

## BOOKS REVIEWED

### ***Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990s* (UPL, Dhaka, 1991, Vols. 1-4)**

Reviewed by

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The Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990s is indeed a phenomenon. Hats off to the Planning Adviser of the Interim Government for his imaginative initiative to make the best use of his temporary office, and to the over 250 professionals who have given their sweat without asking for a material reward, to help the nation's leaders formulate policies for the development of the country.

Twenty nine Task Forces in areas of economics, development administration, technology, energy, women in development and environment deliberated on the state of affairs in their respective fields and on directions for positive change, under three objectives of development strategies given to them as proclaimed by most of our political parties and in the successive Five Year Plans, i. e.,

- (i) alleviation of poverty;
- (ii) greater self-reliance in the development process; and
- (iii) ensuring a process of sustained growth for the economy.

As I have discussed elsewhere\*, I have a basic problem in talking in terms of concepts like poverty alleviation which give the people a negative self-image and delivery orientation rather than invoking creative effort from them with the needed transfer of control over productive assets. This, however, I shall not harp on here. The report of the Task Forces comprise a collection of information, analysis and recommendations in the various respective fields, for the first time put together in one handy set of documents. The development challenge for the nation comes out in this set of documents in clear and unambiguous terms. The information and analysis of the economy and of its performance since independence, and of the "superstructure" governing it, add up to the following dismal picture:

The growth rate of GNP over the last 20 years since independence has averaged in the order of 4 per cent per annum which has not given any dynamism to the economy; growths in total agricultural as well as food crop outputs have progressively decelerated, both having been in the neighborhood of 2 per cent per annum in the eighties, barely keeping pace with the rate of population growth; industry has stagnated, with its share of GNP declining in the last decade from a peak level of 10.8 per cent in 1979-80 to 8.49 per cent in 1988-89; the infrastructure of the country is not being maintained. And with all this there has naturally not been any fundamental improvement on the poverty front, although the condition of some poverty groups has improved thanks perhaps to some specific anti-poverty programmes and a relative decline in foodgrain prices in recent years.

The rate of saving out of domestic income has remained negligible, with chronic dissaving by the public sector and little saving by the private sector. The aid-dependence of the country's develop-

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\* "People's Self-development", *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* (Hum.), Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, Dec. 1989, and Md. Anisur Rahman, "Towards an Alternative Development Paradigm", *Bangladesh Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 11, No. 2A.

ment budget has steadily risen and is total today. Much of the aid funds have been leaking into the hands of rent seekers in the aid funds administration and a foreign consultancy network patronized by the aid agencies. Whatever productive activities have been taking place in the country, as well as survival activities of the population, have been increasingly destroying resources for future survival and sustainable development - industrial pollution destroying fisheries resources; diversion away from soil into the household oven valuable nutrients and organic matters destroying soil quality; depletion of bio-diversity vital for human survival directly as well as through its effects on the sustainability of agriculture, forestry and fisheries production; and rapid depletion of forest resources, the effective tree cover today being an alarming 5.1 per cent of the total land area while the "danger limit", I understand, being in the order of 20-25 per cent.

With the rate of growth of population as it is, the future survival of the nation (as a society of any order) depends on the ability to lift the growth rate of GNP to the order of 6-8 per cent by the turn of the century and sustain it in that neighborhood. Without a drastic change in the nature of the environment-affecting activities of the nation and in particular without a major breakthrough in agricultural technology to preserve soil quality and bio-diversity, such an acceleration of economic activities will further press on the degrading environment and will in fact be self-defeating - e. g., the nation will not "survive" in the long run short of a revolution in its environment "culture".

To cap it all, the state of the nation's "superstructure" is not conducive to facing this challenge of development. The major political parties represent the interests of the "millionaire" rather than of the ordinary people. A sad erosion of national self-respect surrendering initiatives for the solution of problems to external assistance, viewing successes in accessing external funds as high credentials, and a lust for foreign products have left little encouragement for local initiatives and the production of indigenous goods.

Donor politics is very much a part of this negative superstructure. The promotion of political and commercial interests of the donor rather than serious development of the country, seems to have been the dominant objective of aid policy. Aid has come easy from donors who have patronized one government after another notwithstanding the heights of abuse of aid funds, and whose "experts" and consultants rather than the country's own professionals have had the dominant voice in deciding upon and implementing "development" projects. An import liberalization policy has been imposed on the country handicapping its bid for industrialization, while the donors' policies of tied aid (tying aid to the import of both goods and expertise from the donor countries) have given implicit protection to donors' "industries" producing goods as well as consultants.

