

Agricultural Extension in South Asia

Renegotiating Patriarchy: Gender, Agency and the Bangladesh Paradox

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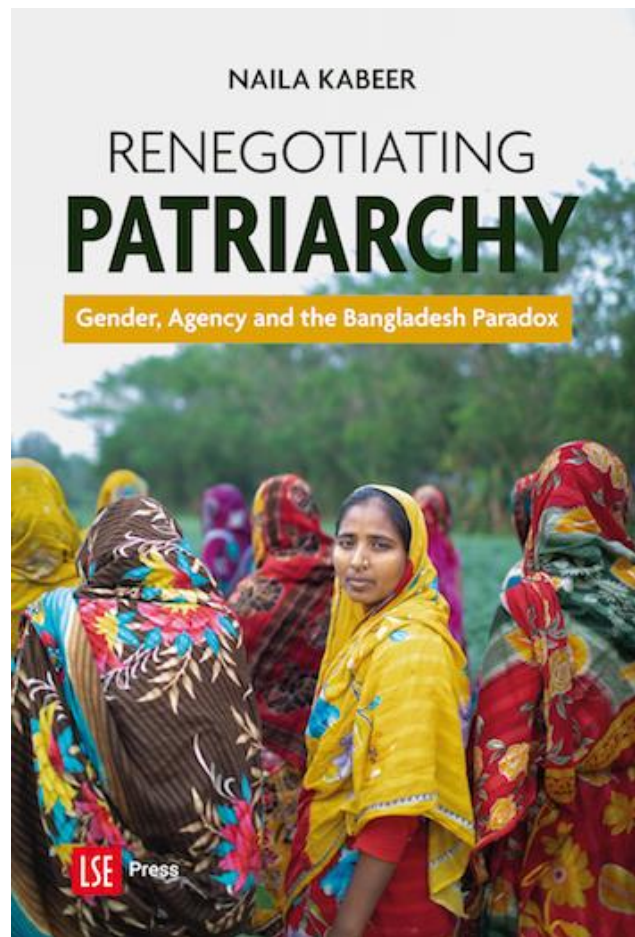
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In this landmark account of Bangladesh's journey from 1971 to 2015, Kabeer unpacks what has internationally been awed at as the 'Bangladesh paradox'. A paradox - a conundrum, surprise, puzzle, even a miracle - culturally, economically and politically that a nation with dismal socio-economic indicators at its birth, could turn them around within a span of four decades; controlling its burgeoning population, closing the gender gap in education, health and employment, amidst tough odds of extreme patriarchy and a rising religious orthodoxy in addition to its geographical and political precariousness. Kabeer's work presents the essential missing piece of the paradox explanation - the role and responses of ordinary people, who made the paradox possible and makes several strides towards answering the enduring question: how does social change take place in the face of insurmountable barriers?

Lucid and luminous, even as it deals with some of the most complicated political and social conundrums, the style of the text is signature Naila Kabeer. She builds on the structuration and practice theorists (Giddens, Bourdieu, Ortner, Sewell, Abu-Lughod, Kandiyoti) to convincingly create a framework where structure and agency interact organically and make way for social change. Where structure itself, as it shifts and evolves, facilitates agency's possibility of finding crevices and cracks to act on an opportunity, enabling the everyday strategies that women create and wield to survive, live and thrive.



Through this framework, Kabeer brings together the fragmented strands of change - a complex and messy process at multiple levels, without any single driving force - to not only resolve the paradox but also convincingly argue that it was an ill-conceived paradox, constructed out of etic perspectives and model cases, to start with. This work is a testament that there is never a singular way to achieve development, that change needs to happen at various levels simultaneously and to measure social change ordinary people's participation, aspirations and everyday actions matter, as much as the sophisticated development models. It defies the notion that modernization is a pre-requisite for social change and displays the fascinating play between structure and agency.

In 1971, Bangladesh was a newly formed nation scarred and jaded with successive cultural and political conflicts, a wrecking cyclone and a debilitating war for independence. A highly vulnerable new nation, it was termed by an antagonistic Kissinger (then US President's National Security Advisor) as an "international basket case (57)." It was deemed destined to forever hold out "a begging bowl to the rest of the world", it was called "a catalogue of woes", with a "litany of grim statistics", "trapped in a development impasse (57-58)." And yet four decades later, it came from being a 'pro-natalist delta' to a nation with controlled fertility rates, reduced child mortality and high rates of education and employment for girls – all improved social indicators matching those of developed nations, defying the models of development, which Kabeer rightly points out had speculated from an etic perspective.

Among the people of Bangladesh, the number of children was not thought of as something in their control, was considered the will of God and belonged to the realm of Doxa. At the same time however, people, especially women wanted to stop having children, out of the sheer exhaustion of childbirth and the deep poverty they endured. Gradually, the efforts of the state Family Planning Workers (FPWs), who took the clinic to women's doorsteps and connected with them culturally and contextually, met women's desire for better lives for themselves and their children. The family planning workers, thus became the wedge between what was possible (according to people – no control on number of children) and what was desirable (lesser number of children); eventually replacing quantity of children with quality of upbringing of children. Flexible and culturally responsive ways of FPWs were the key to success. Recruiting local women as FPWs resulted in building trust, creating role models and making the FP education more accessible, relevant and normalised like dal-bhat (as mundane as the typical daily meal of rice and lentils in the region) (131).

