

Book Reviews

S. Narayan and Sreeradha Datta (Eds.), *Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2020, pp. xvii+263, Price ₹ 995/- only.

This book is the outcome of a project of the Institute of South Asian Studies of the National University of Singapore. It has brought together the contributors to a workshop in May 2019 where the format of the papers was finalized. When Bangladesh completed twenty-five years of its existence, a volume was brought out to commemorate the occasion and naturally when it completed fifty years, another volume has been made available. This period witnessed changes in the conditions of the country. At the time of its independence, the future was considered dark although Mujibur Rehman visualized *Sonar Bangla*. The essays in the book show that his dream is within reach. It was a country of famines and floods but much water has passed its rivers since then.

The first essay is by Mustafizur Rahman covering 'a journey of dual graduation and the attendant challenges.' At the time of its independence, the country was deemed to be a perennial bottomless basket. From a low income country then, in 2018 it was classified as a developing country. It is also classed among the fastest growing economies of the world. There is an increasing global integration of its economy. But it has problems to face. It is one of the most climate vulnerable countries of the world. Salinity intrusion, river erosion and desertification are expected to increase in the future. The next chapter by Amitendu Palit deals with export challenges. It is a leading exporter of apparels and readymade garments in the world. This is partially owing to the preferential access currently available to it. But as development proceeds, it may not be available and hence alternative exportable goods need to be found. Selim Raihan deals with the readymade garments. They are the flagship exports contributing greatly to foreign exchange earnings and employment. But there are problems too. The major markets are North America and Europe and it takes a relatively long time to ship them there. Raw materials are imported, physical infrastructure is weak, shortage of skilled labour and invisible costs like corruption are inhibitions. Efforts to produce high value added and quality products have not been a great success. Introduction of labour-saving machinery may help, but it may result in loss of employment, particularly low skilled jobs of women.

S. Narayan discusses the role of multilateral agencies and NGOs in the economy. He particularly looks at the population programme, Grameen bank, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee models and Proshikha. During the early years most of the development needs were financed by grants rather than loans by foreign donors. They came as food, project or commodity aid from them. Foreign aid was for development initiatives, especially health, population and education sectors. After 1980s the focus was on industry and foreign investment.

There was a substantial improvement in economic indicators like education, health, poverty, population, family planning, women's empowerment, micro finance and broad sectors of the economy (agriculture, manufacturing and services) which accelerated growth of the economy. Salehuddin Ahmed writes about policy stances and financial sector developments. Banking is obviously an important segment of the financial sector. A major policy shift occurred in 1980s with the emergency of ten new private commercial banks. The country moved from a fixed exchange rate system to a market-based flexible exchange rate system in 2003. Foreign exchange operations and payment system were also simplified. But the debt market is in its infancy while the insurance industry is fairly developed. Ahmed writes, "To meet the challenges, one of the most important tasks is to make the financial sector... more competitive and service-oriented, which can cater to the needs of all types of clients.... The challenges of the external sectors... are also to be met..." (p. 118).

Sreeradha Datta examines the politico-social fabric. The author thinks that the country is poised to be a critical regional player. After the military rule for about fifteen years, its transition to a parliamentary democracy is a creditable achievement. But Datta adds, "The polity of Bangladesh continues to be dominated by dynastic politics, weak institutions, absence of political accountability, lack of a responsible opposition, and a pronouncedly weak law-and-order situation" (p. 123). Other problems are political and social violence, corruption, cohabitation with the Islamists, etc. Amena Mohsin writes about women vs. development and empowerment. Despite the visibility of women in politics, their condition is not too good so much so that political parties incorporate gender concerns in their manifestos. It is an irony that "The constitution of Bangladesh, on the one hand, gives equality to women, and on the other hand, curtails it through personal laws" (p. 167). It is an absurdity that "The continued existence of family laws, specially the provisions on inheritance and child custody rights, marginalizes women, both of the Muslim and Hindu communities. The latter do not even have any rights of divorce, as Hindu marriages are not registered" (p. 169).

Amit Ranjan and Roshini Kapur express concern about militancy in Bangladesh. Even Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sought the membership of Bangladesh to the Organisation of Islamic Countries. The Tendency gathered strength in the following years. The present prime minister has taken steps to tackle this problem but it is so deep-rooted that even her party has made use of Islamist political groups to win elections. Involvement of women in militant groups is also a matter of concern. S. Narayan and Sarin Paraparath discuss the energy issues. Natural gas is the primary source of energy and though coal reserves exist, they are not fully used. Energy demand is met by importing electricity from India. In the total energy supply, the contribution of renewables is just 1 per cent! Bangladesh aims to be a high-income country by 2041. Energy supply could be constraint for achieving this goal. When the economy moves from textiles, garments and leather industry to light engineering, processed foods and pharmaceutical sectors on the one hand

and strengthens the transport sector on the other, the energy requirements will move up.

Shamsher M. Chowdhury has scanned Indo-Bangladesh relations. There was an atmosphere of bonhomie between the two countries to start with. Soon Farakkah Barrage became a point of friction between them. Its growing relations with China were also viewed with some concern in New Delhi. But under its present dispensation, there has been a change for the better. Chowdhury points out, "The degree of trust at the highest political level was such that even the conscious decision of the Sheikh Hasina-led government to continue and strengthen its bilateral political, military and economic ties with China did not seem to disturb Delhi much" (p. 233). Finally, Sreeradha Datta writes about the foreign policy of Bangladesh. It has managed a perfect balance between India and China. It is also an active member of sub-regional groups. As is well-known, the idea of SAARC was first mooted by Ziaur Rahman. It is also contributing to the UN peace-keeping force. It has supported the Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds. But with its own population pressure and erosion of land with rising sea levels, this support cannot be indefinite. However, its relations with Pakistan continue to be volatile.

These are the issues discussed in this book. The contributors have made an objective analysis and have highlighted both the problems as well as the prospects. Despite problems on the way, it is a happy augury that Bangladesh is well on the path of development.