Bangladesh 2021: A critical history initiative

A challenge to all Bangladeshis – help produce fifty great works of Bangladeshi history in five years

Launched by Brick Lane Circle
8 October 2016
Seventh Annual Bengal History Week 2016
London
Why this Initiative?

- Most reputable history of the land which constitutes Bangladesh today are written by non-Bangladeshis
- An inadequate involvement of Bangladeshis at the cutting edge of historical research and writing
- Excessive ideological and political preoccupation with history among Bangladeshis
The consequence

- Most Bangladeshis do not value history written by fellow Bangladeshis

- Politicised history prevents the learning of effective and useful lessons from the past

- Our understanding of the following remains very superficial:
  - where we came from
  - our journeys and conflicts through various times
  - our relationships with the outside world
  - how our long past has shaped our present
An example of our trade links. How much do we know and understand?
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**16th Century Bengal exports**

<table>
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<th>From Bengal</th>
<th>Export</th>
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<td>Maleka</td>
<td>'The first set were the eastward routes, dominated by the trade to the great entrepot of Melaka- supplied from Bengal with textiles, rice, sugar and conserves.'</td>
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<td>Middle India Ocean</td>
<td>'To Sri Lanka, Malabar and the Maldives. To all these areas, Bengal again exported textiles and foodstuffs, and the rice export to the Maldives was in fact one of the constant features of Bengal trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.'</td>
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<td>Trade with Burma</td>
<td>‘there come each year four or five naus of Bengalla [to Cosmin],and the goods that these naus bring are sinabafo textiles and every other cloth which is consumed in the kingdom.’</td>
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<td>Western Indian Ocean</td>
<td>'Direct links between the Bengal ports and the Red Sea and the ports of Gujarat - included textiles, sugar and Bengal long pepper. In the case of Gujarat, strong links between Bengal and the ports of Chaul, Dabhol and Cambay.'</td>
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An example of our trade links. How much do we know and understand?

People from Bengal going to Banten in the 16th Century for trade
Captain James Lancaster (East India Company) (1602)

“We set sail from the island of Sombrero on the 29th May, and got sight of Sumatra on the 2d June, coming to anchor in the road of Acheen on the 5th, about two miles from the city. We here found sixteen or eighteen sail of different countries, Guzerat, Bengal, Calicut, Malabar, Pegu, and Patane, which had come for trade.”
Participation in research and writing

- Communities inherit different levels of participatory capacity from previous generations
- Our aim should be objectivity but what do we mean by objectivity
- A highly developed critical thinking ability (based on the rules of logic and human rationality) and creative imagination are necessary ingredients for participating at the level that matters
- Need market to supply demand and resources to pay for research and writing
Ibn Khaldun on history research

“The writing of history requires numerous sources and greatly varied knowledge. It also requires a good speculative mind and thoroughness. The possession of these two qualities leads the historian to the truth and keeps him from slips and errors.

If he trusts historical information in its plain transmitted form and has no clear knowledge of the principles resulting from custom, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilization, or the conditions governing human social organization, and if, furthermore, he does not evaluate remote or ancient material through comparison with near or contemporary material, he often cannot avoid stumbling and slipping and deviating from the highroad of truth.”
Ibn Khaldun on history research

“Historians, Qur'an commentators and leading transmitters have committed frequent errors in the stories and events they reported. They accepted them in the plain transmitted form, without regard for its value. They did not check them with the principles underlying such historical situations, nor did they compare them with similar material.

Also, they did not probe (more deeply) with the yardstick of philosophy, with the help of knowledge of the nature of things, or with the help of speculation and historical insight. Therefore, they strayed from the truth and found themselves lost in the desert of baseless assumptions and errors.”
The initiative

In 2021 Bangladesh will be half a century old as an independent country. To celebrate its 50th birth anniversary Brick Lane Circle invites all interested Bangladeshis to become critical historians and help produce at least fifty great works of history by 2021.

Those who are inspired by the initiative do not have to be involved with Brick Lane Circle. They can undertake their work independently, without any reference to us.
Next steps

- A major conference in April 2017
- Workshops, conversation, networking and sharing (now – 2021)
- A history project by Brick Lane Circle involving around 25 community volunteers to write and publish a book on Bangladesh’s history in 2021