

# Not the casuarina tree

## Shahid Alam is not terribly impressed by a travel tale

AS travelogues go, *Kuala Lumpur Pathe Pathe* is rather humdrum. As a book that highlights the importance of archives to a nation or country, however, Sharif uddin Ahmed's work carries some weight, an aspect that should have a far greater impact on the people and government of Bangladesh than its contents in one hundred pages and small change. According to The New American Desk Encyclopedia, archives, which are documents of a public body preserved in an organized manner, began in 1789 with the French Archives Nationales as the systematic collection and supervision by a central government agency. Quoting the director general of the Malaysian National Archives, Ahmed brings out the significance of archives to a society: "Archives are not only important for heritage preservation but also as means of transparency in a government.... They can be the reference to our past strengths and weaknesses, and guide us to move forward...." However, the author laments, there is little public awareness in Bangladesh about the important role that archives can play in a country's development.

The book under review grew out of Sharif uddin Ahmed and a team from Bangladesh (which also included a Dutch member, Florus Geraedts) that attended the International Council on Archives' (ICA) 16th International Congress on Archives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in July 2008. The primary goal of ICA is to help preserve the

cultural heritage of nations throughout the world. I must confess that I had taken up the book in anticipation of going through a travelogue of people and places, sights and sounds, above all, the idiosyncrasies and distinctiveness that make the Malaysian a Malaysian, and looking for human stories that attract or repel (often the two represent a similar emotion under different circumstances), that fascinate and leave an indelible imprint on ones mind. I have not found them, at least not to the extent of making them memorable, not even the sketchy and spotty accounts of the plight of migrant Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. The nine days that the author spent in that country are taken up, in addition to terse details of the conference proceedings, mostly by narratives of food, more food, and still more food dished up during the meeting days and special visits (although, strangely, there is not much detail of specific Malaysian cuisine that were served up), and at a restaurant with a Bangladeshi waiter, shopping, and the many travails of departure from, and arrival in, Bangladesh and Malaysia. Not much of the exotic, and nothing of the romantic, in Malaysia, comes through in the book.

*Kuala Lumpur Pathe Pathe* does, however, bring any romantically-inclined reader, especially one from Bangladesh, down to earth with sobering thoughts on the imperative of meticulously gathering and preserving archival materials. The author states his primary

objective in attending the conference as getting ideas from its proceedings and Malaysia's experience in archival management for implementing an effective plan of action along that line in Bangladesh. At one point, he notes that, whereas only a few short decades back, Malaysian National Archives officials used to be trained at the Indian



**Kuala Lumpur Pathe Pathe**  
Sharif uddin Ahmed  
Academic Press and Publishers  
Library

National Archives in New Delhi, these days they are the ones to provide training to archivists worldwide. Simultaneously with his professional interest (Ahmed is a Professor of History at Dhaka University and a former Director of Archives and Public Library of the Government of Bangladesh), the author also sought to find meaning-

ful solutions to how Kuala Lumpur has turned into one of the most beautiful cities in the world, while Dhaka is beset with multifarious problems. He might have found an answer in his own observation on how, on observing Dhaka from the air at night, he found it to be enchanting under the lights. He was looking at an illusion, flattering to deceive!

The conference was suitably impressive with 1200 delegates from 138 countries having descended on the Malaysian capital "to discuss the challenges confronting the profession and to set a trend for the new millennium." 300 of the delegates presented papers on the theme of "Archives, Governance and Development: Mapping Future Society" in order to stress on the importance of collecting and preserving archival materials as one tool for ensuring good governance. The author was satisfied with the overall quality manifested at the conference. In line with the major objectives of ICA and the conference, Ahmed offers some cogent thoughts on the rather poor state of archival management, in spite of a few stellar individual efforts, in Bangladesh. He perceives a general lack of awareness among the people on the importance of archives. Such lamentable paucity is not just confined to the general citizenry; it is also present in government circles, intellectuals, and people in important institutions like the judicial system. This factor has been a crucial impediment to the development and flourishing of

archives in this country.

