BOOK REVIEWS

Abdul Karim, DACCA : THE MUGHAL CAPITAL, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca, 1964, pp. 514, price Rs. 20 or 40 Shillings or $7.50.

Dacca is among those old cities of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, which have attracted the attention of quite a large number of scholars. Besides the publication of several volumes of East India Company's Dacca Factory Records and the usual district gazetteer and statistical accounts, we are acquainted with at least a dozen of works in Bengali, English and Urdu which deal with the different aspects of the history and antiquities of Dacca. Dr. Karim's present study, which is a compendium of revenue documents with an interpretative commentary, is a very welcome addition to this literature. It deals with the revenue administration of Bengal, the pattern of the growth of trade and industry in old Dacca, and the economic life of its citizens under the later Mughals in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Dr. Karim has already made substantial contribution to the larger scheme of writing the social history of the Muslims of Bengal, which subject seems to have captivated the attention of many young scholars of East Pakistan in recent times. His Social History of the Muslims of Bengal (1959) and Murshid Quli Khan and His Times (1963) gained him Ph.D. degrees from Dacca and London, respectively. A third work, Corpus of the Muslim Coins of Bengal (1960), was rated highly and fetched him the Akbar Silver Medal from Delhi. His work in Bengali on the famous muslin industry of Dacca is being published by the Bengali Academy of Dacca. In this fifth work, the author's main interest has been to make available to other scholars a number of rare and invaluable revenue documents, which were recovered by him from the India Office Library (now Commonwealth Relations Office), London.

The book under review has been divided into an interpretative commentary in the earlier portion consisting of six chapters (pp. 1—108), and a collection of documents in the later portion arranged in 13 appendices (pp. 109-497). In the first chapter of the interpretative part the author deals with the nomenclature of Dacca and in its second chapter he discusses the chronology of the Nawabs and Nā’īb Nāzims of Dacca under the Mughals. Then he passes on to the main topics of the book, namely “growth of the city” (ch. iii), “Dacca as administrative headquarters” (ch. iv), “Dacca as a centre of trade and industry” (ch. v), and finally, “the economic life of the people” (ch. vi). Obviously, being conscious of the existence of so many works in this field, our author has drastically curtailed the scope of his discussion and confined himself only to those topics which were either cursorily dealt with by his predecessors or were not at all touched by them. But within this limited scope, his penetrating analysis has cleared up many obscurities, established new facts and provided us with a related and authentic story of the origin, growth and decay of this Eastern Capital during the period under review.
An almost obscure place in the pre-Mughal times, Dacca was made the capital of the eastern Mughal provinces by Sūbadār Khān Chishti about the year 1610 and was renamed after the reigning monarch Jahāngīrnagar. Well-connected with the network of riverways and easy to defend from external attack, Dacca rose to prominence almost in no time; and henceforth for about one century, both as the seat of provincial administration and as a flourishing centre of trade and industry, she played a pivotal role in the political and economic life of Bengal. On the transfer of the capital to Patna in 1703 and then to Murshidabad in the second decade of the 18th century, the status of Dacca was reduced to that of the seat of a Deputy Sūbadār or Nā'īb Nāzīm. Even so, she remained in control of the administration of a greater part of Eastern Bengal and her loss in this respect was amply compensated by the expansion of the European commercial enterprises. As a result, in spite of this great political setback Dacca continued to prosper economically down to the Battle of Plassey in 1757. After the British occupation it suffered heavily and with the abolition of the office of the Nā'īb Nāzīm in 1843 it lost all its political importance and economic prosperity.

This long and chequered history of Dacca, her steady growth as an important politico-economic entity, her booming but short-lived prosperity and her lingering decay,—all this has been brought into clear perspective by Dr. Karim through a painstaking analysis of a mass of documents presented in the appendices. Chapters iii-vi are especially instructive in which the author has broken new ground and has shown that although for her steady growth Dacca owed much to her political importance, the main planks of her prosperity rested on her foreign trade and indigenous industry, in both of which she vied with some of the most prosperous contemporary cities of the East. In particular, her superior textile products, such as muslin and jāmdānī had become indispensable items of adornment for the fashionable world of those days. The result was an enormous inflow of gold and silver, which filled the coffers of the commercial concerns.

