CHAPTER V

THE ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

I. The social classes.

One may, following Moreland, classify the various elements which constituted mediaeval Bengali society broadly under two heads: the producing and the consuming classes. Such a division fails to take note of the fact that the producing classes were at the same time the consumers of the bulk of the commodities produced in the country. But in view of the comparative insignificance of the consuming classes in the productive activities of the period, this classification may be taken as a practical basis for our study.

The zamindars and the higher government officials constituted the uppermost strata of the consuming classes. Moreland commented on the absence of any independent aristocracy, distinct from the official classes, in Mughal India. But whatever the conditions in Upper India might have been, in Bengal the zamindars and the Rajas did constitute an independent aristocracy for all practical purposes. Even those chiefs who had become mansabdar-jargirdars of the empire, suffered little change so far as their position vis-a-vis their own estates were concerned. Even the Ain-i-Akbari recognized the existence of the Bengal zamindars as a distinct class and mentioned that there were ‘zamindars of three classes’ (i.e. castes) in sarkar Fathabad. The law of escheat to which the Mughal officers were subject did not, it appears, apply in case of the Bengal zamindars who had accepted service under the emperor. When Musa Khan Masnad-i-Ala passed away, his son succeeded to the estates of the deceased almost as a matter of course and no question of escheat did arise.

The mansabdars or imperial officers who came to Bengal in the wake of the Mughal conquest appear to have been recruited almost exclusively from among non-Bengali elements, both
Indian and non-Indian. Except for the zamindars who were formally drafted into service and were often required to participate in campaigns, we do not hear in any place of Bengalis being actually given mansabs. Nor did the officers,—whose services were transferable,—settle down in Bengal. So the official class throughout our period was nothing more than a body of foreigners who came to this province only as sojourners and went back at the end of their terms of service. During their stay in Bengal they were given jagirs which they actually administered or assignments on revenue in the collection of which they occasionally participated.

The high officers did not all belong to the same category. In the Baharistan, there are repeated references to the distinction and clashes of interest between the subahdar’s men and the imperial officers. Apparently, the subahdar’s men were mansabdars placed under the viceroy’s authority, while the ‘imperial officers’ were those sent directly from the court or under imperial orders with commissions in the province. Though perhaps the latter’s status was higher and imperial ordinances were issued from time to time to safeguard their interests, the governor’s patronage secured for the former a position of comparative advantage.

The financial position of the officers was not always an easy one. Collection from the ryots in their allotted jagirs often involved considerable difficulties. Payment of the assignments on revenue was neither regular nor secured without wranglings. The presents which an officer had to send from time to time to the subahdar or the imperial court involved almost ruinous expenditure. The laws of escheat encouraged extravagance,—though a son occasionally inherited a part of his father’s property,—and Nathan’s father, for instance, left behind at his death hardly enough to cover the expenses of his funeral.

Viewed from the standpoint of the ryots or that of the economic life of the period, the highly placed men under the zamindars and local chiefs,—mostly natives of the province, both Hindus and Muslims,—occupied a position similar to that of the mansabdars, except for the fact of their being permanently settled in this land. The designations by which some of them were known suggest considerable status. Thus Nathan mentioned the ‘Peshwas’ of Musa Khan, while Manrique referred to the
‘Mapatras’ (Mahapatras) or ‘controllers of the Royal estates’ in Midnapore. The terms of service under which the zamindars’ officers were employed are not known. It is highly probable that lands were assigned to them, for land-grants were the rule of the day and even the imperial officers parcelled out jagirs among their subordinates for the latter’s maintenance.

Numerous classes of subordinate officers and clerical staff constituted an important element in Mughal officialdom. The contemporary sources bear witness to the presence of such lower officers and clerks in Bengal in large numbers. Of these, mention may first be made of junior mansabdars, whose exact status cannot be ascertained. Then there were the ahadis or gentlemen-troopers who had failed to secure a ‘mansab’. A characteristic feature of Mughal bureaucracy, the ahadis however are mentioned only once in the Baharistan and that in connection with Shahjahan’s brief period of usurpation. One wonders whether this evidence of silence indicates the presence of only a few officers of this class in Bengal. The clerical staff was surely much more numerous. Our sources refer to the mutasaddis or accountants, the mustawfis who signed and sealed, “the transactions of sales and cheques of soldiers and servants” and amils or revenue-collectors. The karkuns and qanungos, local staff connected with the collection of revenue, were figures as familiar in Bengal as in the other subahs of the empire. Besides such clerical staff, a host of petty officers constituted an integral part of the administrative machinery. Amongst these were the tarafdars whose exact functions cannot be ascertained, and the sazawals (who cannot be exactly termed officers), entrusted with such general functions as bringing soldiers together or recalling officers from their jagirs in time of emergency. Besides such employees with specific designations, the officers had under them a large body of subordinates who assisted them in their multifarious duties. These subordinates were vaguely described as the officer’s men. Some of them, however, had specific functions. Thus, for instance, at least some of the high officers had their own diwans and bakhshis, and sent special agents to the provincial courts to look after their interests. For the elephant stables in charge of the officers there were special ‘faujdars of the elephant stable’, elephant-keepers, mushrifs (inspectors) and tahvildars whose status was semi-menial.
A class, at least as important as the officers and subordinates from the numerical point of view, were the soldiers in the employ of the government (or rather of the officers) and the local chiefs. It is difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty the number of soldiers who were sent from Upper India or those who were locally recruited. But in view of the constant wars and rebellions which characterised the first half-century of Mughal rule in Bengal, it seems pretty certain that the soldiery constituted no negligible proportion of the consuming classes. In the statistical tables of the sarkars of the Bengal subah given in the Ain-i-Akbari a certain number of cavalry and infantry men is mentioned against each sarkar. These numbers almost surely do not refer to the actual strength of the Bengal army, but gives a rough estimate of soldiers who could be locally recruited in case of need. Still, with regard to Bengal it is difficult to accept Mr. Moreland's suggestion that the local 'foot-soldiers' were only 'the peasantry of a particular area . . . impressed temporarily when military operations were in progress'. It appears that a substantial proportion of the local recruits consisted of skilled archers and infantry men,—the Kuch paiks and Afghan naqdis for instance,—who constituted something like a military caste. That at least some of them were paid by the government,—a fact questioned by Moreland,—is proved by the reference to the allowances of the paiks, at times 'made an addition to revenue' payable by the ryots. The soldiers maintained by the zamindars,—the men of the cavalry, the infantry and the fleet,—also must have been considerable in number. To soldiers, regular or temporarily impressed into service, one may add the camp-followers. They, however, do not seem to have constituted a distinct class, but were perhaps only a section of the local people who took to a lucrative occupation at the time of war.

The relation of the services and the soldiery with the productive activities was very tenuous. This is particularly true of our period when the government is known to have undertaken no work of development. Collection of revenue and maintenance of law and order were then the only functions of the government and its employees. In so far as a certain amount of security was essential for normal economic life, the classes mentioned above had an indirect importance in the work
of production. Beyond that their contribution in this respect was practically nil.

This was even more true of the servants and slaves who were to be found in large numbers in the establishments of the officers, the local chiefs and the Portuguese residents of the country. The services they rendered to their masters tended to no essential needs but were in the nature of luxuries. One of the chief motives in keeping a large menial staff was display. Many of the servants, however, had specific functions allotted to them. Pelsaert mentioned the horse-keeper, the carter, the farrash (steward), the masalchi, the mahut and a few others who, to be sure, were figures as familiar in the officers' households in Bengal as in those of Agra. To this list may be added the names of the mir manzil (superintendent of household), the mir saman (in charge of goods), sawkials and kahars (palanquin-bearers) mentioned in the Baharistan. It is however interesting to note that though the officers kept a numerous host of menials, the household of a rich Hindu merchant as described in the Chandimangala apparently did not have more than a few servants. The menials were all very poorly paid and often there were heavy deductions from their wages.

In the economic life of the country, the slaves occupied a position in many ways similar to that of the servants. But here were some important differences. In the first place, the slaves, unlike the servants, were articles of commerce. The slave-hunting expeditions of the Portuguese, who captured entire villages, seized pilgrims and campaigned regularly every year for such purposes, are too well known to need repetition. The Mughal officers emulated their example with success. Thus slaves were taken by the plundering army from villages in Rani Maydan's territory. Expeditions were sent to the hills to provide slaves for Nathan's sister. The numerous references to the capture of villagers during campaigns perhaps imply activities of a similar type. The slaves thus captured were of course not only exported to other parts of India and foreign countries, but also freely sold and purchased in local markets under deeds of sale sealed by the Qazi. Many of them were turned into eunuchs, of whom there were three types: Sandal, Badami and Kafur. These eunuchs often rose to positions of importance,—a thing which no ordinary menial could hope to
do,—in the services of the local chiefs. Nathan mentioned, for instance, Khwaja Sandal, the chief of Raja Satrajit's regiment. The slaves of the Portuguese at Goa, Linschoten informs us, made 'all sorts of confections and conserves..., much fyne needle works' etc. The master maintained his own family as well as the slaves on the proceeds of the sale of such articles. Cabral describing the Portuguese of Hugli mentioned 'their black women, their clever cooks, their dancing girls, their confectioners, their seamstresses and so on', who also perhaps functioned in the same way as the slaves at Goa,—a surmise which is supported by Schouten's reference to a half-caste trader of Hugli whose slaves 'had to earn their living and serve him or give him a part of their gain'. Thus at least a section of the slaves appears to have taken part in productive activities of some sort.

Mr. Moreland emphasized 'the comparative insignificance of the middle classes' in Akbar's India and drew attention to the absence of such important professions as journalism, education and law. He, however, admitted that 'this statement is possibly less applicable to Bengal than to other parts of India', and confessed his failure to speak with authority on the subject due to his ignorance of the Bengali language. As a matter of fact, Bengal in the period under review had a numerous middle class to which belonged a variety of professions. This class, of course, was different in character from its modern counterpart. But that fact in no way indicates its 'comparative insignificance' nor does Bernier's comment that 'a man must be either of the highest rank or live miserably' apply to Mughal Bengal.

At the top of the social ladder among the professional classes in Bengal stood the Brahmins,—teachers, scholars and priests,—'reverenced by the common natives more like Gods than men'. Many of them were no poor scholars but enjoyed great wealth and prestige. The Brahmin scholars seem to have adopted teaching as their usual profession. In Bowrey's time, they were 'dispersed into most villages in the Kingdom' and had 'the tuition both of the Gentues and the Orixas'. The local Rajas and zamindars gave lands and presents to the Brahmin teachers, some of whom stayed at the chieftains' courts and regaled the latter with discussions on the scriptures. To a less respected class belonged the professional priests who went about
worshipping the household deities of their disciples and received in return payments in cash and kind. Many of the Brahmans, in the opinion of the Europeans of a later period, were ‘great astrologers’. The Brahmans, called ‘grahavipras’, discussed the scriptures and prepared horoscopes for the children. Then, there were the ‘ghatak’ Brahmans or marriage-brokers who earned a living not merely through honest negotiation of marriages, but often also by a sort of blackmail casting aspersions on the family of those who did not properly reward them.

The Vaidyas or native medicine-men, who constitute a separate caste in Bengal, occupied a position of considerable importance. Mukundarama has immortalised the cunning ways and extortionate demands of his contemporary native physicians in a well-known passage. The kaviraja’s stock with the Muslim officers was very high indeed, some of them being even considered ‘Messiah-like’. Others, again, were no mere physicians but sought to reinforce their knowledge of medicine with a mastery of the astrological science. Among the Muslims, the Mulas, the teachers in the maktab and the hakims were the counterparts of the Brahmmin priests, scholars and Vaidyas. Two special sources of the Mulla’s income are mentioned in the Chandimangala: Muslim marriages and slaughter of fowls and animals. The hakims did not apparently enjoy very high status and were considered less expert than the Hindu physicians in the art of healing.

A section of the professional classes consisted of poets, musicians, dancers and the like who earned their living mainly by entertaining the rich zamindars and officers and, to a lesser degree, the public in general. Many of the famous Bengali poets of the 16th and 17th centuries—Mukundarama, Ruparama and Kshemananda for instance—were directly maintained by local chiefs. The ‘bhat’ or minstrels were similarly patronized by the zamindars. The Muslim officers of the empire coming from outside Bengal also patronized a few non-Bengali poets who composed ‘Jangnamas’ in Persian. Among the dancers and musicians patronised by the officers there were, however, both Bengalis and non-Bengalis, the ‘hulyanis’ and ‘kalawants’ being very popular with the Mughal bureaucrats. Closely associated with this class were the prostitutes who lived in segregated
quarters. "Most governors", wrote Bowrey, "... doe allow that any woman (Moore, Gentue or Ouria) unmarried may lawfully turne common Whore, ... and take her habitation among other whores in small villages separated from any married folkes houses, paying so much per mensem to the Governor ... " Besides, they also had to dance and sing before the governor and the kotwal without any remuneration.

Mukundarama also mentioned a number of poorer professions. Among these, there were besides the washermen, the barbers, the tailors, the 'hajams' (Muslim barbers who circumcised the children), the ferrymen (patni) and the like such special professions as grass-cutters, drum-beaters (to which belonged many aboriginal tribes, e.g., Pulinda, Kirata, Kol) and the Maratha quack-surgeons who operated in cases of cataract.

Quite a large number of men, both among the Hindus and the Muslims, lived on begging in the name of religion and thus constituted a parasitical class. Among the Muslims, there were besides the mendicant orders many individual recluses, some of whom even belonged to noble families. Among the Hindus, there were the Kapalikas and the professional Vairagis who lived on begging. To such a parasitical class also belonged a large number of Vaishnavas who secured a living from rent-free land-grants and performed no services in return.

Among the producing classes in the country, the peasantry was of course the most important as also the most numerous. The majority of the peasants appear to have been small-scale farmers who tilled their own land. It is a surprising fact that in the long list of the various classes of people given by Mukundarama, the landless agricultural labourer as such is nowhere mentioned. The 'beruniyas' mentioned several times appear to have been a class of unskilled labourers who might be called upon to discharge a variety of functions such as construction of dams and the cutting down of forests. But purely agricultural functions are nowhere mentioned in their connection. These facts indicate that landless agricultural labourers,—even if they constituted a class,—occupied a position of comparative insignificance. The rich farmer who had his lands tilled by a large number of labourers is also conspicuous by his absence from Mukundarama's list. The vague account of the rich ('mahajan') Vaisya who constantly worshipped Krishna and
followed agricultural pursuits may refer to the big farmer, but this indication is in no way conclusive.

Our knowledge of the manufacturing classes is much fuller. The workmen at Agra, as Pelsaert informs us, followed hereditary occupations. The conditions prevalent in Bengal till only the other day and the reference to various manufacturing groups in the Chandimangala in a way which suggests that they were mutually exclusive castes indicate that Pelsaert's remark is also applicable to Mughal Bengal. Among the manufacturing classes the weavers and the workers in metal, e.g., the blacksmiths, the goldsmiths (who were also dealers in gold) and the manufacturers of bell-metal utensils (kansari) were the more important. In the long list given by Mukundamara jewellers, carpenters, and manufacturers of conch-shell articles (sankhavanika) also appear along with the potter, the paper-manufacturer (kagaji) and the cloth-dyer (rangrej). Then there were the 'teki' who manufactured oil and the makers of various food-stuffs such as the confectioner (who did not merely make sweetmeats, but also manufactured a more important commodity, sugar), and the 'pithari' or cake-maker. Certain articles of daily need were produced by the 'chamars' who made leather goods and the 'doms' who manufactured wickerworks. Besides, there were also the producers of certain luxury articles, e.g., the flowerman, who made wreaths and bouquets and the painter of 'pats' who hawked about his wares. Later Tavernier saw at Dacca and Patna more than 2,000 persons occupied in the manufacture of stone toys meant for export.

