

Book Review

Suchira Roychoudhury (ed): *Gaur, The Medieval City of Bengal*, Special Issue of *Pratna Samiksha* (A Journal of Archaeology), Centre for Archaeological Studies & Training, Eastern India, Kolkata, 2012, vii+218, 3 Maps, 34 Colour Plates, ISBN 2229 7979 (Institution Rs. 1000.00 and Individual Rs. 800.00).

The volume under review is a Special Issue of '*Pratna Samiksha*' a journal published by the Centre for Archaeological Studies & Training, Eastern India, Kolkata. The volume is a thematic one containing a collection of research papers on the Medieval City of Gaur, (C. 1450-1565 CE) contributed by the core members of a research project on Gaur. Based on the findings of archaeological explorations, original contemporary records, coins, inscriptions and the available maps from the 19th century, the contributors attempted to make a fresh study of the medieval urban centre of Gaur, which held the focal point of the administration of the Muslim rulers of Bengal in the 15th and 16th century CE. All the attempts in the articles have revolved round the urbanization of Gaur, its background, the political and economic stimulus that contributed to the making of Gaur. Profusely illustrated with photographs of the sites and the artifacts and the old maps the volume is a most welcome addition to our knowledge of the very important medieval urban centre of Bengal. It helps us to understand the features of urbanization of the largest Sultanate city of Bengal.

The volume has been divided into six sections, namely Background, Historiography, Political History and Economic Formation, Environment, Archaeology and Settlement Pattern, Epigraphy and Numismatics, and Technological Innovation. An 'Aftermath' (quite curious a heading) has been added at the end.

In the 'Background' section Aniruddha Ray places the city of 'Gaur' in the overview of the medieval archaeology of Bengal as well as gives us a clear idea about the site and surroundings of the city in historical perspective. The author also delves into the decline of the city. But it must be mentioned that Ray chooses a very broad canvas of the whole of Bengal, which is rather somewhat irrelevant in the context of the present monograph, and thereby 'Gaur' loses its focus in his write up.

The second section, ‘Situating Gaur in Colonial and Nationalist Historiography’, by Ratnabali Chatterjee is a very competent historiographic analysis of both colonial and local writers from Alexander Cunningham and the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861 to Akshay Kumar Maitreya (1861-1930). The section is an analysis of Colonial and National explorers who surveyed the ruins of Gaur and left records of the findings; notable among them are the Indigo planter Henry Creighton’s (1817), *The Ruins of Gaur* M. Abid Ali Khan’s *Memories of Gaur and Pandua*, edited and revised by H.E. Stapleton, 1931) and Akshay Kumar Maitreya in his journal *Aitihāsik Chitra* and *Gaura Lekhamala* (1912). Maitreya’s exploration of medieval Gaur was part of a much larger project of writing the history of the Bengali people. His essays, *Gaurer Katha* (BS 1390) provide valuable data on medieval Gaur and he has been credited to have “laid the foundation of regional history which had the ethno-linguist identity of the Bengali people built into its core”.

In conclusion the author makes it clear that the current project on Gaur was rooted in the historical problem of treating, in the context of Bengal, Muhammed Habib’s thesis: ‘that an urban revolution was initiated in India in the thirteenth century’. It was found from the study of the works of colonial and nationalist archaeologists that a rich literature (dating back to the 16th century CE) as well as the material remains that a rescrutiny was needed. And that is what prompted the present volume.

The next two chapters in the third section reconstructed the political history of Pre-medieval and Medieval period, the latter is titled as Dynastic History: A Framework. The next chapter authored by Aniruddha Ray deals with the Economic Formation of medieval Bengal as a background study for the understanding of the urbanization of Gaur.

Utilising Persian, European and Bengali sources Ray tries to give us an idea of Economic Formation of pre-medieval and medieval Bengal. The author has dealt very elaborately on the basis of Mukundaram Chakravarti, one of the greatest poets of the *Mangal Kuryas*. His knowledge of European sources has been well-blended with the local vernacular sources to form an idea about the forces that acted in the formation of the Bengal economy and the society.

The narrative of the archaeological remains of the city of Gaur, its environment and settlement pattern are the subject matters of the next section of the book. The narrative of the archaeological remains is quite exhaustive and Sharmi Chakraborty’s chapter on the Environment of Gaur adds quite a welcome addition to present day historiography.

Environmental history is a recent addition to the discipline of history and Sharmi Chakraborty's attempt to quite a laudable effort at reconstructing the physical environment of medieval Gaur. Tracing the geography, geology, river system, tanks and ponds, the climate and above all the geography of Gaur, Chakraborty places the locational advantage of Gaur for its growth and at the same time blames the ever-oscillating channel of the Ganges and seasonal epidemics as the causes of its decay. The author concludes, "Gaur is, like in most of the urban centres of its time, an expression of how the people harnessed their natural resources as the technology of the time would allow them to do. But within those limits the medieval man showed his ingenuity and common sense— an understanding of the land handed down by thousand years of adaptation to this specific environment and technique acquired from ever-expanding cultural horizon. However, once the Ganges shifted its course Gaur lost its logic of continuation and was subsequently abandoned" (p. 125).

