

## 15 Bengal, Assam and South-East Asia

I left and we were at sea for forty-three days and then reached the country of Bengal. It is a spacious country, producing rice in abundance. Nowhere in the world have I seen cheaper produce than there, but it is gloomy and the people of Khurasan say, '*duzakhast pur ni'mah*', meaning 'it is a hell full of blessings'.

The first city we entered in Bengal was Sudkawan, a very big city on the shore of the Great Sea.<sup>1</sup> The rivers Gang, to which the Indians go to pilgrimage, and Jun unite there and flow into the sea. From here I travelled to the mountains of Kamaru, a journey of one month.<sup>2</sup> They are extensive mountains which join China and also Tibet, where are the musk gazelles. The people of these mountains look like Turks. They are strong workers and a slave of that race is twice as good as a slave of another. They are also famous for resorting to magic and for their involvement in it. My object in going to these mountains was to meet a saint living there, Shaikh Jalal al-Din of Tabriz.<sup>3</sup>

### Account of the Shaikh Jalal al-Din

This shaikh is among the greatest saints and most remarkable men, responsible for famous miracles and wonderful achievements. He was an aged man. He told me he had even set eyes on – God's mercy on him – the Caliph al-Musta'sim in Baghdad and was there when he was killed. Later on his companions told me that he had fasted for about forty years, breaking the fast only at intervals of ten days. He had a cow and used to break his fast with its milk. He also used to stand up all night. In appearance he was thin, tall and had little

hair on his cheeks. He converted the people of those mountains to Islam, and that is why he stayed among them.

#### A miracle of his

When I was on my way to visit this shaikh four of his companions met me two days' journey from the place where he lived. They told me that the shaikh had said to the faqirs who were with him, 'The traveller from the Maghrib has come to you. Go and receive him.' They had set out accordingly by his order. He had no knowledge whatever of me; this had been divinely revealed to him. I went with them to the shaikh and came to his hospice outside the cave. When I entered his presence he rose, embraced me, and asked about my country and my travels, about which I informed him. He said to me, 'You are the traveller of the Arabs.' One of his companions who was present said, 'And of the non-Arabs, my master.' He said, 'And of the non-Arabs. Treat him with respect.' They took me to the hospice and gave me hospitality for three days.

When I had said farewell to Shaikh Jalal al-Din I travelled to the city of Habanq, one of the biggest and most beautiful cities.<sup>4</sup> It is divided by a river which flows from the mountains of Kamaru, called the Blue River, by which one goes to Bengal. After travelling on this river for fifteen days, we reached the city of Sunarkawan.<sup>5</sup> When we arrived there we found a junk intending to go to the country of al-Jawah which is forty days' sail away, on which we embarked.

After fifteen days we arrived at the country of the Barahnakar, who have mouths like those of dogs.<sup>6</sup> They are sottish and do not adhere to the religion of the Indians or to any other. They live on the sea-shore in houses of reeds roofed with dried grass, and have many bananas, areca palms and betel bushes. Their men are like us except that their mouths are like those of dogs. Their women are not like that, however, and are of outstanding beauty. The men are naked with no covering except that some of them put their male organs and testicles in a painted holder made of reeds and attached to their bellies. The women cover themselves with tree leaves. There is a community of Muslims among them, people from Bengal and al-Jawah who live in a separate quarter. They told us that the Barahnakar copulate like beasts and do not hide what they are doing. A man has thirty wives,

more or less, and they do not commit adultery. If one does commit adultery the penalty for the man is that he is fixed to a cross till he dies, unless his friend or slave is fixed to the cross in his stead, when he is freed. The penalty for the woman is that the sultan orders all his household attendants to copulate with her, one after the other till she dies, in his presence. Then they throw her into the sea.

#### Account of their sultan

Their sultan came to us riding on an elephant on which was a kind of pack saddle made of skins. He was dressed in a goatskin robe, the hair on which was turned outwards. On his head were three coloured silk fillets and in his hand was a javelin of reed. Some twenty of his relatives accompanied him on elephants. He sent us a gift of pepper, ginger, cinnamon, fish and Bengali cloths. They do not wear these but deck the elephants with them on feast days. For every ship that docks in his country he takes a slave girl, a male slave, elephant cloths, and gold ornaments which his wife puts in her girdle and on her toes. If anyone does not give them this tribute they use magic against him. The sea becomes rough for him and he perishes, or almost so.

