1

Introduction

On December 13, 2010, the streets of Dhaka were once again convulsed by demonstrations and a strike by the nation's garment workers. Workers blocked the highways and roads with barricades and picketed outside factories, demanding that the government implement a new minimum wage of US$43 per month, which was supposed to have come into effect in November. At least three protesters lost their lives in clashes with police, and dozens more were injured in the violence that followed. Similar protests had taken place earlier in June and July of that year and were the latest in a history of regular garment-worker mobilizations that dated back to the early 1990s. Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry is worth $15 billion annually, accounts for more than three-quarters of its exports and services a wide range of well-known Western clothing companies that include Gap, Marks and Spencer and Walmart. A typical garment worker is a young woman recently arrived from a rural village and who lives in rented slum housing near a factory or an export processing zone (EPZ), where she works as a machinist and earns approximately $1.50 a day. The garment workplace brings her face to face with the contradictions and complexity of a globalised economy: the factory may be Korean-owned, the fabric from Taiwan, the yarn from India and the packaging materials from China, yet the garments that she manufactures will each carry a "made in Bangladesh" label. Located within a remote, weakly regulated outpost of the global capitalist economy, and increasingly dependent on a precarious and exploitative international division of labour, these garment workers are typical of many people in Bangladesh. They try to build a livelihood through working to secure whatever income can be managed from the market, struggling for justice from the state and attempting to organise themselves within a civil society in order to protect their interests.

The aim of this book is to provide a concise, up-to-date overview of the politics, economy and civil society of Bangladesh in a way that makes sense of the achievements and contradictions faced by Bangladesh and its people in a changing world. It is intended as an introductory text for general readers, students and teachers and does not assume prior knowledge of its subject. It aims to move beyond the level of description to dig more deeply under the surface of issues than a traditional textbook might allow. It seeks to engage with current debates and at times challenge received wisdom. The book presents the key background and a wide range of factual information, but the reader should also note that this is also a personal interpretative essay that inevitably reflects my research interests over the past twenty-five years in the broad field of development studies and my own personal positioning as a Western outsider.

Understanding Bangladesh's politics, economy and civil society requires covering a considerable amount of historical and political ground in order to identify the main themes. Processes of change and development have been contradictory, with transformation accompanied by a recurrent set of tensions. In the economic sphere, since the 1980s the mainstream international development donor community has pushed heavily for the liberalisation and privatisation of Bangladesh's economy. Although this agenda has been driven through in many areas of the economy, in others it is still resisted through the actions of citizens and government. Nevertheless, a level of relative peace and social stability has been secured in Bangladesh (at least compared with most of South Asia), and during the past decade, there has also been consistent economic growth and renewed interest in discoveries of potentially exploitable natural resources. In the social and political spheres, there are longstanding tensions between religious and secular Bangladeshi identities, recurring periods of unease between majority Bengali Muslims and other minority Bangladeshi communities, and an increasingly gridlocked set of national political institutions. These problems have increasingly led many internal and external observers to characterise Bangladesh as a regularly "failing" state.

Formerly East Pakistan, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation in 1971, after a prolonged two-decade struggle for autonomy that culminated in a nine-month war with the Pakistan army and, eventually, in the military intervention of India. A "least developed country" according to UN categorisation, Bangladesh is predominantly rural in character, has a population estimated at around 162 million, a per capita annual income of $369 and an economy that has long been heavily foreign-aid dependent. Bangladesh has seen periods of authoritarian military rule as well as two decades of unstable

electoral democracy, and is still widely seen today as suffering from severe problems of governance and high levels of corruption. It has long been a country central to the aid industry, and has become particularly known for the extensiveness of its nongovernmental organisation (NGO) sector that some have identified with a wider "civil society." The sector nevertheless has far longer roots that go back to the wider social movements and associational life that have regularly engaged its citizens in local and national struggles.

