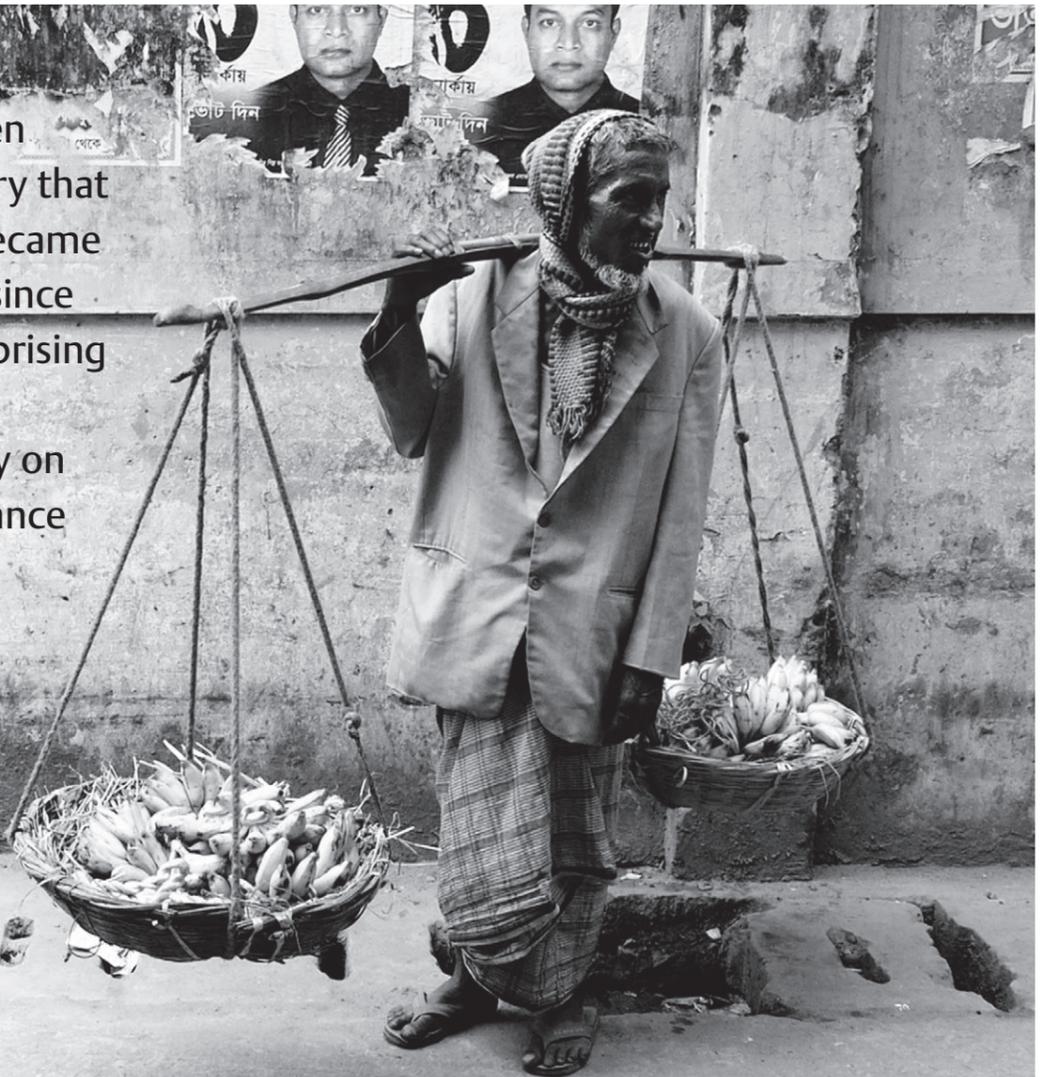


A history of Bangladesh

How to write a history of poverty stricken and overpopulated Bangladesh, a country that after the British left India in 1947 first became (East) Pakistan and officially exists only since 1971? Bob van der Linden finds it unsurprising that *A History of Bangladesh* is more of a transnational narrative, focussing heavily on Bengal – as a region of ancient long-distance trade and modern imperial capitalism – India and Pakistan.

Bob van der Linden



Schendel, Willem van. 2009.

A History of Bangladesh.

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TO MAKE THE STORY even more intriguing, Van Schendel decided to deal with long-term processes related to the might of the region's nature and geographical conditions (Part I) as well as with the 'middle range trends' of Bengal's imperial encounters with the Mughals and the British (Part II). Even so, almost two thirds of the book (Parts III-V) concern the recent 'high politics' of the famine of 1943, the Partition of British India, the Bangladesh Liberation War, the creation of the national cultures of, consecutively, 'Bengaliness' and (Muslim) 'Bangladeshiness', the tense relationship with India, military rule (1975-90), Cold War politics, and so on.

In Part I, Van Schendel expands on Richard Eaton's idea of Bengal as a region of 'multiple frontiers' (from *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Besides the natural land-water frontier (north-south), and the ancient cultural 'Sanskritic' frontier (west-east), there are also the agrarian, state, Islamic and Bengali language frontiers, which after their expansion led to tensions among human winners and losers, the latter of course often being the (non-Muslim) ethnic minorities. What I find missing in the book, however, is a specific discussion of what can be labelled the 'imperial intellectual frontier', which since the 19th century undeniably has been the most crucial 'frontier'. For was it not during the imperial encounter that existing ideas became more rationalised and new ones introduced in the context of processes of state formation and an emerging liberal public sphere? Did Bengalis not become increasingly self-conscious of their own traditions and the wider world during this period? And did their subsequent activities, though generally to their own amazement, not result in Pakistan and Bangladesh?

