

the apparent fact that John Stuart Mill, like everybody else in his time, participated in an "orientalist discourse" on the Indian "other" is too blatantly true to satisfy a thoughtful historian. Not the smallest virtue of Zastoupil's outstanding book is that it imparts a new dose of subtlety to the somewhat ritualized debate about intercultural perceptions in the age of empire.

*Jürgen Osterhammel*

JAMES J. NOVAK, *Bangladesh. Reflections on the Water*. (The Essential Asia Series, edited by David I. Steinberg). Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. xv, 235 pp, \$ 24.95. ISBN 0-253-34121-3.

To review this book must be a rare pleasure is what I thought when I started to read a book which does not begin by listing the endless problems of this archetype of a developing country, but starts in a sympathetic, although sometimes ironic style: "Every year they come. Usually in winter, indeed most of them in winter. When the weather is nice. They try to avoid the hot and rainy season, which comes in May and the summer. They come in winter because the winters are delightful ..." And he lists those who come: the officials, the salesmen, the reporters, and the few scholars, "serious of mien, analytical of eye." (p. 1). It is, thus, not only a book on Bangladesh, but also a reflection of a Westerner's perceptions and reflections. The writer calls himself a non-scholar and presents "not a book of original research so much as an interpretative one based on primary and secondary research sources." (p. xv). He has lived and travelled in Asia for thirty years as a pharmaceutical corporation executive, as a columnist and reporter for numerous newspapers and worked, from 1982 to 1985, as the Resident Representative of The Asia Foundation in Bangladesh. In these years, he certainly developed an eye for change in the region, although he might be reproached, like all other "experts", with feeling himself more expert than the others. The author is at his best when he narrates what he has seen and experienced; he is much weaker when he tries to sum up his extensive reading.

The book is arranged in eight chapters. In "The Scene" he starts with the foreigners who come to Bangladesh for one reason or another, but most probably not as tourists; Dhaka is, of course, a place where one may start to doubt the eternal wisdom of the "viceroys of charity" (p. 2), though the reviewer is not so certain whether they are all so successful in dictating the country's macroeconomic policy. And Amartya Sen (Poverty and

Famines, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981) will not agree that a poor harvest was responsible for the famine of 1943 and "forced the country to its knees" (p. 7), but that it was a matter of mass deprivation and poor organisation; like most historians, he also would not subscribe to five million dead (rather, three million). That China possibly got the tea from Bengal (p. 9), however, might be true, since tea had been found growing in its natural form in those areas which historically were part of Assam.

That the author loves the country becomes clear from chapter 2, entitled "The Seasons": "For sheer loveliness, there is no land on earth more beautiful, with a climate more pleasant, than Bangladesh" (p. 22). His description of the six seasons, i.e. *barsa*, *sarat*, *hemanto*, *seet*, *basanto*, and *grisma*, is one of the most informative and useful parts of the book. He rightly says that "the floods are a repository of the rich silt that accounts for the nation's fertility" (p. 31), and describes how the rivers shift their course: until the seventeenth century the Ganges flowed into the ocean before it reached the territories of present-day Bangladesh. But it was not the drought of 1770 alone which cost the lives of one third of Bengal's population: it was also due to the changes in land titles and taxation which the new colonial power had unwisely introduced (cf. The Cambridge Economic History, vol. 2. New Delhi: Orient Longman. 1991, p. 298). Whether water covers over 80 percent of the country (p. 36) or less, as is usually reported, the author gives a good introduction as to how a people can live with so much water around.

In the chapter on "Pride and Poverty" the author enlightens us on Bengal's glorious past, but again, however, he offers some unusual explanations, e.g. that in 1974 food shipments from the United States were delayed by the Watergate crisis (p. 57); as far as the American role is concerned, critics explain the suspension of food aid as retaliation for Bangladesh's export of jute bags to Cuba and the US embargo on all exports of edible oils as due to domestic scarcity (Just Faaland (ed.): Aid and influence: the case of Bangladesh. London: Macmillan 1981, p. 98f.). And was culture in ancient Bengal "distinctly Bangladeshi" (p. 59), or rather not just Bengali? And would it not be enough to emphasize that Bangladeshi villagers are nice? Explaining that they "are not nice because of their poverty, as many romantics imagine, but because of the culture they inherited" (p. 60), gives them little chance to be just themselves. And the Ganges certainly does not run from Kashmir (p. 61), nor were there eight hundred years between Buddha's birth and the second century B.C. (p. 64). Explaining Hinduism, the author gets mixed up when he writes that caste means colour (p. 66); he puts the year of the division of Bengal as 1912 (p. 69), and – in a slight deviation from the topic – explains that Saint

Boniface introduced the Christmas tree into Christianity (p. 74). Similar mistakes come up in the next chapter ("Aspects of the Bangladeshi mind"), where Urdu is "an Indo-Aryan language related to Farsee" (p. 90), Mahmud of Ghazni and Muhammad Ghori were "great military leaders of Bengal" (p. 123), the *havildars* are misspelled "harildars" (ibid), the first eight years of independence last until 1981 (p. 124), and the *Mukhti Bahini* become "Mujib Bahini" (ibid.).

"I Am the Cyclone; I Am Destruction", the chapter on the Mujib era, allows the author to draw more on his own experience and on reports of eye witnesses; the style becomes, however, often apodictic, with sentences like "All Bangladeshi have a split-level mind" (p. 141); this continues in the following chapter ("Further Tales of Murder and Politics"), dealing with the years of Ziaur Rahman and, briefly, Ershad.

The last two short chapters deal with "Bangladesh and the United States" and the country's future ("Will Bangladesh Survive?"), followed by some practical hints and very personal observations ("Investing and Visiting"), like the one that the universities "are the nation's greatest disgrace" (p. 219). It concludes with a "Bibliographical Essay", i.e. a rather unorganised listing of reference works and acknowledgements, and a none too comprehensive index.

Not all points of criticism have been listed above; still, the book makes good reading and is highly informative at times. Except for the author's own observations, however, facts need to be cross-checked with the standard reference literature. David I. Steinberg, the editor of *The Essential Asia Series*, in his foreword, writes, "There is no reason why the general informed public should not have access to better information on the diverse societies and cultures of Asia", and, therefore, has "stimulated a number of authors to write works that maintain individuality and at the same time explain the society in question." (p. xi f). The authors – and not only they – might benefit if Indiana University were to lend them more editorial assistance.

Wolfgang-Peter Zingel