

Book Review

Society and Urbanization in Medieval Bengal, by Muhammad Akhtaruzzaman, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2009, pp. xiii + 429 with a sketch-map of Bengal (Eastern India), Tk. 500.00

The monograph *Society and Urbanization in Medieval Bengal* has grown out of a doctoral dissertation titled "Social Life and Urban Centres in Eastern India in the 13th and 14th Centuries" which earned the author the PhD degree in 1997 from the Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, India. An in-depth look at the themes presented in the core chapters of the book will but imbibe one to submit that it is an excellent piece of research. It is divided into eight chapters including the Introduction and Conclusion. The first three chapters are titled 'Introduction' (chapter 1), 'Historical Geography of Medieval Bengal' (chapter 2) and 'Formation and Nature of the Sultanat Polity' (chapter 3). Together they can be treated as foundation upon which the four main chapters (excluding the Conclusion) stand. Dr Muhammad Akhtaruzzaman is a promising scholar who has approached the subject in a serious way and has substantiated his views with historical convincing evidences and arguments.

Bengal equated with Eastern India in medieval times formed the nucleus of hierarchial, socio-cultural and politico-economic advancements in the territorial expanse of the Muslim rule in the sub-continent. It gets its corroboration from the epigraphic source where its synonymous Arabic word *mulk ush sharq* was applied to the Lakhnawati kingdom (i.e. Bengal) in the

early phase of Muslim rule in this area. Even the governorship of Bengal was considered to be a lucrative assignment by the sultans of Delhi until the establishment of Independent Sultanate by Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah (1338-1359) after the conquest of three well-defined administrative units of Lakhnawati, Satgaon and Sonargaon in around 1352. The sultans of Delhi always had a covetous eye to the occupation of the territorial jurisdiction of Bengal since it emerged as an independent Sultanate. Bihar was also under the jurisdiction of Lakhnawati kingdom as is clear from epigraphical records. It is therefore possible to assert that Bengal as an eastern region of Delhi Sultanate acquired its importance over other principalities of the sub-continent after the inception of Muslim rule in the beginning of the 13th century, and ultimately the term Eastern India is predominantly applied to Bengal with outlying areas of Bihar. Hence the title of this monograph is justified and the author's opinion that "a modest attempt has been made here to analyse the various aspects of social life in the light of changing circumstances observed in the process of urbanization and its other relevant concomitants." is appropriate.

In the first chapter (Introduction), the author has competently justified the need for the study of the subject in a new dimension referring to the use of his diverse source-materials like archaeological, literary in the form of chronicles, *malfuzat*, *maktubat* and *tazkirah* and also the accounts of the foreign travellers. Moreover, he has scanned all the available modern works on the topic and the related fields, thus pointing out the shortcomings and flaws contained therein. The second chapter (Historical Geography of Medieval Bengal) deals with historical geography touching on the *Janapada* names prevalent previously and during the time under consideration, merging in the country name of Bengal. Of the geo-physical aspects, the changing character of the rivers and water-courses along with the topographical divisions and their habitats has received critical consideration. Moreover, it has also been highlighted that the geo-physical aspects of Bengal and in some points Bihar

had played a pivotal role in moulding the behaviour and life-pattern of the people of the region. The role played by the Muslim rulers in the transformation of Bengal society has been highlighted by drawing on many the contemporary sources. In the words of the author, "The new rulers' attempt, however, changed not only the topographical features but also influenced the life and culture of the people." (p72) The third chapter (Formation and Nature of Sultanat Polity) provides an in-depth study of the backdrop to the formation and expansion of Muslim rule in Eastern India particularly in Bengal, touching on the politico-administrative structures of the time. Dr Akhtaruzzaman has used all the relevant materials in a judicious way in the foregoing chapters, which prepared him to develop his main arguments in the remaining chapters.

