

Book Review

Bangladesh Development Studies
Vol. XLIV, March-June 2021, Nos. 1&2

Towards the Epic Story of Bangladesh

(Untranquil Recollections: From Dawn to Darkness Political Economy of Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh, Rehman Sobhan, The University Press Limited (UPL), March 2022, 407 pages)

S. NAZRUL ISLAM*

The second volume of Rehman Sobhan's memoirs, *Untranquil Recollections From Dawn to Darkness Political Economy of Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh* (Sobhan, 2022), deals primarily with the years 1972-1975, which comprise probably the most difficult period of the nation's history. Titanic battles were fought during this period over the country's policy direction. Over a short period of about 3.5 years, the epochal triumph of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman ended in a tragedy, which was captured by the title of S. A. Karim's book, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy* (Karim, 2009). The second volume of Sobhan's memoirs, dealing with this period, thus, deserves special attention.

The memoir begins with Sobhan's return to liberated Bangladesh and ends with his going to exile (at the end of December 1975) after the coup of August 15 changed the political landscape of the country altogether. The heart of the story lies in the narration of his experience as a member of the Bangladesh Planning Commission (BPC).

As we know from the first volume of his memoirs, *Untranquil Recollections: Years of Fulfillment* (Sobhan, 2015), Sobhan was one of the Bengali economists who, with Nurul Islam in the lead, developed and articulated the economic rationale for the struggle of the people of Bangladesh against discrimination within Pakistan and for national self-determination. They helped Bangabandhu and Tajuddin to formulate the Awami League manifesto for the 1970 election in the light of the 6-point and 11-point charters, work out the implications of these charters for the future constitution of Pakistan, and finally conduct the negotiations with the Yahya team in March 1971, and simultaneously guide the economy-related tasks of the non-cooperation movement that was launched from the historic rally of March 7. Following the crackdown of March 25 and the onset of the Liberation War, they crossed the border to India and made themselves available

* United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA).

for the service of the government-in-exile; most of them went abroad as its envoy to mobilize international support for the independence of Bangladesh. Given this history, one can well imagine the excitement with which Sobhan and his colleagues returned to Bangladesh and how eager they were to help build the new nation.

On his part, Bangabandhu was also eager to make use of the services of the distinguished economists who helped him during the Pakistan period. He wanted them to form the Planning Commission and help him formulate and implement necessary economic plans and policies. Earlier, Nurul Islam, in his memoirs, *An Economist's Tale: Making of a Nation Bangladesh* (Islam, 2003), provided us with an excellent account of the 1972-1975 period, focusing on the work of the BPC. In his memoirs, Sobhan covers the same ground, focusing on the issues pertaining to the divisions that were under his jurisdiction and in a different style, adding many new pieces of information and insights. Sobhan is more direct and does not hesitate to name the names and point out the differences of views among his colleagues at the BPC. Sobhan is also more philosophical and ruminates on the broader implications of the events he witnessed and in which he took part.

We come to know that all four professors – Nurul Islam, Rehman Sobhan, Mosharrif Hossain, and Anisur Rahman – joined the BPC, but they did so with somewhat different frames of mind. Before the Liberation War, Bangabandhu had already declared his intention to build an exploitation-free, socialist economy in the new country. Socialism was also accepted as one of the basic principles of independent Bangladesh. The task set for the economists by Bangabandhu was, thus, to help him build a socialist economy in Bangladesh.

Regarding this basic task, the four professors differed at two levels. The first was regarding their own commitment to socialism. Among the four, Sobhan shared Bangabandhu's commitment to socialism most strongly. Mosharrif Hossain and Anisur Rahman also sympathised with the socialist goal, though in varying degrees and ways. Nurul Islam, by contrast, was a skeptic who did not have an ideological commitment to socialism. However, he decided to go along, particularly because Bangabandhu had declared himself for socialism, and Bangladesh as a state had accepted socialism as the goal.

The second level of differences among the four concerned the question of whether Bangabandhu and his party Awami League were capable of delivering on socialism. In this regard, the most skeptic seemed to be Mosharrif Hossain, who actually led the Planning Department of the government in exile, while Islam, Sobhan, and Rahman served as envoys abroad. Hossain, therefore, had the opportunity of seeing from close quarters, the Awami League in action during the

Liberation War, and hence was more aware of its limitations. As Sobhan informs, Hossain was reluctant to join the BPC and required considerable persuasion to do so, leaving his position at Rajshahi University. Anisur Rahman also had serious doubts and was not eager to join the BPC but allowed the possibility of “educating” the ruling party through their joint efforts (Sobhan, 2022, p. 88). Islam also had misgivings on this account but could not decline Bangabandhu’s invitation to help him in this effort. It was only Sobhan, as he put it, who “genuinely believed that the objective conditions dictated that a process of social transformation could be carried through (ibid., p. 94).”

