

BOOK REVIEW

Marcus Franda, **Bangladesh: The First Decade** (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd. in association with Universities Field Staff International, Hanover, 1982), x and 351 pages, price not mentioned.

Marcus Franda's **Bangladesh: The First Decade** is a refreshing departure from the conventional post-mortem treatments of events and developments of national and international dimension in political science. As a nation traverses its path of evolution right from its birth, critical assessment of the dynamics of forces that bear on its course serves the double purpose of evaluation and providing primary ingredients for future research. The book is a collection of 14 essays written over the decade of seventies and early eighties by the author as part of his reporting on South Asia for the Universities Field Staff International (former American Universities Field Staff until it went international in 1981.)

The essays in the volume have been presented into four parts: (1) The Liberation War and its Aftermath, (2) Indo-Bangladesh Relations, (3) Population and Resources, and (4) Ziaur Rahman's Bangladesh. Within each part the essays have been arranged in chronological order. The essays provide a topical account of the major political, economic and social factors affecting Bangladesh. On the otherhand, Parts I and IV, when read sequentially, provide a chronological account of the "volatile politics of Bangladesh" in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The three articles in Part I—the Beginning of Bangladesh (1972), Aid Dependence and Many Futures of Bangladesh (1972) and the Bangladesh Coup (1975)—demonstrate that many of the problems encountered by Bangladesh during its first decade of existence have been visible from the beginning. For example, the sheer magnitude of human and social problem following the "political solution" of 1971, aid dependence and the accompanying intricate problems, the failure of political leadership in utilising the patriotic fervour of independence into nation building activities have been as much

valid in the late seventies and early eighties as in the immediate post-independence days.

Failure of leadership at the top is an issue that has been correctly identified in terms of personality factors. For example the author states that Mujib pursued the same policy of loyalty to old associates, simplifying issues and sharpening cleavages in the changed situation of post-independence days as in the Pakistan days (p. 57). The author holds these factors responsible for transformation of Mujib in terms of dependence on patronage and adulation and conversion of multiparty politics into petty one-party dictatorial regime.

But it seems untenable when the author argues that the international development establishment was primarily responsible for failure of leadership (pp. vii-viii). There is no doubt that the international development agencies failed to get development going and they were able to "buy Ministers, establish elaborate homes and offices and institutions for themselves and their organizations and provide contracts for....." etc. etc. (pp. 32-33) Such findings presaged the massive corruption under Zia government having its roots in the flow of external aid and the manner in which it was used, as also pointed out by the author (p. 281-82). But relating the role of external development agencies to failure of leadership seems to be somewhat far-fetched.

The third article on the August 1975 coup written in the immediate post-coup days seems to bring out some positive notion of the author toward the new regime. The most critical factor for Bangladesh at that juncture of time was the Indo-Bangladesh relation as has been pointed out by the author. Initial reservation on the part of India and extreme caution followed by Bangladesh despite host of thorny issues (brought out in part III) has been correctly identified in depicting Indo-Bangla relationship.

Part II contains three articles—two dealing with the refugee problem and migration from Bangladesh while the third essay takes up the totality of Indo-Bangladesh relationship as obtaining in 1975. The burden of refugees, problem of rehabilitation and migration from Bangladesh into India have been viewed from Indian perspective. The thorny issues in Indo-Bangladesh relations,

namely, the border problems, the maritime boundary and the Farraka barrage, have been lucidly presented. But in his diagnosis of the anti-Indian feeling in Bangladesh, communal feelings seem to have been over-emphasised. It was primarily economic factors that fed "the vision of exploitation and dark designs by a powerful neighbour" (p. 138). The apprehension of the author on communal problems at least in Bangladesh, seems to be misplaced and was not borne by events till 1975 when the essay was written.

Part III elaborates the major issues of economic development in Bangladesh—population, use of water resources and food policy—partly raised in Part I. First two essays have been written in 1973 and the third one in 1981. The author concludes that little progress have been achieved in population administration and use of water resources. Therefore, the author claims that, almost all generalisations developed in early 1970s remained valid for the beginning of the 1980s. For example, the author portrays a very grim picture of Bangladesh facing the greatest challenge of humanity; a heavy and rapidly rising population pressure leading to usually high man/land and man/natural resources ratios (p. 3). Against this background, the author assesses the gigantic population problem vis-a-vis the production possibilities and mobilisation of resources as contained in the First Five Year Plan (1973-78) to come to the painful conclusion: ".....what is ever present and indescribably real, is the tragedy of the suffering of a people who at least for the present have lost control of their own destiny, in large part because they are so many of them in such a small space." (p. 161).

The second essay (1973) in Part III dealing with issues of water resources correctly points out the irony: large scale projects were not pursued because of lack of international cooperation, medium sized projects were inadequate to the problems involved and were reaction to immediate crisis situation while small scale projects appeared to be difficult to implement because of lack of organizational cooperation among people at local level (p. 180). And naturally such poor performance in utilization of water resources have been reflected in agriculture, food production in particular, as has been brought out by the author in his third article (1981) in this Part. The author looks at both production and distributional aspects of food. On the production side, he has taken

into consideration the issues related to and impact of canal digging programme. The author successfully brings out the pros and cons of food price and rationing system and points out the helplessness of the Government to cope with the extreme poverty situation in rural areas despite temporary bumper production and satisfactory stock situation.

Part IV under the title Ziaur Rahman's Bangladesh consists of five essays written in the period 1979-82 explores Zia's life and regime, circumstances surrounding his death post-Zia events in 1981-82. The author then attempts to assess the impact of these developments on Bangladesh as it enters the second decade of its existence, still struggling with poverty and discontent, domestic disorder and outstanding problems with India. The author considers the Zia regime as one of the most effective Asian rulers in stirring up interest in development activities, both at home and abroad. At the same time, the problems of unprecedented corruption among bureaucrats and his close aides, law and order situation and disputes with India plagued his government. And above all the fact remains, according to the author, that Zia did not survive to give a full trial of his own approach to development. The great imponderables which the author raises towards the end of his book are: "Where the leadership will come from and whether it will be up to the unprecedented challenges confronting this seemingly ill-fated nation as it enters the second decade of its independent existence." (p. 335)

The book under review is the outcome of careful and critical observation of events in Bangladesh over a long period of time. The author has used a wide variety of sources including personal interviews. However, the reviewer cannot help straightening some facts and raising some questions on some points. It is difficult to agree with the author that the War of Independence of 1971 may be called a civil war (p. vii) at least from the Bangladesh perspective. Secondly, interpreting Section Officer in Bangladesh civil service as 'intermediate clerk' (p. 52) does not speak of facts as the position describes an officer, though at the lowest rung of civil service. Thirdly, the "Gibson mission" theory behind the October 1977 coup cannot but be questioned, more so because the author has not cited any source whatsoever. A minor editorial lapse is the discrepancy of dating of Preface (16 Oct. 1981) and that of the last article (1982).

Despite these shortcomings the books is a valuable piece of work to indicate what normally goes wrong with planners, politicians and leadership in Bangladesh and also with aid donors working in and for Bangladesh.

—Abdur Rob Khan