digging deeper into unweaving the relation between Islam and neoliberalism in Bangladesh, this section highlights few quintessential characteristics of Bengali culture. According to Lewis (2011), the complex blend of religion, culture, and language is the catalyst for the country's unique socio-cultural and political formations. However, since the arrival of wide-spread neoliberalism and the subsequent consumerism in the country, Bengali cultures and Bangla language have been influenced far more rapidly by varieties of external forces than they were earlier, for example, during the "Pakistan period." As a result, social and economic relations have started to rely heavily on religion, particularly Islam, as an attempt to produce a new kind of "authenticity" in the country's cultures and

language. Scholarly research on this theme also reveals tensions around Islamophobia triggered by the so called “War on Terror” and other forms of stigmatization of Islam may contribute to the overall trend towards Islamic orthodoxy in Bangladesh (Peek, 2005; Schmidt, 2004; Siddiqi, 2019). A comment from a male informant, government official in this context stands out:

When I grew up in Dhaka in a conservative Muslim family during late 1950s and early 1960s, hardly any women I knew like my mother, aunts, neighbours and classmates used Hijabs and Niqabs. But they [women in Hijab and/or Niqab] are in abundance in Dhaka. ...Bangladeshis want to be Islamic so that their culture and identity do not disappear. (personal communication, August 11, 2016)

Arguably, this reminds us of Hegel’s (1979 [1807]) definition of nationalism, which is premised upon the need for people to feel proud of where they come from, to identify with something beyond merely their own achievements and to anchor their identities beyond the ego. Although group identities in Bengal have long been fluid and influenced by various structural forces — political, religious, and economic, the formation of the Bangladesh nation as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983) has been fraught with ideological ambiguities in determining the role of secularism and religion in the democratically elected government. While it would be naïve to think that social divisions did not exist in the past, what is apparent is that communal consciousness in Bengal was heightened by certain “investigative modalities” that became central to political legitimization and governance in colonial South Asia. These modalities include the formalization of an “official” historiography, land surveys, census enumerations, surveillance, and curatorial practices (Cohn, 1996). Through these “cultural technologies of rule” (Cohn, 1996), communal identities and ethno-religious differences were reified by the imposition of western educated, Macaulay-oriented knowledge production, conjoined with new modes of governmentality. In using the term “communalism,” the author refers to a particular form of identity construction in the Indian subcontinent that emerges from a nexus of colonial discourse and state practice that involves the “othering” of religious communities (Rahim, 2007). In Rahim’s words, “Dividing communities along religious lines not only produces a binary political and social division, but also diffuses intra-community contradictions, creating an aura of homogeneity within the rank and file of the community in question” (p. 556).

Building upon that, initially, the Awami League (AL) government in 1972, under Sheikh Mujib’s leadership, enacted a constitution that recognized equal status to all religions, and launched a moderate socialist program to encourage opportunities for social mobility and development that was not available under the Pakistani regime. In support of the constitutional ban on communalism and religious discrimination, the AL government in 1972 declared Bangladesh a People’s Republic, picked a national anthem composed by Tagore, and designed a flag completely devoid of Islamic symbolism (Kabir, 2007). Geopolitically, the early 1970s was the waning years of the Cold War and the beginning of Western led neoliberalism.

The country [Bangladesh] found itself entrapped in Cold War proxy politics. The United States, which in a bid to renew relations with China had actively supported West Pakistan during the 1971 war, initially refused to recognize Bangladesh’s sovereignty; it was also profoundly suspicious of what it saw as the nation’s overtly socialist bent. (Siddiqi, 2018, p. 244)

Thus, it was not a surprise when Mujib’s period of relative optimism in the wake of independence, followed by famine in 1974 caused by various natural and human-made conditions (Sen, 1982), led to a series of CIA supported military coups in 1975 (Chossudovsky, 2003, p. 161). Siddiqi (2018, p. 254) marks that period as one when Bengali cultural majoritarianism started to attain a distinctly “Islamic” bent.

Siddiqi’s remarks foreground the military coup that brought General Zia-ur Rahman and his Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) to materialize a twin desire to de-nationalize the economy through private capital incentives and to establish a pro-Islamic government. In 1977, General Zia amended the national constitution by replacing a commitment to secularism with *Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim*—the supreme confidence and faith in almighty Allah as the base of all actions. General Zia also added a new clause to Article 25(2) stating the state shall endeavor to

consolidate, preserve, and strengthen fraternal relations among Muslim countries based on Islamic solidarity (Siddiqi, 2018). Secondly, within the period of 1977 and 1979, General Zia withdrew the ban on religion-based political parties with several executive orders. This gave Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (BJI) recognition as a political party, and it consequently became the country's biggest religion-based political party (Khan, 2019). These constitutional amendments fostered transnational ties with other Islamic countries, especially Saudi Arabia. It was not until the assassination of Mujib and Zia's accession to power that the Royal Saudi government formally recognized the new state of Bangladesh. This change of regime "expedited the flow of aid from the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia as the most important source" (Kabeer, 2011, p. 149).

Following his assassination in 1981, Zia was succeeded by General Ershad and his new Jatiya (National) Party, a conservative political party that through the Eighth Amendment in Article 2A declared Islam the state religion of Bangladesh. Ershad also established a *Zakat* fund under the President and made the call to prayer mandatory before all television broadcasts (Kabeer, 2011, p. 147). Backed by a powerful military, including the dispersion of military representatives in various central and local government positions, Islam was given a central place in state ideology as secular and liberal opposition were marginalized (Sobhan, 1984, p. 202). During Ershad's rule, development policies, as influenced by Western neoliberal prescriptions, drifted further to the private sector and export-oriented growth, and economic dependency on OPEC countries such as Saudi Arabia increased (Chossudovsky, 2003, p. 161).

Building upon these macro-level changes, the implementation of neoliberal policies in Bangladesh initiated a surge of commodification of public or commonly held goods including education, water, and healthcare, and ushered in a consumerist individualism (Gauthier, 2019; Polanyi, 2008 [1944]). For example, various aspects of Bengali cultures, such as *Pohela Boishakh* (Bengali New Year) appear to be celebrated with embellished commodification. In addition, *Eid-ul-Azha* (Qurbani Eid) and regular lifestyle have been affected by this phenomenon. In particular, among the people of urban Dhaka, eating out and outsourcing food related responsibilities to catering services have become a common trend. In the words of a seasoned female informant,

When I was a child we rarely ate at restaurants, we had our clothes tailored and had houses that were very small in comparison to now and they held few clothes, the changes that happened in the 80s, 90s, etc. altered the quality of life - people went abroad more, donors were widespread, financialization spread, people began to migrate to cities. (personal communication, July 13, 2021)

Moreover, the author came across a number of crowded "hijab boutique" stores in Dhaka that sold hijab and related accessories and attire. This was a striking discovery compared to a decade-old Dhaka the author knew of. In addition, online outlets for "Islamic clothing" appeared on Bangladesh's social media platforms. At the same time, in Dhaka's social scenes, increasing number of females show up with full-sleeve outfits and headgears. This was also an interesting finding because during my lived experience as a child and teenager in the 1980s and until mid-1990s in Bangladesh, I did not come across such consciousness regarding an Islamic identity in social gatherings. According to a university educated, practicing Muslim female informant, "*ghomta* (hijab) in Bangladesh these days represents more like a fashion or a trend than representing an individual's moralistic views and religious expression". In another social event, I heard an elderly female relative listening to a conversation that included "diamond embedded hijabs." These examples of de-privatized faith remind me of Gauthier's (2019, p. 201) arguments that neoliberalism facilitates producing and expressing identities and constructing meaningful lifestyles through marketization of religion. It converts religion into lifestyles and voluntary union rather than belief and belonging. These practices can profoundly modify institutions and their rapport with tradition, whose former modes can be dismissed, challenged, and/or renewed.

Gauthier (2019), in his explanation of such emerging phenomena, highlights the interconnection between diaspora communities with the effects of emigration, multiple communication technologies, and the global financial system. He argues that in contemporary times, the diaspora remains strongly tied to their communities and homelands. Moreover, it functions as an influential agent for economic development and "in the on-going religious revival" (p. 210). For example, many members of Bangladeshi diaspora around the world also function as influential agents for "the on-going religious revival" through, for example, mainstreaming halal meat consumption and online Quran classes for children, while making contributions for the economic development of the country (Gauthier, 2019; Turner, 2011). An informant mentioned the "contribution" of migrant workers to this emerged phenomenon. It is important to

acknowledge that remittances earned by Bangladeshi migrant workers contribute significantly to the economic development of the country, and they remain underappreciated and marginalized both at home and abroad. However, the wife and elder daughter of a migrant worker, who was present at the time of my informal chat with his family, mentioned that “*Uni* [the husband] after returning home from *Arob desh* [the Middle East] encouraged me and my daughter to wear *niqab*.”

Kibria (2008) explores the identity transformations of Muslim Bangladeshi labor migrants to the Gulf states of the Middle East. She explains that for the Bangladeshis, developments of national consciousness, in particular of a critical nationalism, remain a key feature of the migration episode. The migrants affirm the *ummah* – the idea that the bonds of Muslims, based on their adherence to the core tenets of Islam, are far more important than differences of culture and nationality. In addition, Gardner and Osella (2004) highlight that the intertwining of religious practice and consumption in this process: “as migrants and their families reinvent themselves as high-status members of their community, how they worship and how they spend their earnings – activities which are often closely linked – tend to take centre stage” (p. xxxiii). Kibria (2008) further elaborates that “in an assertion of modernity, the returned South Asian migrant rejects the local folk Islam of his/her home community in favor of a global and ‘pure’ Islam” (p. 521).

Whether through diaspora or local consumerism, a certain emerging phenomenon brought in a more conservative strain of Islam that is being enforced at the socio-political and individual level through consumerism in the name of preserving the “authenticity” of Bangladeshi Muslim culture. For example, Griffiths and Hasan (2015) in their study of rural *madrassahs* in Bangladesh found that these institutions frown upon women’s empowerment and openly preach men to enforce wearing *hijabs* and *niqabs* on women. During my general communication with farmers, owners of small business, and laborers, I observed that Bangladesh’s urban and rural bourgeois establish new mosques and *madrassahs* in their rural constituencies and encourage others to donate to these establishments. It is argued that this Islamism veils the struggle of unproductive and/or underemployed labor and their lack of class-consciousness and organization (White, 2002).

During the trips to rural Shirajganj and Munshiganj districts, as well as during a trip to Cox’s Bazar, I came across loudspeakers in bus stations, rickshaw stands, and market areas that continuously played *waz mahfil* (Islamic sermons), preaching the benefits of following the five pillars of Islam, and praising Prophet Mohammed for his conduct in educating the masses. In the first two locations, which were purely rural settings, the author noticed such sermons often involved giving vulgar, misogynistic speeches regarding females, and derogatory comments about “others,” rather than discussing the five pillars of Islam. For example, in Bangladesh’s social media, a fraction of speakers in *waz mahfils* events claim self-coined rhetoric, such as “women are born to pleasure males” and “Allah wouldn’t punish a Muslim when he seizes the property of a non-Muslim” (Bangladesh’s Rajniti, 2021, online). Stille (2020), based on fieldwork and interviews, analyzes an archive of several dozens of sermons, and argues how popular preaching shapes roles and rules of what can be said, imagined, and felt. He adds that since the 19th century, *waz mahfils* have become so popular that today it is possible to participate in them on a daily basis in many regions of the country. Despite their significance in the rise of popular politics, the sermons are often disregarded as Islamist propaganda, and very little research is dedicated to them.

Although reasonable Bangladeshi Muslims reject any propaganda-filled *waz*, the role of the state in tracking down the ill-educated preachers, who apparently have large number of followers, is unclear. These were surprising discoveries for me because growing up as a male in the late-80s and early-90s, I witnessed *waz mahfils* as indoor events for special Islamic occasions, in particular, before Friday’s *Jummah* prayer. However, what I witnessed two decades later suggested Islam had become de-privatized (Casanova, 1994). Moreover, the money or “donation” collection aspect of these stalls reminds of Gauthier’s (2019, p. 202) critique that neoliberalism encourages all organizations, big or small, to perceive themselves on an entrepreneurial model, and perceive their actions as that of actors within market segments, with an obligation to brand and market themselves and their missions in order to “survive” in a competitive environment.

Citing these measures as examples of “creeping Islamisation,” Schendel (2009, p. 38) argues that they polarize a Bengali vernacular cultural model (and traditional identity) with more “authentic” Islamic religious conduct, now considered pious by villagers and many in the country’s urban sphere. This can be explained as globalization imposing a culture of its own on the Bengali population, and through this, the market dominating the three main cultural elements: language, culture, and religion, in particular Islam (Barber, 1996; Casanova, 1994). Thus, an emerging phenomenon is constructed, in which otherwise unassimilable economics and religion coexist to complement sets of processes (Gauthier, 2019). I argue that in contemporary Bangladesh, the development of a

majoritarian, nationalistic discourse of Islam is an outcome of an emerged phenomenon (Gautier, 2019), in which social relations and production have become embedded in Islam instead of Islam being embedded in the larger culture (Polanyi, 2008 [1944]). The author of this article refers to this phenomenon as the “great” transformation of Bangladesh. Explaining how this has materialized in the span of two decades is a challenging task (Figure 1).

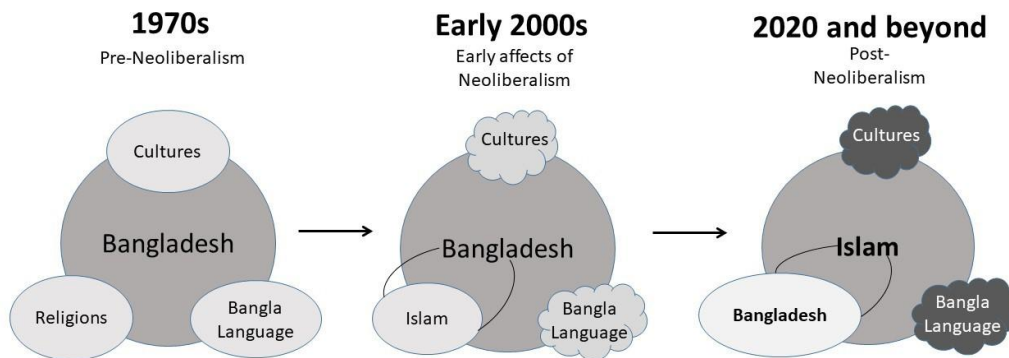


Figure 1: Bangladesh – The “Great” Transformation

Source: Author's own formulation.

