Broken limbs, broken lives: Ethnography of a hospital ward in Bangladesh

Zaman, S.

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Chapter III

BANGLADESH: A LAND OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

The world frequently receives bad news about Bangladesh. However, a land of heroic accomplishments and rich culture hides behind the images of cyclones, floods and famine. By briefly discussing the political history, society, health, education and economics of Bangladesh, this chapter touches on some of Bangladesh’s accomplishments as well as obstacles to achieving further undertakings.

Political history

Early history

Travellers, conquerors, missionaries, princely rulers and peasants wrote the earliest accounts of Bengalis. To Ibn e Batuta, a fourteenth century traveller from Africa, Bengal was a ‘hall full of bounties and wealthiest and cheapest land of the world’. The seventeenth century French physician and traveller Bernier was so charmed by Bengal that he wrote, ‘Bengal has a hundred gates open for entrance but not one for departure’. Bengalis’ forefathers were Aryan, Dravidian, West Asian, Tibetan and Burmese. This rich ethnic background is partially the result of the geographic location of Bangladesh; Bengalis live on the periphery of Indian and Chinese cultures. Their home on the rich soil and well-watered plains of the Ganges and Brahmaputra enabled an agrarian existence.

Originally, Bengalis were Buddhist and Hindu, but in the twelfth century, Muslim soldiers and Sufi missionaries from West Asia converted most of them to Islam. The pious Sufis found their greatest response among the Untouchables, who were generally ostracised from the Hindu caste system.

With the coming of Mogul Emperor Akbar to the Delhi throne in the sixteenth century, Bengal became part of the Mogul Empire until the British took over several hundred years later. Bengal, which was a peaceful and prosperous kingdom, contributed to the stability of the Mogul throne.

The European interest in Bengal began with the Portuguese who, during the last quarter of the fifteenth century, established trading posts and Christian missions. They were soon displaced by the Dutch East India Company, which established indigo plantations on the shore of the Bengali Ganges. Bangladesh was also known in the West for its Muslin, which was considered the finest fabric the world has ever produced. At the end of seventeenth century the British secured themselves in Calcutta, by that time Bengal’s largest, most important city. With the nearly concomitant decline

of Mogul power, the British East India Company effectively became the ruler of eastern India. The British hold on Bengal was confirmed when the British defeated the local ruler in Bengal at Plassy, a few miles north of Calcutta, in 1757. From that time on the British extended their rule to all of India.

**British period**

In 1857, Indian soldiers of the British Indian Army, drawn mostly from Muslim units from Bengal, mutinied at the Meerut cantonment near Delhi, starting a yearlong insurrection against the British. The mutineers then marched to Delhi and offered their services to the Mogul emperor, whose predecessors had suffered an ignoble defeat 100 years earlier at Plassy. The 1857 uprising seriously threatened British rule in India. When mutinous units finally surrendered one year later, in 1858, the British exiled the Mogul Emperor to Burma, thereby formally ending the Mogul Empire. As a direct consequence of the revolt, the British also dissolved the British East India Company and assumed direct rule over India. British India was thereafter headed by a governor general. The transfer of the control from East India Company to the British crown accelerated the pace of development in India and greatly altered political conditions within the subcontinent.

In education, commerce and government services, the Muslims of India lagged behind the Hindus, who more quickly adapted themselves to rapidly changing socio-economic conditions. Moreover, after the mutiny, the British favoured Hindus, as the mutineers were mostly Muslim soldiers. Furthermore, during British rule in India, most industry was Hindu owned and operated. Access to land by the Muslim population was also limited due to the Land Lease Act of Lord Cornwallis in 1793. Under the new system, the revenue collecting rights were often auctioned to the highest bidders, whether or not they had any knowledge of rural conditions or agriculture. Thus, agriculture became a matter of speculation among urban financiers, who were mostly Hindu. The traditional personal link between resident Zaminders (landlords) and the peasants was broken. To poor peasant Muslim tenants, the Hindu landlord, merchant and moneylender, often combined in a single person, became an object of fear and resentment. As a result, as the prospect of independence from British rule grew, the majority of Muslims desired a complete break from India with its Hindu majority.

Two major political parties in undivided India came to represent the movement for independence from British rule: the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League. The Indian National Congress, formed in 1885, which was initially broadly based with many influential Muslim leaders, finally came to reflect the aspirations of the Hindu majority in the country. The Muslim League, founded in 1906, was essentially a political party to protect the interests of Indian Muslims. It was within these two parties that the alternative schemes for structuring an independent India were argued.

Ultimately two independent states were created in 1947, India and Pakistan, ending nearly 200 years of British colonial rule. Because Bengal's western portion is mostly Hindu, when the British left it chose to remain part of India, which is also predominantly Hindu. Today it is called West Bengal state, whose capital is Kolkata (Calcutta). East Bengal, with a largely Muslim population, voted to become part of the newly formed Pakistan, whose people were mostly Muslim. Pakistan's two halves, West and East Pakistan, were divided by eleven hundred miles of India. After the
partition, a large portion of the Hindu population of the then East Pakistan migrated to India. In East Pakistan the Hindu population dwindled from 28% in 1941, to 18.5% in 1961. The India-Pakistan partition also resulted several religious communal riots.

