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 Classics' 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 less facile in the other works that he translated. Now I have come across a new translation, 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 a travelogue, a fascinating one that, but for the translation, has been ably done by a qualified (in four other published translated works) translator like Kaiser Haq.

Haq has translated from Professor ABM Habibullah's Vilyavana, the complete Bengali translation of Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin's memoir in Persian, Shivalag / Nama-e-Vilyat. He has, in his introduction, provided an introduction to the translation of this "out-of-the-way literature," which includes the information that he undertook the task of an old-fashioned translator who had claimed that his great-great-grand uncle, Mirza I'tesamuddin, was the first Indian to visit Great Britain. Haq points out that the earliest Indians were probably literate lascars who did not leave behind any literary works on their lives, but the Mirza certainly preceded by over half a century Raja Ram Mohan 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 1768 as a representative, well-versed in Persian, of Moghal Emperor Shah Alam, in the company of Captain Swinton, ambassador of the Emperor to the King of England. Thus began his odyssey to Vilyat, the Indian word for Britain and Europe, which ended with his return to Bengal in 1769. The Mirza 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 human qualities as well as the prejudices of his culture. He is curious about alien cultures, and is a good observer possessed with an engaging descriptive ability. In this he is a refreshing contrast to the introduction that, often characterizes the colonial subject's response to the West. I will end the translator's commentary on 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 fascinating. 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 not. In fact, two of the chapters (so delineated by the translator) are devoted to serious and erudite discussion on religions and their 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's account on how Job Charnock founded Kolkata after having gained the Mughal 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 the country. Those who were suppurating 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 Englishmen! The Mirza's account is full of such fatuities, 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 aberrant Mirza: "you neither eat our food, 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 war, but the British are not. In fact, he considers the British have polished manners and taste, and that Paris "far surpasses all other cities in the Fitchinghee world." However, there is an element of contradiction here because later he asserts that there is "no city on earth as large as beautiful" as London. His displeasure is with the French who he describes as "a concealed race, whose conversation is always an attempt to display their own superiority and to unfairly belittle others." We learn from the Mirza the names of accomplished Indian artists and sculptors of his time like Mani, Farhad, and Belgad, but whose works pale in beauty and artistry in the face of the "exquisitely lovely paintings and sculptures of the ancient Greeks," who were present at 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 thetis' in beauty, that she would have adorned even fairies in covering their pretty faces." He praises "the generosities of the English... A traveler from abroad is nearer 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 madrasah." Of course, the Mirza was equating madrasah with a school, as was done in India of his time, but it is, nonetheless, a delightful and quaint depiction. He takes time to note the wretched existence of the Jews in Europe and in other lands. "No person respects or esteem them," he remarks, "on the contrary, those of other faiths, love them in the Frenchman, 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 pail, drink ice-cold water, recline effeminate 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 beggars poetry." 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 13th century Persian didactic epic. Now the Mirza completed his memoir in the 18th century, and died by the year 1800 at the latest. So, the epic must have been composed by the 18th 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 through his lifetime.

SHAHID ALAM — WRITER, ACTOR, AUTEUR - IS HEAD, MEDIA, DEPARTMENT, INDEPENDENT UNIVERSITY BANGLADESH (IUB).