

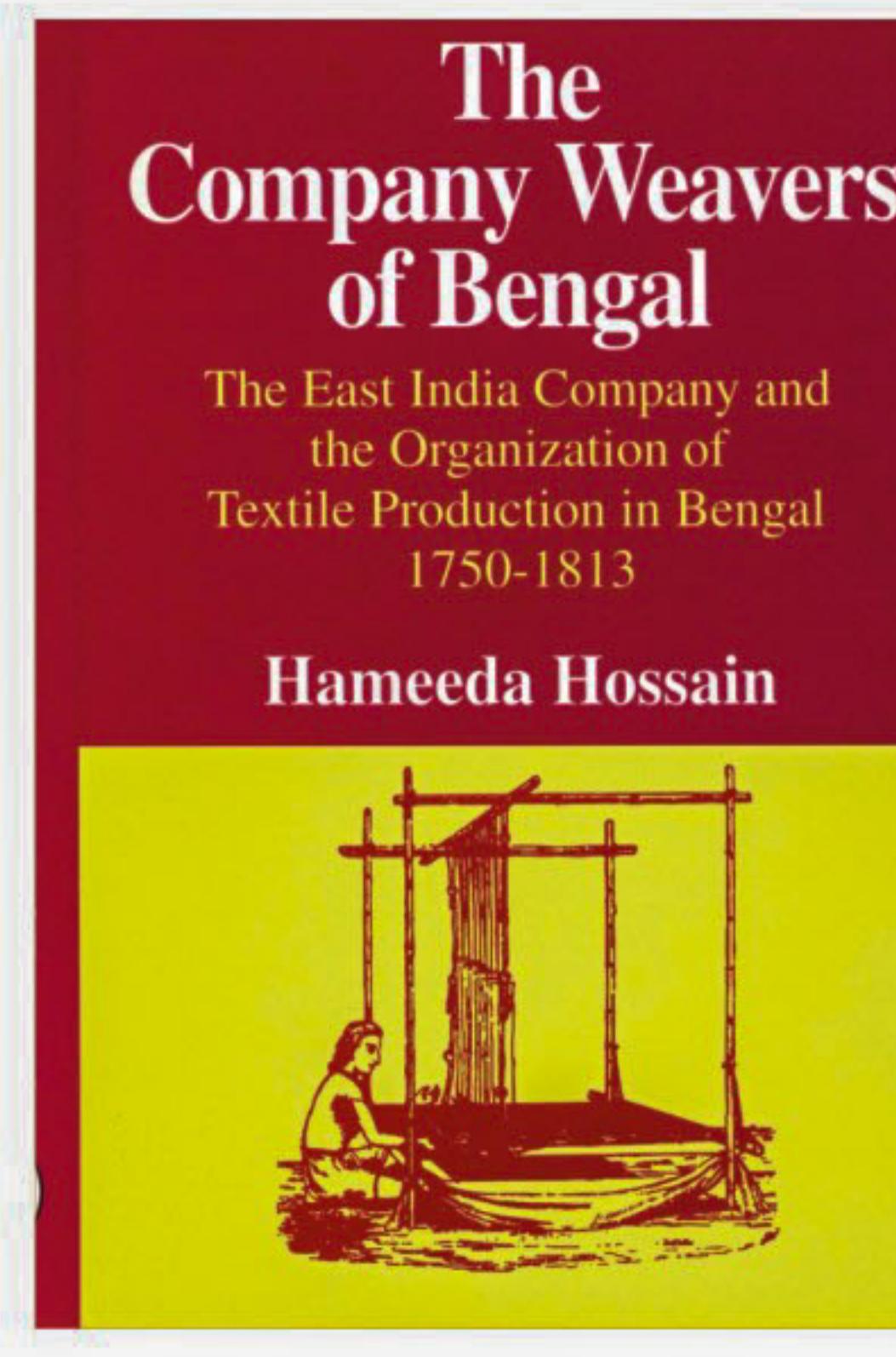
# One for the recondite

*Shahid Alam is delighted by a tale of weavers*

You want to know about the weavers of Bengal and their famed (in history and folklore) products during a particular period? Then go to Hameeda Hossain's *The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal 1750-1813*. The title and subtitle are a dead giveaway of the period covered, although to get a detailed, illuminating and extensive description of the weavers (male and female) at work and their products, you have to pay close attention to almost every page of the close to two hundred pages of text and appendices. However, be warned, it is anything but light reading, one, in fact, that the serious scholar or aficionado of the subject matter would probably find the greatest interest in, and most out of, but the casual reader could find it evocative of tales heard from (often with suitable, and pleasantly excusable, embellishments) parents, grandparents, and other golden-agers of the glory and prowess of the Bengal weavers and textiles they magically wove and produced. But *The Company Weavers of Bengal* is also about murky tales of corruption and exploitation, committed by both Europeans and locals, and a vivid portrayal of what the British East Indian Company presaged: full-fledged colonialism engaged in by the government of Great Britain in what was easily the jewel in her imperial crown: India.

The book is, in the author's words, "the outcome of my research for a PhD thesis at Oxford University." And, as might be expected of a doctoral dissertation carried out at a prestigious institution like Oxford, the research work has been carried out meticulously. Hameeda Hossain explains the study's objective, which is to take a look at "the changes which took place in the production of cotton textiles in Bengal during the latter half of the eighteenth century. It attempts to relate these to changes in the life and conditions of the artisans who supplied the East India Company's investment particularly from 1750 to 1813." Here, too, she competently manages to nail the variety of these changes, which actually tell a bleak story of steady decline represented by both a falling demand for cloth and a reduced capacity of production by the weavers. Hossain's finding that the value of cloth purchased from the Dhaka arangs "had fallen from Rs 2,850,000 in 1747 to Rs 1,401,545 in 1797" is an eloquent testimony to the downfall in the fortunes of a once-prolific and productive community and their