Such a lackadaisical attitude has contributed to the disastrous outcomes of, on the one hand, record management and preservation suffering damage, and, on the other, old documents suffering from neglect or even destruction. The cumulative consequence has been the erosion and destruction of our culture, heritage, and history. Ahmed suggests creating awareness about the necessity of preserving archives among the general citizenry as a fundamental step towards improving the unsatisfactory situation in the country.

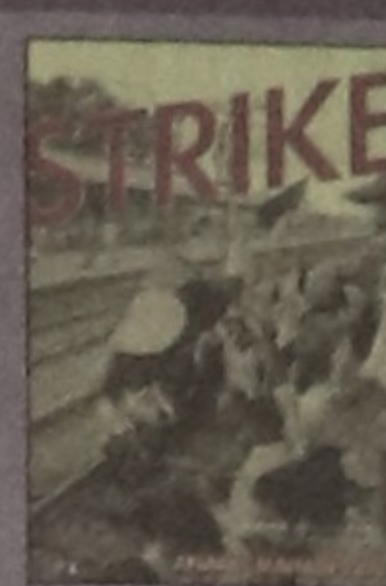
The book offers tidbits of observation that are interesting as well as instructive. One is that, in Malaysia, although a Muslim majority country, women enjoy considerable freedom of movement, at par with men. Another is poignant. On a short official visit to Malacca (now having reverted to its ancient name of "Melaka"), he found that the local youths would often behave badly with, even to the extent of resorting to physical attacks on, the immigrant Bangladeshi workers living there. Some things, like ethnocentrism and its unpleasant manifestations, may be found all across the globe! *Kuala Lumpur Pathe Pathe* will have served an important cause if it can spread the message of awareness in the people on the need to gather and preserve archival material of Bangladesh.

Dr. Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communications Department, Independent University Bangladesh.

### AT A GLANCE

*The Strike*  
Anand Mahadevan  
Penguin

It is what you could call a novel encompassing all modern sensibilities. Against an Indian social background, it brings into its wide range individual struggle, love, sex and politics. In simple terms, it is a microcosm of India as it is or as it might be in the literary imagination. You will love the style.

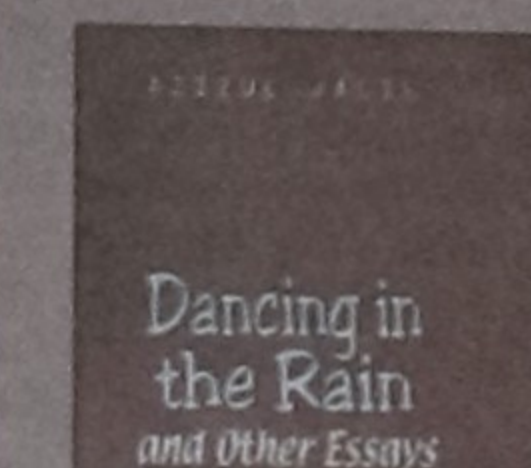
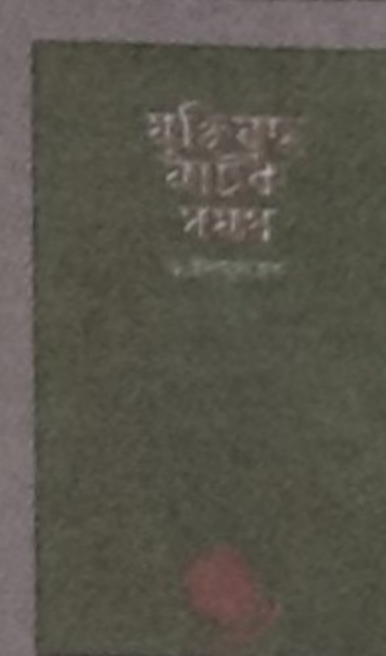


**Bengal Partition 1905**  
And East Bengal  
Muntassir Mamoon  
Trans. Rana Razzaque  
International Centre for Bengal Studies

The forgotten tale of the 1905 partition has always been a sore point with Bengalis across the divide. In this work, clearly based on extensive research, Mamoon goes over the varied sentiments which characterized the division among the different social structures of Bengal. A revealing read.

