BOOK REVIEW


For long, the historians of this subcontinent focussed their attention on the Gangetic valley, the seat of the empires, the "Hindustan proper." Then in the second quarter of this century, the South Indian historians asserted the existence—and a glorious one at that—of the great Indian peninsula on the historical scene of this subcontinent. Now with the emergence of Pakistan the forlorn and historically forgotten regions of the two wings also came into their own and some good work is being done to discover the history of the eastern province of Pakistan and of Sind region in the west. It is hoped that the pace of the work will be accelerated and its academic standard raised, and that the Pathans,—Sir Olaf Caroe has done excellent pioneering work for them—the Panjabis,—some good work has already been done on two cities : Lahore and Multan—and the Baluch will soon catch up with their East Pakistani and Sindhi brethren. Only when all these regional histories are compiled, synthesized and assimilated, the work of writing a history of Pakistan can be taken up in earnestness.

It is a happy sign that the East Pakistani historians are laying greater emphasis on the cultural and socio-political aspect of history. Thus after Dr. Enamul Haq's oft-quoted monographs (in Bengali) on Sufism in Bengal and the Muslim contribution to Bengali literature, Dr. Abdul Karim's Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (1959), Murshid Quli Khan and His Times (1963), and Dacca: the Mughal Capital (1961), Professor A. H. Dani's History of Muslim Architecture in Bengal (1960), Dr. Abdur Rahim's Social and Cultural History of Bengal (Vol. I of which was published in 1963), and Dr. M. A. Khan's History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal (1965), we now have the book under review. Sometimes the Hindustan-centred historians advance the excuse of paucity of material for writing the history of the far-flung regions of the subcontinent. The present work adequately disproves this contention. Dr. Tarafdar's socio-political study of only forty-four years of Bengal's history is spread over four hundred closely-printed pages.

Dr. Tarafdar has cast his net very wide, indeed, to collect the data for his study. He has thoroughly read not only all the Persian chronicles of the period but has also delved deep into the contemporary historical, religious, legendary and literary writings in Assamese, Bengali and Sanskrit. He is also aware of "the importance of the foreign travellers' accounts," which in his words, "cannot be overestimated" (p. 374). And in this respect the period under his study is one of the most fortunate in the whole history of this subcontinent, for it was the time when from the west the energetic and enterprising Portuguese burst upon the eastern seas like a cyclone, while from the east the Chinese having reached the zenith of their maritime activity in the first half of the fifteenth century, had started showing signs of rapid decline. Unlike many other maritime nations, both
the Portuguese and the Chinese navigators were quite keen on keeping records of their naval exploits. Hājī Cheng Ho, the greatest Chinese navigator of all times, visited Bengal some eighty years before the establishment of the dynasty under study. He had with him his official chronicler, Ma Huan, a keen observer, who was a Muslim like the great Admiral himself. Ludovico di Varthema, Duarte Barbosa, Tomé Pires and João de Barros—all of them contemporaries of the Husain Shāhīs—have left for us authentic accounts of the economic and socio-political life in Bengal of those times. The learned John Huyghen van Linschoten who came to the east about half a century after the fall of the Husain Shāhī dynasty has also left some interesting accounts of the coasts of the Bay of Bengal, which can be helpful in reconstructing the socio-political history of the Husain Shāhīs. But Dr. Tarafdar has been too much fascinated by the poetic, mythical and mystical writings of the period under his study to pay due attention to this very rich source material. For Ma Huan's accounts he has relied on George Philip's outdated translation and does not seem to be aware of the excellent work done on it by J. J. L. Duyvendak (Ma Huan Reexamined, Amsterdam, 1933). The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires (tr. & ed. A. Z. Cortesão, Hakluyt, 1944) has been rightly estimated as "surely the most important and complete account of the East produced in the first half of the 16th century" (Cortesão, xiii). It is a veritable mine of information on the economic (and political) contacts of Husain Shāhī Bengal with its maritime neighbours, but it is out of the reach of our author. The Voyage of John Huyghen van Linschoten (tr. & ed. Burnell and Tiele, Hakluyt, 1885) also seems inaccessible to him. He has used The Book of Duarte Barbosa (tr. & ed. M. L. Dames, Hakluyt, 1918) but only superficially. He claims that Barbosa "came to Bengal in the early sixteenth century" (p. 374). But Duarte Barbosa never came to Bengal, though he did collect quite accurate and first-hand information from the Portuguese merchants and sailors, who visited this part of the east. The slipshod manner in which the foreign travellers' accounts are utilized by him, is the weakest point of the book under review, which is otherwise an admirable piece of research work. The tragedy is that the mystic in Dr. Tarafdar has overpowered the historian in him, which has put his work historically out of the focus of reality.

