

Stories from Life and Literature

FARAH GHUZNAVI

Glancing nervously at the dogs that lay basking in the winter sunshine, I tried to move ahead with confidence, telling myself that the venerable Tollygunge Club would never allow their clientele anywhere near animals that hadn't had their rabies shots. But I needn't have worried, not one of the canines raised its head as I walked past.

The dogs were the only ones looking lethargic in a place that was buzzing with activity, almost electric with anticipation. *The Times of India* (TOI) Literature Festival, well established in its annual Delhi incarnation, had finally come to Kolkata!

For its inaugural version in November 2018, the festival was planned as a one-day event. And it had what the Festival Director, Vinita Nangia, described as a singular focus on literature, unadulterated by the bells and whistles that characterise some other lifests. To make the most of that one day, TOI had planned "40 sessions and up to 45 hours of literary talk, discussions and workshops by Indian and international authors." And the event certainly lived up to its billing.

Along with Bangladeshi writers Selina Hussain and Anisul Hoque, I was attending the extravaganza. But as a participant on two panels, there was little time for me to take advantage of the discussions simultaneously underway at four locations set amidst the lush greenery of the venue.

At one session I attended, Bengali film director Srijit Mukherji discussed the challenges of bringing to celluloid the modern-day adaptation of Sankar's iconic novel *Chowringhee*, re-titled *Shah Jahan Regency*. Mukherji's other offerings have included the recent *Ek Je Chhilo Raja* based on the mysterious story of the Bhawal Raja, which features Bangladesh's own Jaya Ahsan (who was also attending the TOI festival).

On a related note, I had been amazed to find household names like Sankar and Shirshendu on the Festival programme. The fame of these writers is such that most readers of Bangla novels refer to them by a single name, no

further identification being deemed necessary. And although Sankar himself was unable to join the discussion with Srijit Mukherji, I witnessed his appearance at the inaugural session of the TOI Festival, where another household name in India, Ruskin Bond, was receiving a special award for his contributions to literature.

Bond regaled the audience with amusing vignettes, sharing the trade secret of how he used thinly-disguised members of his extended family as inspiration whenever he ran out of characters. He took care to press into service only those whom he rarely encountered, he said — so there was no

coverage (now close to 100%), and the higher per capita incomes that Bangladeshi citizens have achieved, along with what is currently one of the highest economic growth rates in the world — developments that Indian audiences are often unaware of.

In a serendipitous coincidence, I also encountered Vivek Shanbhag, whose debut short story collection, intriguingly titled *Ghachar Ghochar*, has received rave reviews, and got him to sign a copy of the book. I was struck by his modest, soft-spoken manner. It is always a pleasure to meet a writer who remains so down-to-earth despite achieving success.



danger of being held to account for taking such liberties! That gave me a few ideas...

The Bangladesh panel, moderated by Indian poet Prabal Basu, discussed the continuing cultural and emotional ties between Bengalis on both sides of the India-Bangladesh border. Selina Hossain encouraged Indian Bengalis to fight for their linguistic identity, discussing how, and at what cost, the Bangla language had taken its rightful place in the erstwhile East Bengal. Anisul Hoque provided a more updated picture of Bangladesh as it is today, peppering his literary anecdotes with statistics. He touched on sanitary latrine

My other panel, about the many facets of a woman, comprised a lively set of participants: India's first female crime journalist (Rashmi Saksena), an expert in the ancient Eastern erotic literatures (Seema Anand), a popular blogger and novelist (Kiran Manral), and myself. The session was moderated by Nazia Erum, whose book on the challenges of parenting a Muslim child in India today addresses important issues of discrimination and bullying.

Swapping stories about how we came to be the writers, women and misfits that we are, resulted in considerable hilarity — as well as some passionate discussions, which I suspect

the panelists enjoyed just as much as the audience seemed to.

Notwithstanding her research on the Kama Sutra as a text on women's issues, Seema's happy marriage of three decades presented an interesting contrast to her mother's choice of three marriages over *her* lifetime! And unusually, Seema's grandmother and all her grandmother's sisters were educated working women, all of whom (bar one) married for love. Her grandmother's youngest sister was a gynaecologist who divorced her wealthy husband because he was repeatedly unfaithful, an unusual choice for an Indian woman of that era.

Rashmi discussed some of the challenges she had faced as the first woman covering the crime beat for a major newspaper in 1971. It was clear that she took pride in being a pioneer, and that too, very much on her own terms: "I didn't wear jeans, I didn't smoke, and I didn't try to be 'one of the guys'." And when my editor asked me, 'How can you cover a riot in a sari and heels?' I showed him, by doing just that...

