



Fifty Years of Bangladesh, 1971–2021

Crises of Culture,
Development,
Governance, and Identity

Taj Hashmi

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“As of today, it is the only historical sociology of Bangladesh illustrating the nation’s culture, development, governance, and identity crises from the perspectives of history, politics, sociology, and cultural anthropology. Excellent work.”

—Kamal Siddiqui, *Former Professor at the IDPM, Manchester University, UK*

“A must-read book to understand why 50 years after becoming independent, Bangladesh continues to be one of the most fractured countries in the world, its huge economic progress notwithstanding. Taj Hashmi has brilliantly examined the historical, political, economic, social and cultural contexts of Bangladesh’s disunity to conclude that it is still dysfunctional.”

—M. Serajul Islam, *Retired Bangladeshi Diplomat, Bangladesh*

“What a history Bangladesh has had in 50 years! Taj Hashmi captures it all in his beloved homeland! In his pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the soul he pulls no punches and critiques his “sonar Bangla” in the starkest terms but he remains optimistic and ever hopeful. In ten brilliantly and exhaustively researched chapters he covers all the nation’s fault-lines from its booming garment industry to its rural agricultural base, from its history under the Raj to its significant place in the 21st century global economy, from its Bengali and Islamic orientation to its Bangladeshi-Islamic identity, and from its reverence and criticism of its heroes from Pakistan’s founder Jinnah to Mujeeb and Zia and their descendants to the demographic and environmental catastrophes that beckon. It is thirty years since the erudite, well-travelled, and cosmopolitan Hashmi penned his *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, and over twenty years since his *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*. Scholars and the public will recognize and appreciate his frank assessment as much as some will find it challenging and uncomfortable. Everyone will benefit from his forthright comments on the global economy and its social, political, and economic impact: but “Culture Matters”.”

—Roger D. Long, *Eastern Michigan University, USA*

“The narrative sweep of this book covers Bangladesh’s political culture, development, identity, and governance over the last fifty years of its independence since 1971. This appraisal is reminiscent of Taj Hashmi’s other recognized social history volumes on South Asia. I recommend this book for the fresh as well as the veteran readers of Bangladesh history.”

—M. Rashiduzzaman, *Professor Emeritus in Political Science at Rowan University, Glassboro, New Jersey, USA*

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*Fazlu, my childhood friend, perished with his entire family
in 1971 but saved my life*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“Freedom and slavery are mental states.”—M.K. Gandhi¹

“The truth which makes men free is for the most part the truth which men prefer not to hear.”—Herbert Agar²

This study is a sequel to my previous three works on Bangladesh: *Ouponibeshik Bangla* (Colonial Bengal), *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia* and *Women and Islam in Bangladesh*. Although the stories are different, there are thematic similarities between this study and the previous ones. All of them have in common peasants, peasant culture, discrimination against underdogs and abuse of human rights. The title of this study could be the what-went-wrong-syndrome of Bangladesh. This is a departure from almost all the traditional studies on modern and contemporary Bangladesh. Only a handful of works by scholars like Sarmila Bose and Yasmin Saikia are dispassionate, objective studies on Bangladesh’s Liberation War. This myth-buster sheds light on many known and unknown facts about the history, politics, society, and culture of the country. The country is not just another postcolonial counterpart of India, Pakistan or Sri Lanka; Algeria, Indonesia, Nigeria, Singapore or Vietnam. It became independent twice, once in 1947, and then again in 1971.

This historical sociology of Bangladesh is a myth-buster that sheds light on many known and unknown facts about the history, politics, society and culture of the country. Besides being a twice-born country—liberated twice, from the British in 1947 and from West Pakistanis in 1971—it is also an artificial entity suffering from acute crises of culture, governance

and identity. The author of this study attributes the culture and identity crises to the demographic by-products of bad governance. In addition to being overpopulated, Bangladesh is also resource-poor and has one of the most unskilled populations, largely lumpen elements and peasants. According to Marx, these people represent “the unchanging remnants of the past.” The second round of independence empowered these lumpen classes, who suffer from an identity crisis and never learn the art of governance. The proliferation of pseudo-history about Liberation has further divided the polity between the two warring tribes who only glorify their respective idols, Mujib and Zia. Pre-political and pre-capitalist peasants’/lumpen elements’ lack of mutual trust and respect has further plagued Bangladesh, turning it into one of the least governable, corrupt and inefficient countries. It is essential to replace the pre-capitalist order of the country run by multiple lumpen classes with capitalist and inclusive institutions.

Since this work is the first of its kind concerning the country, no single volume on history, politics, cultural anthropology, sociology, development studies and economics is going to be a substitute, let alone a competitor, of this multi-disciplinary study. I have pointed out here as to how the divisive polity of Bangladesh has become a fractured one, fast destabilizing the country beyond one’s imagination. Despite the high GDP growth (6–7 per cent) and the visible improvements in the infrastructure in and around Dhaka (although one rainy day virtually turns the over-populated tiny city’s congested roads into waist-deep canals), the bulk of the population have remained poor, uneducated, backward and superstitious, while the country has remained very poor. Fifty years after the Liberation, the country is still among the four least developed countries (LDCs) from South Asia, along with Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal, and the forty-six others across the world, mostly from the Sub-Saharan Africa.

Bangladesh is one of the few countries that suffer from such a severe identity crisis and people behave so irrationally and erratically as one encounters there! Political leaders, economists and journalists in any LDC, but in Bangladesh, assert publicly that their nation has reached the same levels of development, growth and overall prosperity as Switzerland, Singapore and the US. As a final note, it is astounding but true that Bangladeshi football fans who support Brazil or Argentina attack each other violently during the World Cup, and some fans commit suicide after their teams lose. Bangladeshis are extremely opinionated. Thus, there is always a diametrically opposed set of opinions regarding everything:

religion, their country's history, politics, political culture, economy and what lies beyond the first fifty years of its existence. Having grown up in the country myself, I can offer some insight on this topic.

