

Iqbal, Iftekhhar: *The Bengal Delta. Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2010. ISBN: 978-0-230-23183-2; 288 S.

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In the first paragraph of his introduction Iftekhhar Iqbal states that „this book argues that an understanding of the ecology of plains is essential for any analysis of the politics and society of colonial South Asia“ (p. 1). This may not be very surprising as there was some substantial research on the subject a couple of decades ago.¹ Yet it is surprising that despite the importance of the theme this study is the first work on the environmental-cum-political history of a South Asian region for more than a decade which does not focus on forestry, forest management, tribal societies and the colonial state. The preeminence of this focus, however, is one of the general shortcomings of South Asian environmental and ecological history reflecting the still dominant colonial discourse on South Asia's nature and its resources as well as the right to use or exploit them.²

Iqbal's investigation and analysis starts with the early days of British colonial rule in Bengal in particular the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and its ecological as well as social consequences. Due to the ecological system of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta the infamous Permanent Settlement could not be implemented in large parts of the eastern delta as the permanently shifting river course made such a fixed revenue assessment impossible. Individual leasing of land on rather liberal conditions based on irregular and incomplete surveys became predominant in the region encouraging wasteland reclamation in riverine areas. When revenue income from the Permanent Settlement dwindled during the nineteenth century, the colonial state was compelled to further grant tenancy rights which were given with the tenancy legislation of 1859 and 1885 consolidating the agriculturists' occupancy rights and the state's revenue income. Rather than a decline which is part of the Indian „nationalist“ historiography, an

overall improvement of the agrarian conditions took place at least in the eastern part of the delta.

The stable agricultural conditions led to the in-migration of many settlers into the eastern parts of Bengal contribution to an overall agricultural improvement. This is the topic of the second chapter. The large and highly diversified fluvial system facilitated a dense exchange system, mainly based on boats, and guaranteed the delta's commercial and human communication. Bazaars and boats were the backbone of trade, commerce and communication. The eastern delta's economy was famous for its biologically highly diversified rice production. Land reclamation as well as the intense cultivation of alluvial lands by whole families (in contrast to the absentee zamindar landlord of the permanently settled western Bengal districts) led to a rather stable ecological regime. This stability also prevented the spreading of diseases like cholera and malaria which were proportionally higher in other parts of Bengal where reclamation and cultivation was less prevalent. Better nutrition and better health cer-

¹ Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India* (vol. 1: The United Provinces under British Rule, 1860-1900, New Delhi 1971; Michael Mann, *British Rule on Indian Soil. North India in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*, Delhi 1999 (German PhD-Dissertation: *Britische Herrschaft auf indischem Boden. Landwirtschaftliche Transformation und ökologische Destruktion des „Central Doab“, 1801-1854*, Stuttgart 1992); David Gilmartin, *Models of the hydraulic environment. Colonial irrigation, state power and community in the Indus Basin*, in: David Arnold / Ramachandra Guha (eds.), *Nature, Culture, Imperialism. Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 210-36; Meena Bhargava, *State, Society, and Ecology: Gorakhpur in Transition 1750-1830*, Delhi 1999.

² Apart from several monographs on colonial forestry and forest management, e.g. Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forests. Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces, 1860-1914*, Delhi 1996, which is part of the series 'Studies in Social Ecology and Environmental History' edited by Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil comprising more than ten volumes, see also the edited volume by Richard H. Grove, Vinita Damodaran, Satpal Sangwan (eds.), *Nature and the Orient. The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi 1998 (based on a conference in New Delhi in 1992 and a volume of the above mentioned series) as well as latest edited volume by Ranjan Chakrabarty (ed.), *Situating Environmental History*, Delhi 2007.