handiworks. And, what an assortment of textiles the Bengal weaver community (mostly from Dhaka) produced between 1750 and 1800: malmal, abrawahs, allaballi, addatis, terrandam, shabnam, sarkar ali, chikan, kashida, raing, and others, exported to places as far and diverse as London, mainland Europe, Manila, Borneo, Jeddah, and other places, the entirety likely to send one down the nostalgic lane of tales heard, or read, or, on the rare occasion, seen.

Hossain homes in on the micro-level constraints to partly explain the causative factors of the decline. Strange as it might sound today, cotton piece-goods was Bengal's leading export item, including in the eighteenth century. The author provides figures to stress the importance of cotton textiles to Bengal's export industry: "in 1766 they formed 75.3 per cent of the (East India) Company's total exports; their proportion rose in 1772-3 to 80.4 per cent. Even as late as 1801-2 they provided 50 per cent of the total exports of the Company and the private mer-



**The Company Weavers of Bengal**  
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Hameeda Hossain

chants." And, yet, this flourishing and profitable industry started to decline as the eighteenth century was drawing to a close, in a large measure because the producers were getting enough of a raw deal from various quarters for them to gradually abandon their age-old profession.

Hossain's findings explain the nature of this exploitation: "Although arang employees worked for a fixed salary which ranged in 1792 from Rs 5 for the junior employee to Rs 50 for the gumashas, it became customary to extract a fee for all transactions from weavers. Some of these changes were recognized as legitimate, such as the muhris' fees for maintaining the weavers' accounts; the gumashas also added a commission for brokerage. In addition the weaver often had to make illegitimate payments or bribes before his cloth could be selected. These invisible charges added to actual costs. In order to accommodate the demands of the intermediaries within the price structure dictated at the Factory, the weavers were forced to debase the quality of the product. In the long run, the financial interests of the arang employees interfered with the Company's procurement, which was not conducive to efficient commercial management. As long as their purpose was served by the siphoning off a part of the weavers' earnings, they made little effort to organize production more systematically or to improve the weavers' capacity to produce."