In 1969, when I was a student at Dhaka University, I was actively involved in the anti-Ayub movement. In addition to being an eyewitness to the events leading to the massacre of the Bihari immigrants in East Pakistan and the emergence of Bangladesh following the brutal Pakistani military crackdown in 1971, I can dispel several popular myths about 1971. Less than 1 per cent of my college and university friends and people I knew well ever crossed the border into India or became freedom fighters. While the pseudo-freedom fighters who never used a gun lived in safe havens in India, 20,000–30,000 ill-trained Bengali guerrilla fighters fought with vintage small arms. Although they were annoying to the Pakistani Occupation Army, they never played a decisive role in defeating the Pakistanis. Despite this, successive governments, leaders, intellectuals and laymen in the country cannot resist asserting in the most unequivocal terms that Bengali freedom fighters, *not* the Indian government and armed forces, played a decisive role in the Liberation of the country. There have been more pseudo-freedom fighters with ruling-party connections in Post-Liberation Bangladesh than anyone could have imagined. Not only did actual freedom fighters and pretenders receive accelerated promotions and privileges as government employees, but recently their children and grandchildren have been granted 20 per cent employment quotas. This could not be more immoral or divisive than anything else. Interestingly, Bangladeshis in general never acknowledge that India played the decisive role in liberating their country.

The publicity surrounding the “three million dead” figure in 1971 has made it seem unbelievable but it is true that I lost more friends and acquaintances in Bangladesh in the Covid-19 pandemic than in the Liberation War of 1971. If there had been three million Bengalis killed by the Pakistan Army and their associates in 1971 (denying this figure is a crime in Bangladesh today), they would have killed 500 in each of the twenty districts of East Pakistan every day. Dhaka University, the birth-place of the Liberation War, would have lost a few thousand students, teachers and employees, but only 150 were killed by Pakistanis. Dhaka University (and other universities, colleges, schools, shops and industries in East Pakistan) remained open during the Liberation War (March–December 1971), except for the first three and last two weeks. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi authorities, intellectuals or the general public have never

acknowledged the mass killing of *Biharis* in East Pakistan, and Bangladesh, after the Liberation.

At Sirajganj, a small town in northern Bangladesh before the Pakistani Army entered the town on 27 April 1971, I lost many *Bihari* school friends, who were burned alive or brutally killed by Bengali lynching mobs. Fazlul Haq Qureshi was one of them. He saved my life the day before he was killed along with all of his immediate family members. Almost 700 *Bihari* men, women and children met the same fate at Sirajganj alone, where I grew up.

Although I have not conclusively argued that the country has no better option or future in the coming decades to overcome the manmade and natural disasters, but in view of the drastic decline in the quality of education, the constant emigration of most of the employable graduates from the country and the massive plunder of wealth and violations of human rights by the ruling elites, bureaucrats, police, armed forces and even the judiciary, with impunity, one has reasons to worry about Bangladesh in the coming decades. As a result, ethical values have deteriorated among the vast majority of Bangladeshis, especially among the affluent, politicians, bureaucrats, police and judiciary, while religious obscurantism and intolerance have been steadily rising. Defenders of democracy and human rights in this country are subject to abduction, arrest, enforced disappearance or exile for speaking out against corruption and autocracy. Again, one has every reason to worry about the country because of the sharp polarization between the two major political parties, the Awami League (“secular Bengali nationalist”) and the BNP (“Islam-loving, Bangladeshi nationalist”), which has virtually fractured the polity of Bangladesh. There are other fault lines too, between the so-called pro- and anti-Indian people. The growing economic disparity between the proverbial “1 per cent” and the rest of the people has all the potential to destabilize the country for decades. One is not sure if the country is going to graduate from the LDC status in 2026.³ This writer, however, agrees with Willem van Schendel, who wonders if perpetual bad governance, poor resource management, the growing demographic pressure and their ecological consequences are likely to adversely affect Bangladesh in the coming years! He raises the pertinent question: “Is the delta headed for boom or bust?”⁴ Basically, the study illustrates Bangladeshis’ ambivalence about their past, present and future course, further compounded by their premodern culture and identity crisis.

I have discussed in the main text that the average Bangladeshi, regardless of their educational or economic background, represents a premodern, rural and peasant culture. Thus, their collective behaviour reflects their alienation from the state, corruption, lack of respect for others, unpredictability and violence. The disrespect they showed to Jinnah and Mujib, two of their most celebrated heroes and icons during the 1940s and 1970s, is blatant. Although Bengali Muslims had contributed wholeheartedly to the transformation of East Bengal into East Pakistan in the 1940s, their progeny not only dismembered the “promised land” of their parents and grandparents, but, in the aftermath of the creation of Bangladesh, also wiped out virtually everything associated with Pakistan, even symbolically. As a result, they substituted names such as Jinnah, Iqbal and Liaquat Ali with those of Mujib and other Bengali heroes. Incredibly, even Mujib tolerated these unnecessary changes and even seemed to have enjoyed replacing Jinnah’s name (who happened to be his idol at the time) with his own as the new names of roads, buildings, parks and monuments across the country. The acts reflect Bangladeshis’ collective amnesia, political immaturity, denial of history and denunciation of their own past, as they once loved Jinnah and Pakistan. Paradoxically, they also know that had there been no Pakistan, there would have been no Bangladesh! Mujib was treated even worse than Jinnah. Among the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis, the brutal assassination of Mujib and most of his immediate family members went unlamented. Additionally, many Bangladeshis, including Mujib’s cronies and beneficiaries, also publicly celebrated his overthrow.