Certain classes of artisans appear to have been either directly dependent on or closely associated with the provincial government and its officers. There are repeated references in the Baharistan to the workmen and labourers of the navy. Elsewhere, the same work refers to the government 'karkhanas' and their workers. The specific purpose of such 'karkhanas' is not very clear. Only in one place we are told that furnitures were among the articles manufactured there. Lastly, there were the unskilled labourers or 'beruniyas'. They, as already noted, were employed in a variety of functions and usually worked under group-leaders. Beyond this little is known about this interesting class of people.

The commercial classes occupied a position of great
importance in the economic life of the period. At the top of this class stood the big merchants and traders, both Hindus and Muslims. The Vaisya merchants, we are told, travelled from place to place in their boats on commercial errands. The Muslim merchants are also known to have owned crafts with which they traded along the coast. As middlemen, the merchants carried on a considerable volume of trade with the Portuguese, money being advanced to them by the Europeans for purchase of commodities. The ‘paikars’ or wholesale dealers who later supplied raw silk to the English factories apparently belonged to the same class. The richer merchants acquired ‘stupefying wealth’. The Kshatris of Dacca, Manrique informs us, had amassed ‘such quantity indeed that, being difficult to count, it used commonly to be weighed’. The merchant-princes of the same city advanced hundred thousand rupees to Nathan at a short notice.

The shopkeepers and the smaller businessmen, some of whom were ‘even well-to-do’, constituted another element of the commercial class. Many of the manufacturers sold their own wares and thus partly belonged to the same class. But there were others who only kept shops and often sold only some particular ware or other. Thus a class of people dealt in oil manufactured by others. Besides, there must have been small stores of consumers’ goods so familiar to-day, but such multi-purpose shops are nowhere mentioned in the contemporary sources.

The hawkers and pedlars of various wares belonged to one of the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Mukundarama mentioned specifically the vegetable-sellers in local ‘hats’, the ‘chandalas’ who hawked about salt and certain fruits, the meat-sellers and the ‘baitis’ who not only manufactured musical instruments but also sold mats in the town. Such classes constituted the poorest element in society.

II. Class relations.

The information supplied by our sources about the relations between the various classes is meagre but not without interest. The chiefs and zamindars, as already noted, often acted as patrons to certain professional classes. They, along with other moneyed classes, provided a market for luxury goods produced
in the country and thus their indirect relation with the artisan class was one of great importance. A sentence in the Chandi-mangala even suggests that the manufacturers of costly cloths were given rent-free lands. So far as the commercial classes were concerned, the freedom of their economic activities was hampered by the various imposts levied by the zamindars. The servants of the zamindars, officers and traders all joined hands in exploiting the poor shopkeepers. Their wares were taken away on payment of nominal prices,—at times nothing at all was paid,—and there was hardly any provision for the redress of their grievances. The relations between the zamindars and the peasantry have been discussed elsewhere in this work. Here it may however be recalled that as rent-receivers and money-lenders responsible to nobody, the zamindars freely exploited the peasantry and levied extra imposts; but the fear of mass exodus and the natural slackness of zamindari administration acted as checks on oppression.

The officers, like the chiefs, patronized certain professional classes, e.g., kavirajas, hakims, poets, dancers, musicians and astrologers. Their high standard of living and the expensive presents which they locally purchased and sent to the viceregal or imperial courts no doubt acted as an incentive to certain types of production. By occasionally drafting into service for piece-work certain classes of artisans, e.g., carpenters and blacksmiths, they also provided employment though only in a limited sense. The relationship between the merchants and the officers was even more direct. The officers, in the first place, sought to extort as much money as they possibly could from the traders. The merchants, again, provided loans for the officers, as the latter were frequently in want. The 'beparis' also acted as ration-suppliers to the armies and followed the latter at the time of campaign. Pelsaert, in describing the economic condition of Upper India, referred to the adverse effects of official oppression on agricultural production. His statements, it appears, are at least partly applicable to Bengal as well. For, as Manrique informs us, in case the Hindus failed to pay the heavy taxes levied on them, their wives and children were sold as slaves by auction. The officers violated the honour of the ryots' women practically with impunity while their piyadas subjected the peasants to extortion. The services of the common people were
requisitioned apparently without pay. Still the ryots on the officers’ estates were generally loyal, though they tried to evade payment of their dues whenever possible. The relations between the officers and their subordinates were also none too happy. Non-payment of wages was a constant source of discontent and occasionally led to desertion. Petty subordinates were treated with scant courtesy: tarafdars who drew up accounts unfavourable to an officer might even be flogged. The servants were often considered no better than chattels. The khidmatgars who could not be taken away from a besieged fort were ordered to perform ‘jawhar’ (i.e., self-immolation).

Moreland’s statement about the smallness of the market for the services of the professional classes is not true of Mughal Bengal. The priests had a big clientele. The Brahmin teachers seldom lacked students. The Vaidyas who enjoyed a high reputation perhaps had a proportionately large practice. The astrologers were called in to prepare horoscopes for children. And, if one accepts Mukundarama’s statement about the Kayasthas being all educated men, the educated middle class was surely not very small. The student of Bengali literature of the 16th-17th centuries may even wonder whether the educated middle class of that period was in proportion very much smaller than its modern counterpart. It was no doubt poorer, and the level of its education and culture proportionately lower. Still at a time when Navadvipa had attained the status of Hindu India’s intellectual capital, when the study of Navyanyaya flourished along the banks of the Ganges and schools were set up in every other village, and when even the young son of a poor household like Ruparama Chakravarti went to distant places in quest of learning, literacy and secondary education could not have been limited to an insignificant part of a total population, much smaller than that of to-day.

III. The state of agriculture.

The bases of economic life in that epoch were, of course, in many ways similar to those which were characteristic of this province until the beginning of the industrial era. Agriculture, the pivot of Bengal’s economy, was limited and primitive in character. Small-scale farms cultivated by the owner were the typical units of agricultural production. The implements used
were the same old plough and cattle and the scarcity of capital induced the peasant to borrow from money-lenders or zamindars. The ideas regarding ownership of land do not seem to have been very clear. The lands of the khalsa sharifa belonged in theory to the emperor. Regarding the lands parcelled out as jagirs and those under the zamindars, there was no such clear-cut theory. But there, as elsewhere, the ryots enjoyed a certain amount of security of tenure. If they occasionally left their lands, the desire to evade extortion was usually their main motive. As Moreland pointed out, ‘the process of disentangling the conception of private right from political allegiance’ had not yet started, and in the literature of the period the tenants in the zamindars’ estates are invariably described as ‘praJa’ or subjects.

The proverbial fertility of Bengal’s soil is mentioned in the writings of the contemporary travellers. The chief product was rice, of which there were so many varieties that, according to Abul Fazl, “if a single grain of each kind were collected, they would fill a large vase”. Lentils, oilseed, mustard, wheat, long pepper and cotton were among the other important products of the soil. Besides, there were also the fruits so familiar to-day, e.g., pine-apple, jack-fruit, mulberry, banana, mango and oranges. Mention should also be made in this connection of some less common products, e.g., round pepper and opium, ‘the best in India’. The prices of agricultural products are said to have been very cheap, but in the absence of any specific data we are not in a position to form any precise idea on the subject.

IV. Piscaries and forests.

Throughout the mediaeval period fishing was an occupation paying enough to provide employment for several distinct classes of people. Among these there were the ‘jaliya Kaivartas’ whose main occupation was fishing and the Muslim Kabaris who sold fish. The estimated dues on the produce and piscary of rivers, tanks etc. mentioned in the Ain in connection with two of the Bengal sarkars (Bazuha and Sonargaon) also indicate the flourishing state of the Bengal fisheries.

The forests provided among other things timber for masts, and valuable aloe-wood. The woods of Chandikan yielded ‘great store of Ware’ while ‘golas’ were established in the-
Sundarban forests for preparation of lac. As elephants were of vital importance for purposes of communication and warfare, arrangements were regularly made for capturing them. Hill-ponies or tangan horses were found at Ghoraghhat. Talking birds such as ‘bhangraj’ and ‘maina’ caught in the forests were also in great demand.

V. Industrial production.

In the field of industrial production, as all indications go to show, the artisan system was prevalent. Explaining the system in brief, Moreland wrote “that the management of business had not been separated from the work of manufacture, and . . . . production was carried on by artisans without superior capitalist direction”. But advances made by middlemen often supplied the need for capital. For large-scale enterprises ‘organisation had to be brought specially into existence’ and the services of contractors were requisitioned. The description of settlement of Gujarat in Chandimangala mentions the arrival of groups of labourers under individual leaders. In the Baharistan also there are references to the ‘sardars of the workmen’ and the ‘sardars of the elephant-catchers’. But these may also suggest the existence of something in the nature of permanent labour-organisations under individual leaders. The existence of the contract system is however proved by an explicit reference in the Baharistan.

In this period Bengal was rich in the variety of its manufactures. Its most important products were textiles. Different types of cloths,—such as cotton cloth, tasser and grass cloth,—were manufactured. Special varieties, e.g., Sahonnes, Hammomes, Tzinde, Patta, Sallalo, Bastan, Kassa, Sarampuras, Satpassas, Gomsas, Beatillias ‘and a thousand like names’ are also mentioned in our sources. The extent of the weaving industry in Bengal can be guessed from Pelsaert’s statement that in “Chabaspur and Sonargaon with the surrounding villages and indeed as far as Jagannath, all live by the weaving industry, and the produce has the highest reputation and quality”. The herb cloth or grass cloth, mentioned frequently in the contemporary sources, enjoyed great popularity. It was ‘dearer and more esteemed’ as also ‘much fayrer than the silke.’ Pieces or articles made of this stuff were beautifully embroider-
ed, sometimes mixed and woven with silk. Among the textile goods manufactured in Bengal there were also the quilts, 'stichte with birds, beastes or worke very thicke'. The famous Bengal muslins had already made their mark as one of the finest products of Indian craftsmanship. In the sarkar of Sonargaon, the Ain-i-Akbari informs us, was produced 'a species of muslin very fine and in great quantity'. The best products of the Bengal looms secured a price, very high even according to modern standards. At Malda, Nathan bought "a rare piece of cloth for himself at a cost of Rs. 4,000/-". In this period Bengal also had a considerable silk-industry. Large quantities of raw silk, as also silk skeins and cloths were produced.

Several other industries also occupied an important position in Bengal's economy. Manufacture of ships and boats, for instance, had assumed the proportions of a large-scale industry. The boats were of a great variety and at Dacca in the days of Tavernier, the entire river bank exceeding two kos in length was inhabited for the most part by the carpenters who built galleys and other vessels. The products of a number of handicrafts, e.g., conch-shell articles, toys, ornaments etc., were also greatly in demand. Fitch saw at Bakla women wearing silver hoops and ornaments made of silver, copper and ivory. Bowrey, writing nearly a century later, described the gold and silver ornaments of Bengal, some set with diamonds and pearls. Tavernier, as already mentioned, found at Dacca and Patna more than 2,000 persons occupied in manufacturing stone toys (including tortoise-shell and sea-shell bracelets) and coral beads.

Manufacture of certain food-stuffs, many of which were exported to other parts of India, was an important feature of the industrial life of the period. Sugar, base and refined, 'gur' or jaggery, butter and oil, various conserves of fruits, palm wine etc. are mentioned in the contemporary sources as the common products of Bengal. To these may be added a mineral product, salt, which was rather scarce in those days. Lastly, it is interesting to note that the Ain mentions the existence of iron mines in sarkar Bazuha. But we have no means of knowing to what extent these mines were worked or exploited.

VI. Bengal's commerce.

A growing commerce was the most notable feature of
Bengal's economic life in this epoch. In discussing its character, we have to take note of certain factors which profoundly influenced it. Thus, in the first place, the coming of the Portuguese had revolutionized commercial activities in this province by throwing open the Asian market to Bengal goods and by snatching away from the Arabs and the local merchants the control of coastal and overseas trade. The Bengali or Indian traders continued to have a share in this trade, but only as lesser partners. A second factor was the policy of the government, or rather its officers, to subject the merchants,—specially the native ones,—to extortion. The unfortunate consequences of such a policy were described graphically by Shihabuddin Talish. The limited amount of available specie was a third factor influencing the character of commerce. Pyrard de Laval and Bowrey noted the use of shell as token currency in daily transactions. In Kuch Bihar, Fitch informs us, almonds were used as small money and though Abul Fazl wrote of the rents being paid by the peasants in mohars and rupees, the use of coins must have been somewhat restricted in scope. The surprisingly low price of commodities was surely related in some way to this scarcity of coin as also to the low purchasing power of the people.

Though circumscribed by such factors, commerce flourished in Bengal on an almost unprecedented scale due to the richness and variety of Bengal's products, the comparative peace secured by the Mughal administration and above all, the activities of the European traders. The products of Bengal were now sent to various parts of India by land and river routes. Up the river Ganges the Bengal traders,—the Portuguese in particular,—carried to Patna cotton goods, silk, saltpetre and jewelleries from this province. Silk, musk and civet of Bengal were available at Agra at reasonable rates. Lead, tin, ivory, quicksilver and vermillion brought from Bengal sold very well at Gujarat. Bengal vermillion also had a good market at Ajmere. Tippera merchants came to Dacca to buy coral, yellow amber, tortoise-shell and sea-shell bracelets, articles which were also exported to Assam. Besides these, Bengal also sent to different parts of the country rice, lac, opium, beeswax, civet, long pepper, various drugs, moist sugar and slaves or eunuchs. In return it imported salt, opium, lead, carpets etc. from Agra,
cotton from Patna, shawls from Kashmir and coarse silk and bad quality gold from Tippera.

Bengal at this period also had a flourishing coastal trade with lands as far as Ceylon and Portuguese India on the one side and the Kingdom of Pegu on the other. Her cotton cloth and rice were regularly exported to ‘India’, Ceylon, Pegu and lands further beyond the seas. Besides, Masulipatam received from this province regular supplies of silk and muga till Dutch piracy in the Bay and political disturbances interfered with this peaceful commerce. To Ceylon were sent provisions of victuals as also pavilions for beds, wrought quilts, fine Calicut cloth, pintadoes and other fine works, opium, raw and wrought silks etc. Portuguese India was supplied with slaves, victuals, rattan and the like. Pegu provided a good market for fine Bengal calicoes.

The Portuguese, on the other hand, brought to Bengal shell from the Maldives, conch-shells from Tinnevelly coast, pepper from Malabar and cinnamon from Ceylon. Ceylon also supplied pearls and elephants. The Ceylon elephants were procured through a barter system in exchange of the goods supplied from Bengal. Pegu supplied gold, silver and costly jewels.

Bengal in this epoch also had a considerable foreign trade both by land and sea. The volume of sea trade under Portuguese control was much larger than that of the overland trade. Traders came from Bhutan to buy coral, amber etc. Fine muslins put into hollow bamboos were carried by merchants to Khorasan, Persia, Turkey and other Middle Eastern countries. A return current must also have been there, though the available information on this point is rather meagre. Tavernier noted that in return for the gold and silk sent to China, Tippera received silver which was minted into coin.