*Mukrijuddho Natok Shomogro*  
Dr. Enamul Haq  
Agami Prakashani

The writer has just completed a half century in the theatre. In this work, he brings into focus his thoughts on the War of Liberation through six plays on the seminal struggle that left Bengalis a free nation for the first time in history. The plays are a reminder of the pain that went into the struggle.



**Dancing in the Rain**  
And Other Essays  
Azizul Jallil  
The University Press Limited

Jallil's essays have always been a refreshing read. In these articles, some of his best thoughts emerge and on issues ranging from the purely social to the hugely literary. His reminiscences have always been a journey back into history. It is something he does with finesse, as this book so clearly demonstrates.

# Big man thrown to the wolves

## Farida Shaikh is moved by the life of a Pakhtoon

IT'S a beautiful book--- in shape and size with a cover picture of the Pukhtun Badshah Ghaffar Khan, a map of 17 agencies--- Chitral, Dir, Kohistan, Swat, Manshara, Abbotabad, Mohmand, Malakand, Mardan, Peshawar, Khyber, Khurram, Kohat, North Waziristan, South Waziristan, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan and states or agencies of the North West Frontier.

This biographical work originated in 1980 in the writer's quest for *Understanding the Muslim Mind*. Then Ghaffar Khan was in his mid-nineties, and Rajmohan's work concentrated on past Muslims of the subcontinent. This work on Ghaffar Khan is the writer's compliance with the wish of Asfandyar Khan for a biography of his grandfather for the new generation. The background discussion of the book is when the Taliban still controlled Afghanistan, Indo-Pak relations, Musharraf, religious extremism combined with terrorism and the situation in Kashmir. When Rajmohan returned to Delhi from his visit to Charsadda on 11 September 2001 he saw on television the Twin Towers crumbling in New York.

influenced by his Christian teacher and Mohandas Gandhi. Badshah Khan was a devout Muslim and wanted to save Buddhism in NWFP. He was extremely serious about education for Pushtun women, and sent his own teenage daughter Mehr Taj to study in England.

Why was Ghaffar Khan was also known as the Frontier Gandhi? Rajmohan's subtitle is *Nonviolent Badshah of the Pakhtuns*. Nonviolence is what Gandhi is known to have preached during the partition period of the subcontinent.

Ghaffar Khan's ideology was purely humanistic. It was a movement to awaken consciousness in the Pakhtuns about their own identity, their history, their geography, and their distinct language and culture, their religion. Yes, the Pathans are Sunni Muslims but much influenced by Sufism and universal brotherhood of man.

Rajmohan Gandhi's book is 'nicely printed and readable'; it is best described as 'personal'. The contents of the book are labeled as 'controversial and difficult'. The magnitude of the work on Ghaffar Khan is mostly drawn from writings by other scholars, but Rajmohan makes a glaring omission. He does not refer to Mukulika Banerjee's *The Pathan Unarmed: Opposition and Memory in the North West Frontier*.

As an anthropologist, Banerjee argues that Bacha Khan's nonviolent movement was different in its philosophical provenance from that of Gandhi. "The civil disobedience campaign carried out by these Khudai Khidmatgar recruits between 1930 and 1934 was argu-

ably the most heroic and extraordinary of all such episodes in the Indian nationalist movement" (p. 71). It was successful in achieving what Max Weber had considered impossible, that is, a successful application of ethics to politics.

The Khudai Khidmatgar, or the "servants of God," were a movement, an ideology enshrined in a combination of Islam and Pukhtunwali, the code of the Pathans. Ghaffar Khan appealed to



**Ghaffar Khan**  
Nonviolent Badshah of Pakhtoons  
Rajmohan Gandhi  
Penguin-Viking

the Pathans' sense of religious tradition and honor for their own traditions, which contained solutions to their problems. He was against 'me first' and double standards. The movement started in 1920 and remained aloof from the

communal violence that intensified during the 1930s.