Quadir (2015) provides an alternative that can be contextualized in the de-privatization of Islam in Bangladesh. He explains that politicized and unaccountable state practices have unleashed a wave of privatization [neoliberalism] that suggests that politics has become the main vehicle for accumulating capital in contemporary Bangladesh. For example, close ties between government bureaucrats and businessmen turned party loyalists have led to a surge in granting operating licenses to start private banks, private television channels, and private universities in the country (Amundsen, 2016; Ruud, 2011). Political patronage is the most critical component in this context and has also been known to protect the members of party student wings, trade union groups, and grassroot party volunteers (Lewis, 2011; Riaz, 2014; Ruud, 2011). In this context, Ahmad adds,

But one of the biggest challenges which we did not understand, confront or defeat was corruption. It did not remain a set of discrete criminal acts; it gradually became a way of life that engulfed us, practiced openly and boldly. (Ahmad, 2021, online)

In principle, a version of such reconfigured client-patron relations existed before this new phase of capitalism, but its newly emerged form under neoliberalism fostered conditions for disaffection and desperation, presently leveraged through the provision of free healthcare, education (e.g., Qur’anic schools) by Islamic political parties, such as the *Bangladesh Jamaat-e Islami* (BJI) and others including *Hefazot-e-Islam* and *Islami Oikya Jot* (Islamic Unity Front) (Riaz, 2012, 2014; Tasnim, 2012; Mishra, 2012). Casanova refers to such instances as a de-privatizing moment for a religion because this is how Islam in Bangladesh abandons “its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, disruptive legitimization, and redrawing of the boundaries” (Casanova, 1994, p. 66). In addition, Lewis (2011) critiques such client-patron relations in that they created a space for Islam that was consequently used for political expediency. Lewis’s conclusion echoes Riaz’s (2004) findings that ascendant conservative Islamization is the outcome of a deliberate act of economic and political partnerships that have been in function in Bangladesh for the last 25 years.

“associational nexus,” religious parties such as *Jamaat-e-Islami* in Bangladesh combine political activities with social development and treat society as subordinate to the economy. This is what Polanyi highlights as the self-defined “developed” world running society “as an adjunct to the market, where instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system” (Polanyi, 2008 [1944], p. 24). In addition, Riaz (2004) argues that under an overarching political umbrella, this has emboldened student members, trade union leaders, and grassroot party volunteers to employ a “politics of fear” for capital gain. He points to radical branches of these parties that recruit vulnerable, desperate and marginalized young minds, and draw them into the so called “Islamic forces” that consequently attack “others” in the nation. Prominent Bangladeshi filmmaker Tareque Masud (2010), in his award-winning feature film *Runway*, showcased this recruitment aspect of Islamic extremism in Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, the religious demography in Bangladesh has changed considerably in recent decades. The most salient demographic trend is the declining number of Hindus in the country. At the time of Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, the Hindu population amounted to approximately 23 per cent of the country’s entire population. Current estimates put that figure at around nine per cent (Sunandapriya, 2013). There are a number of factors and motivations contributing to this migrant outflow. Two critical dimensions noted by the UN special report were the role of contested property relations between Hindu and Muslims, and the experience of harassment, and at times, physical violence towards religious minorities (UN, 2015, pp. 6-7). In the words of a male, aged mid-40s, informant:

Bangla language, Bangladesh is my ancestral right and land but as a Hindu minority, frankly speaking, I do not always feel safe. Most Bangladeshi Muslims are kind and warm but I have come across a few odd, Islami radicals like RSS or BJP-esque. When you have small children at home, you need to feel assured. So, I, like many other Hindu families in Bangladesh, managed Aadhaar³ cards for my family as a backup in case we ever need to move to India to save our lives. (personal communication, August 24, 2016)

In addition, in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, where the religious landscape has distinctively differed from the rest of Bangladesh, demographic changes have been even more pronounced, not least as a result of government-induced population resettlement, particularly since the late 1970s (UN, 2015). Unlike a few decades ago, when the indigenous peoples living in that region — mostly following Buddhism and Christianity — constituted the vast majority, the proportions of indigenous and Bengali populations have by now become more or less even. As a result of those changes, Islam has become quite visible in the shape of many newly erected mosques and *madrasas*, similar to the rest of Bangladesh. Findings from field observations indicate remittances from the Middle East and the influence of global Islam have significantly contributed to this spatial transformation (Kibria, 2008). In addition, the northwest of Bangladesh, where many Hindu and indigenous groups have been living for generations, has started to experience religious violence, in particular Islamic extremism (World Watch Monitor, 2015; European Country of Origin Information Network, 2018). This has resulted in the migration of many Hindu families to the Chittagong Hill Tracts region, where they feel safer than in other parts of Bangladesh (UN, 2015). It should be noted that, in this region, ethnic and religious minorities, although largely overlapping, are not identical. For instance, some of the Buddhists or Christians living in the region have a Bengali background, while the majority of the followers of those two religions are indigenous from the Chakma, Marma, Tanchangya, and Khyang tribal groups. Despite these common cultural histories and ties, religious minorities in Bangladesh have faced threats of displacement, harassment, and violence. Siddiqi (2019) adds, “For the hypernationalist and authoritarian state, I contend, queer and politically dissident bodies are equally disposable” (p. 2).

Unfortunately, certain patterns that emerge from the above case of the Hill Tracts indicate that religious minorities suffer from displacement, forceful out-migration, and continue to feel insecure and vulnerable in Bangladesh. Feldman (2016, p. 2) maps how intertwined processes—“a set of ongoing and contradictory policy reforms and practices that reproduces both difference and majoritarian rule”—made Hindus as national “others” and dispossessed them of their land in contemporary Bangladesh (Qutb, 2006 [1964]; Rahim, 2007). Informal conversations with Bangladeshi academics, human rights activists and retired high ranking military personnel show that they acknowledged the correlation between the political agenda and violence induced displacement of religious minorities in Bangladesh that is often driven by economic motives and has accompanied the broader shift towards unregulated markets and increased privatization. Essentially, this confirms Harvey’s (2003) theory of “accumulation

by dispossession” in the case of Bangladesh, a version of which Elyachar (2005) and Joya (2020) cited as a neoliberal outcome in contemporary Egypt.

These examples suggest a peculiar, uncalled for outcome of forceful materialism under a neoliberal umbrella that appears to be legitimized by employing Islam. However, if we interpret the two key concepts, *Rabbaniyat* and *Khalifat*, as explained by Hashim (1965, p. 33) and Huq (2013, p. 56), to know and live Islam means is to sustain one’s own self and other creatures around him or her faithfully. These scholars further explain that a Quranic exegesis mutes the question of religious culpability of non-Muslims and highlights one to focus back to the self, whereby any human being, through uncontrolled material desires and an ill-directed use of power, can deny god. Therefore, what we can presently observe in Bangladesh in the name of Islam, can be explained as an emerging phenomenon induced by neoliberalism and consumerism (Gauthier 2019).

Although ethno-religious minorities have borne the brunt of this Islamization within the changing landscapes of Bangladesh, they are not the only ones feeling marginalized and dislocated. Other ethnic minorities, local secular writers and bloggers, intellectuals and critics of Islamic fundamentalism, and gay rights activists — that challenged the rise of extremism and fundamentalism — have also faced discrimination in recent decades. This has been, in particular, apparent among the country’s growing youth population. These examples reemphasize that neoliberalism and consumerism are two different, but complementary, sets of processes. In addition, the examples affirm that modernity includes land as a commodity, and neoliberalism deepens that trend. Overall, they indicate a marketization of Islam that in the last few decades triumphed at the cost of fueling ethno-religious conflict and communal tensions in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

This article attempted to weave the connection between neoliberalism and Islam in Bangladesh by illustrating how an overarching theme of neoliberal development brought in a commodity culture through privatization and an increased consumerism and carved room for Islamic symbols to form identity for the locals. The article also provided arguments in favor of the existence of a certain kind of patron-client setup that employs “Islamic forces” to attack “others” for capital gain and terrorizes foreigners.

The author anticipates readers will confer that Bangladesh is at a crossroads after its 50 years and in the 21st Century. Despite tremendous potential for economic growth, it has done little to protect, let alone strengthen, the legal rights and freedoms of religious minorities that was part of the bedrock of its constitution. This is not unique to Bangladesh. It is well known that the state’s involvement in religious life under a neoliberal umbrella remains a contentious one in Bangladesh, elsewhere in South Asia, and around the world. Arguments and evidence presented in this article do not indicate that the Islamization of Bangladesh foreclose the possibility of a just and moral society, nor do they intend to reinforce the common trope that Muslims are somehow resistant to secular ideas. Rather, the explanations indicate, as Max-Neef (2012) puts it, “neoliberal economics which has conquered the entire world backed by most politicians and corporate people is killing more people than the armies put together” (online). Finally, when ascendant forms of religious nationalism emerge alongside economic policies that foster conditions of socioeconomic inequality and marginalization, they create conditions where violence and extremism thrive. The question moving forward is not that religion should be taken off the agenda in political and public life in Bangladesh, but rather what are the best practices for thinking about civil society where there can be positive cooperation between religious views and the state (Calhoun et. al, 2011).

Endnotes

¹ A new phase of understanding of the politics of development began in the 1970s when the Bretton Woods financial institutions imposed structural changes in the modern era that ultimately changed the meaning of development, especially for those countries trapped by these new arrangements. For example, these international financial donor institutions removed the control of the state on capital that consequently weakened the capacity of a state to promote national economic growth. At the same time, the dominant economic players encouraged increased cross border capital flows. These changing policies are frequently defined as neoliberalism. See Harvey (2005), Chang (2003), Husain (2019), Reinert (2007), and Venugopal (2015) for details.

² Bengali culture is based on the material conditions – agriculture, food, weather, and climate, among others, for the ethnic *Bangla* (Bengali) speaking peoples living in the Ganges Delta region of the Indian subcontinent. Rivers, boats, monsoon, agriculture, and folk music, among others, are the backbone of the Bengali culture. Bengali people speak in various dialects of the Bengali language. Traditionally, rivers form as boundaries as to where one dialect will begin and another will end (e.g., people on both sides of the *Padma* River speak in two different dialects of the Bengali language). Various historical and political events and influences divided the Bengali culture into two countries: West Bengal province in India and to the east, Bangladesh. This consequentially led to the construction of two cultural capitals for the Bengali culture: Kolkata (previously, Calcutta) in West Bengal and Dhaka (previously, Dacca) in Bangladesh. In the 21st century, Bengali culture has expanded globally to the various corners of the world due to emigration. At the same time, this culture appears to be slowly disappearing vis-à-vis other dominant South Asian cultures based on Hindi and Urdu languages. Moreover, the influence of English language and culture, as a result of colonization, remains strong in the region. Collectively, one can argue that these external cultural influences, as they mix with various external economic and political forces, subtly cause a sense of insecurity among the Bengalis (collected from anonymous interviewees).

³ *Aadhaar* means “foundation” or “base.” In the context of India, the term refers to a 12-digit unique identity number for the residents or passport holders in India, based on their biometric and demographic data. Presently, *Aadhaar* is the world’s largest biometric ID system. Ref: <https://uidai.gov.in/about-uidai.html>.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses his gratitude to Drs. Ali Riaz and David Geary for their insights, input, and assistance during the earlier versions of the article. The author also thanks the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Funding

Travel grant to Bangladesh in 2016 was provided by Dr. David Geary from the Hampton Fund sponsored Research Assistantship at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Also, the UBC Irving K. Barber research and travel grant in 2014.

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Ageing and Ageism: Myths and Realities in Selected Rural and Urban Areas of Bangladesh

Md. Masudur Rahman*
 Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University, Mymensingh
 mrahman1masud@gmail.com

Mst. Sadia Afrin
 University of Dhaka
 sadia165afrin@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Abstract

This study attempts to examine the myths and realities concerning ageing and ageism by contrasting the situation in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. Stereotypes about the elderly in Bangladesh are not always consistent with reality and the scenario of ageism can differ by demographic setting. In this study, a mixed-method approach was followed, with qualitative and quantitative methods, with an emphasis on the latter. This study included adults aged above 60 years from two different areas. Dhaka city was the urban setting for the study and Barguna district was the rural setting. The sample included 340 observations, equally divided between the urban and the rural settings. The findings suggest that myths and realities concerning ageing and ageism operate differently in rural and urban areas, although they reveal some similarities. The study explores how elderly people who comprise a large portion of the country's population are treated. It highlights disparities between traditional attitudes towards the elderly and the modern realities faced by contemporary society.

Keywords: Ageing, Ageism, Bangladesh

Introduction

The “death of an elderly person is the end of a library” is a Chinese maxim. The elderly are often addressed as “old is gold”, but at the same time, elderly people are sometimes ignored in our present social structures (Rahman and Ahmmad, 2018). Elderly people are sometimes neglected and deprived of their human rights. Many family members ignore elderly people because they cannot contribute financially to the family. In Bangladeshi folk tales, this fable about the old exemplifies what is meant by the above.

There was an old man who lived with his son, daughter-in-law, and grandson. His son, along with his daughter-in-law, did not want to keep an incapable old person in their home and considered him a burden. Finally, the son decided to get himself rid of the problem. He took his old father in a big basket and set out for the jungle. His plan was to leave his old father there. The grandson, observing his father, said, “Father, please bring back the basket.” “Why?” asked the father. “Because I will need it when you will grow old,” replied the grandson (Idowu, et al. 2013).

In Bangladesh, adult children, particularly sons but also daughters to some extent nowadays are considered to be the main source of security and economic support to their parents, particularly in the time of disaster, sickness, and in old age (Hossain, 2016; Cain, 1986; Islam and Nath 2012). Within the social structure in Bangladesh, it is true

in some cases that elderly people are neglected by their children. Estimates of this negligence varies from rural (40%) to urban (25%) areas of Bangladesh, according to this study.

