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### Dancing with the River: People and Life on the Chars of South Asia, by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta

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describes Indian textiles in Thailand over the last few centuries. As one would expect, it is a tale of mutual influences between Thai designers and Indian producers.

Pius Malekandathil now also has a long list of publications to his credit. He is the best of the younger Indian scholars using Portuguese records. His new collection consists mostly of previously published pieces, some of them lightly revised, though even so there is considerable overlap. A very diverse number of topics are covered, ranging from Akbar and the Jesuits, conversions in the pearl fisheries, the port city of Goa, trading networks in South India, trade with the eastern Mediterranean and with East Africa, coastal Konkan and the interior, an analysis of an early travel narrative by a St. Thomas Christian priest who complained of the Rome-centrism of the Indian church, and a study of Portuguese enclaves around 1800. Chapter 9 on the Bay of Bengal is a version of his chapter in the Chandra and Ray volume noted above.

There is much of value in these various chapters, and all are copiously referenced. To my mind Chapter 3 on Goa is largely obscure and over-written. What are we to make of this: 'Pride-evoking epithets and metaphorical usages...were fabricated and circulated in the process of elevating the city from the boundaries of time and space to the heights of concepts and ideas...' (p. 70)? And while paying tribute to the amount of valuable empirical data collected here, Professor Malekandathil does overestimate the role of the Portuguese. He claims that they 'controlled' trade between India and the Swahili coast (p. 127), thus ignoring much greater trade from Gujarati ports. His figures on the trade of Portuguese Diu and Daman and Goa fail to note that Surat's trade at the same time was several times larger. Nor can we accept that Portuguese made up the majority of the populations in British Bombay, Madras and Calcutta (p. 219).

Overall, it must be said that in both these collections the parts are better than the whole. It is not always clear what is the theme or themes which give some overall unity and structure. Indeed the titles of both books are vague and unfocused. However this is not to deny that there are individual chapters of interest; it is the overall coherence which at times is unclear.

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Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta, *Dancing with the River: People and Life on the Chars of South Asia* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013), ISBN 978-0-300-18830-1, xx + 272 pp., £40.00, hdbk.

This book explores a phenomenon in Bengal which is intriguing for various disciplines. The Bengal region is known for its wide river systems that heavily influence the life of its population. *Dancing with the River* focuses on one aspect of this nexus between nature and culture by taking the example of the Damodar river and the people inhabiting its *char* land.

'*Char*' (*car*) is the Bengali term for an island which emerges due to the deposition of alluvium transported by rivers. In the densely-populated region of Bengal these islands, which can disappear as quickly or slowly as they have emerged, have attracted settlers who have developed strategies to cope with this rough and uncertain environment. While such strategies have been widely explored for *chars* in Bangladesh, the book by Kuntala Lahiri-Dutt and Gopa Samanta offers insights into the less studied lives of *char* dwellers in the Indian state of West Bengal and hence fills a gap in this field.

The protagonists of the first section are the Damodar and its hybrid environment for which Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta vehemently reject a categorisation along the conventional lines of land and water. The authors illustrate how the growing importance of land ownership and transformation of the agricultural sector under British rule changed the perception of rivers and reinforced the land–water dichotomy. Besides changing agricultural methods, which earlier were often in harmony with this hybrid environment, rivers were reconceptualised as disruptive elements which needed to be tamed in order to serve the land-based economy. Since then, river control measures like embankments have contributed to making the behaviour of rivers unpredictable, putting the livelihoods of people living close to them at risk. However, the *chars* of the Damodar seem to be an exception to this tendency of a deteriorating river–people relationship. Control measures have added new livelihood options due to the growing formation and stabilisation of its *chars*, which have attracted ever more people since India’s independence in 1947.

The second half of the book describes the lives of these people on *chars* close to the city of Burdwan and in the region between the administrative units of the Bankura and Burdwan districts. Because *chars* are often in-between places—between land and water and above all between administrative jurisdictions—they attract people in transition. Thus in many cases the Damodar *chars* function as portals for migration. From the 1,312 households that took part in Lahiri-Dutt and Samanta’s survey, 701 originated from Bangladesh. Most other families came from other parts of India, and only a minority from the neighbouring areas. The history of settlement on the Damodar *chars* and the detailed portrayal of people’s socio-economic struggle today in these unique microcosms make *Dancing with the River* an intriguing read.

Unfortunately, herein lies also the weakness of this study. Apart from careless usage of terminology, e.g. the application of the term ‘caste’ in contestable contexts, or the categorisation of Bangladeshis as an ‘ethnic communit[y]’ (p.98), the simplifications of socio-cultural and political background information are disappointing. Bangladesh, for instance, is portrayed as a stronghold of political Islam and Hindu oppression, thus compelling its Hindu population to migrate to India. Although this image is indeed partly true, and is true for some of the Damodar *char* settlers, it does not explain the continuous influx of Muslim Bangladeshis into India. That the representation of the neighbouring country is problematic becomes obvious when the attempt to declare Bangladesh an Islamic republic in 1975 is emphasised without informing the reader that it is also today the People’s Republic of Bangladesh. Furthermore, the frequent use of Bengali terms hampers the reading flow significantly. This is unfortunate and unnecessary in many cases where there are well-established and suitable English translations, as for instance in the cases of “*bandh*” (*bādh* ‘dam’), “*morol*” (*morāl* ‘village headman’) and “*patta*” (*pāṭṭā* ‘legal document’).

Despite these few caveats, the book is a welcome addition to interdisciplinary studies dealing with agricultural practices, economy predicaments, environmental, geographical and geological formations, and migration at the intersection between land and water.

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