**Pakistani period**

Beginning in August 1947, the Bengalis in East Pakistan were ruled by West Pakistanis based in Pakistan’s capital, Karachi, even though Bengalis were the majority in all of Pakistan. Though the Pakistanis were Muslim, they were not of Bengali ethnic origin but were instead Punjabis, Pathans, Sindhis and Beluchis. West Pakistanis dominated Bengalis in all political, economic and cultural spheres of life. Bengalis were not even allowed to use their native Bangla language, but were forced to learn Urdu, the language of the West Pakistani elite that had been chosen as Pakistan’s state language for its supposed ‘Islamic’ character. The Bengalis viewed this prohibition as a symbol of West Pakistan’s disregard for Bengali culture and identity. Though the Bengalis had decided for themselves to join the new nation of Pakistan, a country that they themselves had helped found when India was partitioned, they soon became disenchanted with the union. They discovered that they had thrown off one colonial ruler for another. In the ensuing years the situation became increasingly intolerable for the Bengalis, as the West Pakistani elite, which has dominated Pakistani politics since independence, gave itself the best jobs and most of the development funds.

**Birth of Bangladesh**

When the Bengalis of East Pakistan began agitating for greater autonomy in the Pakistani state, and their leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, won an election that would have made him Pakistan’s Prime Minister, the Pakistan Army, controlled by West Pakistanis, rolled into action. On the night March 26, 1971, a civil war began when army tanks appeared in various parts of Dhaka city, the capital of East Pakistan, particularly around Dhaka University, and began shooting Bengali students, intellectuals, civilians and politicians. All told, 3 million civilians were murdered, over 250,000 women were raped and over 20 million Bengalis became refugees in this brutal civil war. The genocide ended on December 16, 1971 when the Pakistani Army surrendered to an advancing Indian Army, which was assisted by millions of Bangladeshi Freedom Fighters. What had begun as an attempt by the East to gain greater autonomy ended with the birth of a new nation: Bangladesh. After centuries of foreign domination and wealth depletion by outside rulers, Bangladesh emerged as one of the least developed nations on earth, a sorry category for what had once been the richest province of India.

**After Independence**

In the years after independence from Pakistan, a number of regimes rose and fell in the course of violent Bangladeshi politics. Sheikh Mujib, the leader of the war of independence, returned to a very different country after being released from Pakistani jail. Bangladesh was scarred by its civil war; a huge number of people had been killed, raped and displaced. The task of economic rehabilitation, and specifically the
immediate goal of food distribution to a hungry populace, was disrupted by crippled communication and transportation systems. Despite substantial foreign aid, mostly from India, the Soviet Union, the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNICEF, food supplies were scarce. There was rampant corruption and black marketeering. The new nation faced many other seemingly insurmountable problems that inhibited its reconstruction. One of the most glaring was the establishment of law and order.

The political landscape was complicated; numerous bands of guerrilla freedom fighters, remainders of the independence war, roamed around the countryside, fully armed and outside the control of the government. Many freedom fighters joined the Bangladesh army and thus legally retained their weapons, but many others ignored Mujib’s plea to surrender their weapons. Some armed groups took the law into their own hands and set up territories under their own jurisdiction. Some leftist groups who favoured armed struggle against Mujib’s regime were also active. The countryside was eventually pacified by counter-insurgency ‘National Defence Force’ (Rakhkhi Bahini) which was established from the ranks of freedom fighters.

The departure of the Pakistanis after the war also left a disorganised civil service. Within the army there were also opposing interests. Bengali military officers who did not escape from West Pakistan during the war and those who remained at their posts in East Pakistan were denied promotions and were assigned functionless jobs, to their great consternation. The formation of paramilitary National Defence Force also disappointed the army as they started to share resources and power of the regular army. A radical leftist organisation called the National Socialist Party (or JSD, Jatio Shamajitanrik dal) demanded a ‘People’s Army’.

Mujib’s inability to restore law and order and limit corruption in the country triggered Bangladesh’s first bloody military coup in August 1975. Mujib was assassinated and military control of politics was established. The army began to play a much more important and visible role in Bangladeshi politics. In the three decades since then, Bangladeshi rulers have assumed power in the aftermath of extraordinary and often bloody events, such as civil war, a military coup or the assassination of his predecessor. In the first twenty years of independence, there were four successful coups, in addition to a string of uprisings by soldiers, assassination plots and abortive rebellions. Sixteen of Bangladesh’s 31 years of independence have passed under non-democratic rule. Public and political life in Bangladesh has thus largely been characterised by violent dislocation and non-democratic governance. During the dictatorial rule the economy was ruined. Productivity, efficiency and the morale of public servants deteriorated sharply. Lack of discipline and mismanagement in the public sector were widespread and there was serious misuse of public office and state power.