As land shares shrank with the number of children, parents understood education as another important asset they could give their children to make them future-ready. Many government policies favoured girls' education and the most popular one was 'stipend for girls', which applied to all schools and registered alleya madrassas in the country. With this, girls' enrolment saw an increase from 8% in 1994 to 48% in 2005 (109). Daughters who were considered "the neighbor's tree" (217) just a couple of decades ago, were now being revalued and not seen as a liability. With daughters' enhanced capacities and skills, they were increasingly replacing sons as the emotional and financial support and care giver to their parents. Daughters were undertaking the functions of sons.

Women's entry into paid work away from their homestead came with better education and the rise of the garment industry. Young women joined the garment industry in large numbers, against all sorts of restrictions and backlash from the larger communities and/or immediate families. The garment factory employment, which wasn't thought of for the women to start with, boosted the female labour force participation and people started looking at this opportunity and the booming microfinance under the Grameen bank as viable and robust employment opportunities for their daughters, which in turn eased the resistance to having and educating daughters. This impetus was largely coming from the mothers

and the women in the families, who had seen the patriarchal bargain fail in the advent of independence struggle, with men not being able to provide and protect women. Ripple effect of economic contribution of women to their families was that they had more decision-making power than before and dowries payable at their marriages reduced significantly.

Additionally, with girls being more valued and employable, daughters-in-law (DiL) also changed. The patriarchal bargain of the family, where the son was supposed to take care of his parents first and foremost and the DiL was subordinated to the MiL (mothers-in-law) was recalculated. As the DiLs were educated and/or employed and more assertive, parents turned to their daughters for care and support, who were increasingly able to provide it both emotionally and financially. The shift from sons to daughters was not altruistic but, like many other shifts, a pragmatic one, a rethought bargain. Pragmatism proved to be a quality that stood in good stead for both the government and the people of Bangladesh.

The government went for a policy orientation of scale, speed and selectivity (in favour of women and poor) and allowed facilitative partnerships with NGOs which accelerated the process of growth and took change to the depths of the society, for example BRAC - Bangladesh's home grown development agency with its contextual, sustainable and innovative approaches, became a solid bridge between policy and contextual realities of the nation and played a crucial part in reducing poverty, lowering child mortality and other stubborn social issues. It was the pragmatism of the people of Bangladesh that allowed them to adopt as suitable in the journey for growth. Multiple frontiers, geographical isolation, influence of diverse rulers and religions, created a syncretic form of Islam in Bangladesh, with elements of Sufism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, which made people pragmatic and choose growth over religious prescription. As is said about their adoption of Arabic surnames which would give them a possibility of upward mobility - "Last year I was Jolaha, this year I am a Shaikh, next year if prices rise, I shall be a 'Syed' (39)." This pragmatism also became a major reason why the gender gap could close even amidst a rise of orthodox 'Wahabi' Islam (from the middle eastern money and influence). As a woman respondent said, she respected shariat but she followed marfat (sufism) (213) and another one declared, "my religion is my business (196)". In the face of assertion of shariat, the adaptability and leniency of marfat was valued and preserved, especially by women from lower classes, who could not afford to trade mobility and opportunity for piety and struck a negotiation between personal agency and growth, and a religious subjectivity.

Kabeer also accounts briefly for the reverse paradox in India, where social norms, religious beliefs and even legal frameworks supported the "necessity of sons (258)" - with the dictates of caste making them essential for inheriting land, continuing patrilineage, looking after parents and lighting their funeral pyres. Norms and rules of upper-caste Hinduism froze gender role hierarchy as an element of the structural core and sanskritisation meant that to display upward mobility more and more castes and population groups adopted this gender role hierarchy, which explains the spreading of dowry to southern India. While son preference got replaced by quality of child bearing and raising in Bangladesh as people saw the benefits of having smaller families, in India, the desire for smaller families and an intensified son preference was balanced out with the advent of sex-selective abortions, where people could make an ideal family by controlling the number and sexes of children.

In Bangladesh today, patriarchy has not disappeared, religious orthodoxy is still at a rise and governance and economy are still in a dismal state. Without radical reform the Bangladesh paradox might not sustain (263). But there has certainly been a marvellous renegotiation with patriarchy, a bargain re-

struck, by the everyday choices and actions of ordinary women (and men), who were desperate for a better life, which made this social change possible, defying speculations and developmental models.

Packed with primary qualitative studies, ethnographic vignettes and robust quantitative data and statistics, the book makes for an authoritative yet accessible take on Bangladesh. It will be useful to a myriad range of scholars like anthropology, development studies, political science, population and demography studies, South-Asian studies, and, because of its sheer eloquence, anyone who is interested in a well written historical, political and developmental account of the region.

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