The work is a portrait of the man, a towering prominent Muslim figure in the modern history of the subcontinent. He was 'immensely tall... with... an absolute straight back, great nose kindly eyes and a permanent aura of non-violent defiance--- an undeniable right.' His was a quadrangular clash; a nonviolent struggle for Muslim nationalism, for Hindu nationalism, against British imperialism, Pathan separatism and Pakhtun dignity. Ghaffar Khan lived for peace and tolerance.

As a five year old boy, Ghaffar was hit by the mullah when he asked for an explanation of the Quranic verse. Behram Khan, his father, sent him to British Municipal School Peshawar run by Reverend Wigram. There were only 71 matriculates in 1902.

Ghaffar Khan was barely 20 years old when in May 1919 a border dispute led to the Third Anglo Afghan War. In the midst of martial law in Peshawar, Ghaffar Khan led the Pathans to support King Amanullah in Afghanistan. He was implicated on charges of sedition by the British, who alleged that Ghaffar Khan had been denouncing the Rowlett Act. He had earlier decided to protest against this bill, which enabled the police to detain a person without trial for carrying seditious pamphlets in person.

Badshah Khan was arrested, taken to Mardan jail and then to Peshawar cantonment. He was asked if he was stirring agitation against the government and if he was the 'Badshah of the Pathans.'

His reply was, 'I don't know the answer to that, but I know that I am a servant of the community. We cannot take the Rowlett Bill lying down.' Old Behram Khan was also imprisoned, though both were released shortly afterward. However, this was the start of a bitter career of altogether 27 years in imprisonment.

Bacha Khan was a political prisoner for 12 years under the British and 15 years under Pakistan. In 1947, his wisdom and moral courage stood firm. He refused to be part of the referendum in the NWFP, arguing that agitation would lead to violence and bloodshed. On the creation of Pakistan he took the formal oath of allegiance, but the NWFP government was dismissed and Bacha Khan and his followers were branded as "friends of Gandhi" and "traitors to Pakistan." Bacha Khan and his followers felt a sense of betrayal by both Pakistan and India. Bacha Khan's last words to Gandhi were: "You have thrown us to the wolves" (Banerjee, p. 189).

In honour of Ghaffar Khan, the Indian government offered him a future resting place next to Gandhi's mausoleum. Venerated in Pakistan, Bacha Khan understandably wished to be buried in the garden of his house in Jalalabad in Afghanistan, where he had spent most of his later life. Born in 1890 in village Utmanzai, Charsadda, he died in 1988 in Peshawar. An estimated 20,000 attended his funeral, including Rajiv Gandhi and some other world leaders.

Farida Shaikh is a social analyst and regular book reviewer.

# Purity of soul

## Nausheen Rahman is charmed by one woman's heroism

*A Child Widow's Story* is a biography of Sister Subbalakshmi, a very admirable Indian social reformer who brought about an unimaginable transformation in the lives of South Indian child widows.

The author, Monica Felton, who was in public service in Britain before going to India (to settle) in 1956, had numerous sittings with Subbalakshmi (stretching over several months) during which the latter related her story. This story has been divided into five sections, five legs of the journey of her life, so to speak: Looking Backward, The Education of Subbalakshmi, The Widows' Home, Living in the World, and Looking Forward.

Subbalakshmi's two younger sisters were her students in school and, as they called her "Sister", the other girls did the same. Moreover, she says, "I want to be a sister to all young widows." That is how she came to be known as "Sister".

This very kind and equitable lady narrates her story in an unpretentious, but engrossing way. When Monica Felton says, "But most people don't use their opportunities. You did. That's what makes you important!" She responds by "laughing scornfully" and saying, "Who cares about being important? Being useful is the only thing that matters."

Subbalakshmi was herself a child widow, but was very fortunate in that she did not have to undergo the severe hardships other widows did. Her progressive and sagacious father, despite scathing criticism and condemnation from many quarters, was resolute in his decision to educate his daughter. She, in turn, set about seriously to acquire education and then to educate other women. Her mother and her aunt were also very supportive. Her aunt, "Chitti's", character makes us have renewed faith in human goodness and forbearance.

