

Decades of Change

Jagatpur 1977-1997: Poverty and Social Change in Bangladesh by

Kamal Siddiqui;

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pp xxvii + 476, \$ 27.50.

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Jagatpur by Kamal Siddiqui joins the limited category of village studies over time. In particular, it is the meticulous account of a Bangladeshi village studied first for a PhD thesis in 1974, and then again in 1994, when Bangladesh's political turns gave the author some free time. I have argued elsewhere that this category of studies represents a useful cross-check on the volume of statistics with which we are all inundated and distrust.

The book has suffered and benefited from the fact that the author is a civil service doyen and key adviser to the present BNP prime minister. That is he is a controversial figure in a divided land. But it is worth reading. The *Jagatpur* book tries to do a number of things but I am frankly most interested in a by-product. It reviews the literature on the causes of poverty in Bangladesh, analyses how they apply to Jagatpur, and makes wide ranging recommendations how the poverty could be remedied. Siddiqui concludes that poverty is caused by a repressive culture that keeps people from modernising and using modern technology. He calls for a 'liberation theology' which will break through the cultural chains – empower women, revive education, and energise the village economy. He clearly does not think that limitations of environment and available technologies are what limit growth.

But my interest is a by-product. The book confirms, at least for one village, the common sense impression that Bangladesh including the rural areas and the poor is better off. People are certainly better dressed, living a little longer, getting around a little bit more easily in rural areas, and a little more linked by communications.

I have just finished a couple of months on an assignment involving the rural areas of north Bangladesh for the first time in eight years and can see some difference. The roads are better and air conditioned

buses ply over them (with horrendous accident figures as in India). The Jamuna River Bridge joining the two halves of the country for the first time in history has cut travel times considerably. TV has penetrated. Out in Haors, the local elites having bought mobile power sources from BRAC, at 44,000 taka a blow, have hooked up their TVs and the neighbours come to gawk. ISD and mobile phones connect the more isolated river ghats with the world. I'll confess that I didn't try them – mainly because it would have been the middle of the night in the US. NGO offices and programmes are everywhere.

Siddiqui is less impressed with this than he should be. The decline in poverty is correctly partially attributed to rising real wages for the unskilled and lowered interest rates on small loans. The former has to be partially attributable to the massive construction and food for work activities of the NGOs and others. The garment industry and labour emigration certainly contributed as well. The lowering of interest rates has to have something to do with the massive NGO microcredit programmers. In reverse, the impressive fact is that the moneylender is alive and well in Jagatpur despite a large number of microcredit NGOs.

The accomplishments are fragile – but this is beyond the scope of Siddiqui's book. The Multifibre Agreement is reaching an end, and great disaster is universally

apprehended. I suspect, that the impact will be appreciable but not devastating. Garments do account for 77 per cent of Bangladesh's exports (1999-2000) and explain some of its economic dynamism. (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Pocketbook: Bangladesh 2001*, December 2002, p 256.) Exactly what will happen is hard to predict. But buyers are not likely to act suddenly. The other big factor in Bangladesh's recent growth is the accelerating return from labour migration. Large-scale migration has been a factor for many years – but the returns to Bangladesh seem to have accelerated – homeward investment, remittances, retirements, etc. The official figures bounce around with little logic, and are probably close to worthless. The returns to emigration may all peak, but it is still going strong. Those who have read Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* will get a sense about how this labour migration works itself out. Dhaka is an environmental disaster – on top of the general environmental strain of accelerating population. Though TFR is down to 2.8 from 3.5 that still means a lot of new people.

Finally, as Siddiqui emphasises, the progress has been painfully slow and as always there have been cultural losses – as the younger generation opts for Hollywood and Bollywood or even Kollywood over Rabindra and Nazrul Sangeet – to say nothing of folk or religious culture. Still, "Absolute poverty considerably declined over the two decades although the extent of absolute poverty remaining was quite quite staggering" (p 47). **EPW**