There are six obligatory stages in the biological process of a person's life cycle – infancy, childhood, adolescence, youth, and early old age as well as later old age (Villalba, 1999). Ageing is an inevitable biological process that starts at birth and ends at the death of every human being (Little, 2012). The Constitution of the Bangladesh mentions the rights of elderly people in Article 15 as the “provision of the basic necessities of life, including food, clothing, shelter, education and medical care; the right to reasonable rest, recreation and leisure; and the right to social security, that is to say, to public assistance in cases of undeserved want arising from unemployment, illness or disablement, or suffered by widows or orphans or in old age” (Constitution of Bangladesh, Article 15/a, 15/c, and 15/d). But in reality, ageing often becomes a burden for a modernizing society, where the family size is smaller and the understanding of a family is becoming limited to a nuclear one, instead of an extended one. Moreover, the consequences of technological changes and improvement in medical sciences are that death rates have fallen in many developing countries, including Bangladesh. As a result, the number of elderly people is increasing gradually in Bangladesh. Likewise, due to rapid urbanization and industrialization, people are becoming self-dependent, and people are reluctant to accept the burden of elderly care. Therefore, the traditional attitudes towards the elderly have changed while their numbers have increased in Bangladesh. We expect the scenario to be different in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is a large and densely populated country (1,115.62 people per square kilometer in 2019) in South Asia, bordering Burma and India. Its population is 163.05 million, estimated in 2019, up from the 2013 estimate of 156.5 million (World Population Review, 2019). It is also the eighth largest populated country in the world and has started to experience an emerging issue of increased elderly among its vulnerable population. According to the census of 2011, the percentage of elderly people in Bangladesh was 7.7 percent (BBS, 2015) and the size of the population of Bangladesh aged 65 years or more reached 8 million in 2010 from 4 million in 1990 (UN, 2013). This pattern of increase is forecasted to be steeper in the coming years. Traditionally, elderly people were revered in the Bangladeshi society. But along with other traditional social institutions, values with respect to the elderly are changing rapidly due to the impacts of modernization and urbanization. By 2050, the world's population aged 60 years and older is expected to total 2 billion, up from 900 million in 2015 (WHO, 2018). Today, 125 million people are aged 80 years or older in the world (WHO, 2018). In Bangladesh, as in other regions of the world, the population aged 60 years or more, considered elderly, is growing faster than other age groups, and they face some neglect by their family (Rahman, 2018). At times, they may not be given their basic human rights. As family traditions weaken, many elderly people now live apart from their children. As per the Bangladesh Constitution, needy elderly people have a right to social security; this is one of the fundamental principles of state policy (Constitution of Bangladesh, Article 15/d) and one of their fundamental rights (Constitution of Bangladesh, Article 26-47A; Rahman, 2018). Given this backdrop, this study attempts to examine the situation of the elderly in the context of Bangladesh, with special emphasis on a comparison of rural and urban areas, highlighting the disparities between common understanding and the actual scenarios concerning ageing and ageism in the context of Bangladesh

Ageing, Ageism and Society

Ageing is determined not only by physiological, but also by socially constructed factors for all societies. The ageing process is a genetic reality that has its own dynamics (Hossain, Akhtar, and Uddin, 2006). Nonetheless, old age is also socially constructed (Verma et al., 2016). Biologically, ageing is the collective result of decremting processes at the cellular, sub-cellular, or organ level that are associated with the passage of time. It is also the end of the life cycle and a biological reality that has its own underlying forces largely beyond human control (Gorman, 2000). However, social thinkers are mostly concerned about social factors related to ageing, termed “social ageing”, so that they can contribute to an understanding of this process and its implications. Social ageing is multidimensional and dynamic. It contains the transition into and out of roles, expectations about behavior, societal allocation of resources, and opportunities (Hossain, Akhtar, and Uddin, 2006; Morgan and Kunkel, 2001). On the contrary, ageism is a process of systematic discrimination against people because they are old, similar to racism and sexism, which focuses on skin color and/or gender (Eglit, 2005). Ageism can function as a stereotype in society, and can lead to elderly persons' invisibility, marginalization, and social exclusion. This occurs in society because those who are younger and more able than the elderly are treated as more valued. The elderly can be relegated to a second-class status, and their needs and their lives are treated as if they do not matter as much in society (Spencer, 2009).

Many studies on ageing and elderly populations have been conducted in lower and middle-income countries such as Bangladesh, primarily in order to gauge difficulties faced in old age. A study estimates that by 2025, Bangladesh, along with other Asian countries such as China, India, Indonesia, and Pakistan, will account for about half of the world's total elderly population (Kabir et al., 2013). In Bangladesh, most elderly people live in absolute poverty, and in many cases, offspring do not support their old parents, even though the parents have invested their effort and property for their children's education and livelihood betterment (Rahman, 2017). A study by Hossain, Akhtar, and Uddin (2006) examined problems faced by the elderly, providing theoretical perspectives and emphasizing the needs of elderly, highlighting the limitations of available services for them in the context of Bangladesh. Khan (2009) covers the steps taken for the welfare of the elderly people in developing countries such as Bangladesh, and Kabir et al. (2016) review the different non-communicable diseases that the elderly suffer from. Islam (2015) points to various types of abuse faced by the elderly. This study finds that the existing literature has a major gap, which is the difference in the perception and reality in attitudes towards elderly people in Bangladesh.

Theoretical Framework

A comprehensive understanding of ageing and ageism in Bangladesh may be compiled by combining various theoretical perspectives. This study elucidates and is analyzed using theoretical perspectives, which are effectually connected to the contemporary situations of old aged people in Bangladesh. Ageism is studied using several theories such as social disengagement theory, social pathology theory, deviant behavior theory, conflict theory, and labeling theory (Weinberg and Rubington, 1973). Life Course Perspective (LCP), which falls under the broader framework of "active aging", is another theory which is taken into consideration by World Health Organization (WHO, 2002). Social ageing refers to changes in people's roles and relationships in a society as they age, and social gerontologists explain how this process occurs in societies.

The process of ageing and ageism are primarily studied using four theoretical points of view. First, ageism is examined most significantly through disengagement theory. This theory focuses on the alterations in elderly people's authority, and the reversal of authority from the elderly to the young, in every society. Societal arrangements require elderly people to leave their engagements, including their previous jobs. This is the way in which a society affects the conversion of its elderly into one that leads a new, more sedentary lifestyle, and ensures that their previous roles will be undertaken by a younger generation that is presumably more able to carry out these roles. While a society needs to confirm that disengagement happens, this theory is often considered a functionalist explanation of the ageing process (Cumming and Henry, 1961). In the context of Bangladesh, disengagement theory is appropriate because it sets up elderly people as unproductive and a burden for society. Secondly, labeling theory is valuable in elucidating ageism, which is a process that men and women create (Becker, 1963). Ageing is socially constructed because it is society that labels the elderly as old, unproductive, degenerative, and liable, although they may not have these qualities (Hossain, Akhtar, and Uddin, 2006) and may face several difficulties from these prejudices (Curran and Ranzetti, 1996). In Bangladesh, this theory is applicable, as people treat the elderly as unproductive, and deem them a social burden because of their dependency, resulting in their facing the kinds of difficulties predicted by this theory. Also, this theory falls into the more general framework of a conflict theory of society and inequality, showing how these exist among the aged. Thirdly, social gerontologists also prefer activity theory, which assumes that elderly people benefit both themselves and their society if they remain active and try to continue to perform the roles they had before they aged (Choi and Kim, 2011). Activity theory focuses on the individual and her/his perception of the ageing process and is often considered a social interactionist explanation of the social ageing. This is also applicable in the context of Bangladesh. Lastly, "active ageing" emphasizes the active contributions of elderly people, and the importance of maintaining autonomy and independence within a relational context requiring interdependence and intergenerational solidarity. It draws on a Life Course Perspective (LCP), noting that the youth of today are the elderly people of "tomorrow", and the quality of life depends on the accumulation of experiences throughout the life cycle. Thus, it requires a rights-based approach that "recognizes the rights of people to equality of opportunity and treatment in all aspects of life as they grow elderly" and "supports their responsibility to exercise their participation in the political process and other aspects of community life" (WHO, 2002, p. 13).

This study is linked to these theories and explores the myths and realities around ageing and ageism in Bangladeshi society. Elderly people are treated as a source of pride for the youth, but sometimes as a curse for some who have older parents, reflecting the different strands of the above theories.

Methodology

This is a mixed-method study that collected multiple responses from different occupational and age groups. A qualitative method is used to include case studies that capture in-depth stories about ageism. In addition, a face-to-face survey is used to collect quantitative data representing the elderly people sampled in this study (Bryman, 1984). As this study intends to reveal the perceptions and actual conditions concerning ageing and ageism in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh, both males and females aged 60 years or older are sampled for this study. The elderly sample is selected from Barguna Sadar Upazila in Barguna district and several areas of Dhaka city. A total of 340 elderly people are interviewed, out of which, 40 case studies are presented in the qualitative section (20 from Dhaka city and 20 from Barguna Sadar Upazila). For the quantitative section, a total of 300 survey interviews are conducted in both rural and urban areas, with 150 in each region. The sample size is comparatively small, and this can be a limitation of this study. In the qualitative study, elderly people who are 60 years or older are purposively selected in both Barguna district and Dhaka city areas. To conduct the case studies, 20 elderly people are selected from different areas of Barguna Sadar Upazila, and an additional 20 elderly people are selected from some selected areas of Dhaka city, such as Dhanmondi, Ramna, old Dhaka, and Azimpur. On the other hand, in the quantitative study, the survey sample is selected conveniently in both the rural and urban areas.

Statistical Analysis

The analysis in this study attempts to capture the general scenario of the entire country, although the sample is small in size. As mentioned above, the study uses both quantitative and qualitative data, collected from face-to-face surveys and case studies. In the qualitative study, the data is analyzed descriptively, strengthening the statements from the quantitative study. In the quantitative study, the survey data is analyzed using the SPSS software. The numerical data is processed through coding, data entry, and then analysis using the software. Then the data is presented graphically in this study. Both of the analyses allow this study to be generalized and representable.

Elderly Demography and Ageing Experiences in Bangladesh

The number of the aged is increasing and their lives are becoming gradually complex with the passage of time. Due to the innovations in health technology, the mortality rate is falling, and life expectancy is increasing. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of elderly people in the survey sample. More than half of the elderly people (62%) are 60 to 70 years old, and the rest are above 70 years old. More than half (56%) of the sample are female. In this study, 26% of the elderly people are widows or widowers, and 74% are married. With regards to the educational qualification, 46% are literate and more than half of the sample respondents are illiterate. In both rural and urban areas, only one-third of the elderly people are employed, and the remaining 68% are unemployed. Additionally, more than three-fifth of the elderly people live in an extended family, and only a third of them live in a nuclear family.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of elderly people surveyed (n = 340)

Characteristics	Categories	Percentage (%)
Age	60-70 years	62
	70+ years	38
Sex	Male	44
	Female	56
Marital Status	Married	74
	Widow	26
Educational Qualification	Literate	46
	Illiterate	54
Employment Status	Employed	32
	Unemployed	68
Types of Family	Extended family	65
	Nuclear family	35

This study finds some important facts regarding old age experiences in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. First, elderly people receive limited financial support from their children. Though most elderly people retire at the age of 62, or 65 in certain types of jobs, they typically live 15-20 years after their retirement. At that time, most of them have to depend on others if they have no savings. These ageing people are sometimes treated as a social burden to their family members and a general stereotype prevails that they demand much and do little. But, in actuality, they contribute much through their active involvement in childcare and household chores.

The picture differs depending on whether the area is rural or urban. Our study reveals that the elderly in urban areas are more financially self-reliant than those in rural areas. We find that three-fourths of the elderly (74%) in rural areas are engaged in agricultural farming. They earn their livelihood by cultivating crops, selling vegetables, poultry, fruits, etc. However, they have limited or no surplus at the end of the day and are forced to depend on their adult children working outside rural areas. The remaining proportion of the elderly are entirely reliant on their children in the rural areas and may face neglect. In urban areas, 61% of the elderly are engaged in several types of informal sector employment. They earn money to maintain their own family. In this last phase of life, they have to work hard to earn a subsistence. Our sample showed that they are informal sector workers such as rickshaw pullers, tea sellers, security guards, petty traders, and even construction workers. Some of them have to earn to support the entire family, in spite of having working adult children. The rest of the elderly urban sample are the retired and pass their time with their family members. In some cases, they contribute to raising and caring for children, particularly their grandchildren. Other activities and contributions of the elderly such as doing household chores, daily shopping for family, conversing with and teaching children, helping family members are also common and recognized in the family.

Second, our study has several findings on how the elderly are treated by their children. In traditional agro-based societies, elderly people live with their near and dear ones, and in most cases depend on them for their basic needs. Socially, it is the responsibility of children to take care of their elderly parents when the parents are no longer able to meet their own needs. But it is quite a difficult task for the young generation to perform that traditional responsibility towards their parents in a modern industrialized world, particularly because of job and professional demands. In both rural and urban areas, elderly people do not want to say that their children do not treat them well, but in-depth interviews led many of them to say indirectly that their working children pay insufficient attention to them. There are also differences in rural and urban areas. In rural areas, it is more commonplace to care less about the elderly. Their children usually go outside to work, marry someone, and then start a separate nuclear family. They neglect their old parents and offer little or no financial support to them. More than half of the elderly in rural areas expressed dissatisfaction with the treatment received from their children. It was also seen that children of lower-income families with little or no educational qualification are implicated in such neglect. The children of families with some educational attainment paid more attention to their ageing parents. On the other hand, in urban areas, only 33% of the elderly expressed that their children do not treat them adequately, while about 65% of survey respondents say that their children treated them well. Also, it was found that female children were more mindful of the care of elderly parents.

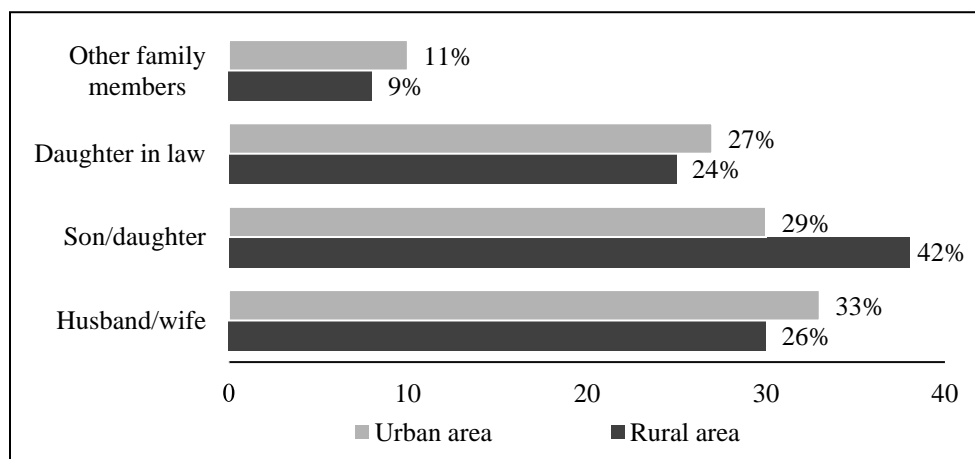


Figure 1: Actors in elderly negligence in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh

The details show us that although parents did not want to allege that their children neglected them, some of the case studies identified certain family members who seriously neglected the elderly. This negligence was emotional, financial, physical and/or social. Figure 1 shows family members who neglect elderly people, as found in this study. Within the group that said their children do not treat them well, 42% claim that they are neglected by their son/daughter in rural areas, while only 29% of urban respondents said so. Spousal neglect mentioned by elderly people appears to be similar in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. Survey respondents also reported that their daughters-in-law neglected them, this being true in both rural and urban areas, and slightly higher (27%) in urban areas. About 11% of the elderly reported neglect by other family members in the urban sample. Negligence here referred to the lack of care or friendly attitude to the elderly, who face economic difficulties and feel lonely. The negligence is structural and results from the changing structure of families in both rural and urban areas. It is important to mention that the level of negligence is based on the opinion of the respondents, and this study observes that level of negligence is increasing.

