

Book Reviews

***Bengal Water Craft: Boat-Building and Fishing Communities* by Lotika Varadarajan, Manohar New Delhi, 2016; Pages 307; Price Rs.3995/-**

Smritikumar Sarkar*

This is yet another wonderful book true to the genre of the scholar like Dr. Lotika Varadarajan, a historian and ethnographer combined, who had passionately pursued her lifetime research interest in highlighting India's craft tradition. Those familiar with her works would recall that her favourite pastime was to raise question and she never stopped before going to the bottom of a problem. For her, the best method was to examine the craft through close observation and intimate conversation with the craftsman in search of what could be called the participant's view. She also exposed folk memories, which she valued more than the archival narratives in tracing the historical base of the craft. The reader finds in most of her works on the Indian craft tradition a lively charm not always found in similar other books.

The book is a living history of the Bengal boats and different groups of people associated with it – manufacturing, river transport including sundry other uses, and fishing. The watercraft is a well-known area of Dr. Varadarajan's research interests. She had worked earlier on the watercrafts of the Lakshadweep, and Andaman & Nicobar Islands; but the present work is a more exhaustive exposition of the subject based on ethnological data retrieved through extensive and intensive field studies. The choice of Bengal, although she has not explained it, seems quite obvious in view of the extreme variety, plurality and 'extraordinary

richness' of the Bengal boats, perhaps unparalleled in the whole of South Asia. One only recalls Abul Fazl's remark on the boats of Bengal followed by similar other observations by European travellers and administrators since the late seventeenth century.

The book begins with a brief foray into the geo-political characteristics of the Indian part of Bengal (West Bengal) followed by the author's narratives of her methodology, the reasoning behind the arrangement of the text and spacing of the extensive field surveys conducted by her, its hub centre included, on which the book is primarily based; and an anecdote as to why the belief system and rituals are important in understanding the boat and fishermen communities of Bengal.

This is followed by a brief discussion (chapters 1-2) of the most archaic forms of watercraft – the raft – (*bhælā, bhurā, dongā*, etc.) found in different parts of the region including its transient form made of stems of the local banana plant used mainly during the flood; and its recent variation of the type using corrugated tin to make it lighter, an innovation, we are told, made by the user himself. These are mostly single user rafts used both for fording shallow water and fishing.

Dr. Varadarajan then shifts to Balagarh, 'the most important commercial centre of boat manufacturing' in contemporary West Bengal,

* Former Vice Chancellor, The University of Burdwan, Corresponding Address: 57/2 BC Chatterjee Street, Kolkata-700056.
Email: smritikumar.karigar@gmail.com

devoting ‘considerable attention’ to the place in her attempt to delineate the broad patterns of boat building in Bengal, and she kept on comparing her findings here with the types of boat manufactured in other centres discussed later. She rightly argues, ‘Balagarh *dingi* – the oldest variety of the boat produced here – does not reflect the boat building tradition of antiquity.’ The point missed out here is that boat building at Balagarh owed its origin to the commercial boost based on the adjacent medieval port city of Saptagram, the *porto pequeno de Bengalā* of the Portuguese, succeeded by Hugli, Chandernagore and Calcutta in the downstream of the river Hugli; having been partially influenced by the Portuguese; also appropriating various boat building traditions of different parts of undivided Bengal. The author has discussed various types of the boat made here, studying the evolution of the new varieties including the hybridisation of different types to cater to the changing market demand.

Most of the remaining parts of the book, (chapter 4 to 13) except the last one, is devoted to the discussion of various types of boat found and manufactured in different parts of the province from the sub-Himalayan northern Bengal districts to the Sunderban region in the south; and some amalgamated types from neighbouring regions of Odisha (such as the boat called *Pātiā*), and the erstwhile eastern Bengal turned Bangladesh. In all these chapters, the author has discussed some thirty-five types of boat from their classical to the latest version now in use (such as the Kakdwip trawler). What would draw an admiration of a careful reader is not just the number of the types covered, but the minute details of nearly every important aspect, both material and ritualistic, associated with the types of boat discussed. The keen attention paid to all these subjects, the formulation of questions put involving multiple case studies in widely different geo-cultural locations, understanding the artisan’s perception of the work and their problems associated with it, and finally analysing the massive amount of data

thus collated; and putting them in a logically coherent narrative is really awe inspiring.

