



## State of Bangladesh Studies: An Exploration in Historical Literature

IFTEKHAR IQBAL

*[iftekhar.iqbal@cantab.net](mailto:iftekhar.iqbal@cantab.net)*

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With more than 178,000 entries on 'Bangladesh' in the WorldCat, the idea that the country has remained understudied may not be apt anymore.<sup>1</sup> Research and publications in the postcolonial period reflect on a continuously productive interest in the country and its place in the region. However, there has been little critical assessment of the scope, quantity and quality of the field of Bangladesh studies. This article explores the evolving trends in Bangladesh studies, giving a chronological overview with a particular focus on the modern period. The use of the term 'Bangladesh' in this article is informed by its present day political boundary, but occasional, especially pre-1947, references are also made to neighbouring regions of western Bengal and the north-eastern region of India, which formed its essential political, economic, social, cultural and environmental parts. This is by no means an exhaustive essay on the field, neither in terms of thematic coverage, nor in terms of authors and scholars. As an introduction to this volume's FOKUS on Bangladesh, it intends to throw light on major turns and tendencies in the existing historical literature.

### **Prehistoric and Ancient Period**

Reconstruction of the ancient period of Bengal had a clear political agenda for historians writing in colonial times. One of the foremost historians of Bengal from the late colonial period, R. C. Majumdar, a Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dhaka, made a plea for the historical existence of indigenous political agencies and establishments, something that was closer to the need of the national movement (cf. Majumdar 1925; Majumdar 1943). Bangladesh's claims to earliest antiquity have been traditionally supported by the example of the



urban settlements in Mohasthangarh in the northern region of the country, which date back to the third century BCE. In the last few decades the long-lasting interest on Mohasthangarh has been slightly overshadowed by the example of an older urban settlement in central Bangladesh, dating back to about 600 BCE with indications of pit dwelling from a much earlier date.

Archaeologists and historians working on Bangladesh have also been asking questions regarding the development of trade networks. Evidence from the archaeological sites of Wari-Bateshwar, excavated under the supervision of S. S. Mostafizur Rahman since 2000, suggests that the apparently river-centric territorial dissection did not prevent more elaborate intra-regional economic relations that targeted international trade through the Bay of Bengal via the river Meghna. In some of his publications, Dilip Kumar Chakrabarti, an archaeologist at Cambridge University, presents a synthesis of earlier scholarship and new perspectives on the prehistoric and ancient period (Chakrabarti 1992).

With the birth of Pakistan, the political context changed and the quest for legitimacy of the new postcolonial state was sought through closer scrutiny of political establishments, particularly in the territory that became East Pakistan. R. C. Majumdar's Indian nationalist reconstruction was replaced by a new kind of orientation under the new political circumstances. Abdul Momin Chowdhury, in his *Dynastic History of Bengal*, based on a doctoral dissertation in the University of London in the 1960s, sought to reconstruct the history of more local, regional Eastern Bengal rulers, who established political roots distinct from the Pala Empire, despite the fact that both followed Buddhism. To Chowdhury, it was not only the highly fluid ecological regime that had given this region a distinct strategic and political edge, but also its trade and commerce that, due to its vast coastal area, acted as an expansive gateway to the Indian Ocean (Chowdhury 1967).

Chowdhury also highlighted Dharmapala's military expeditions into northern India, which although short-lived, present a case of Bengal's transformation from a provincial power to an imperial one. Perhaps due to the paucity of sources, historical research on ancient period lacks diversity beyond the political domain, but a significant exception is Husain's study which sheds unprecedented light on everyday life, including that of women, in a major episode in ancient Bengal (Husain 1968). In recent times, however, original research on ancient Bengal has declined in Bangladesh, excepting a few that have continued to



seek geographically informed formative elements of the regions that form today's Bangladesh (for example, Islam 2014).

### **Medieval Period**

For the medieval period, a recurrent theme has been the origin of the Muslims in Bengal. Early British writers' arguments of 'Islamisation' of the region by force were replaced by the arguments that Islam migrated to Bengal with Arab and Persian Muslim merchants. Some have argued about mass conversions to Islam by the eastern Indian Buddhists who allegedly suffered persecution by the Brahmin rulers of the Sena dynasty. Another argument revolved around the role of the Sufis whose simplicity and performance of miracles contributed to the mass conversion of rural people. A synthetic argument, put forward by Richard M. Eaton, suggests that the reclamation of frontier lands along the Sundarbans forests and swamps at the shores of the Bay of Bengal led to the peasants' economic mobility around the personalities of religious leaders. This eventually resulted in the concentration of a majority Muslim population in this eastern flank of South Asia (Eaton 1993). Recently, Willem van Schendel has considered this region more as a crossroad than a closed frontier, implying a pluralistic process of space-making alongside 'Islamisation' (van Schendel 2009).