The knowledge about these initial differences among the four professors – provided clearly by Sobhan – helps us understand the various *modus operandi* that the four professors adopted subsequently. For example, Rahman wanted to test the commitment of political leadership to the goal of socialism. Accordingly, he wrote “visionary papers” and wanted the Cabinet to react to them. In particular, he emphasised the need for the leadership to practice austerity (such as riding bicycles to their offices) to set an example to the people of shared sacrifice. Unless this basic commitment issue was sorted out, Rahman was not interested in developing detailed policy papers and plans. Seeing that the political leadership was not responsive to his broad suggestions, he concluded that socialism was not possible with such leadership and accordingly was the first among the four professors to leave the BPC. (He first went part-time and left completely after the finalisation of the First Five-Year Plan (FFYP) in November 1973.)

Mosharraf Hossain showed more patience and devoted himself to developing concrete policies that the government, if genuinely interested in building socialism, could adopt and implement. Thus, he developed policies but left them to the line ministries to decide whether to implement them or not. As an example, Sobhan cites Hossain’s policy paper on land reform, which in his view, “was an excellent pragmatic document suggesting ceilings on landholdings and distribution of surplus land above the ceiling to the landless along with reforms in the tenurial system (ibid., p. 92).” However, Sobhan informs that Hossain was not eager to force a Cabinet discussion on his paper and instead was content to leave it for the record. Similarly, Sobhan informs that it was Hossain, in an altercation with World Bank’s Peter Cargill, who took up the challenge of formulating the First Five Year Plan in just one year and actually mobilised the Commission to meet this challenge successfully. Sobhan notes that it was the parts of the FFYP that were under the supervision of Hossain that were most detailed. Again, Hossain was not that hopeful about seeing these policies and projects getting implemented and left the BPC in early 1974.

Since Nurul Islam did not have a strong ideological commitment to socialism, he had less reason to be affronted by the apparent lacking in this regard on the part of the ruling political party. What perturbed him more were corruption, misuse of power, and other such unwarranted behaviour that were harmful even for pursuing a capitalist path of development. He deployed his powerful analytical mind to identify the obstacles to the improvement of the overall economic performance and devise ways to overcome them. Given his enormous knowledge and expertise in the area of international and trade economics, Islam used his talent to ensure the best outcome for Bangladesh in the areas of foreign aid and trade.

It was Sobhan, who was, in his own words, the “incurable optimist.” He took “Bangabandhu’s statements at their face value (ibid., p. 395)” and worked earnestly to develop plans and policies that were necessary to follow up on those statements. As he informs, 75 per cent of the papers emanating from the Planning Commission to the Prime Minister, the Cabinet, and individual ministers came from divisions that were under his jurisdiction (ibid., p. 94). Sobhan actually went beyond and tried to make sure that those policies and plans were actually implemented. As he admitted, he “assumed an activist role” and went “beyond my areas of responsibility (ibid., p. 395).” This, of course, led him into conflict with many line ministries whose officials thought that he was overstepping and encroaching into their domains.

Among the divisions that Sobhan was in charge of was industries, and given the nationalisation policy of 1972 (March), it was also the main theatre where the fate of the socialist way of development was being decided. In this connection, Sobhan shows that the policy of nationalisation and the decision to include even Bangali-owned enterprises in its scope came from Bangabandhu himself and were not an imposition by the four professors. Sobhan explains the considerations which might have led Bangabandhu to prefer the sweeping nationalisation policy. This is something that Nurul Islam also explained meticulously in his *Making of a Nation* (Chapter 9). Sobhan’s discussion, however, adds to the refutation of the allegation that socialism was imposed on Bangabandhu. In fact, Bangabandhu’s *Unfinished Autobiography* (Rahman, 2012) and *Amar Dekha Naya Chin* (Rahman, 2020) have now shown clearly that the belief in socialism was not something that he stumbled upon in 1972 or even in 1969. Instead, it goes back to the 1950s, reinforced by his visit to China.¹

¹The following are an example of many similar statements that Bangabandhu made in *Unfinished Autobiography*:

Whether or not the nationalised industries could function efficiently became the litmus test for the efficacy of the socialist development strategy in Bangladesh. Sobhan put his heart and soul into making nationalisation a success. He already told the story of this herculean effort in his book, written jointly with Muzaffar Ahmed, *Public Enterprises in an Intermediate Regime* (Sobhan & Ahmed, 1980). However, as he wryly noted, few read that voluminous book, so his recounting of that story in a summary form is one of the most informative parts of the current book.