Last but not least, it makes one wonder if the overall degeneration process is reversible at all. Ordinary Bangladeshis are totally unaware of the impending catastrophic impact of global warming, which in the next 30–50 years will flood over 10 per cent of the delta’s landmass with salty seawater, leaving 18–30 million people in a state of landlessness and destitution. It is tragic that those who are aware of the impending disaster among sections of the educated Bangladeshis could not be more apathetic or fatalist in this regard.

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My work is a product of more than fifty years of my exposure to higher education, which involved systematic experiments with ideas and truths presented by my teachers, peers and colleagues at two of my alma maters, Dhaka University and the University of Western Australia. I am indebted to all of them immensely. I am especially thankful to my teachers, colleagues, peers and friends, who helped me learn new things and formulate new ideas about the history, politics, economy and collective culture of the people in Bangladesh and beyond. They include Professors A.B.M. Habibullah, Abdur Razzaq, Abdul Alim, Latifa Akanda, Sufia Ahmed, M. Mufakharul Islam, Ahmed Sharif, Badruddin Umar, M. Rashiduzzaman, Saaduddin Ahmed, Maniruzzaman Miah, Talukder Maniruzzaman, Ahmed Kamal, Abul Kasem Fazlul Haq, Peter Reeves,

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NOTES

1. *Non-violence in Peace and War* (1949), vol. 2, ch. 5.
2. *A Time for Greatness* (1942), ch. 7.
3. Usami Takashi, "Bangladesh—Graduation from Least Developed Countries Status and Its Implications", RIETI—Research Institute of Trade and Industry, Japan, April 2021. <https://www.rieti.go.jp/en/publications/summary/21040015.html>.
4. Willem van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009, p. 250.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Taj Hashmi (aka Taj ul-Islam Hashmi) was born in Assam, India in 1948 and raised in East Pakistan (Bangladesh). He is fluent in multiple languages. He holds an MA and a BA (Hons) in Islamic History and Culture from Dhaka University, and a PhD in Modern South Asian History from the University of Western Australia; and did his postdoc at Oxford and Monash. A retired Professor of History, Islam and Security Studies at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in US, UBC in Canada and NUS in Singapore, he taught at several universities in the US, Canada, Singapore, Australia and Bangladesh. He is a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society (FRAS) since 1997. His key works include *Colonial Bengal* (in Bengali), *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia*, *Women and Islam in Bangladesh* and *Global Jihad and America*. Besides being an advocate for human rights, he is a public speaker and writes regular columns on Bangladesh, history, international affairs, Islam and politics.



Introduction

The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie, de'liberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic.
—John F. Kennedy (*Commencement Address at Yale University, 11 June 1962* <https://www.jfklibrary.org/archives/other-resources/john-f-kennedy-speeches/yale-university-19620611>)

Somebody should ask these hypocrites [Bangladeshi Muslims] if they could give one good reason for the separate existence of Bangladesh after the destruction of the two-nation theory. If the theory has been demolished, as they claim, then the only logical consequence should be the reunion of Bangladesh with India, as seems to be the positive stand of the Bangladeshi Hindus ... had Pakistan not been created then, Bangladesh too would not have come into existence now.
—Basant Chatterjee (*Inside Bangladesh Today*, S. Chand & Company, New Delhi, 1973, p. 155)

THE UNIQUE ENTITY OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is not just another country in South Asia or the Third World. As with many poor, backward, fractured—and largely artificial—postcolonial nations like India, Pakistan and Afro-Asian and Latin American countries, Bangladesh is a corruption-infested country governed by an unaccountable government. That is where the similarities end! From a number of perspectives, the country has a unique position among

postcolonial countries. This over-populated nation-state is a “twice-born” nation-state, which was decolonized in 1947, and freed from the internal colonialism of Pakistan in 1971. A demographer’s nightmare, Bangladesh is home to more than 170 million people (half the US population) on a landmass roughly equal to the size of Iowa. The country is also prone to frequent natural disasters. Unless the world miraculously saves itself from the growing threat of global warming, in fifty years or so, Bangladesh’s densely populated coastline will submerge under the Bay of Bengal, resulting in the salinization of river water upstream and the permanent loss of thousands of hectares of arable land. Bangladeshi scholar Saleh Ahmed—who has performed an empirical study on global warming in Bangladesh—believes that “any change in expected weather and climate patterns will seriously reduce Bangladesh’s food security,” hindering the nation’s Sustainable Development Goals. He predicts that the apocalypse will become the new normal in Bangladesh.¹ Unless mitigating measures are taken, M.G. Quibria also predicts a dreadful ecological-cum-environmental nightmare for Bangladesh in the 2050s. In the country, around 1 per cent of arable land is lost every year due to urbanization, human settlement, road infrastructure, waterlogging, depletion of groundwater and soil fertility, salinity and riverbank erosion that spreads sand onto croplands upstream. The issue is likely to worsen with the continued rise in river water flows, following the increased melting of the ice in the Himalayas due to climate change.²

Quibria further argues:

When Bangladesh became independent, it was widely believed that economics would be the Achilles’ heel for the country, while politics would be relatively smooth going. There were both historical and cultural reasons for this optimism. Regarding politics, it was thought that democratic values were in the DNA of the people, as the birth of the country was the outcome of a bloody political struggle for democratic rights of its people Although the aforementioned conditions should be conducive to a flourishing democracy, things did not turn out as expected—hopes were dashed almost immediately after independence.³

