

SPECIAL ISSUE

Bengal: A Region with a Pioneering Past and an Uncertain Future

Introduction

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This special issue of ASIEN is dedicated to the region of Bengal, which was the focus of two interdisciplinary “Conferences on Bengal Related Studies for Students and Young Scholars” at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in 2010 and 2012. The conferences brought together young scholars from different disciplines, primarily the humanities, whose research focuses on different cultural, geographic, historic, linguistic, political, and socioeconomic aspects of the Bengal region — an area today consisting mainly of Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal. The four papers in this issue each present a strand of work to be found on Bengal as a region in different disciplines. The two conferences from which these articles emerged revealed the challenge of integrating varying disciplines, theoretical perspectives, and methodologies. Nonetheless, all four papers discuss processes of societal change — and it is herein that interdisciplinary methodologies can help contribute to an understanding of the wider developments that are taking place in a particular region.

Historically, the Bengal region has played a vital role in the emergence of the modern Indian state. Until 1911 Calcutta was the capital of British India and a prosperous center for culture, education, and trade. The first article in this issue, “Breaking the Cage: Traveling, Freedom, and English Society in *Imlaṇḍe Baṅgamahilā*” by Sukla Chatterjee, investigates this period and particularly the second half of the 19th century. At that time, the intense contact between colonizer and colonized was not only generating new cultural expressions — for instance giving birth to new genres in the field of literature — but was also politically manifesting in the emergence of local reform movements and, above all, Bengali and Indian national awakening. The contrasting developments occurring during that time — marked by the simultaneous inclusion of foreign elements and the formation of local resistance — are reflected in the travelogue *Imlaṇḍe Baṅgamahilā*

(“A Bengali Woman in England”) written by Krishnabhabini Das, a Bengali woman who spent eight years in London at the end of the 19th century and who wrote extensively about her stay there.

By about a hundred years later the Bengal region’s set-up had dramatically changed. This region not only gained independence from the British in 1947, but was divided mainly into East Pakistan, which became Bangladesh in 1971, and West Bengal, a union state of India. Even though historical differences between East and West Bengal cannot be denied — for instance the high number of Muslims in the East and the dominance of Hinduism in the West — the dynamics that were set in motion by the partition seem to have divided this region for good. This political act not only prompted migration in both directions but also intensified the divergence in developments occurring in these two geopolitical entities. As a result, research today tends to focus mostly on either one part of Bengal or the other, unless it takes a comparative perspective. Further, there is a distinct divide between the two largest cities Dhaka and Calcutta — in India the latter has been officially named “Kolkata” since 2001 — and the rest of Bengal. Urban Calcutta is increasingly associated with an emerging middle class that enjoys a lifestyle beyond the imagination of previous generations and that is distinctly embedded in global dynamics. Against this backdrop, Hia Sen investigates in her article “From *Rabīndra Saṅgīt* to *Doraemon*: Inheritance and Globalization of Children’s Leisure Culture in Kolkata” the changing leisure culture of children in Calcutta from the 1950s until today. With that she contributes to a discourse that looks at the forces and factors of globalization as well as their implications on a local scale.

The remaining two articles of this issue are situated in present-day Bangladesh. They reflect the general perception in the “West” that tends to associate culture rather with Calcutta — often either justly or unjustly labelled “the cultural capital of India” — and “problems” with Dhaka or Bangladesh. This dichotomous view seems to rest particularly on the keen interest of scholars in the “West” to explain, portray, or solve problems in Bangladesh. Alongside the perception of Bangladesh as a country of floods and poverty, the existence therein of a disaster-stricken garment industry has also compounded such negative impressions. Without denying the reality of these socioeconomic problems, Elisabeth Fink’s observation in her article “Trade Unions, NGOs, and Transnationalization: Experiences from the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh” is that such negative images have themselves become a vehicle through which foreign and local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh can create their “business.” Elisabeth Fink hence scrutinizes the roles of NGOs and trade unions in her paper, and puts particular emphasis on how their internationalization affects local activism.

While the “West” is directly linked to the Bangladeshi garment industry, as the main buyer of its products, so are the industrialized countries also largely held responsible for anthropogenic climate change and its global effects, examples of which

seemingly have already been strongly felt in the south of Bangladesh. Though there is currently a paucity of detailed studies that can directly link the more frequently occurring environmental disasters in Bangladesh to global climate change, whether responsible or not the “West” will in any case have sooner or later to deal with the consequences of these disasters. For instance, so-called “environmental refugees” — often referred to as “climate refugees” although their decision to migrate may relate to environmental circumstances beyond the immediate impacts of climate change — are a new category of migrants, people who will almost certainly find their way across the borders of the developed countries in the long run. Until now, however, environmental disaster-induced migration seems to be limited to occurring only within the borders of Bangladesh itself, leading especially to new rural–urban migration patterns. Bishawjit Mallick investigates the nature and implications of this internal migration specifically in the wake of Cyclones Sidr in 2007 and Aila in 2009 in his article “Cyclone-Induced Migration in Southwest Coastal Bangladesh.”

In our view, the four articles provide important and wide-ranging perspectives for understanding more fully the Bengal region’s past, as well as for making sense — beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries — of its more recent developments and challenges. With a view to continuing this exchange across disciplines, we thus look forward to the upcoming “Conference on Bengal Related Studies for Students and Young Scholars” scheduled to take place at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg in October 2014.