

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## PEOPLE AND PLACES

### The Glory That Was Sonargaon

by Fayza Haq

Now virtually half buried under heavy clusters of bamboo and dense jungle stands the lost township of Sonargaon, about 17 miles off north-east of Dhaka, bearing the testimony of a history of great significance.

SONARGAON originates in the Sanskrit words Suborno Gram, meaning Golden Town, and dates back to the Buddhist and Hindu reign of six century AD to eleventh century AD. It is said that the history of the place washed by the Meghna, Brahmaputra and the Sitalakha cannot be exactly dated. It is listed in the history of the literature of Tibet.

According to Dr Habiba Khatun the Sonargaon of Early and Middle Age is Subarno Gram Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy declared the place to be a "char" in the sixth century. In many places of this area red coloured earth is to be found.

During the Buddhist Hindu period it was near the capital of Samatata and some Buddhist relics were found in this place. Descriptions of this was found in the Tibetan literature.

It is believed that it was the capital of Eastern Bengal before it fell in the hands of Mohammed Bakhtiar Khilji, Cunningham says it was definitely a Hindu capital. Other historical evidences say Sonargaon was a big city and was the capital of East Bengal much before Dhaka.

The present Sonargaon came into being in 1281 A. D. Its decay quickened when Ikhtiaruddin Mohammed Bin Bakhtiar Khilji captured the Nadiya district of West Bengal. In 1204 Laxman Sen fled from Nadiya and came to Sonargaon. He had his two sons administered this area with a powerful hand.

The first definite historical reference to this town is found in the Tarikh-i-Firozshahi of Ziauddin Barani who mentions the establishment of friendly relations between Sultan Giasuddin Balban of Delhi and Rai Danuj of Sonargaon when, in 1281, the Sultan visited East Bengal.

With the constant attack of the Muslims, Sonargaon got separated from Bikrampur. From 1270 the Devraj family ruled. At that time Tugril was ruling Bengal as representative of Giasuddin Balban in Delhi. When Tugril revolted, Balban marched against Tugril and reached Sonargaon. From that period a reliable history of Sonargaon can be traced. Between 1280 AD



Gateway to Kadam Rasul Mazar, Sonargaon.

and 1300 AD the Muslim rule in Sonargaon began and it served as the capital of East Bengal upto 1583.

When Balban reached Sonargaon he found a Shobhya King ruling. Balban left behind his son Bughra Khan as the administrator of Sonargaon. Bughra Khan being lazy and lackadaisical, his kingdom got divided into four parts. Shortly Rukunuddin took over. For the first time land tax was imposed. Shortly afterwards Firoze ruled over Sonargaon from Lakhnabat in Gaur. He represented Balban and assumed the name of Sultan Shamsuddin Firoze Shah. No coins were discovered in this period. However his revolting son Bahadur fled from Gaur and minted coins at Sonargaon in the name of Abdul Muzaffar Giasuddin Bahadur Shah, and declared the independence of Sonargaon even when his father was alive.

Meanwhile the Tughlaks took over in Delhi from Balbans in 1324. Giasuddin Tughlak attacked Bengal and Bahram Khan administrated Sonargaon on his behalf.

In 1352 Sultan Mohammed Tughlak ascended the Delhi throne and released Giasuddin Bahadur Shah from prison and sent along Bahram Khan to administrate the place. Bahadur Shah revolted against Delhi and was defeated and killed in 1328. Tartar Khan was the next administrator of Sonargaon. There ends the Balban rule.

Then came the Sultani period. After the death of Bahram Khan in 1338 Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah revolted against Delhi and declared himself the independent ruler of Bengal. He was a cool and courageous Sultan. A lot of travellers were attracted to Sonargaon. It was during this period that Ibn Batuta came to Sonargaon in 1345. From the period it became internationally famous. Trade and commerce flourished through the port specially muslin. The visit of Ibn Batuta has been recorded as a historical fact.

The fall of Sonargaon took place in the time of Isa Khan's son during Musa Khan's period, and Dhaka became the capital. Musa Khan was defeated by Subaidar Islam Khan. Sonargaon had become important as a commercial centre over the centuries and not so much as a capital because earlier kings of Bengal all ruled Bengal from Pandua, Lakhnawator and Gaur. Anything related to Bengal took place at these three points.

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Visitor through Lok Shilpa Jadughar (Folk Art Museum), set up by the famous painter Zainul Abedin.