Dr. Karim’s analysis of the living standards of different professional groups reveals interesting facts. On the basis of the documentary evidence that he has amply provided, he has shown that the immigrants from European countries and from Marwar (in Rajputana) and some other places in Northern India, who established firms and factories at Dacca, played a significant role in raising the status of the city to that of a premier centre of trade and industry in that part of the world. They were mainly responsible for the capital investment even in the industries run by the indigenous people, and along with the government officials they also took a lion’s share in the benefit that accrued from it. They lived a highly luxurious life. Their agents and brokers, too, were quite well off. But the fate of the primary producers, of artisans like the weavers, of clerks and scribes, and of other ordinary wage-earners was deplorable. They received an average income of Rs. 2/- to Rs. 4/- per month. Even the weaver of the celebrated muslin normally received not more than Rs. 25/- for a piece of cloth on which he had to spend his skill and labour for six months.

As the main beneficiaries of the booming prosperity of Dacca had little permanent interest in the indigenous soil, they usually remitted a large part of their income to their homes outside the native land. This unusual pattern of profit-sharing seems to have kept the primary producers almost on the verge of
starvation. The same pattern allied with the system of monopolies practised in various sectors of commerce and industry considerably stifled the prospect of the growth of indigenous capital or of trade guilds, which might have freed the local workers from the tight grip of foreign capital and might have given them bargaining capacity.

These are some of the important facts of the economic history of Dacca to which Dr. Karim has drawn our attention, for which he deserves our gratitude. Dr. Karim has a facile pen. He has presented the interpretative portion of the book in lucid language, which will be found both entertaining and instructive by the specialist and the layman alike. The documentary part of the book offers exhaustive data on revenue receipts and expenditures, rates of custom duties collected by the shahbandar of Dacca, the volume of trade in the different commodities, market rates at various districts of Bengal, and inventories of important properties. All this can be fruitfully utilized by the specialists who are interested in the history and economics of Bengal.

KARACHI.

M. A. KHAN


This beautifully bound volume containing a Preface by Sir Hamilton Gibb has been carefully written by Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who is at present a visiting Professor of Islamic Studies at the American University of Beirut. It is a revised and elaborated version of a thesis that was presented by him to the Department of the History of Science and Learning at Harvard University in 1958. It seeks to explain some of the cosmological principles of the Muslims and, in the words of the author, "brings into focus the contours of the cosmos in which the Muslims lived and thought." It stands remarkable in its theme in so far as it tries to present to the reader the general world view of the Muslims themselves. Up till now scholars have been studying the cosmological and natural sciences of the Islamic world mainly to supply the historical link between these sciences as cultivated by the Muslims and as these were later developed in the modern age. Little attention has so far been paid by the scholars to the study of the original contributions made by the Muslim scholars in the field. Professor Nasr has made a successful attempt to fill up this gap.

Professor Nasr has tried to trace a single line in "the complex process by which the Muslim Community gradually discovered its own true nature and habitat." For this purpose he has selected the leading figures of the 4th/11th and 5th/12th centuries, which constituted the golden age of Muslim philosophy. He has been judicious in his selection, for, the Ikhwan al-Šafā, al-Birūnī and Ibn Sinā undoubtedly represent "the various conceptual perspectives in Islam." He has divided his study into three parts with a Prologue after the Introduction and a Conclusion at the end.

Part I deals with the Rasā'il of the Ikhwan al-Šafā and the author deserves our congratulation for his successful attempt in recapitulating the cosmological views of the Ikhwan beginning with the principles governing Nature, then the hierarchy
in the Universe, followed by a study of various parts of the Universe starting with the heavens and then descending to the sublunary world. Then making a study of meteorology, geography, mineralogy, botany and zoology of the Ikhwan; he has completed his exposition with their study of man as the terminal link in the chain of terrestrial beings as well as the microcosm in whom multiplicity returns once again to unity.