Third, living arrangements are an important component for the overall well-being of the elderly, and elderly people face problems in this area. More than half of the poor families (56%) cannot ensure separate living places for the elderly as they live in one or two room houses even if they have more than five members. For this reason, the elderly people sleep and take rest in the veranda or a hovel, in unhygienic living conditions. Such negligence is also common in rural areas of Bangladesh. Although the elderly are involved in family activities that ensure their food, limited recreation, and other basic needs, they have to sacrifice the better shelter for others.

Fourth, older people are sometimes mistreated by daughters-in-law, especially in rural areas. This is particularly true due to poverty in lower-middle income rural families where the conflicts between parents and daughters-in-law are more acute. The elderly report that their daughters-in-law may have bad attitudes and quarrelsome behavior. We also find that the elderly have a good relationship with their grandchildren in rural areas, but in urban settings, in some cases, they say that their grandchildren find them backward with regard to their inabilities with technology and their rustic background.

Fifth, elderly people in Bangladesh are not always respected and well cared for by their families, and with the passage of time, elderly abuse is alarmingly visible in rural poor families. Some people think that old people are always napping in their rocking chairs or eating and taking rest all day and night and are basically unproductive due to disengagement from the labor market, dependent on others, and generally useless.

Finally, some elderly people get more advantages than others as people continue to respect them due to their age. Sixty five percent of respondents said that they get extra care from children for being elderly than others. But the remainder of respondents expressed that they had bad experiences and that they are neglected by their children as well as others in both rural and urban settings.

How Does Society Portray Ageing People in Bangladesh?

The concept that “old age is a burden” is socially constructed. There are several silent myths about the elderly people in our society but often these are not applicable. These myths are misconceptions, according to the survey respondents.

Old Age Health Complications and Social Myths

Ageing people are less energetic, having several health complications. Younger people can think that ageing means leisure and waiting to pass. The elderly are often sick and feeble, and therefore more likely to catch and carry illnesses. The common diseases experienced by the elderly are found to be bone or joint conditions, hypertension, eye or vision problem, heart conditions, memory or concentration problem, ear or hearing problem, insomnia, back problems, respiratory problems, foot problems, depression, prostate or bladder problems, among others. One of the myths that exists in our society is that “old age means illnesses”. It is thought that very necessarily the elderly people will go through physical illnesses. Table 2 exemplifies that this is not just a myth in rural areas, as about 74% of the rural respondents agreed with this conventional attitude, although this number is lower in urban setting.

Table 2: Perception of elderly people regarding their health condition (n = 340)

Health related myths	Rural area		Urban area	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Old age means illnesses?	74	26	68	32
Physical capacity worsening?	90	10	85	15
Losing energy due to old age?	86	14	70	30

There is no disagreement on another social myth that “physical capacity wanes while ageing”. On this question, 90% of the rural elderly and 85% of the urban elderly strongly agreed that their physical capacity is worsening gradually, given the normal biological process of ageing.

“Losing energy due to old age” is a conventional concept regarding the elderly people. The survey respondents in the rural and urban areas had different opinions about their physical energy. Although 86% of the respondents from rural areas affirm that while ageing, losing energy is a very normal process, but we found that nearly one-third of the urban elderly think they still have much energy to work. An elderly woman who lives in Dhaka with her son’s family said:

I am 85 years old, still capable to do all the household chores. In this old age, I also have no diseases that I suffer from. Sometimes I still go out with my daughter-in-law for shopping.

That elderly people will lack energy is a myth that is not universally true. Even though a lack of energy is common in the elderly, it is clear from conversations in this study that physicians should take their patients’ reports more seriously because a lack of energy is often linked to health problems rather than ageing.

Mental Stress and Old Age Loneliness

The last stage of ageing consists of depression and mental stress due to a lack of work activities. One stereotype about ageing that “elderly people remain depressed” all the times is often accurate. Most of the elderly people live independently while maintaining close relationships with family, friends, and neighbors. In this study, 83% of the urban elderly shared that they remain depressed silently, and 60% of rural respondents said so. Sometimes they feel lonely, isolated, and dejected in spite of living within the family. A 60-years old male farmer and father of five children, mentioned his own experiences:

As the only earner in my family, I have lots of duties and responsibilities to maintain. My elder son has made a separate family with his wife and my other four children study in schools and colleges. I have to afford their educational costs as well as other family costs. Sometimes I cannot afford all the costs and I remain in debt. So sometimes I feel very depressed and lonely in this old age.

There is another myth regarding the “effects of ageing on the brain and cognition” but this study finds that 91% of the rural respondents and 84% of the urban elderly sampled agree that their brain works properly when it is needed.

Many people think that the “elderly seem angry, short-tempered or intolerant”. But the reality is that elderly people are not angry simply because of ageing, but due to factors related to life, livelihood, and surroundings. Most of the elderly surveyed think that they are less short-tempered than before. Although in this survey 29% of the rural elderly and 43% of the urban elderly recognize themselves as short-tempered, they refuse to consider this trait as related to their ageing.

In our complex society, people are busy with various tasks and many people experience loneliness and depression for numerous reasons. People think that “elderly people experience more loneliness” than ever either as a

result of living separately from children or due to lack of strong and sustainable family ties. They often have less connections with their friends they were once close to. It is inevitable that people lose connection with their friends when growing old and it becomes practically difficult to make new friendships and build new circles of friends. This study attempts to connect the relationships between elderly and loneliness.

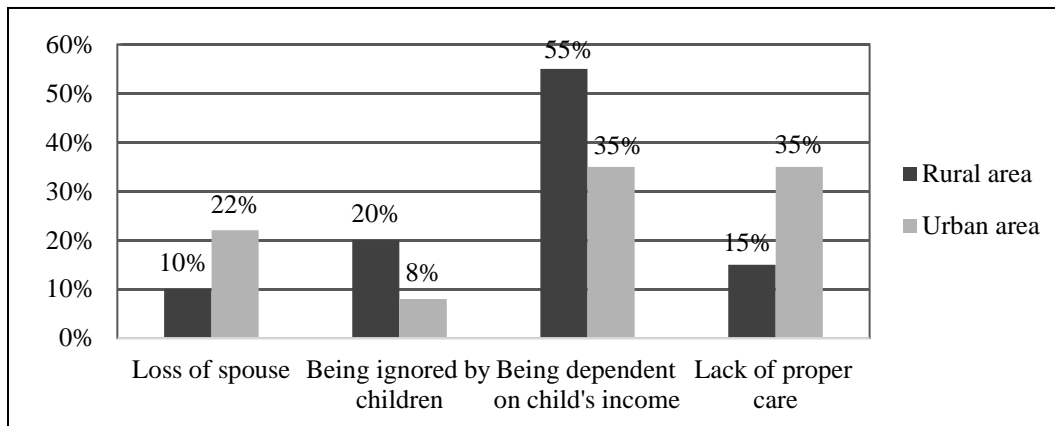


Figure 2: Causes of elderly loneliness in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh

We find that loneliness is a common feature among the elderly, particularly in urban areas. Figure 2 shows four causes of loneliness that were gleaned from our survey. The most important cause in rural areas is the dependency of the elderly on their child's income, although this is less important in urban areas (35%). The survey respondents also feel lonely because they feel that they are not being taken care of properly. Finally, elderly people are lonely due to the loss of their spouse and being ignored by their children.

People also think that ageing leads to a problem of the “decline of memory”. Strokes and dementia increase with the passage of time when a person becomes older. We find that this is indeed the case in both rural and urban areas. In rural areas 63% of elderly respondents say that ageing has led to memory losses for them, and this is worsening day by day. In urban settings, 46% of the elderly think that they are probably losing their memory with the process of ageing. A 62-year-old woman said:

I cannot remember things for long time. Even when I cook food, I sometimes forget where I have kept the salt. Sometimes I also use salt two times in the curry during cooking.

Productivity of Elderly People and Social Myths

In Bangladesh, many consider the elderly to be less productive and a burden to society. They often think that elderly people do not earn, but only spend, and spending on the care of elderly people is nothing but a waste of resources. The study findings contradict this. The elderly people are shown to earn money and support their families. They are engaged in many economic activities such as cultivating, informal work, such as selling crops, rickshaw pulling, and working as domestic workers, among others. Nevertheless, stereotypes persist that elderly people are incapable of carrying out any duties and responsibilities. This is why we see that they are compelled to retire from their positions at the age of 62, in spite of their capability to serve at that age. Most of the respondents in this study area were fully confident that they can learn things just like the youth if they receive appropriate training. This was true of 69% of respondents in urban areas and 79% of those in rural areas. An old man from a village told us:

Actually, if an 80-year old person is told to lift a 100 kg weight, this will be impossible. But I think that any kind of tasks which are suitable for the elderly people can be done by me, and maybe by almost all the elderly people.

It is also thought that the elderly have a negative view of the benefits of technology. But the fact is that, in spite of being mostly disconnected from the world of digital services, they are not averse to technological change. We find that 89% of the urban elderly and 71% of the rural elderly are positive about and adaptable with regard to technological change. Table 3 identifies several types of work done by the elderly. In rural areas, 40% of the survey respondents are involved in agricultural cultivation and 30% in the informal economy, primarily in selling produce. Some elderly people, especially women, do the household chores even when they become old. About a tenth of the rural respondents do not participate in productive activities, including some because of their illness. In urban areas, 45% of the elderly are involved in the informal economy and sell clothes, vegetables, fruits, peanuts, etc. A larger percentage than the rural elderly report that they do household chores to help the family. Finally, the share of the elderly who are not involved in any work is higher in urban areas. We find, therefore, that productivity and creativity often continue to the very end of life, despite the myth that they are reduced with the passage of life.

Table 3: Work involvement and elderly productivity (n = 340)

Work involvement	Rural area (%)	Urban area (%)
Agricultural cultivating	40	0
Informal economy	30	45
Household chores	15	20
Others	5	15
No involvement	10	20

Conclusion

Ageing people play a vital role in every society. They support the family mentally during crises and children rely on their wisdom when they make major decisions in their family. There are several myths in our society regarding the burden that the elderly imposes on others. This study examines how ageing people are treated by others and how they feel they are perceived in our society. We find from our survey results that 45% of the elderly in Bangladesh feel that they are treated as a burden and paid less attention by the family in both rural and urban regions. Although people believe that the elderly are unable to work, we find that they often earn income in their old age, spend time with their grandchildren, and sometimes do shopping and buy groceries for the household. A good proportion of ageing people may even be the sole earner and may be involved in the informal economy. If sometimes they do not have sufficient energy to work, they still provide mental support to their family. Often due to the loss of their spouse, dependency on their child's income, and feeling ignored by their children, they feel solitary during the last years of their life. As mentioned in Figure 1, they may feel neglected by their children, by their son/daughter-in-law, and even by their spouses. In Bangladesh, although there are laws to ensure parents' rights, children nonetheless ignore their parents in both rural and urban areas. Old age does not necessarily imply morbidity, and ageing is a process through which we all have to pass. Ageing people can play major roles in the family supporting the family members, especially during times of crisis, for care of younger children, and to help with household chores. This study helps us to better understand the significance of ageing, including the myths and realities around ageing and ageism.

As people go through their life cycle, becoming elderly is an inevitable part of life. Disengagement is a process which every elderly person has to go through, but active ageing is a concept that engages them from a human rights point of view. It is widely believed the elderly only consume and do not contribute to their family. Within this backdrop, some elderly people are not considered as a burden because of their economic contribution to the family, and often their economic status matters most in how they are treated. This study finds that while conditions for the elderly are generally similar in both rural and urban areas, the rural elderly are somewhat more deprived or neglected by family members than their urban counterparts. It is also found that the urban elderly perceive themselves as having more physical capacity and less illness. Elderly people are assets in any society. We believe that the elderly should be honored, accepted as social capital, and their participation in social and cultural activities ensured. Society should legally protect them from the violation of their rights. To ensure this, our study recommends the following:

- a) Family members should continue providing supports to the elderly and children should respect their parents with dignity in every aspect of society.

- b) People should not treat elderly people as a social burden and ensure that their basic needs are met in both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh.
- c) The government should implement laws regarding elderly care in Bangladesh, ensuring human rights for the elderly, as ageing is an inevitable biological process.
- d) Further research could be done to understand the changing situation of ageing people in the process of modernization to examine in what manner the basic human rights of ageing are declining and how they can be ensured.

Declarations

This study was not sponsored. The authors conducted this research using their own finances.

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Vulnerability to Natural Hazards and Climate Resilient Socio-economic Development in Bhola

Farzana Tasnim
Department of Environmental Science
Stamford University Bangladesh
farzanaorthi7@gmail.com

Md. Sahadat Hossain*
Department of Sustainable Resources Management
SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry
Syracuse, New York, USA
shawpanesrm@yahoo.co.uk; mhossain1@esf.edu

K. Mauddod Elahi
Department of Environmental Science
Stamford University Bangladesh
elahikm@stamforduniversity.edu.bd

* Corresponding Author

Abstract

Bhola is the largest island in Bangladesh that has been suffering directly and indirectly from natural hazards almost every year. These hazards are adversely affecting the socio-economic and environmental conditions of local communities, slowing down their overall development. Although natural hazard-induced damages are already identified in different sectors, the reduction of economic losses and deaths remain largely unaddressed due to poor understanding and practices among communities regarding resilience activities. Our study aims to understand the vulnerability to natural hazards and climate resilient socio-economic development in Bhola. The results found in this study suggest that cyclones are the main devastating natural hazard in this district, whereas other hazards such as flood and river bank erosion are also common. It is also found that most of the unions of Bhola Sadar upazila have been affected by cyclones. Casualties and damage were very high in Tazumuddin upazila and the highest migration occurred from Charfasson upazila. The results also suggest that most of the region has medium resilience to natural hazards. Among the six thematic areas used in this study to determine the levels of community resilience, “knowledge and education” scored the highest and “preparedness and response” scored the lowest. These results suggest that policy makers consider the need for building a hazard resilient community in the coastal areas of Bangladesh.

Keywords: Adaptive Capacity, Bhola, Disaster, Hazard, Resilience

Introduction

Bangladesh is the largest deltaic country in the world, and its geographic location exposes its inhabitants to natural hazards such as cyclones, sea level rise, salinity intrusion, river bank erosion, land loss, and drought (A. U. Ahmed *et al.*, 2012; Rahaman *et al.*, 2021). These environmental stressors cause communities to be vulnerable by affecting their sustenance, livelihoods, recreation, and agricultural productivity, while damaging their homes and property and imposing long-term adversity on the country’s socio-economic and environmental systems (Ayeb-Karlsson *et al.*, 2016).

Understanding vulnerability and the governance of resilience in the built environment are foundations for hazard resilient sustainable development. Community vulnerability can be gauged from adaptive capacity, whereas resilience reflects the capacity to manage existing and envisioned physical systems, as well as natural ecosystems, in a manner that can persist during extreme adverse events (IPCC, 2014). However, these two terminologies are not in opposition, but rather complementary in explaining in-depth depictions of these natural and built environmental systems (Adger, 2006; B. Ahmed *et al.*, 2016; Summers *et al.*, 2018).