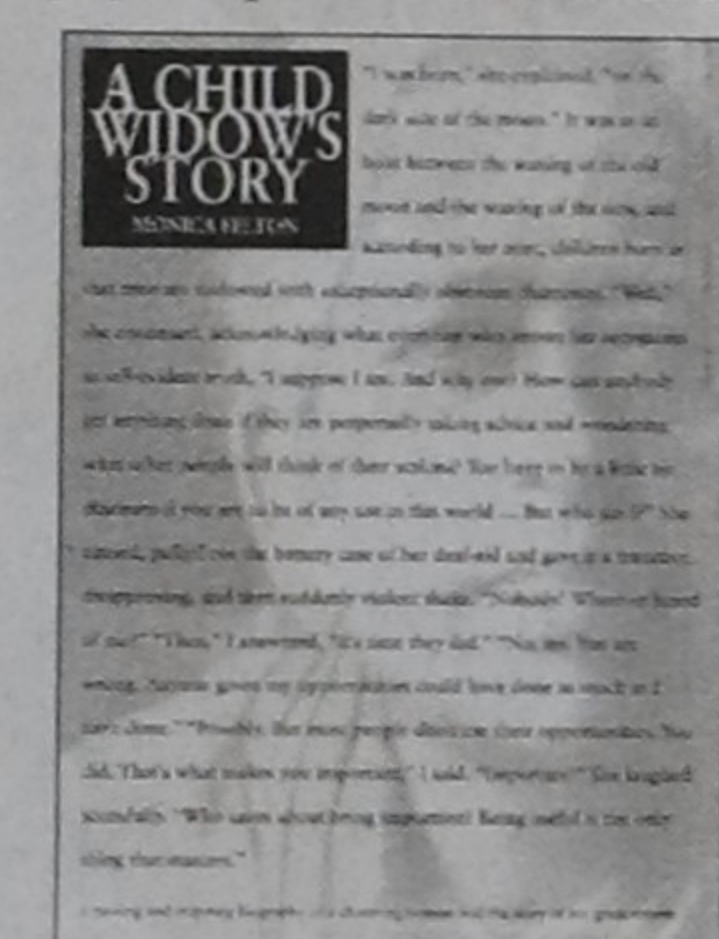
Subbalakshmi's story is as much the story of the many women she helped, as it is hers; hence, it is not about her own personal sufferings it is about her concern for others and her endeavors to bring some meaning, some dignity and a little happiness into the lives of hapless girls.

The story reveals the pleasure Subbalakshmi gets from studying, the joy she derives from teaching, and her pride at being a woman: "I could see no reason why women should be less than men in the eyes of God." Her breaking away from orthodox created a big scandal: "No Brahmin lady, much less a widow, had ever become a teacher."

Various areas of interest have been dealt with in this book: Child Marriage, Child Widowhood, the dowry system, remarriage of widows, marriage between people of different castes, etc. Different perspectives of human rights, women's freedom, the state of untouchables, spiritualism, etc. are shown, and we see age-old beliefs, customs and traditions with new eyes. We also observe how some conservative people's views change gradually. We read beautiful thoughts on religion and humanity and instances of the adversities and obstacles different women confronted at different stages of their lives. This multi-dimensional book

offers an insight into the psyche of women: brahmins, non brahmins, widows, single girls, young wives (some of whom became active propagandists). We get pulled into the lives of courageous young women as they struggle against the odds and emerge as winners. We wonder at the patience and tenacity of these dedicated pioneers of women's rights (particularly rights regarding education) while maintaining their religious beliefs.

As Sister Subbalakshmi and her cohorts (who include women of other nationalities), think of new ploys to rope in recruits for the insti-



**A Child Widow's Story**  
Monica Felton  
Katha

tutions they set up, we feel their tension and excitement, and also their sense of accomplishment when they succeed.

Sister's "rendition" of the events, her crystal-clear reminiscences, are awe-inspiring, more so because they are related so honestly, so accurately and so modestly. We realize that she is deeply religious and that none of the changes she was bringing about went against her religion.

The expenses, the daunting opposition, the illogical superstitions ("Widows and black cats were equally unlucky"), and other difficulties none of these managed to deter her and the other stalwarts. Some of her students went on to become doctors, some teachers. The stories of some of these girls have been included and each has its own attractive quality. Among Subbalakshmi's students were the children of fishermen and untouchables (for whom she opened a school).

