

## PREFACE

In a bid to standardize higher education in the country, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has introduced Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) based on five types of courses viz. *core, generic, discipline specific general elective, ability and skill enhancement* for graduate students of all programmes at Honours level. This brings in the semester pattern, which finds efficacy in sync with credit system, credit transfer, comprehensive continuous assessments and a graded pattern of evaluation. The objective is to offer learners ample flexibility of choose from a wide gamut of courses, as also to provide them lateral mobility between various educational institutions in the country where they can carry their acquired credits. I am happy to note that the University has been recently accredited by National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India (NAAC) with grade "A".

UGC (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations, 2020 have mandated compliance with CBCS for U. G. programmes for all the HEIs in this mode. Welcoming this paradigm shift in higher education, Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) has resolved to adopt CBCS from the academic session 2021-22 at the Under Graduate Degree Programme level. The present syllabus, framed in the spirit of syllabi recommended by UGC, lays due stress on all aspects envisaged in the curricular framework of the apex body on higher education. It will be imparted to learners over the six semesters of the Programme.

Self Learning Materials (SLMs) are the mainstay of Student Support Services (SSS) of an Open University. From a logistic point of view, NSOU has embarked upon CBCS presently with SLMs in English/Bengali. Eventually, the English version SLMs will be translated into Bengali too, for the benefit of learners. As always, all of our teaching faculties contributed in this process. In addition to this we have also requisitioned the services of best academics in each domain in preparation of the new SLMs. I am sure they will be of commendable academic support. We look forward to proactive feedback from all stakeholders who will participate in the teaching-learning based on these study materials. It has been a very challenging task well executed, and I congratulate all concerned in the preparation of these SLMs.

I wish the venture a grand success.

**Professor (Dr.) Subha Sankar Sarkar**  
Vice-Chancellor

**Netaji Subhas Open University**  
**Under Graduate Degree Programme**  
**Choice Based Credit System (CBCS)**  
**Subject : Honours in History (HHI)**  
**Eastern India (With Special Reference to Bengal) : (Earliest to 1203/1204–1757)**  
**Course Code : GE-HI-21**

**First Edition : July, 2021**

---

Printed in accordance with the regulations of the Distance  
Education Bureau of the University Grants Commission

**Netaji Subhas Open University**  
**Under Graduate Degree Programme**  
**Choice Based Credit System (CBCS)**  
**Subject : Honours in History (HHI)**

**: Board of Studies :**  
**: Members :**

**Chandan Basu**

*Professor of History*  
*NSOU and Chairperson, BoS*

**Soumitra Sreemani**

*Associate Professor of History*  
*NSOU*

**Ritu Mathur (Mitra)**

*Associate Professor of History*  
*NSOU*

**Manosanta Biswas**

*Assistant Professor of History*  
*NSOU*

**Balai Chandra Barui**

*Professor (Former) of History*  
*University of Kalyani*

**Rup Kumar Barman**

*Professor of History*  
*Jadavpur University*

**Biswajit Brahmachari**

*Associate Professor of History*  
*Shyamsundar College*

**Eastern India (With Special Reference to Bengal) : (Earliest to 1203/1204–1757)**  
**Course Code : GE-HI-21**

**: Writer :**

**Souvik Dasgupta**

*Research Fellow*  
*The Presidency University*

**: Editor :**

**Chandan Basu**

*Professor of History*  
*NSOU*

**: Format Editing :**

**Chandan Basu**

*Professor of History*  
*NSOU*

**Notification**

All rights reserved. No part of this Self-Learning Material (SLM) may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from Netaji Subhas Open University.

**Kishore Sengupta**

Registrar



**Eastern India (With Special Reference to Bengal) :**  
**(Earliest to 1203/1204–1757)**  
**Course Code : GE-HI-21**

**Module-I : Eastern India : Political Development (1201–1575)**

<b>Unit - 1</b>	□ Advent of Islam in Eastern India	185 – 198
<b>Unit - 2</b>	□ Bengal under the Mameluks (1227 - 87 CE)	199 – 207
<b>Unit - 3</b>	□ Bengal under Iliyash Shahi Dynasty	208 – 215
<b>Unit - 4</b>	□ Bengal under the Hussain Shahi Dynasty	216 – 223
<b>Unit - 5</b>	□ Afghan Rule in Bengal	224 – 234

**Module-II : Eastern India : Political Development (1575–1757)**

<b>Unit - 6</b>	□ Mughal Conquest of Bihar and Bengal	237 – 246
<b>Unit - 7</b>	□ Bengal under Jahangir and Shah Jahan	247 – 256
<b>Unit - 8</b>	□ Bengal under Aurangzeb	257 – 264
<b>Unit - 9</b>	□ The Rise of Murshid Quli Khan	265 – 271
<b>Unit - 10</b>	□ The Development of Nawabi Bengal as a Regional Power	272 – 282
<b>Unit - 11</b>	□ Bengal under Siraj-ud-dwala	283 – 289
<b>Unit - 12</b>	□ The Battle of Plassey (1757) : Impact	290 – 299

### **Module-III : Medieval Bengal : Economy and Society**

<b>Unit - 13</b> □ The Medieval Agrarian Structure : Evolution of the Zamindar Class and Talukdari System : Peasant Society and Process of Peasantization	303 – 312
<b>Unit - 14</b> □ The Economy : Indigenous Trade and the Role of the Foreign Companies	313 – 325
<b>Unit - 15</b> □ Urbanization in Medieval Bengal	326 – 335
<b>Unit - 16</b> □ Society and Literature : An Overview	336 – 342

