

Book Review

Shamsul Hossain, *Eternal Chittagong*, published by Mahfuz Anam as part of The Daily Star's *Adamyia Chattagrama* Festival, 2012, 135 pages (no price mentioned).

In 2012 the *Daily Star* in association with 'Heritage Chatigrama' held Adamyia Chattagrama Festival. *Eternal Chittagong* is an outcome of that festival. It offers "an enlightened understanding of [Chittagong's] present, through a better knowledge of the past...[and] for the future generations who will be inspired by the region's glorious past and be motivated to work for its prosperous future" (p. xix)

The nicely produced book is more than a catalogue of exhibits; it contains an enormous volume of materials related to Chittagong's glorious past, and exposes to its readers the past history and heritage in a novel way. The cultural plurality is brought to the attention of the readers and researchers in such a way that can be considered a panoramic record of Chittagong's past glory. The author is concerned about the poor state of heritage preservation and conservation in the city, and he has successfully focused on this point through photographs.

A quick look at the book may give one the idea that it is 'a coffee-table almanac'. This is hardly the case. The author attempts to present a chronological account from Chittagong's pre-history to the history of the colonial period. But the book evolves in an interesting way: with a beautiful and high quality full-page photographs, with a note describing the object or building in English and Bangla on the adjacent page. In writing the notes the author often quotes the English translation of medieval Persian chronicles or modern English books.

The book is divided into six sections: Pre-history; Pre-medieval Harikela; Sultanate Chatigrama/Chatgaon; Arakanese Chatigrama; Mughal Islamabad/Chatgam and Colonial Islamabad/Chateegaon (vulgarly Chittagong). The first section covers only two pages. But the few lines of notes make it clear that the area needs to be brought under scientific archaeological survey and investigation, which has not yet been done, though pre-historic implements came to light from Sitakund Hill as early as 1886 C.E.

The next section deals with Pre-medieval Harikela, a kingdom that grew in the area. The author introduces the importance of this early kingdom by referring to

the relevant sources. In the same section we find the beautiful photograph of one of the famous Jhewari Bronze sculpture of a Rekha temple. Other photographs in this section are the highly impressive Vase Grant of Devatideva, king of Harikela; Kantideva's Copper-plate, Vase Grant of Attakaradeva; Nasirabad copper plate of Damodaradeva; Harikela coins including a few issued by Attakadeva and other Akara dynasty kings of Harikela. A few illustrations of the Jhewari Bronze sculptures of Buddha in his different postures clearly show the excellence of this sculptural school. The photographs of the Bronze images end with one of Basudhara, an excellent piece of art work of the Jhewari artisans. The last illustration in this section is the replica of a Stupa. The photographs of the Jhewari Bronzes are so beautiful that not only scholars of sculptural art, but laymen would be convinced of the excellence of the achievements of the Jhewari artisans. The author successfully brings the attention of the readers to Jhewari (in Anwara Upazila of Chittagong), an important seat of Bronze sculptural art. He also aptly concludes that "the recovered cultural properties helped Chittagong rank with the other famous art centers of pre-medieval period." The specific art-style of the Jhewari Brinzes is recognized as a distinct school having profound influence on the Bronze Sculptures in the neighboring countries of south-east Asia.

The next section is 'Sultani Chatgaon'. With a very brief one page note on the period the author reproduces the map of Jao de Barrows (1550 C.E.) and another map (source not mentioned) showing the route from Chittagong to Pandua. The pictorial reproductions start with Fakirer Masjid at Dewannagar, Hathazari, which the author claims to be the earliest mosque of the Sultani period in Chittagong. There is a fragmentary Tughra inscription, a photograph of which is also reproduced, fixed on the façade of the mosque. The next photograph shows the interior of the mosque which gives a very modern look, possibly due to several phases of renovation work. The photograph of another Sultani mosque with its do-chala gateway follows. The gateway is detached from the main building, on its eastern side. The author draws our attention to the prosperity of Chittagong in the Sultani period by reproducing photographs (with, of course, short notes) of the stone inscriptions with exquisite calligraphy, Terracotta ornamentations, ruins of a few mosques and a coin of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah minted from Chatgam. The details of the writing on the coin are also given.

Chittagong under the Arakanese kings is dealt with in the next section. A few Arakanese coins are reproduced – bilingual as well as trilingual. The Mughal period of Chittagong is represented by 21 photographs of mosques; some in ruins, but mostly renovated and wear a modern look, though the Mughal features are

visible. The inscription on the Haji mosque at Pahartali contains the mention of the new name of Islamabad given to Chittagong by the Mughals.

Colonial Chittagong is represented by two types of buildings: the earlier structures and the later structures. This section starts with a beautiful photograph of the recently renovated Court Building. Then a series of renovated colonial buildings demonstrate the European influence in the architecture of the city. That Chittagong had to face the horrors of the Second World War is portrayed by a photograph of and an elaborate note on the War Cemetery. A complete list of colonial architecture is given as an Appendix to this section.

The inner consciousness of the author is clearly felt in the Bibliography section of the book. His feeling was that the photographs and the short notes (both in Bangla and English) may attract future researchers to take up the task of building up a comprehensive history of Chittagong. For them the author has given at the end of the book an exhaustive bibliography of both Primary and Secondary sources, which I believe, will be very helpful for future researchers. Though at first look the book may appear a pictorial exposition of Chittagong, the order and selection of the illustrations and the bilingual short notes on them give a clear indication of the author's intention to produce pictorial primary sources of the history and heritage of Chittagong, so that future researchers are attracted to build up the local history of a very important region of Bangladesh.

One cannot but admire the beautifully produced double-paged color photographs of various aspects of Chittagong and also some photographs of the colonial buildings. Here one must note that the colonial court house was going to be demolished and the hue and cry of the heritage-conscious citizens of Chittagong as well as of the whole country could save it and after excellent renovation, it is now one of the centers of attraction in Chittagong. Its photograph in the book would prove the veracity of the above statement.

Shamsul Hossain deserves our admiration for producing a beautiful pictorial monograph with the title 'Eternal Chittagong in the Eyes of Tourists, Travellers and Scholars'. The full title leaves very little to be guessed regarding the intention of the author. We only wish, the author could take some more time and produce a full monograph on Chittagong. We hope some future researchers will fulfill the cherished wish of Dr. Shamsul Hossain.

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