Hossain spends much time on the weavers' lives, including the social and personal intricacies that shaped them. There were both Hindu and Muslim weavers, whose division of labour was based on gender, age and caste. From among a long list of such division and the attendant associations, complexities, and nuances of relationship, a few are cited here for providing a kaleidoscope on them. All classes of weaver women in Bengal were engaged in

the part-time activity of yarn spinning. The Muslim weavers were divided into jamdani tantis and the inferior julahas. The Hindu weavers fell in a low category of nine castes known as nabasudras. They were classified into two major castes, the higher status tantis and the jugis. Hossain elaborates on some of their specification: "As a rule, caste panchayats regulated the social relationships within each caste. But it is not certain to what extent these relationships were a function of economic activities. If the formalized structure of the guilds was not applied uniformly in all castes, labour control and trade interests were maintained through various methods. The Dhaka rafugars were tightly organized and kept their skills strictly within the patrilineal family by refusing to teach their daughters' children, whilst other embroiderers such as chikandas, had no such inhibitions."

The weavers were exploited, by both the locals and the foreign traders. However, their lack of organizational strength and bargaining power contributed significantly to their failure to evolve an effective social organization that could effectively fight for their interests. This, in spite of a community of interests that developed among the weavers and other artisans who supplied their goods for the export trade. Hossain believes that, among other reasons, the social divisions of labour that were heightened by the presence of intermediaries prevented a link-up between different occupational groups. As a result, "While different forms of resistance were adopted there was little possibility of the weavers being able to organize a collective response.... Some of them sought to escape the system by migrating from their villages and arangs or deserting their occupations." There! The beginning of a steep decline of a legendary profession was signaled.

The East India Company comes in for some intense scrutiny by the author for doing essentially what it was in India for: to make money by exploiting the locals. Her conclusion in correlating the Company's rise in power and influence and the decline of the Bengal weavers is incisive: "It was not until the early nineteenth century that Bengal's textiles became redundant to the Company's commerce. Until then, as the export sector had evolved in response to overseas demand, it had provided a profitable commerce to European commercial enterprises. This had induced the East India Company to involve itself directly with the system of procurement and production. Yet this interaction did not contribute to the development of the production sector, for in the last decades of the eighteenth century it was unable to keep pace with expanding demand. It coincided with the period when the East India Company emerged as a major buyer of textiles and acquired political and administrative power. It was thus able to influence economic activity and to provide a centralized direction to trade and production. Yet in spite of its increased procurement targets, the results were a reduction in output, deteriorating conditions of producers and a decay of the arangs." The Company Weavers of Bengal will be a delight to history buffs and a trip back in time, providing readers an opportunity to ruminate over what Bengal once had, and then lost.

Shahid Alam is Head, Media and Communication Department, Independent University Bangladesh (IUB).

## ESSAY

### J. C. Jack's Faridpur

SUBRATA KUMAR DAS

People interested in Faridpur find Anandanath Roy's (1856-1926) work *Faridpuri Itihas* (History of Faridpur) as a most helpful book. Published in two volumes, one in 1905 and the second in 1915, the book is regarded as the most ancient resource to know about the land and life of a fertile district of the country. The recent editions of that old book have added much meat for interested literati. Two editions from Dhaka, one edited by the renowned journalist Abu Sayeed Khan, comprising the first volume only, in 2005, and the other edited by Dr Tapan Bagchi, comprising both the volumes, in 2007 drew many to the century-old historic document. In between those two editions, another one, edited by Kamal Chowdhury and comprising two volumes as well as some more old articles on Faridpur, came out from Kolkata, and drew proper praise. In respect of the research on Faridpur, the name of Prof Abdus Sobhan, an author of some anthologies on Faridpur, could be a worthy name to mention. With its many merits, the tilted arrangement and writing of Anandanath Roy's book could be surpassed by another one which is hardly mentioned. A laborious and truly researched work, *The Economic Life of a Bengal District*, is, to speak frankly, a great study on the district in particular, and on the whole of Bangladesh in general.

During the first decade of the twentieth century a survey was conducted by the erstwhile British government in many Bengal districts. The survey in Faridpur, comprising present-day Faridpur, Gopalgonj, Madaripur, Shariatpur and Rajbari districts, started in 1906 and came to an end after four years. A group of some two hundred university graduates were deployed in the project and eventually the result was a 4000-volume 'Record of Right' relating to the two million people of the

district. The Economic Life of a Bengal District was based on facts and information available from the survey reports.