However, the struggle for democracy remained alive in Bangladesh. Opposition parties, although they represented conflicting views and were as unwilling as the ruling regime to share power, remained a vital force that commanded the loyalties of a large proportion of the population. Socialist and communist parties, centrist parties and conservative Islamic parties, each with their own visions of the path that Bangladesh should follow, became united in the late 1980s and forced the last military ruler to resign in 1990. Democratic government has been established in Bangladesh since the early 1990s. The Bangladesh constitution provides for a unicameral legislature called Jatiya Sangsad, or the national parliament. It comprises 330 members of whom 300 are directly elected by adult franchise, and 30 are
exclusively female members elected by the national parliament. The parliamentary form of government has the president as the head of state and the Prime Minister as the chief executive. After many years of autocratic rule, the first elected government was formed by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in 1990. This government was succeeded by the Awami League in 1996 election. A historical twist took place in the most recent national election in 2001, when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party formed a coalition government with Jamat-e-Islam, a fundamentalist Islamic group that opposed the independence of Bangladesh. The rise of fundamentalist parties is a recent phenomenon; they play a more and more important role in some parts of Bangladesh, mostly in the border areas.

It is estimated that there are over 125 political parties in Bangladesh. However, the majority of these parties are based solely in urban areas and have tiny constituencies. The five or six major political parties maintain their respective mass organisations of workers, students, farmers, women, and so forth. Of these, the student front generally occupies the most prominent position. Although more than a decade has passed under a democratically elected government, the problems of governance have occupied the centre stage of national debate. The two democratically elected governments headed by two different parties have been characterised by weak governance. Weak governance is indicated by poor accountability within the government institutions, ineffective co-ordination between departments, corruption and poor work ethic. There are also conflicts between national and local level politics, which result in frequent violence and political killings. In recent years, on many occasions elected leaders pose challenges to the community level traditional leaders based on family lineage or religious authority. Because of the fierce nature of rivalry in Bangladeshi politics, the democratic practice is also frequently hampered, as the opposition party usually rejects the election result and refuses to join the parliament session. The current Bangladeshi political scene is full of frequent hartals (strikes), demonstrations and political murders.

Society and people

Ethnicity, language and religion

Bangladesh is the most densely populated country in the world. Over ninety-eight percent of the people in Bangladesh are Bengalis, a branch of Indo-Aryans that migrated into the eastern reaches of India after the movement of the parent group from Central Asia during the second millennium before Christ. Bangladesh's minority tribal population comprises just over one percent of the total population. They live primarily in Chittagong Hills and in some north and north-eastern part of Bangladesh. Most tribal people are of Sino-Tibetan descent and have distinctive Mongoloid features.

Bangladesh is unique among the countries of South Asia in that one language, Bengali, is shared by almost all citizens. The Biharis and tribal communities value their own language, though they also speak Bengali. Bengali is the most easterly of the Indo-European languages derived from Sanskrit. It evolved through Prakrit and, to an extent resulting from the Buddhist influence, Pali. It is written in a modified Sanskrit script, unlike Urdu, which uses an Arabic script. The Bengali language has a major literary tradition, which is exemplified in the work of Rabinrindranath Tagore, a Noble laureate in 1913.
About eighty-eight percent of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim, giving the country one of the largest concentrations of Muslims in the world. Most of the remaining twelve percent are Hindu, the majority of them members of lower castes, formerly Untouchables, who were designated by Gandhi as Harijons (Children of the God). The majority of the upper-caste Hindus fled to India in the early 1950s and during the 1971 civil war. The Muslim community in the Bengal region developed independently of the dominant Islamic trends in India. The preservation of pre-Islamic cultural elements from Buddhist and Hindu periods made the commitment to Islam uniquely Bangladeshi. Christian missions have contributed much to the educational, medical and social infrastructure of the country. The religion of the tribal groups in Bangladesh is either Buddhist, Christian or traditional.

Although the independence movement of Bangladesh was inspired by a non-communal, Bengali identity, with the advent of the military rule in 1975, the Muslim identity was re-emphasised, and the citizens were renamed ‘Bangladeshi’. The secular nationalist ideology that was embodied in Bangladesh’s Constitution was subsequently replaced by a commitment to an Islamic way of life through a series of constitutional amendments. This created a new debate concerning the identity of the people. Questions were asked whether people of Bangladesh should be called ‘Bangali’, ‘Bangladeshi’, or ‘Muslim’, which generated a sense of separation from the Hindus in the country. These debates spurned a number of religious-based communal riots took place in the 1980s and 1990s.

There is another major debate concerning the identity of the non-Bengalis in Bangladesh, particularly the indigenous population of Chittagong Hill Tracks. Though they form less than two percent of the population, they are nevertheless citizens of Bangladesh, who are neither Bengali nor Muslim. After the independence of Bangladesh, the ruling government overlooked the rights of the indigenous people and suppressed their quest for identity and autonomy. This in turn generated an armed resistance by the indigenous people of Chittagong Hill Tracks, which came to an end in the late 1990s after about three decades. A peace accord was signed by the government and the representatives of the indigenous people. The implementation of the accord however still remains questionable. As a whole the issue of nationalism is in a deep crisis in present-day Bangladesh.

Living

Bangladesh is predominantly agricultural. About eighty percent of the people in Bangladesh live in villages and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. However, nearly half (48%) of the country’s rural population is landless, owning at most 0.05 acres; social inequality in the rural society is determined by access to land. Because of their landlessness, a large portion of the population must work as agricultural labourers and sharecroppers.