Bengal’s overseas trade in this period was mostly in the hands of the Portuguese. We have noted elsewhere the nature and volume of this trade and its implications in the life of the country. Here it may be added that the native traders had not completely lost their hold over the maritime commerce. John Davis the Navigator saw a settlement of Bengali traders at Achin in 1599. Bowrey found at Balasore and Pipli some 20 ships of considerable burthen belonging to the governor and
some merchants which sailed every year to Ceylon, Tenasserim and the Maldives. Bernier noted the fact that Indians, despite their cowardice, made long voyages from Bengal to Tenasserim, Achin, Malacca, Siam, Macassar, Mocha, Bandar-Abbas and other places, depending on the course of the wind. Thus the growing overseas trade contributed directly to the prosperity of the native mercantile community. But the fact that the English and Dutch could not penetrate into Bengal before 1633 deprived the province in this period of the benefits which their trade had already conferred on certain other parts of India. The local markets registered immediate reactions to the coming of the European traders in the shape of increased prices. Besides, a more permanent rise in the price-level also appears to have resulted. Cesar Federici paid half a larine (a larine=about 12s 6d) for a cow in 1565 and was supposed to have paid double the usual price, while in the eighties of the 16th century, according to Linschoten’s estimate, the price for the same had risen to one larine.

In describing the opulence of Bengal towards the close of the 17th century, Bernier referred to the popular proverb that there were a hundred gates for gold to enter Bengal, but not one for its exit. That gold did pour into the country, specially in the latter half of the 17th century, is an unquestionable fact. But it reached the pockets of a comparatively small section and the picture of the poor ryot’s life which emerges from contemporary literature is one of dire distress. Against the oppression of zamindars and officials he had practically no redress but for exceptional measures like flight or open rebellion. In case of natural calamities he had no means of sustenance excepting the money-lender’s assistance, which was granted on no easy terms. Taken altogether, the economic condition of the masses presented a dark picture which accords ill with the impression of plenty and prosperity often conveyed by the travellers’ accounts.

NOTES ON AUTHORITIES

Section I. For Moreland’s analysis of the classes in Indian society, see India at the Death of Akbar, 63 ff. For the position of the zamindars as independent aristocrats, see Chapter I of the present work; also Ain, II, 144; Baharistan, 289a; tr., II, 680. For the clashes of interest between the
subahdar's men and the imperial officers, see Baharistan, 103a, 105b; tr., I, 214, 220. For the officers' financial difficulties, see Baharistan, 77b, 235a, 271a-271b, 283a; tr., I, 203; II, 522, 628-29, 663; 665. For the position of the chiefs' employees, see ibid., ib, 289a; tr., I, 29, 680; Manrique, I, 22. For subordinate officers and clerks, see India at the Death of Akbar, 73-82; Baharistan, 5a, 101b, 166b, 167a, 171b, 185a, 200a, 214a, 172b, 312b; tr., I, 13, 210, 329, 330, 384, 429; II, 461, 632, 744. For number and importance of soldiers, see Moreland, op. cit., 74-5; Baharistan, 146b, 164b, 181a, 187b, 188a, 236b, etc.; tr., I, 273, 321, 370, 390, 392; II, 527 etc.; Ain. II, 130; Chandimangala, 104, 113, 114; Madhuyoge Vangla o Vangali, 33-7. For the servants and slaves, see Pelsaert 61-3; Baharistan, 64a, 173a, 195a, 281b, 284b-285a, 311b; tr., I, 163, 348, 412; II, 657, 668, 741; Chandimangala, 147, 195-96; Ain, II, 135; Bernier, I, 238; Manrique, I, 73-4, 92; Linschoten, I, 186; Cabral in Manrique, II, 405: Schouten, I, 151. For the middle class, see Moreland, op. cit., 26-7, 83n; Bowrey, 205-206; Chandimangala, 103, 104; Baharistan. 65a, 140b, 142b; tr., I, 167, 256, 262. For artists and poorer professions, see Chandimangala, 100, 103-107; Baharistan, 23b ff., 106b; I, 70, 224; II, 512; Bowrey, 206-207. For the parasitical elements in society, see Baharistan, 285a; tr., II, 668. Chandimangala, 104. For the agricultural classes see ibid., 32, 100-101, 104. For the manufacturing classes, see ibid., 103, 106-7; Pelsaert, 60, Tavernier, II, 266-67; Baharistan, 6b, 156, 312a, 323a-323b, etc.; tr., I, 20, 43 etc.; II, 742, 770. For the unskilled labourers, see Chandimangala, 91. For the commercial classes, see ibid., 104, 106; Pelsaert, 63; Manrique, I, 33, 44, 428, 441-42; Master, II, 317; Baharistan, 276b; tr., II, 644.

Section II. For the relations of officers and chiefs with other classes, see Pelsaert, 47; 62-3; Chandimangala, 106, 107; Bowrey, 194; Manrique, I, 53-4; Baharistan, 9b, 10b, 49b-50a, 65a, 106b, 173b, 217a, 244b, 264a-264b, 276b, 302a etc.; tr., I, 29, 34, 121-22, 167, 224, 349; II, 469, 549, 607, 633, 715 etc.

Section III. For the peasants’ dependence on the money-lender-zamindar, see Chadimangala, 101, 102. For agricultural products and fertility of soil, see Bernier, II, 309-10, 315; Linschoten, I, 94; Ain, II, 134; Bowrey, 132-33; Ain, II, 134, 135; Abdul Latif’s Travels (Bengal: Past and Present, 1928); Fathiyya-i-Ibrityah, 13-14.

Section IV. For fishermen and piscaries, see Chandimangala, 103, 107; Ain. II, 151, 152. For forest products, see Ain. II, 135, 136-37; Manrique, I, 406-407; Purchas, X, 206; Baharistan, 47a, 274a; tr., I, 248; II, 638.

Section V. For money advanced by middlemen, see Chandimangala, 31. For organisation of large-scale enterprises, see ibid., 91; Baharistan, 11b, 49b-50a, 291b; tr., I, 35, 1221; II, 687. For textile manufactures, see Letters Received, I, 74; Factory Records, I, 84, 103, 112, 193, 253; Linschoten, I, 96; Early Travels, 28; Pelsaert, 8; Ain, II, 136; Baharistan, 15b; tr., I, 43; Travels of Peter Mundy, II, 362. For other industries and manufactures, see Tavernier, I, 128; II, 266-67; Manrique, I, 35-6; Early Travels, 27-8; Roe, 308-309; Linschoten, I, 97; II, 23-6, 49, 79-80; Bowrey, 132; Ain, II, 136; Baharistan, 2b: tr., I, 5.
Section VI. For the limited supply of specie, see Purchas, IX (Pyrard), 560; Bowrey, 200; Early Travels, 25; Ain, II, 134. For prices, see Cesar Federici, Purchas, X, 137; Linschoten, I, 35; Bernier, II, 311; Bowrey, 133-34. For inland commerce, see Travels of Peter Mundy, II, 154-56; Factory Records, I, 195; Bernier, II, 309-10, 312-13; Letters Received, II, 181; III, 66; Tavernier, II, 23, 266-67, 273, 275; Manrique, I, 428-29; II, 395; Purchas, X, 206; Haklyut's Voyages, VI, 25-6; Linschoten, I, 96. For coastal trade, see Early Travels, 28, 34, 43, 44; Manrique, I, 29, 446; Haklyut's Voyages, VI, 400-401; Linschoten, I, 97; Letters Received, I. 264; III, 25; Bowrey, 181; Cesar Federici, Purchas, X, 136. For foreign trade, see Manrique, I, 56-7; Tavernier, II, 275; Purchas, II, 322; X, 137; Bowrey, 179; Bernier, II, 305; Linschoten, I, 94; also Chapter II of the present work.
CHAPTER VI

MODES OF LIFE

I. The course of a Hindu's life from birth to death.

The way of life of the average Bengali in the 16th and 17th centuries was in many ways similar to that of his modern counterpart in the villages except, of course, for such far-reaching changes as have been introduced by western influence and the inroad of industrial civilisation. In the older way of life, religion,—its ritualistic aspect in particular,—had a greater part to play and the life of the average Hindu as seen through our sources looks like an even monotonous path marked at regular intervals by a series of religious rituals. Many of these rites described in contemporary vernacular literature or prescribed in the Smriti work of Raghunandana are still current. Many others, however, are now obsolete.

The traditional way of life claimed the Bengali Hindu child for its own as soon as the fact of his conception became known. A series of ante-natal rites followed, in which orthodox practices sanctioned by ancient texts mingled freely with local customs. First, the rite of 'garbhadhana' was to be observed with 'homa' and 'sraddha', seeking the blessings of the gods and the manes for the newly-conceived baby. At the beginning of the third month after which, according to ancient Hindu theory, the child in the womb made its first movements, the expectant mother went through the rite of 'pumsavana' in her husband's company and offered prayers to Prajapati and other gods. 'Simantonnyayana',—a rite of which the chief features were a particular mode of coiffure and the use of vermilion,—followed, the last of antenatal rites being 'soshyantihoma' to be observed when the labour pain began.

Surprisingly enough, practically none of these rites prescribed in Raghunandana's Smriti are mentioned in contemporary literature which describes other popular observances. This, of
course, does not prove that the former had already become obsolete, but only indicates that the local customs were more popular than scriptural rites. Among such popular customs was, 'sadh' an occasion on which the expectant mother was feted and presented new clothes.

From the birth of a child onwards there followed another series of rites. While orthodox Raghunandana describes the 'jata-karma' or birth-rites accompanied by traditional 'vriddhi-sraddha', a truer picture is provided by the 'mangalakavyas'. On the birth of a child, a fire was lighted with straws taken from the thatching and Shashthi, the goddess of children, was worshipped, the skull of a cow being first placed at the door of the labour-room. Such rites were obviously inspired by belief in magic and the supernatural and were meant to avert the influence of the 'evil eye'. Shashthi was worshipped again on the sixth day after the birth; other rites followed on the eighth, ninth and twenty-first day, on one of which occasions lentils were distributed among the relatives. The child was given a name in the first month. After that the mother left the labour-room and had her ritualistic bath.

The 'annaprasana', or the child's first rice-taking, was an important ceremony then as it is now. This ceremony represents a typical compromise between local customs and orthodoxy. For as Raghunandana pointed out, though the rite was not mentioned in Gobhila-sutra, it was prescribed by a later authority and hence was to be observed according to one's family custom. The other notable rites associated with childhood were 'chudakarana' (shaving the head), 'karnavedha' (piercing the ears), 'vidyarambha' (initiation into studies) and 'upanayana' or initiation into religious life. Of these, the first two as distinct religious rites are practically obsolete to-day.

The young boy then went to school where he might study as a day-scholar or resident boarder. A day-scholar belonging to a rich family apparently paid his teacher at a monthly rate. After the student had learnt the letters and the elements of grammar, he went through a course of study which included classical Sanskrit poetry with commentaries, rhetoric, poetics and Nyaya. The account given of Srimanta's education in the Chandimangala is obviously an idealized picture; still it is no doubt true that many young men rounded off their education
with a vocational training in medicine or astrology. 'Purva-
paksha' or discussions between the teacher and the taught was
an important element in the educational method of the period.

Descriptions of marriage and family life cover many pages of
the Bengali 'panchalis'. Early marriage was very much in
vogue, though perhaps young men usually did not marry
before the end of their educational career. But a man who had
to remain unmarried till twenty-five was reckoned almost an
old bachelor. For girls, seven was considered to be the ideal
age for marriage and the age-limit of twelve could be crossed
only at the cost of grave social opprobrium. A girl of eleven
was considered to be in an advanced stage of youth. The
custom of taking bride-money (kanya-pan) was widely prevalent,
though giving the daughter in marriage without taking it was
considered to be a particularly meritorious act. Presents and
even lands were given to the bridegroom, and a formal cash
present to his father, but the dowry system in the modern sense
of the term appears to have been less prevalent. Monogamy
was the usual practice, as Manrique observed; but polygamy
was by no means uncommon. Even the beginnings of the later
excesses of Kulin polygamy were also perhaps noticeable.

Marriage negotiations were undertaken by the professional
broker or the friends of either party. With the 'adhivasa' or
the preliminary rite, the ceremony would begin in the bride-
groom's house attended by music, dance and the eulogistic
recitals by the minstrel. The presents from the bridegroom's
party would be carried in a procession to the bride's house to
the accompaniment of ritual songs sung by professional singers.
In the bride's home, there would be hilarious scenes on the
occasion of her 'spice bath' (gandha adhivasa), a preliminary
rite, as women poured water on each other, a custom which was
known as 'jalsahi'. Bizarre practices followed, as the mother
and well-wishers of the bride went out in search of charms to
ensure the bride's happiness. A cow's skull would be placed
in the compound in order to make the bridegroom as quiet as a
cow in his married life. Then in the evening the bridegroom's
party (supposing of course that we are speaking of rich men)
started out in a gala procession with gorgeous palanquins,
elephants, musicians and minstrels. A mock-fight between the
bridegroom's party and the one sent to receive it appears to
have been a part of the show. 'Stri-achar' or reception by the women, still a familiar custom, also included rites specifically meant to act as charms. As regards the ceremony of marriage itself, it was very much like its modern counterpart and any detailed account of it would be superfluous. The same is true of the rites and functions after marriage, the only difference being that the guests invited to the bridegroom's house were given presents. Mention should also be made of another post-marital rite which has now become practically obsolete but was then celebrated with great gusto. This was 'pushpotsava' followed by the 'second marriage' on the occasion of the young wife's attainment of puberty. Water-sports marked by hilarious scenes, not always within the limits of propriety, were the characteristic features of this rite.

The character of the average Bengali home and the socio-ethical ideas which influenced it, have not undergone any fundamental change in course of the last few centuries. The son's duty to his parents and the wife's duty to her husband were viewed almost as religious obligations. Widowhood was looked upon as a cruel curse which rendered life worse than death, while Suttee was extolled as a laudable practice. On the other hand polygamy, though quite current, was not favoured. Among other social ideas the great contempt in which childless men and women were held and the way in which the birth of daughters was deplored are particularly noticeable. The idea on sex morals was rather rigorous, and the danger of scandals was always there; and scandal usually meant 'loss of caste'. The attitude to caste was, of course, more orthodox than it is at present. Brahmins, as noted elsewhere in this work, were looked upon as gods rather than men. Kulinism deeply influenced the thoughts and habits of the Bengalis, and giving a daughter in marriage to a person whose ancestry was not spotless from the view-point of caste would be a source of calumny. The tendency on part of lower castes to pretend to a higher dignity was common, as it is to some extent even today. Untouchability was a socially powerful custom and even men of the same caste would not interdine freely. The comparative purity of family history from the view-point of caste was taken into consideration in deciding whether a person could take his meals in the house of another member of his caste, and
he in whose house all men of his caste could dine without hesitation enjoyed great prestige. Mere wealth was not enough to free the low-born from social stigma.