J C Jack was an officer of the British civil service. A settlement officer, Jack had to join the Royal Field Artillery afterwards on a temporary basis. But before leaving for the First World War he sent the manuscript for publication lest he failed to come back. The book was published in 1916.

The chapters of the book are: The District and its inhabitants, their homes and manner of life; The Domestic Budget; Income and Economic Condition of the People as Revealed by the Statistics; Indebtedness; and Taxation. In the appendix the author has explained how the huge data was collected and synchronised.

The most interesting feature of Jack's book is the socio-economic picture of the times. It gives minute details of the land and people and their living styles at the time. He did not miss mentioning what sort of clothes the people put on then, what furniture they used, what food they took, et cetera. And thus the book has been an enormously worthy read.

The first chapter tells of the people, households and living style of the locality. The author mentions that the district, having a population of 2,121,914 and an area of 2464 square miles, does not have any roads at all. Brick-built houses are mostly unavailable. People move to their neighbours' homes along footpaths. While making these descriptions, Jack makes a comparison of the houses of Faridpur with those of England for which it proves more interesting to people learning about life in this plainland.

The observant nature of the writer generates some more excitement for the readers as very frequently he peeps into nooks and corners to add some novel observation. He points out the living patterns of the rich as well as the poor, as also of

Hindus and Muslims. He notes: 'Most of the poorer houses are thatched, a very large portion of the cultivators now roof two or three of their huts with sheets of corrugated iron, which are sold in the larger markets. In some of the parts of the country tin-roofed houses are a common feature of the landscape and almost every homestead has at least one hut roofed with tin; but communications are so bad in the interior that, away from the single line of railway or the steamer routes on the big rivers, transport is a great difficulty and tin roofs are much rarer (page 23)'.

Jack has also made his study rich through bringing in geographical as well as historical references. He says: 'Faridpur is situated in the upper part of the Ganges delta. The Ganges delta is a very particular formation. It is absolutely flat and was in remote times a shallow lagoon of great extent on the edge of the Bay of Bengal.' And thus the survey report becomes more than a survey and turns into an excellent read for common people too.

Let me finish this write-up with a comment by J C Jack alias James Charles Jack on Bengalis. He asserts: 'The Bengali is certainly the cleanest race on earth. High or low, rich and poor, old and young, men and women, people of all occupations and all conditions bathe everyday, submerging themselves even in the coldest weather from head to foot (page 20).' What could be more uplifting than reading a book that includes such an appraisal of Bengalis by an Englishman in British colonial times!

We are sure *The Economic Life of a Bengal District*, published by The Oxford University Press, will prove educative for readers in the coming days.

Subrata Kumar Das, author of [www.bangladeshinovels.com](http://www.bangladeshinovels.com) could be reached at [subratakdas@yahoo.com](mailto:subratakdas@yahoo.com)

Loneliness stretching into the sea

*Nausheen Rahman finds God in a tale*

I wanted to read a serious book, but constraints of time made me scan my bookshelves for one that I'd be able to finish quickly. Among the several as-yet unread books, I happily found Marquez's *The Story of a Shipwrecked Sailor*. Besides its thinness (106 pages), what prompted my choice was the title. I've always enjoyed tales about the sea and seamen (Robinson Crusoe and Swiss Family Robinson being childhood favorites, and later, *The Old Man and The Sea*). Moreover, the blurb said it was the author's first major work; this was another feature I found interesting. Then there was the fact that this was a true story.

The book is a story retold by Marquez. Luis Alejandro Velasco, a twenty-year-old Colombian sailor, had recounted his experiences to Marquez, who was a staff reporter for *El-Espectador*, a Bogota newspaper. Marquez says the book is "a journalistic reconstruction". Velasco was one of the eight crew members who had been swept overboard the Caldas, a Colombian destroyer, in 1955. He was the only one who survived. The account first appeared in the Bogota daily that year, and was published as a book in 1970.