The last chapter offers a selective study of the fishing methods, mostly based on the southern part of West Bengal, starting with the most primitive fish catching device – harpoon and trappings that could be in use since the time immemorial, shifting to similar other devices like trappings followed by ubiquitous fishing net – not just the variety but the whole hierarchy of it. From the act of a single person, fishing diversifies into group activity depending on the purpose for and the type of the net used, which is again related to the ecology of the water body – fishing in the shallow water, pond, canal, stream, river, and the sea. The designation of different types of net, stated by the author, depends on the length, breadth, size and shape of the mesh; and the size is determined by ‘the number of the *phera* or the length between the two knots in one mesh.’ In the similar way, the author discusses all the technical details of fishing nets; measurements and methods of net making, materials utilized, and the way the nets are used in fishing. An interesting part of this discussion is making of the large pots and their distribution by boat among the fishing communities. The fishermen used these pots for carrying potable water while on long fishing sorties; the potter, his kiln and craft rituals – every interesting bit of it has been included here. The chapter is concluded with a brief reference to the traditional fish preserving techniques resorted to by the fishermen when they have a large catch.

The rich narrative of the extremely diverse boat typology blended with a large number of lively illustrations however lacks an attempt to explain the diversity of the Bengal boats, a question that the interested reader might encounter. The recent research has firmly established the historical base of the rich commercial tradition of Bengal alluded to in the medieval Bengali literature. The failure to situate the discussion in its historical perspective thus eluded the author

from a very interesting aspect of the boat tradition of Bengal – the uninterrupted continuity of the Gangetic boats from Allahabad via Patna, Munger, Rajmahal, Dhaka and Murshidabad down to the Bhot Ghāt in Howrah and the colonial Calcutta, unknowingly sustained through numberless centuries by the riverine trade and pilgrimage traffic along the Ganges and its tributaries since the river had been the great national high way in those days. The continuity is reflected by the existence of a certain type of boat plying on these river routes and which the early English records are replete with frequent references to. For, the East India Company regularly needed these boats for their commercial, administrative, and military purposes. Some of the boat types discussed in the book thus appears to be the degenerated form of these old boats. The extra-regional resemblance of the nomenclature used for different types of boats and the inter-regional connectivity of the craft skill and traditional knowledge of the community of boatmen are interesting related points also missed out here.

But, all these do in no way undermine the importance of this excellent work done by an erudite scholar. The book is characterised by its focus on the technology of boat building in the region, which the author proposed at the very

outset, to examine ‘not as an issue frozen in time and space, but as a cross-cultural construct moulded by the changing environment’ – a commitment she successfully fulfilled throughout her narrative. While discussing the various types of boat, she has underlined an overlapping uniformity in carpentry styles and techniques; which, I believe, was due to the trend of mobility of the craftsmen, horizontal and vertical both, she noticed in different manufacturing centres. Thus, the participation of the non-craftsmen workgroup like *Rajbanshi* in boat manufacturing tends to suggest the demand induced inward pull for the craft. A good part of the discussion is devoted to the belief systems of the participants in the craft of boat manufacturing and also in fishing, analysing their myths and rituals, dos and don’ts. What is important to note here is the remarkable connectivity in customs, knowledge skill, and in the pursuance of their profession, often across the community, between different groups of craftsmen located in different parts of the province.

The book is appended with a bibliography and a very useful index, with both the publisher and the sponsor having done a very good work. I am confident that it would fascinate the prospective reader and inspire a new generation of researchers in the field.