It is generally held that the Ikhwan were the Shi'is of the Isma'ili sect. Our author, too, seems to be inclined to the same view. The present reviewer, however, finds it difficult to reconcile it with the fact that they were against the Isma'ili doctrine of satr (Rasa'il, Bombay edition, III: 86 and IV: 58), were not on good terms with the Batinis (15: 58 and 759), and mention the names of the first three Caliphs with great respect (IV: 179-80 and 219). Again, unlike the Isma'ili sect of history, who were ready to go to any length to bring about the revolution according to their own ideas, the Ikhwan are not known to have preached a violent political revolution. While enumerating the names of the Ikhwan a minor error seems to have crept in. In place of 'Zaid ibn Rifai' (pp. 25 and 26) it should read 'Zaid ibn Rifaih'C.

In Part II the author deals with the life, works and significance of al-Biruni. As the philosophical works of al-Biruni have not so far seen the light of the day, the author has taken great trouble in analyzing Al-Biruni's conception of Nature on the basis of his many studies of the manifestations of Nature which are dispersed in his extant works.

Opposing Aristotelian philosophy, Al-Biruni made an extensive study of Muhammad ibn Zakariyya al-Razi and perhaps of other writers who had been imbued with Hermetic ideas. For him the role of reason lay in leading naturally to the Transcendent Cause of all things. Thus he occupies a very prominent place among those pioneers of Islamic civilization who "devoted themselves to the study of the intellectual sciences and who synthesized the achievements of pre-Islamic cultures and developed them in the spirit of Islam." The author's exposition of al-Biruni's manifestations of Nature illustrates the thesis that belief in Islam enables a scientist to appreciate the wonders of the Creator and that science does not oppose the teachings of Islam. The author has admirably analyzed the cosmological doctrines of this great philosopher, whom he pays his homage in a befitting manner when he says: "As a scholar and compiler his studies touch upon nearly every field of medieval learning, all of which he approaches as a Muslim. He fights vehemently against anything he believes to be against Islam, as, for example, the eternity of the world, while on the other hand he defends the virtues of acquiring knowledge in all domains as the duty of the Muslim. For example, with respect to the physical sciences he criticizes those who cover up their ignorance by appealing to God's wisdom and who make no effort to learn about the beauty of Nature through its study. As he says, 'Many people attribute to God's wisdom all they do not know of physical science' " (p. 173).

In Part III, the author deals with "the Life and Works of Ibn Sina and his significance". Ibn Sina overshadowed all the thinkers of his time as well as of the subsequent periods in Islamdom. Even Europe could not escape his influence in various branches of science and medicine. His Shifa' remains
until today as one of the most important texts, on *hikmah*, or the traditional theosophy of the Muslims. His published works bear testimony to the fact that he tries to dispel any point of discrepancy between Islam and Philosophy and successfully gives an exposition of some fundamental doctrines of Islam in the expressions of the philosophy of the Peripatetic School. This is strange, however, to conceive that Ibn Sinā aimed in his sojourn from the Universe to the highest realm of Being to reach that august realm without the help of the Prophet, since according to him “the science of the elite (*'Ilm al-Khawāṣī*) depends upon the symbolic interpretation (*ta’wil*) of the Sacred Scriptures whose tradition goes back to the Prophet” (p. 268). In fact, Ibn Sinā’s “esoteric” works demand a deep critical study in order to explain “how Ibn Sinā’s doctrines served as one of the main components and the immediate background of the synthesis achieved by Suhrawardi two centuries later.”

The conclusion arrived at by the author can be restated precisely in the meaning of the Qur’ānic verse, “Verily we all belong to Allah and verily we shall return to Him”. For, “to have a knowledge of things is to know from where they originate and therefore where they ultimately return. Muslim authors who have been generally imbued with the central Muslim doctrine of Unity have been fully aware of this basic institution of the ultimate return of all things to their Origin and the integration of multiplicity into Unity.”

An Appendix on “the Symbols of the Planets and the Divisions of the Zodiac” and a very useful bibliography besides the Index have been added towards the end of the book.

This excellent study is strongly recommended to all students of Muslim learning and philosophy. The get-up of the work is as admirable as the theme of the work itself which has been made available at a very reasonable price.

KARACHI.

M. S. H. MAŠÜML