Bangladeshi villages, all 68,000 of them, are small and close-knit communities. A typical village is home to 400 to 1000 persons comprising a group of homes called para. Each para has its own name. Since the late seventies, NGOs have generated new dynamics in rural life. Although a small percentage of villagers have always been involved in non-farm related activities, through their micro-credit programmes, NGOs have created new options for various non-agricultural employment in villages, including poultry, transport and small trading.
Although farming has traditionally ranked among the most desirable occupations, villagers in recent years have begun to encourage their children to leave the increasingly overcrowded countryside to seek more secure employment in the (even more crowded) cities. Traditional sources of prestige, such as landholding, a distinguished lineage and religious piety are beginning to be replaced by modern education, higher income and steadier work as sources of prestige. However, Bangladesh is still largely an agricultural society.

About twenty percent of the population lives in urban areas. Urban centres grew in numbers and population during the 1980s as a result of an administrative decentralisation programme that featured the creation of sub-districts. Of all the expanding cities, Dhaka, the national capital and the principal seat of culture, has had the biggest gain in population, growing from 3.4 million in 1981 to 9.9 million in 2001. A majority of other urban areas are relatively small cities that have grown because of their function as administrative centres or geographically suitable localities for inland transportation and commercial facilities. These small urban areas are generally shabby in appearance. Most of the urban population congregate in ramshackle structures with poor sanitation and few to no modern amenities. Urban areas are populated mostly by government and private functionaries, merchants and other business personnel. There are some textile, jute, sugar and chemical industries mostly built during the Pakistan period. There is also an increasing number of garment manufacturing factories because of the availability of cheap labour force in the country. These garment factories were built during recent decades and have generated new employment opportunities, particularly for women.

In Dhaka, about half of the population are poverty and disaster-related (e.g. flood, cyclone) migrants from both the countryside and from urban areas. They live far below the poverty line. In the post-independence period, permanent net migration is highest in Dhaka, because the importance of the capital city tremendously increased after independence. A major consequence of such migration is the rapid growth of slums and squatter settlements in and around the city.

In addition to the rural to urban migration, considerable migration has also been taking place within the rural areas of the region. People from the areas of relatively less developed agriculture and less cropping intensity migrate for one or more seasons to areas where agriculture is more developed. There is also seasonal migration, depending on the crops in different areas. Inter-district migration also takes place because of urbanisation, population density and job prospects. Since the late seventies, a large number of people have also migrated to foreign countries, mostly to Middle East, in search of employment. The unprecedented efforts of oil-rich but manpower-poor countries to attract workers to build infrastructure help to explain this emigration. Out-migration of Hindu population is also a politico-historical reality. There is also a recent tendency of the middle and upper middle class citizens to emigrate to America, Canada and European countries.

The influence of globalisation is manifested in the household use of satellite TV, mobile telephone and rapidly growing number of cyber cafes in the major cities of the country. This has created a visible change in people’s lifestyles, particularly in main cities like Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna. These changes are affecting people’s values, family structures and other aspects of life.

*Family and kinship*
Family and kinship are the core of social life in Bangladesh. The family in Bangladeshi society has more functions and plays a much more important role than the family in the Western world does. In both rural and urban areas of Bangladesh, a substantial portion of families are extended families. Husband, wife, unmarried children, elderly parents, married but unemployed sons, divorced or separated daughters and sisters and physically or mentally handicapped brothers and sisters are all members of the extended family. Children learn to show unquestioned obedience to parents during childhood and later maintain their parents with all possible care and affection. The family behaves as one integrated unit in social and economic activities.

Any vital decision in the life of an individual, like a decision regarding marriage, education, purchasing property, career choice and choice of treatment of disease is made with the consultation and consent of other family members. For example, marriage is a civil contract rather a religious sacrament in Islam, and the parties involved in the contract represent the interests of families rather than the direct personal interests of the perspective spouses. In Bangladesh, parents ordinarily select spouses for their children, although men exercise some influence over the choice of their spouses. Only in the most sophisticated elite class does a women participate in her own marriage arrangements. Marriage is generally arranged between families of similar social standing. Marriage functions to ensure the continuity of families rather than provide companionship to individuals, and the new bride’s relationship with her mother-in-law is probably more important to her well-being than her frequently impersonal relationship with her husband. A woman begins to gain respect and security in her husband’s or father-in-law’s house only after giving birth to a son. Mothers therefore cherish and indulge their sons, while daughters are frequently more strictly disciplined and are assigned heavy household chores from an early age. In many families the closest and most enduring emotional relationship is that between mother and son. The father is a more distant figure, worthy of formal respect.

Due to rapid population growth, considerable development efforts of the government and NGOs and the increased influence of modern values, enormous changes have taken place in the economy and the society of Bangladesh over the past few decades, especially during the post-independence period. The rapid population growth has caused high population density, with a concomitant rapid decline in the land-to-man ratio and landlessness. There has been increased rural-urban migration, growth of urban slums, unemployment and incidence of poverty. As a result of the development efforts, adoption of modern technology in agriculture and agricultural productivity has increased, literacy rate in general and female education in particular has increased, the mobility and role of women in the economy and the society have been enhanced and traditional values and beliefs have been disintegrating. Alongside these changes, a huge out-migration of labour and influx of foreign aid and capital have increased interaction between Bangladesh and the outside world, raising the exposure of the people of Bangladesh to modern ideas and modes of living. All of these have, in turn, caused structural change in the economy and a shift in the traditional balance of social life, affecting all institutions, including that of the family.