Apart from Willem Van Schendel's *A History of Bangladesh* (2009), which this book aims to complement, and Rounaq Jahan's (2001) edited book *Bangladesh: Promise and Performance*, now more than a decade old and therefore rather out of date, there is no such introductory book currently available to an international readership. This absence provides an obstacle to students requiring an introductory academic text and to people who may visit Bangladesh for an increasing variety of reasons – conducting business, seeing family, undertaking development work or simply exploring a country that has so far escaped the mainstream tourist market. This shortage of basic literature might at first appear a surprising omission. Yet one of the paradoxes of Bangladesh is that, despite its dramatic emergence as a nation that reshaped the postcolonial order in South Asia, its status as an archetypal "developing" country and its widely dispersed migrant communities, it remains relatively unknown compared with the rest of the region.

Although Bangladesh is a country that is just four decades old, as the eastern part of the region of Bengal it has a long and varied history – as India's commercial centre during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as a key acquisition of the British Empire and later as part of the new postcolonial state of Pakistan. Since 1971 Bangladesh has undergone significant political and economic changes. These include numerous coup d'états that produced two long periods of authoritarian military governments, a series of popular mass protest movements that culminated in the *gono andolon*, or "people power," overthrow of the final military regime of General H. M. Ershad in 1990 and the establishment in 1991 of a fragile, though still functioning, system of parliamentary democracy. This system remains in place despite the imposition in January 2007 of an unelected military-backed caretaker government for a two-year period. This was eventually followed by democratic elections that returned for a second term Sheikh Hasina Wazed, leader of the Awami League (AL) political party founded by her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, known popularly as "the father of the nation," or *bangabandhu*, "friend of Bengal." Nor has Bangladesh's economy stood still during four

decades of political turbulence. A heavy reliance on foreign aid was gradually displaced during the 1990s by the growth of overseas remittances from migrant workers as the country's main source of foreign exchange, and its historical reliance on jute exports was replaced by two new nontraditional exports in the form of ready-made garments and frozen shrimps.

Despite a population that is comparable in size to that of Pakistan, and extensive communities of global migrants of Bangladeshi origin present in the Gulf States, Europe, North America and India, Bangladesh and Bangladeshis receive surprisingly little attention within the Western media. It has been of limited geopolitical interest to Western nations compared with Pakistan and largely overshadowed by India in the Western imagination. In the United Kingdom, Bangladesh is rarely featured in the news, except every few years when pictures of severe flooding or cyclone damage briefly make the headlines. During the writing of this book, I would often log on to the South Asia section of the BBC News Web site and find information about Bangladesh to be strangely absent. It was almost as if important events were only to be found taking place in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, just as within the academic field of South Asian studies, research and teaching also remains dominated by a far larger volume of work devoted to India and Pakistan. An important aim of this book is to argue the case for Bangladesh's importance, not only for its inhabitants and neighbours but also for the wider global community as a whole. There are four main elements to this argument.

First, Bangladesh's position within the ongoing expansion and integration of the global capitalist economy is changing. Although Bangladesh in recent decades has mainly been viewed as only as a source of cheap labour within the international economic system, which is epitomised by the rapid growth of its garment industry, new concerns over energy scarcity at the global level mean that it is attracting increased attention as the location for potentially valuable natural resources. It has long been known that there are gas and coal reserves in the region, but only recently have rising international energy prices led foreign companies to begin systematic exploration activity in Bangladesh, and the sector has been opened up to limited foreign investment. In 2007, for example, the Bibyana gas field in Sylhet began production as part of a joint venture between the U.S.-based Chevron company and the state Petrobangla agency. There has been considerable domestic opposition to the exploitation of natural resources by foreign capital, and energy has now become a highly charged political issue.

Second, Bangladesh remains an important focus for the international development industry. It has long attracted high levels of aid and been a

testing ground for development ideas and approaches. Recently, Bangladesh has gained international respect as a country that has made significant progress towards at least some of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) developed by the United Nations, which focuses on meeting targets by 2015 for, among other things, poverty eradication, reduction of child mortality, improved maternal health and primary education. Bangladesh's extensive NGO sector increasingly commands international media attention. Some of the leaders of these NGOs have been acclaimed as development visionaries or "social entrepreneurs," counterpointed against an increasingly pessimistic popular view of a struggling international development industry compromised by lack of competence and wasted aid resources. Today, Bangladesh is internationally known as the homeland of 2006 Nobel Prize winner Professor Mohammed Yunus, founder of the pioneering microfinance organisation Grameen Bank and now active as a global propagator of new ideas about the transformational power of "social business." Another increasingly well-known figure is Sir Fazle H. Abed, knighted in 2010 in the United Kingdom in recognition of his work with BRAC, the organisation he founded shortly after Bangladesh's Liberation War, which has grown into one of the world's leading development organisations.

