

BOOK REVIEW

Achal Malhotra, *The South Caucasus: Transition from Subjugation to Independence*, (New Delhi, ICWA / Macmillan Education, 2020), Pages: 248, Price: Rs. 2,215.00.

The South Caucasus region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) has been largely neglected by Indian policy makers and academia. The recent conflagration in Nagorno Karabakh has brought some attention to the area. Hence, this is a timely book. It is a commendable effort to introduce the region to Indian students of International Relations (IR), and those who are interested in India's foreign policy towards this strategically important area which is gaining importance as many of the connectivity projects, including those promoted by India (INSTC) and China (BRI), pass through this area. The South Caucasus is at the crossroad of Asia and Europe, and significant oil reserves make the region important for energy supplies.

The good thing about the book is that while it aims to introduce the region, it also focuses on its complexities. After a brief introduction to the region, the author traces its historical development over one and half centuries, especially its socio-economic and political transformation under the Soviet system, and the events leading to its demise. He then discusses the complex political and economic development of the three states since the Soviet disintegration in 1991.

It has been well pointed out that, despite belonging to the same geographical space and with an intertwined history, the three countries have followed different trajectories in their domestic, political, and economic development, and especially their foreign policy, during the last thirty years. In the initial years after independence, all three countries sought to build a market economy, a multiparty competitive political system, and sought to improve relations with the USA and Europe - although the extent and degree of their engagement with the USA, Europe, and Russia varied with the passage of time. Georgia has been most eager to join Euro-Atlantic structures (for example, the European Union and NATO), while Armenia and Azerbaijan have followed a more complex policy. Azerbaijan has tried to keep aloof from the rivalry between Russia and the West. While seeking greater economic and trade ties and more investment and technology transfers from

West, it has faced problems on the issue of democracy and human rights in view of the nature of its polity (institutionalised and personalised family rule). Despite its over dependence on Russia, Armenia has tried to balance its ties with the EU. Major developments in the three countries in the initial twenty-five years of their evolution have been covered in adequate detail in this book. The complexities and difficulties of transition, political instability, and civil wars have also been documented very well.

The author deals with the two lingering/simmering conflicts in the area: the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and the Nagorno Karabakh dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The book provides a lot of information about the antecedents and factors behind these conflicts. The roles of Russia and other powers have been discussed. It makes a prognosis about oil rich Azerbaijan's military build-up, and its desire to make territorial gains against Armenia - something that was proved right by subsequent events. However, a greater discussion of the Soviet nationality policy, which created this problem in the first place, would have been very useful. Critics say that the Soviet nationality policy, which was complex and at times contradictory, paved the way for the subsequent conflict,. They accuse Soviet leaders of paying lip service to the principle of national self-determination, while actually adopting a divide and rule policy with the nationalities.

The fundamental problem, according to the author, is not the ethno territorial but two conflicting principles: the territorial integrity of states, and the right to self-determination. Another reason which makes any settlement difficult is that all parties have taken maximalist positions which makes compromise and resolution difficult to achieve. While the Abkhaz, South Ossetian and Nagorno Karabakh Armenians want nothing less than complete secession from their respective states, Georgia and Azerbaijan are willing to offer some autonomy, at best. Factors which led to the recent conflagration have been discussed at length.

Another contribution of the book is that it brings out great power politics in the past, and at present. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires tried to control the area, in which the latter got the upper hand. Since the Soviet disintegration, Russia, the USA and the EU are competing in the military, strategic, economic, and ideological arena. The USA/EU wish to make the end of Communism irreversible, liberate the region from Russian dominance, and promote a market economy and Western style democracy. Russia does not have ideological motives, but security concerns - that is, limiting the presence of adversarial powers. One

can argue that Turkey and China might have been given more space in view of their increasing role and presence.