Bangladesh is an “artificial state,” in league with India and Pakistan. It is a by-product of two Partitions, first in 1947 and then in 1971. Both the Partitions were avoidable. Hence the epithet, “artificial state!” Bangladesh suffers from a tremendous identity crisis and any coherent sense of

direction. First, the bulk of the population (Muslims) adopted Jinnah's Two-Nation Theory as a mantra of political freedom, economic salvation and social upliftment of the downtrodden (in colonial Bengal, Muslims and the poor were synonyms); the second time the same people believed in the primacy of their Bengali identity, and in the capacity to handle their own affairs independently. As their political geography changed dramatically, they registered their resentment against unknown and known hands pulling the invisible strings to keep them disempowered or away from their cherished goals. East Bengalis, who failed to achieve their promised utopias despite the two rounds of Liberation, have had a love-hate relationship with entities they themselves carved out of British India and Pakistan, East Pakistan and Bangladesh. Even though there is a proliferation of historical literature that emphasizes the importance of economic factors in the formation of Pakistan and Bangladesh, this writer believes ethnic pride, pride in one's religion and the desire to preserve one's identity played the most crucial role on both occasions in 1947 and 1971. One can recall that Indians' fervent religious devotion and their desire to restore the legitimacy of the Mughal Empire were the main drivers behind the First War of Independence of 1857–1858 ("Sepoy Mutiny"). The Pakistan and Bangladesh movements both reflected Indian Muslims' and East Bengalis' aspirations for human dignity. For East Bengalis, neither Pakistan nor Bangladesh made economic sense in the long run.

There are diametrically opposite narratives about Mujib's role in creating Bangladesh from the 1950s to 1971, just as there are divergent accounts of who killed Mujib and overthrew his government in 1975. Additionally, the post-Mujib era is not without contradictory stories and/or conspiracy theories. In this regard, the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) massacre of February 2009 and the so-called 1/11 are examples. Therefore, conspiracy theories and politically biased stories have made it difficult to write an objective history of Bangladesh. It is not what various narrators think about events and people, but the reliability of data and the objective assessment of it that matters.

CULTURE

Since singling out the cultural factor of underdevelopment in Bangladesh, in historical and contemporary perspectives, is the cornerstone of this study, now it is another chicken-and-egg situation: if centuries of bad governance under foreign and indigenous rule first created the "culture of

underdevelopment” or it was the other way around! The main focus of this study is the collective culture of the people—mainly their political culture—which has shaped the society, economy and politics of Bangladesh. As elaborated in Chap. 8, Perez de Cuellar has observed, “failures and frustrated expectations of development” give rise to cultural tensions, wars and authoritarian regimes, disrupting the development process itself. This work elaborates the Weberian concept that correlates development and social change with religion or culture of the people concerned; and what he has elaborated as “greedy adventurism” or the pirate mentality of ruling elites, and mass inertia, explain the overall backwardness of the country. This study has not only examined the “culture of poverty” emanating out of poverty, which Oscar Lewis studied in Mexico, but also demonstrated how that culture accentuated poverty in Bangladesh, by creating a subculture (or a cultural group within a larger culture) of its own. I believe this is pertinent to our understanding of “development” of “underdevelopment” (both are loaded concepts). I have argued that countries devoid of democracy, such as Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE—despite their high GDP growth and per capita income—are still underdeveloped, and likely to remain so for many years. And, true democracy, ensuring the rule of law, and the freedom of expression, human rights and dignity, and equal opportunities for every citizen implies true development. I have challenged the Churchillian arrogant ethnocentrism that there could be no democracy east of Suez, as we know, Japan and South Korea, have been democracies for decades, and a few more are emerging across the Asia-Pacific region. So, I have argued that, given the right leadership, even Bangladesh could be a developed democracy. Although Plato has warned: “Those who are able to see beyond the shadows and lies of their culture will never be understood, let alone believed by the masses,” yet this study aims at showing things “beyond the shadows and lies” of Bangladeshi culture to make them understood and believable to the readers.

Due to the overwhelming majority of Bangladeshis coming from the peasantry, the communal “moral economy” of the peasantry is characterized by isolation from each other and from the state, risk aversion, mutual mistrust and idealizing poverty, otherwise known as *mota bhat*, *mota kapur* (coarse rice, coarse cloth). Hence, the acceptance of subsistence living or poverty as preordained by God, or natural! Romanticizing about the past and idealizing (and even glorifying) poverty by the masses works as a safety valve against mass revolutions from the bottom. Historically, the mass acceptance of abuse of power, corruption and unequal treatment by their

superiors by East Bengalis legitimized the “thousand years of foreign rule” until 1971. Things have hardly changed in the realm of the collective political culture of the people during the first fifty years of their Liberation. During the last decade of the period under review, they have mostly remained passive victims of autocracy—and even proto-fascist rule. The age-old collective experience of the people, which is about autocracy and the abuse of power from above, has fine-tuned the culture that legitimizes any wrongdoing by the superordinates. Therefore, in the absence of the Weberian “Protestant work ethic,” which encourages hard work, thrift and efficiency across the board in one’s career, the ruling elites and their cronies plunder national wealth with impunity in Bangladesh (including elsewhere in the Third World). Meanwhile, efficiency, growth and development, social and economic justice and fair distribution of opportunities have almost totally disappeared from the country. Finally, as the ancient saying goes, “a fish rots from the head down”—often attributed to Mao Zedong—the Bangladeshi society (at least since British colonial rule began) is “rotten” from top to bottom; the classes below the ruling and business elites (no longer two different entities) are equally devoid of ethical values. In fact, even teachers, professionals, judges, police and clerics engage in unethical practices. It is nearly impossible today to tell whether a cleric or devoutly religious person is ethical or free from corruption and vices. Bangladesh’s persistent dysfunctionality and backwardness have been the result of four characteristics of its collective culture: (a) ignorance; (b) arrogance/anger; (c) lack of ethics; (d) fatalism. Self-inflicted ignorance and centuries of exploitative foreign rule have turned the bulk of Bengalis into angry, fatalist, and suspicious of others at the same time.

