

Witness to the woes

by Abdul Bayes

PROFESSOR Rehman Sobhan's second volume of memoir *Untranquil Recollections From Dawn to Darkness: Political Economy of Nation Building in Post-Liberation Bangladesh*, published by the University Press Ltd in March 2022, covers the cruel and divisive part spanning nearly three years in his engagement with the Planning Commission. He attempts to capture the problems of reconstructing the war-ravaged economy while building institutions from scratches. The regime started with hopes and Rehman Sobhan discusses why those hopes never came to fruition.

The beauty of the book

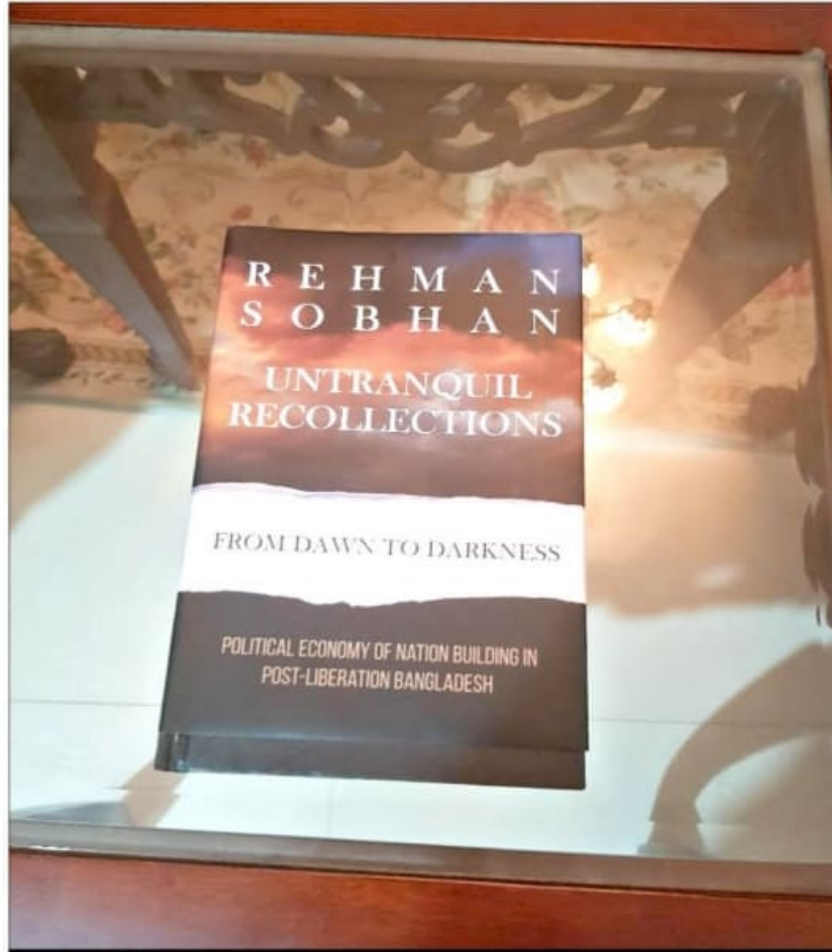
The book deals with a critical analysis of the Planning Commission and the party in power and opposition; history, economics and politics of a particular period; riveting memoir with shafts of whimsical humour; unheard and unsung persons on board; and removing confusion between Bangabandhu v Tajuddin Ahmad, socialism and nationalisation, the killers as the healers, etc.

Rehman Sobhan could not imagine that within three years and ten months he would be flying out of this same airport towards another phase of self-exile for next four years sadly saying, 'In this time, the newly independent nation of our dreams would languish under cantonment rule while its founder, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, his family and his closest political comrades lay silent in their graves.'

The memoir, a no-less-momentous phase of his life, spans from his arrival at Dhaka airport to an independent Bangladesh to unanticipated departure into exile from the same airport. This phase began in hope but ended in darkness.

The book is a personal story attempting to capture challenges of building institutions. But it is also a story of four comrades in the Planning Commission and the 'task rendered more challenges [with] the elected government where none of its leaders including PM, had any experience of serving in a national government'.

