

# ARCADIA ON THE JALANGI

JOHN DREW

(Concluding part)

## IMPINGING REALITIES

It was not all utopian: Jones expected his researches, like his law codes, to have practical benefits. While enjoying his Arcadia, he was aware not everyone was living in a golden age. For all the endowments conferred by the Rajbari, the countryside had more than its fair share of not only pandits but of a corresponding religious manifestation, satis.

Only days before his death, in April 1794, Jones was trying to establish the nature of the Vedic sanction for sati: his wife's behaviour following his untimely death was exemplary of a more modern response, equally courageous: she burned to make his work public and sacrificed herself only on an editorial pyre.

Krishnanagar (the name often written as spoken, Kissen- or Kishna-ghur) also had more than its fair share of tigers and dacoits. A tiger-cub, as we have seen, was raised within the gates of the Joneses' estate. As for dacoity, some of it at least stemmed from the remorseless way drought, cyclones, bad harvests and famine drove the landless (and sometimes landed) poor into theft and criminality.

We see Jones employing local people in his researches and, a pittance as it would be, we can be sure none went away empty-handed. He not only gave more than his share towards famine relief (in 1788) but spent more than his own pocket would allow to support those pandits and maulvis with whom he worked unless and until he could enlist Government support for them.

In the mere decade he was in Bengal, he was fair, scrupulous and generous. All his literary work was published at his own expense and any profits given for the relief of insolvent debtors. The Joneses lived well but modestly, transmitting just so much money to England as would permit them to retire and live modestly there on an estate similar to that on the Jalangi.

Jones loathed the state of politics in England, he wanted to be independent of politicians and he declared that, if they could not live independently in England, they would live in exile on the Jalangi. They might have done that anyway but for Anna Maria's ill-health.

It is easy to mock a Briton in a well-paid job there for referring to Bengal as "the paradise of regions" but how many others of his countrymen have either then or now expressed a similar delight in the place or, for that matter, engaged with such energy and intellect in learning about the many manifestations of its culture from its people?

While Anna Maria would bravely strive to compile the good edition of his works her husband believed was the best monument to a man of letters, an immediate expression of the loss at Jones's death was seen in the unrestrained tears shed by the maulvis, both Shia and Sunni, and pandits, Vaishnav and Saivite alike, with whom he had worked. One of those pandits, SarvoruSarma Trivedi, expressed a common feeling in lines that might equally have graced a Persian or a Sanskrit poem and were copied up by the English poet Coleridge: "To you there are many like me; yet to me there is none like you, but yourself; there are numerous groves of night flowers; yet the night flower sees nothing of the moon, but the moon".

## HERITAGE POSTSCRIPT

The matter of Sir William Jones should properly be left on that note but what if a contemporary, if less imaginative, traveller on the heritage trail in Bengal asks exactly where it was on the Jalangi the moon shone on Anna Maria as she moved among the

that includes much cartographical information about the district as it was in those days.

The left hand side of Rennell's map is bounded by Nadiya and the Hooghly river and framed by a line giving the latitude readings. Evidently because where he is living is so close to the edge of the map, this co-ordinate catches Jones's eye: he writes quite specifically to Spencer: "On the left hand, in lat. 23° 25' now sits your friend on a beautiful dry plain near Crishna-nagar... on the banks of a charming serpentine river...". There is no longitude reading on that part of the map to catch Jones's eye and so he does not give it.

Rennell's map indicates that the Jalangi had a lot more water in it then and a lot more islands, the great loop in it to the north between Krishnanagar and its mouth opposite Nadiya being marked by two channels with an island in the middle and swamp (not dry plain) immediately below it. Since all Jones's contact is with Krishnanagar and Nadiya, it is most unlikely



200-year-old Mansion at Maheshgunj, near Krishnanagar.

Jones to be "near" Krishnanagar and sometimes "close to" the celebrated college or university of Brahmins at Nadiya. There are less than ten miles by road (and ferry) between the two towns.

Because the Jalangi makes a great loop between the towns, though with some shift in its course since Rennell drew his map, we can fairly surely put our finger on the two places at lat. 23° 25' where the Joneses' estate was most likely to have been situated. One is near Krishnanagar where the river flows northward after leaving the town behind; the other is close to Nadiya (though still with a Krishnanagar address) where the river, having looped south again, turns westward to its confluence with the Bhagirathi.

