



Review

Iftekhar Iqbal

The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State, and Social Change 1840-1943
Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series,
Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010,
268 pages, ISBN 9780230231832, Price 66€.

This book is an attempt to ecologically revisit the much written-about politico-economic history of Bengal, particularly that of Eastern Bengal from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century. At the onset it can be stated that while doing this, the book largely remains successful in presenting a set of convincing arguments.

Altogether the book consists of nine chapters including an 'Introduction' and a chapter 'Reflections' (the latter replaces the standard term and format of 'Conclusion'). This book does not have one specific topic that is followed through chronologically over a period of time. However, this does not set any restriction in appreciating a visible chronological progression around the theme of ecological limitations that influenced, and in certain cases also determined, the material culture of the region, and of ecological interventions made mainly by the colonial state that compounded ecological restraints with social fallouts. While adopting this approach, Iqbal has managed to escape the potential criticism of presenting only a state-centric account of 'ecological destruction', as is often done, either under the impulse of colonial extraction (exploitation?) or under the framework of colonial modernity. This is an important intervention because most of the studies on ecological histories, as he rightly points out in his introduction, tend 'to see the state as the key authority and manager of nature' (p. 10). What happens then, as Iqbal explains, is that this standard approach further divides itself into two complementary parts: one charts the line of 'unprecedented destruction' under colonialism's varied impulses (control and revenue primarily) (pp. 10f.), and the second describes the trajectory of 'subaltern resistance' to the state domination, in which resistance itself becomes 'an index of the state's power against which [it] is launched' (p. 11). In looking at the social implication (and thus moving beyond state)



of ecological changes that includes separate treatment of the social categories like 'bhadralok' and 'peasantry' (mainly in chapters 3 to 5), Iqbal has managed to give an idea of how the changes in ecological regimes were affecting, and in turn were adapted and resisted by different social groups.

Qualification of the current environmental-ecological intervention is one theoretical point; another related claim of the author is to re-visit the *category* of the 'agrarian' and the *historiography* of the 'agrarian': by the first, he seems to mean to rescue agrarian from its 'autonomous' cell (p. 10), and by second, to question, among other things, the binary of agrarian and environmental. To let the author speak himself: 'The relative failure of the agrarian history of modern Bengal in placing itself in broader, multiple political and social contexts can be understood in terms of the way in which it has remained disassociated from the ecological questions' (p. 10). Tracing the agro-ecological contours of the eastern Bengal is however not the only concern of the author here, these are further mapped on the political changes as developing from the beginning of the twentieth century. The author here presents an ecological pre-history of communal (and national politics) leading up to the great famine of 1943 (chapter 8).

Let's start with the basic chronology of this ecological perspective on Deltaic Bengal. As chapter 2 shows, the story starts with the colonial state's intervention to resume the wastelands that comprised of forested areas but more importantly of char and diara lands. These were shifting alluvial formations which were highly productive. Iqbal argues that the intense reclamation and resumption measures adopted by the colonial state from the early nineteenth century, included the decision to not settle these lands permanently (pp. 20f.). While the practical reason as he suggests was the fluvial condition coupled with the zeal to maximise the revenue, the ideological premise was drawn upon the contemporary critique of the Permanent Settlement. The state devised the legal intervention (the Regulation XI of 1825) in such a way that all the reclaimed and resumed lands, that had become *khas*, became state's property while all the losses accrued to the zamindars. This promoted, as he traces in the following chapter, a system in which the state preferred to engage directly with the raiyats. This collusion of ecology (that promoted the production of commercial crops like jute, and also of rice that was widely traded) and state mechanism, he argues, explains why in the eastern Bengal's deltaic districts the condi-



tion of peasantry was better than, for instance, in western Bengal or Bihar. Until the end of the nineteenth century, so far agricultural expansion, agricultural productivity and rural prosperity was concerned, the picture as presented by the author is of growth on the one hand and of remarkably little differentiation 'within the society of peasant small-holders' on the other (p. 38; pp. 61-66).

The next level of this story starts from the turn of the twentieth century (covered in Chapters 5-7) when the expansive limits of this ecological belt fairly reached a limit. The social constellations in Bengal also started changing, in which the *bhadralok* class started returning to the countryside, a point which Iqbal convincingly makes against the established historiographical wisdom of their being primarily located in urban centres. It was also in this time that the new 'intrusions' – the railways and the road embankments on the one hand and the water hyacinth weed on the other – made their way into the delta. However, to return to the first gear of the story: while Iqbal's contention that the colonial state wanted to maximise revenue from these fertile alluvial lands is broadly acceptable, he unwittingly posits a binary between revenue maximisation and the idea of permanence. Histories of diara lands from Bihar suggest that the impulse to maximise revenue did not necessarily mean a dilution of the ideology of permanence. For the Board of Revenue, the relevance of permanence depended heavily on the processes of attaining it, namely, the measurement and surveys. Iqbal is aware of the difficulty the government faced in measuring the lands in a fluid environment (p. 37), but nowhere has he outlined the fact that accurate surveys were integral to the way the Board conceptualised and tried to attain permanence. Therefore quite paradoxically, it was rather the self-assumed heightened sense of ideological commitment than its absence that led to the rise of the lease system in the diara lands which symbolised the revenue-maximisation zeal of the colonial state. In passing it may also be mentioned that while assessing the condition of peasants in the Sunderban delta the author has made cursory comparisons with western Bengal and Bihar, his arguments would have become much sharper had he compared the diara conditions of Sunderban with say, diara conditions of other places (Bihar, Orissa or even Punjab). For instance, as late as in the 1870s, he suggests, the *khas* management was encouraged by the colonial state in the Sunderbans (p. 25), whereas in other regions under the directive of the Board, the state was asked to shed off its alluvial responsibility. His understanding of lack of relative



