

BOOK REVIEW

Bangladesh's Economic and Social Progress From a Basket Case to a Development Model

Ed. by Munim Kumar Barai,
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Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State for the United States of America, made an adverse comment about Bangladesh when the country received its independence from Pakistan in 1971 and termed Bangladesh as a 'bottomless basket' that can only demand from the rest of the world but cannot offer anything in return. On the eve of the celebration of the Golden Jubilee of its independence in 2021, Bangladesh has successfully qualified for graduation from the Least Developed Countries' list. The country has successfully consolidated its position globally through its sustained efforts in all the major development indicators. Currently, Pakistan's Prime Minister has advised his colleagues to follow Bangladesh as a development model to achieve rapid progress in all areas of Pakistan. The countries that once hesitated to recognize Bangladesh in 1971 have turned into major development partners in overseas development assistance, foreign direct investment, remittance sources, or as export destinations. Surprisingly, Bangladesh did not follow any particular development model portrayed in development economics literature to arrive at its current state. This book's main theme is to examine the paradox of bottomless basket vs. emerging economy in the context of Bangladesh within just fifty years of its independence from Pakistan. The whole world is closely watching the remarkable progress that Bangladesh has made within this short period in poverty reduction, as well as physical and social infrastructure, significant outward linkage through readymade garments and overseas remittance, an improvement in adult literacy, a reduction in infant mortality, and a substantial increase in life expectancy and women's empowerment.

The country's development is heading in such a direction that shortly, many foreigners and Bangladeshi diaspora living abroad may think of relocating to Bangladesh, considering its advantageous and strategic geopolitical location in South Asia. The underlying reasons for this miraculous transformation are to be explored through intensive research in different areas, emphasizing its drivers vis-à-vis other South Asian countries. In this context, this book rightly points out diverse sectors from readymade garments, remittance, agriculture, education, health, financial sector, civil service, and non-government organizations (NGOs) to inclusiveness, climate resilience

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and more. It focuses on the intrinsic reasoning behind the rapid growth and development and highlights the challenges in different areas like governance, and infrastructure. The book is a timely initiative in formulating Bangladesh's journey from an LDC to a developing country within the shortest possible time in spite of some challenges towards its progress and transformation.

The green-colored cover page nicely portrays the symbol of agrarian rural Bengal, which is striving towards a developed and advanced economy. Even though it fought against Pakistan's discriminatory role, Bangladesh's current position is far ahead of Pakistan in most development indicators. Its situation may be partially compared to that of Singapore, which Malaysia abandoned in 1962, but which became a role model in East Asia. However, Bangladesh's development was inhibited by a period of long-standing political instability when the subsequent political authority did not follow the spirit of liberation. The country has successfully tested the poverty reduction model and is now moving towards investment in infrastructure to meet the growing demand of a developing economy. The author/editor has a solid track record of successfully conducting similar works in the past. The contributors to the articles in each of the chapters are selected for their expertise in their respective areas of specialization. The editor has prepared the preface or introduction from the core of his heart based on his long-term association with rural Bangladesh.

The book comprises thirteen chapters classified into six parts. Part I, is an introduction written by the editor himself, and the subsequent chapters contain articles classified under four significant aspects of the social and economic development of Bangladesh as follows: Part II, Drawing the Boundary of Bangladesh's Development, Part III, Finance and Development, Part IV, Economic Sectors and Development, and Part V, Role of Government and NGOs Development. These are followed by a comprehensive Conclusion written by the editor. The book's title and the chapter titles indicate that the book is intended to examine Bangladesh's development dynamics, focusing on the key drivers in its growth and development process.

In the extensive introductory chapter, the editor Professor Barai presents alternative theories of economic development and details five decades of data on social and economic indicators of development and justifiably concludes that Bangladesh's Development does not fall into any specific category based on the existing theoretical framework. The editor portrays how Bangladesh has been transformed from an agrarian subsistence society to a middle-income country in only four and a half decades as an independent nation, and identifies the key drivers behind this transformation. The conclusions follow neither a Rostow type of straight-line progression nor a Marxian path from feudalism to capitalism to communism via socialism.

In Part II, entitled Drawing the Boundary of Bangladesh's Development, the authors have introduced the distinct features of the country's development perspective, which seem to be unique. In Chapter 2 Mausumi Mahapatra sets the political-economic perspective of the whole book with her comment, "In the context of governance challenges and despite the trend of privatization reforms, the public sector has remained a strong force in both envisioning developments and in navigating the path toward such development. What is interesting is that the state has arguably retained this dirigiste feature despite the precedence of political instability." (p. 85). She has also rightly commented, "For Bangladesh, being a small and relatively homogenous country in terms of culture, language, and religion, unlike neighboring India, can be considered an advantage in the spread of ideas and innovative practices." (p. 84). Mallick and Rahman, in Chapter 3, focus on the inclusiveness and climate-resilient development strategy and identify some challenges. "The critical challenges are: (a) to stop climate change through urgent mitigation measures now and create an effective implementation of post-2030 development agenda with commitments and greater participation of both developed and developing countries to halt dangerous climate change; (b) to explore how to live in a warmer climate,

which is now unavoidable; and (c) to promote a low-carbon economy and curtail the extravagant lifestyles of the rich, who do the most harm through luxuries and overconsumption (p. 111)” The last chapter in this part by Pervez and Haque deals with social sector developments such as in education, health, and life expectancy. They categorically mention that “State policies promoted universal primary education with special emphasis on educating girls. Responding to the needs of the market, the state is now implementing policies for providing more market-oriented, skills-based education. In a concerted effort, the state and non-state actors are effectively contributing to developing human capital by expanding education and health services, leading to higher life expectancy. However, there are miles to go (p. 140).”