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Political history remains a strong area for medieval Bengal. After 1947, most of the political histories written in what became East Pakistan have sought to fill the existing gap in the historiography that was perceived to have underappreciated Muslim historical legacies in Bengal and India in general. Most of Mohar Ali's works seem to be driven by this perception (Ali 1985). Ali used many Arabic and Persian inscriptions and textual sources to reconstruct the political and cultural history of medieval Bengal. Despite his relative bias towards Muslim polity, his works remain examples of a combination of empirical details and a quest for recovering the political self of the Bengali Muslim in the environment of the state of Pakistan. More earthbound and socially oriented studies have been conducted by Abdul Karim focusing on the Sufis and using many Bengali sources (Karim 1985).

Historians of nationalist orientation have seen in the unification of three major regions of northern (Gauda), eastern (Sonargaon) and western (Satgaon) Bengal under Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (1342-58 CE), who took up the title of Shah-i-Bangalah (The King of Bengal), the earliest evidence of some form of territorial 'nationalism' in the region. He is regarded as the first ruler who was able to exert



sovereignty over all of Bengal. It was on this strong political-regional basis that Bengal was able to secure two-hundred years of independence (1352-1576 AD) from north Indian imperial powers. This long spell of independence from Delhi is also seen as the time for the flourishing of Bengal literature and language, despite the fact that the rulers were of Middle Eastern origin. The nationalist historical literature holds the Mughals responsible for the end of an independent era of Bengal and highlights the resistance against the Mughals by local landlords including the Bara Bhuiyans of Eastern Bengal.

Beside the mainstream political and social history of medieval times, works of new genres are emerging, including those on technology (Tarafdar 1995), urbanisation (Akhtaruzzaman 2009), and architectural history (Hasan 2007). Methodologically significant works on medieval times relating to the use of coins to reconstruct political and economic history have engaged historians for some time, with Nalini Kanta Bhattasali showing the way. Some recent works attempt new synthesis while taking a broader view of the society. Based on such sources, Hussain (2003) reasserts earlier arguments that "acute poverty and starvation of a larger section of the society is unbelievable" in medieval Bengal (Hussain 2003).

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The study of medieval Bengal still mostly revolves around the normative argument for a prosperous society, which was discontinued with the arrival of colonial governments. The period is also temporally segmented from the ancient or pre-Muslim period, without the aspects of continuity in social or economic trajectories being looked into. What also remains understudied for this period is the predominant formative social agencies, whether or not we term those as 'civil society'. A great deal of focus on political, economic and social history of the period has left room for an intellectual history that can shed light on aspects of social autonomy, being relatively independent of the state – a development that predates European experiences of the same.

A spatially broader attempt at locating medieval Bengal in the global cross-currents enabled by the Indian Ocean came more recently in the interesting works of Rila Mukherjee (2006). Her research arrives in the context of the dominant literature on the Indian Ocean as a global-historical space. Mukherjee's work, which had a Braudelian approach, examined the northern Bay of Bengal as a commercial confluence where Bengal forged its transregional connections. Richard Eaton, on the other hand, focused on agriculture as a vehicle for social formation and mobility, when the mutually engaging activities of the post-1200



Turko-Afghan princes and preachers spurred agriculture, economy and Islamisation (Mukherjee 2011). If for Mukherjee Bengal was a frontier of the Indian Ocean, for Eaton the region was a frontier of the South Asian landmass.

The idea that Bengal was a frontier of the sea conjures up a vision of mobility of capital and commodities across numerous coastal trading ports, with limited insight on the inland social dynamics that such motilities could generate – lacunae particularly marked in the first generation of Indian Ocean Studies. The idea of Bengal as a frontier of the South Asian landmass could, therefore, be appreciated by the example of deeper social formation taking place through reclamation of frontier wilderness – an angle that has long influenced the historiography of United States. This approach, which implies that Eastern Bengal as South Asia's last frontier ended in the wilderness of the Sundarbans forests, affirms a particular form and process of post-Cold War regionalism. In the light of more recent scholarship on trans-regional mobilities across various religious, political and economic networks, such a spatially inflexible trajectory of identity must expect a revisit with respect to modern times. There are scopes to locate Bengal both as the frontier of the Indian Ocean and of the South Asian landmass and engage the question of Bengali identity in that dual-frontier complex.

