

HISTORY WITH A VISION

by

NIRA WICKRAMASINGHE

ASIA BEFORE EUROPE, Economy and Civilisation of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750 by K.N. Chaudhuri, Cambridge University Press, 1990, pp. 477

Fernand Braudel's writing of history was a major break away movement from the supremacy previously accorded to unilinear narration of a certain class of events. He explored the role of time, space and structural relationships through a wealth of historical studies.¹ His interest was in historical processes and the interplay between different physical systems. In his studies, climate, environment and mechanisms of social control such as capitalism and the world economy constantly interact with one another to produce a whole stream of material consequences. Beneath the rapidly changing history of government, wars and famines, there emerged other unmoving histories, histories that withstood the march of time, histories of sea routes, corn, of gold, mining, of drought and irrigation etc... this is what he termed 'la longue durée' or 'the long term'.

K.N. Chaudhuri who is Professor of Economic History of Asia, University of London, and the Director of the Centre of Indian Ocean Studies² owes a lot to Braudel and he acknowledges this debt elegantly when he writes: 'Braudel's work is a constant reminder that to write history with any kind of intuitive understanding, the historian must use his vision as much as his mind'. Like Braudel, Chaudhuri is a visionary whose book is a reflective wander through Asia from the seventh to the eighteenth century. But unlike Braudel who was always reluctant to examine the role of ideas, Chaudhuri is also interested in ideology as a structuring principle in social

life. Foucault's work which he quotes, has made him aware of the ever present danger to assume that classificatory terms such as madness, capitalism and sexuality have universal meanings independent of the historical context.³ Thus Chaudhuri reminds us that the term Asia is essentially western and does not exist in any Asian language. The name or the linguistic sign 'Indian Ocean' is also an arbitrary construction with a narrow range of meaning: the real Indian Ocean was an area that extended geographically from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf to the sea that lies beyond Japan. But except for a few pages devoted to Oriental Despotism and the Asiatic Mode of production, Chaudhuri does not systematically deconstruct the term Asia in the way Edward Said's *Orientalism* - which surprisingly is not even mentioned by Chaudhuri - analyses the ideology of Orientalism, that is the European construct of the Orient - as a dominant discourse.⁴ *Asia before Europe* is accepted as a given. It would have been perhaps interesting to look at the presuppositions existing behind such institutions as the Royal Asiatic Society or more recent scholarly journals such as the Journal of Asian Studies or Modern Asian Studies. But Chaudhuri's interest, obviously, is more in material life than in ideology and in this sense he is more Braudelian than he wishes to admit.

This book is a study of the dynamic interaction between economic life, society and civilisations in the regions around and beyond the Indian Ocean during the period from the rise of Islam to 1750. It explores in great detail how the identity of different Asian civilisations was established and examines the structural features of food

habits, clothing, architectural types and housing. The analysis of the different modes of economic production is followed by a description of the role of crop raising, pastoral nomadism, industrial activities and the history of urbanisation for the main regions of the Indian Ocean.

Chaudhuri's main aim is to discover the principles which consciously or otherwise established different sets of people in premodern Asia to consider themselves as being an integral part of an entire structure. He strives to discover the limits of historical unity (integration) and disunity (disintegration) of the four Asian civilisations, Islamic, Indian, Southeast Asian and Chinese, and to look for the principles which fix those limits. *Asia before Europe* presents a distinctive theory of comparative history. An extension of Fernand Braudel's theory of time and space, the methodology sets out the logical foundation of the historical perceptions of unities and disunities, continuities, ruptures and thresholds.

The greatest quality of this book is its readability. Amusing anecdotes and vivid descriptions by contemporary travellers such as al Muqqadasi, Bernier, Della Valle colourfully illustrate Chaudhuri's arguments and illuminate his scholarship. In his chapter on clothing we learn that between the sixth and eighteenth centuries Europeans were known as 'hatmen'. Contrary to Braudel's conclusions on the changelessness of dress in Asia, Chaudhuri shows that fashion in dress was as much a part of Asian culture as Europe, though its forms were not immediately intelligible or accessible to outsiders. Akbar's wardrobe for instance contained 1000 complete suits of which

→

Dr. Nira Wickramasinghe teaches Modern History at the University of Colombo

HISTORY

120 were kept in constant readiness. Together with clothing and housing, food and drink constituted the ground floor of material life. Social identity, functional usage, economic production were the principal historical determinants of these three sets. In food preparation, all Asian civilisations maintained the distinction between the raw, the cooked and the preserved. The food of the poor was the same across Asia: a form of porridge or stew made from boiled millet, barley and rice often mixed with peas and pulses. In India it was known as kbichri, in Han China as keng, in the Middle East as harisa. Food habits it seems have not undergone major changes. Ibn Battuta's description of a meal he was served in Multan in the Punjab was very similar to today's type of food. The ingenuity of pre-modern Asians is also stressed. We learn for instance that rotating a metal vessel in a solution of refined saltpetre was the Indian's method of refrigerating water. More expensive was Akbar's method of bringing down ice supplies from distant mountains when his court was in residence in Lahore. The general reader will find much pleasure and interest in browsing through the beautifully illustrated chapters on food, dress, architecture, rural and industrial production.

