

Book Review

Rural Transformation: Insights from Bangladesh, by Dr. Mahabub Hossain, and Abdul Bayes, The University Press Limited; 1st edition (2018), 570 pp.

‘Rural Transformation: Insights from Bangladesh’ is a seminal book written by two eminent economists of Bangladesh – Dr. Mahabub Hossain and Professor Abdul Bayes. Published by University Press Limited (UPL), in association with BRAC (Building Resources Across Communities) in 2018, the book contains 21 chapters with a body of tables and annexures. Apparently, it covers almost all aspects of rural economy of Bangladesh. The principal aim of this book, as mentioned by the authors, is to infuse some insights into the “transformation” that rural Bangladesh has passed-through during the last two decades. By “transformation” it means the socioeconomic and political process rooted in rural society that affects livelihoods through various linkages and multiplier effects. Since independence, a plethora of rigorous research papers on such transformation has been produced, but most of them relate generally to agriculture, and particularly to rice production. The *raison d’être* for focusing on rice and the crop sector are understandable. The livelihoods of the rural people in Bangladesh tend to center on the utilization of natural resources for crop production. Again, among crops, rice supremely reigns as a dominant staple crop. The adage, *Mase-vate Bangalee* (Bengalis live on rice and fish) or *Dal-vate Bangalee* (Bengalis live with rice and pulses), reminds readers of the pervasive presence of rice in the daily lives of the people of Bangladesh. By and large, food insecurity forces people to lean heavily on food production.

Besides rice, many other activities also encompass rural economy — such as livestock, fisheries and forestry, agro-processing and cottage industries, construction and transport operation, petty trade, business, and various other kinds of services. They go a long way in affecting peoples’ lives and livelihoods. However, the knowledge of the structure and growth of the non-farm activities that center on farming is limited by lack of data. It is true that some snapshot information of non-crop activities is available from small-scale sample surveys

To understand the operation of the rural economy and society, *ipso facto*, one must study the interactions of agricultural and non-agricultural activities, and how they shape the livelihoods of the people who occupy the rural landscape. The transformation of the rural economy—rural development in a broader space—refers to the economic, social, and political processes that go inside the rural society, and the ways in which

these processes influence and interact with each other. It means that we need to look into the problem from the people's perspectives rather than from solely on the economic activities that they are engaged in.

Over the past years, a group of scholars advanced the knowledge of the operation of rural society through in-depth case studies of a few selected villages. These anthropological and sociological studies had a strong focus on people and class relations that were helpful in understanding the interface between the rural power structure and development activities. Sample household surveys in purposively selected villages were also undertaken to generate primary information for analyzing the agrarian structure, its impact on the development of productive forces, and the impact of external interventions on income distribution and. It remained an issue, however, whether the insights obtained through the micro-studies could be generalized for the country as a whole, and the extent to which the studies are still valid in the context of recent developments of the productive forces in rural Bangladesh.

This book is based on primary data collected through surveys of the same villages, and in different time periods over a span of 20 years. The benchmark survey was conducted in 1987-88 (henceforth, 1988) for a study sponsored by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines for assessing the impact of the green revolution in unfavorable rice growing environments. The first author of the book (Mahabub Hossain) led the BIDS team conducting the study. Although research methodology is given in details in the book, suffice to say that a multistage random sampling method was used to select the sample for the study. The samples were drawn from the list of unions using the random number tables.

For an analytical discourse, the book draws on the Sustainable Livelihood Framework (SLF) developed at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, and used extensively by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in project planning and implementation. In fact, throughout the book, this approach has been used to analyze the interface of different conditioning factors (e.g., technology, infrastructure, and institutions) in mediating the relationships between asset endowments and livelihood strategies of rural people, and obviously, with a special focus on the resource-poor households.

The book is, perhaps, the first of its kind to be based on panel data comprising 1988, 2000, 2008 and 2014. The data base of this book has already been used by the World Bank and other international organizations in the publications of policy related papers. The most important aspect is that the last chapter of the book, "A Tale of Transformation" is based on oral history of villagers – akin to anthropological approach. Thus, both

rigorous quantitative and qualitative methods mark significantly in the book.

However, the book could cover many of the emerging challenges that rural economy of Bangladesh is likely to face in future such as climate change, rural small enterprises, urbanization and migration from rural areas, quality of life etc. The hope is that in future surveys, the issues would be addressed, but for the moment, the recommendation for the scholars, students, politicians and policy makers to engage themselves in changing the lives and livelihoods of the rural people of Bangladesh. Studies of this kind are rare in the world. The two seminal work worth mentioning is the work of Hayami and Kikuchi (2002) on *A Rice Village Saga: Three Decades of Green Revolution in the Philippines* and, Palanpur: *The Economy of an Indian Village* by Bliss C. J. and Nicholas Stern (1982). Noticeably, both the books banked only on one village for a longitudinal study while Mahabub Hossain and Abdul Bayes have at their disposal data from 62 villages that represent the entire country. The breadth and depth of the studies give credibility to the book. This book is an interesting read as it offers adequate insights for policy planning.

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