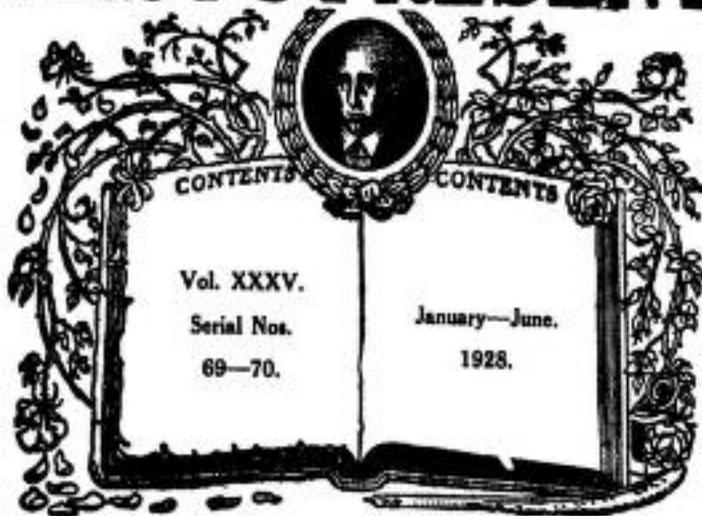




BENGAL PAST & PRESENT



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A Description of North Bengal in 1609 A.D.

[KHWAJAH ABUL HASAN, afterwards surnamed Yamin-ud-daula Asaf Khan, was a brother of Nur Jahan and the father of the Empress Mumtaz Mahal. In 1608, before the rise of his sister to share the throne of Jahangir, he was appointed to the comparatively humble post of *diwan* of Bengal, *vice* Wazir Khan, at the same time that a new governor was sent out to this province in the person of Shaikh Ala-ud-din Chishti, surnamed Islam Khan. Abul Hasan had a favourite retainer, named Abdul Latif, the son of Abdullah Abbasi, a native of Ahmadabad in Gujerat, whom he asked to come from his home to Delhi. Starting from Ahmadabad on 10th December 1607, Abdul Latif joined his master in the Emperor's retinue at Ludhiana, and with the royal party came to Agra (11th March 1608). He has left a diary of this journey and the next one to Bengal, with descriptions of the cities, shrines and manners observed on the way. Only one manuscript of this Persian work is known to exist, and I translate the following account from it, with some abridgement. J. S.]

Starting from Agra by boat with Khwajah Abul Hasan, on 8th April, 1608, we reached Allahabad on 28th April, Benares on 3rd May, Patna on 10th May, Mungr on 17th May, and Rajmahal on 5th June.

Rajmahal was then the capital of Bengal. On 7th December, 1608 we left Rajmahal in the train of Islam Khan, the new governor of Bengal, and moved down the Ganges towards Bhati. Our first voyage was to *pargana* Goāsh, in the *sarkar* of Narangabad. On our left hand lay the cities of Gaur, Tanda, Malda and Pandua, (the last being the burial-place of His Holiness Makhdum Shaikh Nur, Qutb-i-Alam, the successor of Shaikh Nizam-ud-din Auliya; but we did not disembark to visit these places. Near Goāsh we cross the Ganges.

We halted for a month or two at Alaipur, a village in *sarkar* Naurangabad (*sic*), in expectation of the coming of Rajah Satrajit (surnamed Shahzada Rai) the zamindar of Bhushna and of Pratapaditya the Rajah of Jessore. Alaipur is an ordinary place and deserves no praise. But one league from it are two villages named Bāghā and Malik,—the former appertaining to *pargana* Chandiābāzu and the latter to *pargana* Alaipur.

Hawādhā Miān, an old sage, aged about a hundred years, is living here [at Bāghā]. In the centre of the village stands a beautiful tank,—which is called *pukhar* in the Bengali tongue,—filled with a water that might excite the rivalry of the *Kausar* spring in heaven. Around this tank

the sons and dependents of this holy man have constructed *chak-bandis* (houses grouped round a quadrangle), which overlook the tank. There is a mosque here which was constructed in 930 A.H. (1) by Sultan Ala-ud-din Husain Shah, one of the former Kings of Bengal.

