

Book Review

James Wise: *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal*.
Edited with an Introduction by Ananda Bhattacharya. Indian Reprint.
Delhi. Manohar. 2016. pp. 503. INR. 1995/-

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Among the richest sources on the social history of colonial India are ethnographic reports that several European officials produced related to various regions of India. Together with the Census data, they provide valuable, documented information on certain aspects of our past history, not easily available elsewhere. For Bengal, we may justly recall the labours of E.T Dalton, Francis Buchanan Hamilton, R.M. Martin, James Taylor, W.W. Hunter and H.H. Risley. James Wise was a medical practitioner by profession who developed an interest in social and cultural anthropology of which the book under review is a fine specimen.

Wise admits to have considerably relied on Dalton but brings forth information on subjects not adequately covered by earlier investigations. The book is divided into five parts, dealing with the Mohammedans, Religious Sects of the Hindus, Hindu Castes and Aboriginal races and the Armenian and Portuguese communities in eastern Bengal. Wise's interest in the Mohammedans of the region continued at least until 1894 when he contributed a detailed paper on the subject to the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

What immediately catches the reader's attention to the book is that it delivers more than is promised by its title. Going by the title alone, it would be difficult to guess that Wise devotes a considerable part of this work to informed descriptions of the numerous religious sects within the Hindus and Muslims in the region. I have to say though that some of this information, especially in relation to the Hindus, is somewhat misleading and erroneous.

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When examining his comments on the Vaishnavas in Bengal I found Wise to be horribly mixed up in matters of essential detail concerning the life and work of the medieval mystic, Chaitanya. Apart from getting his dates wrong, (Wise claims that he died in 1528 at the age of 43), this work also calls Chaitanya a 'vairagi, who assumed the name 'Chaitanya' for himself and settled at Katak (Cuttack). At the time, such claims might well have offended pious Vaishnavas for the man in question was a formally initiated ascetic, was given the name Krishna Chaitanya by his *diksha guru*, and spent the second half of his life at Puri. It is also noticeable that Wise treats the term 'Vaishnava' synonymously with Gaudiya (or Bengal) Vaishnavism when, in fact, there were several other Vaishnava sects (*sampradayas*). Quite erroneously again, he considers *bhakti* as exhibited by Chaitanya as something of a 'novelty' in Hinduism (pp. 188-89). What is interesting though is the revelation that up country Vaishnava communities such as the Ramavats and the Nimavats would admit sudras from upper India but not Bengali castes. We also know from Wise's descriptions that in the district of Dhaka, Vaishnava shrines vastly outnumbered those of the Saivas and the Saktas. There were as many as 321 temples dedicated to Vishnu-Krishna compared to only 39 to Kali and 38 to Siva (p.179).

On the subject of Hindu social and religious practices, Wise gives us much valuable information. His treatment of Kulin polygamy in east Bengal (pp. 271-94) is most lucid and intelligible; admittedly, the complex mechanisms of this system I never really understood until I read this book. Wise also surprised me with the claim that in Kamrup, even Vaidik Brahmins were known to approve of widow marriages, though children born of such marriages could not marry within their father's caste. Apparently, widows who married did not quite

come to possess the social standing that virgins did. This tangentially confirms my surmise that in colonial Bengal, it was Vidyasagar's stubborn refusal to devise a different marriage rite for the widow that hardened the orthodox opposition against him. It does appear an exaggeration though to claim that in Buchanan's time (in the 1830s and 1840s) almost three-fourth of the Hindu population in district Dinajpur had no inhibitions against marrying a widow (p.153). Along with Akshaykumar Dutta, who also authored a valuable monograph on the subject, Wise provides a fairly detailed account of dissenting Hindu religious sects in ethnic Bengal, highlighting the interesting fact that some of these were founded by ritually 'fallen' Brahmins (*patita*) themselves.

In the case of Muslims, Wise prefers to deal more with occupational groups rather than religious sub-communities even as he notes the preponderance of Shias in the Dhaka district. As many as 90 artisan groups are dealt with in fascinating detail. We gather thus that he Tanti and the Julaha, occupationally both weavers, did not get along well with each other. The Tantis, presumably drawn from local Hindu converts, looked upon his migrant, up country Julaha, as bigoted and foolhardy and even preferred to use different makes of looms.

A relatively small but valuable section is devoted to the history of migrant Armenian and Portugese who formed settlements in east Bengal as early as the 16th century. Both these communities were integrally connected with

trade and finance in the region and successfully made the transition from late Mughal rule to that of the East India Company. In the 1880s, when Wise's book was first published, its description of the Armenians and the Portugese settlers had to be a fairly early account that could be reasonably relied upon.

Ananda Bhattacharya has rendered a valuable service in bringing this rare and hitherto not so accessible work back to life. I am not certain if the 1883 London edition of this book included any sketches, ink drawings or photographs. There is none included in this edition, a fact that contrasts unfavourably with the earlier book by Dalton which included several of these. I personally think that the editor should have resorted to the use of annotated notes, especially in correcting false or misleading information offered by Wise. It would appear that he has also been somewhat careless with proof reading. On page xvii of his Introduction, the expression 'non-extinct' should really have been 'now extinct', a change that radically alters the meaning. On page xxii again, the term 'gain' is better translated as an endogamous group or a 'sept' rather than 'village community' That having been said, the fact that the book is now readily accessible is bound to encourage fresh research in the history and anthropology of colonial Bengal. I do wish though that it were made more affordable for those willing to acquiring a personal copy.