The joint family system must have been current in this period, though there are not many references to nor any detailed description of it in our sources. Ruparama Chakravarti, the poet of Dharmamangala, was the member of a joint family in which four brothers lived together, apparently under the guardianship of the eldest who even had the right to turn them out. But perhaps the system had not yet reached the grand proportions which became its characteristic feature in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the ideal household, the mother-in-law handed over the charge of house-keeping to the young bride who did the house-work under her directions, and spent the later years in dignified leisure. The old father retired from the daily business of life and turned to religious pursuits. At times he would depart to Benares and there await his end in the bosom of his faith. This happy picture was surely not true of all joint families. The mother-in-law and the husband’s sister might often become a source of misery to the young bride. But the really unhappy home was one in which a worthless son-in-law, unable to maintain himself, had settled permanently. Quarrels between the mother and the daughter and constant bickerings were the usual lot of such families. The household of the polygamist was also a proverbial home of troubles. Aided by wily maid-servants, the god of quarrels here reigned supreme and in the mutual relations of the co-wives the possibility of free fights and fisticuffs was by no means precluded. The relations between co-wives were in some cases quite happy and the generous elder, when not listening to the counsel of maid-servants (to whom a house divided was a source of both pleasure and profit), might even shower kindness and care on the young co-wife. But such cases were rare and competition for the husband’s affection with the assistance of powerful charms and magic formulas was the general rule in a polygamous home. No wonder that the girl who married into such a family was often considered lost.

Superstitions played a prominent part in the daily life of the average Bengali. Charms were used not merely to ensnare a restive husband but also to secure such other ends as the birth
of a son or cure of diseases. The fear of the ‘evil eye’ was ever present in the minds of men and the young child was considered particularly susceptible on this point. People believed in all sorts of omens. The flight of a kite over one’s head, a woodcutter with bundle of woods, a crow sitting on a dry branch, a beggar woman begging for the half of a gourd were all supposed to be bad omens, while prostitutes, flower-vendors etc., were considered particularly auspicious.

The last wish of a pious Hindu was to die near the waters of the Ganges. To quote the words of Cesar Federici, “when any one is sicke, he is brought out of the country to the banke of the River, and there they make him a small cottage of strawe, and every day they wet him with that water”. Thus the life of a Bengali Hindu ended, as it had begun, amidst religious rituals.

II. The life of the rich.

Our sources portray in glowing colours the life of the richer classes in that period. The aristocrats, the merchants and the more successful members of the professional classes all lived in great comfort and luxury.

The courts of the local Rajas and chiefs, who constituted the uppermost strata of Bengali society, reflected their wealth and power. The village headmen and the subordinate chiefs regularly assembled in these courts. There the court-scholar and the minister sat by the Rajah’s side along with a number of pundits and the court-priest on seats of Bhutan rug and jute cloth. Professional ‘pathaks’ or readers told stories from the Puranas and musicians sang to the tune of the vina, while the patra discussed financial matters with a bundle of papers in his hand. In and around the court also stood sentinel, the guards and armed soldiers of the chief.

The chiefs’ seats of power as also the towns and cities of our period are described in some of the contemporary sources. The imaginary account of Ujani in Chandimangala reads very much like an idealized description of some real town, with a stone fort in the centre and bamboo stockades round it. Ghoraghat, the best qasba (village with market) in Bengal, according to Abdul Latif, had many beautiful mansions and delightful gardens erected and laid by the officers. Islam Khan built a large mosque in the middle of the bazar and some residences
within the fort. Kuch Bihar as described by Shihabuddin Talish had ‘flower beds in the streets and trees to both side of them’. Bowrey found Dacca, the new capital, to be ‘an admirable city for its greatness, for its magnificent buildings and multitude of inhabitants’, while Thevenot described it as a very narrow town with houses mostly of cane covered with mud. Bakla in the days of Ralph Fitch had fair and high-built houses and large streets.

The European travellers while praising the magnificence of some buildings do not mention the material with which these were built. The stone mansions described in Bengali literature do not seem to have existed in our period except as relics of earlier architecture or, oftener still, only in imagination. In describing stone temples Mukundarama inadvertently referred to straw thatchings, a fact which indicates the type of structure with which the poet was really familiar. Coming from a poet who lived in the court of a chief and was hence likely to know more about stone structures than most people, this erroneous description also proves the rarity of such buildings at the time. Brick buildings, specially those made of sun-dried brick, were less rare. These were plastered with lime mixed with cow-dung and finally coated “with still another composition made of herb, milk, sugar and gum” for smoothness and lustre. Most of the dwelling houses, however, were made of wood or bamboo. The local craftsmen achieved great excellence even with such materials. “Their houses are made of bamboos”, wrote Abul Fazl, “some of which are so constructed that the cost of a single one will be five thousand rupees or more and they last a long time.” The imperial officers stationed at Khagorghata constructed ‘nice bungalows’ of this type at Rs. 1,500.00 each, and the temple at Jessore which excited Nathan’s admiration was also a wooden structure. Two types of houses familiar in Bengal are mentioned by Ruparama—‘Chauchala’ and ‘Bangala’ or bungalow. ‘Jaltungis’ or houses built on a raised platform in the middle of water-tanks were a luxury in which some indulged. And though Mukundarama’s descriptions are full of imaginative exaggerations, the high walls (or stockades) round the palace, water-tanks with stone ghats and gates which appear in them no doubt corresponded to reality at least so far as the palaces of the Rajas and chiefs were concerned. Some merchants had
beautiful houses "with big and commodious apartments and very clean reservoirs of water for bathing". But all rich men did not live in big houses. As Fitch noted, though many people in Sonargaon were very rich, the houses there were small and covered with straw with few mats round the wall and doors to keep out foxes and tigers.

The equipment and utensils in use even in a rich household were comparatively few in number and limited in variety. But costly materials often made up for the lack of variety. The Chaitanya Bhagavata contains a striking description of the outer room or reception room in the house of Pundarik Vidyavidhi, a rich Vaishnava. The master of the house sat on a costly bedstead decorated with brass-plates and covered with beautiful awnings. A bed with fine covers and silk pillows was spread on it and several water jugs, big and small, and a brass betel-pot were at hand, while two servants stood waving fans made of peacock's feather.

The interior of the house was also decorated more or less in the same manner as the outer room, the bedstead being the main piece of furniture. Broomsticks of peacock feather were used in rich homes to sweep the floor, on which mats often resembling 'woven silk' were spread. Mosquito curtains made of fancy materials with decorative patterns were hung and the bed was also lavishly decorated in other ways. Except for these, pots and jugs of various types, articles of daily use such as mirrors and combs and toys ('chiter puttali') were about the only articles to be found even in a rich household, though perhaps some of these were really made of gold and other costly materials as is often mentioned. The rich often kept elephants. "But the Bengalis", to quote the words of Abul Fazl, "rarely took to horseback". Palanquins, often covered with rich cloth (pater dola), were the usual means of travel by land. The sukhasan or sukhpal was 'a crescent-shaped litter covered with camlet or scarlet cloth and the like', the two sides of which had fastenings of various metals. Chariots or carriages drawn by horses are mentioned by Mukundarama, while Ruparama referred also to camel-carts which must have been very rare in Bengal, if not altogether a figment of imagination.

In whatever way the life of the rich Bengali in our period might have been limited or circumscribed, the culinary art
suffered from no lack of variety. The ‘panchalis’ and the Vaishnava biographies give long lists of the dishes then taken, many of which have now become obsolete while others are still very common. Though Moreland questioned the view that supply of food-stuffs etc., was more plentiful in 17th century India than it is to-day, the fact remains that practically all the contemporary travellers wondered at the abundance of the good things of life in Bengal. Manrique saw at Hugli a surprising variety and abundance of food-stuffs. Fowls, castrated goats, veal, chicken, birds, many kinds of rice, ghi, milk products and sweetmeats, plenty of sugar and fruits were some of the stuffs he noted in his itinerary. It would be futile to mention all the dishes which appear in the long lists given in the Bengali works of this period. Herbs, vegetables and fishes cooked in different fashions and sweetmeats made of fruits, lentils and milk-products were the common items of food. In certain parts of the country the majority of the people were vegetarians living on rice, milk and fruits, though their meals too,—judging from the long lists in the Vaishnava biographies,—were in no way monotonous or limited in variety. Some sects, according to Manrique, even abhorred red vegetables and lived only on Khichri with a large quantity of ghi. At feasts they took costly Gujarati Khichri with almonds, raisins, cloves, mace etc. The reference, apparently, is to some extremist section of Vaishnavas. The Raja of Tamluk treated Manrique to a vegetarian meal consisting of stews of rice and herb, dishes with milk and vegetables cooked with much ghi and various sweets. The non-vegetarians used to take the flesh of certain animals e.g., wild boars and rabbits, which are either tabooed or rarely taken these days. The tabooed foods of the period included tame pigs, hens, eggs, and most of the domestic animals. The habitual dress of the upper classes consisted of short dhoties with no upper garments. But turbans were in use. The fashionable city-dwellers wore tussore dhoties and ‘Khassa’ cloth. Well-to-do men also put on a ‘chaddar’. On festive occasions, men wore trousers, called ‘ijars’ and a ‘cabaya’ or long tunic of muslin after the Mughal style. The ijars were worn very narrow and long with plenty of lines and creases. There was a slight difference between Hindu and Muslim cabayas. The richer classes had actually adopted ijar, shirt (jama) and cabaya with turban as their
habitual outfit. But most of them put on only white stuffs, and their turbans were smaller and their breeches shorter than those of the Muslims. They also wore stockings under Muslim influence. But these stockings, it seems, were of leather, for these were manufactured by ‘chamars’ who generally made leather goods. It is not clear if leathern foot-wear of any other variety were worn, though there is reference to ‘paduka’ in our sources, which may after all mean nothing more than wooden sandals. Ornaments such as golden ear-rings, necklaces, rings, bangles and armlets were commonly worn. As for toilet, men anointed their bodies with sandal-paste and put on ‘tilaka’ marks.

Women’s dress consisted of sari and a brassière (kanchali). On ceremonial occasions an extra piece of cloth (mekhala) was wrapped round the upper part of the body, and rich ladies also put on ijar as an underwear. On festive occasions, silk and brocade were worn in profusion. Brassières were embroidered with varied designs, including scenes from mythological stories.

The ornaments worn by women were of a great variety. These were of gold, silver, shell and ivory, some being set with costly jewels, and coral. Bauli was worn covering the upper part of the ear, while kundala was the ornament for the lower part. A number of ornaments used in this period, e.g., nakmachhi for the nose, pansuli for the feet, sapuda, and sateswari har (necklace with hundred strings?) for the neck etc. have now become obsolete. More common ornaments, e.g., jewelled ear-tops, golden wrist-bands (vajuvandha), ornaments for the hand such as chudi, kankana, angad, tad and rings, nupur for the feet, necklaces and the like were also much in use.

Upper class women also took great care of their toilet. They massaged themselves with ‘narayana’ oil before bath and washed their heads with ‘amlaki’ fruits. Bathing with water drawn from wells or tanks was a particular luxury (going to the river or tank for bath being the more common practice). Round the vermilion mark on the forehead a line would be drawn with sandal-paste, and a dot of collyrium put near it as a sort of foil to beauty. Pretty designs with ‘kumkum’ and sandal-paste were also a part of the toilet. Flowers were used in profusion, particularly to decorate one’s hair, and elegant styles of coiffure were in vogue, some being named after birds, e.g., suathuti, lotan etc.
The young children of rich families,—both male and female,—were given costly ornaments, e.g., ornaments for the feet called magra and khadu, jewelled necklace, bangles, armlets and earrings. Children were often draped in yellow, the colour commonly associated with the child Krishna.

Dice was the most favourite pastime of the rich. There were several other indoor games such as bagchali and the 'sand-game'. The latter was a form of gambling. Music, dramatic performances and listening to Puranic stories were popular entertainments. The 'pigeon game' also appears to have been popular. This game was something like a race, and the owner of the bird which came first would be declared the winner. Ruparama mentioned another game, idik, as one which was played in the streets. Military displays by professional soldiers with javelins, swords and raibans provided entertainment for their masters. Picnic was still another form of recreation.

Religious festivals on a grand scale were perhaps more important than games or pastimes as a source of entertainment and recreation. The 'thirteen ceremonies in twelve months' were no mere casual proverb in the 16th-17th centuries. Besides the 'vratas' already mentioned there were such others as Itu or Ithural, still not obsolete, Dharmaekadasi observed in honour of Dharma, and special 'vratas' undertaken in fulfilment of vows to particular deities, such as Shashthi. Durga was worshipped with great pomp and a large number of animals were sacrificed on these occasions. Among the living creatures sacrificed in honour of the deity, there were besides the usual buffalo and goat, several others such as sheep, carps and swans. On the day of the immersion ceremony, the procession carrying the earthen image would be led by dancing girls and the image thrown into some river to the accompaniment of abuses. Another popular ceremony was 'holi' or the colour-festival on which occasion platforms or pandals (dolimancha) were set up in the gardens of the rich.

III. The life of the poor.

Our sources have naturally less to tell us about the humble annals of the poor, but that little is not without significance. The poor man in Bengal in the early days of Mughal rule suffered specially due to the prevalent political insecurity and
administrative chaos. Towards the end of our period, peace descended on the land. But until then, the forms of oppression were many and varied. The implications of the wars and rebellions and the character of the administration,—whether in the hands of the zamindars or in those of the officers,—in the context of the life of the people have been discussed in Chapter I. The life-story of Mukundarama and Kshemanandakata, —the latter, incidentally, wrote in the middle of the 17th century, long after the consolidation of Mughal rule in Bengal,—show how official or zamindars’ oppression forced people long settled in a locality to quit and seek new shelters. An oppressive zamindar might even turn the poor ryots over-night into slaves. The poor were in a state of perpetual indebtedness. The wily money-lender sat at the door when the corn was ripe so that the debtor-ryot had no means of escape. The middleman-financier withheld payment of advances to the spinner and thus beat down the price of yarn. In case of flood or any other calamity, the ryot had only the mahajan to fall back upon, one can well guess with what results.

The poor lived in thatched houses which were hardly any useful shelters even if there was a light rain. As Tavernier observed with reference to the houses of the carpenters at Dacca, these were, “properly speaking, only miserable huts made of bamboo and mud.” Others were made only of mud and clay. Manrique, however, found them very clean and spread with cow-dung. The only furniture of the poor were straw mats, ‘kanthas’ and a few earthen pots (Manrique mentioned a specific number: four). The general standard of health was apparently very low. Shihabuddin Talish mentioned the ‘fatal and loathsome diseases’ prevalent in Bengal,—leprosy, leucoderma, elephantiasis, cutaneous eruptions, goitre and hydrocele,—from which the happier clime of Assam was free.

As regards food, the poor,—according to Manrique,—were satisfied with rice and salt, a little ‘saga’ (herbs) and a few simple stews. ‘Amani’ (stale rice-water) was a common and major item of the poor man’s diet, and holes were dug into the mud-floor to serve as cups for this humble dish. Only the well-to-do could afford milk and milk-products. Curd and a cheap sweet made of milk, jaggery and oil-seed are however mentioned in Chandimangala as rare delicacies which the poor
could afford on rare occasions. Fish too was not taken either very often or in large quantities, specially by those who lived inland or far from the rivers. But the inventiveness of the Bengali brain sought to relieve the monotony of this simple diet through culinary experiments not entirely without success. Lentil cooked with cocoanut-water, fried seeds of jack-fruit spread with lemon juice, spinach cooked with sour fruits,—such were some of the delicacies which even the poorest could afford. So the fate of the poor in Bengal was to some extent better than that of his counterpart in Upper India who, according to Pelsaert, took every day the same unvarying ‘khichri’ and fried lentils. The poorer classes of the population,—or at least some among them,—could afford an occasional meat diet, being undeterred by taboo. Burnt mongoose and lizards, ducks, eggs and porcupine flesh were taken by the hunters and, we may assume, also by others belonging to the lowest rung of society. The poor man generally could not afford to take any intoxicants, but the distribution of bhang and opium to encourage sailors and workers, mentioned by Nathan, suggests that the poorer folk were no total strangers to addiction.