### **Colonial period**

The strength of the field of colonial Bengal lies in the vast colonial archives, statistical data as well as multiple political and ideological moorings. An important set of work emerging since the 1960s focused on the perceived 'transition' in Bengal during and following the British take-over, K. M. Mohsin and Sushil Chaudhury's work being a representative study of this genre (Mohsin 1973). In terms of closer structural analysis of the colonial period, there was the question of the Permanent Settlement, the land revenue system introduced in 1793, which created a class of zamindars (landlords) bestowed with almost absolute power over land and the responsibility of collecting revenue on behalf of the colonial state. Issues relating to the Permanent Settlement's ideological origin, complex tenure systems, agrarian institutional arrangements, and the relationship between the landlord and the peasants that it helped to define – all have been examined for clues to the stagnation of rural economy and society in the colonial period (Gopal 1949; cf. Guha 1982; cf. Islam 1979). If the Permanent



Settlement is seen from the vantage point of colonial governance, Jon Wilson's book has put forward a strong case against a fixed ideological or policy imperative, arguing that the abstract nature of the codification of laws in the form of the Permanent Settlement had its origin in the anxious search for stability by the British rulers, who found themselves complete strangers to the local conditions (Wilson 2008).

Criticism of the Permanent Settlement grew in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the first major attempt to break with this element of the colonial legacy was made with the abolition of the system by the governments of East Bengal (Pakistan) and West Bengal (India) in the 1950s. An intriguing question arises here: if the structural mechanisms of revenue generation were held to be the key to the ills of agrarian society and rural economy, why did the abolition of the settlement fail to bring about the anticipated mobility and 'development' in the six decades following decolonisation? Such questioning of the formal, elitist and 'structural' analysis of colonial agrarian society necessitated a shift of focus towards the 'return of the peasant' in South Asian historiography, yielding a vast range of literature (Bose 1986; cf. Chatterjee 1997; cf. Ray 1979).

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In the particular case of East Bengal, the restoration of 'agency' to the largely Muslim peasantry can be examined in three broad perspectives: 'patron-client', 'world-capitalist' and 'subalternist'. A version of the 'patron-client' analysis of peasant society was elucidated in the 1970s by Ratnalekha Ray, who argued that a section of the richer peasants or village oligarchy, identified by her as 'jotedars', had been powerful catalysts in agrarian relations as early as the Mughal period. They sustained patron-client relationships and socially reproduced and exercised power over the vast majority of subordinate peasantry by extending credit and market facilities. These groups remained key social and political forces even after the creation of the loyal landlords through the Permanent Settlement. More recent versions of the patron-client thesis suggest that richer peasants, instead of investing in capitalist farming, perpetuated the system's grip on the vast rural mass as creditors, traders and rentiers, which resulted in rural stagnation.

The 'world-capitalist' analysis of Bengali agrarian society is comprehensively employed in the works of Sugata Bose. Examining links between the globally connected capitalist system and conditions in local agrarian production, Bose sought the source of the peasant's dominant role within the context of the world economic depression of



the 1930s. Although Bose believes that the power of the zamindars declined as a result of a series of tenancy acts legislated since the 1880s, he argues that during the economic depression of the 1930s richer peasants were able to fully assert their influence by extending credit to the vast number of poor peasants, creating a situation of extreme dependency and vulnerability that culminated in the latter becoming the main victims of the great Bengal famine of 1943. Thus, the rich peasants became the 'chief beneficiaries' of the system, followed by zamindars and grain-dealers in the wake of the famine. In other words, the emergence of the rich peasant in agrarian Bangladesh coincided with soaring poverty that culminated in the great Bengal famine of 1943, leaving the rich peasants well-placed to further expand their base of domination by buying up the holdings of the famine victims.

Within the Subaltern Studies project, the case of East Bengal peasant society was taken up by Partha Chatterjee. Chatterjee does not disagree with Bose's conclusion about the emergence of rich peasants as 'surplus appropriators' in the course of the first half of the twentieth century, but he has strong reservations about Bose's methodological approaches. He criticises Bose for analysing the dominance of the peasant from an angle that results "entirely from a reified structural dynamic" of demography, market and credit relations and not from the "conflict among conscious human agents" (Iqbal, 2010: 6-10). As obvious victims of 'false consciousness', according to Partha Chatterjee, peasants preferred to ally with their dominant co-religionists rather than to be dominated by the Hindus, who were considered 'external'. This position did not help the ordinary peasant to escape the suffering of material deprivation. Communal, rather than class, consciousness not only perpetuated the hegemony of the richer peasants but lent support for the Muslim communitarian idea of Pakistan which promised a 'utopia' that would free its inhabitants from the domination of 'outsiders' such as the Hindu zamindars or bhadralok and mahajans. The twentieth-century East Bengal peasant therefore ended up supporting a communally inspired nation-state rather than organising a more materialistic 'peasant revolution'.