The last two chapters deal with India's ties with the region during the past and at present. The Indian settlements in Armenia during ancient times and the Fire temple, together with an Indian Caravan Sarai near Baku during medieval time has been well documented. The book also talks about the presence of Armenian traders in India, especially in Calcutta, and their departure around the time of India's independence. The author is quite candid in admitting that the region has not been on India's foreign policy radar. Its relations have been uneven with the three countries: quite warm with Armenia (with three Presidential visits), not very friendly with Azerbaijan, and no embassy in Tbilisi (Georgia). The reasons have also been discussed. Azerbaijan's support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir, and Georgia's difficult ties with Russia have come in the way. There is no clearly articulated Indian policy towards the region. The author rightly maintains that, in view of India's emerging global status and ambitions, the country should be engaging more with the three states.

All in all, this is an interesting and comprehensive narrative, and a must read for students of IR and Indian Foreign Policy.

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S. Narayan and Sreeradha Datta (Eds.), *'Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges'*, (New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2020), Pages: 292 Price: Rs. 829.00 (HB), Rs. 509.00 (PB)

The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971 was preceded by large scale violence committed against the Bengali population of erstwhile East Pakistan that led to the launch of the Liberation War. Although the bloody Liberation War culminated in an independent Bangladesh, the newly founded nation was left with a fragile economy, and a devastated infrastructure to cope with thousands of homeless people, widespread disease, alarmingly high levels of malnutrition, and starvation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding

father of Bangladesh, popularly known as Bangabandhu, had a dream of making his country *Sonar Bangla* - a prosperous nation - free from poverty, hunger, and all sorts of exploitation. Since Bangabandhu had high regard for state-led and state-owned growth processes, he decided to establish economic institutions such as the Planning Commission and launched the first Five-Year Plan in 1973.

The first Five-Year Plan was intended to reduce poverty, and increase the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate to 5.5 percent per annum, and the per capita income at 2.5 percent per annum. The plan failed to live up to the expectations of both the leadership and the people. Indeed, the situation became quite problematic in the Fall of 1974 when a famine swept the country and hit the lowest strata of the society quite hard. At this stage, sceptics painted quite a bleak picture of Bangladesh's future. Henry Kissinger, the then US Secretary of State, was one of those sceptics, and he infamously termed Bangladesh as a "Bottomless Basket." Throughout the 1970s, the country could post only a depressingly 2-3 percent GDP growth, with per capita income hovering around US\$ 200. In order to meet the growing socio-economic challenges at home, adequate mechanisms, and a workable strategy was the much-needed requirement. Leaders and policymakers decided to introduce economic reforms, and liberalise the economy. Such reforms were aimed at strengthening market forces at home on the one hand, and integrate the economy with the rest of the world on the other. These measures proved helpful as, during 1980s, the Bangladeshi economy grew at around 3.5 percent per annum. This was followed by an average growth of 4.5 percent during the first half of the 1990s, which further improved in the second half to reach 5.0 percent. Such an impressive performance was recorded at a time when a devastating flood ravaged the country in 1998. Ever since, Bangladesh has never looked back, and continued to march on the path of development and prosperity. Prior to COVID-19, the economy was growing at over 7.0 percent.

It is at this crucial juncture that S. Narayan and Sreeradha Datta have come up with an edited volume which analyses Bangladesh's development, and challenges it faces. The volume is composed of eleven chapters, and an "Introduction" by the editors. The first five chapters deal with Bangladesh's performance in the areas of economic growth and development. Chapter six and seven discuss socio-political issues and women empowerment, respectively. Chapter eight focuses on militancy, while chapter nine explores issues related to energy and development. Chapter 10 analyses five decades of India-Bangladesh relations, whereas

chapter 11 focuses on Bangladesh's foreign policy.

In the very first chapter, Mustafizur Rahman analyses the impressive track record of Bangladesh's resilience, business, entrepreneurship development, economic growth, and socio-economic progress. He argues that Bangladesh's impressive score card is built on her ability to attain a consistently high pace of economic growth on the one hand, and of good performance in areas of development indicators on the other. The overall result of all these is reflected in the country achieving dual graduation: from being a Low-Income Country to a Lower Middle-Income Country in 2015 as per the criteria set by World Bank; and from having the Least Developed Country status to achieving Developing Country status in 2018, according to criteria set by the United Nations.