Coming from a conservative family, Nazia explained how a simple practice introduced by her mother had made it easier for her to consider herself an equal to the men in her family. "Ammma always ensured that my brother and I shared the responsibility for laying the table during meal times. If one of us set down the plates and glasses, the other had to put out the cutlery." It was a small thing, but one that clearly made a big difference in terms of shaping Nazia into the person that she is today.

Kiran had us all in stitches, confessing that she was far from the traditional Indian domestic goddess. As she said, more often than not, of the two tiffin boxes (for snack break and lunch break) that her son takes to school every day, the first invariably contains a jam sandwich. Given the casual cruelty that children are capable of, one day her offspring was targeted with an attempted insult along the lines of "How come your mother sends you

out with only a jam sandwich every single day?"

The boy taunting Kiran's son then proceeded to list all the delicacies that *his* mother put into his snack-box every day. The response was not quite what the bully had expected. His eight-year-old "victim" coolly responded by saying, with equal provocation and considerable pride, "Well, *my* mother writes books. What does *yours* do?" And that was, not surprisingly, the end of the discussion!

From the discussion of family anecdotes to the wider issues of women's roles in society, the conversation flowed fast and sometimes furious. Given the final word in our discussion, I shared my realisation that when I write stories, it is the outliers who interest me most.

For example, if we look at ten people, men or women, who are facing a similar situation — whether dealing with a violent spouse, or being unable to live up to society's expectations due to fertility issues — eight of them will react in ways that may be considered fairly typical. Most often, that involves being broken down by circumstances, and understandably so.

But there is always that one person (or sometimes two) who finds another way of coping with the situation, however painful it is. Someone who is able to rise above the challenges he or she faces. And I suspect it is the day when those one or two exceptions that so fascinate me become at least half of the total number, that we will see meaningful social change underway.

After that enjoyable discussion, it seemed a fitting postscript to our session when a young audience member told me later how the discussion had led her to the realization that "a woman must discover herself, and not be invented by others." In the end, I believe that her statement holds true for each and every one of us — whether man, woman or child.

Farah Ghuznavi is a writer, translator and development worker.

REVIEWS

History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives- Vol. I and II

Edited by Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti. ISBN 978-984-34-4520-9. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018

REVIEWED BY SONIA NISHAT AMIN

History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives (up to c. 1200 CE)- Vol. I & II, edited by renowned historians of ancient and medieval Bengal, Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti, will evoke keen interest among the academic community and general readers. Many decades had passed since the publication of the first such study in the 1940s under the editorship of R.C. Majumdar and Jadunath Sarkar, viz. the classic *History of Bengal*. As pointed out by A.R. Mallick in the foreword to the three volumes of *History of Bangladesh 1701-1971*, published in 1992:

"Nearly half a century has passed since the celebrated *History of Bengal* was published by the University of Dhaka. In the meantime a great mass of new information has come to light, new knowledge has accumulated, techniques of writing history have further advanced and new researches and interpretations of historical events have put many of our established theories and views to doubt. Hence there was a strong feeling among the scholars and general readers that the history of Bengal ought to be re-written in the light of the latest historiographical developments..."

The volumes being reviewed here is a part of the series on a comprehensive history of the region. The first part of the ambitious project- three volumes edited by Sirajul Islam under the title *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971* was published in 1992, and twenty six years elapsed before the prequel could be published.

In the introduction to the *History of Early Bengal*, the editors have clarified certain terms which are crucial to any conceptualization of the region's historiography. For instance, the term "early Bengal" has been clarified at some length because it has been deemed appropriate in resolving the problem of nomenclature due to blurred boundaries. The volumes deal with the nation state of Bangladesh and states of West Bengal and Tripura in India, and parts of Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, as the case may be. The editors point out in the introduction, by using the term Early

Bengal: "we go beyond the boundaries of the nation-state." (Introduction, XXVI)

It is not possible to do justice to this work, the collaborative effort of scholars from all over the world, each renowned in his or her field, in a brief review. Suffice it to say, that the work is well worth the anticipation engendered.