tainly contributed to the romantic image of the so called „sonar bangla“ (Golden Bengal) which was part of the national construction of Bengal at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The Faraizi Movement is dealt with in the next chapter. Usually depicted as a religious movement, it in fact started as a Muslim reform movement addressing socially deprived weavers, mostly Muslims, and, according to Iqbal's analysis, was soon transformed into a peasant movement covering large parts of eastern Bengal (see map p. 71). According to different sources between 80.000 and 300.000 were involved in the resistance movement of the 1840s and 50s. It was hierarchically organized beginning at the grass-root level which decisively contributed to the strength of the movement. In contrast to Titu Mir's „jihad“ against the colonial regime which had ended in a disaster, the Faraizi Movement never acted openly against the British colonial state. Instead it successfully broadened its social base building up horizontal coalitions between peasants of different beliefs and social backgrounds against any perceived threat from the landed elite. During the 1860s and 80s the movement was omnipresent in eastern Bengal. Yet, after the death of its leader Noa Miyan the movement lost much of its strength and consequently of its political influence.

The fifth chapter re-interprets the role of the bhadralok, the urban based, largely Calcutta elite of colonial Bengal. In contrast to the predominant narrative Iqbal demonstrates that an increasing number of members of the then town-dwelling absentee landlord class returned to the countryside to improve their economic lot. It was the upper caste Hindus, Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya, who migrated into eastern Bengal. To make them move the government offered special revenue conditions. Between 1890 and 1930 the number of the bhadralok grew faster in the eastern than in the western part of Bengal. In the 1930s it was obvious that the rural bhadralok elite was better off than the ordinary cultivator which was part of the colonial regime's strategy to extend the basis of the landlords whom it regarded as the major pillar of the state. On the other hand, the number of landless labourers increased which comprised almost a third of Bengal's rural population

by 1940. Between 1931 and 1941 alone their number rose by 50 per cent. Simultaneously, the number of indebted rural households increased. In 1910 there were 55 per cent of all households without debts whilst in 1933 the number had fallen to 17 per cent. During the first three decades the economic situation, the conditions and the composition of the rural population had changed dramatically causing an overall impoverishment of the people except, of course, the new rural bhadralok.

Chapter six narrates the story of the railway-mania in Bengal. The building of the railways of the Raj started in Bengal in the 1850s. However, the Bengal delta was included in that network only from the 1870s onwards. Debates on the pros and cons of such an extensive network crossing the many waterways of the delta included the alternative or parallel development of a riverine canal system, however, also delayed the beginning of the construction work. Due to the geological conditions almost all railway lines were built on artificially erected high embankments. As the embankments had too little and too few culverts and bridges, they caused many ecological problems like flooding, water-logging, decreasing agricultural outputs and a substantial increase of diseases in otherwise for example malaria free regions. Critique, particularly that of the local people, was dismissed because peasants were regarded as unable to understand and appreciate the benefits of modernization. Three case studies exemplify the onslaught of modernization on the highly diversified ecosystem of the Bengal delta. By the 1930s, as Iqbal convincingly demonstrates, the environment of the delta region had changed substantially.

The following chapter continues the story of the massive man-made onslaught on the ecosystem of Bengal. It was the spread of the water-hyacinth pest over an increasing amount of the water surface in the delta which soon caused severe problems in navigation, the economy and the environment at large. The origin of the water-hyacinth remains obscure, yet it seems very likely that it was imported at the end of the nineteenth century because of its beautiful flower. About 1900 the plant started to spread. Within less than four decades it covered an area of 4000

square miles whilst the weed affected a total area of 35.000 square miles which is equivalent to one-ninth of the delta's plain. Measures to stop the spreading of the weed concentrated on experiments for the economic utilization of the plant rather than its eradication. Fodder, fuel and fertilizer were the options for the future use of the plant. Experiments, however, prolonged effective measures to prevent the spreading of the water-hyacinth. Still the legislation of 1936 included the possibility of the weed's economic utilization despite the fact that the weed indeed was strangulating the economy and ecology of the country.