Thus, on the wreckage of an older historiography that dealt with the zamindars and bhadraloks as the catalysts for agrarian relations, the peasant has been revived, albeit what started as the 'return of the peasant' ended as a spectre of the same. The thrust of this peasant-centric approach is that the peasant has become more influential than the zamindar in the analysis of complex agrarian relations. After a



slight earlier twirl over whether these domineering peasants should be called 'jotedars' or 'rich peasants', the latter prevailed and the only difference between the historians endorsing the category of the peasantry centred on their chronology of peasant dominance. Ray believed that influential richer peasants had been present in both pre-colonial and colonial times, Bose found them active and powerful since the 1930s and Chatterjee found the rich peasant's dominance in an immeasurable realm of consciousness which seemed to transcend time.

The emphasis on the economic emergence of the dominant peasant, alongside the decline of agrarian society and the gradual detachment of the previously predominant zamindar-bhadralok and mahajans from the agrarian landscape, lends a strangely romantic attitude to the patriarchy of the good old days, but fails to answer some of the questions that this historiography itself raises. If sections of the peasantry were potentially capable of exerting their influence over the poorer peasants from the late nineteenth century, why did they wait until the depression of the 1930s to take the upper hand? How was it possible for the richer peasants to strengthen their exploitative actions as creditors and buyers of the lands of poorer peasants at a time when relatively wealthier zamindars or bhadralok failed to do so in the context of the economic depression of the 1930s which affected all – particularly all strata of the peasants – who must have suffered from the drastic fall of prices? Why didn't communalism become more intense in the nineteenth century when the Hindu zamindari bhadralok were supposedly more assertive? Why did communalism become so fervent at a time when the Hindu bhadralok's authority and power had supposedly declined in the countryside?

It seems that the peasant in these major historiographical studies has been given a berth with only cultural and emotional windows. On the other hand, there have been a few statistically informed works focusing on the material conditions and capitalist context for the peasants and their vulnerability (cf. Islam 1978; Sen 1981). More recently, David Ludden has focused on Bengal, in a comparative and long-term context, as an agrarian region with its multiple temporal and material contexts (Ludden 2011). As far as the study of industrial contexts and the place of the worker in it goes, relatively little literature was produced on the subject despite the fact that Bengal saw some industrial development. The initial early twentieth century nationalist debates on drainage of capital to Britain from India gave way to a critique of backwardness of Indian economy as a result of the colonial rule. Questioning the dominance of this literature, a group of



historians emphasised the need to examine the conditions and rights of labourers and working class, especially after the Russian Revolution.

A pioneering Marxist work on the Indian working class movement was published in 1923 by a Bengali economist teaching at New York University and published from Berlin (cf. Das 1923). Labour movement studies got diversified in the late twentieth century into studies on subsectors of industries as well as agencies like women workers in the mine fields (Awwal 1985). More literature on the industrial labour came in the domain of Subaltern Studies, focusing on industrial workers in the jute and other sectors, one most cited one is by Dipesh Chakrabarty, whose work took a departure from the classical Marxist analysis of production relations to the use of caste and consciousness and an array of intra-labour networks (Chakrabarty 1989).

Beyond agrarian and industrial history of colonial Bengal, the political history is characterised by the study of forms of resistance against the British and the landlords. This resistance has been studied as a crude and sporadic political form against colonial rulers and their local zamindar agents. These included the Fakir-Sanyasi movement, the Wahhabi-inspired Titu Meer, the Faraizi peasant movement and many other such movements. A majority of these peasant movements have been perceived as influenced by the Wahhabi movement and Islamist resistance to colonialism. A relatively smaller number of studies have interpreted these movements from a Marxist perspective (cf. Kaviraj 1981). A recent study has examined the Faraizi movement in particular and the rise and decline of an agrarian polity in general from an ecological perspective (cf. Iqbal 2010). Further, the study of the identity issue that emerged as a quest for understanding Islamisation in the Middle Ages transformed into the question of identity of Bengali Muslim in the political and social environment of Bengal. This question was located at the disciplinary crossroads of reformist Islam, syncretistic traditions and colonial modernity (cf. Ahmed 1981; Roy 1983; Sofa 1976).

In the past decade, political, social and economic histories have seen fresher studies in the medical history particularly in the works of David Arnold and Deepak Kumar, although covering broader India, but referring to Bengal. Kazi Ihtesham's study of Bengal public health was followed by another recent one by Kabita Ray (cf. Ihtesham 1986; Ray 1998). More recently the focus on Western medical experiences has given way to the study of local and indigenous medical traditions (Mukharji 2009). The field of history of medicine or of public health



has remained underdeveloped, a trend that has continued in today's Bangladesh. Institutional history, too, has been left behind; Sharif Ahmed's work on Mitford hospital is one of the few in the field of medical history (cf. Ahmed 2008). The history of Dhaka University by Abdur Rahim is an authoritative work, although it could have been more expansive and critical if the Hartog Papers, preserved in the British Library, could have been used. At the elementary level of education, there has been little works, excepting a few lone examples (cf. Shahidullah 1987).