The next chapter in this section, Settlement Pattern through Archaeological Finds, is very ably chalked out by Sutapa Sinha. The investigating team found the survey map prepared in 1878 by J.H. Ravenshaw most accurate and they carried out their intensive and extensive explorations in the city of Gaur on its basis during the years 1992 to 1997 and identified all the 113 habitation sites. They also plotted extant structures of all types in the 15 sector maps. After reassembling all the 15 sector maps, an idea of the settlement pattern of the city has been formed on the basis of spatial distribution and density of assemblages and their inter-relation. The city was divided broadly into four principal functional zones: the Royal Centre, the Noble's Quarter, the Urban Core and the Garrison Area. All these have been clearly shown in a map (No. 3).

The description of extant buildings along with the artifacts found is quite elaborate and the value of the book lies in the detailed recording done on the basis of the fieldwork for a number of years; of course, a very painstaking job done admirably well.

The next section of the book deals with Epigraphy and Numismatics, in which Pratip Kumar Mitra documented some new Epigraphs and Sutapa Sinha documented the coins found in Gaur. Both the chapters add a wealth of new information derived from the epigraphic and numismatic sources.

In the next section on 'Technological Innovation'. Ratnabali Chatterjee studies the Glazed tiles from Gaur, and Somnath Ghosh, Varada Khaladkar and Kaushik Gangopadhyay make an Archaeometric study on the Technology of the Glazed Bricks from Gaur and Pandua. To my knowledge, there are only a few studies on glazed ceramics of medieval India. Studies on glazed ceramics are

rare - all the studies are on the basis of historical evidence without any archaeometrical analysis. From this context the chapter by Somnath Ghosh *et. al.* is quite innovative and rather technical, but its value cannot be overestimated.

The last section of the book, "Aftermath" contains Soumitra Das' interesting note on 'Gaur to St. John's Church' in which he clearly showed by digging into the archives that the blue marble floor of St. John's Church situated in Dalhousie Square (at present BBD Bag) of Kolkata was laid with the stones brought from Gaur through the good offices of Charles Grant, a director of the E.I. Company who was stationed at Malda.

In this Section, 'Aftermath', Pratip Kumar Mitra has drawn a short biographical sketch of Henry Creighton (1764-1807), the Manager of the Guamalati Indigo Factory owned by Charles Grant, Commercial Resident at the East India Company's factory at Malda. Guamalati was right among the ruins of Gaur, a photograph of the factory is provided in Pl. 31a of the present book. Henry Creighton (1764-1807), a native of Scotland, pioneered the research on the remains of the medieval city of Gaur. He was the man who drew the attention of the contemporaries about the treasures of Gaur that lay hidden under the forest and groves. He developed a large portfolio of drawings of the ruins of Gaur and its vicinity. In 1801 he completed the field survey of the city of Gaur and prepared a detailed map of its ruins. Ultimately in 1817, after his death, Creighton's labor was put in print, *The Ruins of Gaur: Described and Represented in Eighteen views with a topographical map.* This appendix on Creighton is highly informative and places the work of this man from Scotland in the proper perspective for the present research on Gaur.

But, no doubt, the best documentations of Gaur in this monograph are the 64 high quality coloured photographs of the remains that have been retrieved during archaeological explorations as well as of some of the buildings to show their present condition, especially the glazing used in the different buildings. Four maps— two by J.J. Pemberton (1847-48), one by J.H. Ravenshaw and one by Henry Creighton (1801)— reproduced in the volume in their original size are of immense value, since they were not easily available to scholars and one map drawn on the basis of the Survey of India records attempts to recreate the environmental condition of the time, add to the value of the present volume on Gaur.

In this context it may be mentioned that the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh published in 1997 a volume on 'Gaur-Lakhnauti' edited by ABM Husain. The

historical city of Gaur at present stands in the two modern states of India and Bangladesh. The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh's volume naturally concentrated on the Bangladesh side of the medieval city. But the major portion of the medieval city lies in the Indian side and the volume under review gives us a detailed picture of the glories that was Gaur. The two volumes taken together have a record of the medieval city of Gaur for the posterity.

Gaur, The Medieval City of Bengal, is an excellently produced book and well designed to cover all aspects including historiography, environment and technological innovations. The two entries in the 'Aftermath' section are interesting and at the same time informative. I have no doubt that the volume will be welcomed by one and all as a very useful addition in the field of Bengal's historical archaeology and it will hold its ground for a long time to come.

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