Vulnerability as a concept originated from natural hazards studies in the beginning of the 18th century and was used to gauge the magnitude of the negative response of a system to a disaster (Janssen *et al.*, 2006). Vulnerability refers to the capacity to be wounded, i.e., the degree to which a system is likely to experience harm due to physical, social, and economic exposure to a hazard (Sharifi, 2016). It has been used as an interlinked concept, defined as a function that includes resilience, adaptability, susceptibility, marginality, fragility, and risk (Füssel, 2007). Vulnerability is also the combined representation of several factors such as exposure, susceptibility, and adaptive capacity. It is a function of the character, intensity, magnitude, frequency of casualties to which the system or community, or individual, is exposed, and is related to various other factors (Barbier, 2015; Rahman and Rahman, 2015).

Like vulnerability, resilience is also perceived in different ways within a system or for an individual. Both are considered as central points from which to govern and develop a framework to reduce and manage natural disaster risk. Resilience originates from ecological research fields used to demonstrate the capability of an ecosystem to absorb a hazardous event (Connor and Zhang, 2014). In disaster studies, resilience is defined as the ability to absorb, resist or accommodate adverse unpredictable shocks and stresses without significantly changing the basic structures of the exposed system or individual (Janssen *et al.*, 2006; Sharifi, 2016).

The application of the concept of resilience may depend on several factors: (1) types of activities; (2) for whom these may be implemented; (3) agents of decision-making and (4) the cultural context within which implementation occurs (Cote and Nightingale, 2012). How activities and institutions determine the political economy of climate change resilience is also important; this allows us to understand who will be benefited by resilience activities, power relations in implementing activities, and varying access to resources and concurrent inequality in society (Beymer-Farris *et al.*, 2012). Climate resilience should consider varying levels of climate impact, and the capacity of different social groups to respond to climate change. These factors of impact and response to climate change may include “levels of on-the-ground social inequality, rights and unequal access to resources, poverty, poor infrastructure, lack of representation and inadequate systems of social protection, planning and risk management” (Tanner *et al.*, 2015, p. 23).

Bangladesh is a multi-hazard prone country in the world due to its geographical location and the seventh most vulnerable country to climate related extreme weather events in the world (Eckstein *et al.*, 2019). Floods, cyclones, tidal surges, landslides, tornadoes, riverbank erosion, droughts, and earthquakes are very common hazards (Alam and Collins, 2010). Atmospheric disasters (e.g., tropical storms) and hydrologic disasters (e.g., flooding, drought, storm surges, salinization, sedimentation, and erosion) are a common annual phenomenon in this country. Also, 97.1% of its landmass and 97.7% of its population are susceptible to disasters (WB, 2015). Due to its geographical setting, low income, and dense population, the effects of natural calamities are more severe and makes it highly vulnerable and at risk (Alam and Collins, 2010; Brammer, 2014; Paul and Routray, 2010).

The physical and meteorological characteristics of the Bay of Bengal make it an ideal ground to form an average 16 tropical cyclones each year, which is 6-10% of global cyclone formations (Paul, 2009). Bangladesh is also highly vulnerable because of its 711 km long coastline with Bay of Bengal, and thereby expected to suffer a severe cyclone every three years (Hossain *et al.*, 2019; Tasnim *et al.*, 2015). Approximately 40% of global cyclonic storm surges occurred in Bangladesh in the past 60 years, mainly affecting the coastal zones (Haque *et al.*, 2012; Murty, 1984). According to Penning-Rowsell *et al.* (2013), there were 15 major cyclonic hazards that have struck the coastal zone of Bangladesh since 1960, of which nine struck the southeastern coast, four happened in the southwest, and two hit the central and eastern coasts. In the last 200 years, about 70 major cyclones struck Bangladesh, and 900,000 people died from these in the last 35 years. During the last 20 years, there was approximately USD 1.69 billion worth of losses due to climate induced disasters, amounting to 0.41 percent of national GDP (Eckstein *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, the estimated loss from the cyclone in 1970 was USD 63 million, cyclone Gorky in 1991 cost USD 2 billion, and the total losses due to Sidr in 2007 was USD 1.7 billion. In addition, excessive rainfall during the monsoon season led to the inundation of 20-25% of the landmass, and this ranged from 40-70% in extreme cases such as the flood in 1954,

1955, 1974, 1987, 1988, 1998, 2002, 2004, and 2007. Each of these flood events killed hundreds of people and caused untold damages to crops and property (Penning-Rowsell *et al.*, 2013).

The devastation that natural hazards cause depend on their characteristics i.e., hazard type, frequency, magnitude, etc., and the distribution of consequences varies by individual and community characteristics, i.e., proportion of women, elderly, infant, poor people, income, house type, etc., and national level characteristics, i.e., physical, social, economic response, and communication infrastructures (Hossain *et al.*, 2019; Islam *et al.*, 2016). Hazard resilient development has become a priority for long-term sustainability in built and natural ecosystems. In the context of Bangladesh, we can identify many factors affecting community resilience. These include networking relationships, social capital, and recovery mechanism (LaLone, 2012), as well as support from different organizations, planning, regulation, training, and governance (Burby *et al.*, 2000; Dasgupta *et al.*, 2014; Islam *et al.*, 2017; Manyena *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, some gaps continue to be found in the implementation of these frameworks for community resilience due to insufficient consideration of power, political interests, and a lack of systematic interactions among resources, actions, and learnings (Ashley and Carney, 1999). These gaps need to be addressed while exploring their interactions (Cote and Nightingale, 2012).

The coastal area of Bangladesh is different from the rest of the country not only because of its unique geo-physical characteristics, but also because of sociopolitical circumstances that often limit people's access to endowed resources, perpetuating their risk and vulnerabilities. Coastal hazards such as tropical cyclones and coastal erosion are regarded as the greatest threats to human life and security in many countries. Bangladesh is a predominantly agricultural economy, with an increasing population, while being one of the most prone to natural disasters (WB, 2015). The coastal zones of Bangladesh are naturally dynamic making them particularly vulnerable to hazards mentioned earlier. There are 19 coastal districts, covering 47,201 km² (32%) of the total landmass, and accommodating 36.8 million (28%) of the total population, of which 52% are poor, and have many infants, children, elderly, and females, who are comparatively more vulnerable than others (Islam, 2004; Islam, 2008; Parvin *et al.*, 2008). Storm surges during cyclonic events and river erosion are the two major calamities causing the primary vulnerability in Bhola district.

Our study focuses on Bhola, a southern coastal district of Bangladesh. Bhola is particularly vulnerable to natural hazards (Fritz *et al.*, 2009). Historically, there have been many devastating cyclones in Bhola that caused severe casualties and loss of property. For example, in 1970, about 167,000 people died due to a cyclone and most of the casualties were in Tazumuddin upazila (Islam *et al.*, 2015). Most people in Bhola earn their livelihood by farming and fishing, and they live in the vulnerable areas. When natural disasters occur, they are the first to suffer (Hossain, 2018). Homesteads and agricultural crops are damaged, and fisheries are washed away. Development activities and infrastructure are also hampered and damaged. This is how the economic growth rate is adversely affected due to such disasters. Besides, the social situation of people living in the area is already difficult. Many of them are forced to live illegally on embankments and other vulnerable areas and do not have their own land to cultivate (Hossain *et al.*, 2008). Various initiatives have been taken to address these vulnerabilities and build community capacity to recover from disasters, and promote resilience (van der Vegt *et al.*, 2015). For example, attention has been given to the likelihood of vulnerability or risk, social structures, adaptation strategy, as well as the characteristics of natural and built environment. Including these factors in enhancing the resilience capacity of local community has been important for policy makers (Ahmed *et al.*, 2016; Islam *et al.*, 2017; Summers *et al.*, 2018; Uddin *et al.*, 2020).

In view of the above background, our study was conducted to identify the major environmental impacts of natural hazards in Bhola district, and to assess the climate resilient socio-economic growth and development there. The main questions to which we seek answers are (a) *What are the major natural hazards in Bhola district?* and (b) *Are the socio-economic and environmental development in Bhola hazard resilient?*

Methodology

Study Area

Bhola is a southern coastal district of Bangladesh situated between 21° 51'38" to 22° 51'40" N latitudes and 90° 32'07" to 90° 55'44" E longitudes, comprising an area of 3,737.21 km². It is 90 km long and 20 km wide. This island district consists of 67 unions under 7 upazilas, which are Tazumuddin, Burhanuddin, Bhola Sadar, Manpura, Charfasson, Lalmohan, and Daulatkhan (Islam *et al.*, 2015). Figure 1 shows that this island is in the delta of the Meghna River, while the Tetulia River flows on the western side, and the Shahbazpur channel flows from the eastern side.

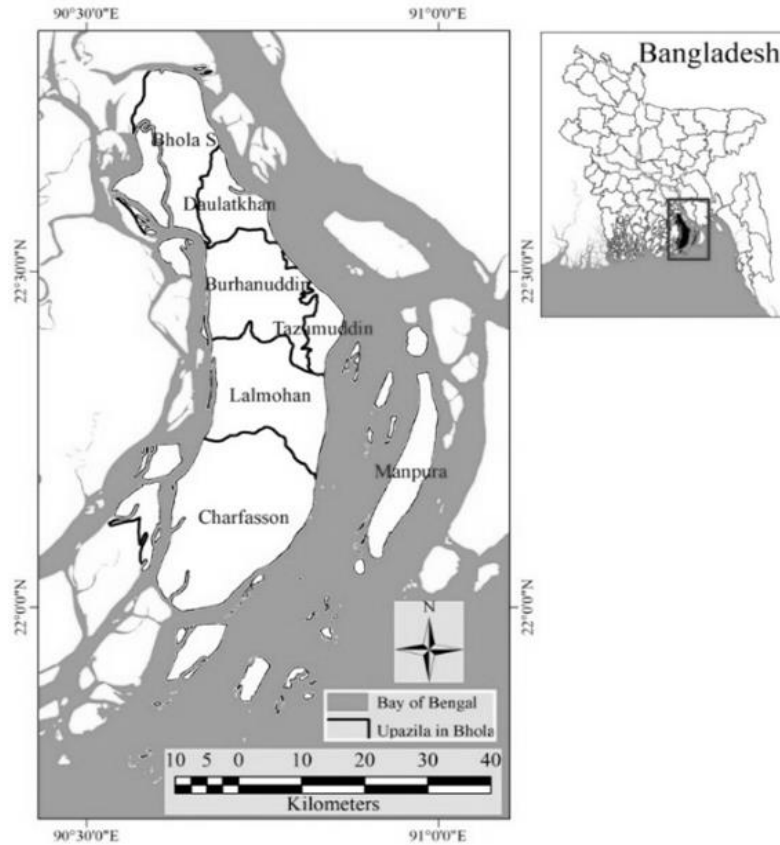


Figure 1: Upazilas of Bhola district

Study Design and Data Collection Methods

Our study used both primary and secondary data to analyze the socio-economic and environmental conditions of different upazilas of Bhola district. The study has two parts: firstly, analysis of historical hazard events along with their damages and casualties for vulnerability assessment, and secondly, understanding peoples’ perception regarding resilient capacity.

Assessment of Vulnerability

The historical data on hazards casualties in Bhola during 1941-2019 have been used for the analysis of exposure in this area. Information regarding historical hazards that have occurred in this district was collected from EM-DAT (2015), Khan (1995), BMD (2015), DMIC (2015), IFRC (2015), pertinent books, journals, reports, articles, newspapers and available websites. In addition, data from Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) of Bhola District Information office, reports on disasters, NGO publications were also used as data sources. The amalgamated data were classified into hazard types, number of strikes, magnitudes, frequencies, damages, and casualties. After this a normalization was used in Equation 1 to adjust the values of indicators of different upazilas into a common scale (UNDP, 2015). Then the exposures of an upazila to natural hazards were calculated by normalizing the total values in Equation 2.

$$U_x = \frac{X_v - X_{min}}{X_{max} - X_{min}} \text{ (If maximum value represents highest sensitivity)..... (1)}$$

$$U_x = \frac{X_{max} - X_v}{X_{max} - X_{min}} \text{ (If minimum value represents highest sensitivity)}$$

Where, U_x represents the normalized value of an indicator X for a spatial location U . X_v is the value of an indicator (V) for a specific location in relation to maximum (X_{max}) and (X_{min}) values of all spatial locations for that

indicator respectively. The exposure is calculated for each spatial location i.e., upazila for measuring vulnerability based on Equation 2.

$$Exposure_{UU} = \sum NNNN_{UU} + HHHH_{UU} + HHHH_{UU} + LL_{UU} + DD_{UU} \dots \dots \dots (2)$$

Where, U is the exposed upazila that is considered for analyzing exposures to natural hazards based on the number of total hazards occurring during 1941-2019 (NS_U); HM_U is the magnitude of the hazard; loss of property and infrastructures such as houses, and roads are indicated by HF_U ; livestock is L_U and the number of people who died is D_U .

Subsequently, there were nine exposures, eight sensitivity, and seven adaptive capacity indicators selected from similar studies to analyze vulnerability to natural hazards, shown in Table 1. The values of indicators were collected from relevant sources and normalized in Equation 1, and vulnerability of upazilas in Bhola district was calculated using IPCC guideline (IPCC, 2014) shown in Equation 3.

Table 1: Selection of determinants

Determinants	Indicators
Sensitivity	- Proportion of people living in mud houses (%)
	- Proportion of people living in <i>jhupris</i> (%)
	- Population density (person/km ²)
	- Proportion of people living below the poverty line (%)
	- Proportion of disabled people (%)
	- Proportion of people working in agriculture (%)
	- Proportion of floating people (%)
	- Proportion of females (%)
Adaptive Capacity	- Literacy rate (%)
	- Per capita cyclone shelter
	- Proportion of people using hygienic sanitation (%)
	- Proportion of people using safe drinking water (%)
	- Proportion of people living in concrete houses (%)
	- Proportion of people above the poverty line (%)
- Proportion of people employed (%)	

$$V_{UU} = \sum S_{UU} - \sum AC_{UU} \dots \dots \dots (3)$$

Where, V_U is the vulnerability of an upazila generated by subtracting the total normalized value of adaptive capacity (AC_{UU}) from the total normalized sensitivity (S_{UU}) value of upazila U.

Analysis of Resilience Capacity

Bhola consists of seven upazilas named above. After analyzing the vulnerability to natural hazards in these seven upazilas, a perception study was conducted to understand the community’s knowledge of resilience, and how these are connected to considerations of social, economic, and infrastructural development activities. There were nine respondents from each upazila, i.e., a total 63 persons were interviewed. The sampled interviewees included students, teachers, private job holders, NGO workers, developmental engineers, doctors, government officials, journalists, and politicians.