In a land where racial prejudices are high and norms of conduct very rigid for women, it was by no means easy to overcome the many problems. Yet, Sister Subbalakshmi continued to persevere in her calm, sensible, unflustered and firm manner.

It is difficult to decide which is more enjoyable Sister Subbalakshmi's story as told by her, or Monica Felton's narration of it in her writing. Combined, they form a superb and absorbing piece of writing, a book that is not only a must-read, but a must-have in one's collection.

Nausheen Rahman teaches and is a critic.

# Digging deep into history

## Audity Falguni goes browsing through archaeological records

ARCHAEOLOGY is related to the renovation, resurrection and reconstruction of non-documented and extinct history of ancient men through the analysis of their material remains conveying their cultural tradition, often hidden within ancient mounds.

Mahasthanagar represents Pundranagar or Pundranagala, the earliest urban centre of Bengal. It is located eight miles north of today's Bogra township of Bangladesh and is in contact with the Barind high terraces in the west, and the Teesta-Karatoa alluvial plain demarcated to the east, the Brahmaputra. Cultural relics and remnants in this area lucidly testify to the existence of the urban settlement of early historic and medieval periods. This remarkable archaeological site was first identified by Sir Alexander Cunningham in 1879. But the first regular excavation was conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India after 50 years in 1928-29 and the work was limited to three small mounds of the site. Subsequently the excavation work was sporadically carried out till 1992. But the investigation initiated at Mahasthanagar in 1993 by the Franco-Bangla mission under an agreement between the governments of France and Bangladesh in 1992 gave a new impetus to Mahasthan Archaeology. The scientific excavation carried out on a new method has been helpful in collecting and recording a large assemblage of cultural materials ranging

in date from 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. to 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. in their proper contexts.

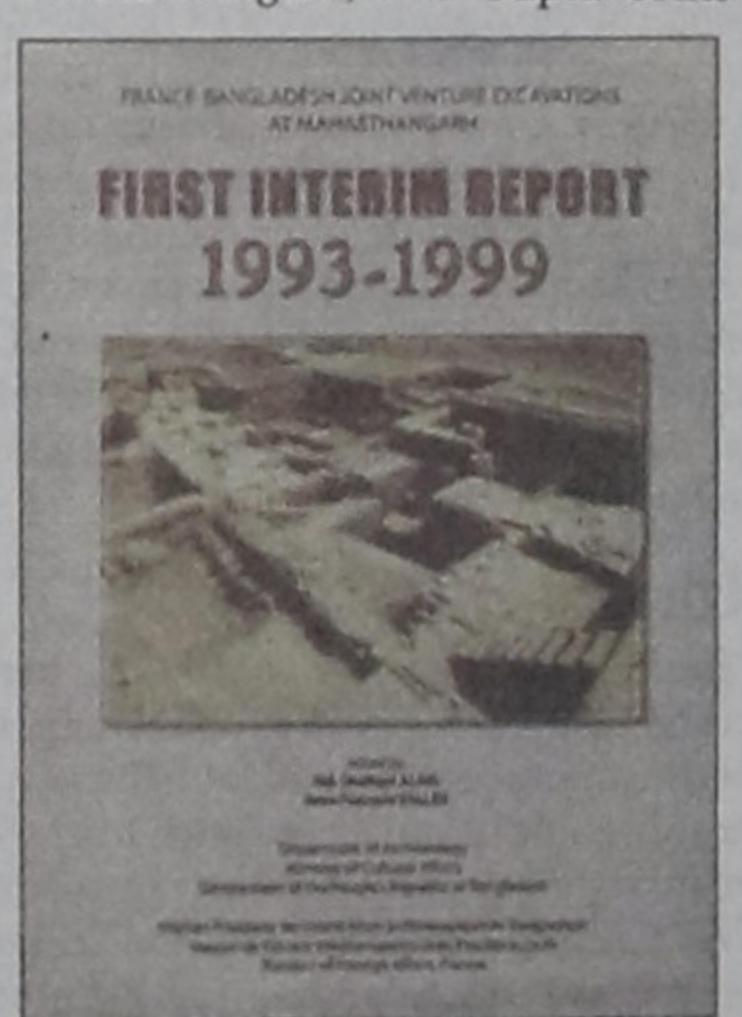
The book contains 13 articles in total. The articles mostly deal with historical and environmental perspectives of the site, radiocarbon dates from Mahasthanagar, coins, northern black polished ware complex, readings of beads, ceramics and domestic wares from Mahasthan and exploration at Parasuram's Palace Site.

