

ALI RIAZ / MOHAMMAD SAJJADUR RAHMAN (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh*. London: Routledge, 2016. Xix, 448 pages, £140.00. ISBN 978-0-415-73461-5

Bangladesh has a tradition of bringing out excellent reference works in the English language, and the new *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Bangladesh* is a welcome addition to this trend. This is all the more remarkable given that the country won its independence after a long fight for its own language and, decades ago, decided to publish official documents in Bangla rather than in English. In 2003, a twelve-volume national encyclopaedia was published both in English and Bangla and is also available on the internet. Its second edition came out in 2016. The handbook under review, however, is less a compendium like the *Banglapedia*, but rather a collection of 36 articles dedicated to pressing issues and problems, written almost exclusively by academics from Bangladesh, mostly with a background of study and service outside of the country, especially in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. As the editors write in their Introduction:

In a few years Bangladesh will celebrate its fiftieth year of independence. The country emerged as an independent nation in 1971, although it has existed for centuries – as a part of the Mughal Empire, as part of the British-colonized subcontinent, and then as the eastern province of Pakistan (1947–1971). [...] Since its independence Bangladesh has faced adverse situations – political, economic, and environmental. Yet, it has not only survived, but thrived. Once described as a “test case for development”, the country has achieved significant social and economic progress in the past decades (p. 1).

Accordingly, the book is a proud recounting of achievements, as well as an attempt to present the difficulties, with all their complexities, that the country has faced. This has been done with great attention to brevity and clarity. All of the contributions are highly informative and readable.

That the project took longer than expected speaks for the optimism of the editors. Their success in having articles updated as needed should be gratefully acknowledged. All texts are well referenced, and at the end of the book there is a detailed index. The book is organized into six parts:

Part One “History and the making of contemporary Bangladesh” is dedicated to topics including: Bangladeshi politics since independence, nationalism, secularism and the genocide of 1971. The last article on the Shabagh rising – in support of the government’s policy to not only finally bring the perpetrators of the massacres of the Liberation War to court, but also have them executed – explains how sentiments and frustration are passed on through generations and can erupt out of the blue.

“Politics and institutions”, the second part, deals with political parties, elections and the party system, public administration, non-governmental organizations and civil-military relations. The shifting nature of NGOs from

service delivery to advocacy in their first phase, to the development industry in their second, and to “marketization and hybridization” (p. 126) in the third, is a wider phenomenon, but can be studied par excellence in Bangladesh. On reflection however, the concept of non-government organizations needs greater differentiation, as not-for-profit organizations are major providers of social services not only in “developing” countries.

The third part is for good reason the longest section, encompassing “Economy and development”. It took Bangladesh more than twenty years to recover from civil war and reach a level of consumption equal to that in the last year within an undivided Pakistan, made possible by advances in three areas: first and foremost in agriculture, allowing an improving food supply for a growing population; in industry, where Bangladesh advanced to become a world leader in ready-made garments, produced by millions of young women with a predominantly rural background; and in the emigration of millions of workers, whose home remittances are amongst the highest in the world. Self-sufficiency in food production (more or less), textile exports and remittances allow Bangladesh large-scale imports and the building up of foreign exchange reserves, both of which were unimaginable in the difficult years after independence.

The next part, entitled “Energy and environment”, is the shortest section, with articles on power and energy potentials, climate change and water issues. The country has a deficit in primary energy, but a reliable (electric) energy supply is a precondition for export-oriented industry, where instant reaction to rapidly changing world market trends is required. With most of the country only a few metres above sea level and located in one of the largest river deltas of the world, natural calamities like floods, droughts and cyclones are regular events that easily become disasters. Global warming, a rising sea level and the prospect of the increasing frequency of extreme weather phenomena add to such problems, and will affect millions of citizens. This could trigger mass migration within the country and beyond.

Diverse questions are analysed in part five on “State, society and rights”. Human rights and the law, the state of gender, the CHT and the peace process, religious minorities, print and electronic media, the education system and public health are all examined. The fact that Bangladesh has managed to surpass countries with higher production and income levels such as Pakistan and India in the field of social services has attracted international attention. Beyond the satisfaction this has created in Bangladesh, this is important evidence that social development is not just a function of economic growth. As Sri Lanka had earlier shown, education and health can be improved significantly also in poorer countries.

The final section, on security and external relations, is characterized by Bangladesh’s unique geography and history: tucked in a corner of the subcontinent, Bangladesh shares a long and winding boundary with India, and a

much shorter stretch with Myanmar. The country blocks India's access to its own northeast, a region which could – in theory – be reached easily by rail and road across Bangladesh. Historically and culturally the country was part of Bengal, and the idea of Pakistan as a separate state for the Muslims of India was especially strong here. Bangladesh's history as East Pakistan (1947–1971) ended almost half a century ago, but the role of religion in the state is far from defined. As for the outlook going forward: “Besides domestic drivers, such as political instability, growing authoritarian tendencies of the ruling regime, proliferation of intolerance, polarization of society, and lack of space for religio-political parties within the mainstream, the future trajectory of terrorism in Bangladesh will depend on the global political situation, especially in the Middle East. If the role of the West, mainly the USA, in international politics reinforces the sense of Muslim victimhood, then the appeal of violent extremism to the common people in Bangladesh is likely to intensify” (p. 435).

This book will be a standard reference work on Bangladesh for years to come, and a necessary addition to any collection on the region in general and on Bangladesh in particular. Bangladesh as a “test case for development” offers useful insights for other “less developed” countries and their donors.

*Wolfgang-Peter Zingel*

ANDREW SMALL, *The China-Pakistan Axis. Asia's New Geopolitics*. London: Hurst, 2015. 319 pages, £30.00. ISBN 978-1-84904-341-0

In a book of over 300 pages dealing with an under-researched state-to-state relationship, the reader can expect a reasonable number of footnotes, as well as a bibliography and an index of perhaps 25 pages. In this regard, Andrew Small's book clearly surpasses expectations. It is telling that the main text of this meticulously researched and well-written book on the history and trajectory of the China-Pakistan axis consists of 188 pages, while the remaining 131 pages are solely devoted to an impressive quantity of documentation.

Small writes on page 5 that “in-depth studies on the China-Pakistan relationship are few and far between, with virtually no full-length treatments appearing since the early 1970s”. Clearly, the author has successfully taken up the challenge and chronicles what has happened, and, more importantly, what is currently happening between Pakistan, the Islamic state, and China, the Communist state. The book provides a detailed account of the origins and developments of this relationship, China's secret role in (and not so secret support of) Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, trade issues, the current status of extremist movements in both countries, and possible future developments.