Divided into 12 chapters in volume I subsumed under the divisions "Archaeology, Political History, Polity" ; and 20 in volume II devoted to "Society, Economy, Culture," the anthology covers the entire range of social institutions in their interplay with the land and its geography, from the earliest times to circa 1200. The topics covered in Volume I include historical geography, anthropological history, archaeological sites, and political history. Volume II devoted to society, economy and culture, contains chapters such as: everyday life in early Bengal, life of women, issues of Varna and Jati, agricultural technology and monetary history; religions, art, architecture, manuscripts and linguistic developments. A cursory glance reveals that new topics (i.e. historical geography, fiscal history, agricultural technology, gender history, linguistic history, maritime and cultural linkages) – are incorporated along with new techniques and interpretations.

As a history enthusiast teaching history for a long time, I read several chapters of the two volumes with a keen interest. The introduction written by the editors Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti, sets the stage for the ensuing chapters in a thought provoking manner. The first chapter on historical geography by Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Aksadul Alam, deals with a relatively new branch of history.

Many archaeological sites have been excavated in the latter half of the 20th century and the first quarter of the 21st. The amazing corpus of information gleaned from these new sites, tools and methods of excavation, investigation and analysis, inform the chapters devoted to archaeology. Bishnupriya

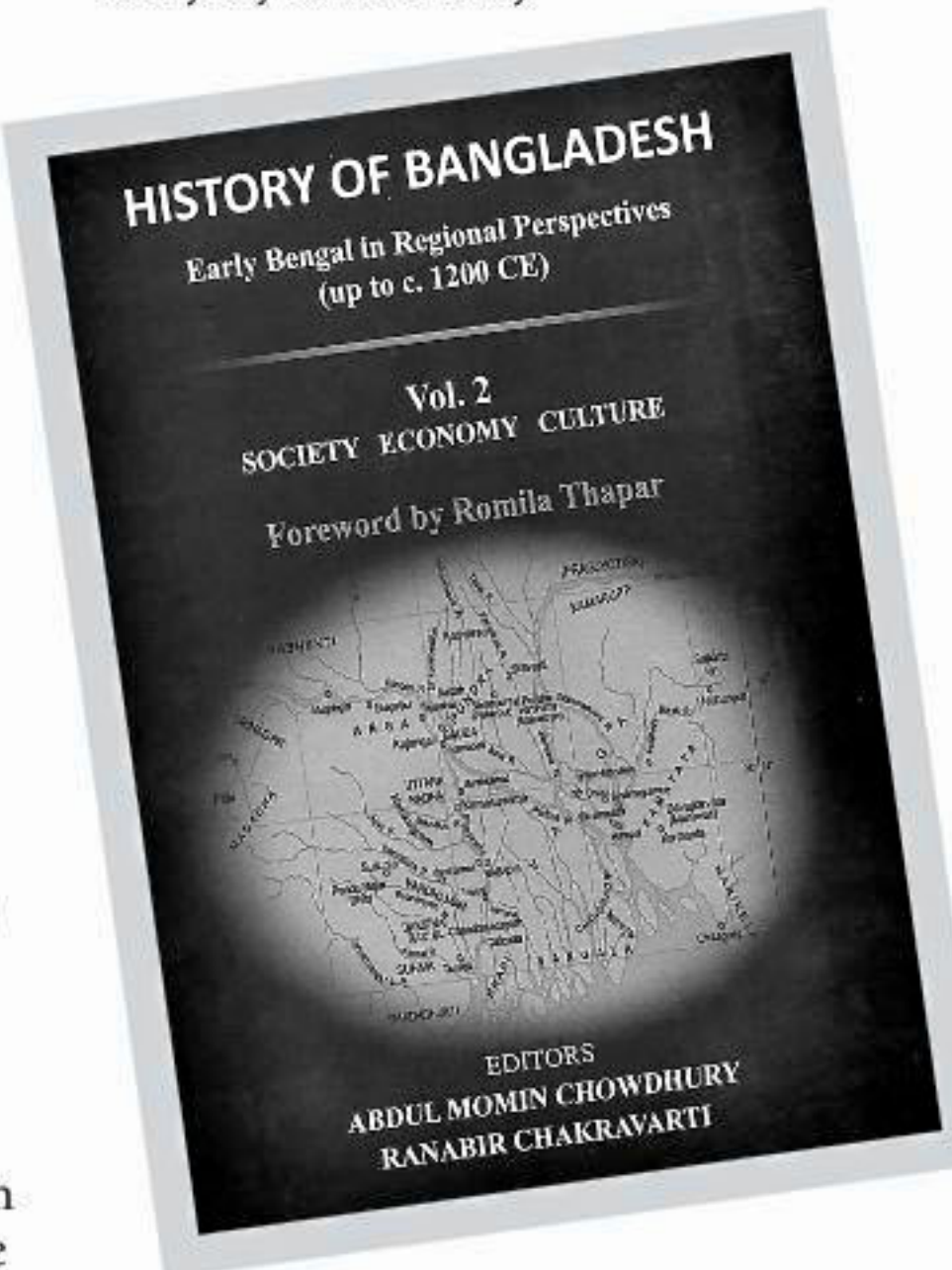
Basak provides a succinct introduction to the subject.