K.N. Chaudhuri introduces an interesting but rather complex theory of the structure of time and space. 'Historical events,' he writes, 'are located not only in an order of succession, measured by solar time, but they are also characterised by quality and power which have time and space dimen-

sions.' For instance the annual pilgrimage to Mecca belongs to a cyclical class of events. It had, has and will have the power to influence millions of lives and human decisions, and is thus characterised by a quality which has remained almost a constant in history. Added to the time dimension, the power of this event extended and extends over large areas thus acquiring a space dimension.

Chaudhuri's thoughts on historical time are particularly enlightening and will perhaps encourage historians to rethink the foundation of their discipline. In his analysis, time appears quite clearly as a social construct but nevertheless, he accepts the notions of 'order' and 'succession' which embody the perception of 'before' and 'after' as basic concepts essential to historical writing. Although history was not viewed in terms of the same temporal units as those in Europe, Chaudhuri remarks perceptively that Asian societies were aware of the triple order of tense - past, present and future - and of the physical presence of temporal order in the collective life. But the actual metrics of time varied between civilisations: for instance some societies chose rotations of the earth, others those of the moon. Most importantly, time was appropriated by people who were in a position of social and political dominance. The length of the working day, of religious festivities were all fixed by mandates of power: 'Expressions such as idle, industrious, leisured and even obedient had little meaning with a concept of authority that appropriated in the name of duty, the hours from dawn to sunset in the lives of farmers and artisans.' Quite clearly time did not then and does not now exist *per se*.

In his conclusion, Professor Chaudhuri demonstrates how Indian Ocean societies were united or separated from one another by a conscious cultural and linguistic identity. However, below the surface of awareness, there was a deeper structure of unities created by a common ecology, technology of economic production, traditions of government, theory of political obligations and rights and a shared historical experience. Thus the period from the rise of Islam to 1750 witnessed a 'life-cycle' for Indian Ocean civilisations validated by the assumption that the average value of certain ratios did not radically change: the ratio between population and cultivated land, between the level of technology and the rate of innovation, between the expected standard of living and possibilities of improvement, between the state's capacity to regulate economic life and the autonomy of social groups. In this Baudelarian vision of an unchanging Asia obeying the rationale of 'longue duree' the state was a dynamic force. Although the concept of the state itself excluded a rigid definition of citizenship and even territorial demarcations - premodern states were constantly the theatre of internal and external migrations and of annual movements of nomadic people - imperial expansion, political conflicts and strong ruling dynasties introduced the element of movement. Chaudhuri's perceptive comments on state formation contain much that is thought provoking for scholars who are trying to understand the growth of collective identities and grapple with the domination of nationalism as an ideology in the world today.

1. F. Braudel's well known works are: *Civilisation materielle: economie et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siecle*, Vol. I, II, III, Paris, 1979 and *La Mediterranee et le monde mediterraneen a l'epoque de Philippe II*, 2nd edn, Paris, 1966. The Annales school of French history which grew up around a review founded by Marc Bloch, Lucien Febre and Fernand Braudel in 1929 was mainly responsible for the renewal of history in its attempt to depart from both tradi-

tional narrative approaches and traditional subject are as in historical writings.

2. K.N. Chaudhuri has published widely, including *The Trading World of Asia and The English East India Company 1660-1700*, Cambridge, 1978 and *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge, 1985.

3. See especially, M. Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, trans. R. Howard, London, 1971 and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, London, 1972.

4. E.W. Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin, 1985.

"The Heads of State or Government while reaffirming their commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, emphasised the need to ensure that development remains at the centre of international attention."

- Colombo Declaration of the Sixth SAARC Summit, December 21, 1991.

"If you don't have enough food in your stomach, talking of human rights is a little abstract."

- An Indian official who attended the Colombo SAARC Summit.

An old debate is opened anew: **Development, or Democracy and Human Rights?**

Should these three themes be itemised and arranged in a hierarchical order?

Isn't it a little concrete that, in most cases, the victims of both 'development' and human rights violations are those whose stomachs are empty?

Cannot **development, democracy and human rights** travel together?

These are some of the central issues that concern the economics and politics of the Third World today. And of our country too.

The next issue of *Pravada* will discuss these issues.