The reviewer believes that the role of privatization and the deliberate shift in the mode of production and distribution in the wake of the post-cold-war era and the demographic dividend should have been given more priority in some articles. This political-economic and macro perspective has had an underlying spill-over effect on all areas of policymaking. The reregulation process started gradually through the adoption of the regulated market economy model rather than the purely socialist model, which was the ground reality right after 1971. Nevertheless, the authors have rightly pointed out the strategies, dynamics, and underlying factors in the transformation.

In Part III on Finance and Development, the chapter by Banerjee, Kayum, and Uddin astutely focuses on the fact that on the financial side, the growth pattern has an apparent bias towards bank based credits while other significant indicators of financial development like the stock market and bond market are still at a preparatory stage and have a long way to go. However, privatization is playing a dominant role in the financial market. In Chapter 6, Uddin, Abedin, and Afroz examine access to finance for inclusive development and state that 75% of the country's population is covered within the formal financial chain. The authors warn that the country should not be complacent and should introduce more innovation in the areas of digitalization and inclusiveness. In the last chapter on finance, Professor Barai himself explores the role of remittances, and identifies it as one of the most vibrant sources of economic growth in the country. Remittance and readymade garments have evolved as the two primary sources of economic growth in Bangladesh.

In Part IV on Economic Sectors and Development, Miah, Hasan, and Uddin in Chapter 8 identify the dynamics of the transformation from an agrarian economy to a service sector economy and its implication for development. The main limitation of agriculture-based development is the failure to develop the agro-business in the wake of development. In Chapter 9, Rahman and Chowdhury have accurately identified the readymade garment industry's role in shaping this economy's foundation by enabling the take-off of an urban industrial society. Compared to traditional Jute and Jute Goods, Readymade Garments fulfilled the aspirations for rapid economic development and have consolidated Bangladesh's position in the global market. As the authors have rightly pointed out, “Despite many challenges, the RMG sector of Bangladesh has continued to exhibit robust performance, competitive strength, and, most importantly, social commitment; hence, its contribution to the economy deserves appreciation and respect.” In the last chapter on economics, Akhteruzzaman, Sarker, and Rahman examine the light engineering sector's role, another growing sector, but remark that it could grow faster. Even though countries like Japan have progressed by using a concerted effort through the Small and Medium Enterprise (SME), this area is yet to develop in Bangladesh, and it is a grey area of its development.

Part V compares the roles of the government and the private sector via Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). In Chapter 11, Professor Bala scrutinizes the civil service reform's role in the development process and examines “how various policy initiatives and innovative uses of digital tools for service process simplification have reduced the gap between the ordinary citizens and the

government employees by bringing the once inaccessible government services to the citizens' doorsteps." Digitalization and privatization are being adopted within the system of bureaucracy to make it more dynamic and market-driven. In the chapter on NGOs, Chowdhury, Das, Chakraborty, and Barai categorically appreciate the NGOs' role in poverty alleviation and identify six challenges of NGO-based development despite its contributory role in microcredit and other areas.

All the articles have rightly identified different areas where Bangladesh has made tremendous progress, what could be done, and how the country needs reform to face a developing nation's challenges. This is an issue of breaking the paradox developed by Kissinger fifty years back when the country had just started its journey after several decades of deprivation and discrimination. Considering the comprehensive nature of its coverage, we may consider the edited book as an accomplishment in that it has successfully identified the vital issues related to the fast-growing nature of the country's economy.

Some of the potential challenges to rapid growth and development are due to non-cooperation by opposing political forces, which creates a potential threat to sustainability. There is a growing concern that inequality, corruption, and environmental issues are still predominant in Bangladesh. These could create a long-standing risk in the country. A potential solution could be developing independent institutions which are resilient to changes in political power. It is not entirely clear whether the potential weaknesses stem from the limitations of privatization or other exogenous sources. This book could have identified some of those potential risks in some of the chapters by allowing some development critiques. A cost-benefit analysis on some of the benchmark models like neighboring China, India, the Southeast Asian Model, or the Far East Model followed by Japan, one of the best development partners, could have added more value to the discussion. Despite some limitations, the book deserves appreciation from its readers for providing an objective analysis of the development path and the strategies in an eloquent way.

The main readers may include university teachers, students, researchers, government officials and policymakers, as well as NGO activists locally, regionally, and globally. This book has an inherent interdisciplinary outlook in the sense that it touches upon governance, politics, and various social aspects, in addition to economics. Anyone who is interested in developing countries, or South Asia in general, or Bangladesh in particular, will find this book extremely useful. Those interested in exploring the underlying drivers of growth and development in South Asia will also find this book helpful.

If we search Bangladesh's Development literature, we can hardly find any good-quality textbooks or edited books. This book will fill this gap by providing a ready reference to those who want to explore the underlying reasons for the remarkable 'development surprise' taking place in this little land within just fifty years of its independence. This book could be a ready reference to researchers and policymakers during the golden jubilee of Bangladeshi's independence in the year 2021. The book's main feature follows the style of data-driven policy suggestion in most of the articles. The authors have some research points substantiated by data and evidence that make it a research piece and extremely useful as a reference book for many emerging research projects in respective areas of Bangladesh's Development and in other developing countries too.