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The politico-social fabric of Bangladesh

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At the time of its independence from Pakistan in 1972, Bangladesh stood in the UN category of "Least Developed Nation". Recently, it was in the news for outstripping India in per-capita income; in fact, it has left India behind on several markers of human development – from sanitation to nutrition and access to healthcare – having long outperformed Pakistan on every such index.

Edited by S Narayan and Sreeradha Datta, Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges is not gung-ho about this record but a sober appraisal moving ahead. As Rehman Sobhan reminds us in the Foreword, the country has generated a new concept, the Bangladesh paradox — where robust growth accompanies regression in governance. Bangladesh may well join the global upper-income group by 2041, but alongside healthy public investment, it needs to sustain small farmers, a gender revolution that began with micro-credit, openings for small entrepreneurs, and the energy of its NGO sector. Is this feasible amid the increasing dominance and lack of accountability of the Awami League Party, the disappearance of independent institutions, the reduced agency of both opposition groups and civil society?

The following are extracts from the Introduction and the chapter "Examining the Contemporary Politico-social Fabric" of the book.

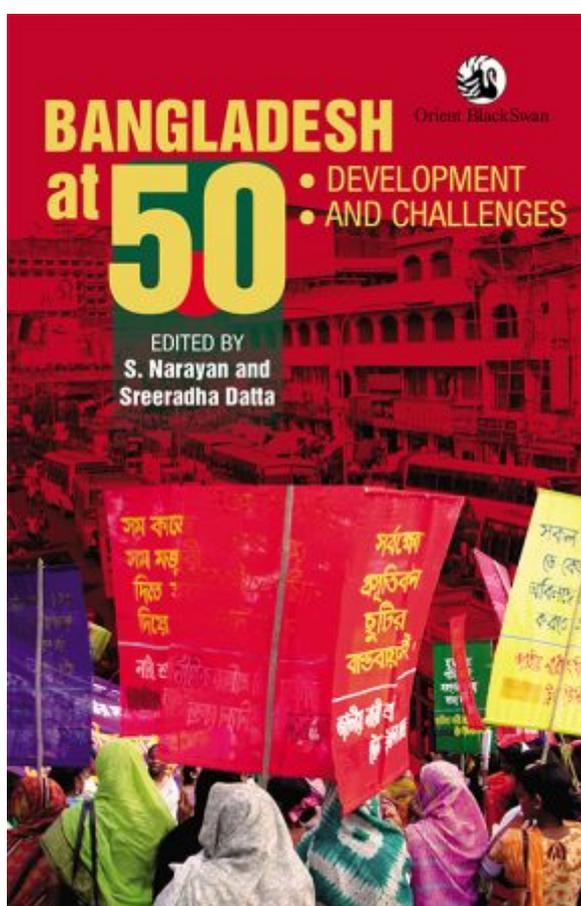


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The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bangladesh grew by 7.3 per cent in 2017 and is expected to do better in the coming years. At this rate, its growth will overtake the numbers that India and China are expected to achieve. Per capita incomes are reported at \$1,750, and the population below poverty line (BPL) has come down from 56 per cent in 1990–91 to 21.8 per cent in 2018. The currency in Bangladesh is stable, unlike in Pakistan, where there has been a significant erosion in the value of the local currency against the US dollar. This growth, however, has its own share of imperfections.

Most importantly, employment opportunities are limited to the garment sector, which accounts for close to 80 per cent of organised employment. There are several reports of Bangladeshis fleeing the country in search of employment in the EU countries, and risking their lives in illicit crossings of the Mediterranean. There is a big gap between rural and urban livelihoods, as well as between the privileged and the underprivileged. Infrastructure remains poor, and border crossings are a place for rent-seeking. There is prevalence of corruption in public services. Logistics are a challenge for the movement of goods, and not enough investment is being made in infrastructure.

One recurring issue that Bangladesh is forced to confront is that of rising sea levels and the resultant shrinking of habitable areas. Eighty per cent of the land in Bangladesh is less than 12 metres above sea level. According to one estimate, at the present level of population growth and global warming, by 2050, Bangladesh 'will have 300 million people to live in just about 120,000 square kilometre area', thereby increasing the country's population density to 2,500 or more per square kilometre (Ministry of Environment and Forests [MoEF] 2012: 114). This, in practical terms, would mean that at least 20 million or 7 per cent of the population would lose their inhabitations and become climate refugees.

As per some estimates, riverbank erosion displaces more than 1,00,000 people annually in Bangladesh. The country periodically faces severe flooding, and consequentially, the impact of climate change would unleash many challenges, including issues of relocation and internal migration, unemployment, poverty, and many more negatives emanating from this problem. The 2007 Sidr

Cyclone had revealed the levels of devastation and consequences of such disasters. Given the impending threat, Bangladesh has in place the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP), identifying six pillars and over 40 actions. Also, the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust (BCCT) fund was created to fund the measures to tackle and counter the effects of climate change. These are included in the national, sectoral and local planning processes for achieving comprehensive results.

At the individual level, the government is engaged in creating awareness and preparedness among the public to reduce their susceptibility to the adverse effects of extreme climatic change. The measures adopted include forecasting and an early warning system, land-use planning, and improved relief and rehabilitation mechanisms. In recent times, measures were also taken to create a green belt along the coast of the Bay of Bengal, and to employ volunteers to offset the impact of natural disasters like cyclones and tidal surges.

Finally, Bangladesh is concerned about energy security. The country's natural gas reserves will be adequate only for a decade, and growing power consumption would need to be addressed through imports of gas, oil and coal. In the coming decades, this would put pressure on foreign-exchange resources.

[...]

With the introduction of the Digital Security Act, 2018, functioning of free and independent media has been greatly jeopardised. This Act allows greater government control over online publishing and social media, but it was not without its share of controversy and protests. The Sheikh Hasina government, however, has stood its ground. This was not unexpected, and with the consolidation of power, this government has made clear its displeasure towards any alternative view from the media. Inter-nationally recognised journalists and editors, including Magsaysay Award recipients, have been charged repeatedly with sedition and defamation. Not only were they legally harassed, but their papers and channels have also been deprived of government revenue. The more recent incident of the well-known photographer, Shahidul Alam, who was arrested in August 2018, for 'spreading false information' about students protesting against unsafe traffic in Dhaka, is a case in point, of the government exerting its stronghold over media (Alam 2018). New social media, including Facebook, was also drawn into a similar controversy (*The Economist* 2018). Summing up the core problem, economist Rehman Sobhan observes:

Bangladesh's parliamentary democracy has been transformed into electoral autocracy, raises grave concerns ... we have ... also become more unequal, more intolerant and hence more prone to violence in our social and political relations, I have written elsewhere that Bangladesh has graduated from two economies to two societies. This is dangerous to social and political stability and could even endanger our economic gains (Hassan and Bardhan 2017).

This is an unfortunate development, given the fact that Sheikh Hasina sought to bring about greater decentralisation in governance by increasing the number of regional administrative divisions in the country when she returned to power in 2008 (Sáez 2016). That environment, however, now seems to have changed drastically.

Bangladesh's recurring political instability is compounded by a lack of political accountability and the absence of a system of checks and balances. The lack of institutional mechanisms to restrict and curb authoritarian tendencies as well as the inability to establish the independence of various institutions has led to problems of governance. Nearing 50 years of independence, Bangladesh is yet to conceive, evolve and build strong institutions that would safeguard and guarantee the essence of democracy—a gap that needs to be addressed without any delay.

These are excerpts from *Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges* edited by S Narayan and Sreeradha Datta and published by Orient Blackswan. Republished here with permission from the publisher.

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