

Book Review

Nurul Islam, *Exploration in Development Issues, Selected Articles of Nurul Islam*, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington DC, Ashgate Publishing Limited, Hants, England and Ashgate Publishing Company, Burlington, USA, 2003, ISBN 0 7546 15952, pp 568, Price not mentioned.

This collection of articles by a veritable stalwart in the field of economics, covers almost the entire spectrum of development issues ranging from Food Supply, Agriculture and the State, International Trade, Economic Assistance and Economic Policy. It is a book decidedly not for the uninitiated and to both comprehend and enjoy the work one has to have a certain devotion to the subject and perhaps even a modicum of passion for the same.

The articles span a period of about four decades of the author's chequered and illustrious career. Starting as a professor at Dhaka University, Islam became the pioneer head of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics in the then East and West Pakistan. Then he went on to head the economic and social policy department of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. His most recent assignment has been that of adviser at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), a period in which he penned most of his articles on food security.

Given that the articles were written over a relatively lengthy period of time, development thinking on various issues has undergone considerable modification and change and this, to an extent is reflected in these writings. In the main the articles are policy-oriented, reflecting the nuances in the debates, thinking and research. The contents themselves are not simply a re-hash of what has been said before, but Islam gives his own astute insights here and there into the various permutations and combinations of theories and concepts.

The section on development policy includes two concepts in development economics, namely surplus labour and balanced growth, concepts that were very much in vogue in the earlier years of development thinking. The author then goes on to discuss long term development plans for individual developing countries, including their implementation. The chapter on plan implementation specifically discusses the medium term plan in Bangladesh in the early 1970s and the

problems and obstacles in implementation that arose therefrom. The author also makes passing historical reference to the days when planning as a policy tool was popular to the era of deregulation and privatisation when planning became the *bete noire* of economic policy makers. The last subsection goes beyond considerations of economic growth, delving into the questions of income distribution and poverty. Also discussed are the merits and demerits of open versus closed economy, as well as the pace and sequence of adjustment to and integration with the process of globalisation.

The chapter on inward looking strategies is in essence a detailed historical perspective on the strategy of import substitution, its evolution, causes, consequences and the subsequent modification and rejection of the strategy. While the early stages of industrialisation necessitated the substitution of imports, the idea that the country should focus on sectors and industries where it enjoyed long run comparative advantage gained increasing popularity. With the passage of time, import substitution industries, the author points out, when based on comparative advantage succeeded in entering the export market. Such issues have an added bearing and relevance today when developing countries are actively pursuing policies of structural adjustment, the current buzzword in the lexicon of development.

The chapter on East Asia discusses threadbare the characteristics and causes of the so-called Asian Miracle. Also presented in this chapter are a few lessons for South Asia and it is Islam's contention that developing countries in the present day and age encounter new constraints on their freedom of action, and hence he questions whether it is at all possible for developing countries to replicate those policies in totality even if they so desired.

The author aptly puts it that 'The pendulum in development thinking, after swinging from one extreme to the other, tends to settle in the middle, at least for some time'. To substantiate this statement, Islam cites the example of mainstream economists who seem to be adopting a more balanced view of the state and the market, virtually discarding a total dependence and free play of market forces that was *a la mode* in the 1980s and 1990s.

Yet another pearl of wisdom that Islam offers the reader and worth quoting is: 'The process of development is not always smooth or stable; nor is it necessarily or universally peaceful. There are occasional disruptions and dislocations; the chances are that they are less traumatic and destabilizing in

an open, democratic, pluralistic and decentralized system than in an authoritarian one. Compromises are more likely in a democratic system with a high probability that disruptions are minimized'. (p 9)

The chapter on 'Reflections on Development Perspectives since the 1960s' is inherently valuable and relevant in itself. The author examines the interrelationship between growth, equity and poverty, and questions such propositions such as whether growth leads to inequality, whether attempts to redistribute assets or strive for greater equity stifle growth, and more pertinently in the context of today's Pakistan whether the proposition that growth 'first' and equity and poverty alleviation 'later' are feasible in the real world.

Food security, a concept and concern having considerable importance in development literature right from its inception is discussed next in its broad sense. The author extrapolates food demand into the future, discusses policy reforms in agriculture, the access of households to food and the twin problems of under nourishment and poverty and last but not least, the variability in food supplies and prices, their implications and ways of tackling them.

The issues discussed in the chapter on trade include the rapidly expanding trade in intermediate inputs, the role of strategic trade intervention in seeking a large market share and the impact of multinationals that procure inputs from sources distributed worldwide as well as sell outputs in the world market. Implications for trade policy of such issues is also touched upon. As concerns the chapter on aid, it makes for interesting reading since the current debates surrounding the aid phenomena are presented. For instance whether aid is limited in its effectiveness, the problem of donor fatigue, the inadequate impact of aid on growth, whether like structural adjustment 'aid conditionality' is interference by the donors in the domestic economy, and how acceptable or otherwise this is, and the alternative of self-help and policy reforms/improvement in the recipient countries.

Islam talks about the Bangladesh experience in the early 1970s concerning economic policy reform and the IMF and here he gives some precious insights into the overall effects of devaluation being delayed to early 1995 rather than in October 1974, and the negotiations with the IMF and consequences for the economy resulting from this.

The book is undoubtedly a classic in the true sense of the word for those in the economics profession. The style is impeccable and quite

apparently written by a person with profound intellect and a deep grasp of the issues. I, for one cannot fault it on any count.

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