What Sobhan shows again is that the record of the nationalised enterprises was not as dismal as was portrayed by certain sections of the press. As he informs, the output of the nationalised sector as a whole by 1973-74 had gone well beyond the 1969-70 level, and by 1975-1975 surpassed the pre-liberation levels. Thus, he disagrees with the widespread notion that the nationalised sector failed in Bangladesh – a notion that was reinforced later by the collapse of the centrally planned economies. Instead, he thinks that the nationalised sector could have done even better. As he puts it, “My own perspective on the sector can be seen more as a lament on what might have been than on what happened (ibid., p. 199).”

In this regard, Sobhan suggests that he could have been more successful in his effort to improve the performance of the state sector had he had the executive power, such as being “appointed as a minister with exclusive responsibility for the nationalised sector.” He believed that he “understood the problems, had found solutions to address them, and had earned the confidence of the industry executives and firmly retained both the commitment and competence to initiate a turn round in the fortunes of the nationalised sector (ibid., p. 200).”

This is a theme that Sobhan returns to in the book’s concluding chapter, where he offers insightful reflections on his overall experience of the period and, in particular, his work at the BPC. He reiterates that every policy proposal he had prepared was “doable.” All they needed was “political support.” As he informs, “It

“I am myself not a communist. However, I believe in socialism and I don’t believe in the capitalist economy. I consider the latter to be an instrument of exploitation. As long as the economy that creates capitalists will remain in this world, there can be no end to the exploitation of man by man (Rahman, 2012, p. 234).”

It may be noted that Bangabandhu was making these statements in a manuscript written while in jail, with uncertain prospects of it ever being published, and with no political expediency in mind. These were expressions of his sincere convictions.

did not take me long to discover that I needed political power to bring about change (ibid., p. 336).” Sobhan does not shy away from deducing the implications of this conclusion, which is that he needed to “enter the political arena, build up support within the political system, and invest much time in winning support for these ideas both within the political establishment as well as from prospective public constituencies. This involved risks, sustainable changes in lifestyle, and commitment to stay on the course come what may (ibid., p. 336-337).”

Sobhan also makes it clear that he was not thinking of building an independent political base. Instead, he recognised that his political engagement would require “Bangabandhu’s blessings.” However, for that, he would have to become “a full-time party activist who would act with his direction and within the ground rules set by him (ibid., p. 337).” As Sobhan points out, “party politics anywhere is not an exercise in private enterprise but is part of a process of collective action (ibid., p. 337).” He also recognises that joining politics would require him to be “willing to pay a price, which could impinge on my personal and family life or may even have ended my life as it did Bangabandhu’s (ibid.).”

It is well-known that Bangabandhu was quite welcoming to prominent intellectuals joining his party and becoming political ministers. Kamal Hossain is a prominent example. As Nurul Islam informs in detail in his *Making of a Nation*, Bangabandhu repeatedly urged him to become a political minister. He wanted Islam to participate in the 1973 election to become first an MP and then a political minister, a position that could strengthen Islam’s and thereby the BPC’s position in the government. Similarly, after the introduction of the BAKSAL system, which made the distinction between political and technocrat ministers somewhat moot, Bangabandhu again urged Islam to become a member of the cabinet. We know that Islam declined the offer because, in his words, he did not have the necessary “fire in the belly.” Sobhan, on the other hand, definitely had the fire in the belly but could not pursue the course, in part, because it would have required him “to become fluent in Bangla.” As he puts it, “my failure to do so remains one of the most unforgivable mistakes in my life, and I have paid a heavy political price for my irresponsibility.” Indeed, one wonders what a positive difference it would make for the nation if Sobhan had emerged as a political leader of Bangladesh!

Reflecting his modesty, Sobhan ends the first chapter of his book with the following line, “I can at best hope that the historian who eventually writes our epic story will be able to fill in a few footnotes by drawing on my modest narrative

(Sobhan, 2021, p. 8).” Instead of footnotes, his memoirs, as also the memoirs of Nurul Islam and Anisur Rahman, are, in fact, the building blocks upon which the epic story of Bangladesh will have to be constructed. I wish volume II of Sobhan’s memoirs wide readership and due attention.

REFERENCES

- Islam, N. (2003). *An economist’s tale: Making of a nation Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.
- Karim, S. A. (2009). *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and tragedy*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.
- Sobhan, R. (2015). *Untranquil recollections: Years of fulfilment*. New Delhi: Sage Select.
- Sobhan, R. (2022). *Untranquil recollections from dawn to darkness: Political economy of nation building in post-liberation Bangladesh*. Dhaka: The University Press Limited.
- Sobhan, R., & Muzaffer, A. (1980). *Public enterprise in an intermediate regime: A study in the political economy of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).
- রহমান, শেখ মুজিবুর। (২০১২)। *অসমাণ্ড আঅজীবনী*। ঢাকা: দি ইউনিভার্সিটি প্রেস লিমিটেড।
- রহমান, শেখ মুজিবুর। (২০২০)। *আমার দেখা নয়াজীন*। ঢাকা: বাংলা একাডেমী।