BOOK—REVIEW


The land of Bangladesh (former East Pakistan and East Bengal) has been one of the most underdeveloped, and impoverished areas of the Sub-continent. Poverty and destitution of the Bengali Muslims remained proverbial under the British rule as the famous report of W. W. Hunter testifies. The Muslims, after the loss of their rule (in 1757) gradually sank in the morass of poverty, illiteracy, disease and general social decline; and the sectors of economy, education, politics etc. were captured by the more educated and rich upper classes of Hindus. The struggle for Pakistan was not only motivated by the ideological and cultural differences of the two communities but was also significantly embedded in the economic reality—the Bengali masses longed for a decent human existence when at least their basic necessities would be realized. The establishment of Pakistan was the culmination of this struggle.

The Book under review does not deal with the struggle of independence for Pakistan, nor does it concern itself with the post 1947 political history of East Pakistan, but rather it recounts the political history of Bangladesh after 1971. The narration of events is kaleidoscopic and highly interesting since the treatment is penetrating and comprehensive and seeks to discuss the problem in the broader political, economic and ideological perspective.

The main thesis of the book, as the title suggests, is that the only justification for an 'independent' Bangladesh as claimed by the Awami Leaguers, was the economic/political emancipation of the down-trodden Bengalis from the bourgeois rulers of Pakistan. But, as the 'independent' Bangladesh fell into the whirlpool of political intrigues and into the clutches of Indian rulers, soon disillusionment came to the Bangladeshis that this
freedom was a deception, that independence was a chimera and a strata-
gem of the Awami Leaguers to exploit the Bengali masses. Bangladesh be-
came ‘free’ in 1971: “But where, one asks in vain,” say the authors, “is the
freedom which was promised to the people? Political freedom, econo-
ic freedom, cultural freedom? On the contrary, every day that passes
brings fresh evidence of Bangladesh’s subservience to India on the political
front: its economic powerlessness in the face of Indian pressure, and its
inability to preserve its cultural identity against the onslaughts of Brahmanical
tyranny.” (p. 246).

Dr. Matiur Rahman was educated at the Universities of Dacca
and London. He is a student of international political movements. His
earlier books, From Consultation to Confrontation—A Study of the All
Indian Muslim League in British Indian Politics (London: Luzac, 1971)
and Bangladesh Today (London: News and Media, 1977) are well known.
He is the editor of the Journal The Scanner.

Naeem Hasan is a researcher and journalist. He is a former editor
of two Bengali journals—Awaz and Nishan. He is also the author of the
book: Bangladesh Tragedy: Through the Eyes of Foreign Journalists
(London 1977). Both the authors claim to be the eye witnesses to the
Bangladesh ‘tragedy.’

The recent history of Bangladesh (from 1971 to 1980) is full of
swift and rapid political developments, upheavals, military coups and in-
ternal changes. A critical and objective examination of political and his-
torical phenomena of such a short duration is highly hazardous from
scholarly point of view. Therefore many hypotheses and questions of the
authors raised in various chapters remain unconfirmed and unanswered.
Obviously the authors, for their evidence, depend mainly on the periodic
literature—daily newspapers, weeklies, etc. most of which are politically
oriented and biased as far as political changes in the developing countries
are concerned.

The Book comprises eight well-written and fully-documented chap-
ters. The first chapter ‘Retribution and Lawlessness’ narrates the brutal-
ties perpetuated by the political opponents on the helpless victims who were
suspect of sympathy with Pakistan. This lawlessness and political chaos
during the first thirty months of Bangladesh took a heavy toll of human life and turned the entire country into a slaughter-house. The authors, like other critics of Awami League, believe that the reign of terror unleashed by the rulers was meant to divert people’s attention from their miserable economic plight. The Awami League had promised the people a Sonar (golden) Bangla but they got nothing but “the dull deadening depression of daily failure and suffering”.

The authors assert that economic ruin, political violence, social crimes, and corruption were the symptoms of a deeper malaise: behind all the political activity, social change, there was no social philosophy, no ideology, no aim, no purpose and no plan on which to build the socio-economic structure of an independent Bangladesh. The whole country was a ship adrift, without its rudder and without any direction.