Third, as the third most populous Muslim majority country in the world, Bangladesh has gained a new profile in the post-9/11 era. Within the policy climate of the so-called war on terror – the term coined by George W. Bush that emerged during the 2000s – this status provided it with a new strategic importance within U.S. foreign policy and led to several high-profile visits by key leaders such as Hillary Clinton. This carried with it a counternarrative of concern that Bangladesh was under an additional threat alongside more familiar problems of poverty and humanitarian disasters, in which its continuing governance problems could prove fertile for breeding international terrorism and threaten its status as a moderate Muslim majority country. The book *Bangladesh: The Next Afghanistan?* (2005) by Indian journalist Hiranmay Karlekar highlights growing and increasingly paranoid concerns being voiced in some quarters within India. Yet despite these moral panics, Bangladesh continues to serve as an important antidote to Samuel Huntingdon's (1993) warning of a so-called clash of civilisations between the east and the west. It has come to be seen as an example of a moderate majority Muslim democratic country and is often favourably contrasted with Pakistan because it has maintained a reputation as a relatively tolerant society. A distinctive Bengali Muslim identity has been forged within a postcolonial secular nationalist setting. This identity has been informed by the struggle to preserve the richness of the Bengali language and culture, within

a context that has been conditioned over thousands of years by religious influences that have included Sufi, Hindu and Buddhist traditions.

Fourth, the issue of climate change has now catapulted Bangladesh into the international environmental debates. A predominantly flat deltaic country prone to regular flooding, even the smallest of sea-level rises could have severe consequences for millions of its inhabitants. This is leading to increasing global concern, as climate change climbs higher up the international agenda. There have always been disaster stories in the mainstream media whenever Bangladesh is affected, as it regularly is, by the severe floods and destructive cyclones that cause massive loss of life and human suffering (Novak 1993). It is now also portrayed as being on the frontline of climate change, at the heart of a new crisis narrative that warns of "a country underwater" and the creation of what some people have begun calling "climate change refugees." For the first time, with climate change, Bangladesh's problems are being felt also as part of "our" problems in the west. Typical of this often-breathless tone of reporting was Ian Williams's (2009) National Broadcasting Company (NBC) Worldblog report:

> More than half of Bangladesh is less than 20 feet above sea level. Experts say it faces a double threat: rising sea levels as a result of the melting ice caps and glaciers, and more extreme weather, like cyclones and heavy rain. Taken together this could generate more climate change refugees than anywhere else on earth.

In an increasingly globalised world, perhaps the problems of "poor" countries such as Bangladesh are beginning to feel much closer to people in the wealthy countries than they had once seemed before.

Approaching Bangladesh in the Literature

Much of what has been, and continues to be, written about Bangladesh is heavily slanted towards particular viewpoints and perspectives. Boundaries around knowledge production are acute, and these hamper understanding in different ways. Academic researchers working within or on South Asia confine themselves within certain disciplinary or geographical perspectives. For example, historians have tended to focus on the prepartition period and social scientists have concerned themselves with the present. Partition in 1947 did not only mean the imposition of new borders and movements of people across boundaries, as Mahbubar Rahman and Willem Van Schendel (2004: 209) remind us, but also the creation of divisions within academic communities studying India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Many scholars still restrict their work to issues of citizenship, nation and development only within the modern borders of South Asia. Since 1947,

tensions between the new states have limited the exchange of ideas among the subcontinent's scholars. This narrowing of focus was reproduced among foreign researchers studying South Asia, many of whom opt to study just one postpartition country. Research on Bangladesh, beyond that focusing specifically on "development," has also tended to be subsumed within the wider "Indianist" study of Bengal.