#### Anecdote

It happened that one night while we were in their port a slave of the master of the ship, who had repeatedly visited these people, left the ship one night for an assignation with the wife of one of their chief men, in a place like a cave on the shore. The husband knew of this and came to the cave with a party of his friends, found them there and they were taken to the sultan. He ordered that the slave's testicles should be cut off and he should be crucified. By his orders people copulated with the woman till she died. Then the sultan came to the shore and excused himself for what had happened, saying, 'We have to enforce our laws.' He then gave the master of the ship a slave in place of the one he had crucified.

We left these people and after twenty-five days we reached the island of al-Jawah [Sumatra], from which Jawi incense takes its name. We saw it at a distance of half a day's sail. It is green and

very well-wooded. We landed at the port, where the vice-admiral wrote to the sultan informing him of my arrival. The notables then came out and brought a horse from the sultan's stables and other horses. I and my companions mounted and we entered the sultan's capital, the city of Sumutrah, a fine, big city with wooden walls and towers.<sup>7</sup>

#### Account of the sultan of al-Jawah

He is Sultan al-Malik al-Zahir,<sup>8</sup> one of the noblest and most generous of kings, a Shafi'i in rite and a lover of jurists, who come to his audiences for the recitation of the Qur'an and for discussions. He often fights against and raids the infidels. He is unassuming and walks to the Friday prayer on foot. The people of his country are eager to fight infidels and readily go on campaign with him. They dominate the neighbouring infidels who pay the poll tax in return for peace.

I stayed in Sumutrah with the sultan for fifteen days. After that I sought permission to travel, for it was the season of the voyage to China which is not organized at any other time. The sultan prepared a junk for us, stocked it with provisions, and was most generous and kind. May God reward him! He sent one of his companions with us to be host to us on the junk. We sailed along his country for twenty-one nights. Then we reached Mul Jawah, which is a country of infidels.<sup>9</sup> It extends for two months' travel. It has aromatics, and good aloes of Qaqulah and Qamarah, both places being in the country. In the country of Sultan al-Zahir, that is in al-Jawah, there are only incense, camphor, some cloves and some Indian aloes.

We arrived at the port of Qaqulah, a fine city with a wall of cut stone wide enough to take three elephants. The first thing I noticed outside the city was elephants with loads of Indian aloes wood which they burn in their houses; it is the price of firewood among us, or even cheaper. That, however, is when they sell it to each other. When they sell to [foreign] merchants a load costs a robe of cotton, cotton being more expensive than silk among them. Elephants are very common; they ride on them and use them as beasts of burden. Everyone who has a shop ties up his elephant beside it, and rides it to go home and to carry goods.

Account of the sultan of Mul Jawah

He is an infidel. I saw him outside his palace before a pavilion sitting on the ground with no mat. He summoned me, so I came to him and said, 'Greetings to whoever follows the true guidance.' They understood only the word *salam*. The sultan welcomed me and ordered a cloth to be spread for me to sit on. I said to the interpreter, 'How shall I sit on a cloth when the sultan is sitting on the ground?' He said, 'This is his custom. He sits on the ground as a mark of humility. You are a guest and you have come from a great sultan. You must be treated with honour.' I sat down and he asked me about the sultan of India. His questions were terse. He said to me, 'You will stay as our guest for three days and then depart.'

Account of a wonderful thing I saw in his assembly

In this sultan's assembly I saw a man with a knife like a billhook. He laid it on his neck and spoke at length although I did not understand. Then he took the knife in both hands and cut his own throat. His head fell to the ground because the knife was so sharp and his grip of it so strong. I was astounded at what he had done. The sultan said, 'Does anyone do this among you?' I said, 'I have never seen this anywhere.' He laughed and said, 'These are our slaves and they kill themselves for love of us.' He ordered the body to be carried away and burnt. The sultan's deputies, the state officials, the troops and the common people went out to the cremation. He granted ample pensions to his children, wife and brothers, and they were highly honoured because of what he had done. Someone who had been present at that assembly told me that what the man had said had been an affirmation of his love for the sultan, and a declaration that he was killing himself for love of him, as his father had killed himself for love of the sultan's father, and as his grandfather had done for love of the sultan's grandfather.

