

DIETER CONRAD, WOLFGANG-PETER ZINGEL (eds.): *Bangladesh. Dritte Heidelberger Südasiengespräche*. (Beiträge zur Südasienforschung 158). Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1994. 242 pages, DM 82,-. ISBN 3-515-06549-0

The publication presents 12 contributions to a conference which was organized by the South-Asia-Institute of Heidelberg University. The topics covered range from national identity, the legal system, economic and agricultural development, also including international technical cooperation and the relationship between Bangladesh and Germany.

- The problem of national identity is mainly analysed from the perspective of the dual character of Bangladeshi society. Language and culture are identified as essential elements of national identity. Regarding the relationship between Islam and local culture, it seems that priorities have still to be laid down.
- Legal consolidation is considered to have made considerable progress since the fall of the Ershad regime. However, in some areas the situation is still not satisfactory; the judicial system and the central bank do not function independent of the government.
- The economic situation received great consideration during the conference. Partly, the participants concentrated on fundamental questions such as the capacity of Bangladesh to survive in the long run as an independent country. Bangladeshi politics are seen to be too export-orientated.
- (Private) exports from Bangladesh to Germany have been increasing during recent years. Various factors such as the low quality of Bangladeshi products and the restricted experience of Bangladeshi producers in the international market prevent further increase. But experience is showing that potential exporters can be efficiently supported by relatively restricted means, such as export-promotion seminars.
- Four contributions deal with international technical cooperation and development policy. The participants pointed out that the German government is attributing but minor importance to technical cooperation between the two countries.
- Different aspects of Bangladeshi development policy are covered. The policies put into practice in the Chittagong Hill tracts are considered to aim primarily at the integration of the local (cultural and ethnic) minority into the mainstream of Bangladeshi society. Development objectives are of very restricted importance.
- The conference was concluded with contributions on NGOs and promotion of women. A flexible gender approach, integrating the whole family, is considered necessary and appropriate. In spite of some clear shortcomings of the NGOs active in Bangladesh, they are important in the implementation of development policy (networking activities). NGOs also reflect the overall problem of the country: its high external dependency.

This interesting publication gives a first insight into various aspects of Bangladeshi society and its economy. The contributions motivate the reader to look deeper into the individual subjects.

Agnes M. Gerold

KATY GARDNER: *Songs at the River's Edge. Stories from a Bangladeshi Village*. London: Pluto Press, 1997 (1991). 160 pages, Pb £ 9.99. ISBN 0-7453-1094-X - Hb £ 30.00. ISBN 0-7453-1095-8

This is the narrative of a young anthropologist who did 16 months of field work in Talukpur, a small hamlet in the Sylhet District of Bangladesh, in 1987 and 1988. Her personal observations allow valuable insights into the villagers' lives, but also into her own reflections, since participatory observation most probably has its impact on the observer as well as on the observed. Talukpur, of course, is not the true name of the place and the names of people have been changed, but everything the author narrates has most probably been experienced by her; still, the book has been classified as "fiction" in the Library of Congress Catalogue. Without the restrictions of an academic exercise she has managed to write a very readable book, one of the few on Bangladesh which creates sympathy for the people and their country. The stories she tells are of birth and death, of women and marriage, of festivals and saints, of poverty and indebtedness, of natural calamities and successful and failed attempts to improve one's lot by emigration. Trying to integrate herself into society, she describes the life of the women, mainly confined to the security and restrictions of *pardah* and *sharom* (shame). There is little on agriculture and husbandry, on socio-economics or on lineage and marriage systems. Having studied anthropology had certainly sharpened her eye for the situation of being "exposed" for the first time to a different culture, if not to an unfamiliar environment. For the uninitiated there is a useful glossary of Bangla/All-Indian terms which enrich local English.

The book was first published in 1991 and has been positively reviewed. Since then the author has revisited the village and, in the new preface, gives a short account of the many changes. Given the small number of readable and informative books on Bangladesh, one appreciates that the book has been made available as paperback at an affordable price. It is to be highly recommended for first reading on Bangladesh, and even on village life in (Muslim) South Asia.

Wolfgang-Peter Zingel