



## Blind Spots and Biases in Bangladesh Studies

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### **Bangladesh Studies?**

Is there an academic field of Bangladesh studies? Let us limit ourselves to the social sciences and the humanities. Clearly, in these domains a lot of research activity is going on – and a lot more than used to be the case. Our understanding of the huge jumble of people that we call Bangladeshi society is increasing. But Bangladesh studies is still a relatively disjointed and poorly institutionalised field of knowledge production. Therefore, anyone wishing to say something about Bangladesh studies is immediately faced with his or her limitations. Each of us can only survey bits and pieces. This certainly goes for me, and what I am going to do in this short note is give you my version, from my particular and quite limited vantage point – the view from my private helicopter.

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### **Strengths**

As you will have gathered from the title, I will focus mostly on aspects of concern but I would like to begin with some strengths. To start with, in the 40-odd years of the country's independent existence, there has been a mind-boggling academic regeneration. We have to remember that scholarly studies (to which I restrict myself here) started out at a very low level, the result of the unprecedented and unrivalled quadruple elimination of large sections of potential contributors. In 1947 many Hindu intellectuals fled the territory and, equally important, many Muslim intellectuals chose to remain in India. Again, in 1971 targeted killing of local intellectuals and, equally important, the flight of many non-Bengali intellectuals to Pakistan led to another double depletion. As a result, independent Bangladesh started out with a minute scholarly community.



The period from the 1970s to the 1990s was not easy on this group – the universities passed through a very difficult period, as did the country as a whole – but since then a new network of young scholars has been growing vigorously and the space for critical academic debate has expanded. The teaching of Bangladesh studies has greatly improved in the country, and both locally trained and foreign-trained researchers participate in this. In addition, large Bangladeshi communities in different parts of the world are now producing a number of students with an interest in the study of Bangladesh. There is even hope for new initiatives and research investments from the diaspora, something we have seen develop among other diasporic communities wishing to maintain links with their home country.<sup>1</sup>

In terms of content, too, the study of Bangladesh is now infinitely richer than it was 40 years ago, when the main themes were development (often quite narrowly and instrumentally defined), the 1971 war, colonial history, and Bengali language and literature. Many more themes have come up since then, creating a dense network of exciting new connections, not just between subfields, but also between Bangladesh studies and international developments in the social sciences and humanities. The future of knowledge production about Bangladesh looks bright.

### **Weaknesses**

But have these developments made Bangladesh a more visible society in the wider world? I would say: scarcely, and certainly nowhere in line with its status as one of the most populous societies on earth. Bangladesh studies are still a field *in statu nascendi*, in the process of being formed. They have not yet reached the point of producing sustained academic debates that contribute powerfully to wider discussions in the social sciences and humanities. Let me point to five frailties here:

1) Bangladesh studies suffer from low self-esteem. Even now there is a sense of defensiveness, of being the new kid on the block, an underdog in the field of South Asia studies. This sensibility expresses itself in an urge to stress national and cultural glory, to cherish the memory of great men/women, and to be hypersensitive to critical outsiders whose opinions and analyses are given more weight than they should.

2) Bangladesh studies have no international presence to speak of. There are no “Centres for Bangladesh Studies” in universities and research centres beyond the region. Although some centres came up in



the 1970s and 1980s, these have faded away since then.<sup>2</sup> There are not even regular world conferences of Bangladesh studies such as they exist for most other countries. Consequently, there are no economies of scale in the global production of knowledge about Bangladesh because most scholars of Bangladesh work either in Bangladesh or in relative isolation outside it. Remarkable for a country so proud of its cultural and linguistic heritage, successive governments of Bangladesh have failed completely to develop an effective cultural foreign policy.

3) The social backgrounds of scholars working on Bangladesh are remarkably restricted. They are mostly Bangladeshi citizens, diaspora South Asians, and development/policy scholars. The initial interest that Bangladesh's independence, and its branding as a mecca of development, generated in the last quarter of the twentieth century, has ebbed away, and no broad interest remains among young scholars worldwide, except for a few who drift into the field by chance. The teaching of Bangladesh studies abroad has declined and it is uncoordinated, scanty and often in the hands of people who have little or no first-hand knowledge. Take a look at the syllabi of any survey course on South Asia in universities in the West.

4) Within Bangladesh, academically sound knowledge production is hampered by a number of factors. One is that serious peer-review is a recent and still lightly established practice when it comes to research funding, career advancement, or publication in national journals. Another factor is that the level of research funding for the social sciences and humanities remains at a low level and is hemmed in by political constraints.

5) A final weakness is that a clear distinction between academic writing for co-specialists and writing for wider audiences is not always evident. In itself it is a great strength that scholars write for both groups but maintaining the distinction is important, for two reasons. First, academic writing has developed a number of codes, professional controls, conceptual specifics and ethical restrictions that make it less immediately usable in the public arena. It is about analysing society in a specific register. As a genre it differs from policy advice, political intervention, essayism and journalism. Second, academic writing should be free from the fear of touching on current social taboos and myths. In order to examine and effectively challenge such taboos and myths, it needs to be nurtured in specialist communities. In Bangladesh studies, these distinctions between realms of knowledge production are often blurred.



## Biases

In addition to current weaknesses it is also useful to consider biases in Bangladesh studies. Biases, or inclinations of outlook, can be regarded as positive, or negative, depending on your point of view. In Bangladesh studies a number stand out – and there are good reasons why they are there. Let me very briefly mention a few:

1) The vast majority of scholars equate the study of Bangladesh with that of its majority population, Bengalis. Ethnic minorities are generally forgotten or relegated to the realm of anthropology or security studies. Things are changing here, but slowly. We also need to address a similar bias regarding religious minorities – these continue to be heavily burdened with Partition-related suspicions.