Compared to the literature on environmental history in other parts of India, Bengal has remained relatively less focused on, despite the fact that the region has much to offer to an environmental historical quest. This is not to propose that an environmental perspective has not been taken up at all. Looking through the rich array of research on the history of Bengal, we can identify a number of substantial works that have engaged ecological factors to examine some forms of economic activities. In the 1930s, Radhakamal Mukerjee charted the changes in the river systems and their impact on different types of geophysical regions within the Bengal Delta. In doing so, Mukerjee also traced the demographic movement and performance of agricultural sectors. About the same time, Birendranath Ganguli threw significant light on our understanding of nature's inherent capacity to influence the pattern of human fertility behaviour in a given ecological circumstance. In the 1970s, Panandikar linked deltaic ecological properties with economic well-being or woes, while Binay Bhuhsan Chaudhuri identified the fertile deltaic region of Bengal with the successful commercialisation of agriculture in the nineteenth century. Recently, Sugata Bose has highlighted the works of Radhakamal Mukherjee and Birandranath Ganguli by reminding us of the important link between the rivers of eastern Bengal and demographic pattern.

These works, often imbued with a Tagorian sense of appreciation of nature as a pristine provider, are remarkable attempts to document the role of nature, particularly the river, on economic activities. Some remarkable works have dealt with the chars and forest, with specific focus on the reclamation process, tenure pattern and environmental resource management. Notwithstanding their importance in the history of the colonial revenue system and policy formulations, these works have not examined the questions of social, economic and political relations over a longer period of time, keeping broader ecological issues at the centre. These works are, however, important for our purpose and once placed in perspective their merit could be fully ap-



preciated in the light of the new developments in the field of environmental history. Recently, Iftekhkar Iqbal has taken a broader view of the colonial economy, society and politics from a perspective that provides greater and evolving agency to ecology (cf. Iqbal 2010).

The intellectual history of colonial times has been largely dominated by the discourse on the so-called Bengal Renaissance as a mark of the Bengali nation's cultural prowess. There has been some criticism of the Bengal Renaissance for not being inclusive enough to accommodate the Muslim and other cultural and literary traditions. The search for a cosmopolitan intellectual tradition in times of colonial modernity has remained a less trodden ground (cf. Ahmed 1965). The study of Dhaka as an urban space began in earnest in the 1980s, with Sharif Uddin Ahmed's publication, followed by a number of interesting works by Muntassir Mamoon, Nazrul Islam, Golam Rabbani and a cluster of publications under the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh's project celebrating four hundred years of the city (cf. Ahmed 1986; Mamoon 2009; Rabbani 1997; Siddiqui 2010). Earlier well researched works include Ahmad Hasan Dani, *Dacca: A Record of its Changing Fortunes* (1962). It is surprising that Chittagong which had been a global crossroad for centuries has received little attention (cf. Ali 1964).<sup>2</sup>

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In terms of Partition studies, Joya Chatterji has sought to correct some of the mainstream political historical trajectory that has taken Bengali Muslims as the sole separatist element in the breaking up of India (Chatterji 1994). More recent works have looked at the felt memories at individual, family and community levels (cf. Kabir 2014). Within a methodologically new approach, partition histories are being studied via digital humanities using oral interviews.<sup>3</sup> But new books are yet to be written on the basis of such oral resources.

Another area that has received attention more recently is the study of Bangladeshi diaspora. Vivek Bald has made significant recovery of the history of Bangladeshi diaspora in the USA that had much wider ranging social interactions in the USA than imagined earlier. Other works includes useful team research on Bengali Muslim diaspora in different regional and global locations (cf. Bald 2013; Alexander et al. 2014).

Gender history in the last few decades has focused mainly on colonial Bengal, surprisingly neglecting the pre-colonial and Pakistan periods. In the dominant literature on colonial Bengali bhadralok (gentlemen), Sonia Amin's study of 'bhadramohila' (ladies) shed important new light (cf. Amin 1996). Mohua Sarkar focused on the social con-



struction of Bengali Muslim womanhood amidst the numerous works on their Hindu counterparts (cf. Sarkar 2008). In the majority of writings on Bengali Muslim women, Begum Rokeya and to some extent Begum Faizunnesa feature prominently as harbingers of modernity and progress. Some recent works, on the other hand, contest the dominant idea that some of the Muslim women writers broke out of tradition and ushered in revolutionary modern and secular worldview. Such conceptualisation excludes the many fraught and uncertain ways in which nation and modernity were imagined by the Bengali Muslim women intellectuals and writers. These writers had to place themselves unsteadily between tradition and religion on the one hand and questions of women's empowerment in the condition of late colonial modernity on the other (cf. Azim & Hasan 2014).

