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# Book Review: “*Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence*” by Ali Riaz

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This is a timely contribution about the post-liberation history of Bangladesh which has been turbulent to say the least; but amidst many controversies, the post-liberation history of Bangladesh offers a rich case study of both development and maldevelopment in the global capitalist order-disorder dialectic. It is written by a leading scholar of politics in Bangladesh, and former political activist from the generation that came after the generation that took part directly in the liberation war itself. The lessons from this brief history have much relevance for our war-torn, tragic times. Needless to say, the post-liberation history of Bangladesh like all contemporary histories of our world remains a work-in-progress and it is too early to pass a final judgment.

The book – aside from an introductory and a concluding chapter – has seven substantive chapters. Chapter one begins dramatically by referring to the besieged capital of East Pakistan, Dhaka on 16 December, 1971. The narrative here can be treated as a brief and cursory background including the six points, the main events leading to March 26, 1971 and some controversies related to the declaration of independence. There are intriguing claims regarding a convergence of middle-class and working-class interests and the characteristics of a state in formation. All these require extended treatment but do not fall within the scope of the present volume which is clearly about the post-liberation history of Bangladesh. Still, the major omission here would seem to be a discussion and analysis of the eleven points and comparison of the six points and eleven points programs. The latter, while not exhaustive, did try to address some of the class demands of the workers and peasants and was accepted by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and other progressive Awami League leaders almost immediately after it came out during the mass movement of 1969.

Chapters 2 to 7 discuss, admirably, in a relatively short span, important topics in chronological order. The rise and demise of authoritarianism covers the period from 1972 to 1991 in less than 40 pages. This excellent summary of events misses something by its extreme brevity of analysis. Many details from the 1972 to events leading up to the August 15 coup of 1975 and the other

two coups, the role of JSD and the machinations in the military as well as the roles of other countries, esp. India, US, USSR, Pakistan and other Islamic countries are given short shrift. A more complete history, yet to be written, will need to address these gaps.

Chapter 3 is written in a similar vein. Chronologically, it covers the period from 1991-2015. The main objective, it appears, is to describe the difficulties of building an institutionalized democracy in a developing country. In the author's view, the initial optimism remains unfulfilled and democracy retreats rather than advances.

The next four chapters can be read as analyses of the complex processes unleashed during the few decades of independence of Bangladesh. For example, thematically, chapter 4 deals with “democracy: aspiration, nature and quality”. There is much of value from a political theory perspective here. As a contributor to the field of deepening democracy and democratic theory, I find much to admire here. However, somehow the discussion remains limited to the narrow field of political science. Thinkers such as Rawls, Sen, Nussbaum and extensions of a deeper form of liberal and social democratic theory are not discussed.

In the following chapters, the discussion of important themes such as political parties and national/cultural identity/identities offer much valuable analysis. Clearly, like all imagined national communities, Bangladesh needs to address the question of multiple identities and the potential for a monolithic *Bangalee* nationalism to become oppressive to other non-*Bangalee* groups. There are several deep issues connected with the construction of alternative modernities in this context.

As Debesh Roy, one of the most original thinkers in *Bangla* about novel and novelization reminds us, there were at least two modernities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bangla literature. The modernity of *Bankim* and *Madhushudan*, based largely on European models (more specifically, romantic models) in fiction and poetry won out over a more carnivalesque, self-parodying version started by *Ishwar Gupta* and *Hutom*.<sup>1</sup> This was not accidental. As Roy explains:

In his [Gupta's] construction of a poetic foot by mixing English words, we might have been able to read the secret autobiography of the *Bangalee* middleclass of Kolkata. This self-reportage is what made him so acceptable, and ultimately this same self-reportage is what became a liability. Without the literary flourishes of Romanticism, this poetry in reality was simply the alter ego of prose, a reportage where the *Bangalee* reader could not hide his own true face from himself.... However, 'the boy who has read A-B<sup>2</sup> in college' has become mature by then---he no longer wants to be a figure of fun in *Ishwar Gupta*. Therefore, the modernity that started with Gupta Kavi, the account of that same modernity with honest and forceful language became unacceptable to the *Bangalee* society.<sup>3</sup>

Although Roy does not refer to the further problem of Muslim modernism and modernity in Bengal, many of the leaders of Bangladesh nationalist movements were motivated by ideas of creating an Islamic modernity and

justice under the influence of leaders like Abul Hashim in pre-1947 Bengal. Ideas of post-1917 socialism were also in the air. The complex and somewhat contradictory ideas of nationalism, socialism, democracy, etc. that came together and then came apart in the post-liberation history of Bangladesh require much more detailed treatment than one can find in Ali Riaz's book. But he has broached these issues with clarity and set the stage for further discussions among those scholars who mainly read and write in English. Riaz's book deserves a wide readership and will generate valuable critical response and discussion.

## Endnotes

1. Debesh Roy, *Uponnyash Niye (On Novel)*, De's Publishing, Calcutta, 1991, p.3.
2. Refers to the degree *Ars Baccalaureate*
3. Ibid. p. 8. (my translation)