Our study used GOALies (GOAL) guidance manual for determining the levels of individual and community resilience developed by the International Humanitarian Agency (IHA, 2015). There are 15 consultation questions used from this manual under five thematic areas, namely governance, risk assessment, knowledge and education, risk management and vulnerability reduction, and disaster preparedness and response. These thematic areas are chosen based on physical characteristics of hazards, geomorphological characteristics of the location, as well as socio-

economic and infrastructural conditions of Bhola, as shown in Table 2. McCaul and Mitsidou (2016) used this guidance toolkit for analyzing the community resilience in Honduras.

Table 2: Thematic and focused area

	Thematic Areas	Questionnaire Features
Governance	Rights awareness and advocacy	Is the community aware of its rights and the legal obligations of government and other stakeholders that provide protection?
	Integration with development planning	Is Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) seen by the community as an integral part of plans and actions to achieve wider community goals (e.g., poverty alleviation, quality of life)?
	Access to funding and partnerships	Are there clear, agreed, and stable DRR partnerships between the community and other actors (local authorities, NGOs, businesses, etc.)?
	Inclusion of vulnerable groups	Are vulnerable groups present in the community included/represented in community decision making and management of DRR?
	Women's participation	Do women participate in community decision making and management of DRR?
	Risk Assessment	Local and scientific methods for risk awareness
Knowledge and Education	Dissemination of DRR knowledge	Are DRR knowledge and capacities being passed on to children formally through local schools and informally via oral tradition from one generation to the next?
	Knowledge and Education: Cultural attitudes and values	Do the community's cultural attitudes and values (e.g., expectations of help/self-sufficiency, religious/ideological views) enable it to adapt to and recover from shocks and stresses?
Risk Management and Vulnerability Reduction	Sustainable environmental management	Does the community adopt sustainable environmental management practices that reduce disaster risk and adapt to new risks related to climate change?
	Food and water supplies	Does the community have a secure supply of food and water and manage an equitable distribution system during disasters?
	Social protection	Does the community have access to social protection schemes to support risk reduction directly, through targeted DRR activities, and/or indirectly, through socioeconomic development activities that reduce vulnerability?
	Income and asset protection	Are household and community asset bases (income, savings and convertible property) sufficiently large and diverse to support disaster coping strategies, and are there measures to protect them against disasters?
	Infrastructure and basic services	Are the community's building infrastructure and basic services resilient to disasters (including being located in safe areas, using hazard-resistant construction methods and structural mitigation measures)?
	Land use and planning	Does the community's decision-making regarding land use and management take hazard risks and vulnerabilities into account?
Preparedness and Response	Emergency infrastructure	Are emergency shelters (purposely built or modified) accessible to community and with adequate facilities for all affected population?

The responses were recorded in Likert Scale from “no awareness (score 20)”, “some awareness but takes no action (score 40)”, “some awareness with improved capacity to act (score 60)”, “good awareness occasionally (score 80)”, and “good awareness with culture of safety (score 100)”. The responses from low (20) to high (100) represents their hazard resilient knowledge and practices in the developmental activities.

These responses (scores) were transferred into a data worksheet for perception analysis. The responses of each group were then analyzed to scrutinize the level of knowledge and practices of selected groups. In addition, these responses were analyzed for each thematic area by using the relative importance index formula in Equation 4.

$$RRRRRRRRRRRRRR RRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR NNRSSSSRR_{ij} = \frac{\sum(NN_{r,r} \times CC_{vv})}{NN_{qq} \times NN} \dots\dots\dots (4)$$

Where, N_r is the frequency of responses to scale criteria i.e., no awareness to occasional good awareness, C_v is the value of the response specific criteria i.e., 20 to 100, N_q is the number of questions under those thematic areas, and N is the total number of respondents of this thematic area (i.e., 63). Table 3 presents the analyzed scores that were converted into five different categories (0-100) and interpreted based on the IHA (2015) guidance manual.

Table 3: Interpretation of responses on resilience (IHA, 2015)

Level (Score)	1 (0-20)	2 (21-40)	3 (41-60)	4 (61-80)	5 (81-100)
Category	Minimum Resilience	Low Resilience	Medium Resilience	Resilient	High Resilience
Response pattern in the questionnaire	No awareness	Some awareness but takes no action	Some awareness with improved capacity to act	Good awareness occasionally	Good awareness with culture of safety

Results and Discussion

By analyzing the historical hazards since 1941 to 2019 as well as the questionnaire survey, our study found that cyclones are the main natural hazard in Bhola district. They strike in 1–2-year intervals, with varying severity that results in very mild to severe destruction. Floods are found to be the second common natural hazard, recurring every 3-4 years and causing mild to moderate damage. However, not all upazilas of this district suffer from this hazard at the same time. Another hazard, riverbank erosion, found to occur every year in the upazilas, as elsewhere in the coastal area of the country, often causes severe destruction to land and property.

Exposure to Natural Hazards

A 10-year (2007-2017) analysis of exposure to natural hazards in this district confirms that cyclones are the primary natural hazard, followed by floods, and riverbank erosion. In Figure 2, normalization of casualties shows that most of the unions of Bhola Sadar upazila were affected by natural hazards, and that Manpura scored lower casualties than other upazilas. On the other hand, Tazumuddin upazila was found to be most exposed to casualties, the largest number of households being affected, and the land area, as well agricultural land damaged (0.2), livestock killed (1.0), and maximum roads and bridges impaired (1.0). Manpura, Charfasson, Burhanuddin (0.5), Lalmohan (0.0) and Daulatkhan (0.0) upazilas experienced the minimum casualties. Further, the natural hazards causing the largest number of displaced people was in Charfasson, and Figure 2 shows no one was found to have migrated from Daulatkhan upazila.

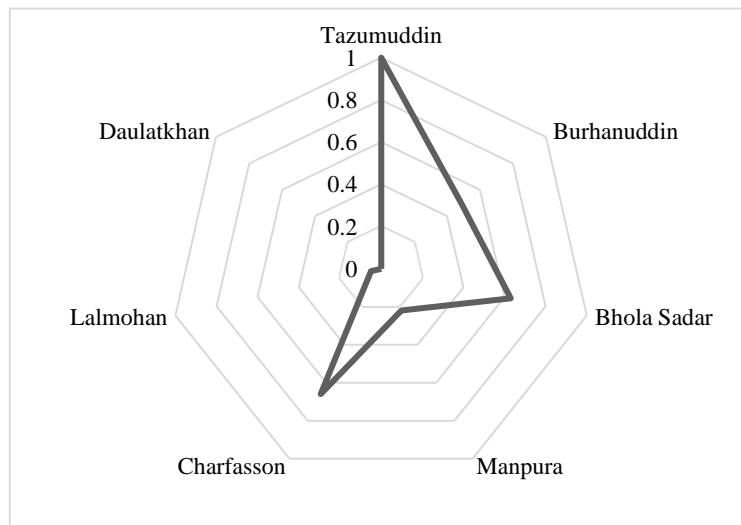


Figure 2: Exposure Score to Natural Hazards in Bhola District

Sensitivity

In terms of sensitivity, Table 4 presents the normalized value of sensitivity to show that among the seven upazilas of Bhola, Manpura has been more sensitive than other upazilas, while Charfasson has been less so.

Table 4: Normalized sensitivity scores to natural hazards at different upazilas

Sensitivity Indicators	Bhola Sadar	Burhanuddin	Char-fasson	Daulatkhan	Lalmohan	Manpura	Tazumuddin
Proportion of people living in mud houses	0.36	0.71	0.52	0.60	0.86	0.00	1.00
Proportion of people living in <i>jhupris</i>	0.00	0.04	0.24	0.09	0.03	1.00	0.14
Population density (km ²)	1.00	0.74	0.25	0.39	0.61	0.00	0.05
Proportion of people below the poverty line	0.00	0.15	1.00	0.48	0.00	0.67	0.58
Proportion of disabled people	0.43	0.57	0.71	0.71	0.14	1.00	0.00
Proportion of people dependent on agricultural profession	1.00	0.08	0.22	0.04	0.07	0.00	0.02
Proportion of floating people	1.00	0.04	0.17	0.09	0.21	0.00	0.00
Proportion of females	0.00	0.99	0.97	0.99	1.00	0.95	0.93
Proportion of aged people (>65 years)	0.91	0.45	1.00	0.76	0.67	0.91	0.00
Total normalized score	4.70	3.78	5.08	4.14	3.58	4.53	2.73
Normalization score based on total	0.84	0.45	1.00	0.60	0.36	0.77	0.00
Sensitivity rank	2	5	1	4	6	3	7

Adaptive Capacity

In terms of normalized adaptive capacity values, Table 5 shows that Manpura scored the lowest on this measure, while Lalmohan and Tazumuddin have been more adaptive.

Table 5: Normalized adaptive capacity scores to natural hazards at different upazilas

Adaptive capacity indicators	Bhola Sadar	Burhanuddin	Char-fasson	Daulatkhan	Lalmohan	Manpura	Tazumuddin
Proportion of literate people	0.32	0.39	0.32	0.00	1.00	0.13	0.21
Number of cyclone shelters	0.32	0.89	1.00	0.11	0.68	0.30	0.00
Proportion of people using hygienic sanitation	0.84	0.82	0.51	0.79	0.98	0.00	1.00
Proportion of people using safe drinking water	0.82	0.93	0.00	0.96	1.00	0.62	0.76
Proportion of people living in buildings (pukka houses)	1.00	0.55	0.35	0.60	0.35	0.00	0.25
Proportion of people above the poverty line	0.00	0.17	0.35	0.60	0.24	0.28	1.00
Proportion of people employed	0.93	0.38	1.00	0.20	0.57	0.00	0.12
Total normalized score	4.23	4.14	3.52	3.25	4.82	1.34	3.34
Normalization score based on total	0.8	0.8	0.6	0.5	1.0	0.0	0.6
Adaptive capacity rank	2	2	3	4	1	5	3

Vulnerability

From Figure 3, we can see that the vulnerability indicator shows that Manpura is the most vulnerable upazila, while Burhanuddin is the least vulnerable.

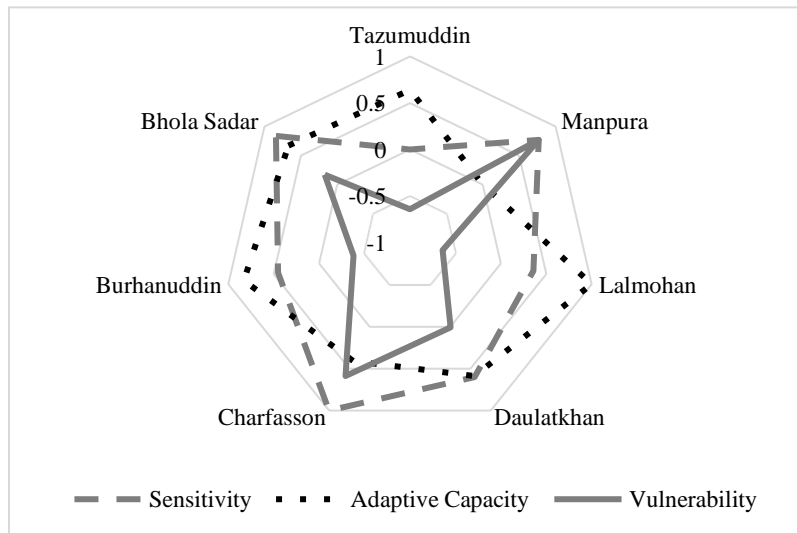


Figure 3: Vulnerability to natural hazards

Table 6: Vulnerability to natural hazards at different upazilas

Upazila	Sensitivity	Adaptive Capacity	Vulnerability	Rank
Manpura	0.77	0.00	0.77	1
Charfasson	1.00	0.41	0.59	2
Bhola Sadar	0.84	0.67	0.17	3
Daulatkhan	0.60	0.59	0.01	4
Burhanuddin	0.45	0.83	-0.38	5
Lalmohan	0.36	1.00	-0.64	6
Tazumuddin	0.00	0.64	-0.64	6

Table 6 shows that Manpura is ranked as the most vulnerable, while Lalmohan and Tazumuddin are ranked lowest in vulnerability. The degree of vulnerability is found to be determined by the adaptive capacity of each location. Even though Manpura has comparatively lower sensitive score than Charfasson, the lower adaptive capacity ranked it to be most vulnerable.

Addressing Hazard Resilient Socio-Economic and Environmental Development

For assessing the perceptions on the above issues, the sampled populations were selected to be interviewed using a semi-structured schedule at pre-appointed times. The interview questions were mostly open ended. Responses are presented in Figures six and seven.

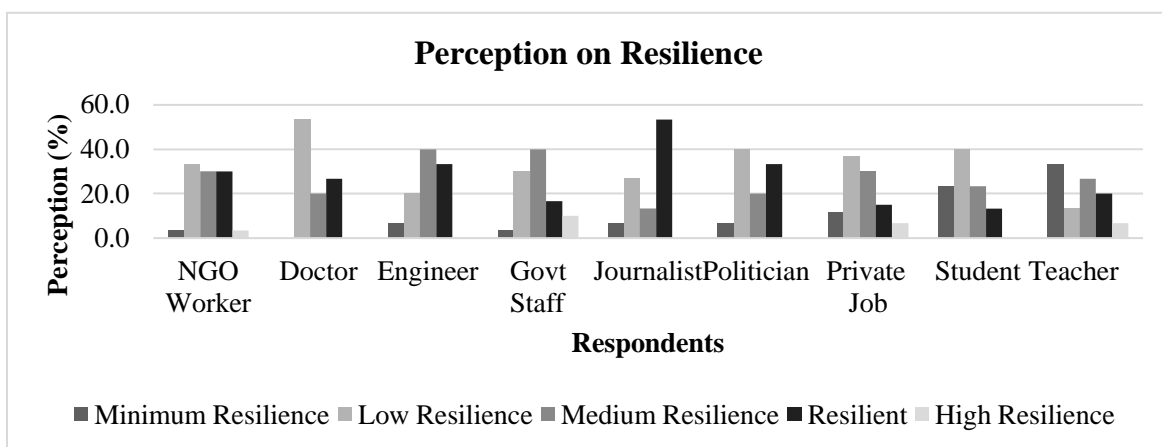


Figure 4: Perception of different groups of people regarding the resilience of Bhola

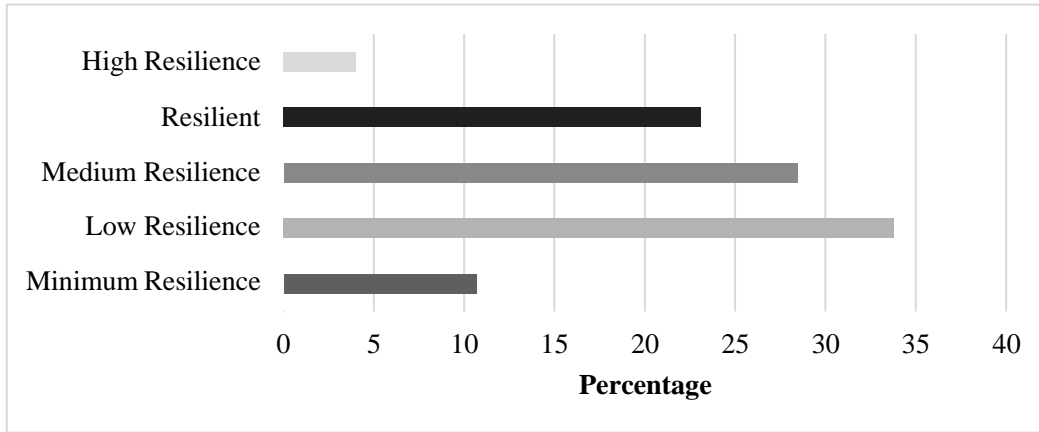


Figure 5: Overall knowledge and practices of resilience in Bhola

According to the above overall resilience score based on people’s perception, it is found that most consider climate resilience regarding natural hazards to be low in Bhola, and very few people think it is high. A significant number of people also find it to be medium.