We set sail from Qaqulah and after thirty-four days reached the Sluggish or Tranquil Sea, which has a reddish colour; they claim that this is because of the earth of the land which bounds it. It has no wind and no waves and no movement in spite of its extent. For this reason every Chinese junk is accompanied by three boats, as we have said.

They are rowed and tow it. Besides, there are in every junk about twenty very big oars like masts. Some thirty men assemble by each oar and stand in two ranks facing each other. Two very big ropes like cables are attached to each oar. One party pulls the rope and then lets it go; then the other party pulls it. They sing with fine voices as they do this, and usually they sing *La'la, la'la*.

We sailed on this sea for thirty-seven days, then reached the country of Tawalisi.<sup>10</sup> The people of this country worship idols. They are of handsome appearance and resemble the Turks, most of them having reddish colouring. They are brave and intrepid and their women ride horses, understand archery, and fight just like the men. We anchored in one of their ports in the city of Kailukari, one of their finest and largest cities. The king had appointed his daughter to govern that city, and her name is Urduja.

#### Account of this princess

On the second day after our arrival at the port of Kailukari the princess summoned the captain, officers and merchants to a banquet she had prepared for them according to her custom. The captain wanted me to attend with them, but I refused, for they are infidels and it is not lawful to eat their food. When the guests attended upon her she said, 'Is there any one of you who has stayed behind and has not come?' The captain said to her, 'Only one man has stayed behind. He is the qadi and he does not eat your food.' She said, 'Summon him.' Her bodyguards and the captain's companions came and said, 'Obey the princess,' so I went to her. She was receiving in full state. Around her were women past child-bearing who were her viziers. They sat below the throne on sandalwood chairs. The men were before her. Her seat was covered in silk and had silk curtains; it was of sandalwood inlaid with many gold plaques. In the assembly hall were benches of carved wood on which were many gold vessels, both large and small, such as amphoras, jugs and goblets. The captain told me they were filled with a drink that induces cheerfulness, sweetens the breath, helps digestion, and enhances sexual intercourse.<sup>11</sup>

When I greeted the princess she said to me in Turkish, 'How are you? Are you well?' She seated me near her. She wrote Arabic well and said to one of her attendants, 'Bring an inkwell and paper.' They

were brought and she wrote, 'In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate.' She said, 'What is this?' I said, 'That is God's name.' She said, 'Good.' Then she asked me from which country I came. I said, 'From India.' She said, 'The pepper country?' I said, 'Yes.' She asked me about that country and events there and I answered her. She said, 'I must invade it and take possession of it. Its wealth and its soldiers please me.' I said to her, 'Do so.' She ordered that I should be given robes, two elephant loads of rice, two buffalo cows, ten sheep, four pounds of julep, and four *martabans*, which are big vessels,<sup>12</sup> filled with ginger, pepper, citrus fruit and mangoes, all salted with what is used in preparing for sea voyages.

The ship owner told me that this princess had in her army women, serving women and slaves, who fought like men, and that she goes out among her troops of men and women, invades the territory of her enemies, is present at the fighting, and engages the champions. He told me there was a fierce battle between her and one of her enemies in which many of her soldiers were killed and her army was on the point of fleeing; but she forced her way forwards and broke through the armies till she reached the king against whom she was fighting, pierced him with a lance thrust and killed him. At this point his troops fled, and she brought his head on a spear, which his family recovered from her for much treasure. When she returned to her father he made her ruler of that city. He told me also that the kings' sons used to ask for her in marriage, and she used to say, 'I shall marry only a man who fights against me and defeats me.' They avoided doing this, being afraid of the disgrace if she were to defeat them.