

# For casual reader and connoisseur alike

## *Shahid Alam delights in the tales of an early traveller*

A good number of years ago I was introduced to Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* through David Magarshack's translation, accompanied by a learned introduction. After having gone through the novel, I could not agree more with the publisher, Penguin Classic's back cover's observation that, "The reader of David Magarshack's fluent translation can appreciate both a magnificent gallery of characters and the piercing insight which makes Dostoyevsky the most terrifying of all writers." Magarshack translated directly from the Russian original, and he was no less facile in the other works that he translated. Now I have come across a book, *The Wonders of Vilayet*, which has been translated from a translation of the original. Something of the original understandably gets lost in a translation; so one can only speculate on what, if anything, has been lost through the tertiary presentation. Thankfully, though, *The Wonders of Vilayet* is just a travelogue, a fascinating one at that, but with no pretension of having the universal significance of *Crime and Punishment*. Consequently, there is less chance of much getting lost in translation even if tertiary, and especially if the translation has been ably done by a qualified (with four other published translated works) translator like Kaiser Haq.

Haq has translated from Professor ABM Habibullah's *Vilayetnama*, the complete Bengali translation of Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin's memoir in Persian, *Shigurf Nama-e-Vilayet*. He gives a thoughtful, instructive Introduction to the translation of this

"out-of-the-way literature", which includes the information that he undertook the task after an old school friend had claimed that his great-great-great-grand uncle, Mirza I'tesamuddin, was the first Indian to visit Great Britain. Haq points out that the earliest Indians were probably illiterate lascars who did not leave behind any literary work on their lives, but the Mirza certainly preceded by over half a century Raja Ram Mohun Roy, generally thought to be the first Indian to visit Britain and write about it. I'tesamuddin, like Roy, was a Bengali, but he went to Britain in 1766 as a representative, well-versed in Persian, of Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, in the company of Captain Swinton, ambassador of the Emperor to the King of England. Thus began his odyssey to Vilayet, the Indian word for Britain and Europe, and ended with his return to Bengal in 1769. The Mirza has left behind a fascinating account of his travels and the impressions of those two years and nine months.

Haq gives his impression of the man and his historical significance: "The Mirza...was an Indian gentleman, proud of his lineage, well educated in the traditional manner; and he happened to live through the most crucial transition in Indian history. When he was born the East India Company was one among several European trading houses; when he died they were the effective rulers of most of India. Yet he was not...a 'colonial subject,' and this coupled with his elite background makes his memoir unique. He embodies the humane qualities as well as the prejudices of his culture. He is curious about alien cul-



**The Wonders of Vilayet**  
Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin  
translation Kaiser Haq  
writers. ink

tures, and is a good observer possessed with an engaging descriptive ability. In this he is a refreshing contrast to the introversion that...often characterizes the colonial subject's response to the West." I will end the translator's commentary with one that is as relevant to the South Asian culture today as it was three thousand years back, and one that is as shameful as it is infuriating. After pointing out that the Mirza "belongs to a culture with the longest history of colour prejudice," he drives home the exclamation point: "None is more

aware of subtle differences of shade than the Indian."

The Mirza comes across as a devout Muslim, but both from reading his account and between the lines, one can surmise that he was no bigot. In fact, two of the chapters (so delineated by the translator) are devoted to serious and erudite discussion on religious faiths and beliefs. His observations regarding the decline of the Mughals after Aurangzeb is particularly important since they were made as the empire was passing into English hands, but they have been identified as cogent by historians writing on the post-Aurangzeb period from the comfortable distance of time and the availability of a wealth of documentary evidence. The Mirza laments on how Job Charnock founded Kolkata after having gained the Emperor's favour in granting the East India Company the right to trade tax-free and tax-free lease of forty bighas of land, and how then the company seized the opportunity to hold sway over much of India: "Those who only yesterday were supplicants for forty bighas of land are today masters of one half of India and have brought to their knees a host of proud and arrogant chieftains!" The Mirza's account is full of such fatalisms, another common enough trait among South Asians of whatever religion. It is also a narrative of wallowing in self-pity, a characteristic not uncommon in the average South Asian.

There is a startling observation about Bengalis that Swinton made with regard to the abstemious Mirza: "...you neither eat our meat nor drink our wine. The only reason I think of for this is that you

are a Bengali, and the Bengalis are notorious among Indians for their folly and stupidity." Nonetheless, the Mirza was a great admirer of the British character and industry. He compares the French and the British, where the former distinctly comes off as second best. He acknowledges that the French are skilled in the arts and sciences, and have polished manners and taste, and that Paris "far surpasses all other cities in the Firinghee world." However, there is an element of contradiction here because later he asserts that there is "no city on earth as large or beautiful" as London. His displeasure is with the French who he stamps as "a conceited race, whose conversation is always an attempt to display their own superiority and to unfairly belittle other nations."

We learn from the Mirza the names of accomplished Indian artists and sculptors of his time like Mani, Farhad, and Behzad, but whose works pale in beauty and artistry in the face of the "exquisitely lovely paintings and sculptures of the ancient world" that are housed in Westminster Abbey. The Mirza's sense of beautiful women is an accurate reflection of the common South Asian prejudice in favour of light skin tone. Therefore, to him, the white English women "were as lovely as houris; their beauty would have shamed even fairies into covering their pretty faces." He praises "the generosity of the English.... A traveler from abroad is dearer to them than their own life, and they will take great pains to make him happy." An amusing part of the memoir is the depiction of Oxford University as an "ancient *madrassah*". Of course, the Mirza was equating *madrassah* with a

school, as was done in the India of his time, but it is, nonetheless, a delightfully quaint depiction. He takes time to note the wretched existence of the Jews in Europe and in other lands. "No person respects or esteems them," he remarks, "on the contrary, those of other faiths, including the Moslems, wish to put them to death."

The Mirza contrasts the physical prowess and endurance of even the aristocratic and wealthy Englishman and the Indian nobles and princes of his time, "who gorge themselves on pilau, drink ice-cooled water, recline effeminately on soft velvet cushions and let luxury and self-indulgence rule their lives". And finds the answer to why the English have subdued the Indians in their own homeland. He also holds this wise, if at times a little simplistic, outlook: "...friendship between two peoples increases the wealth of both, while enmity begets poverty." There is also an anomaly that could probably be explained by careless editing. The Mirza talks about Maulana Rumi's *Masnavi*, but, in parentheses, it is referred to as a 19<sup>th</sup> century Persian didactic epic. Now, the Mirza completed his memoir in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and died by the year 1800 at the latest. So, the epic must have been composed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the latest. Nevertheless, *The Wonders of Vilayet* is a wonderful read, letting the reader into a keen observer's mind as he recorded events and impressions of foreign lands and home during his lifetime.

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