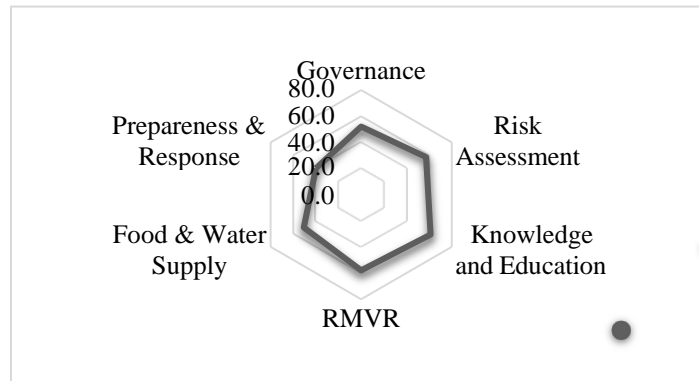


Figure 6: Resilience based on thematic areas of Bhola

There were six thematic areas on which the analysis of climate resilience in consideration of natural hazards in Bhola was conducted. Figure 8 shows that some of these values are resilient. From these scores, Table 7 shows that “knowledge and education” is resilient, and “preparedness and response” is low in resilience among the thematic areas.

Table 7: Resilience of different areas of Bhola district

Thematic Areas	Score	Category
Governance	52.0	Medium Resilience
Risk Assessment	57.3	Medium Resilience
Knowledge and Education	61.3	Resilient
Risk Management and Vulnerability Reduction	58.0	Medium Resilience
Food and Water Supply	50.7	Medium Resilience
Preparedness and Response	40.0	Low Resilience

An effective resilience framework comprises a complex but well-developed network of institutions where the government agencies, local governments, private sector, and NGOs participate to pursue a common and comprehensive goal. While this integrated network system has considerably reduced natural disasters induced casualties in Bangladesh over

the years, the economic losses could not be contained in recent disasters. Table 7 seeks to explain the resilience categories of six sectors such as governance, risk assessment, knowledge and education, risk management and vulnerability reduction, food and water supply, preparedness and response which are involved in managing disasters.

This study finds that high resilience capacity exists in knowledge and education (score 61) and low resilience capacity exists in preparedness and response (score 40). In addition, Figures 6 and 7 show that most of the general people perceived their minimum and low resilience considerations regarding development activities. Therefore, a continued willingness and ability to learn and acquire knowledge and skills is important for community resilience in Bhola, particularly for dealing with future continuous adaptation and hazard resilient development. This is consistent with the literature (e.g., Adger, 2000). Hence, enhancing the resilience capability of community people at all sectors of Bhola may enable a positive response by improving practices related to saving lives and property. This has been shown in the case of a community which has transformed to high resilience during the onset and post-event recovery from Cyclone Aila, which, despite severely impacting the southwestern coast of Bangladesh, resulted in a relatively low number of fatalities (Panda *et al.*, 2011).

Conclusion

This study has been conducted to assess the knowledge and practices of hazard resilient socio-economic and environmental development in Bhola. It has revealed that cyclones are the common natural hazards in Bhola district, followed by floods and riverbank erosion. These were the most devastating for the socio-economic conditions of local people and were found to occur every 1-2 years. Analyzing the secondary data, it is found that Bhola Sadar was mostly affected by these natural hazards, whereas Manpura was found to be less affected compared to the other upazilas. Meanwhile, Manpura was found to be more vulnerable due to its lack of adaptive capacity, whereas Lalmohan and Tazumuddin had comparatively more adaptive capacity.

In the perception study, considerable differences were found among the understanding and practices of hazard resilient socio-economic developmental activities in Bhola. The overall resilience score shows that consideration of hazard resilient activities was very low, and this was likely portrayed in the perception scores. In addition, it was also found resilience in terms of “knowledge and education” is high whereas “preparedness and response” is low among the thematic areas queried.

This heterogeneity and ambiguity of the data in this study may be overcome through the collection of current data on sensitivity and adaptive capacity indicators, as they will provide a more reliable scenario of vulnerability of different upazilas of Bhola. However, this study may be useful for enhancing the knowledge and practices of hazard resilient development that will also eventually reduce the vulnerability of Bhola and other similar geographical locations.

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Book Review

The Company Weavers of Bengal The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal 1750-1813

Hameeda Hossain

Review by: Samia Khatun
SOAS University of London
samia.khatun@soas.ac.uk

There were two sisters named Dukho and Sukh who were cotton spinners, according to a fairy tale or *rupkatha* that once popularly circulated around Mymensingh. They were daughters of a deceased *tanti* – a weaver who had left behind two wives. When a gust of wind carries away a bale of cotton and thread that the two sisters had spun with their mothers, Dukho goes on an epic journey to the moon to retrieve the cotton. She goes to visit the old woman who sits outside time forever spinning thread in the moon – *chander maer buri*. With textiles industries long shaping the economy of the Bengal delta, mentions of textiles production are ubiquitous throughout the cultural history of Bengal, *sutras* (thread) woven into *tantras* (warp) comprising the basis of important formations in South Asian intellectual history. It is the economic workings of a crucial late 18th century moment in this larger global history of Bengal textiles that Dr. Hameeda Hossain has in painstaking detail sketched in her book *The Company Weavers of Bengal*. First published in 1988, it remains the authoritative account today of the colonization and collapse of the thriving handwoven textiles industry viewed from East Bengal.

Today in my classroom, I use this book as a teaching tool. Recently when sisters Sukh and Dukho appeared in a draft chapter by Raahi Adhya, my doctoral student who is writing a dissertation on *rupkatha*, I directed her to Dr. Hossain's *Company Weavers* with a range of questions: Tell me how cultural history is connected to economic transformations that take place in the Bengal delta. How is popular imagination connected to the day-to-day lives of the people who recited and refashioned these stories? Can we connect stories of dead weavers, widowed wives, and grieving daughters chasing vanishing wealth to the “histories from below” of textiles production in Bengal? A good place to begin seeking answers to some of these questions, *Company Weavers* is a meticulously researched piece of empirical work that today offers map to the labyrinth of economic records in English, Bengali, and Persian documenting the colonization of the Bengal textiles industry by the British East India Company. From these dry archival materials, the imaginative detail with which Dr. Hossain pieces together the complex collective processes of cultivating cotton, spinning fine threads, and weaving Bengal muslin bear testament to skills in the practice of empirical history that I can only ever hope to impart to students.

Hameeda Hossain undertook the research for this book during the five years that she was living in Britain in exile following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh. Completing a PhD in History between 1977 and 1982, Dr. Hossain worked under the supervision of Dr. Tapan Raychaudhuri at Oxford University. Precisely during the years that Dr. Hossain was training in economic history, Dr. Raychaudhuri launched an important debate against the “Cambridge School” – a group of historians who in the 1980s came to be known as imperial apologists of sorts in South Asian history circles. With histories of the textiles industry often at the center of these debates in economic history, against this backdrop Dr. Hossain produced a work that quietly made numerous interventions that were ahead of their time when *Company Weavers* was first published in 1988.

A major achievement of this book that is never explicitly stated is that it operates as an important corrective to the India-centrism of economic histories of Bengal textiles. From Dr. Hossain's work, we glimpse that the very moments that are collectively remembered by modern historians shift significantly if the view is considered from East rather than West Bengal. For example, since Romesh Chunder Dutt's *Economic History of India* was published in

1902, economic historians have long grappled with the problem of famine. Dr. Hossain draws attention to the geographically uneven attention accorded to different famines which devastated colonized Bengal in the aftermath of ecological events. She writes that “the calamity of 1787-8 has not been given much attention by historians, perhaps because the floods and storms affected only the south-eastern regions” of Bengal. Yet as she notes, “the disaster was recorded in unusual detail in colonial sources,” John Taylor the British commercial resident at the Dhaka Factory writing that “in 1787 and 1788 a great number of Spinners died of famine.” Pointing out a number of these uneven disparities between the empirical evidence and emphases in South Asian historiography, between the lines of *Company Weavers* is a critique of the ways that modern historical consciousness of Bengal is profoundly India-centric – a serious problem that plagues much South Asia scholarship today and is inextricable from the dominance of the Indian nation-state in the geopolitics of the region.

Dr. Hossain’s challenge to the androcentrism of much of the economic history of South Asian textiles industries is likewise executed in particularly understated way in *Company Weavers*. At every step of her storytelling, she is attentive to the gendered division of labor that shapes the industry. The women who cleaned cotton in spaces between other forms of labor, the thread spinners drawn from every caste and class background, the forms of embroidery that created employment for different groups of women, remain at the very center of Dr. Hossain’s view throughout the book. At the time that she was writing *Company Weavers*, in the British context people politicized through various women’s movement were just beginning the task of rewriting history – a field which by its very architecture remains a profoundly masculinist discipline in its priorities and exclusions. With the early 1980s comprising the moment when feminists began entering University History departments with the hope of making interventions into how the very discipline works, Dr. Hossain’s work pre-figures some of these intellectual trends that would ultimately flower in the 1990s. The result is that *Company Weavers* does not loudly declare itself as feminist history - it simply is.

These innovations I have outlined here ultimately culminate in a larger theoretical argument that builds over the course of *Company Weavers*, challenging a key narrative that structure accounts of the modern destruction of the Bengal textiles industry. Since Karl Marx’s writings reproduced the 1834 declaration by William Bentinck, Governor General of British India, that “the bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India”, the established story across the left-right political spectrum has long been that destruction of hand-woven textiles industry in Bengal was driven by the invention of the spinning jenny and the “English cotton machine.” Hameeda Hossain’s work shows that this story is simply not borne out by the archival evidence. In doing so, she implicitly challenges a tale of technological evolution that has hidden within it a claim of European civilizational superiority – the story that in the end *they* had the better tools. Operating as an invitation to examine this racist fiction in greater detail, *Company Weavers* anticipated some of the central questions that would shape the discipline of history in the decades that followed - questions that are being raised yet again today by new generations seeking to decolonize Historical storytelling.

Book Review

Good Economics for Hard Times: Better Answers to Our Biggest Problems

Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo

Review by: Mohammad Muaz Jalil
University of Ottawa
mjali044@uottawa.ca

In this book¹, Nobel Laureate economists Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo cover key issues facing us, from rising inequality to migration, climate crisis, and more. The authors provide an evidence-rich, balanced, and nuanced picture of what we know: profound repercussion of “stickiness in economics”², importance of dignity, and centrality of human well-being.

For a book with only eight substantive chapters, it includes over 650 references, drawing on cutting edge research. Each chapter typically deals with a core issue such as trade, growth, or climate, providing evidence and exploring both good and bad economics. All chapters conclude with discussions on various policy options. The authors show humility by recognizing that they may not have all the answers and with humor acknowledge that economists can often get things wrong. But they say, “there is plenty of good economics to go around” (p. 8).

The introductory chapter discusses how people have lost faith in economists; a survey in UK found that only 25% trusted economists (p. 4). Chapter 2 challenges the conventional wisdom around migration: public in developed countries overestimate the volume of immigration. It discusses that low-skill immigrants benefit local population, unlike high-skilled migrants, which is more mixed in impact. The arrival of low-skilled immigrants 1) boosts local consumption, 2) slows down mechanization, and 3) opens up new opportunity as industries relocate. The authors could have explored further the cultural dimension of anti-immigrant stances, and rise in populism³, rather than focusing mainly on traditional economics-based explanation⁴.

Gains from trade, examined in Chapter 3, is more ambiguous in its presentation; evidence suggests that trade liberalization may increase inequality. Path-breaking research by economist Petia Topalova showed that increased exposure to trade slowed down poverty reduction. Brand, reputation, and network often act as trade barriers. Trade is, thus, not a magic bullet, and less so for large economies because economies can be “sticky” (e.g., people are unwilling to relocate when jobs disappear) and the negative impact of trade amplifies gradually. Thus, governments need to work on redistribution and job training, and reduce relocation cost.

Chapter 4 on preference is considered by Duflo as the most important chapter and her favorite⁵. Here the book’s focus pivots⁶ from neoclassical economics towards other fields, such as psychology, sociology, and behavioral economics. Contrary to economic theory⁷, consumers often do not know their preference and can be influenced. For example, there is an experiment showing bankers cheating when their banker identity is activated as opposed to their identity as a person belonging to a family. The chapter introduces concepts of statistical discrimination, collective action, homophily, and echo chambers, among others. It concludes by arguing that stable consistent preferences are rarely true, and interaction does not reduce prejudice, nor does confronting people with facts. Smart policies such as zoning for peace or diverting people towards policy related debate than ideological may be more helpful in changing behavior. However, the authors provide limited evidence to justify their efficacy.

Chapter 5 on growth is the most heavily cited and argues that instead of “Chasing the Growth Mirage”, we should focus on delivering well-being. Total factor productivity and spill-over from technology ideas are important but cannot fully account for growth. Efficient allocation of misallocated resources probably provides the greatest momentum, but it is limited, especially when approaching a technological frontier. The authors argue that countries

can remove egregious economic waste but should focus on improving wellbeing. They warn against industrial policies, but then do not conclude on how to remove such “egregious waste”. Furthermore, economic growth was successful in lifting over 1 billion people out of poverty⁸, and the number of low-income countries has halved to 34 just between 2001 and 2013⁹. Hence growth is still necessary and certainly not as elusive as the authors’ purport.

Chapter 6 on climate is the shortest and probably the weakest chapter. It makes a compelling case against developing countries’ complacencies towards carbon mitigation, notwithstanding the fact that developed countries are historically responsible for pollution. Technology solutions are often too optimistic; fundamentally we need to reduce our energy “addiction”. There is discussion around reframing the debate, the Green New Deal, and carbon taxation but it is not clear how to budget such programs.