Ranabir Chakravarti concludes Volume I with an incisive essay, "State Formation and Polity." Through a novel treatment of the subject he enables the reader to view the history of the rise and fall of disparate dynasties through the theoretical perspective of power and state formation. This chapter will be a lasting contribution to the scholarship on early statehood in Bengal.

As a practitioner of socio- cultural and gender history, I turned eagerly to volume II – Society, Economy, Culture. "Everyday Life in Early

the human population gets. Chapter 3 and an appendix following this focus exclusively on women's role, status and their relationship to social institutions. "Social Life of Women," written by the pioneering scholar in women's history in Bangladesh, Shahanara Hussain, brings in a comprehensive women's history in early Bengal. Observations are corroborated by the rich textual and archaeological evidence collected by Professor Hussain. However, one would have liked a more elaborate introduction and a clarification regarding the time indicated by the phrase "contemporary sources" at various points (e.g. - p.8, paragraphs 1, 2, 3). As the period covered here spreads across several centuries, the clarification becomes important. There is, moreover, a preponderant reliance on the *Manu Samhita* as source material in the chapter. Also, subheadings might have aided in organizing the wealth of information presented. At times the presentation becomes too narrative. For instance when the author says, "Practice of seclusion was prevalent in royal families," the reader would like to know when this was prevalent, where exactly and if possible, why?

The chapter above is followed by an excellent article titled, "Social History of Women in Ancient Times: Emergent Methodological and Historiographical Issues," by Nupur Dasgupta which should have been included as a chapter rather than an appendix. Dasgupta's analysis applies to the writing of women's history of any period, ancient, medieval or modern. The author traces developments in this relatively new branch of history- the sources, interpretations/theories, methodologies of writing that the sub-discipline has forged into being. The writer points out that the first breakthrough from stereotypical discussion of women by (male) historians, came in the 1960s when scholars such as Sukumari Bhattacharji emphasized the centrality of women's lives by rescuing their history from the margins. Dynamic historical texts and



Bengal" by Suchandra Ghosh and Sayantan Pal is a well organized read covering major aspects of daily life in the period under review. However, photographs would have been relevant here. Kunal Chakrabarti enriches the volume with his scholarship on Brahmanism in an indigenous context in his chapter Brahmanical Religions.

The history of women has been accorded an important place in the volume. This addresses the tokenism encountered in most works where a cursory acknowledgement is all that half

interpretations were henceforth undertaken. Dasgupta provides a brief but analytical narration of the notable contributions made by these scholars in reconstructing women's lives. The essay will be of interest to scholars who study women in any time period.

The section on Economy contains three chapters: Economic Life: Agrarian and Non-Agrarian Pursuits by Ranabir Chakravarti; Agricultural Technology by Md. Shahinur Rahman; and Media of Exchange: Reflections on the Monetary History by Susmita Basu Majumdar. Perhaps for the first time, these provide the reader, with an overview of the economic conditions of early Bengal, in a single location.

The chapters on sculpture (including frieze art) offer fresh insights not only on new material, but also into interpretations (iconography). Four chapters in Volume II dwell on sculpture – as it was the leading and most prevalent art form of the period in the region.

Any discussion of the origin and development of Bangla literature starts with the *Charyapadas* – a collection of mystical songs and poems in the Buddhist Vajrayana tradition during the Pala Empire. Heretofore, only a few of these palm-leaf manuscripts had been unearthed dating back to the efforts of Haraprasad Shastri in 1916. Recently Syed Mohammad Shahed created a stir in the academic community by unearthing a trove of *Charyapad* manuscripts. His *Charyapada* (chapter 18) is thus a rich contribution to the volume and the cultural history of early medieval Bengal.

In concluding, I would like to say these two volumes present the findings of the latest research on the given topic gathered with the most refined tools available to the historian today. The anthology will become a classic in its own right.

Sonia Nishat Amin (Professor, Dept of History, University of Dhaka) specialises in the study of gender and culture in colonial Bengal.