The dress of the poor people conformed to their general standard of living, that is to say, it consisted of the irreducible minimum required by conventions of civilised society. Men and women, according to Abul Fazl, for the most part went “naked wearing only a cloth (lungi) about the loins”. On festive occasions they, however, wore very clean, white clothes. The dress of a poor huntsman, as described by Mukundarama, had a simple elegance. The hunter’s child wore a wreath of iron sticks round his neck, with a tiger’s claw as pendant. His cloth was red, his hair was tied with net and crystal ear-tops adorned his ears. The grown-up hunter’s dress was also similar; and when he went out on his day’s errand, he rubbed his body with red dust,—his only toilet. Women of the poorer classes satisfied their natural instinct for self-adornment with ornaments of bell-metal, and ‘calai’ (tin) and at best wore ‘silver hoops about their necks and armes’ while their legs were also ‘ringed with silver and copper and rings made of elephant’s teeth’.

The recreations which the poor could afford were of course few. Most of these centred round religious festivals or public
functions of a semi-religious character. In the open pandals where ‘panchalis’ were read and sung or the ‘kathak’ told stories from the Puranas, the village folk gathered and constituted the bulk of the audience. The Vaishnava ‘mahotsavas’ were open to all and sundry, and the Durga-‘puja’, arranged by the rich, provided entertainment for the poor as well. The ‘gajan’ or religious procession attended by the beating of drums and ritual dances in honour of Dharma was chiefly a poor man’s festival. The same is true of ‘churak’ held in honour of Siva, an occasion on which the devotees pierced their backs and tongues with sharp arrows and hooks.

Natural calamities affected the poor very severely. Any great famine did not occur in Bengal during our period, but there was a minor one in 1625. Besides, scarcity followed almost invariably in the wake of wars and campaigns and we have noted elsewhere how prices went up and famine conditions ensued at such times. So the life of the poor, never very happy in this land, must have been particularly gloomy during those years of storm and strife. Still, perhaps the natural fertility of the soil and the abundance of supplies reduced to some extent the sufferings caused by an inequitous economy and political turmoils.

IV. The life of the Muslims.

The life of the Muslim community in Bengal was marked by some distinctive features. The Muslim inhabitants of Bengal were divided into at least four sections on a racial basis: the Saiyads, the Mughals, the Pathans and the natives of Bengal. The new converts from Hinduism were known by the name of Gaysal. Here as elsewhere there were several clans among the Pathans, e.g., Subali, Nehali, Pani, Kudani, Huni etc. Certain professions were monopolized by the Muslims. Each of these professions had apparently assumed the character of something like a caste. There were among these the cake-seller (pithari), the fish-seller (kabari), the paper-maker (kagaji), the cloth-dyer (rangrej), the ‘hajam’ or barber whose special job was circumcision of children, the ‘kasai’ or butcher who sold beef, the tailor, the weaver and so on. An interesting sub-caste was the ‘Golas’, i.e., Muslims who had been disgraced for their non-observance of fast and ritual prayer.
The Muslim aristocrats and officers lived in a grand style and almost made a cult of display. Wherever they went, they were constantly attended by a numerous retinue of servants—slaves, both black and brown, guards, lackeys, valets and the like. The governors and high officers would be followed even on a short journey by a magnificent train of elephants, horses, cavaliers and infantrymen displaying colourful streamers and liversies and carrying for the convenience of the noble master parasols, goblets and even bath-tubs. The richest had in their service servants with specialised functions, e.g., wood-cutters, water-carriers, palanquin-bearers etc. When they went out on longer journeys in their luxurious palanquins, or ox-drawn carriages they were surrounded by music-makers playing on flutes and tambourines while guards, cooks, valets and slaves carried ‘arms, banderoles, victuals, tents and all that is necessary for the convenience of the voyage’.

The Mughal grandees, while serving out their term of office in this outlying province, constructed bungalows and ‘lofty mansions’ with bamboos or the wood of betel-nut trees in their places of sojourn. Some of these structures were even three-storied. But in remote villages an officer might condescend to live in a mud-house with thatched roof. Generally they tried to live as much after the grand style which was their usual habit as the circumstances permitted. So even in God-forsaken corners of the country their houses had ‘hammams’ or bathrooms, a rare luxury in Bengal, while in the houses of the Mirzas there were even audience-halls decorated with rich cushions and canopies. The houses of the Muslim gentry were big and spacious with beautiful apartments and halls. Many of these were flat-roofed and had beautiful gardens, green arbours and even covered walks. Some even had bathing pools and fish-ponds.

Rich Persian carpets and fine mats covered the floor in the houses of the rich. The Muslims had benches and tools as well, but they preferred to sit cross-legged on their mats and carpets. In the sixties of the seventeenth century Schouten found that the richest merchants of Hugli and Pipli had paltry chairs in their stores for the convenience of the Dutch merchants with whom they had dealings. Some also kept gold and silver plates for purposes of display.
The Muslims generally shaved their heads and kept beards. The well-to-do among them put on long *cabayas*, ‘made of the finest cotton cloths, silk stuffs, or gold and silver and of all the costliest things’. These dresses came down to the knee, were folded round the neck and attached with knots in front from top to bottom. Red and white silken sashes with tassels, from which would hang beautiful scimitars, were also used. Cotton or silk vests were worn next to the skin. Their breeches coming down to the ankle were very long and proportionately wide. These were very narrow at the bottom, being gathered tightly round the legs and usually made of striped red cloth. Their shoes were ‘big and broad . . . , ordinarily made of embroidered red leather’ and worn without laces or buckles. The turbans were made of very long pieces of fine white cotton or silk cloth with stripes of gold. A silken shoulder sash was used while going out and the court-dress was made ‘nearly all of brocade’. The Mulas, however, were very modestly dressed, ‘all in white from head to foot’ even when they attended court. In the hours of relaxation the rich too would be dressed simply in a *lungi*, an underwear, a belt and a turban. The Muslim ladies put on ‘a big piece of very fine cotton cloth round their body, beginning at the waist’ and coming down to the ankles. Drawers of light stuff were also worn. Another piece of cloth and occasionally also a shoulder sash were used to cover the upper part of the body; but the ladies, we are told, generally preferred while at home to go about bare-bodied down to the waist. Ornaments were used in profusion and there were some whose arms were ‘adorned therewith up to the elbow’. While going out, they covered their face with a silken veil.

It appears that even the Muslims who came to settle in Bengal from other parts, had adopted rice as their staple food though Indian breads,—‘very fine biscuits’, according to Schouten’s description,—made of wheat products were at times used. ‘A lot of fowl cooked in various fashions’, birds’ meat, conserves and fruits were the favourite dishes. At Gaur, Manrique was treated by a Mirza to a variety of dishes which included various meats, pickles, cucumber, radish, lemons and green chillies soaked in vinegar, various sweets and finally dried fruits from Persia and Kashmir. No wonder that the meal took ‘a weary three hours’. The menu would be comparatively
simple in a very big feast and might consist only of klushka, bread cooked with ghi and water and a sweet dish called khirsa. The majority of Muslims did not take wine or other strong drinks, at least in public. But Schouten claimed to be ‘an eyewitness of the fact that they drink long draughts of arrack and such other liquors secretly and on the sly’. He also mentioned another intoxicant commonly in use at the time, viz., ‘small round balls of a paste made of many aromatic seeds mixed with opium’.

The grave manners and florid etiquette of the Muslim upper classes earned the praise and admiration of foreigners. In social gatherings, they spoke ‘in a very low voice, with much order, moderation, gravity and sweetness’. ‘Often they speak into each other’s ear,’ writes a 17th century traveller, ‘and then they put the end of their shoulder-sash or their right hand in front of their mouth, for fear of inconveniencing each other with their breath’. Betel and betel-nut were presented to the visitors and they were escorted with much civility at the time of departure. Rigid forms were also observed at meals, licking one’s fingers being considered particularly boorish; but wiping the hand on one’s clothes at the end of a meal was apparently no taboo.

The pace of life of the rich Muslims in Bengal was pretty fast. Banquets and feasts with plenty of music and dances were almost a part of their daily routine. In such feasts, otto of roses was sprinkled profusely and the guests were given presents. It was the height of good form to accept only a part of these presents. These recreations were seldom very innocent. Courtesans and nautch girls were almost invariably their central features and the big banquets became scenes of little-concealed debauchery, which no one seemed to mind. Purer forms of amusement were however not unknown. The officers posted in Bengal often held soirees to listen to story-telling, recitation of poems and reading of books. Dice was their favourite indoor game. Polo or chaugan,—for which there was a special playground at Dacca,—elephant-fights, hunting, excursions and picnics were also very popular with them.

Besides the Id-ul-fitr, Iduzzoha and Muharram, in this period the Muslims also celebrated the King’s birth-day and the New Year’s Day (Nawroc). On the occasion of the Iduzzoha
the Persians, we are told, sacrificed a camel decorated with roses and other flowers to the accompaniment of strange gestures; and after the usual feast, there would be ‘songs, dances and many types of games’. The Muharram was celebrated in much the same way as at present, but with one notable difference: the day’s pageantry terminated with a ceremonial destruction of the straw-figures of Yezid and Simar. The Muharram so roused the frenzy of the faithful that it was safer for the Hindus to stay indoor on these occasions. During Ramzan the Muslims went to the mosques at night with lanterns to offer their midnight prayers.

Every town had a big principal mosque and several smaller ones. The mosques of Bengal were generally very low,—ordinarily the walls were not more than two yards in height,—and for that reason built on high ground in order to make these appear higher than the other buildings. The mosques mostly had square bases, flat roofs and very white walls. There would be many tombstones in the adjoining yard and a number of houses and apartments around the prayer-hall. For ablutions before prayer, some of the mosques had around their walls large ditches full of water, ‘like rivers’; others had big cisterns at the entrance. The mosques, we are told, were ‘built with stone (brick ?) and lime, but the rest of the materials were very flimsy’. Their revenue was very moderate. The Mullas were only assured of the rent of the houses around the mosques and had to depend for the rest on charities, presents and the testamentary bequests of the devout. They did not draw any salary, but were given lodgings in the houses around the mosques. They also had some income from the schools run by them and the services which they rendered on occasions like marriage. When animals were slaughtered in accordance with Islamic regulations, the Mulla had a share in the meat,—the head, we are told, being usually reserved for him. Some of the Mullas had a great reputation for learning; others remained celibate and lived a life of great austerity; others still remained in solitude, separated from the rest of the world, ‘passing nearly all their days and nights in meditation and prayer’.

The children of the well-to-do were carefully educated. ‘The mosques served as schools, the Mullas as teachers’. The
children were first taught to read and write and made to study the Quran very thoroughly. Then they studied some particular subject,—e.g., philosophy, rhetoric, medicine, poetry etc.,—according to the future vocation chosen for them by their guardians. The children of the poor learned some trade or other while some of them became servants or soldiers.

The Muslims betrothed their children between the age of six and eight, but the marriage was not solemnized before they had attained the age of puberty. When a girl reached this age, she was adorned with flowers, and taken to some river where a ceremony was held. Then came the day of marriage. On this day the bridegroom's party brought out a gala procession which would march through the main thoroughfares. The bridegroom sat on a richly caparisoned horse while parasols of paper, silk or some other light stuff were held over his head. The marriage was solemnized by a Mulla in the presence of a Qazi who acted as witness. Betel, arack and some other delicacies were served in the feast which followed. In the houses of the rich the marriage festivities continued for several days. On the day after the marriage, the near relations of the couple would come to inspect the nuptial bed to look for the signs of consummation and evidence of the bride's virginity. If they were satisfied, they would 'testify to it with great transports of joy'; but the lot of husbands less fortunate in their marriage was truly awful.

Among the richer classes both polygamy and divorce are said to have been very much in vogue. While a husband might kill his faithless wife with impunity, the betrayed wife had no means of redress. Schouten, however, informs us that if a wife could prove before the Qazi that her husband had beaten her or did not provide her with maintenance, she could secure dissolution of marriage, though not without a great slur on her reputation. In such cases the girl children went with their mother while the boys stayed with the divorced husband. If this account be true, then Muslim women in 17th century Bengal had more privileges than are sanctioned by a strict interpretation of Islamic law.

Economy was not the forte of rich Muslim ladies and household expenditure cost the husbands quite a lot. The rich girl would bring from her father's house a number of slaves and maidservants. To this none too small retinue the husbands
would add the guards of the harem,—black slaves and eunuchs—“often in this way throwing the sheep into the mouth of the wolf”. Still some of them were rich enough to have, sailor-like, a wife in every town ‘where there affairs called them’. In each of these places they would have a separate establishment for a wife or concubine, so that when they went there they found “everything quite ready,—their house, their home, the caresses of their wives”. Purdah was observed very strictly. The ladies had a separate apartment which was their common dormitory, dining hall and living room all rolled into one.

Debauchery was the rule of the day so far as the upper classes were concerned. Prostitutes were brought freely to the homes of the rich,—both Hindus and Muslims. A banquet in which the guests were not treated to this particular variety of entertainment was a slur on the host’s reputation. The Mughal officers competed shamelessly for the female booty secured from the ryots’ homes. Some were worse depraved and had the cheek to write ecstatic passages on their love-affairs with eunuchs, a perversion not sanctioned even by the lax moral code of the 17th century. The clean life of the humbler folk offered a pleasing contrast to the perpetual saturnalia which was the life of the rich.

V. Army and warfare; penal code and prisons.

The soldiers constituted an important element of the population and in the troubled first half-century of Mughal rule warfare was a daily occurrence in many parts of the country. The armies of the local chiefs consisted mainly of infantry and cavalry, though elephants also were used. The cavalry is said to have been manned mostly by Muslims. The different elements in the infantry were classified according to the weapons they used, e.g., the ‘dhalis’ who used shield and sword, the ‘dhanukis’ or archers and so on. Long javelins were also used. The infantrymen were dressed in short dhoties tightly worn (viradhari), had their hair tied with nets and jingling ornaments on their feet. The cavalrymen wore mail-coats and carried small guns (tufang) on their horses. They were also armed with bows, arrows, shields, small pikes, sabres and daggers. Cannon was carried in carts. The artillery consisted of several types of weapons, e.g., cannon, zamburak, ramchangi and musketry. War-elephants carried a
small tower on their back in which would sit three or four men armed with arrows and javelins. Sometimes the elephant would also carry a swivel-gun. Maces were tied to the trunks of elephants and their foreheads were painted red. They were placed in front of the army and used as ramparts as also to bring about confusion in the ranks of the enemy. Flags tied to bamboo poles and music from various instruments, e.g., war-drums, rudravina, cymbals and the like, added colour to the scene.

The camps of the army would cover a wide area. The soldiers' tents were arranged in good order and the commander's tent, which was higher than the rest, would be placed in the middle of the camp with good space all around. Small foraging parties were regularly sent out from the camp to plunder the neighbouring countryside,—a custom which entailed great suffering on the people.

The penal code was very severe in those days. Persons convicted on charges of petty larceny were flogged; death or mutilation was the punishment for more serious crimes. A dark dust-laden room where moles abounded was generally used for confining prisoners. The prisoner was put in chains, his legs were cuffed and a rope was tied to his hair to prevent movement. At times the guards put a block of stone on his chest by way of punishment.

VI. The moral standard.

It is a deplorable fact that no foreigners had anything good to say about the character of the Bengali people. De Laet described them as being of 'subtle, but depraved character'. The men, according to him, were notorious for theft and robbery, the women for immodesty and vice. "Lechery and foul commerce", wrote Schouten, "are common and ordinary things in the whole of India. But in... Bengal and some other countries, in this respect, things are even worse than elsewhere". Manrique found the Bengalis 'a languid race and pusillanimous', 'mean spirited and cowardly', whose popular proverb "mare tacur, na mare cucur" (one who thrashes you is a god, one who does not is a dog),—this grotesque adage was quoted by the Padre in original,—summed up their character and attitude to life. When one remembers Bowrey's high
praise for the intellect of Bengali Brahmans, one cannot explain away such statements as being merely due to the foreigner’s prejudice. Perhaps a decay had long set in and the people’s moral was in an advanced state of disintegration. The Muslims’ greatest delight, we are told, was ‘in keeping whores and elephants’. Native chiefs like Bhim Narain of Kuch Bihar never removed their lips from the tip of the cup and desired nothing but ‘companionship with graceful (women) resembling the cypress in stature’. What was worse, as Manrique noted with insight, the people had learnt to “easily accustom themselves to captivity and slavery”.

NOTES ON AUTHORITIES

Section I. For the rites mentioned in this section, see Raghunandana, samkaracariteram, Chandimangala, 53, 138; Dharmamangala, 46, 124; Chaitanya Bhagavata, adikhandha, IV, V. For the education of the young see Chandimangala, 272-73; Dharmamangala, 18. For marriage customs, see Chandimangala, 57-9, 77, 109, 142-45, 149-53, 213-16; Dharmamangala, 59-69, 87; Chaitanya Bhagavata, 59-61; Lochana, 37, 59, 65-67, 69, 70-75; 153 etc.; Manrique, I, 66. For the ideals and conditions of family life, see Dharmamangala, 18 ff (joint family); Chandimangala, 23, 25, 31, 53-60, 67, 78, 83, 88, 101, 139, 144, 273 etc.; For superstitions, see ibid., 52, 69, 76, 246 etc. Chaitanya Bhagavata, adikhandha, IV. For the last days of a Hindu, see Purchas, X, 114-15.

Section II. For the chiefs’ courts, see Dharmamangala, 49, 66; Chandimangala, 221; Premavilasa (Berhampore edition), 175-76. For description of towns, see Chandimangala, 11, 140, Abdul Latif’s Travels: Fathiyavi-libriyyah, 14; J.A.S.B., 1872, 67; Bowrey, 150; Thvenot, 95: Early Travels, 27-8. For houses and buildings, see Chandimangala, 94-5; Dharmamangala, 78, 79; Schouten, I, 189, 207; Early Travels, 28; Ain, II, 134; Baharistan, 55a, 56a; tr., I, 1, 138-39. For the interior of a house, see Chaitanya Bhagavata, madhyakhanda, VII; Chandimangala, 164, 198, 202; Dharmamangala, 114; Schouten, I, 209. For means of transport and communication, see Ain, II, 134; Chandimangala, 90, 109, 130, 219; Dharmamangala, 66; Schouten, I, 198-99. For food and dress, see Manrique, I, 61-6, 256, 435; Early Travels, 28: Chandimangala, 107, 109, 112, 147, 194, 196-97, 314; Chaitanyakariramrita, madhya lila, XIII; Chaitanya Bhagavata, madhyakhanda, IX; Jayananda, 139; Dharmamangala, 33; also the relevant chapter in Aspects of Bengali Society. For women’s ornaments and toilet, see Chandimangala, 74, 90, 91, 172, 190 etc.; Dharmamangala, 30-32, 77, 107 etc.; Manrique, I, 62-3; Lochananada, 40; Gangamangala, 41. For games, see Dharmamangala, 127; Chandimangala, 256; Chaitanyakariramrita, madhya lila, XII. For ‘pujas’ and ‘vratas’, see Dharmamangala, 69; Chandimangala, 41-2; Manrique, I, 73.

Section III. For the oppression of the poor and various forms of
exploitation, see Dharmamangala, 49; Chandimangala, 31, 35, 37, 39. For the houses of the poor, see ibid., 83; Manrique, I, 64; Tavernier, I, 128. For various diseases, see Fathiyah-i-ibriyyah, 54. For the poor man’s food, see Manrique, I, 128; Chandimangala, 37, 53, 54, 60-61 etc.; Baharistan, 21a; tr., I, 62. For their dress, see Ain, II, 134; Chandimangala, 5; Manrique, I, 62-4; Early Travels, 27-28. For their recreations, see Dharmamangala, 70; Chandimangala, 44; Bowrey, 197-98. For the famine of 1625, see Manrique, I, xxvii (introduction).

Section IV. For the life of the Muslims, see Chandimangala, 102-3; Baharistan, 50b, 55a, 75b-76a, 148a, 211b, 221a, 221b, 275b, 276b, 287, etc.; tr., I, 124-25, 138, 197, 278; II, 455, 486, 642, 645, 674, etc.; Manrique, I, 21, 127-28; Bowrey, 207, 216; Schouten, I, 170-204; Pelsaert, 65-7; Abdul Latif’s Travels.

Section V. For army and warfare, see Schouten, I, 201-202; Chandimangala, 113-14; Dharmamangala, 52-4; Gangamangala, 21; Fathiya-i-ibriyyah, 16. For the penal code and prisons, see Chandimangala, 121, 350 etc.; Schouten, I, 200.

Section IV. For the morals of the Bengalis, see De Laet, 73; Manrique, I, 64; Bowrey, 205-206, 216; Fathiyya-i-ibriyyah, 14; Schouten, I, 151.
CHAPTER VII

THE FOREIGNERS IN BENGAL

I. People from various lands: glimpses of their life.

Foreigners from many countries who came to Mughal Bengal, drawn chiefly by prospects of trade, gave a touch of exotic colour to the life of the period. Of them the Portuguese were of course the most numerous. But there were the others too. Only a few years after Bengal had become a subah of the Mughal empire, an Englishman, Ralph Fitch, sailed down from Agra, walked or rowed across a considerable part of the province as far as Kuch Bihar, visited practically all the important places and sailed away again in a Portuguese ship from Sripur to Pegu. To the trading centres on or near the coast, there came once or twice a year a Dutch ship or two to sell the wares of the East Indies and get laden with cloths, foodstuffs and the like. By 1625, near the end of our period, they made bold to sail up the Hugli to the interior of the land, and started their first factory at Chinsura very near the main stronghold of the Portuguese. Then with 3 or 4 boats they traded “from port to port all the year long” buying cheap provisions and transporting them to better markets. Even an occasional Frenchman, like Francois Pyrard de Laval, visited the Portuguese settlement of Chittagong. The Bengali perhaps found little to distinguish between these white people of various nations moving about in baggy breeches and they must have all been lumped together as ‘Saib’, if considered respectable, or as ‘Firingis’, if not so.

But there were other foreigners too, easily distinguishable from the white Europeans. Thus in quest of gold came the traders from many countries of Asia,—Persians, Mughals, Armenians, Central Asians and of course the Hindusthanis. Of the life of these varied people, we unfortunately know little. The Persian, Mughal and Central Asian merchants, as also the
Afghan aristocracy who had become very much the natives of the province, almost surely lived after the same manner as the upper strata of Muslim society in general. A common faith and the common knowledge of one language perhaps acted as a cementing bond and a breaker of barriers and thus helped the strangers from across the north-western mountains to feel at home in this distant land. But the Armenians who, despite the smallness of their community, still lead a distinct exclusive life, surely at that time too maintained their exotic individuality being marked out from the rest of the people by their roseate complexion, their loose antique drapery, their sharp aquiline features of often uncommon beauty and their steadfast adherence to a faith unlike everyone else’s. In his devotion to Christ, however, the Armenian Christian found a common ground on which he could meet the Catholic Portuguese. This and perhaps the latter’s control over local commerce,—the extent of which rendered any successful rivalry practically impossible and co-operation almost essential,—brought the two communities somewhat close together. This is evident from the later appearance of Armenian tombstones in Portuguese churchyards and of epitaphs in Portuguese alongside those in Armenian engraved on these. Even in this early period, there were perhaps among the Armenians in Bengal many “an eminent merchant, honoured by Kings and respected by Governors” who “had travelled... all the four quarters of the world” like Khojah Johannes, the founder of the Armenian Church in Chinsurah, whose body was laid to rest in 1697. And perhaps in this province too the Armenian merchants ran about from place to place buying all they could lay hands on and thus raising the price of things, as they did in Hindustan, to the great disgust of the Dutch factor, Pelsaert. Tavernier in the second half of the 17th century came across four Armenian merchants at Patna who traded in images of yellow amber which were in great demand in the kingdom of Bhutan. As the pious Catholic noted with disgust, “Wherever the Armenians see that money is to be made they have no scruple about supplying materials for the purposes of idolatry”. But if the Armenians were too greedy to be scrupulous, perhaps they were poor as well. The French traveller ‘was inclined to believe that money lacked them, for
it did not appear that they had much of it.

Another community which could be clearly distinguished from the rest, was the Africans. Leaving aside the Abyssinian eunuchs and slaves in the service of Mughal officers and aristocrats, the Africans appear in our sources as mercenaries in the service of local Rajas. The Portuguese who carried on an extensive slave-trade all over Asia and Africa and at Goa were particularly fond of negro slaves, might have been responsible for the import of many of these black soldiers into Bengal. The negro mercenaries in the service of the Raja of Sripur, at any rate, spoke the Portuguese language. And the Portuguese in their settlement of Dianga were also served by negroes. Beyond this little, however, we know practically nothing about the life of this people who constituted a small but interesting section of Bengal's population in our period.

II. The state of law and order in Portuguese settlements.

Our knowledge of the life of the Portuguese in Bengal during the first fifty years of Mughal rule is more complete. Our authorities repeatedly inform us in a mood of generalisation that the Portuguese of Bengal were "without Forts and Government, every man living after his own lust and for the most part, they are such as dare not stay in their places of better Government, for some wickedness by them committed". Of the many pirates and buccaneers for whom plunder was the only regular means of livelihood, this description is surely correct. Equally correct it must have been of the unruly Portuguese at Chittagong and Dianga, who truly lived under no form of subjection to God or man. The traders and soldiers who, in quest of trade or jobs had gone and settled in the far-off back-waters of civilization also lived in 'Luste and Discord' and at times had to be excommunicated. More than 2500 persons, pure Portuguese and Mesticos, were living in Bengal as refugees and outlaws serving native chiefs. Pedro Tavares, when he set out to organise the infant settlement of Hugli under the protection of an Imperial farman, welcomed and subsidised readily every Portuguese or Luso-Indian riff-raff and outlaw—"highway robbers and men of loose lives",—who cared to tramp in. No wonder that in the early years of its history, the pace of life at Hugli was pretty fast. In course
of time, however, Hugli came to possess all the features of a free, organised and civilised settlement, except for such habitual lapses as the buoyant Latin spirit could not very well avoid. Beyond the payment of sair duties, the Portuguese at Hugli acknowledged in no way the suzerain authority of the Grand Mughal. Even the payment of revenue soon became irregular. The Capitan Convidor, annually elected by the citizens, was obeyed by all. At the time of the siege of Hugli, the Captain distributed the muskets and appointed subordinate Captains in charge of the defence. The citizens held meetings to decide on the course of action. Elsewhere in the Portuguese settlements in or near the towns directly under the Mughals, such as the capital, Dacca, there was surely a lesser degree of independence than in the free cities of Hugli and Chittagong. But there was little interference with the daily life of the Portuguese specially in the days of Jahangir who, in his fondness for this people, granted them many exemptions, privileges and fertile lands.

III. The Portuguese merchants.

The element in the Portuguese society which in the long run played the most important part in the life of Bengal was the trading community. They were the first to open the gates of Bengal to European trade and commerce. Perhaps to the contemporary Bengalis the word ‘Firingi’ meant, above all, piratical marauders whose excesses far surpassed in volume and intensity all other forms of Portuguese activity in Bengal. But time has healed the wounds which they inflicted, while the effects of Portuguese trade have proved to be more enduring.

On the eve of our period, the Portuguese traders came to sojourn rather than to stay and we have noted elsewhere how the duration of their stay lengthened from months to years till at last they settled at Hugli. Those who thus settled had at their disposal the advantage of a wide experience in trade. For even while they waited for an imperial farman, they brought to the ports of Bengal the wares of all the Indies, Malacca, China, the Philippines, the Western coasts of India and the adjacent islands. As they settled down, while the traders from those foreign parts continued to come now there was also a return current from Bengal to Pegu, Ceylon, the
Indies and Portuguese India. Nearer home, they sailed up to Patna in their frigates with their imports from abroad and brought back to Bengal in return Jaunpur carpets, ambertis and the like. This trading community was enriched from time to time by fresh though not always good blood. The 'highway robbers and men of loose lives', financed by Pedro Tavares, soon became successful merchants. Soldiers and pirates often preferred this quieter mode of life after a period of adventurous living. In course of a few decades, many of them earned enormous fortunes. Along both the banks of Hugli they owned extensive properties. Martin Alfonso de Mello who, according to Cabral, was responsible for the Mughal attack on Hugli is said to have aroused the aggressor's cupidity with tales of "the immense riches of the generally affluent Portuguese". The pious Manrique spoke disapprovingly of the conduct of Portuguese magnates, who "lived for their wealth alone", while Du Jarric lamented the spiritual poverty of these men, 'rich in worldly goods'. Writing in the days of Portuguese decline, Tavernier remarked that but for the coming of the Dutch, no iron, but gold and silver alone would be found in the Portuguese factories in India. "In spite of the Dutch having come, however, gold and silver abounded in Portuguese houses in Goa and other parts of India".

In the days of their proud opulence, many among the rich seem to have degenerated into idle parasites. "The Portingales and Mesticoes in India never worke", wrote Linschoten, "... but most of them have their slaves to worke in their shops. There are some married Portingales that get their livings by their slaves, both men and women, whereof some have 12, some 20, and some 30, for it costeth them but little to Keepe them. These slaves for money doe labour for such as have need of their helpe, the women slaves make all sorts of confectures and conserves of Indian fruietes, much fyne needle worke, both cut and wrought workes, and then (their maister) send the fairest and youngest of them well drest up with their wares about the streetes to sell the same". As Linschoten informs us in plain language, the slaves had other things to sell besides their needle-works and conserves, and with the unsavoury gains they thus brought home, their masters could easily maintain them as well as their own family. Some statements of Cabral and Schouten
suggest that this custom was in vogue in Bengal as well.

Slave-trade was another source of their income. The Portuguese merchants of Hugli and other places traded freely with the Maghs and Portuguese of Dianga who brought to the ports of Bengal slaves captured from its towns and villages as also in Magh lands. These poor wretches were purchased and sent to different parts of India by Indian and Portuguese dealers. The Portuguese even had ‘the audacity and effrontery to come to sell in their own country the old men with whom they did not know what to do’. They are also said to have bought up regularly Bengali prisoners for the galleys and in such large numbers, too, that they were depopulating the country. Bernier, a later authority, also refers to the Hugli merchants’ league with the pirates. To quote Linschoten, again, “there are others that use exchanging of moneys and to buy money (when it cometh), as tyme serveth to sell it agayne. There are manie that doe nothing else, and become rich, specialle he that hath a good stocke”. We may assume that in the days when European commerce with its consequent influx of gold was rapidly replacing the cowries with coins, this class of money-changers described by Linschoten flourished in Bengal as well. But even in the days of their degeneration, there were among the Portuguese ‘some handie crafts men, as Hat-makers, shoe-makers, Sayle-makers and Coopers as also the manufac-
turers of silk and cotton stockings, breads, pickles and sweet-
meats’ whom Bowrey noted with admiration long after the massacre of Hugli.