The number of extended families is rapidly declining; nuclear families are becoming more common. Married youths are increasingly reluctant to maintain their elderly parents and hence, are seceding from their parents to form their own nuclear family. The employment of women in the formal economic activities has significantly
increased. As both husbands and wives are increasingly becoming engaged in economic activities, and in many cases have to work in separate places, formal and informal separations between them have become more commonplace. Divorce and separation of couples is on the rise. However, as there is no other alternative support system (such as a government welfare program), the family still plays the key role in individual's life in case of crisis.

Status of women

The life of a woman in Bangladesh is largely shaped by the patriarchal social system. Available data on health, nutrition, education and economic performance indicate that the status of women in Bangladesh is considerably inferior to that of men. Women, in both custom and practice, remain subordinate to men in almost all aspects of their lives; greater autonomy is the privilege of the rich or the necessity of the very poor. Women's lives remain centred around their traditional roles of mother and housewife. They have limited access to markets, employment, education, health care and local government.

The practice of purdah (the traditional seclusion of Muslim women) varies widely by social milieu, but even in relatively sophisticated urban circles the segregation of sexes persists. For most rural families the importance of women's labour makes full seclusion impossible, although the attempt is made. In some areas, for example, women go unveiled within the core of the village but wear the veil or outer garments for trips farther from the community. In all cases, contact with men outside the immediate family is avoided. Purdah is more maintained in certain regions of Bangladesh like Sylhet or Noakhali, than in other areas. In general, women are less visible in public spheres of Bangladeshi life than they are in many other cultures.

However, over the years, through education and modernisation, changes have taken place. These changes have mostly happened in middle class women's lives; their sole traditional role of mother and housewife has been expanded. Changes have also taken place in poorer women's lives, particularly through female-centred activities of NGOs and through involvement of women as labourers in large-scale garment factories. These changes have brought women more into the mainstream of events in Bangladesh, though the position of women in general lags far behind men. The UNDP gender-related development index (GDI) ranks Bangladesh 123rd out of 174 countries. This poor ranking is primarily the result of the low literacy rate and the small share of earned income of women compared to that of men.

Social hierarchy

Muslim Bengalis often maintain social distinctions that can be important in family matters and in political and social mobility. A common differentiation made is between two hereditary groups: ashraf and atraf. The ashraf (noble) are those of high status who served in the government or the military during periods of Muslim rule by northern India, and who are supposedly descendants of Arab families associated with the Prophet Mohammed. The nobility includes people from syed and sheikh lineages. The atraf are the bulk of Bengali Muslims who were converted to Islam in Bengal. The Hindu community has its own ways of making social distinctions in the form of status
difference between different castes. In this system people are categorised according to endogamous social groups of families with the same professional background.

This hierarchy according to family lineage is, however, weakening in Bangladesh. Society is becoming divided into classes based on wealth and political influence. The proscription against marriage between individuals of high born and low born families, once an indicator of the social gap between the two groups, has mostly disappeared. Now most matrimonial alliances are based on wealth and power and not on family distinction. Social distance based on lineage has been replaced by social distance based on wealth and power. Bangladeshis usually use a distinct dichotomous model of social stratification, corresponding to gorib (poor), chotolok (lesser people), or murkhu (ignorant) on one side and dhoni (opulently rich), borolok (big shot) or bhodrolok (noble people) on the other. The first category generally includes those with inferior social status such as landless peasants, small traders, day labourers and all kinds of manual workers. The second category implies higher status, and refers to landlords, businessmen, government and private service holders, academicians and political leaders. However, there are various layers and shades within these categories. A person’s ranking also depends on his or her reputation and various aspects of lifestyles.

After the creation of Bangladesh, opportunities for employment, business and education, which had formally been controlled by non-Bengali Pakistanis, became available to Bengali Muslims. As a result, a new elite class that upset the traditional class relationship based on land ownership and lineage emerged in Bangladesh. However, although the traditional pattern of hierarchy has changed, the principle of hierarchy in interpersonal relations remains as morally correct and necessary. There remains a clear tendency among Bangladeshis to categorise and rank people. Indication of rank is displayed in both casual conversations and official inquiries in which persons are categorised by reference to such indices as income, academic degree, skin colour and birth order within the family.

Health

Health services

The government is the main provider of health services in the country, though the private sector plays an increasingly bigger role. Bangladesh inherited a weak infrastructure from Pakistan, but within the first decade of independence it successfully managed to develop an extensive, multi-tiered public health care infrastructure. (Organogram of Health Ministry is included in the annex). At the top level, there are teaching and specialist hospitals. Below them is a network of district hospitals. Under these are Thana (an administrative unit below the district level) Health Complexes (THCs) which provide primary health care, and at the Union (administrative unit below Thana level) Health and Family Welfare Centres (UHFWCs), which provide outpatient services only. A referral system is meant to operate, whereby patients first approach a primary care centre. If their case cannot be adequately dealt with at that level, they should then be referred upwards for specialized treatment at the secondary or tertiary levels. At the village level, domiciliary services provided by field workers from the Thana and union centres are intended to bring health services to the doorstep of the people.
From 1974 onwards, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) has had a bifurcated organisational structure from the top down to the grassroots level, with one cadre of workers in family planning activities and another cadre in health activities. Developed at the insistence of the donors who wanted to aggressively pursue family planning activities, it led to the duplication of management and service delivery staff, and inefficiencies and difficulties of co-ordination at all levels. Currently, attempts are being made to integrate these two services and improve management for efficient and cost-effective delivery of an essential package of health care services.