Again, myths are integral to culture. Greek for speech, narrative, fiction, plot, myth is premodern people’s religious and secular/mundane discourse to justify and propagate ideologies to maintain social order and legitimize political and religious structures. Modern myths are narratives about the virtues and vices of various cultures and beliefs imposed by certain ideologies to legitimize certain cultures and orders in the name of democracy, freedom, human rights, socialism, Islam or Hindutva. History and truth are often distorted by myths. Bangladesh inherited the culture of fostering myths mostly to legitimize the old social order by inventing myths about staging revolutions in the name of “Muslim” or “Bengali” homelands. In this way, the promotion of “new orders” of Islamic

egalitarianism and Bengali brotherhood gave rise to hundreds of new myths that would legitimize Pakistan and Bangladesh, which were never historical inevitabilities, but by-products of Machiavellian politics. There are some similarities between the two, but that's where the similarity ends.

Using "taboo studies" to shatter the "nationalist mythology" in Bangladesh, Sarmila Bose has defended her seminal work on the Liberation War of Bangladesh as a myth-busting exercise.⁴ Many educated Bangladeshis believe in fabricated data and statements, such as Dhaka University once being called the "Oxford of the East," and many other bizarre stories. The myths of development and the alleviation of poverty are equally overpowering. Global media outlets, human rights organizations and activists have shattered many myths in government narratives about democracy, freedom and development in Bangladesh. In addition to Mujib's dual role as Mazzini and Cavour of Bangladesh, there are myths that Bengali freedom fighters were the "determining factor" of the Liberation War, not the Indian armed forces. The myth about the freedom fighters' "decisive role" in freeing Bangladesh is simply overwhelming. They also received preferential treatment in independent Bangladesh, including rapid promotion in their jobs and other perks. As of late 2021, pseudo or real "freedom fighters"—including their children and grandchildren—are being treated preferentially (a 20 per cent quota for most public sector jobs).

The most ridiculous myth about the Liberation War has been the number of total victims of the Pakistani military operations in Bangladesh. Since Mujib came up with the absurd figure of "three million dead" (as Bengali casualty figure in the Liberation War) soon after his arrival in London on 8 January 1972 from Pakistani prison, which would imply killing around 11,000 people per day by Pakistani soldiers during the nine-month-long Liberation War. Interestingly, neither Mujib had any plans to declare the independence of Bangladesh after winning 160 out of the total 300 seats in the national elections in united Pakistan in 1970, nor did he ever declare the independence of Bangladesh. The myth about the so-called Declaration of Independence by Mujib on 26 March (through an EPR transmitter at the Head Quarters of the Pakistan Army controlled border security force in Dhaka) has become the official version of history. It is surprising but true that questioning the mythical figure of three million dead or Mujib's so-called Declaration of Independence are criminal offences in Bangladesh.

Sarmila Bose tells us why any Bangladeshi author as of 2011 (forty years after the Liberation) failed to produce any well-researched history of the War. She singles out “the only book on 1971 that stands out in terms of research, analysis and objectivity,” the volume by two American scholars, Richard Sisson and Leo Rose, *War and Secession: Pakistan, India, and the Creation of Bangladesh* (1991). She blames Bangladeshis’ demonization of the Pakistanis as “villains” and their self-pity as “victims,” “often with scant regard for factual accuracy or analytical sophistication.”⁵ She has made another very damaging—nevertheless very accurate—observation about Bangladeshi intelligentsia’s habit of not “cross-checking for facts or search for independent corroboration.” She thinks the “only-we-know-better” mentality of Bangladeshis is a hindrance to any objective history writing (on the Liberation War) in the country. She adds: “Even well-educated people often made no distinction between well-established events and the wildest rumours The worst were the ones, often in Dhaka or abroad, who had not participated or suffered directly in the war, but had ‘views’ nevertheless, never mind facts.”⁶

Yasmin Saikia’s path-breaking book on women, the 1971 war, and the making of Bangladesh is another piece of objective scholarship. As part of this work, testimonies of both Bengali and non-Bengali rape victims are presented, showing that men on both sides of the war abused women. Bose and Saikia dispel myths and tell a different story about 1971, which Bangladeshi scholars have failed to tell so far.⁷ As elaborated in Chap. 2, Yahya Khan’s affidavit confirms it was not Mujib but Bhutto who sparked Pakistan’s disintegration.⁸

GOVERNANCE

Good governance is needed in every form of government, whether monarchy, central planning system, mixed economy, free-trade democracy or market economy. It is an essential precondition for economic, cultural and social development. Therefore, good governance goes beyond bureaucratic or structural reforms of public administration, public policy or management. This process involves policymakers, scholars/experts, as well as the general public, especially in an LDC like Bangladesh. While inefficient and corrupt politicians and bureaucrats run Bangladesh, the bulk of the politicians being almost totally incompetent to manage any small enterprise let alone run a government, are being manipulated by corrupt and slightly more efficient bureaucracy. Despite being quite efficient (and

some even honest), bureaucrats tend to report the most palatable things to ruling elites in order to keep their positions. Lastly, “overqualified” bureaucrats exploit “underqualified” politicians in the name of elected or unelected regimes. This has been the main bottleneck to good governance in Bangladesh.