In the fourth chapter, S. Narayan underlines the role played by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and various multilateral agencies in helping Bangladesh overcome a number of developmental challenges. The country was heavily dependent on aid in its initial years, and most of its development needs were financed by grants received through multiple development partners, such as USAID, UNDP, World Bank, ADB, UNFPA, DFID, JICA, AUSAID, GIZ, CIDA, etc. No one can ignore the contributions of the Grameen Bank to deliver credit to small enterprises as well as BRAC's initiatives in education in general, and women's education in particular.

In the third chapter, Selim Raihan discusses the importance of the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in the overall economic growth of the country. The RMG has been the flagship export product of Bangladesh. At home, the RMG sector provides employment to at least 3.5 million people, and is responsible for a significant chunk of foreign exchange earnings. An interesting fact about the RMG industry is that women account for over 60 percent of the workforce. In the second chapter, Amitendu Palit cautions about the challenges that are expected to come with Bangladesh's dual graduation. The success story of Bangladesh is closely linked to its effective use of the non-reciprocal market access available to LDCs. Once Bangladesh graduates to a Middle-Income Country, these benefits would cease to exist. This would bring about new sets of challenges, and might result in losses in export earnings.

In the sixth chapter, Sreeradha Datta critically analyses Bangladesh's politico-social fabric. She raises certain pertinent questions regarding democracy and political stability in the country. She underlines the fact that the Bangladeshi polity is still very much dominated by dynastic politics. Weak

political institutions, and the absence of a strong political opposition has given rise to unaccountability, and a poor law and order situation. Violence, both organised and unorganised, is visible at almost every level of society, which sometimes gets out of control. Observers believe that there are visible signs of social fragmentation, especially due to the violence against minorities, such as the Chakmas and the Hindus. Sreeradha Datta also points towards the continuing violence against women in a country that has consistently been ruled by women leaders. This assertion is also supported by Amena Mohsin in the seventh chapter in which she exclusively focuses on women's empowerment and development in the country. However, she also points out that Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in terms of narrowing the gender gap in different areas.

In chapter 8, Amit Ranjan and Roshni Kapur focus on militancy in Bangladesh. They argue that the narration of the 1971 Liberation War has been one of the country's biggest problems as it has divided various ethnic groups of the country. A section of the population appears to be intolerant towards other religious groups. In recent times, social media has provided people avenues to express their public ire against people of different religions, and this often threatens the minorities. The authors also point out that some of the militant groups have built linkages with international terrorist outfits.

The presence of millions of Rohingya refugees in the country is something that, many observers believe, has the potential to fuel instability not only in Bangladesh but in region as a whole. Sheikh Hasina has, of course, taken measures to address the issue of radicalisation among the youth, and to keep a check on the spread of militancy. However, it seems the nation needs to do much more. Without active regional and international cooperation, it will not be easy for Bangladesh to deal with such complex issues.

Shamsher M. Chowdhury analyses Bangladesh-India relations in the tenth chapter. Like many others, he too notices that India-Bangladesh relations become smooth whenever there is an Awami League government in power. The only exception in this context was the period when Moraraji Desai became the Prime Minister of India in 1977. At this time, there was a Non-Awami League government at the helm in Dhaka, and yet the bilateral relations were pretty good. Chowdhury suggests that India-Bangladesh relations become problematic during the Non-Awami League dispensation at the helm, especially under Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). During this period, issues like water-sharing and the killing of Bangladeshis on the border by the Indian

Border Security Force (BSF) pop up, and receive greater attention. There is a perception in Bangladesh that India has been biased in favour of the Awami League. More or less, perceptions are same in India about Non-Awami League governments, that they prioritise relations with China.

The book covers many aspects of Bangladesh's growth story, and how the country overcame various challenges on the way. India's contribution in the success story of Bangladesh, could have been covered in greater detail. Similarly, more in-depth study of recent developments in China-Bangladesh relations could have added value. Overall, it is a good book, and a must read for those having an interest in developments in Bangladesh and South Asia.

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