INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present work is to give an introductory account of social life in Bengal from the time of the initial conquest by the Mughals to Jahangir's death, covering roughly the first half-century of Mughal rule. The two landmarks in political history have been chosen because they conveniently demarcate a socially significant period. This period witnessed the emergence of new forces which deeply influenced the development of the Bengali people. The first part of the present treatise attempts to work out in detail the implications of these new forces. The second describes the social life of the period and analyses its bases.

The connotation of the term 'social history' is somewhat vague and hence an explanation of the sense in which it has been used in the present context seems called for. Its scope has been defined "as the daily life of the inhabitants of the land in past ages". "This includes," explains Trevelyan, "the human as well as the economic relation of different classes to one another, the character of family and household life, the conditions of labour and of leisure, the attitude of man to nature, the culture of each age as it arose out of these general conditions of life, and took ever changing forms in religion, literature and music, architecture, learning and thought". In short, the scope of social history is as wide as the past activities of man in society. Accordingly, the present work attempts to cover all that was significant in the life of the period under review.

A work on social history has to deal with diverse aspects of a past epoch. So it presupposes a certain amount of spadework on a number of distinct subjects. On most of the numerous aspects of mediaeval Bengali life this necessary spadework has not been done. Still enough materials have been already unearthed to justify an attempt to reconstruct the social history of Bengal in the early Mughal days. The contemporary Persian chronicles, the travellers' accounts, the literature of the period and the religious texts of the Vaishnavas, the Tantrikas and the
Sahajiyas together constitute a considerable volume. Full justice can be done to the subject only if these sources are worked upon for a number of years, preferably by specialists in the various branches. Yet at the same time it seems also possible to sketch a rough outline on the basis of a close scrutiny of a comparatively limited amount of materials of a representative character. Pending further investigation, such an outline might serve as a workable introduction to the subject. The present volume, meant only to be an introduction of this sort, is hence based on a comparatively few contemporary works selected from the total number available. In making this selection care has been taken to leave out nothing of any real importance, while such works as only repeat information already available in more representative ones have generally been ignored. Some of the non-contemporary works belonging to periods at the most a few decades earlier or later have also been used. In a country like Bengal where things moved rather slowly in the past, the accounts contained in non-contemporary works often present a picture substantially the same as that of a proximate epoch. But the data collected from such sources have been always checked up by a comparison with contemporary accounts.

In discussing the various topics, their relative importance has of course been kept in view. But certain aspects have been treated very briefly due to the paucity of relevant data while greater space has been devoted to comparatively less important ones as more information is available with regard to these. Besides, those facts of life which closely resembled their present-day counterparts have also been barely touched upon. Some of the topics included in this work,—Nayanyaya for instance,—are too technical to be adequately treated by any one except a specialist. With regard to these, the present work only gives faithful summaries of authoritative works on the subjects concerned. Religious texts have been studied from a common sense point of view for the collection of socially significant data. I have sought the help of specialists in interpreting the relevant passages. Still if these passages contain, as is often claimed, some esoteric meaning not obvious to the uninitiated, I must be excused for ignoring it.

A very important topic, viz., caste, had to be left out in view
of the paucity of available data. The only contemporary or near-contemporary works on the topic with any established claim to genuineness are the Chandraprabha and the Sadvaidya-Kulapanjika, two annals of the Vaidya caste. Besides, the Chandimangala of Mukundarama gives a long list of castes. All the other works dealing with caste history which are recognised as genuine belong either to a much earlier or to a much later period.

A question may pertinently be asked as to whether it is possible to delineate the social life of a people as slow-moving as the mediaeval Bengalis during any particular half-century of their history and distinguish it from their life in other proximate epochs. The answer to that question is of course partly in the negative. For the daily life of the Bengalis throughout the 16th and 17th centuries followed more or less the same unvarying pattern. But the description of the 'day to day life contained in the present work, based as it is on contemporary sources, is surely true of the period under review, though it may be nearly as true of the proximate epochs. And then there were the distinguishing features. The new forces at work, certain special trends in the religious and even in the economic life of the period, the life of the foreigners resident in this country,—in many ways different from that in the periods to follow,—together gave a distinctive character to the first half-century of Mughal rule in Bengal.

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