### All About Sarees and Where to Look for Them

by Aasha Mehreen Amin

THE traditional dress of the country one is visiting is no doubt a treasured Souvenir. If you are talking of Bangladesh the clothing that perhaps best represents its culture in the most elegant way, is the saree. Six yards of cloth draped around a woman's body in delicate folds and gatherings with not a single stitch is truly an ingenious invention. Some archaeologists have traced this dress to the Greek dress women used to wear thousands of years ago. It is fascinating that this Grecian costume originally brought by the Aryans, is now an intrinsic part of the life and identity of every Bengali woman.

The same can be made of a variety of fabrics — silk, cotton, chiffon, georgette, nylons of innumerable gradations and colours. With its layers of covering worn with and short blouse that leaves the midriff bare: the saree manages to retain the mysterious look of modesty and hidden sensuality of the Bengali woman.

Among the most beautiful or most expensive whichever way you want to look at it, are the 'jamdanis', 'Tangail silks', and 'Rajshahi silks'. If you do not want to spend hours trying to find the most unique 'jamdani' and also avoid huge crowds, the best place to go is probably Bailey Road. Located in one of the most central parts of Dhaka, this road is lined with boutiques and shops selling a variety of 'jamdani', and Tangail silk and cotton sarees. The only thing you should make sure before you leave your hotel or guest house is that your wallet is fairly robust. This is because the prices of the sarees are fairly high, compared to other less elegant shopping areas and there is less scope for bargaining.

A 'jamdani', for example may cost from Taka 2,000 to Taka 3,500/-, depending on the quality of the work. Tangail silks may cost between Taka 1,000 to Taka 1,500/- and the Tangail cottons are from Taka 350/- upwards to about Taka 1,200.

But most visitors from abroad are not interested in going to the usual boutiques, which are known as 'tourist shopping centre'. They want to feel the thrill of the unknown, the mysterious. To be less dramatic, they are curious about places that have a local flavour and a character of their own. Perhaps the place that best fits this description is the area around New Market, where there is Gausia Market, Chandni Chawk Market and Hawker's Market.

Apart from being jam-packed with people at any given time of the day, these markets offer the greatest variety of practically every thing, from sarees to dress material, even jewellery and sandals.

It is also the place where you can get the best bargain. There is no such thing as a fixed price. No matter what the shopkeeper says, if you have the patience and confidence of an expert 'haggler' you will be able to reduce the price by half or even more! Before I go on to the delights

of this area, a word of warning, if you are a foreigner, and especially if you are a woman: it is always advisable to take along a local person, preferably male. It is not just for interpreting but also to avoid being paid unwanted male attention!

If it is just sarees you want, then Hawker's Market is the perfect place, for it is an interesting maze of small shops selling jamdanis and Tangails in all sorts of combinations and designs. A large variety of Indian silks can also be found in every single shop or store in this market. The prices at first may seem as high as those quoted in those expensive

its many folds are pleats. This is not really the case since the art of wearing a sari is both simple and like swimming, something never forgotten once learnt. But even then, there are other types of traditional dresses that are easier to wear. Chadni Chawk and Gausia Markets are practically bursting with ready made "Salwar Kameez" sets and dress material fabrics include plain as well as printed - linen, cotton, polyester, silk, brocade, lace, satin etc. Quality can be assessed often by the discrepancy in price. "Good quality" linen may cost Tk. 150/- per metre, while 'bad



A prospective buyer selecting a 'jamdani' at a boutique.

boutiques but with just a little bargaining you can be assured of a more than satisfactory deal. As soon as you enter the market you will be hailed by a thousand voices, all coaxing and persuading you to sit at their shops. Within seconds they will take several sarees down and open them up to give you a better view. If you are not persuaded by their solicitude, the 'anjals' of the saree whether it is a jamdani or Tangail silk, will definitely tempt you with their breath-takingly beautiful patterns. The shopkeeper will even tell you what colour will suit you but it is better to use one's own discretion since more often than not what he says will suit you also turns out to be what does not suit your wallet! One thing you can be sure of however, whether you buy something or not, at this market you will be treated with a warmth and politeness that makes these shopping areas so special.

Sarees are beautiful outfits but some foreigners think it is too complicated to wear with quality' linen are as low as Tk. 75/- per metre. There is no dearth of imported material — from India, Pakistan and the Far East. But sometimes shopkeepers will claim a fabric to be 'Indian', even if it is Bangladeshi. This does in no way imply poor quality. It is more because for some reason the word 'Indian' has a more appealing sound than 'Bangladeshi' to most Bengalis. Scarves, other wise worn as dupattas are also in abundance in chiffon, georgettes and 'crepe' silk costing from Tk. 45/- to Tk. 150. As for accessories like bangles, bracelets and anklets, can be bought from the young vendors, who are constantly roaming around the market to sell their ware.