Aid issues have long loomed large in what has been written about Bangladesh, and much of the writing that is produced originates from within the "aid industry," even today. The Norwegian economist Just Faaland and J. R. Parkinson (1976) famously described Bangladesh as a "test case for development," while leading Bangladeshi economist Rehman Sobhan wrote the influential book *The Crisis of External Dependence* (1982). Seen as an archetypal "developing" country, people learn about contemporary Bangladesh mainly from the reports of agencies such as the World Bank regarding issues such as poverty and economic growth or from NGOs such as Transparency International (TI). TI's *Corruption Perceptions Index* consistently ranks Bangladesh as a poor performer within the international league tables of "good governance." Geoffrey Wood, another longstanding researcher on Bangladesh, entitled a collection of writings *Bangladesh: Whose Ideas, Whose Interests?* (1994) in recognition of the way that the outside influence of foreign-aid interests has helped to shape Bangladesh's institutions, policies and even its ideas.

Finally, historical writing on Bangladesh has also been strongly shaped by nationalist visions of various kinds. These include the British colonial viewpoint of prepartition Bengal, the ideas of those who advocated the unified Islamic nation of Pakistan with its western and eastern "wings" and those scholars who went on to write Bangladesh's history as a newly independent nation. Each of these narratives are useful in providing insight into the various ways that Bangladesh is experienced and imagined today, but the picture can often appear obscured by what may, at times, seem to be overgeneralised themes of progress, modernisation and heroism. There are as yet far fewer historical accounts of the "subaltern" kind constructed in Bangladesh than are found in India, where generalised narratives and assumed cultural continuities have been challenged and broken apart since the 1980s, revealing the more fragmented and multiple stories of less visible social groups, identities and classes.

Structure of the Book

Following from this introduction, Chapter 2 introduces the structure of Bangladesh's society in terms of class, gender and religion, and provides some basic data on population, social indicators, gross domestic product

(GDP), main productive sectors and exports. It also contextualises Bangladesh within the international economy and the international aid system. Chapter 3 offers a brief historical overview that serves to contextualise an analysis of the state and economy since 1971. It begins with a discussion of precolonial Bengal and the role of the East India Company in securing the region as part of the British Empire, and then considers the post-1947 experience when Bangladesh existed as East Pakistan, before describing the processes of internal colonisation and resistance that led to the outbreak of civil war in 1971.

In Chapter 4 we focus on the state, analysing the development of Bangladesh's political structures and institutions and the tensions and transformations that have taken place within political actors and processes since 1971. It begins with a review of the nation-building work that followed the Liberation War victory under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (known as Mujib), which was based on the secular nationalist principles that had labelled Islamic political parties as collaborators with the Pakistani army. It goes on to trace the disillusionment that followed as Mujib's increasingly rigid and repressive regime failed to capitalise on the momentum of independence, the rise to power of General Ziaur Rahman and the new military politics that continued until the restoration of democracy in 1991. The main achievements of the elected governments (two Bangladesh Nationalist Party [BNP] and two AL) that followed the "people power" movement of 1990 are discussed, alongside the gridlocked politics that have come to characterise government-opposition party relationships. The focus in Chapter 5 is on the nongovernmental sector in Bangladesh. The comparative weakness of the state in Bangladesh has facilitated and been perpetuated by the emergence of a range of powerful nonstate actors. This chapter analyses this nongovernmental sector in all its diversity, from its earliest origins in various traditions of social movement in Bengal, and later in the efforts of international agencies to support development and relief after the 1971 war and a succession of natural disasters that followed, to the evolution of sophisticated and large-scale NGOs. Chapter 6 discusses the economy, which has undergone considerable change since independence in terms of production and trade. This change includes the rise of nontraditional industrial exports, such as ready-made garments and intensive irrigation-led agriculture. It also requires an understanding of important shifts in economic governance, namely the gradual move away from 1970s-style centralised state planning towards a partially liberalised economy.