This leads to the last chapter, which analyses the origins of the Bengal famine of 1943 from an ecological perspective. All together, Iqbal makes out eight agents which contributed decisively to the again man-made disaster. First, despite the growth of the population the area under cultivation remained stagnant from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Second, the average yield of food-grain, in particular rice, decreased. Third, the low agricultural productivity was, most likely, also caused by under-capitalisation. Fourth, in many districts of the eastern delta the water-hyacinth further reduced the amount of available food-crops. Apart from that, water-logging caused similar problems and, in addition, prepared the 'ground' for the further spreading of the weed. Fifth: This caused an overall pauperization of peasants which became landless labourers. This transformation accelerated from the beginning of the twentieth century, when many of the peasants were already living below the poverty line and thus were the first ones struck by the scarcity of 1943. Sixth, due to the water-logging plants were increasingly attacked by various crop diseases. This was in particular true for 'urfa' and 'hispa', both of them ravaging the rice fields of eastern Bengal. Various other diseases also contaminated the paddy fields destroying many of the growing plants. One plant-disease severely struck the rice fields in 1942 thus additionally contributing to the food scarcity of the following year. Seventh, diseases contaminating humans like cholera, malaria and smallpox also spread in the eastern delta infecting the weak-

ened population during the famine. No wonder that Bengal, known for the worst public health in British India and the latter known for its worst public health in Asia, was struck disastrously in 1943, the worst affected area being in the eastern delta region. Eighth, the construction of embankments as well as the effects of the water-hyacinth forced the local population to substitute less nutritious sorts of crops for high nutritious species. This further adulterated the health conditions of large parts of the rural population long before the famine.

„Sonar bangla“ may have been the romanticized idea of pre-colonial Bengal, yet, as Iqbal convincingly shows, „sonar bangla“ was a reality for large parts of the population in the eastern part of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta until the end of the nineteenth century. During the first half of the following century the environmental, ecological, economic and social conditions deteriorated affecting large parts of the rural population. Seen against this background, the human catastrophe of 1943 was the outcome of various long term developments including political decisions that culminated in the disastrous famine which was by far not caused by short term drought and dearth. Iftekhhar Iqbal has written a highly sophisticated in-depth ecological-cum-social history of the Bengal delta which without doubt, deserves the utmost attention by scholars of modern South Asian studies. Yet there are also a few points of critique with respect to the state of the art.

It may be true that the environmental history of South Asia attracted many scholars of the Subaltern School who stressed the topic of nature, power and resistance. However, these were not the only persons interested in the environmental history of South Asia. One wonders why Iftekhhar Iqbal does not refer to the seminal work of Elizabeth Whitcombe dealing with the Ganga-Jamna Doab in the second half of the nineteenth century as well as the reviewer's book on the same region covering the first half of that century (cf. fn. 1). Both books deal with riverine ecological systems and their change including the questions of man-made human catastrophes (famine and starvation to a large extent as consequences of environmental and ecological changes due to

agrarian transformations). Both books would have served as a point of departure. Similarities of the ecological-cum-economical change in a highly diversified landscape are obvious enough to make any analogies rather plausible. And with respect to the lack of interest on ecology among the historians Iftekhhar Iqbal may have mentioned his own publication in the reviewers edited issue of the „Internationales Asienforum“³ which exactly draws the connection between environment and ecology in South Asia.

A point of ‘manual’ critique may be uttered also. In quite a few instances one would have expected references to the sources used in archives and libraries. This is particularly true for the chapters on the delta’s environmental history, i.e. the railway network and the water-hyacinth pest which are obviously the centerpiece of the Iftekhhar Iqbal’s PhD thesis. In any case, references in a scientific publication are, however, essential. And finally, sometimes the reader may get the impression that eastern Bengal, present-day Bangladesh, differs a lot economically, environmentally and socially from western Bengal, present-day federal state „West Bengal“ of the Indian Union thus explaining the overall cultural coherence or homogeneity of the region which came into being in the first half of the twentieth century. „The Bengal Delta“ can but should certainly not be read as contribution to a national historiography of Bangladesh, since this would ridicule the environmental-cum-ecological approach which does not know of national borders.

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³ Iftekhhar Iqbal, Environment and Ecology in South Asia Past and Present, in: Internationales Asienforum 38 (2007) 3-4, pp. 305-398.