2) Studies of Bangladesh suffer from methodological nationalism, or, to use a fancier term, a territorialist epistemology. Scholars take the state territory of Bangladesh as a pre-constituted, naturalised scale of analysis for their studies. In this way they feed the erroneous idea that Bangladesh is a self-enclosed geographical, economic and social unit. Partly a result of the defensiveness that I mentioned just now, Bangladesh studies tend to be ardently national, if not nationalist. This gives them an outdated feel.

3) A third bias is the abiding fascination with political goings-on, which carries over from everyday preoccupations in Bangladesh. Political minutiae, personalities and events are investigated with vigour but we could do with more attention to the structural patterns – economic, cultural, environmental, or, indeed, political – underlying them.

4) Fourth, the study of Bangladesh is still coloured by the developmental gaze. This is understandable because the fads of development policy (for example, gender, microfinance, sustainability) came with their own lavish funding, which have pushed many researchers into these fields and has made it difficult to develop alternative research agendas. And yet, such alternative agendas are essential for Bangladesh studies to become an integrated, dynamic and sustainable field.

5) Finally, there is the bias of Dhaka-centrism. Dhaka is a very large city, poised to become one of the most populous megacities of the twenty-first century world – but Dhaka is not Bangladesh. Even in 2050, when the population of Dhaka is predicted to be around 40 million, it will be home to no more than one out of five Bangladeshis. In many studies of Bangladesh, events in Dhaka take centre stage, or, worse, are tacitly assumed to stand for the entire country. We need to



understand social, economic and political processes beyond Dhaka far better than we do today.

### **Blind Spots**

Clearly, any field has its blind spots. Bangladesh studies are no exception. The funding structure has greatly benefited a particular type of social science (policy-oriented development studies) and national sentiments have benefited others (notably political history and 1971 research). Many other areas remain underexposed. For example, areas that I feel need to be boosted are as dispersed as archaeology, popular culture, dialectology, human geography and mobility studies. I am sure that one could think of many others.

Let us take mobility studies, for example. We may wonder why the Bangladeshi diaspora – one of the largest in the world with tens of millions of people – has received so little scholarly attention. Or, indeed, why migration within Bangladesh (and not only to Dhaka) remains largely unanalysed. Also, why do we still lack a strong anthropology of the state elite, the wealthy, the expat community in Bangladesh, or the aid industry? Why do we know next to nothing about smaller language communities unique to Bangladesh – for example the Mru language (now with its own newly created script) or Chittagonian? Further, is it not time to revisit village studies, to get a sense of post-peasant connections and global influences on agriculture?

### **Situating Bangladesh in South Asian studies?**

Let me end by saying a few words about situating Bangladesh in South Asian studies. My question is: why should we? I mean, there is nothing wrong with linking debates about Bangladesh with those about other societies of South Asia – but is there a need to privilege this context over others? Within South Asian studies, Bangladesh presents a rather unusual trajectory and therefore is likely to remain a marginal case, drawing relatively little real interest from other South Asianists. I would say: efforts in claiming a more central role does not need to take too much of our energy.

In addition, there may be more exciting ways to frame and advance the study of Bangladesh. First of all, we should establish intellectual connections to research in all neighbouring regions. The most stunning blind spot in Bangladesh studies is the persistent neglect of Burma



(Myanmar), a country that remains heavily exoticised and othered in Bangladesh despite the deep, ancient connections; contemporary moves towards reconnecting; and current mutual antagonisms. Bangladesh studies are utterly unprepared to deal with the opening up of Burma that is happening right now. Academic links to Northeast India (granted, nominally that is also South Asia), an equally unfamiliar and disregarded neighbour, are also still very weak. So when it comes to situating Bangladesh studies in a wider regional context, we should look in all directions, not just across to West Bengal and beyond.

But the regional context is no longer a satisfying one because Bangladesh lives beyond its borders and beyond its immediate geographical environment. We often think of this as a recent phenomenon, but of course it is not: Rice cultivators from Bengal settled in central Burma; traders in Sumatra, South Africa and Cuba; professionals in Nigeria, Australia and Japan; labourers in Oman, Malaysia and Italy; not to speak of the tens of millions of Bangladeshis in India and Pakistan. The recent book by Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (2013) constructs the lives of Muslim Bengali peddlers and seamen in the USA from the 1890s and how over time they merged with working-class, mostly African American families. This unknown story of global connections demonstrates that framing Bangladesh studies in global networks of trade, kinship and work is urgently needed.

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In forty years the study of Bangladesh has blossomed and spread in many directions. It has become a dense network of exciting new connections. It is vibrant and it is developing fast. It certainly could do with more coherence and more focused scholarly debate, and it needs more institutional underpinning internationally. But this may well happen, and once it does, it will allow us to push beyond current preoccupations and explore dimensions of social change that have not received due attention in the study of Bangladesh.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A recent example of such initiatives is the involvement of prominent non-resident Indian academics in the newly established and generously funded Nalanda University in Rajgir (Bihar).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the University of Bath (UK), the Centre for Development Research (Copenhagen, Denmark) and the Chr. Michelsen Institute (Bergen, Norway) all hosted groups of Bangladesh scholars and in the 1990s the European Network of Bangladesh Studies organised a number of conferences.