The results are sometimes grotesque and bizarre. For instance, he is quite hard on Shaykh 'Abd al-Ḥaqq, the muḥaddith of Delhi because, according to him, his "tirades" and the "reactionary ideas" of his school of thought "infiltrated into Bengal." (p. 15, n. 1). He seems to be enamoured of the "mysticism" of the Tantric and akin varieties, for he claims:

The response to their [i.e. of the early Muslims of Bengal] mental craving came in all probability from the old and inexhaustible stock of indigenous culture on which the Tantric Yogi and Buddhist Sahajīya or the Natha-panthi had been drawing for centuries. (p. 15)

He himself describes the sexually depraved practices and beliefs of all the above-mentioned "mystical" cults of Bengal (pp. 19, 179, n. 6. 183 and 186-88), yet in the name of "religious syncretism" and "liberal thinking" these "indigenous" (?) cults are approved and the learned author concludes:

The orthodox Sunni Islam does not seem to have given recognition to the local ideas; but its mystic aspect represented by liberal Śūfī-irm did not
hesitate to reconcile itself to the local hieratic forces. (p. 237)

But these mystic, Tantric propensities of the learned author have their bright side as well. It is because of these tendencies that Dr. Tarafdar is at his best in his sympathetic and sensitive depiction of the Hindu and "the popular Muslim" religious life (Chap. V), and of the "Sufi" and the different Tantric and Vaishnava esoteric cults (Chap. VI); and in his critical appraisal of the literature which depicted those cults and the culture that emerged through them (Chap. VII). The following chapter on 'Fine Arts and Architecture' is also a masterly and sensitive piece of research work. But in depicting other branches of the socio-political life in Husain Shahi Bengal the learned author has met with failure in varying degrees. Strangely enough, "orthodox Islam" does not seem to be his forte. He discusses this aspect of the religious life of his area of study in just a short paragraph of thirteen lines, which opens with the following statement:

Islam, in its simple and austere aspect, does not appear to have characterized the life of the people, although literary and epigraphic sources indicate that offering prayers regularly, keeping the Ramadhan fast tenaciously, reading the Qur'an together with other religious scriptures, paying the poor-rate and going on pilgrimage to Mecca, were quite common practices. (p. 163)

One fails to understand that after "regular" and "tenacious" observance of the five pillars of Islam and reading the Qur'an and "other religious scriptures", (perhaps, he means simply religious books), what the learned author demands of a Muslim is that his religious life may be characterized as that of "Islam in its simple and austere aspect."

His complete and uncritical reliance on the contemporary poetic, mythological and mystic literature has left its deep imprint on his delineation of the economic condition of the Husain Shahi Bengal (Chap. IV). "Foreign travellers give us a rosy picture of the life of medieval Bengal", he says (p. 160), but he would not accept it because "pictures of poverty obtain in Bengali literature of the time" (p 162). Giving his readers two brief glimpses from his favourite poetic literature he rushes to conclude:

These glimpses of the condition of common people indicate a position of sharp contrast between the upper and the lower grades of the population. (p. 162)

This hasty judgement of the learned author is based on his neglect of the contemporary travellers' accounts to which we referred previously. The primary source of the wide-spread prosperity of medieval Bengal was its mastery over navigation and maritime trade in the eastern seas and the overseas colonization of its surplus population. They shared their trade and navigation with the Gujaratis, Arabs and Persians in the west and with the Malay-Indonesians and the Chinese in the east. But our author has completely missed it and maintains that:

The seaborne trade of Bengal had completely gone out of the reach of the local traders and it was being thoroughly controlled by the Arab and Persian merchants who were enjoying almost a complete monopoly in the navigation of the Eastern seas. (p. 146)

This is contrary to the evidence of all the foreign travellers from Ma Huan in the
fifteenth to van Linschoten in the late sixteenth century. The most detailed and authentic account of the maritime exploits of his contemporary Bengal are given by the Portuguese historian, Tomé Pires who visited that part of the world at the peak of Husain Shâh’s reign. According to his accounts, the Bengalis were “great merchants with large fortunes and very independent, brought up to trade” (I: 88) “They sailed four or five ships and junks to Malacca and to Pase every year” (I: 92). In Pase [Pasai] the most important seaport of Northern Sumatra of those times there were “many merchants from different Moorish and Kling nations, who do a great deal of trade, among whom the most important are the Bengalees” (I: 142). Further on he says: “The people of Pase are for the most part Bengalees, and the natives descend from this stock” (ibid.) (Italics mine). According to his evidence, which is supported by the local chronicles as discovered by this reviewer, the contemporary ruling dynasty of Sumatra descended from a “Moorish King of the Bengali caste” (I: 143). The Bengalis were also settled in Malacca, the most important sea-port in Southeast Asia of medieval times, in large numbers and were employed there as workmen, fishers and tailors (I: 93). From Tomé Pires’ evidence it appears that their “sharp-wittedness” aroused the jealousy of the local people of Malacca (ibid.) It appears that Tomé Pires himself was greatly impressed by the sharp wits of the Bengalis; he says, “Most of the Bengalis are sleek, handsome, black men, more sharp-witted than the men of any other known race.” (I: 88)

Our author is completely unaware of the enterprising colonization and energetic maritime activities of the Bengalis of medieval, especially Husain Shâhi, times, because he has missed Tomé Pires’ Suma Oriental completely. What is even more surprising is that he ignored the economic significance of the sea-travels and trials of Chând Saudagar, the Sindbad of Bengali folklore. He is only interested in his worship of Manasâ and/or of Shiva (pp. 242-45).