In Chapter 7 we review the relationship between political and economic change and broader demographic and environmental factors. With

a population of more than 160 million, people remain – along with water – one of the country's key assets. The challenge of bringing down high levels of population growth has long been a key priority among government policy makers and international development agencies. Chapter 8 concludes, drawing together the main discussions of the earlier chapters in order to assess the current state of democracy and economy in Bangladesh in an age of neoliberalism. It will argue that Bangladesh is at a crossroads of sorts, and faces a number of pressing dilemmas. First, it confronts the challenge of reinvigorating its democratic institutions in order to build a more inclusive politics, while safeguarding its institutions from the risks brought by growing forms of intolerance and uncivil society. Second, it needs to build on its recent economic growth in such a way that the trend of accelerating inequality is kept in check and benefits are harnessed for its still-large rural population and not just the urban middle classes. Third, Bangladesh will need to manage effectively a new strategic context of the so-called war on terror that it now finds itself in, with domestic and international implications.

Overall, the book is informed by a political economy approach to understanding Bangladesh's society and institutions. The term *political economy* can carry at least two different meanings. Adam Smith used the term in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776; repr. 1970), emphasising the role of the state as one of creating optimum conditions for wealth production, but subsequent liberal economists went on to emphasise the power of the "invisible hand" of markets over politics. Today, their descendants, the neoclassical economists, tend to use the term *political economy* far more narrowly to refer to the interrelationships between economic and political factors in the formation of public policies. This approach has influenced much of what passes for political economy analysis in relation to Bangladesh within international development policy frameworks, such as the UK Department for International Development's (DFID's) "drivers of change" approach to "governance" reform during the early 2000s or, more recently, the World Bank's interest in "problem-driven governance and political economy analysis" (World Bank 2009). Although these ideas may have some practical utility and influence, their analytical value is limited because the emphasis is primarily on the formulation of development policies and the ways these may be constrained or facilitated by the social and political context. Radical traditions of political economy have instead come to refer to the ways that the historical interplay of class relations and power organise and are organised by the economy (Hoogvelt 2001). Influenced by Marxist theory, this approach to political economy calls for an analysis of the structural factors

that affect social and political change and draws attention to the underlying dynamics of economic and political power. In relation to Bangladesh, such an analysis requires us to focus on the narrative of East Bengal's economic exploitation by the British colonial regime within the wider process of India's incorporation during the nineteenth century into a global economy based on capitalist development, the creation of a transformed system of small-scale agricultural commodity producers growing cash crops for the market and the continuing exploitation of surplus value from rural labour under the Pakistan regime during the postcolonial era (McGuire 2009).

A radical political economy perspective aims to provide a more unified view of the power relationships and interests that underpin processes of political action and economic activity and of the underlying structural factors that facilitate and constrain processes of social transformation at local, national and international levels. Although accessing the wealth of material and ideas that many development donor documents may contain, the approach taken here is to address the dominant development discourses about Bangladesh's economics and politics from a critical perspective. At the same time, the heavy emphasis within some forms of radical political economy on macrolevel structural explanations runs the risk of overgeneralisation and also needs to be approached with caution. For example, McGuire's (2009: 25) claim that Bangladesh's "position has hardly changed since it claimed nationhood in 1971" may carry some elements of a general truth, but it fails to do justice to the economic and social transformations that have taken place. A fine-grained approach characterises much of Sobhan's (2004) work, who argues, for example, that the deep-rooted problems of "malgovernance" from which the country has long suffered – such as endemic corruption, poor quality administration and a lack of law and order – require analysis through structural historical analysis, while recognising that change, with positive and negative consequences for different sections of society, has taken place.

The historical approach taken in this book has been influenced by Frederick Cooper's (2002) idea of "the past of the present," with which he argues that an investigation of the past helps us not only to understand the present better but also perhaps to imagine the future. Bangladesh's present and future cannot easily be understood without reference to Bengal's earlier conquest by the Mughals and later by the British, and to the anticolonial struggles that led first to the formation of Pakistan and later to the liberation of Bangladesh. But at the same time we need to resist the notion that the past determines the shape of the present, and we also need to remain sensitive