In the fourth chapter titled 'Urbanization and Urban Centres in Bengal' the author has discussed in a methodical way the question of urbanization and the urban centres that sprang up in Bengal in the eleventh-twelfth centuries. According to the author "prior to the thirteenth century all the leading urban centres, which had originated in ancient period, decayed or declined in early medieval times. Some of the remaining existing settlements could not be called urban centres in the proper sense of the term 'urban', they were small township of the fragmented political authorities and their Brahmana supporters, in which a small section of the population was brought under the culture of urbanization." (p32) Then, in an ascending order, he touched on the process and factors leading to urbanization, urban planning of the Muslims and the security measures related to the urban areas with all other paraphernalia that come within the purview of this subject in the 13th-14th centuries. In support of his views the author had highlighted on a number of urban centres which were renovated or developed as capital cities, mint towns, sea ports, religious sanctuaries and emporiums of the time. The role of urbanization in the development of society and culture is not left out either. In substantiating his assertions he has utilized both literary and archaeological

sources. The remaining chapters focus on issues that emerged as a result of urbanization. According to the author, "with the advent of the Muslims in the early thirteenth century, the process of urbanization in Bengal attained a new phase involving multiple dimensions. The net result of this process of urbanization was the birth of a large number of urban centres that profoundly influenced the life and conditions of people by contributing largely to the socio-economic mobility in Bengal." (p170)

Urbanization can achieve its ultimate goal when society's core units flourish. The fifth chapter of the book is titled 'Some Aspects of Society'. In this chapter the author sheds new light on the growth of Muslim settlements and society, the nature and extent of conversion, social relation among different religious communities, social stratification and mobility, nature of social values and institutions, and other relevant topics. In such a cosmopolitan, integrated society of the time issues like slavery, *sati* (burning of widow after the death of the husband among the Hindus) and prostitution were there and the author explained solutions to such issues were sought. The sixth chapter is titled 'Advancement of Learning and Culture' where the introduction of new crafts and devices, the scope and nature of education, developments in the fields of art and architecture, and modifications in the prestigious institutions are highlighted. Socio-cultural interactions between the various factions and different religious communities of the-then Bengal are also critically discussed. Furthermore, the author has dealt extensively with the monetization of the economy, the growth and promotion of agriculture, and the industrial upkeep and development in the country. The inland agricultural products and industrial goods (after meeting local needs) used to be exported to the neighbouring countries and foreign lands by the sea ports of *Porto Grande* (Chittagong) and *Porto Piqueno* (Satgaon). Such enterprise needed the fair management of trade and commerce, which had not missed the notice of the author. He scrutinized the factors that helped promote inland and foreign

trade and commerce in Bengal in the early phase of Muslim rule. The eighth chapter of the monograph is a Conclusion in which the author summarized the main arguments of the foregoing chapters, arguing that society and economy underwent “modification and transformation mainly because of the process of urbanization. In fact, the emergence of many urban centres during the early centuries of Muslim rule influenced the life and condition of the people significantly. It is important to note here that the revival of urban society characterized by an urban economy and culture took place in Bengal in course of time. In studying the phenomena stated above, several aspects of the social history of medieval Bengal have been dealt with in this book.” (p370)

Paucity of the-then court chronicles and recorded materials hampered the study of the history of Eastern India particularly of Bengal before the mid-twentieth century when, under the editorship of Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the publication of *History of Bengal* Vol. II by Dacca University in 1948 which inspired many scholars to pursue advance research. Thanks to the endeavours of a group of European and local scholars many archaeological sources - particularly numismatic and epigraphic – was unearthed which enabled them to reconstruct the history of medieval Bengal. Of them Alexander Cunningham, H. Blochmann, H.E. Stapleton, H. Beveridge, F.V. Westmaccot (European scholars), K.N. Dishit, R.D. Banerji, Shamsuddin Ahmed, A. H. Dani, Hasan Askari, Abid Ali, Abdul Wali, G. Yazdani, Ziauddin Desai and A. Karim deserve commendation for preparing the ground for other scholars. Mention may also be made that knowledge of Arabic-Persian is needed for such study. In studying medieval Bengal in the socio-cultural context, Abdul Karim’s research monograph titled *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal down to 1538 A.D.* is important which earned him PhD degree from the University of Dacca in 1958 (published in 1959). In addition, *Husain Shahi Bengal (1494-1538 A.D) A Socio-Political Study* earned M. R. Tarafdar PhD degree from the same University in 1961 (published in 1965) and inspired researchers to undertake further study