The Task Forces are to be congratulated for laying bare so very vividly the nature of two decades of "anti-development" and the dismal nature of the "initial conditions" with which the nation has reentered into a phase of political democracy. It should, however, be clear from the set of reports that the three objectives of development strategy given to the Task Forces as guidelines are not attainable without a drastic change in the "superstructure", e. g., without the coming into political power of genuine representatives not of the nation's millionaires but of the wider society; in the regeneration of a spirit and culture of self-pride in all spheres of economic and social life, and in the donor agencies cooperating with such transformations rather than seeking client governments in the country to promote their own industrial, business and employment interests. These preconditions do not exist at this stage. Perhaps in the euphoria of the transition back to political democracy the Task Forces could not have said this stark truth, i.e., the development problem has no solution until its preconditions are given. Positive recommendations addressing the government (and opposition parties) had to be given in any case as a ritualistic duty.

The reports contain a long list of recommendations in the different respective fields, most of which any worthy government would seriously consider. They are, however, not integrated to form parts of one whole. They could not have been so, perhaps, in the time at the disposal of the Task Forces. In this sense, most of the different sets of recommendations are "partial equilibrium" viewpoints which need review from the point of view of important unadmitted considerations. For example, in recommending an unlimited role of private enterprise in industry, the Task Force on Industrial Policy has not considered either the social or the environmental implications of such a strategy. The nation had rejected the concept of "20 families" as a part of its independence movement, for reasons which if anything should be even stronger today. The display of affluence by the "millionaires" in the society amidst severe mass poverty and widespread unemployment is already contributing to mounting social unrest, and an unbridled private venture to industrialization seems unlikely even to settle down. With the Task Force on Environment citing the near total lack of enforced regulations on industrial (and marine) pollution, the question of who will bear the environment costs of private enterprises needs also to be addressed. The predisposition of the Task Force on Industrial Policy toward (competitive) market signals without a caution also overlooks the fact that the market is typically environment-blind which this society cannot any longer afford to be. It is already clear from the report of the Task Force on Environment (and also of that on Technology) that without direct social control of environment-affecting private initiatives much of the country's economic activities are likely to become technically unsustainable beyond some 20 years or so.

There is also a basic economic question which has not been asked by the Task Forces in charge of the economic fields. Given the imperative need to raise the growth rate of GNP sharply, from the

current 4 per cent or so to the order of 6-8 per cent and to sustain it there, the crucial question is which economic class or classes, and what kind of social formation (e. g., individual or joint initiatives) would have the best potential to generate the needed *surplus* and its productive investment on a continuing basis. Somehow the concerned Task Forces have stopped short of this vital question, and have remained preoccupied with sequences of one-time rises in production and employment which do not *per se* ensure the needed sustained high rate of accumulation and growth. In fact, unless I have missed some statement somewhere in this 1500-1600 page set of reports, the only place where a concern for surplus generation appears is in the report of the Task Force on Technology, which recommends a move away from tiny rural cottage industries to small - scale rural industrialization explicitly out of a consideration for surplus maximization, a line of enquiry which should have been a central element in the deliberations of all the Task Forces facing the growth challenge. This is a challenge to discover where the accumulation drive of the society might lie, and to enquire how the best potentials in this respect could be tapped. It is not at all clear - the logic has not been drawn - that the totality of recommendations of the Task Forces promise a transition to the desired order of the overall growth rate.

From this point of view, the thesis of "declining importance of land reform" in view of the land-people ratio presented by the Task Force on Poverty Alleviation, and the implicit support to this thesis by the Task Force on Food and Agriculture and Land Administration does not also address the above crucial question. The control of agricultural assets must come in the hands of a high surplus-generating class of producers under an appropriate social formation. This means, I suggest, some form of group farming, storage, marketing and loan operation by the direct producers in agriculture, in order to reap the benefits of economies of scale and cooperation, and

also to stimulate the collective self-mobilization of the peasantry to go on directly transforming their labour into (infrastructural) capital - a form of instantaneous surplus generation and its investment. Such social formations could also reduce the aggregate cost of meeting the consumption needs of the concerned population and thereby generate more surplus by various kinds of cooperative services - e.g. cooperative stores, education and health facilities, social insurance, etc. - initiated by such groups. This is what I see as the more important potential of the class-organizations of the land-poor in the countryside to which the Task Force on Poverty Alleviation and a number of other Task Forces have made references, indicating a direction of agrarian reform which has become a matter of sheer arithmetic compulsion for us.