social differentiation is based on the Dufferin Report of 1888, which he in contrast to works of Willem van Schendel and Aminul Haque Faraizi ('Rural Labourers in Bengal, 1880 to 1980', Comparative Asian Studies Program (CASP), Rotterdam, 1984) uses to present a picture of rural prosperity. This he claims to do by reading 'some of the narratives [of the report] against the grain' (p. 48), though much of what is explained is more of an exercise in 'reading with the grain', which at times gives the reader a feeling that colonial sources are not dealt with rigorously enough.

Iqbal has also neatly explained the nature of the interaction of the peasant community, as consolidated under the Faraizi movement, with different sections of the society: zamindars, indigo planters, leaseholders, and so on (Chapter 4). It is on the point of social differentiation again that the reader wonders why the jotedars, leaseholders, zamindars, indigo planters and other intermediaries come into Iqbal's narrative *prominently* only in the second half of the nineteenth century. Not that he hasn't explained it: allegedly jotedars and zamindars were weak in deltaic areas (pp. 73-74), and the raiyats consolidated against the indigo planters because 'the cultivation of indigo deprived the raiyat of the two main ecological endowments that provided subsistence and commercial production in deltaic Bengal: the best land use and use of the right season' (p. 77). In spite of this explanation one wonders if commercialisation was one of the main factors involved in the growing prosperity of the deltaic raiyats then why indigo failed to become popular whereas jute could (and did) become a favourable commodity with the raiyats. But a more interesting outcome of Iqbal's narration, which probably sets the contrast with Bihar, is that in the latter place leaseholders (including indigo planters) were a prominent section of the diara landscape right from the beginning of the resumption drive in the 1820s. The implication of this point is somehow bigger than the author has chalked out: it means that while in a place like Bihar the state's lack of knowledge and reach of control manifested in keeping itself restricted to deal with intermediaries (and also 'creating' them over a period of time), in the Sunderbans the same deficiencies on the part of the state put it in a close relationship with the raiyats thus weakening the intermediaries. A related point therefore is: is the author's claim to move beyond the state actually fulfilled in his account? The answer is yes but in a partial way. Although as the author concedes that the state was weak (particularly when talking about a frontier region like Sunder-



bans) and has limited knowledge of agrarian hinterlands yet his account emphasizes the centrality of the colonial state's legal mechanisms, its reclamation policies and its pro-raiyati instances in the Sunderbans that *structured* the ways in which social groups positioned each other.

The state's centrality becomes further entrenched from the late nineteenth century when railways and roads, as Iqbal convincingly argues, disturbed the natural water drainage leading to a rise in instances of flooding and crop destruction (Chapter 6). The next chapter on hyacinth weed that 'covered about one-ninth of the total deltaic plain' (p. 141) complicates the story further, and also brings other actors, especially the industrialists, into the picture. The environmental degradation that had set in both culminates and prepares the ground for the famine of 1943. The reversal of the raiyats' fate is argued for: from the days of the nineteenth century when they were relatively doing well the factors as outlined above led to substantial decline so much so that 'Rural poverty in the area that is now Bangladesh emerged only in the twentieth century' (p. 184). The reader here is asked and left to believe that the bhadralok class, railways and water hyacinth wielded enough power to severely reverse the material conditions of the deltaic raiyats. While degradation and 'economic underdevelopment' sets in (p. 187) the 'ecological' and the 'agrarian' for a while lose their identity in the category of the 'national': 'Thus beside focusing on the specific category of the 'colonial', 'agrarian' or 'environmental' a more useful intervention would be to take a deeper look at the category of the 'national' in locating the power that engaged in agrarian relations within the ecological regime of the Bengal Delta' (p. 14). This point is well taken but sits rather oddly with the fact that it follows just after positively citing David Ludden whose work on agrarian South Asia asks us to bring 'agrarian' outside of the category of 'national' and of the boundary of 'nation-state' (Ludden 1999).

Nitin Sinhan. nsinhan@googlemail.com

Bibliography

Ludden, D. 1999. *An Agrarian History of South Asia: The New Cambridge History of India IV.4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