Government health service delivery is seriously hampered by the inadequate and insufficient supply of equipment, pharmaceuticals and other medical supplies. Apathy of the medical personnel who provide the services and a lack of adequate training and experience of the medical personnel do as well. Some of the personnel problems arise from the reluctance of government staff to be posted in rural areas where facilities such as schools and housing are scarce and also where the potential for private practice is limited. Almost all qualified practitioners in government services, especially in the capital and the major cities, establish their own private practices that they attend after the office hours of their governmental job. The tendency is thus to frequently refer patients seeking government health services to these private clinics, where they receive better attention but at a much higher cost than in government facilities. Thus, as health services are costly in private clinics, they are only accessible to rich people. Although government services are claimed to be free (with exception of some nominal charges in the case of certain facilities) there are various expenditures that patients must make, such as tips to lower level staff and the purchase of medical supplies. The exact number of private hospitals and clinics is not known, but these clinics are situated mainly in big cities like Dhaka and Chittagong and urban areas.

Because of the inadequacy of government services in meeting all the health and family planning needs of the population, hundreds of NGOs attempt to fill the gap. The NGOs are mainly involved in the provision of primary health care in both urban and rural areas. During the first decade of Bangladesh’s existence, the health-related work of NGOs contributed greatly to the formation of a national health care delivery system. NGOs helped with rehabilitation of war affected people, training of health personnel as well as the development of new options for rural health care. Presently a number of large international NGOs (e.g. CARE, Save the Children and World Vision), large national NGOs (e.g. BRAC, Ganashasthya Kendro, Grameen Health Programme) and hundreds of smaller local NGOs are playing a complementary and supplementary role in Bangladesh’s health care delivery system. Due to their flexible, result-oriented management style, NGOs are able to experiment with innovative ways of dealing with the health and population problems of Bangladesh, unlike the highly bureaucratised government structures can. Other organisations providing health services include Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, the Lions Club, the Diabetic Foundation and International research organisation Centre for Health and Population Research (ICDDBR).

Apart from this biomedical health services, there is also a vast non-biomedical health care system operating in the country that includes traditional Aurvadic Kabirajs, Uniani Hakims, homeopathic practitioners, practitioners of ‘folk’ medicine and faith healers. There is one government-run institute of indigenous medicine, where Unani and Aurvadic practitioners are trained. Unani is more popular than Aurvadic treatment in Bangladesh (while in India, the opposite is true), probably because of Unani’s
affiliation with Islam. The commercialisation of Unani has taken place in recent years and packaged Unani medicines are becoming popular. Homeopathy is also a popular choice of treatment by the vast majority of poorer people. There are a number of government affiliated training institutes for homeopathic practitioners.

Although Aurvadic Kabirajes, Unani Hakims and different faith healers are active in the informal health care system in rural areas, Bangladesh also has an extensive array of local shops and pharmacies where biomedical drugs and other health-related supplies are sold. By far the single largest group of rural private practitioners is the ‘unqualified allopathic’ practitioners who are the untrained pharmacists, market sellers and road-side ‘quacks’ with little or no professional training in the use of allopathic drugs. The rural population and the urban poor are the main consumers of this informal health service.

Health status of the people

Although the conventional demographic indicators measuring the health status of the Bangladeshi population register improvement in recent decades, the disease pattern has remained unchanged. Infectious and parasitic diseases, arising from malnutrition, lack of hygiene and poor living conditions continue to dominate. The most common afflictions in rural areas are diarrhoeal diseases, skin diseases, intestinal worm infestations, peptic ulcers, acute respiratory infection, anaemia, diseases related to micronutrient deficiency and eye disease. In addition, pregnancy and childbirth-related illness continue to be major threats to women’s health. Although the maternal mortality rate has nearly halved since 1990, the present rate (4.4 per 1000 live births in 1996) is still a matter of serious concern. The reasons for the high maternal mortality rate include the low nutritional status of pregnant women, the lack of access to or utilisation of health care services and domestic violence. Only twenty five percent of pregnant women receive antenatal care or assistance from trained attendants at childbirth.

Non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, mental illness, cancer and rheumatoid arthritis are reportedly increasing. Little is known about prevalence and incidence of HIV and AIDS. In 1998, the government of Bangladesh set up a surveillance system to track risky behaviour, as well as to look for HIV and other diseases. The results indicated that the prevalence of HIV was still low, but that risky behaviour was common. Villagers visit commercial sex workers in town and return home to infect their wives with various sexually transmitted diseases. It is also not known to what extent working in Middle East might have contributed to rates of HIV infection. Moreover, culture prohibits open discussion and health education about sexually transmitted diseases.

