

AIBS Junior Fellowship Narrative Report

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I am very grateful to the AIBS for awarding me this fellowship and, thus, allowing me the opportunity to spend seven months in Bangladesh, which were wonderful and productive but also challenging at times.

In order to properly reflect on my time in Bangladesh two facts must be taken in consideration. First, I am originally from Bangladesh and have migrated to the U.S. with my family during my early teenage years. Though I have maintained relatively close connection with Bangladesh and have visited the country several times over the last 20 years, this recent visit was different given the significantly longer duration and the primary purpose being research rather than casual visit. The stay provided qualitatively different experience and perception of Bangladesh from anything that I had encountered during my previous visits. Second, I travelled to Bangladesh with my partner, who is also originally from Bangladesh, and our infant son. As any parent can attest, a young child, especially the first born, can occupy parents' daily lives and thought-worlds almost completely. I had to, thus, constantly negotiate demands of my research work with the demands of being a new parent in relatively unfamiliar surroundings.

My research deals with history of political thought and seeks to analyze how life experiences and practical exigencies shape thinking about politics. Thus, it was most helpful for me to have the opportunity to immerse myself in the political culture, intellectual discourses, and struggles of daily life in Bangladesh. Though my research is historical, experiences from present-day Bangladesh have been helpful in constructing the necessary contexts and frames for approaching the past that I am interested in.

During the first three months of my stay, Bangladesh experienced another episode of political unrest with strikes, blockades, burning cars and people, extra judicial killings, and such. During these three months, daily activities, like going to work or buying grocery, became difficult and dangerous. Yet, people had to carry on and so did I. I wonder how such episodes of political crisis and violence, which have been common fixtures in Bangladesh's history, affect scholarship and intellectual culture. For example, I have found that political writings in Bangladesh commonly take the form of short essays of opinions and commentaries on contemporary politics and of calls for concrete political actions; rarely do we find monographs of abstract theory or even in-depth analysis. Perhaps, this has to do with the ways the recurring crises and upheavals demand immediate and practical solutions.

However, despite the crises and the oppressive demands of pragmatism, there exists and have existed a vibrant intellectual culture in Bangladesh, though mostly centered in Dhaka. During my stay, I attended many talks, seminars, conferences, and exhibitions. I even attended some political meetings, press conferences, and protest rallies. Though most of these events were not directly related to my

research, they nevertheless helped me to understand the political and intellectual culture of Bangladesh. One of the highlights of my stay was the opportunity to attend the annual “Ekushe” book-fair held throughout the month of February. The book fair provided me with the opportunity to browse countless books and collect a significant number of books related to my research. The fair also provided the opportunity to meet and converse with contemporary Bangladeshi writers, intellectuals, and scholars.

My research conducted in Bangladesh can be divided into three components. First, I have sought to understand the intellectual landscape of Bangladesh and to identify prominent, influential, and relevant (for my purpose) figures within that. This process involved reading and taking notes on a large number of secondary literature on Bangladesh’s political and Intellectual history. This also involved talking to Bangladeshi scholars and intellectuals for clues and guidance. Second, I have collected and/or read primary literature produced by intellectuals and political thinkers who are subjects of my study. Third, I have conducted formal recorded interviews of few of these intellectuals and thinkers. In conducting my research some of the libraries of Dhaka, notably the Public Library, the Bangla Academy Library, and the National Library and Archives, have been very helpful. Moreover, personal collections and the collections in various bookstores have proved to be invaluable sources as well. My visits to various museums were also very insightful.

I am grateful to the AIBS for providing me with the financial support that allowed me to take time off from teaching and other responsibilities and to focus on my research. I am also grateful to AIBS for arranging to let me use their beautiful Dhaka office as my workstation, which allowed me to separate my research and family responsibilities and use my time more effectively. Completing the research for my dissertation would have been extremely difficult without the generous support from the AIBS. I hope that the dissertation will justice to this generosity and confidence by furthering critical understanding of Bangladeshi intellectual world, political subjectivity, and, ultimately, of Bangladeshi politics.