The mystic introversion has coloured the author’s view of Bengal’s history in another way as well. It has turned him into an inveterate isolationist. To him all outside influences are obnoxious. He has the strange belief that culture thrives in isolation—the caveman must, then, be the acme of culture. He does not seem to realize that his favourite Tantricism and similar esoteric cults, too, did not draw “on the old and inexhaustible stock of indigenous culture” of Bengal in isolation, but were originated outside Bengal, in the Tibeto-Mongolian clime, had spread in greater part of this subcontinent and throughout the Malay-Indonesian archipelago before the advent of Islam and had one of their centres in Kashmir which rivalled, if not excelled, the one in Bengal. The dominating theme of his thesis is

Bengal’s isolation from North India and Central Asia led to her cultural isolation which seems to have accelerated the process of the growth of local culture. (p. 11)

The contribution of Husain Shâhi dynasty, according to him, was its “deliberate policy of detaching Bengal from North Indian imperialism.” (p. 348) and

Now that her isolation from North India had reached its culminating point, Bengal could discover her cultural identity and find herself on her own. (ibid.).

But there is a grain of truth in what he says about “North Indian imperial-
ism." He has, in fact, identified the hegemony of the Gangetic valley with "North Indian (and Central Asian) imperialism". The history of this subcontinent after the advent of the "Central Asian" Aryans into the fertile valley of "the Mother" Ganges—and the history of this part of the world starts from that point—is one long drama of the struggle of the "Heartland" of this subcontinent,—which subsequently extended itself vertically ("Himāchala setu paryantam") across the Vindhya and included in itself another vast, fertile valley, that of the Kāverī,—and its "marginal lands," beyond the Bhāgirathī in the east and beyond the Saraswati in the west. The success of the "Heartland" gave birth to the Mauryan, Gupta, Turki, Mughal and British empires, while the triumph of the "vratya (discarded)" "marginal lands" inhabited by the "demonic", "barbaric" and "outlandish" people: the Aigras, Paisāchas, Kirātas, Pundras, Yavanas and Mlecchas, found its manifestation in:

(i) the flourishing of Buddhism and Islam in the two wings, despite the fact that the political and, for this reason, also the cultural and spiritual centres of both the egalitarian and revolutionary religions were in the core of the "Heartland";

(ii) the establishment of local autonomous kingdoms whenever the hold of the "Heartland" was weakened; and

(iii) finally, the emergence of Pakistan, when for the first time the two "marginal lands" joined hands against the hegemony of the "Heartland".

So, Husain Shāhī Bengal's culture flourished because it liberated itself from this hegemony of the "Heartland". But it did so not to go into its isolationist shell like a Yogi, as Dr. Tarafdar wants us believe, but to go out to the seas like Chānd Saudāgar, as we mentioned above, and to extend its hands of cooperation across the Indian peninsula to the maritime, independent and prosperous state of Gujarāt in the west. The happy results of this cooperation with the west showed themselves in the evolution of the administrative machinery, and the development of the manly calligraphy and architecture of the two wings, as pointed out by Dr. Tarafdar himself (pp. 121-22, 290 and 306-308). The moral of the history of Bengal from the days of the Pālas to those of the British is that whenever it looked towards the sea as a bridge which it is for the brave and the bold, and not as a barrier, which it is for the timid and the introvert,—it prospered.

Dr. Tarafdar's description of the geographical background and the influence it had on the history of Bengal (pp. 5-10) is painstaking and penetrative, despite his usual preoccupation with "the isolation of Bengal from North Indian imperialism." But the lack of a good physical map of the region is keenly felt. João de Barros' and Rennell's maps, which are reproduced here, have an historical and antiquarian value of their own, but they do not contribute towards the understanding of the topography of the region.

The opening sentence of Dr. Tarafdar's Preface proclaims:

The aim of the present work is to give a comprehensive account of socio-political life in Bengal under the Husain Shāhī rule (1494-1538 A.D.) which has a significant place in the history of the country.

The author has only partially succeeded in his aim because of his "mystic", isolationist reading of history. But the reviewer would be failing in his duty
if he does not compliment and congratulate him on the tremendous amount of loving labour that he spent on reconstructing for us a picture of the socio-political life in Bengal during 1494-1538. Even in presenting his isolationist theory of culture he has done a service to his readers, for it would help them in understanding the point of view and the way of thinking of a section of the intelligentsia of East Pakistan. The book is mainly based on a dissertation approved for the degree of Ph.D. by the University of Dacca, the premier seat of learning in the eastern province of Pakistan.

The editing, printing, paper, get-up and binding of the book are according to the excellent traditions set up by the Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca. It has half a dozen good pictures besides the two maps which we mentioned earlier.

RAWALPINDI

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