in Bengal's medieval history. Muhammad Abdur Rahim's *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol 1 (1201-1576) is another treatise (published in 1963) which provided an exhaustive study of socio-cultural and economic aspects of medieval Bengal. These pioneers unlocked the closed-doors of medieval history of Bengal in its multidimensional aspects. In the succeeding decades of the last century an appreciable number of monographs appeared on the subject. A K M Yaqub Ali produced a research monograph titled *Aspects of Society and Culture of the Barind, 1200-1576 A.D.* which earned him the PhD degree from the University of Rajshahi in 1982 (published in 1998 with the same title except the word *Varendra* in place of *Barind*). These works lighted the hurdles which once stood in the way of studying medieval Bengal due to the paucity of archaival materials. In that sense Dr Aktaruzzaman's *Society and Urbanization in Medieval Bengal* is a welcome addition to the vista of Bengal history's during its formative period.

A few points remain to be raised. First, as regards the name of Ikhtiyar al-Din (the conqueror of Lakhnawati kingdom) there are two versions in the manuscripts of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*. In the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* (vol. I) text edited by Professor Abdul Hai Habibi and published by Historical Society of Afghanistan, Kabul in 1963 (2nd edition) the full name (of the conqueror) is written as Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji. Here it indicated that Ikhtiyar al-Din being *kuniyat* or surname, thus his real name is Muhammad Bakhtiyar. There is no mention of his father's name. But the text of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* as translated into English by H.G. Raverty and published in London in 1881 shows the name as Muhammad-i-Bakhtiyar. Taking it as *idafat* or possessive it is explained as Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar i.e. Muhammad, son of Bakhtiyar. On the basis of these two versions of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* the scholars differ in writing the name as Muhammad, son of Bakhtiyar Khalji or Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khaji. The later rely on Abdul Hai Habibi's edited version while the former depend on Raverty's translation. However, the conqueror of Lakhnawati is

popularly known as Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji even though between these two versions there is a great difference in meaning. It seems that Dr Akhtaruzzaman has preferred Raverty's reading and presented him as Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khalji throughout the book. Secondly, on page 140 of the book the author has mentioned the location of Mahisun (i.e. Mahisontosh) in Dinajpur district. This is perhaps an oversight. Before the up-gradation of the subdivision to the district in 1984, Mahisontosh located in Dhamorhat Police Station was within Naogaon subdivision of Rajshahi district. In the pre-partition days of 1947 the Dhamorhat Police Station was under Dinajpur district, and in around 1950 it was removed from Dinajpur and included in Greater Rajshahi district. Since 1984 it is in Naogaon district. In the next edition of this book, this needs to be corrected.

Lastly, under the title of 'Leading Urban Centres' the author has focused on some important urban cities in the 13th-14th centuries. But there is no reason for excluding Pundranagara identified with Mahasthan in Bogra district from this list. Crossing several tiers of civilization its urbanized antiquity could be traced to the 3rd century B.C. on the evidence of a fragmentary Mauryan Brahmi Inscription discovered at this place. Its extensive circumference testifies to its being a flourishing city from ancient times. It was a great emporium of trade and commerce on the bank of the Karatoya River three times busier than the Ganges at the beginning of the 13th century A.D. as recorded in the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* of Minhaj Siraj. Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Iwaz Khalji (1212-1227) built war-flotilla on the Ganges in the west and on the Karatoya in the east to combat the enemy forces on both sides. The Mahasthan inscription of the time of Rukn al-Din Kaikaus dated A.H. 700/1300 A.D. brings to light the name of Khan Muazzam Mukarram Mir Namwar Khan presumed to be *Mir Bahr* or Admiral of Navy who was posted at the Naval headquarters of Mahasthan to keep vigilant eye on the enemies war flotilla in the river Karatoya. The traditions ascribed to Sultan Mahmud Mahisawar

Balkhi of Mahasthan (a large number of tombs in this area, the discovery of the layout of an early Jami mosque in the *Mankalir Bhita* and the Arabic stone inscription) referred to above point out to its having been a great urban settlement of the Muslims prior to 1300 A.D. Moreover, a number of coins belonging to the reign of Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah (1342-1357) and Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1437-1459) procured from the ruins of Mahasthan bear witness to its retaining the previous urban character even in the succeeding periods of the independent Sultanate of Bengal. The author will hopefully keep this point in his mind for future edition of the book.

Overall, this is an important and scholarly contribution on the subject. This book will be of benefit to both scholars and students, and I have no hesitation in recommending it to readers, home and abroad.

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