### **The Pakistan Interregnum**

The Pakistan period in Bangladesh history is as interesting as it is intriguing. Pakistan was born on the dual imagination of liberation from British colonialism on the one hand and Hindu majoritarian domination on the other. The Bengali Muslims contributed enormously to enliven these imaginations (Hashmi 1992). Yet within a quarter of a century the Pakistan experiment that included what is today's Bangladesh fell apart. Following a spell of political, cultural and economic disputes between the two wings of Pakistan, Bangladesh was born after a nine-month long war with Pakistan in 1971. It was not surprising that Bangladesh studies on this period would find the Pakistan experience as an anathema to the postcolonial dreams of emancipation and liberation. Most literature on the Pakistan period of Bangladesh thus looks into this period as an inevitable prelude to Bangladesh.

Beginning in the late 1960s, most focus was on the economic disparity between the West and East Wing (present-day Bangladesh) of the Pakistan state (cf. Sobhan 1971). Failure in political integration also featured prominently in the writings published in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (cf. Jahan 1972). A significant departure from the elitist understanding of Bengali nationalism is Ahmed Kamal's recently published monograph that highlights subaltern agencies' engagement within the party ranks and against postcolonial bureaucracy in the early years of Pakistan. Kamal argues that it was the bureaucracy, still loaded with a colonial mind-set and practices, which stood between the high politics and grass roots political participation. Eventually the party's political elite gave in to the bureaucratic order and in concert with the bureau-



cracy, appeared to be the most mindless force against the people (cf. Kamal 2009; Iqbal 2010a).

The language movement has been the object of a significant number of works, Badruddin Umar's book, based on oral histories, remaining an authoritative one (cf. Umar 1970). A recent article assesses the voluminous literature on the language movement (Adhikari 2000). In recent years the focus has been more on identifying participants to the movement than on the broader significance of the movement itself. An issue that remains to be closely debated is whether the language movement was the fundamental ingredient of the Bengali nationalism that eventually led to the creation of Bangladesh or had it served its temporal purpose in the 1950s and was no longer an effective factor for the emergence of Bangladesh?

Although the Pakistan period has attained a state of abstraction as the political other of the Bangladeshi nation-state, in recent times there have been works that take a more critical view of the period. Neilesh Bose, for example, looks at the late colonial period as providing space for a new, culturally plural identity formation of the Bengali Muslims, beyond the impending West Pakistan high Urdu culture and West Bengal high Bengal culture (Bose 2014).

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One issue that is yet to draw attention of the historian with regard to this period is the fact that Bengali leadership and politicians of the 1960s were working at a time when global capital flow was making inroad in both wings of Pakistan. The nationalist saw in this a great opportunity for 'development' within a more autonomous framework. The issue of disparity and deprivation, economic and cultural, was a real point of departure for the nationalists; a future based on international aid exclusively used for the then East Pakistani territory and people was a vital but nascent component of the autonomist movement. Both worked together, but the culturally constructed form of nationalism received more attention than the developmental aspect, since the first one catered to the need of nationalist narratives more directly. International capital flow became an internalised category within nationalist imagination, whereas Pakistan remained the exclusive other.

### **1971**

If there is any single topic that has received most attention in the field of Bangladesh Studies, it is the war of independence in 1971 (popu-



larly known as the 'Liberation War' in Bangladesh).<sup>4</sup> Collection of primary materials began in earnest in the 1970s and was published in a multi-volume document, but little of these primary materials have been used to write the history of the war (cf. Rahman ed. 1982-85). One strong area of study of 1971 has been the memoirs of participants and freedom fighters, some of which not only contain deeply felt personal histories of the war, but also literary value (cf. Imam 1986). This genre has also been contributed to by intellectuals and army officials of both Bangladesh and Pakistan sides. A majority of the publication have documented the genocidal atrocities committed by Pakistan armies and their local collaborators. In recent times, some works have looked at issues like raped women (Birangana) and war-children (cf. Ibrahim 1998; Mookherjee forthcoming).

A small number of works have tended to deny the extent of atrocities of the Pakistan armies, including Sarmila Bose's claims, which remains controversial and of doubtful merit (Bose 2011). In contrast, Yasmin Saikia looks at the problems of atrocities from a post-event perspective suggesting something in the line of truth and reconciliation (Saikia 2011). 'Meherjaan', a film directed by Rubaiyat Hossain (2011), takes a more humane perspective through the depiction of a love story between a fugitive Pakistani soldier and Bengali girl during the war.

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Contrasting the established national narratives are recent works on the war taking a global perspective. The externalities of the creation of Bangladesh have been so far assessed by the ways that different global and regional powers took part in the conflict in the context of respective foreign policy objectives, which were believed to be shaped by calculations to form strategic alliances. Bangladesh offers an example of a child of the Cold War in which the Indo-Soviet alliance had the upper hand against the tripartite alliance of Pakistan, the United States, and China. Thus there is certain predestination about Bangladesh being born at the blazing crossroads of global politics and diplomacy.