At the very mundane level of immediate concrete action, I would single out the priority given by the Task Force on Energy to spread the use of improved stoves as of vital importance for the health of almost half of our population and for conservation of rapidly depleting biomass fuel. This recommendation of the Task Force can be taken up by the entire society for implementing action without waiting for "development assistance" or policy decisions from above. I understand that Grameen Bank's field experiments with such stoves indicate that there are still some gaps between the design of such stoves and the specific sources of fuel that low income village women can access, and hence some redesigning of the stoves may be necessary. The designers of such stoves, and other relevant competent quarters, may be urged to quickly respond to this experience. I would also mention an omission of another encouraging development - the technology for producing "spirulina", a powerful nutrition supplement, is now in our hands, thanks to the dedicated women scientists in the BCSIR who completed their successful research for the adaptation of this technology about the same time that the nation

entered into the present phase of rebirth of political democracy. This signals a breakthrough on the nutrition front which is now ready for commercial production. The same scientists are now experimenting to discover a technology to have this algae produced in every household of the country. They deserve every encouragement and support in their effort which hopefully will give all development agencies, social activists and the media another massive piece of task by way of taking the spirulina technology to every door in the country as has been done e. g., with oral saline.

As for the other tasks outlined by the Task Forces addressed mainly to the policy makers, the basic problem of the negative superstructure remains. We have no indication that the dedicated work of the nation's best professionals has made any impression on the concerned quarters. The reason for this is contained in the Task Forces' reports as already suggested. In this framework the most valuable suggestion in the whole set of reports, again to be taken up by social action groups, remains that in the Reports on the Role of Political Parties and on Poverty Alleviation, toward working for the creation and strengthening of social and class organizations to articulate and assert the point of view of the majority of the people and to take collective development initiatives themselves. Short of this, a development process in the country meaningful to the people will not even begin. With such popular forces emerging, the role of our professionals would be to address and work directly with these forces, and to help them with those information and analyses which professionals might be in a more advantageous position to collect and process, in order to strengthen the capability of such forces to lead and lift the society.

Meanwhile, the nation owes a big "thank you" to the Task Forces for their work, in particular for alerting all about the gravity of the

economic and social state of affairs. It has been a particular pleasure to read the reports of the Task Forces on Technology and on Environment which both make an integrated analysis of economic, environmental and technological dimensions of our development problem, attempts which enlighten all by showing the essential interrelation between these disciplines. Even if some other individual Task Forces have not been able to face the "general equilibrium" challenge (economic, social, environmental) of a search for a development strategy that will spark off a high growth rate which could be socially and ecologically sustainable, their contributions are nevertheless very valuable, first as a source of information; secondly as a debating point; and thirdly, by revealing gaps in the current lines of economic enquiries which urgently call for new directions of research - most importantly, (1) to enquire into the surplus-generating character and potentials of different economic classes and socio-economic formations and of interventions to promote local-level development or poverty alleviation, and (2) incorporation of environmental cost-benefits in the economic calculus, and enquiry into the means of ensuring that these cost-benefits have their due weight in guiding action. And finally the reports as a whole serve to underline the urgency of total mobilization of our scientists for the needed technological breakthrough to achieve ecologically sustainable development.

The University Press Limited also deserves to be thanked for making these reports available in record time in a handy form. The price of the set remains beyond the reach of most citizens - (paradoxically, only those "millionaires" can buy them !). I hope that all "rich" libraries in the country will buy several copies of the set each so that citizens with inadequate means can go there and read them. And the donor agencies might also wish to read them, if only to be alerted that the nation is not unaware of the damage two decades of

"development assistance" has done to the country; and that there is some self-respect and concern for national self-reliance still left in the country as symbolized in the very conception of the Task Forces and in most of the reports that have been presented as well as in the culture of professionals ignoring "market signals" and contributing *voluntary labor* for the good of the society which does not have a place in the donors' perception of a development strategy.