themselves in a battle that was not of their making and suffered death or imprisonment as a result.

Zayyāt places his fingers on a major problem in the contemporary Arab and Muslim worlds: How to deal with Islamist movements? As a lawyer, Zayyāt does not believe that repression is the solution, and that the 9/11 tragedy has given an upper hand to dictatorial regimes in the Muslim world to perpetrate more oppression against Islamist movements and other oppositional political and religious forces. I believe that one has to embark on a careful examination of the roots of violence in contemporary Arab and Muslim societies. However, Zayyāt does not dwell much on this point. Clearly, the Arab and Muslim worlds have been plagued by tremendous social, economic, and political difficulties that produced violent movements like the Jihād and the Jamā‘ah Islāmiyyah. The increasing authoritarianism of the political elite and the increasing gaps between the haves and have-nots in the Arab world are not likely to mitigate the problem of violence but will instead permit it to fester. Finally, the unlimited war on terror declared by the Bush administration is not helpful in dealing with the problems either. The American occupation of Iraq is certainly going to enhance the position of extremist Islamist movements in the Muslim world.

Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘


Jeremy Seabrook’s most recent book, Freedom Unfinished, deals with development in Bangladesh and in it he contends that the victory of the liberation war was never fully realized. Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, a military dictatorship was established that had the support of religious fundamentalists. This book is an exploration of the intersection of economic oppression, religious fundamentalism, and dysfunctional governance. Seabrook argues that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are the primary means by which the poor resist the power structures of the rich and
religious fundamentalists. He contends that religion has become politicized and this politicization of religion is the primary cause of economic failure.

The format of Seabrook’s book is an interesting collection of interviews he conducted in 1999 and 2000 with intellectuals, artists, and a few religious leaders as he travelled throughout Bangladesh visiting groups and cultural centres organized by Proshika, one of Bangladesh’s first NGOs. It is filled with vivid descriptions of the landscape, the people, and their struggles and triumphs over poverty and oppression. The chapters are named for regions visited, beginning with Seabrook’s arrival in Dhaka. In this first chapter, he interviews Faruque Ahmed who describes Proshika’s early roots in the famine of 1974 and how Proshika became a viable means by which the poor could organize as the government became less and less effectual. Through their organization, the poor are enabled to challenge the existing power structures that cause their poverty.

The three NGOs mentioned in Seabrook’s Freedom Unfinished are BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), Grameen Bank, and Proshika. BRAC and Grameen are two of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh today. Seabrook reports a conversation with Mahbubul Karim, the senior vice-president of Proshika, in which he describes BRAC as project-oriented, Grameen as target-oriented, and Proshika as process-oriented. Proshika lays emphasis on raising the consciousness of the poor through their organization, micro-credit programmes and an emphasis on the preservation of Bengali cultural art forms. One might question why there is an emphasis on culture. Seabrook clearly explains Proshika’s rationale for its cultural focus. Bangladesh was created on a platform of secularism, democracy, and the protection and preservation of Bengali identity. Since the assassination of Sheikh Mujib shortly after independence, Bengali culture has increasingly been the target of criticism by the religious right, which was also opposed to the Bangladeshi war for independence. These critics argue that Bengali culture is in conflict with Islamic culture, and that Islamic culture should take precedence over the culture of Bengal. This intensifying cultural battle is the site of power struggles between the privileged and the poor, and between the religious right (referred to as fundamentalists by Seabrook) and women.

The book offers insight into the power struggles in rural and urban Bangladesh. It demonstrates the ways in which the poor become landless, women become sex workers, and the intense opposition faced by the poor in their efforts to transform their lives. Through the many interviews Seabrook conducts with Bangladeshis, he effectively illuminates the manner in which women have been made central pawns in this struggle between the religious right and the poor. The religious right wants to impose a strict form of
shari‘ab. With a narrow reading of shari‘ab by fundamentalist leaders, women would have reduced access to jobs, jobs they desperately need. As Seabrook reveals, endemic to life in Bangladesh is the journey many women make into predestined poverty, beginning with early marriage, divorce and abandonment, left alone to face the daily effort to feed and care for their children.

A significant contribution of this work is Seabrook’s ability to shed light on the imbrication of crime, politics and religion. The religious right publicly expresses their ideological platform through their participation in political parties such as Jamā‘at-i Islāmi, who they align themselves with the BNP (Bangladesh National Party) in a struggle against the Awami league, which claims to represent secularism. In 1991 the opposition parties, primarily the BNP and the Awami League, successfully ousted the military ruler Ershad by effective execution of ha tāls (general strikes) that paralyzed the young nation. Today, these political parties continue to use ha tāls against whichever party is in power in an absurd effort to demonstrate the governing party’s ineffectiveness. Instead of supporting the democratic process, they cause further economic devastation from the grass roots to the national level. All life in cities and rural areas comes to nearly a complete halt during these periods. Women cannot get to their jobs in garment factories, all land transport is halted, and all shops are closed by the threat of physical violence carried out by men roaming the streets enforcing the ha tāls. Since Bangladesh’s independence, the government has been the means by which the rich, who find comfort in aligning themselves with the fundamentalists, have protected their interests.