In this atmosphere of aimlessness, political in-fighting and intrigues were the natural concomitants. The second chapter analyses the struggle of the political parties and groups immediate before and after the emergence of Bangladesh. The authors contend that Awami league was actually a conglomorate, a political party of four different groups with mixed political leanings: the Bangladesh student’s League, the Awami Jubo (youth) League, the Jatiyo shramik League (National workers League) and the Awami ‘Ulamā’ Party. The Awami League’s concept of an economic system was a sort of bureaucratic socialism which stood for nationalization of commercial banks and insurance companies, large-scale industries and a large part of foreign trade. These measures, however, did not result in increasing the national production, but instead, immensely increased the expenses of administration. The rate of inflation rose rapidly.

About the Islamic parties, the authors say that the political situation immediately after the birth of Bangladesh was not good for those parties which were inclined towards Islamic polity like Muslim League, Jamā’at-e-Islāmī, Niẓām-e-Islām, Pakistan Democratic party, the Krishak Sramik Party. These parties were banned by Mujib, their leaders and workers were arrested, persecuted, imprisoned or killed. Freedom was allowed only to those parties which were secular and socialist in their political programmes (p. 35).
The National Awami Party, (Bhashani group) was, according to the authors, a powerful political factor (after Awami League) because of Mawlana Abdul Hamid Bhashani’s personal charisma and prestige among the rural and industrial workers. Bhashani’s concept of political and economic ideology however lacked clarity and coherence. This had made NAP a disunited political group since it included in its fold many groups with different shades of political ideas. NAP was staunchly opposed to India. (pp. 42-43).

One common trait of other leftist parties like Bangladesh Samajbadi Dal, Communist Party of Bangladesh etc. was their continuous fragmentation into splinter groups which had transformed them into a weak opposition to the ruling party (p. 45).

In them were some revolutionary parties, like the East Bengal Proletarian party. But these parties, and factions, the authors think, were concerned only with capturing political power by any means. (p. 49). All these major political parties, including the Awami League recognized the four basic principles of state: nationalism, secularism, socialism and democracy; however each party emphasized that principle which suited its immediate political ends. (pp. 49-50).

These principles were interpreted differently by different parties, for example, Awami League took Socialism to be a type of state capitalism, in which state owned all factors of production. (p. 51). The authors think that all these parties were after power and none cared about the plight of the suffering masses.

All this shows that there was no viable alternative to Mujib as there was not a single capable political leader to lead the large masses. (p. 55). In this atmosphere general elections were held on 7th March 1973. Awami League captured 281 seats out of 300. The opposition accused the ruling party of rigging the votes and of malpractices. Mujib issued emergency laws to increase his power. He curtailed the fundamental rights of the citizens. The government could detain people without trial. The political parties reacted and tried to forge a united front against Mujibism and Mujib’s dictatorship.
In the local bodies elections of December 1973, it was guessed, about 75 p.c. candidates affiliated to the Awami League were defeated. This was the symptom of growing widespread discontent and popular opposition to the Awami League rule.

The third chapter ‘Bottomless Breadbasket’ is the most interesting part of the book as it gives a detailed analysis of the Bangladesh economy and the problems it faces.

Under the Britishers since 1757 when they occupied the area, East Bengal remained one of the most backward, underdeveloped and poor land in the Sub-continent. The entire economy, education and other important social and cultural departments remained in the hands of rich Hindus who exploited the poor Bengali Muslims. It remained neglected till 1947 when Pakistan came into existence. During its existence as East Pakistan, the authors contend, East Bengal became a prosperous land in centuries when an infra-structure for large-scale industries and education was laid. (p. 71). By 1971 East Pakistan had 600 major industries and many universities, colleges and schools, and dozens of hospitals, 3000 miles of metalled road in 1971 and its power capacity rose to 100,000 K.W. The secession has left East Bengal weak and miserable and exposed again to Indian domination and exploitation from which it had liberated itself in 1947 as an important part of the federation of Pakistan. Now food scarcity, starvation and malnutrition were again staring Bangladesh in the aftermath of ‘independence’.

The jute industry suffered. Nationalization of jute industry in March 1972, according to the authors, paralysed the industry. (78-9). The tea industry also declined. There was a general deterioration in the industrial system of Bangladesh. “The Awami League rulers had bartered away the economic resources of the country to India”. (p. 87). The economy of Bangladesh and its trade began to be dominated by Indian big business interests. Mawlana Bhashani had to shout “not only the border areas, but the entire country was turned into a ‘smuggler haven’.” (p. 89).