At the latter point there is an estate at lat. 23° 25' that has been an estate for at least the past 200 years, being occupied by the Pal Chaudhuri family for three generations and before that by three generations of the Savi family of indigo planters. This is at Maheshgunj (on or about the site of the Sabajnamarked on Rennell's map of the Hoogly river) and its extensive mango orchard surrounds a neo-Classical mansion thought to have been built early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Possibly John Angelo Savi, one time doctor to Tipu Sultan, whose prolific family managed or owned many indigo estates in

Bengal, built it when he spread out there from Kulberia in or about 1820, though it is just possible somebody else had built it earlier. Whoever built it, they could well have chosen the estate for its location on a prime pre-existing site, pulling down an old mud and thatch bangla already thereto make way for a more imposing building designed to last a couple of hundred years.

There is no sign of any such estate at the alternative latitude position on the river some four miles closer to Krishnanagar, just south and short of the hospital outpost of Shaktinagar. That means nothing: history and geography are full of tricks that lead us a merry dance and Bengal's rivers, which have hitherto led the choric dance hereabouts, quickly wash away the habitations of mud and figures of clay, even the goddess, they perennially throw up on their ever-changing banks.

[Sources: *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, vol. II, ed. Garland Cannon; James Rennell's *Bengal Atlas*; *The Banks of the Bhagirathi*, Calcutta Review, vol. VI; *Orientalist Jones*, by Michael J. Franklin]

John Drew is a poet from Cambridge who also writes about cricket, most recently in the December 2016 issue of the ESPN Cricket Monthly. He was travelling in rural Bengal recently and on returning home started to look into the history of one small patch of it.



The Jalangi at Maheshgunj, a mile from the confluence with the Bhagirathi.

flora and fauna of their retreat?

We know the potters of Ghurni, give or take some slithering away of the serpentine river, are where they were in the time of the Joneses. But where was it the Joneses lived out their pastoral myth and from which the world first came to know of *Sakuntala*?

Jones's letters do provide a few clues. Most crucially he tells Spencer to look at James Rennell's map of the Ganges Delta, one of four in that particular 1781 edition

his estate would have been on the right Kasimbazar Island bank of the river or, for that matter, upstream beyond the colony of potters. Moreover, though making use of the river, he would also have wanted to be able to avail himself of the tree-lined road running between Krishnanagar and the ferry crossing to Nadiya. Therefore, the estate would have been on the left bank.

The Joneses' bangla was essentially a place of quiet retirement sometimes said by

# Our Muktijuddho and the Americans

QUAZI MOSTAIN BILLAH

Prof. Mahmudul Huque concludes his book *From Autonomy to Independence: The United States, Pakistan and Emergence of Bangladesh* (Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd. India, 2014) observing: "To sum up, from the beginning American perception, policy and role displayed a basic animus towards East Bengal's long struggle for independence. Concerned with their ideological and strategic goals in the Cold War, American policy makers often failed to appreciate the real nature of Bengali demand for self determination, and they never bothered to probe into the wishes of the people in general. Washington's policy in this regard conformed to the overall framework of US posture in the Third World which showed a marked tendency to suspect democratic and nationalist movements as potentially detrimental to American interests". What can be more ironic than these "ideological and strategic goals"? The champion of democracy suspecting a democratic movement! If we decide to call a spade a spade, what words would best describe American stance with regard to the Third World? Outrageously inhuman? Noxious self seeking? Blatant power-mongering?

In drawing his picture of American policy for the place and period under question, Dr. Huque has refrained from using any strong word as his work is basically an academic endeavor. He has recently retired as Professor of History from the University of Chittagong. But in telling his story, he shows no bias other than respecting academic rigor. In times of need, he has navigated through wider Asian political waters to score his point. To illustrate his point that in the 70s of the last century US foreign policy in Asia was characterized by

America's warming up to undemocratic and dictatorial rulers and regimes in this region, he has referred to numerous instances of American political meddling into the affairs of others. However, American history shows that there was a domestic opposition to American administration's policy as well.