Raghavan (2013) challenges both these national and global forms of teleology and offers a narrative of contingent creation of the country. Although the book provides fresh global and post-national grounds, it actually ends up viewing the birth of Bangladesh as a result of Indian diplomatic and military intervention. There is scope to see Raghavan's *1971* as a global history of India's diplomatic efforts about Bangladesh, if not as a global history of the creation of Bangladesh itself (cf. Raghavan 2013; Iqbal 2014). Works that would strike a balance between



national aspirations and global engagement in terms of the war of 1971 are yet to be seen.

The field of 1971 studies have become a barrage of subjective studies by participants in the war and a site for a search for 'truth' through empirical details at local, regional and national war fronts, leaving professional historians wondering about where to start digging. Yet in recent times a few war veterans and close observers have sought a middle ground (cf. Hasan 1986; Khondker 2014). What remains to be done is an intellectual history of the Liberation War of 1971 that would not merely see the creation of Bangladesh as a by-product of Pakistan's oppression and atrocities, but will provide some agency and weight to Bangladeshi nationalism itself. This would provide clues to the spontaneous armed resistance and war against a political entity which once formed part of their existential imagination. Two explorations in this context are Talukder Maniruzzaman's *The Bangladesh Revolution and its Aftermath* (1980) and the edited volume *Behat Biplob 1971* by Salimullah Khan (2007).

## **Bangladesh**

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Studies on the first four decades of independent Bangladesh are too numerous to sum up here and should be left for a separate discussion. In short, Bangladesh has been a favourite subject more of the political scientists, anthropologists and development experts than of the historians. Throughout the 1980s, political scientists debated the contexts and connotations of the post-1971 political turmoil characterised by coups, counter-coups, assassinations of heads of state and leading politicians and military interventions. These issues continue to animate current political debates (Mascarenhas 1986; Ahmod 2014). Economists during the same period looked at the economic stagnation and declining welfare regime including the famine of 1974 that killed about 1.5 million people, a number that was no less staggering than that of those killed during the war of 1971 itself. Considering the ways in which the value of death has been qualified by certain political trajectories, it is not surprising that the famine of 1974 exists as a footnote of the history of independent Bangladesh. The deaths by war overshadow the deaths by hunger. A lone related example in book form is Mohiuddin Alamgir's *Famine 1974: Political Economy of Mass Starvation in Bangladesh* (1977). There were, however, little studies of the continuity of the nationalist politics that hardly changed the nature of the state that was politically cruel and economically crippled.



The early 1990s was the time for Bangladesh to turn around. Generally acceptable parliamentary elections were held for the first time in its history and the country started full-fledged liberalisation of its economy even before India did in the wake of the post-Cold War polity. Since then the democratic process has stumbled many a time, but surprisingly economic growth has been steady, which even evaded the global depression of the 2007-8 and overcame the impact of expiration of the Multi Fibre Agreement in 2005. So in most recent times, some economists and development experts have sought to understand the 'Bangladesh paradox' in which the country achieved visible growth, at the rate of more than five percent, amidst political violence and poor governance. Khan (2013) takes a critical view of the current state of understanding of political economy of Bangladesh. On the other hand, between political patron-clientelism and economic growth, rampant corruption and political-economic cartels have dominated the public life, which have been subject to scrutiny by many civil society organisations and intellectuals.

### **Bangladesh Studies in Textbooks**

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Bangladesh has become a subject of much pedagogic interest since the early 1990s, when private universities started operating in this country. Such interests are fuelled by government encouragement, need for balancing the syllabi by accommodating subjects of humanities and social sciences, guardians' expectations and so on. Some of the early textbooks focused on contemporary issues (Chowdhury & Alam 2002), while others focused on history and tradition (Ahmed & Chowdhury 2004). The national encyclopedia, *Banglapedia*, is a huge, commendable work by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Islam ed. 2003). These are useful works, but most of them are edited and encyclopaedic in nature. Although these volumes accommodate useful articles and chapters they do not offer a coherent narrative of the dynamics of long-term transformation.

*A History of Bangladesh* by Willem van Schendel (2009) is perhaps the first book that brings such a long span of time within a single cover and offers a refreshingly broader account of the country's historical developments. The strength of the book lies in the author's insightful discovery, by wading through both long and short-term historical steams, of the brighter sides of a nation that looks in many ways doomed, while clearly showing the hollowness of the rhetoric of nationalism (cf. Iqbal 2009).



