

'A History of Bangladesh' by Willem Van Schendel

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'*A History of Bangladesh*' written by famous author Willem van Schendel is a narrative that moves about the amazing twists and that have produced contemporary Bangladesh Society. In this book, the author tried to show, how to write a history 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. In its five parts that covers twenty two chapters, the book depicts a brief and selective history of Bangladesh.

In part I, van Schendel expands on Richard Eaton's idea of Bengal as a region of 'multiple frontiers' such as land-water frontier (north-south), the ancient cultural 'Sanskritic' frontier (west- east), the agrarian, state, Islamic and Bengali language frontiers etc. Part II describes how, over the last few centuries, these age old trends (developing its distinct identity) encountered middle-range ones, especially foreign (British) rule and its lasting effects, colonial conflicts, partition of Bengal during the foreign rule. Almost two thirds of the book (part III-V) concerns the recent 'high politics' of famine of 1943, the partition of British India, the Bangladesh liberation war, the creation of the national cultures of, consecutively, 'Bengaliness' and 'Bangladeshiness', the tense relationship with India, military role (1975-1990), cold war politics and so on.

What I find missing in part I of the book, however, is a specific discussion of what can be labeled the 'imperial intellectual frontier', which since the 19th century undeniably has been the most crucial frontier. Besides, on the whole, the author does not explain how Bengalis created a liberal public sphere, in which processes of identity formation, rationalization and intellectual interaction between metropolis and colony come together. In writing this book, Van Schendel was very much selective in depicting the chronological development of Bangladesh highly depending on secondary data. In some cases, he failed to link up cultural development of Bangladesh.

In conclusion, the author deserves the appreciation for using easily understandable language in writing the book. Readers intended to know brief and selective history of Bangladesh can go through this book.

Reviewed by Mustafa Murshed, Assistant Director, Bangladesh Civil Service Administration Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh