

Title of the Book: *Hooghly: The Global History of a River*

By Robert Ivermee. London, England: C Hurst, 2020. Rs 599/- ISBN (Paperback) 978-93-5422-314-3

Quietly flows the Hooghly: A Review

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The Ganges, that seemingly sacred river now contaminated by sludge and municipal garbage, comes to mind when we think of Indian rivers. It also has half-burned bodies of devoted Hindus floating down it on their last travels, as well as people bathing in it to cleanse themselves. The Ganges, like other rivers, was a river of life and death, which is why people settled along its banks and nourished themselves with its flowing waters. The Ganges has long captivated the West; in the late 1640s, poet Andrew Marvell envisioned his "coy mistress" squandering her time, which he imagines they have for an eternity, in India rather than responding to his overtures: 'Thou by Indian Ganges's side/Shouldst rubies find;'¹ he whinges, while he is left in England 'by the tide of Humber', to lament about his forced celibacy. But who had heard of the Hooghly, a very small Ganges distributary that finally flows south to the Bay of Bengal, in 1645? Not even Andrew Marvell, who was born a year after the English landed in Bengal and wrote a hundred years or so after the Portuguese trader Pedro Tavares first set foot on its bank-

I have heard it said again and again that we are guided altogether by history, and I have energetically nodded, so to say, in my mind whenever I heard it. I have settled this debate in my own heart where I am nothing but a poet. I am there in the role of a creator all alone and free. There's little to enmesh me there in the net of external events. I find it difficult to put up with the pedantic historian when he tries to force me out of the center of my creativity...²

For modern readers, however, Robert Ivermee, a professor at SOAS University of London and the Catholic University of Paris, has produced a fascinating, erudite, and entertaining description of the Hooghly that more than makes up for our lack of acquaintance with Indian rivers other than the Ganges. Although the Hooghly does not contain any rubies, its banks have seen significant events involving worldwide commerce as well as the interactions of

¹ Andrew, Marvell. 2005. *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Elizabeth Donno (London, England: Penguin Classics), p. 50.

² Ranajit, Guha. 2003. *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 96.

several foreign settlements (Mughals, Portuguese, French, Dutch, Danish, and English) with each other and the local people. Ivermee does not ignore the historical backdrop, detailing the history of the Bengal nawabs in Murshidabad and concluding this comprehensive yet concise research with a chapter on “The Hooghly's Global Future”, bringing the Hooghly's globalisation full circle.

According to Heraclitus, you can never put your foot twice into the same river, using the flowing water as a metaphor for the passage of time, and the Hooghly appears to fit this description. The river altered throughout time when European ships came, but it had always changed; archaeological evidence of rice-farming villages on the Hooghly dates back 3000 years, and bigger settlements had been built by the 11th century. Ivermee shows us that

The earliest migrants into Bengal were probably Mongolian people from Burma and the Himalayas.³

By the 5th century BCE, they had been joined by Aryans, who brought with them Sanskrit language and literature, as well as the ‘hierarchical Brahmanical society’⁴ that quickly took root. Around 320 BCE, the Hooghly region was annexed by the Mauryan Empire, whose greatest ruler, Ashoka (reigned 268-232 BCE), brought Buddhism to his vast empire, which included Bengal. The worship of the Hooghly, on the other hand, had been around far longer than the Aryans, and the Brahmanical tradition absorbed previous mythological systems, folklore, and stories into itself. All of this history would be waiting for the Europeans when they came, as relative latecomers riding the wave and certainly not able to control it entirely, despite their best efforts, as Ivermee reminds us

Once after school I saw a most amazing spectacle from our western verandah. A donkey — not one of those donkeys manufactured by British imperial policy but the animal that had always belonged to our own society and has not changed in its ways since the beginning of time — one such donkey had come up from the washermen's quarters and was grazing on the grass while a cow fondly licked its body.⁵

Ivermee leads readers on a fascinating voyage down the Hooghly from Murshidabad to Sagar Island, stopping along the way at Plassey, Chandernagore, Serampore, and Calcutta, after establishing the river's historical and cultural-religious settings. This permits the author to

³ Robert, Ivermee. 2020. *Hooghly: The Global History of a River* (London, England: C Hurst), p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁵ Ranajit, Guha. 2003. *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 97.

concentrate on a collection of interconnected topics that are crucial to comprehending a period when events on the Hooghly were of global importance. Each location visited is linked to numerous groups of people who arrived from far away to establish business operations along the river, bringing with them their varied beliefs, religions, values, and cultures, which all blended into the existing local culture and civilisation. These are places that represent the kingdom of Bengal, the rise of the Dutch, Danish, French, and British East India Companies, and, in the case of Calcutta, the ‘unfinished conquest of nature’⁶ via railways, sewers, and methods of transporting drinking water, transforming it into a “imperial mega-city” connected by rail to the vast subcontinent. The last destination, Sagar Island, depicts ‘the Hooghly's global future.’ The objective of this book, according to Ivermee, is to demonstrate that global history is about the process of global integration, not merely about contacts between various people or business. He writes

borders have been traversed; the interaction and exchange of different peoples and cultures has created new identities and rendered others less meaningful.⁷