In the house of Hawādhā the wise, they have built a college with grass-thatched roofs and mud-plastered walls. Many of his dependents and students are here engaged in study. On the banks of the tank are jack and mango trees,—green, flourishing and giving shade. Around the village the entire countryside is green and refreshing [to look at]; it has been granted to him for his subsistence (*mudud-i-mash*). In truth, it is a very delightful place. In this province we have not beheld any spot other than this which savours of Islam and is free from overcrowding.

How happy are the inhabitants of this retreat, and how lucky are the elders among the residents of this woodland, as they have no concern with other people, nor have other people anything to do with them!

At Alaipur the officers gave a parade of the imperial artillery and war-boats of the province of Bengal, [before the governor]. For five or six months most of the land of this province remains under water, during which period, one must use boats for the purposes of warfare, travelling or hunting. [Various classes of boats described.]

On 2nd March 1609 we started from Alaipur for Nāzirpur. Our first halt was at Fathpur, where we celebrated the Feast of the Sacrifice (*Id*) and the *Nauros*, and where Rajah Satrajit waited on the governor with a present of 18 elephants. . . . We left this place on 30th March and reached the village of Rānā Tāndapur. Here Salim Khan (zamindar of Hijli), the brother of Rajah Indra Narayan (zamindar of Pachet in the Jharkhand hills), and Bir Hambir (Rajah of *sarkar* Mandāram), came with Shaikh Kamāl (the agent previously sent by the governor) and presented 109 elephants.

On 26th April, Rajah Pratapaditya had audience of the governor at Bajrapur, a village (2) presented six elephants, some precious articles, camphor, *aguru*, and about Rs. 50,000 as his tribute. After staying for some days at Court, he took leave for his own country. On 30th April we left Bajrapur and reached Shahpur. We halted on the bank of the river Jamunā, which the Hindus also call the *Atrai*, the water of which has a pleasant taste.

Here Islam Khan left his camp and servants and started, with light equipment, in the company of the chiefs of his army, to hunt elephants in the direction of Nāzirpur. He spent nine days and nights in the jungle of Nāzirpur and returned to his camp after capturing 32 elephants, male and female.

(1) Husain Shah died in 925 A.H. Therefore 930 should be read as 913 or 903.

(2) The text is corrupt here. The village seems to be represented as standing on the Nārad river.

After his return, he built a bridge over the river Jamuna [Atrai] and led his army across it to Ghorāghāt, which was reached on 2nd June. Here we passed the rainy season, building thatched houses.

Ghorāghāt is a *sarkar* of the province of Bengal. The town (qasba, literally a village with a market) is an old one. On account of the elevation of the land, . . . and its good climate, it surpasses other parts of Bengal. It is the best qasba in the province. As the land is high, it is rarely covered by flood water. The river Karatoyā, which rises in Morang (north of Purnea), passes below it. It lies on the road to Kuch Bihar and the country of Usman Afghan (i.e., Sylhet). Here are found abundance of *tangan* (hill ponies), *do-patta* and precious stuffs manufactured in Kuch and the *maina* bird, [a kind of starling, *Coracias Indica*].

This bird looks like a small crow and is very diminutive in size. After a short time spent in teaching it, the bird learns to repeat nicely every language and lesson that one may wish; it becomes a rational speaker eloquent of tongue! After it has acquired the habit of speaking, it can repeat every word that any man may speak [in its hearing]. It can exactly reproduce the cries of the cock, the horse, or any other animal that it may hear. Whatever word in Persian or Hindi is spoken [before it] it also recites and it repeats the sound of every musical instrument which is played [in its hearing]. It lives on milk and rice. It is a very delicate creature, and seldom breeds in any other country than that in which it is found. It is mostly brought to Ghorāghāt from the side of Kuch and Orissa (3). Very often merchants live here for the purpose of buying the above articles of presentation. Formerly Ghorāghāt was the seat of the ruler, and even now the governor often visits it. Many *fugirs* and beggars live here. . . . On 15th October 1609, the Nawab's army set off from Ghorāghāt for Bhati.