A new threat to people’s health has recently emerged: arsenic contamination in ground water. It is estimated that 95% of the population relies on ground water for drinking purposes and over a quarter of Bangladesh is affected by arsenic levels above 0.05 mg/litre, the nationally accepted standard. This means that about 30 million people are potentially at risk of arsenic poisoning.

Achievements
In last decades some remarkable progress has been made in the health and population sectors of Bangladesh. Among these is the outstanding increase in immunization coverage over a short period of time. Before the mid-1980s, disease control programs focused mainly on curative services, but in the late 1980s the emphasis shifted towards a larger role for prevention. An Expanded Program of Immunization (EPI) was initiated in 1986 with the assistance of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). The EPI coverage rose from 2% in 1985 to 67% in 1997 among children 12-23 months of age, and coverage rose from less than 2% to 86% for women with children under one year who obtained at least two tetanus shots.

The most spectacular progress has been made in the field of family planning. Bangladesh is the only country among the poorest 20 countries in the world where sustained fertility reduction has taken place over the past 15 years. Between 1972 and 1996, the contraceptive prevalence rate rose from 4% to 49%, bringing down the fertility rate from 6.3 to 3.3 children per woman.

The landmark National Drug Policy adopted by Bangladesh in 1982 was one of the first among developing countries that promoted the use of essential drugs and restricted the use of drugs with no scientifically proven efficacy. It limited the list of approved drugs to 150 essential drugs and restricted the manufacture and sale of most drugs to national firms, thus prohibiting exorbitant profits.

Despite the achievements, at the dawn of new millennium, Bangladesh is confronted with the challenging task of providing equitable, accessible and good quality health care services to the population at large, the majority of whom live at or below the poverty line.

Education

Bangladesh has gone through various educational systems. From the time of the English rule to the Pakistani regime and finally to the present-day Bangladeshi system, education has evolved not only in method but also in fundamental aspects like language of instruction.

Buddhist monasteries, Sanskrit Tolls, run by Hindu Pundits and Islamic Madrashas are the examples of institutional education in the early history of Bengal. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a system of liberal, English language schools based on the British model was instituted in the region that now constitutes Bangladesh. The emphasis on British education led to the growth of an elite class that provided clerical and administrative support to the colonial administration but did not develop practical skills or technical knowledge. The new elite became alienated from the masses of the people, who had no access to the new education system. For the general masses, the indigenous Sanskrit Tolls and Islamic Madrashas remained as the main institution of education.

During the Pakistani period, there was a general awareness of the need to restructure the education system to meet the needs of the new nation. The reforms of the educational system included an emphasis on broad-based and technical education. However, the impact of such policies was not felt in the then East Pakistan, and with only a few exceptions, a liberal elite-based education system with very little awareness of life in the countryside was in place when Bangladesh became independent from
Pakistan. After independence, many forms of education were permitted to co-exist. Even so, the formidable British system was, and still is, largely in use.

Presently the Bangladeshi system of education is divided into English Medium, Bengali Medium and Religious branches. In English Medium schools, courses are taught in English using English books. English Medium schools are mainly private and are thus accessible to the wealthy class. An alternative to the English Medium is the Bengali Medium, which is offered by the government. The tuition fee is minimal compared to that of the English Medium schools. Apart from these, Madrashas, religious institutions are still there, where poor children are generally sheltered, fed and taught the ways of Islam by Imams. These children learn the script from the Koran and the regular prayers. Madrashas are generally linked to mosques and the children usually serve the mosque. As government subsidies for these institutions are very low, these establishments often rely on public donations. Islam generally plays a dominant role in the education systems of Bangladesh. In all branches of education, it is required to teach Islamic studies. Nevertheless, non-Muslim students are excused from Islamic courses. Besides these schools, there are other disciplines such as cadet colleges and boarding schools where children are taught mainly under military regimes.

The education system in Bangladesh is divided into 4 levels. ‘Primary’ is grades 1 to 5, ‘secondary’ is grades 6 to 10, ‘higher secondary’ is grades 11 and 12, and finally, there is the university level. In Bangladesh the overall literacy rate is about 44 percent (1995); female literacy rate is 28 percent and the male literacy rate is 50 percent. The gap between the literacy rates in urban and rural areas is very wide: 36% are literate in rural areas while 63% are in urban areas. However, with the inception of Universal Primary Education program, the literacy rates have been increasing. The Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) of the development organisation BRAC has contributed to improving female education. Their efforts have helped to reduce the large gender gap in education. In 1998 there were about 52,000 primary schools that enrolled over 50 million students. Additionally, there are about 11,000 secondary institutions. There are 11 government universities and approximately 20 private universities. There are thirteen government and four non-government medical colleges. There are four Government Engineering colleges, one leather technology institute and one textile technology institute. Specialised universities are the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Bangladesh Agricultural University and Post Graduate (PG) Medical University.

It is extremely difficult to educate a population as large as that of Bangladesh. The task of educating is even harder when the people of the country are hungry and suffer from poor health. As education is a key to a successful nation, the government and NGOs in Bangladesh are trying hard to improve the state of education in the country, despite the many obstacles.

