

such efforts are limited, it is abundantly clear that they are necessary and that NGO activity in Calcutta will continue to grow in the years to come.

Using anthropological methods, Thomas provides a vivid description of slums in general but fails to bring out the unique individual experiences of the people living there. Nonetheless, he draws attention to the fact that there ought to be a greater willingness to look into the needs of the poor while formulating urban policy. 'The poor cannot be treated as an afterthought, or shunted off to some department or other, or left to rely on the benevolence of NGOs and the private sector' (pp 166). This book provides interesting reading, even though one wonders if it actually contributes anything substantially new with regard to one's understanding of the poor in Calcutta.

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India: Sustaining Rapid Economic Growth: A World Bank Country Study

The World Bank

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South Asia's Integration into the World Economy

Maria Pigato, Caroline Farah, Ken Itakura, Kwang Jan, Will Martin, Kim Murrell and T. G. Srinivasan

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Even the World Bank deserves a bit of sympathy now and again. The Bank chose the summer of 1997 to publish two reports centrally concerned with South Asia's integration into the world economy—just in time to have the East Asian economic turmoil and the political fallout from the nuclear ante-raising all but obliterate the assumptions on which the analyses were based. The breathtaking naïveté of the young research assistants who synthesise much of the data around which reports of this sort are written is almost touching at times. The India Country Study, for instance, begins with the following statement: 'Private capital inflows are expected to continue to boost international reserves' (p i). What the authors meant was that trends will continue as before as long as the environment that produced them does, which is, of course, fairly meaningless. It is even less comprehensible when viewed alongside the regular diet of warning and caution of which the report is composed. In its pages, we learn that not only is the central government failing to rein in, let alone fundamentally rationalise, its finances, but that the actions and inactions of state governments are pushing India along a path towards crisis. So if India was facing daunting challenges even before the Asian economic virus or nuclear roulette hit the scene, then the Bank's positive spin in both the India Country Study and the second volume, which assesses the potential of South Asia as a whole, is logically unwarranted.

One should not complain too loudly at such inconsistencies. At least the World Bank has bothered to look at the doings of state governments, which are often relegated to footnotes and appendices. Indeed, at first glance, the report seems to have given states the leading role. The second of the three chapters deals with 'Changing States' development policies'. Upon further examination, however, it becomes clear that it is almost exclusively state *finances* that the report-writers are interested in. In other words, it is not a chapter about states as complex centres of political, economic and social change, but about the condition of their balance

sheets. The report turns out to be driven by concerns of public finance, even when the issue under discussion is the provision of infrastructure, an undeniably multifaceted activity. There are two implications to this approach: (1) that state governments exist merely to be facilitators of finance; and (2) that concerns other than the availability and channelling of finance are marginal to the questions that surround the provision of electricity, water, and other services. Distributional issues are irrelevant. The paradoxes that characterise the relationship between centre and region in contemporary Indian politics are similarly epiphenomenal. They are the 'noise' which democracy inconveniently carries in its wake. It is almost painful to realise how profoundly the World Bank has failed to grasp the political dynamics of economic reform.

The same, unfortunately, must be said for the South Asia report as well. Despite providing a useful summary of trade policy during 1996–1997—and recapitulating statistics such as ratios of trade to GDP—the analysis itself is rather anodyne. There is the usual cheerleading about India's potential, with a hint more certainty than usual, which in retrospect should have been all the warning we needed that disruptions were sure to follow. South Asia, we are told, is expected to become a significant force in world trade. Little evidence is produced to support this conclusion. One ray of hope stressed in the report is the enhanced prospects for increased trade within the region. The recently heightened tensions across the India–Pakistan border seem to have undermined such optimism. Great stock is also placed in the capacity of international trade accords, including the full implementation of the Uruguay Round provisions, to create a 'favourable external environment' (p 57) for the flourishing of South Asian trade. Without displaying excessively Cassandra-like tendencies, it is possible to envision at least three or four scenarios in which the climate of world trade might militate against such salutary outcomes. A potentially large fly in the ointment is domestic political opposition—both within and outside parties—to such international instruments as the Multilateral Agreement on Investments.

The problem, of course, with reports of this type is the genre itself. Despite the disclaimers which distance Bank management from the views contained within, the text goes through a screening process dominated by fear of controversy. So the ultimate product is a strange hybrid—part comparative analysis (including helpful statistics on interesting contrasting cases), part wishful thinking, and part evangelising tutorial. Rather than just highlighting compelling ideas, many of the shaded boxes in the text are composed of explanations for the uninitiated—of, for instance, the benefits of foreign direct investment or the case for greater intra-regional trade. The technique employed leaves the impression of having been a highly advanced form of subliminal advertising; and not a very effective one at that. By stacking the evidence and failing to consider the sorts of potential problems that anyone familiar with the region knows exist, the authors have weakened the impact of their case. Neither diagnosis nor prognosis are convincing.

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The Zia Episode in Bangladesh Politics

Habib Zafarullah (ed)

New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1996

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Ziaur Rahman, the 'strategist and tactician' par excellence (p 8), became the President of Bangladesh through a bloodless coup on 20 April 1977. *The Zia Episode in Bangladesh Politics* is an edited book that documents the trials and tribulations of the Zia regime,