The preface, aptly called "The Story of This Story", is in itself, a very exciting piece of writing. It's like reading two different stories in one book, both about the same person and the dramatic events in his life. The preface tells us about a dictatorial regime and the unfortunate consequences of a young sailor's unwavering honesty in his narration. It describes what happened to Velasco after his rescue, while the book is a day-to-day record of his perilous, gruelling experiences at sea.

The foreword also gives us the inside story of Velasco, who had become a hero on returning alive after ten days on a life-raft in the Caribbean sea, and how because of political reasons, his fortune changed. According to him, in his case, "heroism consisted solely of not allowing himself to die of hunger and thirst for ten days". From being a national hero (one who had acquired a lot of money and glory), Velasco soon became a non-entity. He had to pay a huge price for his refusal to change or censor his story. Marquez sees his photograph after a few months, and thinks he "looked as if life had passed through him, leaving behind the serene aura of a hero who had had the courage to dynamite his own statue."

Velasco's story begins as their ship departs from Mobile, Alabama, to return to Colombia. His skill as a chronicler comes to the fore when he begins talking about what happens after he and seven other sailors fall into the water. Luckily, he finds a life-raft. He looks on, helpless and petrified, as his crew members drown. He spends ten days struggling against the forces of nature; his encounters with sharks, a massive turtle, sea-gulls, hunger and thirst overtake one another.

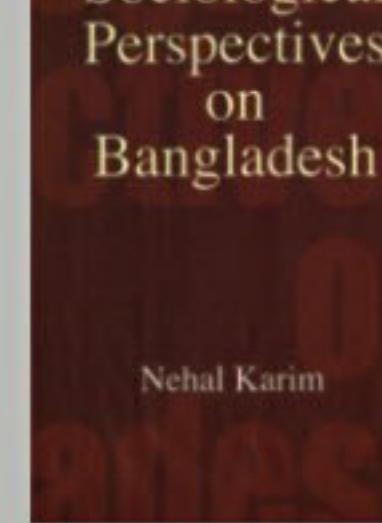
Every detail of his breath-stopping adventure is thrilling and chills the bones. We read on, with nail-biting concern, as he fights not just with death (in various forms), but also with hope, hope that comes and goes.

At the outset, he feels sure he will be rescued. Then, as the days pass, he goes through despair and hope, in turns. He becomes delirious and has hallucinations, and at one point, the thought of dying fills him with a "strange, dim hope". The vast loneliness stretches into the sea and like the sea, while we wonder at man's capacity to endure, at his urge to live that makes him face such adverse circumstances.

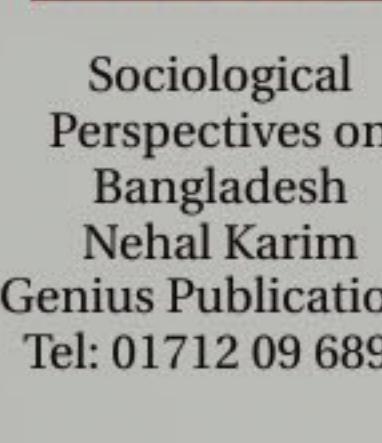
It was a near miracle how Velasco managed to overcome all his hardships and be rescued. As the book ended, despite feeling happy and relieved that he had been saved, I found myself wishing that the book had continued. Velasco's account rekindled the faith in me that God can save anyone anytime He wants, and that fortitude can be our savior in the worst of times.

Nausheen Rahman is a teacher and critic.

## BOOK CHOICE



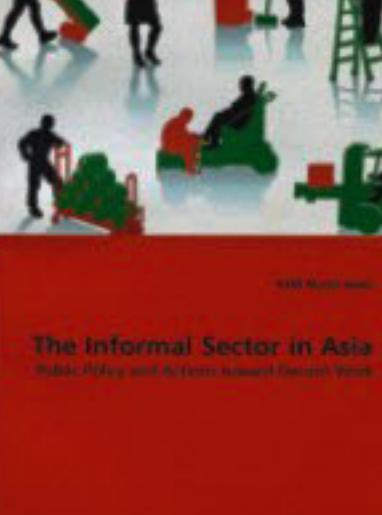
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