Dr. Huque's conclusion runs: "Due to the increasing debacle in Vietnam, the American public refused to endorse concepts of American national interest as defined by the policy making elite

The very first sentence lays down Dr. Huque's theme in the book: "This is a study of American attitude and policy toward the Bengali quest for self-determination". Indeed, from a Bengali perspective the American administration took a villainous position in our war of liberation. I still remember the anxiety that gripped me when I got the news of the dispatching of the 7<sup>th</sup> fleet to the Bay of Bengal in the last days of our liberation war in 1971. I found it hard to believe that a country that loved to portray itself as a

Bangladesh's genuine political struggle and the suffering of its people made little impact on their already made up minds. The cry of the suffering Bengalis could never penetrate the well fortified walls of the White House. However, thanks to the US that it did not decide to intervene with arms directly after all. Wouldn't that have brought another Vietnam at our doorsteps?

One of the appendices is Dr. Huque's English rendering of Bangabandhu's historic and almost immutable 7 March speech. What translation can truly capture its poetry, spirit and resonance? But I don't want to suggest that his translation is weak in any sense. It certainly is all right but yet something is lost here, something more than what is 'lost in translation' But there we need to remember the limits of translation. Who can really capture the boom of thunder in words? The great value of Dr. Huque's book is that it has rolled out a true and faithful account of the history of Bangladesh. Students of Bangladesh history will always appreciate its value. In the end I feel tempted to share a piece of important information with my readers. Dr. Mahmudul Huque was a freedom fighter. I think I don't need to expand what authenticity that confers on his brilliant academic production, *From Autonomy to Independence: The United States, Pakistan and Emergence of Bangladesh*. The ink that composed the book flowed not only from the author's head but also from his heart. I would welcome a second book from him narrating his experiences of the battlefield where he fought.

Mahmudul Huque's *From Autonomy to Independence the United States, Pakistan and Emergence of Bangladesh* is published by Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, India.



The Nixon administration was widely criticised for its close ties with the military junta led by General Yahya Khan.

and clamoured for a more humane American role in world affairs. The Nixon-Kissinger policy towards the Bangladesh liberation war, which proved a total failure, reinforced this trend leading to the emergence of human rights issue as a very significant element in American policy in subsequent years". If the author's reading is correct, then American foreign policy has changed as it has "tilted" towards more humane issues like "human rights". But, I wonder how many readers would concur with Dr. Huque's view on positive change in American foreign policy and not regard it as somewhat naive.

protector of the free world could send its military to stop another country fighting for its freedom. Even today, US role during our liberation war seems to me to have been an unpardonable betrayal of humanity. A few of the senators, a section of the US press and the US public in general, of course, played a sympathetic and humane role and that gesture greatly redeems US policy makers' heartlessness in 1971.

My impression on the situation is that in the sphere of global politics the mighty players like the US play their own games, creating their own rules. The case of



Tropical Gardening, by Paul Klee (1923); watercolor and oil transfer drawing on paper, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

## POOR MAN EATING

KAISER HAQ

Were I a painter  
I am sure  
My signature theme would be  
The title of this poem.  
The sun races to the zenith,  
Imperious as an oriental autocrat.  
The poor man crouches  
In imitation Tommy Hilfiger rags  
In the dwindling shade  
Of a denuded tree.

His hands cradle  
A bowl of fired earth—  
It could be an Ouija board  
To conjure up goodies,  
Courtesy of the weak of conscience.  
And when they come,  
How he falls to it!  
Eyes focused in mystic concentration,  
Left arm protectively around  
The pile of comestibles,  
As right hand shovels them  
Into an eager mouth.

I would paint the scene  
Over and over  
In luscious oil:  
The painted proliferation  
Might work magic,  
Converting seeming impossibility  
Into palpable reality:  
All the world's poor  
Men and women  
Gathered as if on the mythic day  
Of final reckoning,  
On this lowly earth,  
Devouring earthly fare:  
O the gods would come down  
To bless and share!

Kaiser Haq is Bangladesh's leading poet. The poem was first published in 'Pariah and Other Poems' (Bengal Lights: Dhaka). Reprinted by permission.