The economic stagnation affected not only the lower classes but it also hit badly the middle classes. The birth of Bangladesh had increased
sufferings of the broad masses. Wide-spread corruption made life unbearable for the people.

The Awami League leaders in general belonged to the middle class. The authors lucidly describe how this petty bourgeoisie became rich soon after the establishment of Bangladesh. The upper classes joined hands with these elements and looted the wealth of East Bengal in collusion with the big business of India.

According to the authors, the purpose of Indian trade agreements with Bangladesh was to subject the Bangladesh market to India. The fourth chapter describes the political relations of Bangladesh with India. The title 'In India's stifling Embrace' is too realistic.

Chapter Five: 'One Man Rule' portrays the method by which Mujib turned himself into a dictator. He raised Jatiyo Rakhi Bahini (National Security Force) with Indian help, in order to keep an absolute control on the country and its people.

In the Chapter on "Coup and Counter-coups" the book narrates the revolts and mutinies against Mujib, against Khalid Musharraf, and finally against Taher by the late Ziaur Rahman. The dream of 'socialist revolution' by JSD (Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal) was shattered by Ziaur Rahman. Taher was sentenced to death and was later hanged for inciting the army to revolt against the government. The authors think that Ziaur Rahman had betrayed his friend Taher who had previously saved his life.

Chapter Seven, 'Military Dictatorship' describes how Ziaur Rahman who had taken very active role in the rebellion against the Pakistan Army and, later, after 'liberation' was promoted quickly, played one military faction against the other and ultimately emerged as a strong-man. He manoeuvred to keep power in his own hands at all costs. He succeeded in convincing India that if he was removed, an extreme group—Communists or Islamists—would take over Bangladesh.

The last chapter 'General in Mufti' narrates the way how Major Gen. Ziaur Rahman was Compelled to associate some civilians with his basically military rule.
The authors conclude that Bangladesh cannot survive as a client state of India, therefore it has to develop relations—economic and political—with Pakistan and other developing Muslim countries. The Bangladeshis, after their break with Pakistan in 1971, have come to realize that 'independence' has brought them nothing. Bangladesh has once again become the hinterland to Calcutta (as before 1947).

Thus the eight chapters of the Book tell the pathetic story of Bangladesh up to 1980, from Mujib to Major-General Ziaur Rahman who has been accused by the authors of having a Machiavellian disposition.

These judgements on the personality of Ziaur Rahman appear to be too harsh. All developing countries, in particular the Muslim societies, are experiencing similar political, social and economic processes. Mere political freedom does not solve all social and economic problems: poverty of the masses, economic development, capital formation, re-distribution of wealth, decolonization of economic structures. Lack of participation of the masses in the decision-making process, illiteracy, and disease are some of the colossal issues facing any leader of a developing country. The hegemony of super-powers and economic control of developing economies by international monopoly corporations are the hurdles which block these leaders' paths. It is only the future historians who can give an objective and correct judgement of Ziaur Rahman's proper role in the history of Bangladesh. After all some of his services to the country cannot be denied.

Wherever the authors state that Islam has not been restored to its rightful position in the political affairs of the Bangladesh State (p. 215) they are not clear as to what they mean by it. Mere calling something Islamic does not make it Islamic unless all fundamental principles of Islam are implemented to ameliorate the socio-economic conditions of the people at large.

Despite the authors' unnecessary denigration of some Bangladeshi leaders, the book under review gives a matter of fact analysis of the recent political developments in Bangladesh and helps the reader to understand the problems Bangladesh faces today. One single feature which uniquely characterises the authors' approach is their deep feeling and
conscientious sympathy for the suffering Bengali people who have been labouring hard to make their land a Sonar Bangla but so far their efforts have remained unfruitful.

The book contains six relevant appendices: an interview with Mujibur-Rehman by Oriana Fallaci; a speech by Mahmud Ali (in 1975) given in East London; a statement by Air Vice Marshal M.G. Tawab (1977); a statement by Col. K. A. Rashid (1975); an appeal to the delegates to the Islamic Foreign Minister’s Conference, Tripoli, (1977), and finally an excerpt from *The Times of India*, New Delhi, of 12th April 1980, which eulogises the important political mission of Ziaur Rahman in Bangladesh.

The Book also contains a useful bibliography and an index.

Islamabad

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