IV. Portuguese soldiers, pirates and outlaws.

As a class the soldiers were perhaps only next in importance and numerical strength to the merchants and traders. If at Hugli, they were comparatively few in number (as was evident at the time of the siege), at Chittagong, Dianga and such other places, they practically were the only representatives of the white race. According to Linschoten, “all youngmen unmarried are named soldiers, which is the best name that a man can have, not that the soldiers are any waies bound or under the com-
mandment and regiment of any Captain”. The soldiers who came directly from Portugal, (known as filias de Lisboa) were graded into various ranks. But perhaps in Bengal as elsewhere
the common soldier preferred to assume the proud title of Fidalgo, to satisfy the inherent vanity of his Latin nature. In fact the Captains, whose power depended almost entirely on the number and support of his soldiers, sought always and in every way to pander to this vanity. They invited the soldiers to banquets, gave them ‘extras’ from their own purses, and bought them victuals and other things in order to have the best soldiers. At the table the Captains sat together with them and used them “with great favour and curtesie, for otherwise they would not much esteem him, nor yet obey him.” In Arakan, where they formed the backbone of the navy and where their wives had the right of entrance into the queen’s chamber, the Portuguese were granted ‘bilatas’, or revenue-producing lands, “on the understanding that they maintained a certain force of their countrymen and also Gelias”. There the rowers who manned the boats lived on the captain’s lands, under the obligation of serving whenever called upon to do so. Describing Portuguese life in Arakan Bernier wrote, ‘C’était-là la rétraite des fugitifs de Goa, de Ceilan, de Cochin, de Malague et de toutes ces autres places que tenaient autrefois les Portugais dans les Indes; ceux qui avaient abandonné leurs couvents, les gens mariés deux ou trois fois, les assassins, et en un mot les gens de sac et de corde y étaient les mieux venus et les plus considérés, et y menaient une vie detestable et tout-à-fait indigne de chrétiens, jusqu’à se massacrer et empoisonner impunément les uns les autres, et assassiner leurs propres écclésiastiques, qui souvent ne valaient pas mieux qu’eux.” But at least in certain parts of India the married householder among the Portuguese tried to live more decently than his bachelor countrymen. The soldiers, we are told, were forbidden to wear mantles in order to distinguish them from married men. The latter would also “take great offence at such indecent words as the soldiers commonly used among themselves”. The rigours of such invidious distinction must have been softened considerably by the universal regard in which the soldiers were held among the Portuguese. When the soldiers were not away raiding or campaigning, ‘they went gravely about in stately apparel, with slaves or hired men carrying hats overhead’. Ten or twelve of them lived in a house with one or two slaves or hired Indians to serve them and wash their shirts. A few tools with a table and a
bed for each were their only furniture, 'rice sodden with water with some salt fish' or some other cheap thing their usual repast. Often some captain or wealthy lord would provide their food. As to their dress, they had one or two good silken suits in common, and so when one went out, the others stayed at home where shirts and a pair of linen breeches were enough for their dignity. In such dress they sat all day long in their parlours or at their doors, singing and playing on the guitar or some other instrument. To the passer-by, they were 'vastly polite', and freely bid them 'enter, sit, make themselves at home and have a chat'. But at night they went forth in batches to supplement with highway robbery their otherwise slender income. These roughs are indeed said to have been mostly maintained by the wives of the Portuguese, Mesticos and Christians who bestowed "liberal rewards and gifts (upon them) to satisfy (and fulfill) their unchaste and filthy desires". Many also lived openly with 'Solteiras' (i.e., licentious spinsters or widows). Such amours and consequent jealousies were the cause of many duels. Their children, however, were considered legitimate and generally inherited their parents' property. But this mode of life, very naturally, often failed to satisfy, specially in view of the poverty and consequent insecurity which attended it. Many sought a means of escape in trade and settled life. Gonsalves' earlier career is a typical example. They would often start at 'Chattins' i.e., commercial travellers, who went from place to place with merchandise entrusted by some friend or other, apparently on a commission basis, until they become full-fledged traders and got married.

The small Portuguese communities scattered all over Bengal, who were cut off from their own people and did not form an integral part of the society around them had little inducement to inhibit their natural tendency towards lust and disorder. So naturally they lived after the manner of 'horses and wild animals', specially because a major part of such communities consisted of outlaws from other places. But the outlaws were not the only persons who joined the ranks of the pirates to ravage and plunder the practically defenceless coastal regions of Bengal. A commander quarrelling with his fellow captains might take to this less irksome life and would soon be joined by 'persons of better position'. But their life was not a very
easy one. The Chittagong Portuguese, during their early days, had to wage a long war with the Maghs who surrounded them. Even after peace was formally established, the danger of treachery was always there. But their mutual relations generally were peaceful, so that now they were free to raze the coasts and even penetrate into the interior with Magh assistance. Much has been said already about their raids and slave-trade. It should however be added that at times they sought in honourable matrimony the hands of such noble ladies as had the misfortune to fall into their hands. Through the ministration of some ardent missionary, a church-steeple would often raise its head above the thatched huts or more substantial buildings of these far-off colonies, or a visiting priest might remind the isolated communities of their Christian faith once in a long while. Even ecclesiastical wrath might occasionally fall upon their heads in the form of excommunication. The unfortunate wretches so stigmatised would welcome any priestly visitors "as Angels from Heaven and beseech them to intercede", so that at death they might be received into the bosom of the Church, no matter what their life had been.

In their naval operations, the Portuguese generally used the swift fighting crafts called galleots. These crafts had 15 to 20 benches on each side with one man to each oar, usually native lascars who often took their wives with them on their voyages. All vessels had two kitchens, we are told,—one for the captain and soldiers, the other for mariners and sailors. And there would also be some slaves and servants on board. The soldiers on board were all "armed with arquebuse, pike, spear, little China bucklers, bows and arrows". Collars of buffalo hide, laced jerkins, burgonets, iron helmets and very short and tight breeches were the main items of their dress on board vessel. But shoes and stockings were not used. On land, however, the soldiers of the fleet were flamboyantly attired in sailor's breeches, which required "ten ells of stuff" and were 'exceedingly ample and wide below', reaching to the ground. While sailing, they used tents of palm leaves at night for protection from rain and slept on mats, mattresses or carpets, which were folded up and laid aside in the morning. There was very little room on board ship. The trading vessels were particularly crowded, so that if any 'contrary winde' came, part of the
luggages would have to be thrown overboard. For such boats "were so pestered with people and goods that there was scant place to lie in". Besides the 'people and goods', there were the slaves lying under the deck in scores,—the boat which took Manrique from Pipli to 'India' carried 80 of them,—tied together by ropes passed through their palms and sustained by a daily allowance of dry rice thrown to them carelessly as to birds.

V. Portuguese priests and missionaries.

The priests and missionaries, though few in number, were an important element of the Portuguese community in Bengal. The Diocese of Cochin was in the beginning at the head of all Catholic missions in Bengal, of which the Jesuits are the earliest on record. Later a Bishop of Cochin transferred the possession of the Bengal churches and the right of evangelization to the Augustinians of Goa. When Pedro Tavares organised the Hugli settlement, its spiritual government as also that of other neighbouring places was vested in the Augustinian brethren under a 'superior' or vicar-general. Under the authority of Cochin, there was at this time a vicarage first at Satgaon and later at Hugli. In 1606, the jurisdiction of Bengal passed under the newly-created Diocese of Mylapore. From these chief centres the missionaries would go out to evangelise or to minister to the needs of their fellow Christians in outlying parts, setting up Churches and monasteries wherever possible. Secular priests acting as Vicars were probably not unknown. And at times, as for instance between 1598 and 1600, Jesuit missionaries were also directly sent to preach and evangelise, when such steps were considered necessary. By 1616, Dacca, Sripur, Hugli and Pipli became official missionary centres, and new Churches had to be built particularly at places where a large concourse of merchants was wont to assemble. The priests and missionaries enjoyed a very high status in Portuguese society. The Augustinian Mission to Hugli was welcomed by all and when Manrique visited Hugli, he was received with great kindness by both the brethren and the laity. In their regular centres of activity in the heart of the organised settlements, they lived in their convents and monasteries, usually attached to churches. As to their means of livelihood, the
Augustinians in particular declined the governmental offers of land and money and preferred to live by begging from Christians and pagans and on the quarterly grants from the Portuguese king. The less holy but more profitable occupation of trade was also no taboo to them. In fact, many priests often took to trading and hardly made any secret of it. For though trade was officially forbidden, the authorities preferred to look the other way when such delinquencies were unearthed. Further, as Linschoten observed, in Goa the lucrative exchange of money "commeth most commonlie from the Spiritualite, who do secretly use it, by other men's meanes, without any late or hindrance". One may wonder whether the same was the case in Bengal. But not all the priests were worldly, and on the whole, one must admit, they were earnest in their spiritual exertions. We have referred elsewhere to the baptisms, confessions, conversions and reforms which constituted their usual routine. But these do not complete the list of their good deeds (assuming forced conversion to be a good deed, of course). As teachers, they taught the Bengali children in the school at Hugli. Many of them "indevoured to learne the Bengalan Language". Domingo de Souza translated into Bengali a 'tractate of the Christian religion'. Cabral had 'a sufficient knowledge' of the language and Fray Manoel de la Concepcion was 'very skilled in' it. Manrique himself preached in the Bengali language at Tambolin though, alas, to little effect. His work testifies best to the wide range of his Bengali vocabulary, in which the quaint 'babare' and less mentionable slangs loom large. To their even greater credit, the Augustinians and Jesuits participated in relief work during the famine of 1625.

VI. The daily life of the Portuguese citizens.

Many of the Portuguese were 'marryed with the naturall borne women of the countrie', and the children of such marriages known as Mesticoes were of 'yellowish colour'. The Portuguese arrived fresh from home were the most honoured, the casticos or filias de Indies (Portuguese born in India) were next in status, while the Mulattos of seminegroid parentage and the black Christians were at the bottom of the social ladder. Whatever their social status the Portuguese throughout India had in common a most enormous vanity.
While they walked up and down the streets, all went ‘as proudlie as the best’. For to their mind there was “no better than another . . . the rich and the poore man all one, without any difference in their conversation, courtesies and companies”. Their gait was marked by a great swagger and ‘vaineeglorious majestie’. A servant followed them carrying ‘a great hat or raile over their heads’. Flowing robes of silk were their usual attire out of doors and practically everyone carried a sword or rather had it ‘carried after them by a boy’, that it might not trouble them as they walked, ‘nor hinder their gravities’. When they met one another in the streets, florid greetings ‘with a great Besolas manos’ would follow. If such an elaborate gesture was not received with proper attention, naturally a fight for honour would ensue ending often in broken limbs, if not in loss of lives. The inadvertent offer to a visitor of a chair lower than the host’s might also have such terrible consequences.

The tenor of life at home was however generally less hazardous and nerve-racking. Indeed the visitor from abroad found the Luso-Indian and Portuguese household most ‘bountifull’, kept very neat and clean with the help of ‘five, six, ten, twentie . . . slaves’, the numbers varying in proportion to the master’s opulence. Their usual residences were either houses in the Bengali style or more substantial buildings, in which they lived “very cleanly and sweet in all things belonging to their houses, specially in their linen”. Their regular baths and frequent change of clothes also appeared very striking to the European travellers. At home the men went about in ‘extremely white and fine’ shirts and pyjamas with a velvet or taffeta cap called ‘gualteira’ or ‘monteira’ on their head. Thus clad, they would sit chatting at their doors with five or six neighbours, while slaves stood waving fans or scratched their bodies. Occasionally an acquaintance would pay a call, and if the master of the house was not too conservative, the visitor might be entertained with music ‘sung and played’ by the young ladies of the family ‘after the Portugal manner’, on a lute or guitar. Music was so much in favour that they had their slaves play to them at meals, at bed-time and while getting up. This pleasure-loving people were however very devout and all decent folk went regularly to church, if there was one at hand.
In case there were none, they would try to secure the services of some neighbouring priest or missionary for christenings and confessions. At mass, the Portuguese would keep fingering their *pater noster* beads; the unseemly sight of fettered slaves who accompanied their masters would mar the serenity of the church service. The behaviour of the Portuguese, even at church, was marked more by ostentation than by humility; the servant carried a cushion for his master to kneel on at the time of the mass. Their ostentation was matched by their bigotry. Their zeal in forced conversions, their strong reluctance to surrender the converted at the time of the siege of Hugli, their dislike of Ganges water, holy to the Hindus,—all indicate their deep-rooted fanaticism.

The Portuguese all over the Orient mingled ‘their pleasures with their devotions’. On Sundays, holidays and other feastdays all went in a procession with crosses and made ‘a thousand passades and careers on their horses’, so that the religious ceremonies became “like fairs, with banquets and music of all sorts of instruments”. On such days, the pleasure-seekers would also go to pleasant waterside gardens or orchards and take their refreshments ‘in the shade’ as in a picnic. On the Christmas Eve and Holy Thursdays and Fridays, the Portuguese settlements looked particularly gay with the lanterns by the road-side and tables laid with white napery covered with thousand delicacies. ‘In Churches and houses were represented the mysteries of the Nativity with diverse characters, and marionettes...’. ‘Goodly companies of hautbois, cornets-à-bouquin, drums, violins’, etc. played at the church service while baubles and trinkets were sold at the gates. Even at God-forsaken Dianga, Christian festivals like the Feast of Corpus Christi were celebrated. Besides, in the Jesuit College there would be regular dramatic performance and the students would go out in procession, chanting hymns. On the occasions of marriage and christening also, there would be solemn processions with plenty of music and throwing of rosewater, followed up by small dinner parties, ‘with little meate, yet costly’.

But all the amusements of the Portuguese in this country were not so innocent. There were the gambling houses, for instance, set apart for ‘cards, dice and other games of Chance’,
where food, drink and excellent accommodation for the night were available as well as music to entertain the players. The poor soldiers generally frequented these places to receive shares of the gains, generously given away by the winners: this ‘act of gentility’ was called ‘barato’. Games of hand-ball, skittles and bowls, tricks of conjurers, mountebanks and buffoons, animal and snake shows, music (which everybody learnt) and the performance of skilled dancers were also among the common entertainments in the Portuguese settlements.

Their married women, practically cut off from the rest of the society by the strict seclusion which was then customary, lived a life of unhappy luxury. They seldom went out, except to church or to visit a friend, and even then, only in a fully covered palanquin. It was not customary for husbands and wives to meet before marriage. The men, however, tried to have a glimpse of their prospective brides without the make-up which constituted half their beauty. Their dress, out of doors, was of damask, velvet or gold-cloth,—silk being the cheapest thing they would wear,—to which were added very costly jewelleries. At home they put on a fine smock called ‘baju’, a painted cloth wrapped round the body from the waist and a pair of slippers. Their diet, completely Indianised, consisted of rice cooked in the Indian fashion, salt fish, pickles, butter, lentils and the like which they took with their hands, the use of spoons being considered ridiculous. The Indian manner of taking water from narrow-necked earthen pots without touching these with the lips was also adopted. It excited the admiration of Pietro della Valle, and the Portuguese new-comers who failed to imitate it successfully, with obvious consequences, were ridiculed as ‘reynols’.