The study juxtaposes problems of governance with those of development. Scholars agree that development cannot occur without good governance or a transparent and accountable system of government, which is synonymous with democracy. Democracy, we believe, is synonymous with development, and its absence signifies underdevelopment. Bangladesh, however, has become synonymous with bad governance during the past half-century. Perhaps Ziaur Rahman’s short tenure stands out from the long period of civil-military dictatorships, and they have also been corrupted and inefficient. The last twelve years under Sheikh Hasina, who came to power in 2008 through manipulated and doctored elections under a military-run, unelected government with external support, have been the worst in terms of governance. Even the two rounds of national elections in 2014 and 2018 were thoroughly rigged. The last round of elections on 30 December 2018 virtually took place on the night before. Ruling-party activists, with the active cooperation of police, armed forces and officials of the Election Commission, manipulated election results almost in every constituency in favour of the ruling Awami League.

The arbitrary arrests of dissidents, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings of opposition supporters, vote-rigging in favour of the ruling party, corruption and nepotism, and curtailment of freedom of expression all occurred alongside the Liberation and continue now. As with all dictatorships in the world, “autocracy for development first, then democracy” has become a popular slogan in the country, especially since Hasina was re-elected as Prime Minister in 2009. There are certain characteristics of the national political culture that retard democracy and development and have been blamed for the state of bad governance as a result of this. As Hamza Alavi describes, Bangladesh is a typical postcolonial country suffering from colonial hangover, with an over-developed bureaucracy dominating an underdeveloped civil society, and the state as a whole.⁹ The empirical studies of Kamal Siddiqui and Jorge Barenstein on the problem of bad governance in Bangladesh have more or less corroborated Alavi’s classic essay on postcolonialism as a major cause of bad governance in the country.¹⁰ This study has, however, also stressed the importance of the political culture of the average Bangladeshi—which is all about the

collective alienation of the people from the state and state machinery due to various historical factors—with regard to the perennial problem of bad governance in the country.

Of late, the country has become a one-party dictatorship, which is also very corrupt and repressive at the same time. As mentioned in Chap. 6, various international human rights organizations, such as the Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and, among others, Journalists Without Borders have been critical of the Hasina regime for enforced disappearances of hundreds of political opponents of the regime in Bangladesh. Paradoxically, the last ten years of the Raj (1937–1947), the British ensured a better rule of law and more freedom in what is Bangladesh today than Bangladeshis have had since Liberation. Bangladesh, an LDC with high GDP growth, is an autocracy with corruption, state-sponsored terror and human rights violations. Thus, the study examines the qualitative aspects of underdevelopment as well as cultural backwardness, which perpetuates bad governance. The country is engulfed in a vicious cycle of poor governance, cultural backwardness and growth without development. In sum, the very high level of “affective polarization” among followers of the two major political parties, the Awami League and BNP—which is least issue- or ideology-based but is reflective of Bangladeshis’ mutual mistrust and hatred—is a major hindrance of good governance in the country.

UNDERDEVELOPMENT OR GROWTH WITHOUT DEVELOPMENT

The Bangladesh government feeds Bangladeshis and foreigners manipulated or mythical statistics about GDP growth, per capita income, poverty, nutrition, freedom, human rights, prosperity and anything related to the human development index in the country to boost its image. As an LDC, Bangladesh belongs to a group of forty-six countries—four in South Asia, with Afghanistan, Bhutan and Nepal—and is likely to graduate in 2024 or 2026 in accordance with a UN report published in December 2020. Despite the country being an LDC, which is defined by income, education and vulnerability, it is being sold as a middle-income country by the Hasina Regime. Some over-enthusiastic supporters of the regime claim the country is as developed as the US, Switzerland and Singapore even though Bangladesh will not be a middle-income country before 2027.

Interestingly, by now there is sort of a consensus among leading economists and development practitioners that mere high GDP growth rate and the numbers of visible infrastructure development (high-rise buildings and improved communication networks, for example) do not tell us the whole truth about the level of development or underdevelopment, anywhere. Joseph Stiglitz argues: “Chasing GDP growth results in lower living standards. Better indicators are needed to capture well-being and sustainability While GDP is supposed to measure the value of the output of goods and services, in one key sector—government—we typically have no way of doing it, so we often measure the output simply by the inputs.”¹¹ Unless we focus on health, education and the environment, not only on material well-being, “we become distorted in the same way that these measures are distorted,” Stiglitz affirms yet in another piece of writing.¹² Jason Hickel also argues against measuring the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) merely by the elusive “growth.” “Since 1980, the global economy has grown by 380 per cent, but the number of people living in poverty on less than \$5 (Pound Sterling 3.20) a day has increased by more than 1.1 billion So much for the trickle-down effect Instead of pushing poor countries to ‘catch up’ with rich ones, we should be getting rich countries to ‘catch down,’” Hickel argues.¹³

In spite of all the convincing arguments against the study’s thesis of “mythical democracy and development,” we must engage those who believe since Bangladesh is no longer under military rule, and no longer an “international basket case,” it is a democracy and developed as well. There is no denying, Bangladesh has done reasonably good in many areas of development: lowering the rate of natal mortality, epidemics, population growth; and raising life expectancy, growing more food than ever before, raising per capita income, GDP, GNP, literacy rate, female empowerment and generating more electricity than ever before. Of late, Bangladesh has become the second-largest garment exporter in the world, after China. Here cultivators mostly use power tillers, not traditional ploughs and bullocks; and not wind or muscle-power but engines run country boats. One comes across good roads and housing, sanitary toilets and electricity in the countryside as well. The country has built bridges across big and small rivers; highways connect most small and large towns with the capital city; there are scores of public and private colleges and universities, including medical and engineering colleges. Last but not least, Bangladesh has a higher human development index (HDI) than India’s and Pakistan’s. So far so good!