In Ivermee’s book, Hooghly is represented

... [as] not the image of a feudal order nor indeed any political order at all, but that history of the weal and woe of human life which, with its everyday contentment and misery, has always been there in the peasants’ fields and village festivals, manifesting their simple and abiding humanity across all of history — sometimes under Mughal rule, sometimes under British rule.⁸

One significant contribution that this book makes, in my opinion, is that it shifts the focus away from the British East India Company, whose narrative is well-known, to the fact that other equally important foreign commercial ventures operated in Bengal, not to mention the fact that the region had its own well-established political and religious structures throughout the period covered in this book. Many English-speaking readers, I suspect, are unfamiliar with Portuguese traders, Dutch, French, or Danish companies, and perhaps even fewer with Bengal's nawabs, let alone how they all fit together to tell a gripping storey based on the history of a relatively minor river, at least in comparison to the mighty Ganges. In fact, not only the microcosmic Hooghly, but the entire Bengal Delta region comes to be regarded as a

⁶ Ibid, p. 159.

⁷ Robert, Ivermee. 2020. *Hooghly: The Global History of a River* (London, England: C Hurst), p. 215.

⁸ Ranajit, Guha. 2003. *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 99.

type of worldwide “melting pot” in this novel, with the river serving as a kind of magical cauldron into which all the various components are tossed and mixed together in a seething mass. As the Hooghly meanders blissfully along, ignorant to the frenetic human activity taking place on its banks, battles are fought, money is earned and lost, ideas are shared, literature and art is created, ambitions are realised and disappointed, politics, religion, and power are all mixed.

Beginning with the port of Hooghly, Ivermee examines each of the settlements that sprang up along the river's banks, and how some of them, particularly the British East India Company, rose to power, beginning in the purely mercantile and gradually moving into political spheres, influencing India's development. The legal sanction (Firman of Farrukhsiyar) provided the East India Company with the final chance to increase not just its economic dominance, but also to gain political authority. Plassey, for example, was the scene of the famous battle when Robert Clive beat the armies of the nawab Siraj-ud-Dowlah, whom English historians “portrayed as a drunken dictator who terrorised his subjects,” an image that persisted until I was in school. After all, didn't the nawab despise the English and imprison many of them in Calcutta's Black Hole, where they were fed, denied water, and left to suffocate in a claustrophobic room? Siraj-ud-Dowlah had genuine concerns with the East India Company, not least their choice to develop Fort William without his consent, which Ivermee settles. The nawab regarded this as just another attempt by the English to usurp his sovereignty. When he urged them to halt, they refused, using the war with France as a reason, despite the fact that the Compagnie des Indes had already established itself in Chandernagore, another city on our Hooghly trip, by that time (1755). These spectacular occurrences, however, are only half of the narrative.

Ivermee introduces readers to a variety of intriguing individuals linked with the cities along the route to Sagar Island, the final destination, throughout the course of the voyage. Few of these names will be recognisable to English-speaking readers; they are more likely to be familiar with the more renowned (and typically British) personalities linked with the East India Company, such as Clive or Warren Hastings. There's also William Carey (1761-1834), a Serampore missionary with a passion for Sanskrit literature and language who, among other things, made a fortune in indigo, learned Bengali, translated portions of the Bible into Bengali, introduced printing, and established Serampore University, India's first degree-awarding university. Carey's Hindu equivalent, the famous religious philosopher and social reformer Raja Rammohun Roy, is one of the Indians we may name (1772-1833). We also

come across a large number of British surveyors and engineers who researched the river and sought to acquire its jurisdiction.

Ivermee blends historical knowledge and erudition with a belief that history is shaped not just by great individuals and significant events, but by hordes of lesser human beings and little occurrences that, when added together, alter the course of history. The Hooghly stays in the centre of it all. It is the cement that maintains the many nations connected to one another while they are ‘in the sea of life enisled’⁹ in their numerous towns, as Matthew Arnold phrased it.

Ivermee does not exaggerate the significance of the Hooghly: he shows, via a fascinating tale, that even a little tributary river may be a significant source of global connection. The idea of the book can be summed up through the lines of EP Thompson-

The diverse historic cultures, arts, religions, philosophemes, codes, race-consciousness, are not partial phases or aspects of Humanity, or of the Absolute Ideal; they are the developing whole, and express, more or less fully, more or less accurately, the Idea of Universal Humanity.¹⁰

References:

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⁹ The line is taken from the poem *To Marguerite: Continued* which was published in the book *Poetry by Matthew Arnold: Dover Beach, the Scholar Gipsy, to Marguerite: Continued*. Books, L. L. C. 2010. *Poetry by Matthew Arnold: Dover Beach, the Scholar Gipsy, to Marguerite: Continued*, ed. by L. L. C. Books

¹⁰ E. P. Thompson quotes from Brajendranath Seal's eloquent and polymathic *New Essays in Criticism* (1903), which is a Hegelian essay on the theme so germane to Tagore's idea of universal humanity – in his 'Introduction' to Tagore's *Nationalism*, New Delhi: Rupa and Co, 1917, 1991, p. 5.

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