With their frequent baths and use of perfumes and sandal-paste, the Portuguese women appeared very neat and clean. These unfortunate creatures in their seclusion had nothing to do all the day. So they sought to wear off their ennui by chewing betels, singing and playing on instruments, swimming in the pools, looking through the windows at the streets and, above all, by illicit amours in which they were often helped by obliging slaves. The last-mentioned form of amusement frequently ended in death at the hands of the husband, if a timely measure of ‘dhutura’ poison administered by the wife did not forestall such dangers.
VII. The relations of the Portuguese with the local people.

The attitude of the local people to the peaceful Portuguese settlers appears to have been friendly. The Mudas might condemn them as unclean pork-eaters, the Hindus consider them untouchable because of their fondness for beef, and those who had taken their rice be looked upon as having 'lost caste', yet generally they were quite welcome to this land, though the motives which prompted this attitude were not merely altruistic. In any case, when Pedro Tavares returned to Hugli with the imperial farman, the local people 'almost worshipped him'. The government was particularly interested in making the traders settle in Bengal as that would mean more trade and hence more revenue. The Augustinians at Dacca refused to accept lands and money from the government for they feared that they were expected to attract traders in return and might be expelled in case of failure. The local merchants, as also the common people, welcomed the settlers from profit motives. The Rajas of Bakla, Chandikan and Sripur, Isa Khan, the Masnad-i-Ala of Hijli and others assumed a friendly attitude in expectation of increased trade or of military service. The latter motive was the strongest in the case of the Magh Raja. Emperor Akbar, however, allowed the Portuguese to settle, not merely for reasons of trade, but also due to his eclectic spirit. Jahangir too, Bernier informs us, was very fond of the Christians and granted them many privileges for that reason. But the attitude of the local governments was not always very consistent. The King of Chandikan suddenly started persecution and so did the Arakan King on more than one occasion. About 1625 the Mughal government also is said to have participated in the persecution of the Christians. But, in general, the government in Bengal was very tolerant towards them and even protected the Christian missionaries from popular wrath.

Though the Portuguese took the fullest advantage of this tolerant attitude and also intermarried freely with the native women, they did not in any way reciprocate these sentiments. The Portuguese, in their pride, despised all,—"not only the Indians but even all the other Christian nations of Europe", whom they called "white men", a term which reminds one of an American expression, the "poor whites". The Mughals were
looked upon as enemies of Christianity and hence their territories in Bengal were legitimate objects of plunder. The priests and missionaries naturally were the most bigoted of all. They referred confidently to the ‘Gentile and Mahumetan Errours’—Hindu and Muslim religions, in more common parlance,—and stopped their fellow countrymen’s lucrative trade in Ganges water and their neighbourly practice of lending clothes and jewellery to the Hindus for decorating Durga, as both were considered unchristian. The faiths of the Hindus and Muslims were declared to be roads to hell,—the second being the shorter of the two. Forced conversions were considered pious acts and surrendering a single soul converted to Christianity through most unchristian methods appeared reprehensible to most of the Portuguese settled in Bengal. Despite such an attitude, however, they pulled on well enough with the people of the country. The class which came into most intimate contact with the natives were of course the merchants and traders. In the earlier period they used to advance money to the native merchants to secure goods for them. Later the merchants of India also came to their ports to purchase the rarities and the slaves which they imported regularly. Many native merchants also settled at Hugli and their relations with the Portuguese were very friendly; during the siege of Hugli, the Portuguese captains called on the Hindu and Muslim merchants to bear witness to their good conduct before the Mughals. Occasional cases of commercial rivalry were not entirely unknown. A Mirza’s opposition to the entrance of Portuguese ships at Pipli mentioned by Manrique is an instance in point. But in general, the native merchants were content to remain the lesser partners in the new trade. A verse in Ramagopala’s *Sakhanirnaya* referring to Lochanadasa’s life-story seems to suggest that the Portuguese also came into contact with the local people as money-lenders and in case of failure to pay back, the debtor or some one in his stead would have to forfeit his liberty to the creditor. The Portuguese mercantile community enjoyed a privileged position and was an object of the Government’s special protection. Manrique and his fellow travellers, when arrested on suspicion, were assured that no injury would be done to them, if they were bona fide traders.

The priests and missionaries were treated with great consideration. The *shiqdar* of Hijli sent ‘hadiya’ (presents of food-stuff)
to Manrique on his arrival and received him in state. The *kotwal* of Midnapore and the Raja of Tamulk gave him further samples of Muslim and Hindu dishes. The former’s feast was followed by dances which the puritanical Padre found rather lewd, but he was gracious enough to appreciate the ‘*shiropa*’ presented to him. The merchant ‘Moboto Khan’ proved particularly friendly, spoke to the father in Portuguese and also sent his son to learn the language. On his journey to Portuguese India, Manrique had some merchandise entrusted to him. When the people who had been belabouring Manrique found out that he was a priest, they addressed him with due respect as ‘*Saib*’ and ‘*Thakur*’. But the people’s attitude was not always so reverential. The Mulas and dervishes at Dacca started an anti-Christian campaign holding the un-Islamic practice of pork-eating to special condemnation, and the Government had to exert itself to protect the missionaries. The Raja of Tamulk objected to the preaching of Christianity in his territory. The Augustinians’ participation in trade also lowered their prestige in the eyes of the natives. At Dianga a Dominican missionary who tried to stop some Maghs from taking a few people into slavery had to pay for his officiousness with an eye. But the Hindus generally were more tolerant, and so long as they were not converted,—forcibly or after loss of caste due to ‘taking their rice,’—preferred to listen with indifferent curiosity to the Fathers’ sermons delivered in quaint Bengali. The majority of the converts called ‘*kalas*’—many of whom were slaves and most cruelly treated even after conversion,—had little love for their white brothers in faith and were not relied upon by the latter. Their Christianity was naturally skin-deep. But there were some who took earnestly to their new faith and could be handed back to the Mughals only under protest at the time of the siege of Hugli. With the growth of piracy, the entire Portuguese community in Bengal seems to have become suspect in the eyes of the people. The capture of such miscreants,—real or suspected,—was hailed with great jubilation and liberal doses of thrashing were administered in anticipation of more serious punishments. Many unfortunate whites like Manrique must have had taste of such popular vengeance on false suspicion. It is a significant fact that despite their many-sided
activities, the Portuguese survive in popular imagination as pirates and plunderers only and the best-known passage referring to them in the literature of the period perpetuates the memory of their ruthless ravages along the coast.

**VIII. A Portuguese settlement in Bengal: a reconstruction.**

From the accounts of Manrique, his fellow missionaries and the travellers the picture of a typical Portuguese settlement rises clearly in our vision. We see the bungalows and substantial buildings of the Portuguese interspersed with the thatched roofs of the poorer natives. A lofty church-steeple rises into the sky. By its side is a monastery or a missionary residence. If it is Hugli we are thinking of, there will also be a Jesuit school and College and the Casa de Misericordia with its enormous riches. Down the street a rich magnate comes along in flowing robes with ponderous gravity, followed by a servant with an umbrella. He comes across an acquaintance and makes a florid courtesy. Black slaves and servants are running busily about on their errands. An Augustinian Father passes by in his black robe and soon a procession of college students follows chanting some solemn hymn. The native or Mestico craftsman busy in his roadside workshop looks up. Some ladies chewing betels lean forth from their windows and a group of young men sitting on their doorsteps stop their busy chatter for a while. On the river by the town there are a large number of ships from Goa, Burma, Malacca, the Indies, Manila and China. Loads of spices, sandal-wood, rich cloths and the like are being carried from the ships to the godowns. Some are being laden with cloths and food-stuffs. Slaves brought from Arakan are being dragged harshly down, to be taken to the daily market where high-pitched wranglings in Portuguese and Bengali may be heard. Suddenly there is a chattering of hoofs and the gay sound of music. A procession approaches with multi-coloured banners and crosses. It is a feast day. With nightfall the road-sides are lighted up with lanterns and there are a thousand gaieties in every house. On the river there is a busy splashing of oars. Some galleons are sailing out and soon in some hapless village fire and rapine will be let loose. All this confused bustle is suddenly swallowed up in the booming of heavy guns. The Mughals are besieging
Hugli or the Dutch are fighting some Portuguese ship in the Bay. Presently the noise dies out and in the place of the gay busy city we see, as the smoke clears away, a poor apology for a ramshackle town.

NOTES ON AUTHORITIES

Section I. For the reference to respectable Europeans as 'Saib', see Manrique, I, 42, 216. For the traders 'from many countries, see Cabral's letter in Manrique, II, 392. For the account of the Armenians given in this chapter, see Seth, Armenians in India, 304. 305ff, 571ff; Tavernier, II, 261-62. For the Africans, see Pyrard, II, 65-6; Manrique, I, 92.

Sections II-VIII. The account of the life of the Portuguese community in Bengal is based mainly on Pyrard, I, 26-130, 201-49; Linschoten, 154-85; Pimenta's letter in Purchas, X, 205-06; Du Jarric, IV, 82ff; Bowrey, 192-3; Bernier, 237-240; Elliot and Dowson, VII, 31-32 (Padshahnama); Fathiyya-i-ibriyya: Cabral's letter and numerous references in Manrique. Also see Payne, Jahangir and the Jesuits, 206; the Report on Christian communities in Bengal, 1599 in Bengal: Past and Present, 1952; the introduction to Brahman-Catholic Samvada; and Campos.

Pyrard and Linschoten described in detail mainly the life of the Portuguese community at Goa. But both had first-hand knowledge of Portuguese life in Bengal and sections of their account are explicitly stated to be descriptions of Portuguese life in 'all the Oriental countries'. Some parts of these accounts seem obviously applicable to the settled Portuguese communities in Bengal while some of their statements are directly corroborated by Manrique and others in their descriptions in Bengal. Hence the data supplied by Pyrard and Linschoten have been drawn upon wherever it seemed reasonable to do so.
CHAPTER VIII

A RESUME

The first half-century of Mughal rule is one of the most significant epochs in the annals of mediaeval Bengal. Viewed superficially from the standpoint of manners and morals, habits and practices and generally the way of life, there is little to distinguish it from the periods that immediately followed or preceded it. In the context of the essential continuity of Bengali life, landmarks are difficult to discern in spheres such as these. Descriptive passages in mid-16th century works like Chaitanya Bhagavata could often be freely interchanged with those in works written a century later, Ruparama's Dharmamangala for instance, with hardly a chance of detection. But if we look for special features which mark out the period under review as a distinctive one, these are but easy to find.

The years 1575-1627, saw the culmination of processes long at work. It witnessed also the first pulsations of new vital forces destined to shape the future of Bengal and the Bengalis. The processes which reached their culmination in this epoch were the neo-Vaishnava movement and the literary-cultural renaissance which had begun at least as early as the middle of the 15th century and had progressed with little interruption even through the stormy years of Mughal-Afghan conflict for supremacy. The forces which now began to operate practically for the first time in this province were Mughal imperialism and European commerce. Viewed in this light, the significance of the period under review becomes self-evident.

The neo-Vaishnava movement reached its final shape in our period and in this new form became a mighty proselytizing creed. In what exact relationship this final form stood to the teachings of the Master, is a question which cannot be decided with precision. One thing however is certain. If the original movement had any great revolutionary potentiality, much of it
had been frittered away in course of the journey to Vrindavana and back. Still, the neo-Vaishnava movement was the most creative force in the social, religious and cultural life of the epoch under review. It worked a profound change in the thought and morals of those who were converted. Others too felt its impact. But the rigours of caste were not, as is claimed, modified to any considerable extent. No liberal humanism based on a faith in the brotherhood of man was preached. The majority were not converted. Of those who were converted, too, many went back to older ways of life through the backdoor of the Sahajiya cult. So the culmination of the neo-Vaishnava movement concealed behind a facade of superficial success the frustration of a greater promise.

The other process which now reached its climax, or rather yielded its last glorious harvest, was the literary-cultural renaissance of the Turko-Afghan period. With the establishment of the Iliyas Shahi dynasty in the middle of the 14th century, peace in a comparative sense had returned to Bengal after a long period of strife and misrule which had followed in the wake of the Turkish conquest. With the return of peace, cultural pursuits were resumed. This new development assumed significant proportions towards the middle of the 15th century. In the earlier half of the 16th century it reached its first climax and produced a crop of extraordinary talents or near-geniuses and at least one saint who left a permanent imprint on the religion, thought and social habits of his people. The literary and cultural tradition was carried on almost uninterrupted throughout the following decades mainly by the logicians and Vaishnavas. After the establishment of Mughal rule, a fresh crop of literary masterpieces were produced which marked a second climax. Then followed a period of decline.

Cultural activity did not abruptly come to a dead end and even a new literary form was evolved in the 17th century. Nyaya studies were also continued till a climax was reached towards the end of the same century. But there was no longer any galaxy of extraordinary men, and even the second climax appears limited and mediocre when compared with the first.

Of the new forces which were now at work, Mughal rule undoubtedly conferred very real benefits on the people even during the troubled first half-century of its history in this
province. These benefits are to be estimated in terms of the peace and security which now ensued. It is to be estimated also in terms of the new commercial development facilitated by a strong government. Closer connection with the larger life of the Empire was no small gain either. Yet Bengal in the first half-century of Mughal rule was hardly a Utopia. Official oppression, zamindars' misrule and a revenue system which was in effect both extortionate and lacking in uniformity largely undermined the good results ensuing from the establishment of a well-ordered government. Besides, Mughal rule in Bengal maintained throughout the period under review and even during the decades to follow the character of a foreign conquest. And unfortunately, unlike some officials of another foreign government later established in the same province, the imperial mansabdars took less interest in the life and culture of the country than in its fair women and fairer yield of revenue. So the happy development of an earlier epoch when Bengali culture had grown through the effort of the Hindu poets and scholars under the patronage of Muslim Sultans and their officers was now at an end.

This period did not witness the real beginning of the large scale commerce with Europe which was a result of English and Dutch enterprise. The English in the first quarter of the 17th century were only looking for a chance to enter into Bengal. The Dutch traded along the coast, fought with the Portuguese for supremacy in the Bay and, according to some, even succeeded in establishing a factory at Chinsura in 1625. But the years 1575-1627 were a period of Portuguese supremacy so far as Bengal's commerce was concerned. In itself, commercial supremacy of the Portuguese in Bengal was a development without any issue. But it acted as an impetus to industry by opening the markets of Asia to Bengal's products and, what was more, chalked out the routes and indicated the lines which the commerce of the Dutch and the English was to follow in future.

Viewed as a whole, the first half-century of Mughal rule in Bengal was a period of immense importance. But it was not a glorious age, nor even a happy one. After the Mughal-Afghan wars for supremacy in Bengal, the decision in favour of one party secured peace,—but only in a limited sense. Three
decades had to pass after the initial conquest before anything like firm government could be established over the greater part of the country. And these three decades were years of endless suffering for great masses of men. When the wars and rebellions were at last over, people enjoyed the benefits of well-ordered government. Portuguese commerce at the same time brought new wealth to the country. But neither the well-ordered government nor the new wealth could create conditions which might lead to the happy development witnessed in the earlier half of the 16th century. The great days of mediaeval Bengal were definitely at an end.