These markets with their scores of little shops in every nook and corner, people from all walks of life going on their shopping sprees, their hustle and bustle, gives tourist an opportunity to shop and 'see' at the same time, not to mention, go back home with a treasure of 'Eastern' goodies.

### REFLECTIONS

## THE FACES OF RACISM

by Tarzie Vittachi

Racism wears many masks. You see these various guises at work in many human activities: in sport, in politics and its extreme extension called war, in migration, in banking and trade, in the location of peoples' homes, in entertainment, in love, in the use of words, and in a myriad other areas of action. In some of these human activities, like sport, politics and war and in housing the mask is very easy to spot.

For instance, cricket. When the West Indies play the MCC, the entire Third World — including the Indians, Pakistanis and Sri Lankans who have obtained British passports and live in Britain — root lustily for the West Indies. When the Springboks play England all brown, black and yellow skinned people root for England because they are against apartheid — motivated racism. People who wear masks never see their own masks, just other peoples'. And when India plays the West Indies, all of South Asia wants the Indians to win even though, back at home, they hate the Big Brother pretensions of India. It is racial tribalism in its sporting guise.

In love and romance racism has played its hate role right

through human history and literature. The flaw which brought about the tragedy of Othello was not so much his abysmal jealousy but the chronic paranoia of a black man in a white society. When he flouted the tribal code of Venetian society by marrying the ill-white Desdemona the gossips had a field day denouncing this mismatch. It was oh so easy for lago to rouse his suspicions by suggesting that his wife had grown tired of sharing her bed with what was called a black-a-moor, and was tumbling in the ducal hay with a white lover. Or James Bond, for a modern example. He regularly ate the forbidden fruit of miscegenation, sleeping with black, brown and yellow poppies. But they paid the ultimate price for their great

good fortune of being allowed in a white man's bed. They died. Nastily. When we look at international migration the mask of racism tries to soften its appearance with high sounding legal cant: consanguinity, ethnic quotas and such euphemisms. But the racist intent of most immigration laws is abundantly clear. Argentina, for instance is on record that they want more people to develop the vast natural resources it has. But the pattern of migration shows that "people of colour" are not welcome. Colourless migrants are preferred. The British have managed to stem the tide of Commonwealth migrants by resort to new legalisms such as the "partial law" which defines Britishness as a monopoly of those whose granddads were

born on British soil. But they have no compunction about denouncing Malaysia's very similar "Bhumiputra" — sons of the soil — principle of preferential treatment for Malays as a violation of human rights.

The French who, as long as they had an Empire, let migrants from their colonies freely into their country have become increasingly xenophobic about dark-skinned migrants from Africa, Indochina and West Africa. Even the Italians who dreamed of an African Empire in the Horn of Mussolini's days and nourished the notion that they were colour blind, have tightened their immigration laws since violence broke out in Florence a year of two ago when a handful of African youngsters sneaked in and began selling

their wares — tawdry trinkets from their homelands — on the street outside the palatial boutiques of Ferragamo, Gucci, Pucci and that elegant lot. And, as for the United States, the bile-green lady's torch who lit the way into New York harbour to Your Huddled Masses for more than a century now frowns on certain sorts of migrants seeking the protection of her hospitality. These importunate guests are distinguished by their colour and unfamiliar culture.

The masks of racism are most subtly worn in the use of words. Look out for evidence in any of the so-called "international" magazines or newspapers. If there is a story about an outburst of ethnic or racial conflict in the Third

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World — and there is plenty of the, God knows — you can be sure that in the first para the word 'mob' will pop up. 'As mobs rampaged through the streets' et cetera. If ever there is a similar incident in the western world, and there is plenty of that too, you will never find the word 'mob' used. All mobs are black, brown, yellow and purple people. Western riots are 'demos'.

When people who are appalled by these masks of racism ask me what we can do about all this, I have only one reply: Remove your mask first. Then we'll talk this over again.

By arrangement with Executive, Hong Kong

A Magsaysay Award winning Journalist of Sri Lanka, Mr Vittachi has successively served as the Director of IPI Programme for Asia, a founder director of the Manila-based Press Foundation of Asia and, finally, as a senior official of the UNFPA and UNICEF. He is the author of the book "Brown Sahib" and syndicated columnist for international journals.