Chapter 7 discusses rise of automation and high finance. Duflo and Banerjee inject a healthy dose of realism, stating that there can be too much automation; jobs in the middle may disappear, leaving us with very low-skill/high-skill jobs and inequality. Innovative solutions such as the “Robot Tax” or “Universal Basic Income (UBI)” may be difficult to implement. Unlike in Europe, the growth of high financial sectors in the United States or United Kingdom misallocated talent, and, due to a “contagion effect”, inflated CEO salaries. Evidence suggests that increased taxation reduces the use of salary as an incentive, thus reducing pre-tax inequality. Rising inequality can create social erosion, generate backlash, and rise of populism. The authors discuss these implications in the end but could have elaborated further on how inequality impacts the “common good”, eroding societal cohesion¹⁰.

Chapter 8 is an impassioned argument for state legitimacy and argues that we should limit our obsession around corruption¹¹. Governments deal with difficult problems thus likelihood of corruption is higher. Economists have eroded people’s trust in government negatively impacting those who work there. The authors show that government-led cash transfers to the poor can do it; cash transfers can reduce inequality and the poor do not become unproductive. Furthermore, increasing taxes does not reduce work incentive. Chapter 9 is rich in policy prescriptions and supports smart social protection policies such as the Ultra UBI. They also discuss the importance of human dignity and how individuals associate their identity with work; simple income-based social protections (FLEXICURITY) are insufficient – people need respect, and to not be demonized. Transitions are costly, and economies are sticky, hence social programs should support transition: place-based economics may be sensible (e.g., EU’s agricultural policies), and subsidizing the old while facilitating youth to retrain and relocate easily. It ends with a call for action, stating “Economics is too important to be left to Economists” (p. 247).

The book has succeeded in energizing debate: left-wing economist Varoufakis finds the book’s policy prescriptions “unconvincing”, showcasing “demise of capitalism”¹²; at the opposite spectrum, the Wall Street Journal suggests that the prescriptions are “unconvincing” precisely because they are “ambitious” and envisages the “wholesale redesign of social programs” of our economies¹³. However, the book is well researched and encyclopedic, focusing on the message rather than conclusion, lucidly explaining the economic reasoning and finally, “Making Economics Great Again”, which is the title of Chapter 1.

Endnotes

¹ Banerjee, A. V. & Duflo, E. (2019). *Good economics for hard times: Better answers to our biggest problems*. Penguin, UK.

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⁴ Example of Economics-based Explanation: Rodrik, D. (2017). *The economics of populism*. VOX CEPR, available at <https://voxeu.org/article/economics-populist-backlash>

⁵ Duflo, E. (2020). *The 15th James S. Palmer Lecture Series with Professor Esther Duflo* [Video, 20-21 minute]. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7tG26obvuI>

⁶ *ibid*

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¹⁰ Sandel, M. J. (2020). *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* London: Allen Lane.

¹¹ Duflo has made similar argument in other panel discussions. "Making Growth Work for the Poor", video of panel at World Bank-IMF Spring Meetings, April 2019; Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EEBWAGYT090&feature=youtu.be>

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¹³ Easterly, W. (2019, November 17). Good Economics for Hard Times Review: Sticky Markets, Tricky Solutions. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/good-economics-for-hard-times-review-sticky-markets-tricky-solutions-11574021736>

Book Review

Corona Tale: A Bangladeshi Family's Pen War Against the Pandemic

Editors: Wameq A. Raza, Ahmed Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury

Review by: Munir Quddus
Prairie View A&M University
muquddus@pvamu.edu

The book, *Corona Tale: A Bangladeshi Family's Pen War Against the Pandemic*, is an interesting intellectual journey of a family during one of the most disruptive events in recent history. The Corona virus induced a global pandemic that has shaken the global economy and society as few events have done in history. Despite the spectacular gains in science and technology, the virus has laid bare the extreme vulnerability of human civilization to the vagaries of nature. Although, the miracles of modern science eventually offered an answer with the simultaneous invention of several highly effective vaccines, the social and economic toll is still catastrophic. As of today (August 22, 2021), much of the world including 93.5 percent of the Bangladeshis are yet to be vaccinated. There have been 1.5 million reported infections and 25,000 corona virus-related deaths. The future still looks uncertain, if not dark and foreboding.

The 256-page book (with 19 pages of photographs) features 43 chapters of narrative. A majority of the chapters are op-ed writings of a diverse group of authors. The main author and co-editor is Dr. Mushtaque Chowdhury, formerly a senior leader of BRAC and one of the foremost experts in public health. He has served as the founding dean of the James P. Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka. Besides his work in Bangladesh, he holds an appointment as a Professor of Clinical Population and Family Health at the prestigious Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, USA.

Among the chapters, four are based on lectures Professor Chowdhury presented (virtually) at Harvard University, the London School of Economics, the Chatham House in London, and the National Defense College in Dhaka. There are a few chapters in Bengali, but the majority of the materials in the book are in English, and thus accessible to the global reader.

The topics covered range from early concerns by public health officials on how to contain the spread of the disease - the significance of wearing masks, the importance of social distancing, the emphasis on the subdued observance of religious festivals, the vital necessity of implementing a universal health coverage (UHC) program, the need to establish maternity leave coverage during COVID-19, a brief history of vaccines in Bangladesh, and the urgency of introducing big policy reforms in public health care, given the crisis triggered by the pandemic. In these writings, we have the pleasure of listening to the voices of just not scholars, professors, economists, public health experts, but also mothers, children (four and seven years old), working spouses, social activists, and ordinary citizens.

An extensive foreword by noted economist, Professor Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, sets the tone and adds to the book's significance as an informed chronicle of the times. The introduction by the editor, Dr. Wameq Raza, a member of the Chowdhury family who is a trained economist working at the World Bank office in Bangladesh, further captures the essence of the manuscript.

The subject itself is of global interest and grave significance. It is much more than what the statistics are able to capture – an estimated 207 million infected and 4.3 million dead in 222 nations. According to a vaccine tracker by Reuters, the statistics for Bangladesh on this day of August 22, 2021, are as follows: Among the 1.46 million infected, there have been a reported 25,143 Corona virus-related deaths. Nearly 22.45 million vaccination shots have been administered, which translates to roughly 6.5 percent of the population receiving both doses. In reality, according to experts, the infection and death numbers must be adjusted upwards perhaps by a factor of three to five, given the lack

of hospitalization. This is especially true for low-income groups and rural populations, in the absence or dearth of a vital events registration system nationwide.

The uniqueness of the book is that it presents stories of real people in their own words. The intimate glimpse into their personal lives provides a better understanding of the impact of a global crisis compared to the picture based only on statistics. After all, this is a personal crisis for hundreds of millions of families across the globe. From this perspective, the book is a chronicle of our times, a piece of history. A hundred years from now, historians would be amazed to realize how close the human civilization came to a global catastrophe.

The question is what lessons did we as humans learn from this experience, and especially in the context of Bangladesh how did the political leaders, policymakers, bureaucrats, business leaders, and ordinary citizens respond to prepare and avert future disasters. This and other narratives in the future, one hopes, will help move the national and global leaders to build up resiliency against future pandemics and natural disasters. Given the unfolding environmental catastrophe and as humans continue to burden the environment in a way that is clearly unsustainable, no doubt we will see natural disasters in increasing frequency and magnitude.

Some have compared the pandemic with a natural disaster. Similar to a Category 4 storm or cyclone, the pandemic severely disrupts both life and livelihoods. A preliminary study by Harvard economists estimated that for the US economy the cost of the pandemic may be in excess of \$15 trillion. However, unlike a natural disaster, the impact of a pandemic is notoriously difficult to predict, since much depends on how ordinary people respond. The case of vaccine hesitancy and rebellion against mask mandates in America and elsewhere shows the complex nature of societal response to a pandemic. The public health measures to “prevent” the spread of the disease have varied from highly effective in some nations to disastrously ineffective in others, including some rich nations. From the diversity and inclusion lens, the authors note that the wealthy nations are able to purchase the vaccines, stockpile them, and immunize a large section of their willing population, while poor nations have been largely left to fend for themselves. Today, less than two percent of the citizens in Africa have received immunization

The authors point to some challenges in the context of scholarly research and intervention in the health care sector of Bangladesh. On top of the list is a lack of reliable data, essential to designing an effective policy to the crisis (p. 92). On some of the early struggles and failures, the authors point out that the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association leadership did not make sound decisions, putting at risk the health and lives of its most vulnerable workers (p. 66). Similarly, many mosque administrators were slow to implement strategies, such as maintaining social distancing, wearing masks, among others, to stop the spread of the disease

On the history of vaccinations in Bangladesh, Mushtaque Chowdhury writes about the Expanded Program on Immunization (EPI) as one the great largely unrecognized attainments of Bangladesh in the past 20 years. From 2% coverage in mid-1980s, in five years it rose to 70% coverage of the entire population. Today it stands at 90%. This reflects positively on the depth of the management and health expertise present in the country, which could be harnessed for a successful vaccination campaign for COVID-19 immunization. The NGOs, especially BRAC, have played a prominent role in this vaccination effort.

The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed gaping holes in the public health care system in Bangladesh. Mushtaque Chowdhury makes the case that this crisis – painful as it is – may be looked upon as an opportunity to take some big decisions for the welfare of the people of Bangladesh. Very few decisions will be as impactful as that of Universal Health Coverage or UHC (76-79; 80-86).

According to health economists, the rate of return on investment (ROI) in public health is extraordinarily high in Bangladesh - from 900 percent to 2,200 percent by some estimates. A number of nations, both developing and developed, have implemented UHC policy taking advantage of past crises, which can be a societal motivator. Thailand after the Asian Financial Crisis or Rwanda after the 1994 genocide present case studies of developing nations where leaders have used a crisis as an opportunity (p. 78).

Today, the health system in Bangladesh is based on voluntary private spending. The vision of UHC is to move to a health care program based on mandatory public spending by the government. Bangladesh currently spends only 0.4% of its GDP on public health. The authors recommend that the country set a target of spending 2.5% of the GDP on public health, which will be phased in over two to three years. The basic package will include coverage for the entire population for basic and preventative health care measures such as vaccination. Once Universal Care is adopted, those who can afford will seek high quality private care at a premium, freeing up public health care for the ordinary citizens.

Fortunately, Bangladesh is uniquely qualified to move in the direction of a universal publicly funded health care system, where all citizens can participate and benefit. The confluence of factors to support the UHC (p. 84) include: a committed political leadership; a fast-growing economy that is the envy of our neighbors; a solid but growing health care infrastructure including physicians and health care givers, and a sound law and order environment

This is not a scholarly book, nor was it meant to be. If one is looking for a literature review and extensive footnotes or equations, statistical tables, and analysis, one would be disappointed. Finally, there are millions of households in Bangladesh, both urban and rural, with much less favorable financial circumstances than the Raza family and must have had a very difficult experience facing the pandemic.

This book is highly accessible for the average citizen. I suspect access was an important consideration for the editors and authors. By designing and investing in an inclusive health care system, the nation will take a giant step towards improving the welfare of its people. This will improve the country's resiliency, and prepare Bangladesh to deal with the next pandemic, when it arrives. If the authors are able to persuade the government to move in this direction, that will be a fitting legacy for this book.

Journal of Bangladesh Studies ISSN: 1529-0905

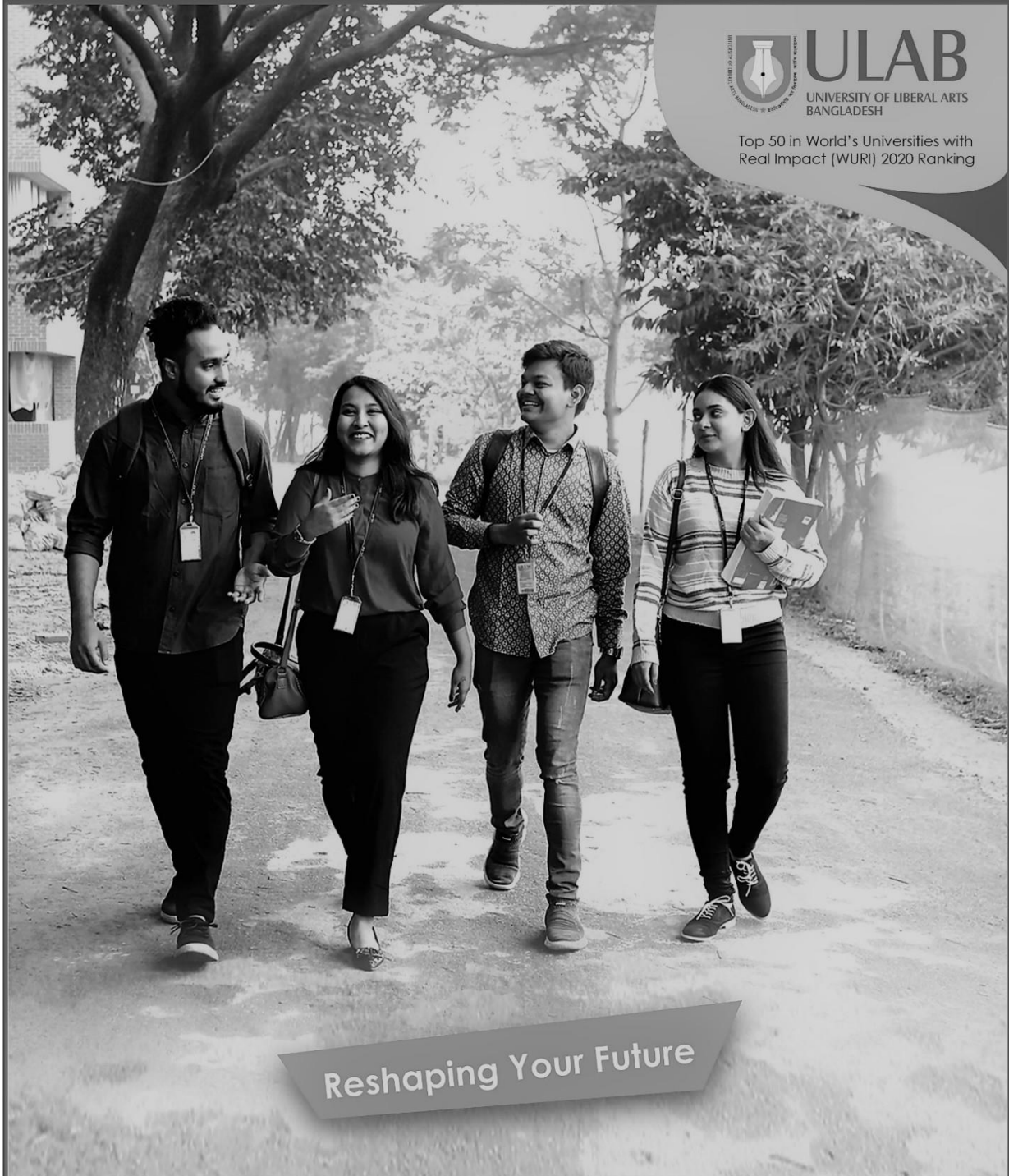
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