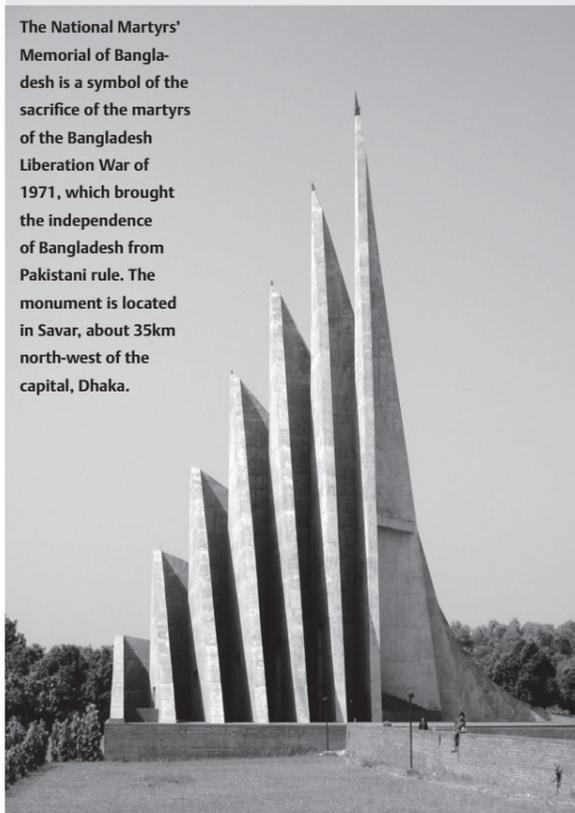
On the whole, Van Schendel does not explain how Bengalis created a liberal public sphere, in which processes of identity formation, rationalisation and intellectual interaction between metropolis and colony come together. For example, he mentions several times the continuing popularity of Rabindranath Tagore and his songs among the people in the region. On the one hand, this refers to the continuity and resilience of Bengali culture in the face of the banning of Tagore's music by the Pakistan government, as well as contemporary radical Muslim politics in Bangladesh. Yet, on the other, Tagore's songs (known as *Rabindra Sangit*) are also part of Bengal's internationalism and liberalism under colonial rule. His eclectic compositions not only made use of various classical Indian musical styles but, in accordance with the English folk song movement,

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Rabindranath Tagore

The National Martyrs' Memorial of Bangladesh is a symbol of the sacrifice of the martyrs of the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971, which brought the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistani rule. The monument is located in Savar, about 35km north-west of the capital, Dhaka.



also included a fascination with folk music, especially that of the free-spirited Baul mystics. The latter was atypical in South Asia at the time, while 'primitive' folk music was looked down upon by the Indian musical elites, who instead defined and canonised their national 'classical' north (Hindustani) and south (Karnatic) Indian music traditions. Then again, under the influence of Western musical practice, Rabindranath was the first composer in South Asia to regard his songs as inviolable entities, while in the rest of the subcontinent singers kept on going endlessly with their musical improvisations.

In the light of Rabindranath's Hindu background and internationalism, it certainly remains fascinating how Tagore's music has retained its importance for such a long time among Bengali Muslims. This all the more so because it was solely after his death in 1941 that he was canonised as Bengal's greatest creative artist and became worshipped in the region. Before that time, most Bengalis saw him as a product of Western influence. My point, however, is that *Rabindra Sangit*, and indeed also the recent reappearance of (his) Baul songs in the repertoire of youth bands in Bangladesh and Indian Bengal, has much to do with the 'internal' Orientalism, 'invention of tradition' and modernist aesthetics that make the study of South Asian intellectual history so ambiguous and appealing. It is cultural tensions and continuities like these that should have been drawn out more in a work that aims to look at the long-term processes that shaped contemporary Bangladesh (p. xxv). In this context, I believe, the use of 19th century categories such as 'religion' and 'nationalism' also should have been problematised, if only from an educational point of view.

Conversely, I am doubtful about Van Schendel's remark that history is 'keenly debated' (p. xxiv) in Bangladesh. On the contrary, I would think that after many years of military rule and censorship the situation is nearly as gloomy as in Pakistan. In any case, *A History of Bangladesh* is not concerned with these supposedly existing debates or current world historical ones, though a discussion of them undeniably would have made it a more urgent textbook. Having said all this, however, it should be clear that these criticisms are solely my response to Van Schendel's statement 'Those who are familiar with the story will find my account highly selective' (p. xxv) and, ultimately, this first widely available one-volume examination of the whole span of Bangladesh history is a welcome contribution to South Asian historiography and deserves a wide readership.

Bob van der Linden is a historian of modern South Asia and the author of *Moral Languages from Colonial Punjab: the Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyahs* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008) and *Music and Empire in Britain and India: Tradition, Internationalism and Cross-Cultural Communication* (in preparation): vanderlinden.bob@gmail.com