Seabrook intersperses interviews with his own short discussions of schooling, landlessness, religion, and women’s lives. At times he raises important questions. For example, in his discussion of Proshika schools in slum areas, Seabrook notes the level of student awareness of Bangabandhu, national poets such as Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore. He then raises the question: “But what does such ‘knowing’ mean, when their experience has been shaped by migration, landlessness, menial labour, subordination?” (p. 71). These are some of the more important areas that needed further analysis in order to bring readers to a better understanding of these provocative questions.

The only region not mentioned by Seabrook is the northeast region of Sylhet. It is disappointing that the story of Sylhet, where tea plantations dot the rolling hills and lush green landscape, was not told or even explored in the book. Had he done so he could have revealed the struggles of the men and
women, both Bengali and Adivasi, who spend their entire lives in these tea
gardens. Additionally, it would have been a great opportunity to discuss the
impact of out-migration on Bengali-Muslim culture due to the high number of
Sylhetis who migrate to the Middle East in search of work. Such a discussion
would yield further information on the nature of fundamentalist resources,
where it finds support and how it spreads its influence in Bangladesh. As
workers return from the Middle East, they bring back with them Middle
Eastern and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam coupled with new
economic power that serves to support a fundamentalist agenda at home.

Moreover, the plight of women in Bangladesh could have been made
more palpable if Seabrook included startling statistics of the number of female-
headed households, acid-burn victims, female suicide, and the rising number of
sex workers.

The book ends with a discussion of two major holidays in Bangladesh,
Ekushey February and Eid al-Adha (‘Īd al-Adḥā). The former celebrates
Bengali language and remembers those killed during the language struggle, and
the other, is an Islamic holiday that commemorates Abraham’s total
submission to God as demonstrated in his willingness to sacrifice his son
Ishmael. Does the juxtaposition of these two holidays represent two separate
cultures? Although readers are provided with a solid depiction of the war of
cultures between the secular humanists and the religious right, it is not clear as
to why Seabrook leaves out a discussion of the moderate, tolerant Islam as
reflected in the lives of the secularists, in the religious piety, and the
veneration associated with Sufi saints or Bauls of Bengal. One is left with,
what I would argue, is a mistaken perception that this tolerant Islam is only a
part of Bangladesh’s past.

These reservations, however, should not overshadow the important
overall contribution this book makes to a general understanding of religion
and power dynamics in Bangladesh’s economic development. The book’s
interdisciplinary approach will appeal to those interested in South Asian
politics, religion and economic development. Seabrook successfully
demonstrates that it is the NGOs who have become the locus of hope and
change for the poor and marginalized in Bangladesh — women, children,
Hindus, Buddhists, Christians, and Adivasis. He paints a picture of a country
not simply impoverished by corruption, crime, and natural disasters, but one
that is fertile, and rich in culture and history. Seabrook demonstrates that
Bangladesh is, despite some of the most devastating conditions of poverty in
the world, a wellspring of intellectuals, artists, and people passionate about
ushering in a change to improve their society. This book illuminates the
incredible human spirit that drives the disempowered to overcome the obstacles that are ever present in Bangladeshi society.

Sufia Mendez Uddin


The book under review is in fact a statement of protest against the attitude of those contemporary Muslim scholars who assume an authoritarian posture while expressing their opinions on issues relating to the *shari‘ah*. The point of protest is that they virtually equate their opinions with the dictates of God and try to impose them on others.

The author was spurred to pursue his scholarly investigation by an incident which resulted to the publication of this book: “. . . in 1996, [when] a Muslim basketball player refused to stand up for the American national anthem” (p. 1) giving rise to a public controversy in America. However, according to the author, “the book is rooted in a much longer and more complicated dynamic” (p. 2).

The book takes up for discussion, among other things, the legal edict (*fatwā*) issued by the Society for Adherence to the Sunnah, which contended that standing for national anthem represents an act of *wala‘* (allegiance) and a Muslim is not allowed to show his *wala‘* to unbelievers and their objects of worship (p. 158). The author considers this illustrative of the authoritarian trend in Islamic legal discourse. The author is also dissatisfied with the arbitrary manner in which at times *ahādīth* are marshalled by this group of scholars. This trend, the author believes, negates the richness and diversity of the Islamic tradition. He argues that in order to uphold the authoritiveness of the religious text, and to respect the integrity of Divine law, it is necessary to adopt rigorous analytical methodologies of interpretation.

The author stresses that no human being embodies God’s Divine authority. Human mind is free to strive to discover the Divine will, but no one has the right to lay an exclusive claim to knowing it. If a person, while