An impressive sequel to van Schendel's book is David Lewis's *Bangladesh* (2011), which makes a significant contribution to the fast developing field of Bangladesh studies. While Schendel's is a narrative of historical dynamics, continuity and discontinuity in a long term perspective, Lewis aims at describing current political and social processes in Bangladesh. For the most part, the book deals with historical narratives with blended insight on the current political economy of development and politics. He has shown through this historical process the emergence of a 'weak state' in a strong society, while also suggesting that most of today's malfunctioning of governance have turned into a structural problem from a regulatory problem.

### **A Few Notes on the Contributions to the FOKUS of the Current Issue of *South Asia Chronicle*.**

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that Bengal and Bangladesh studies have emerged as a major field and are continually getting richer with new contributions. As seen through recent contributions elsewhere and in this special volume of the *South Asia Chronicle*, more nuanced and newer lines of enquiry are emerging. Setting the stage, along with this historiographical overview, is Willem van Schendel's paper, "Blind Spots and Biases in Bangladesh Studies", which offers a brief yet engaging commentary on some of the vital issues regarding Bangladesh Studies, exploring its strengths, weaknesses, biases and blind spots – an assessment that will prove quite useful as the field flourishes.

Neilesh Bose's piece, "Periodisation and the Twentieth Century: Grappling with the Pre-Histories of Bangladesh", takes a departure from the now tired discourse of nationalism and communalism as two solid building blocks of Bangladesh studies. Instead, in outlining the 'pre-history' of Bangladesh he traces the problems of non-recognition of political space and the withholding of redistribution of economic wellness as the precursor of the formation of the region's political community 'outside the national form'. Elora Shehabuddin's paper, "Feminism and Nationalism in Cold War East Pakistan", situates women's activism and nationalism in Bangladesh (erstwhile East Pakistan) in the Cold War global context. By putting together both gender and transnational context, Shehabuddin offers an interesting counter-reading of nationalist narratives of both Pakistan and post-1971 Bangladesh. Thus these two papers by Bose and Shehabuddin present a useful critique of 'methodological nationalism' and examine multiple



temporalities of the public space in a politically turbulent time across the colonial and postcolonial divide.

Annu Jalais's paper, "Bengali 'Biharis' Muharram: The Identitarian Trajectories of a Community", uses her anthropological insight to examine the communitarian implication of the celebrations of Muharram at the sectarian crossroads of Shia and Sunni as well as ethnic boundaries of Bengali and Biharis in both Bangladesh and West Bengal. Another anthropologically interesting piece, "Situating Islamic Non-Friday Sermons in Bangladesh" by Max Stille explores the widely visible but less studied practice of the 'waz-mahfil', religious sermons that take place across the country and are participated in by the ulamas trained in Deoband in India, drawing hundreds of people. Recently there has been refreshing research on the anthropology of popular religious forms in Bangladesh (for example Harder 2011) and Stille's paper shows interesting new pathways from there. Eva Gerharz, in her paper "What is in a Name? Indigenous Identity and the Politics of Denial in Bangladesh", combines anthropological and public policy perspectives to make a case for the politics of misrecognition of indigenous people by the ruling establishment in Bangladesh and examines the consequent emergence of indigenous activism. The three papers by Jalais, Stille and Gerharz thus locate Bangladesh in a trans-regional setting while also keeping the national context in perspective.

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The FOKUS of the current issue of the South Asia Chronicle is based on a workshop held in the summer of 2013 at Humboldt University, Berlin.<sup>5</sup> The final version of the papers by the above mentioned authors reflects on lively conversations that took place in the workshop and make a fitting contribution to the focal theme of this volume "Mapping Bangladesh Studies". By taking cross-disciplinary, trans-spatial and post-national perspectives, the papers collectively show new pathways in the study of Bangladesh.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> WorldCat, the world's largest online catalogue, is not a definitive indication of the extent of research on a topic, but it offers a better view of the 'academic' materials filtered to the major libraries in the world. It needs to be mentioned that the term 'Bangladesh' generally applies to the post-1971 period when the country was officially named thus, meaning that a substantial number of historical studies of Bangladesh also feature in entries under 'Bengal' 'India', and 'East Pakistan'.

<sup>2</sup> One recent exception is van Schendel (2015).

<sup>3</sup> For example a transnational team of historians has taken up a project with support from Endowment for Humanities. See <http://bengaloralhistory.tufts.edu/> [retrieved 16.01.2015].

<sup>4</sup> For a short list of books on the Liberation War, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_books\\_on\\_Liberation\\_War\\_of\\_Bangladesh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_books_on_Liberation_War_of_Bangladesh) [retrieved 16.01.2015]; Also see [http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/?page\\_id=12](http://www.genocidebangladesh.org/?page_id=12) [retrieved 16.01.2015].

<sup>5</sup> The international workshop "Situating Bangladesh in South Asian Studies" was held at the Department of South Asia Studies, Humboldt University, Berlin, 17-19 May, 2013.