However, what successive governments, as well as local and foreign development practitioners, may say regarding development in Bangladesh, things aren't as rosy as they might seem at first glance. There are reasons to worry about the immediate and long-term future of the country. Even questioning the viability of the country is not an out of the world type at all. Things went wrong and are going wrong in Bangladesh, with little or no sign of getting them right in the foreseeable future. And, people are getting nervous about the state of affairs in the country, economic, social and political. Hence the ongoing flight of capital to North America, Europe, Malaysia and Singapore; and an exodus of young (both educated and not-so-educated) from the country to wherever they can! Since the grossly rigged and farcical parliamentary elections of 30 December 2018, the bulk of the population is almost thoroughly de-politicized, disillusioned, frightened and confused about the present and immediate future course of action. Meanwhile, as of early 2021, the gap between the rich and the poor has been widening, while around 70 per cent of Bangladeshis live below the poverty line. By the way, there is absolutely no reason to believe in the ADB drawn poverty line, which is around US\$2 per capita per day on PPP. As of 2021, one needs the equivalent of at least US\$5 per day to live above the poverty line in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the state-sponsored propaganda of phenomenal growth and development has become so overpowering that many ruling-party supporters argue that economic growth is more important than democracy.

Interestingly, there is a convergence of opinion between Sachs and Yunus about the root causes of poverty. The former believes "poverty is a result of corrupt leadership and retrograde cultures that impede modern development," the latter blames governments and banks who think the poor are not creditworthy. Yunus believes financial institutions should be "people worthy" in order to eradicate poverty once and for all. Both of them believe the empowerment of women is a major step towards alleviating poverty, and eradicating it altogether, one day!¹⁴ However, the microcredit-centric poverty alleviation approach is problematic. "Social Business" activities by NGOs and microcredit institutions like BRAC and Grameen Bank in Bangladesh sound wonderful, but in-depth studies of these organizations reveal somewhat disappointing and shocking results. They are profitmaking business enterprises with generous financial and moral support from the World Bank, IMF and mega-corporations and banks in the West. People like Bill and Hillary Clinton have further glorified them to such an extent that any counter-argument or results of

intensive research that project their loopholes and limitations are scandalous blasphemies among economists, development practitioners and donors. Another over-glorified, “female-empowering”—hence “poverty-alleviating” and “growth-generating”—sector is the readymade garment factories in Bangladesh. The beneficiaries of cheap apparel in the developed world frequently glorify the garment factories in the country, which are actually sweatshops that exploit slave labour of poor women, each making less than US\$3 per day. Paradoxically, Jeffrey Sachs (among others) believes microcredit and garment factories in Bangladesh are agents of female empowerment and economic development.¹⁵

The concept of “development of underdevelopment,” as used in this study, is borrowed from Andre Gunder Frank, which is all about the perpetuation of underdevelopment or “lumpen development” of colonial and postcolonial Third World countries by the metropolitan capital in collaboration with the unethical *lumpen bourgeoisie* in those places and Alan Winter.¹⁶ Without challenging the neo-Marxist dependency theory, this study focuses on the internal dynamics of underdevelopment in Bangladesh by imputing the phenomenon to the people’s belief systems or culture which collectively promotes *lumpen development* under the *lumpen bourgeoisie*. Underdevelopment in the Third World can be attributed to colonialism and neocolonialism. According to the study, Third World lumpen bourgeoisie on one hand protect neocolonial interests—which are mutually beneficial—while on the other hand nurture lumpen development through corrupt laws and institutions. Lumpen bourgeoisies and proletariats being consolidated at power in Bangladesh is the core of the problem.

Paradoxically, while GDP growth rate and human development index (HDI) have risen to record high—higher than India’s and Pakistan’s—Bangladesh today has virtually become unlivable, especially for the poor and marginalized. As we know, the polity is sharply polarized between the so-called pro-Pakistani/anti-Liberation/Islamist and pro-Liberation/pro-Indian/secular people. While roughly half the population admires Ziaur Rahman (Zia) (1936–1981), the other half admires Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib) (1920–1975). However, there is nothing permanent about mass commitment and loyalty to leaders or ideologies. As Gustave Le Bon has put it “The masses have never thirsted after the truth. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master; whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim.”¹⁷ So long as Mujib supplied them with illusions, Bangladeshis were with him; and when he was seemingly failing to deliver any more illusions, they just abandoned him.