In the short period that the imperial officers halted at Ghorāghāt, the Nawab built a Jama Masjid in the middle of the bazar and residences (4) within the fort; many of the imperial officers (especially Khwajah Abul Hasan) built beautiful mansions and delightful gardens. Just as these mansions were completed, our hard luck brought this marching order upon us!

In the environs of Ghorāghāt, nay more in the entire province of Bengal, there is abundance of game; so much so that if you once ride out to the jungle for hunting, you can before evening bag 10 to 15 *Kuta-pachah* and deer. One can hunt as many game as his arm has strength [to shoot]. In this province there are wild buffaloes, equal in strength to 14 elephants (each) and with horns five or six yards [in expanse]. This buffalo considers a mounted hunter as no more than a bubble of air and never stirs from its position in fear of musket arrow or sword. After [being hit] by these, it charges like an elephant trained to war. But the tigers of

(3) Mughal Orissa began from Medinipur.

(4) The Persian text is corrupt here. We may also read 'wells' (*chihā hā*) instead of 'places' or residences.

this province are inferior to these buffaloes, and before the latter the tiger becomes no better than an (ordinary) buffalo! Very often these buffaloes hunt the tiger.

The rhinoceros, too, abounds in this province and is hunted with muskets. Excellent shields are made of its hide, which arrows and bullets cannot penetrate. In the middle of its head it has a horn which is sent to distant countries as a rarity and gift.

In Ghoraghāt the pine-apple grows, very sweet and plentiful. . . It is of the size of the *Khar-busa* (melon). In the jungles of this country are many jack, betel nut, mulberry, banana and mango trees. Each jack tree bears three to four hundred fruits, each as large as a pitcher. The mangoes of this part, unlike those of other countries, contain black worms as large as the gad-fly. The wondrous thing about it is that as soon as the mango fruit appears on the tree, the worm is born within it, and as the fruit grows the worm too goes on growing. No hole appears in the fruit from outside. They say that this evil is due to a curse pronounced by the saint Qutb-i-Alam on a village headman of this region.

The *Kamala* (orange) is a fruit of the species *narangi*, but softer and more juicy, and sweeter than the *narangi*. The Emperor Jahangir likes it very much and tastes it often at the time of drinking *rdm rangi*. It is often sent from Bengal to His Majesty.

The Martaban banana of this province is very sweet and tasteful, and superior to that of other places. It even surpasses a little the *sunila* banana of Gujarat.

A kind of *Champi* flower is found here, which cannot be met with elsewhere. It is called *Asai Khāni*. It smells of the he-goat and cannot be likened to any other flower; it may probably be related to the *Mulesri* flower.

The hermitage (*astāna*) of Shah Ismail Ghazi is situated outside Ghorāghāt. He is said to have come as a soldier from *Vilayet* (Persia) and lived here in the region of Sultan Muzaffar Shah of Bengal like an ordinary householder. When he felt complete repentance through the grace of God, he developed the rest of his life to prayer and austerity. [Here the MS. ends abruptly.]

Gorash—midway between the cities of Murshidabad and Jalangi. It is now eight miles south of the Padma. But in Rennell's *Bengal Atlas* (Map No. 10), it is placed just a little to the south of the Ganges.

Alaipur—is opposite Sardah, in the Rajshahi district.

Bagha—at the south-eastern corner of the Rajshahi district. The holy founder's family still retain their lands and some old Persian imperial grants, but Arabic learning has departed from the place.

Bajrapur—15 miles from Nator town and four miles south of Shuktigacha, in the Rajshahi district. (Rennell, Map 6.)

Shahpur—35 miles s. w. of Ghorāghāt. The river at its foot is called *Jabuna*=*Jamuna* (Rennell, Map 5.)