

A Rejoinder to M Asaduzzaman's Review of *The Bengal Delta. Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

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A historian treading the territory of economists must be prepared for rigorous inspection and tough questioning. To my surprise, in his review of my book, *The Bengal Delta*, Dr M Asaduzzaman neither critically inspects nor meaningfully questions the book's premises and findings, but shot at it from a considerable distance with some fragile arrows. It comes as a surprise not merely because of the review on the basis of three out of the nine chapters, also because it seems to have missed the broader angle of the arguments of the book.

These problems of the review flow directly from the reviewer's limited take on the book. The focus on the first three chapters makes him believe that I have taken ecology to have been "static" over the century covered in the book, although the book is about how ecology and society interacted as they got changed during the period. The book's broader objective is to understand the shifts, over the last colonial century, from relative economic and social vibrancy (chapters two, three and four) to the acute lack of wellbeing, including poverty, famine, diseases and social unrest (chapters five, six, seven and eight). I have adopted an ecological and political-ecological perspective to examine the shifts. Thus, ecological changes and corresponding economic and social shifts and vice versa are too dominating a feature of the book to be missed by even a casual reader.

Since I have failed to attract the attention of the reviewer to these broader ecological and corresponding social and economic shifts, I do not feel compelled to respond to his criticism of what I understand by ecology. But to his suggestion that I have taken ecology and environment interchangeably, I must contend that this is an incomplete observation, as evidenced from the preface to the book, where I mention that "Ecology" and "environment" are used interchangeably [in

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the book], although environmentalists see subtle difference in the scope and meaning of the two terms.” Needless to say that the nature and scope of the book did not allow me to enter the much debated issue of the differences and similarities between ecology and environment.

Yet, Dr Asaduzzaman’s understanding of ecology rings the right bell. To him, “agro-ecology includes the intricate intermingling of the water system (here from rivers, but what about rainfall?), the soil characteristics again partly defined by the river system but not all (as part is determined geologically as in the *khior* areas of *Barind* tract), the natural vegetation, partly forests, but also others as well as the cropping patterns practised and of course all kinds of animal, insects and microscopic life that interact with them.” While I feel these are the subjects an ecologist mostly deal with, I am equally surprised that Dr Asaduzzaman has not been able to appreciate that I have met the criteria of ecology set out by himself, at least as much as a historical work and the thematic context of the book in question can accommodate. Not only aspects of agro-ecology, including natural vegetations, insects and pests, but also spatial and temporal variations of rainfall and soil characteristics, among many other similar issues, are directly dealt with in the book.

The Bengal Delta is not merely about ecology itself—an aspect the reviewer does not take cognizance of. Recent interdisciplinary debates continue to focus on the dynamics of ecology not merely in the context of agro-ecology, but also in politics, social behaviour, ecological justice and so on. I have tried to contribute to these nuanced areas of ecological studies too. For instance, why did land alienation mostly take place in the most fertile areas of eastern Bengal in the late colonial period? Why did the British take favourable attitude towards actual cultivators in the nineteenth century and abandoned them in the 20th century in favour of non-cultivating middle class? Why did indigo cultivation was absent in the most part of eastern Bengal? How can we examine the great Bengal famine of 1943 from a long-term ecological perspective?

I find it amusing that at the one hand Dr Asaduzzaman terms my arguments as “chimera”, “disservice” and so on, and on the other, he advises his colleagues at the BIDS to go through the extensive bibliography for their research in order to coming to their “own decisions”, which practically means that *The Bengal Delta* itself is not worth reading. A historian must expect a little more respect than this from an economist.