Economy

East Bengal, the region that became East Pakistan and later Bangladesh, was a prosperous region of South Asia until fairly recently. It had the advantage of a mild, almost tropical climate, fertile soil, ample water and an abundance of fish, wildlife and fruit. The standard of living compared favourably with other parts of South Asia. As early as the thirteenth century, the region was developing as an agrarian economy, but
it was not entirely without commercial centres. Dhaka in particular grew into an important commercial centre during the Mogul Empire. Upon their arrival in the early seventeenth century, however, the British chose to develop Calcutta and not Dhaka as their commercial and administrative centre in South Asia. The development of east Bengal by the British was thereafter limited to agriculture. The colonial infrastructure of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reinforced East Bengal’s function as the primary producer of chiefly of rice and jute for processors and traders in Calcutta and beyond.

There were deleterious effects of British rule on the economy of Bengal. As mentioned before, the Land Lease Act of Lord Cornwallis generated far-reaching negative effects on the economy of this region. The act broke the traditional feudal relation between the farmer and the land owner, and generated opposing interests between those owning and those working the land. This hampered agricultural development. Prior to the arrival of the British, textile industries prospered considerably in the eastern part of Bengal, especially in the areas surrounding Dhaka city. In fact, a major motive of the British ships for anchoring in India was to export the fine Dhaka muslin and other products of silky cotton from Bengal to Europe. But with the industrial revolution in Britain in the late eighteenth century, a mechanised textile industry developed there and the British rulers sought to eliminate Bengali competition by means of trade restrictions and the imposition of prohibitive duties. Not only were Bengali textiles shut out of the British market, they were also shut out of the Indian market because taxes discriminated against local cloth. As a result, while industry developed in Britain, it withered in Bengal.

The partition of British India and emergence of India and Pakistan in 1947 disrupted the former colonial economic systems that had preserved East Bengal (now East Pakistan) as a producer of jute and rice for the urban industrial economy around Calcutta. East Pakistan had to build a new industrial base and modernise agriculture in the midst of a population explosion. Pakistan’s five-year plans opted for development strategy based on industrialisation, but the major share of the development budget went to West Pakistan, which is now Pakistan. The lack of natural resources meant that East Pakistan was heavily dependent on imports; this created a balance of payment problem. Without a substantial industrialisation program or adequate agrarian expansion, the economy of East Pakistan steadily declined.

Decades of skewed development under British rule, followed by neglect under Pakistan and destruction caused by the 1971 war, left the country prostrate during the early 1970s. After independence in 1971, the new government under the leadership of Sheikh Mujib attempted to carry out a more comprehensive land reform programme but failed miserably due to opposition of the landed class from within the ruling party. It pursued a wholesale nationalisation programme, bringing all industrial concerns of any importance in the public sector. But the nationalised sector showed alarmingly poor performance mainly due to the inefficiency and corruption of management and labour leaders, trade unionism by labourers and the sabotage of mills and factories by previous owners.

Nonetheless, the new government witnessed major accomplishments in repairing damage and setting up the basic administrative machinery needed to run the country. With few mineral resources, almost no industrial infrastructure and a mostly unskilled labour force, Bangladesh depended on imports for most of the basic requirements of the nation. Its exports, on the other hand, were agricultural
commodities, especially jute, that declined in real value and were subject to uncontrolled fluctuations in world demand. Under these circumstances, the economy depended on large annual inputs of foreign aid. In fact, since independence more than eighty-five percent of the annual development budget of Bangladesh relied on receipt of foreign aid.

After the assassination of Sheikh Mujib, the new military government abandoned the nationalisation project and took a clearly capitalist path. Economic privatisation and liberalisation were encouraged. A process of withdrawal from the public sector started; the regime also actively sought increase in foreign aid. The successive governments gave an increasingly greater role to the private sector. The private sector did grow in Bangladesh, but it was arbitrary state patronage that usually fuelled the growth of selected individuals.

In rural areas, adoption of modern technology in agriculture has considerably increased, which has led to a significant rise in per acre productivity. A large variety of non-agricultural income opportunities have emerged in the rural areas, reducing dependence of households on agriculture. Export of manpower has significantly increased, enabling a sizeable section of rural households to earn remittance income from abroad. At the same time, inequity in the distribution of income and assets has escalated, and a powerful elite and a large middle class have emerged. A wave of consumerism has flooded the economy; the people of even the remotest corner of the country are increasingly consuming various non-traditional items.

Although there has been a reasonable growth of GDP, reduction of absolute poverty to a significantly lower level and a decline in the rate of fertility over the last three decades, the crucial indicators of development such as savings, investment, growth of the industrial sector and the rate of economic growth continued to remain at extremely low levels. The incidence of poverty remains very high.

Nevertheless, in recent years, large labour exports to Gulf nations (1.85 million during the period between 1976-1996), development of the readymade garment manufacturing industry (only 134 factories in 1984 and 3,618 in 2002) as well as the micro-finance services under government- and NGO-supported programmes (currently 10.2 million people have access to micro-finance programs) have started to create a positive impact on Bangladesh’s economy. Still, economic development is a precarious process because of unstable political conditions.

The hospital that I will describe is shaped by as well as manifests these social, cultural, political and historical features of Bangladesh.