For 24 years after the killing of Bangabandhu, in the era of cantonment rule and its political heirs, Bangabandhu was erased from pub-



— New Age

lic memory until 1996 when Sheikh Hasina Wajed was elected the prime minister.

In a friend's house at Dhanmondi, he woke on a cold new year morning of 1972 'with sunshine streaming through my windows,

suffused with a sense of wellbeing and optimism.' However, his friend Tulu, said, 'the bright sunshine of new year's day may obscure some darker aspects of the newly independent state.' As he mentioned, since the surrender of

Niazi on December 16, the country was passing through a 'twilight phase.'

- six ministers were attempting to establish their authority with no functioning administration, no harmony and coordination so much needed at that critical juncture;
- alternative centres of power like the 16th division comprising armed youths of uncertain antecedents, claiming to be muktijoddha taking over vacant houses, hijacking cars, and extorting money at gun point from unwary citizens;
- the Iqbal Hall emerged as a centre of power under four leaders having own autonomous administration with own bahinis;
- the Mujib bahini provided another centre of power;
- nights in Dhaka had become a fraught moment where people preferred to lock themselves at home or moved around within their own neighbourhood; and
- complications arose with arrivals of officials working in Mujibnagar.

Lieutenant General Wasiuddin, the highest-ranking Bengali in Pakistan army, wrote on March 25 a strong letter to Yahya Khan denouncing actions and advising to release Bangabandhu and resume political negotiations. In consequence he was kept inactive and confined. He was a completely apolitical, professional soldier with allegiance to Bangladesh. Osmani suggested him as the chief of staff, or at least defence adviser. But three Muktiyoddhah Brigadiers Shafiullah, Ziaur Rahman and Khaled Mosharraf advised Bangabandhu not to do it. Bangabandhu complied with their request. 'It is not clear if Bangabandhu ever speculated that an army led by ambitious officers with their own sense of political empowerment, earned through their role in liberation war, was preferable to a more professional force, led by an apolitical general who had no political identity but was widely respected by the entire force who recognised his seniority.'

During the first meeting with Bangabandhu on January 12, 1972, he informed that Nurul Islam would be deputy chairman of the Planning Commission, Rehman Sobhan and Anisur Rahman as members. Later Mosharraf Hosain came on board. After many twists and turns, M Syeduzzaman was selected as secretary of the commission who at some risk to himself and his family managed to escape

from Pakistan through the services of a thriving class of smugglers.

In the very first year, Bangabandhu proposed Tajuddin as the chair of the commission although in Pakistan and India the prime minister holds the post. It was a, what Rehman Sobhan calls, 'laissez-faire chairmanship' with infrequent meetings and the commission led to fend itself. He never shared his socialist and progressive ideas with PC members.

Few lines on the four members of the Planning Commission: Deputy chair Nurul Islam was non-ideological person, but a democrat, liberal and progressive all in small castings. Anisur Rahman was the idealist and argued for austerity among leadership to set examples and proposed that the prime minister, colleagues, PC members would ride to office on bicycles. Before leaving out of frustration, he left behind policy papers for the prime minister entitled, 'lost moment'. Mosharraf Hosain was the pragmatist — at no stage he believed that ruling party would commit to any significant reforms and Rehman Sobhan was the incurable optimist but turned out to be a frustrated activist. Sobhan used to believe that objective conditions dictated that a process of social transformation could be carried through from February 1972 to September 1974, the day of departure, 75 per cent of papers from the commission to the prime minister, the cabinet and ministers came from division under his jurisdiction.

The nationalisation programme was a product of the imperatives of that time after departures of non-Bengali owners rather than ideological prelude to socialism. The aversion of a massive mass starvation in 1972 by the government was not as publicised as the occurrence of the famine of 1974; had major general Shafiullah and AK Khandker worked right on time, the devastation could possibly not happen.

The features of a good memoir are as follows: humour, relevance, authenticity and dramatic events. By all of these criteria, the book appears to me as an excellent piece on history, economics and politics of a particular period.

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