Monica L. Smith, the author of the third article of the book, "The Archaeological Hinterlands of Mahasthanagar: Observations and Potential for Future Research", categorizes the archaeological history of this site into five periods. Those are the early historic (3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), Gupta (3-6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) dynasty period, Pala (8-12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD) dynasty phase, Sena dynasty period (12<sup>th</sup> century AD) and Early Islamic (13-16<sup>th</sup> centuries AD).

"No archaeological remains prior to the late fourth century B.C. have ever been recovered from the region of Mahasthanagar, which suggests that the initial population selected this area and quickly built up the site, possibly as a trading center given its favorable location on the banks of the Karatoya river. The excavations at the Eastern Rampart site since 1993 have provided stratigraphic information about successive phases of the site," Smith tells us.

The archaeologist reminds us of

the later Gupta-era sculptures from the site of Mangalkot, recovery of early-phase Gupta sculptures from the site of Balai Dhap at Mahasthanagar, two Gupta coins



**France-Bangladesh Joint Venture Excavations at Mahasthanagar**  
Department of Archaeology,  
Bangladesh, Institut F-Courby, Maison de l'Orient Meditteranneen,  
France Edit Mohammad Shafiqul Alam,  
Jean-Francois Salles

from the village of Bamanpara and a bronze image of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD from the adjacent village of Sarapur. The author, in addition, quotes 7<sup>th</sup> century Chinese pilgrim Hsuen Tsang, who wrote that in the

country of *Pun-na-fa-tan-na* (Pundravardhana), "there are about twenty *sangharas* (monasteries) with some 3000 priests... (and) there are some hundred Deva temples, where sectaries of different schools congregate (page:68)."

In relation to the Pala dynasty period (8-12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD), the writer observes that the current excavations have shown a resurgence of a relatively rich material culture during this time frame. "The distribution of different site types around Mahasthanagar indicate that the area to the northwest of the city continued to be an area with substantial Buddhist activity, while the area to the south contained habitations and semi-autonomous communities (page: 69)," Smith adds.

In the first and introductory article, "The Archaeology of Mahasthan: Historical and Environmental Perspectives," Jean-Francois Salles and Md. Shafiqul Alam recollect numerous important historical records and events including those related to Buchanan's Description of Dinajpur district (1833), 18<sup>th</sup> century district gazetteer depicting the rebellion of Maznu Shah against the British rulers who used to take shelter in the rampart of Mahasthanagar, a certificate in Arabic which gave Mahasthan territory to a governor in 1685, the Persian inscription of the mosque dated 1130H / 1718 AD and others.

According to the authors, "Finally, beyond the fact that it was an important centre on the route from the Himalaya to the Indian ocean, Mahasthanagar was intricately related to the civilizations of the Gangetic Valley, as shown by various findings such as the Northern Black Polished Ware, the terracotta plaques of "Sunga-style", the punch-marked coins, and even a bronze mirror certainly coming from Gandhara. (page: 13)."

The more the book advances, it turns out to be more complex with purely technical terms of archaeology which might be a bit difficult to be grasped by common readers. The book, however, contains lots of images of coins and terracotta plaques of different ages from the fifth century AD to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, numerous radio carbon images of the excavation sites, mounds, fortified walls, temples and monasteries, sketches and drawings and even satellite images of the related river systems of North Bengal and Mahasthanagar or Bogra in particular.

The book ought to be made available to interested researchers, academicians, students of archaeology and history buffs. The Department of Archaeology might also consider translating the work into Bengali so that general readers in our country can have an access to it.

Audity Falguni is a writer, researcher and journalist.