IDENTITY

Bangladeshis suffer from an identity crisis in general. Bangladesh's majority Muslim population (90 per cent of the population) is unsure about whether Bengali, Muslim or Bangladeshi identity stands above others. While many Bangladeshi Muslims, despite being proud of their national identity, are unsure whether they are primarily "Bangladeshi Muslims" or "Muslim Bangladeshis"; likewise, many Bangladeshi Hindus are torn between loyalty and identity between Bangladesh and India. One may understand the inherent reasons behind these split identities/loyalties among Hindus. The reason may be explicable by the fact that Bangladeshi Hindus were marginalized for decades as citizens of both Pakistan and Bangladesh. They suffer from some inexplicable insecurity. Some Bangladeshi Muslims believe they were duped into joining Pakistan by non-Bengali leaders—Jinnah and his associates—while Mujib and his lieutenants finally liberated them. And the assiduously fed lies and half-truths about the transformation of East Bengal into the eastern wing of Pakistan during the Pakistan period (1947–1971) had alienated many Bangladeshis from the concept of Pakistan. Mujib often fed the people a biased and a fabricated version of history by either extolling himself as the key figure in the Liberation War or singling out his Awami League party as the only factor that contributed to Bangladesh. Consequently, most Bangladeshi youths have hazy to distorted ideas about the history of their country. Bangladeshis born between the late 1960s and the 2000s, who are the bulk of Bangladesh's population born between 1960 and 2000, are almost totally ignorant of their country's history because Mujib's legacy is propagated by the Awami League under Sheikh Hasina. A rural, peasant-working-class culture arose in the Post-Liberation era with the ascendancy of small-town and rural lower-middle and peasant-working-class people to the altars of power. In any case, long before Pakistan or Bangladesh even existed, educated Bengali Muslims began asserting their Muslim identity as a means of differentiating themselves from the more advanced Hindu Bengalis. They disowned "Hindu" clothing, customs and symbols by the early twentieth century. The role of Muslim leaders, mullahs and even academics played a significant role in this regard. In the 1930s, as the Provost of Salimullah Muslim Hall at Dhaka University, the well-known Bengali Muslim professor Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah (1885–1969) reportedly persuaded Muslim students to wear pyjamas and trousers instead of dhoti (considered a "Hindu attire").¹⁸

After the Liberation, intra-ethnic conflicts among Bengali Muslims, mainly based on broad political differences, have been a major source of instability. They are also good at playing the blame game against the ubiquitous “others,” for all the right and wrong reasons. They are corrupt, lack mutual trust and respect, and are alienated from the state. An Awami League supporter believes Mujib and his successors (his blood relatives) have been the only patriots, hence only legitimate rulers, whereas the BNP supporter believes Zia and his successors (also his descendants) have been the only patriotic people. Thus, besides their communal identities as Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and Christian, Bangladeshis are also divided into political lines. Their political commitment reflects more of their deep-rooted patron-client relationship—common to all pre-capitalist or peasant communities—than any long-lasting ideological commitment to any political party.

Nations are imagined communities as Benedict Anderson has argued persuasively,¹⁹ and we also know that individual groups are often identified with individual heroes, ideologies, religions, languages, ethnicities and other identities, which can be pretentious and dangerous. It is important for us to be cautious about showing the world what we pretend to be. There are examples of fractured and potentially fractured nations, from Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, and from Iraq to Syria and Turkey. Bangladesh is a case study in this regard. Since 2014, the country is no longer even an “illiberal democracy.” It is divided by religion, ethnicity (especially in the Chittagong Hill Tracts) or pseudo or pretentious ideologies such as pro- or anti-Liberation, secular or Islamic. As a result of myths—and the creation of new myths—the perennial identity crisis in the country is divisive and deadly. Overall, Bangladeshis represent a fractured polity in terms of their identities. In addition to their class, ethnic and religious differences, people here are divided politically and ideologically as well. Similarly, Bangladeshis, in general, are divided between supporters of two major political parties—the Awami League and the BNP—but Bangladeshi Muslims are again split between relatively secular and Islam-oriented ideologies. Despite the fact that most Bengalis are loyal to Bangladesh, there are some who maintain extra-territorial loyalty to India. These marginal groups seek a merger of Bangladesh and India to undo the Partition of 1947, which divided the Indian Subcontinent and Bengal.

In sum, while politicians, businessmen, the public and private-sector employees in the country are among the most corrupt in the world—this author’s own survey among Bangladeshis at home and abroad in social

media on the perception of the level of corruption among Bangladeshi politicians, businessmen, professionals and government employees have revealed that around 95 per cent of them are absolutely corrupt—no economic miracle without good governance can ever emerge out of an absolutely corrupt society. The culture of hypocrisy and hyped-up “patriotism” are also integral to Bangladeshi culture. Massive corruption and hypocrisy at every level explain why despite the two rounds of independence—in 1947 and 1971—Bangladesh still suffers from the acute crises of culture, governance, development and identity. Plato seems to have the last words in this regard: “Those who are able to see beyond the shadows and lies of their culture will never be understood, let alone believed, by the masses.” The people concerned are not going to be convinced so easily about the drawbacks in their culture, which includes their belief systems, mode of conduct, idiosyncrasies, prejudices, superstitions and, above all, vainglorious boast of personal or collective infallibility.

TRANSCENDING HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY

We need to understand why despite the two rounds of independence, in 1947 and 1971, Bangladesh still suffers from acute crises of culture, identity, governance and development. I have looked into the state of the dysfunctionality of Bangladesh in the light of the history of the British colonial and Pakistani periods in general, and what ensued during the first fifty years of independent Bangladesh. During the first fifty years of independence, a new economic stratum and social stratification have evolved in Bangladesh. Nouveau riche industrialists, businessmen and political elites have replaced the traditional land-based and bureaucratic elites of erstwhile East Pakistan.²⁰ While history and empirical research on the past and present take us quite close to the problem, historical sociology takes us to the core of the problem. While historians do not have the freedom to reconstruct an alternative scenario to any historical event—they do not have the time machine to tell us what could have happened differently—historical sociologists have the leverage to do so. It tries to answer the whys and hows of social changes, and makes some predictions, in this regard. As Peter Turchin argues: “One of the hallmarks of a mature discipline is its ability to make predictions that can be used to test scientific theories. Scientific predictions do not necessarily have to be concerned with future events; they can be made about what occurred in the past.”²¹ Actually, Marx, Durkheim, Weber and others have seen sociology as