### **Module-IV : Medieval Eastern India : Religion and Culture**

<b>Unit - 17</b> □ Religious Traditions	345 – 354
<b>Unit - 18</b> □ Sufism in Bengal	355 – 363
<b>Unit - 19</b> □ Rise and Growth of Vaishnavism : The Bhakti Cult	364 – 370
<b>Unit - 20</b> □ The Jagannath Cult : Formation, Features and Impact	371 – 376

**Eastern India (With Special Reference to Bengal) :**  
**(Earliest to 1203/1204–1757)**

**Course Code : GE-HI-21**





# **Module I**

## **Eastern India : Political Development (1201-1575)**



---

## **Unit 1 □ Advent of Islam in Eastern India**

---

### *Structure*

- 1.0 Objective**
- 1.1 Introduction**
- 1.2 Theory of Immigration**
- 1.3 Theory of the Religion for Sword**
- 1.4 Theory of Religion for Patronage**
- 1.5 Theory of Religion for Social Liberation**
- 1.6 Conclusion**
- 1.7 Questions**
- 1.8 Suggested Readings**

---

### **1.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of this unit is to understand the growth and spread of Islam in Bengal, especially in Eastern Bengal
- Four theories will be discussed.
- These are the theory of immigration, theory of religion for sword, theory of the religion of patronage and theory of social liberation

---

### **1.1 Introduction**

---

Bengal was the most fertile and most revenue yielding territory of the erstwhile Mughal India. In course of time it also became the early seat of the expanding British power in India. As we all know, the British were foreign to this land. So the first and foremost for a such an alien ruler was to have a proper knowledge of his ruling territory. However, the pre-colonial documents were insufficient and not so properly crystallized as to give an official outline of the land to the British. So they themselves undertook several survey operations to gain a firsthand knowledge about the natural

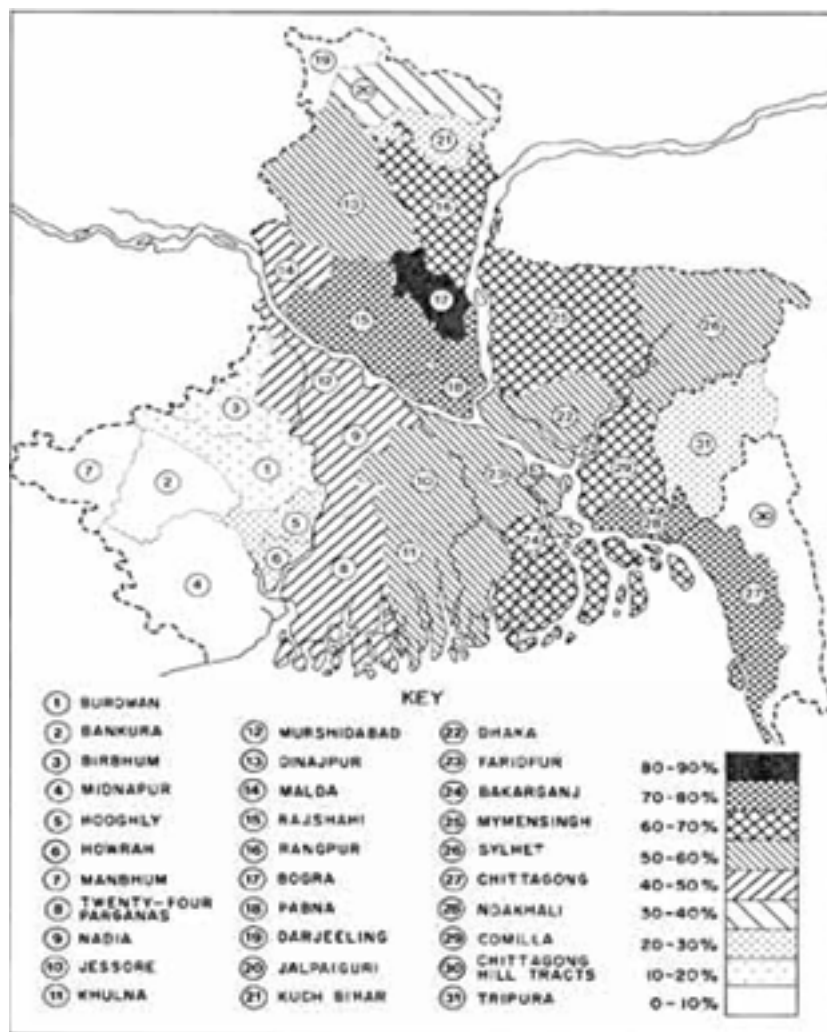
resources, geographical components, cultural and linguistic contents and most importantly the ethnographical population composition of the land. One such massive operation were the All India Censuses.

The most interesting fact revealed by this census of 1872 was the enormous host of Muhammadans resident in Lower Bengal—not massed around the old capitals, but in the alluvial plains of the Delta. It was relatively late in their experience in Bengal that Englishmen became aware of the full extent of the province's Muslim population. With British activity centered on Calcutta, in the predominantly Hindu southwest, colonial officials through most of the nineteenth century perceived Bengal's eastern districts as a vast and rather remote hinterland, with whose cultural profile they were largely unfamiliar. They were consequently astonished when the first official census of the province, that of 1872, showed Muslims totaling 70 percent and more in the Chittagong, Noakhali, Pabna, and Rajshahi districts, and over 80 percent in Bogra. The subject certainly was examined. The census of 1872 touched off a heated debate that lasted the rest of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. As to the words of James Wise (1894), a government official ~

“the most interesting fact revealed by the census of 1872 was the enormous host of Muhammadans resident in Lower Bengal—not massed around the old capitals, but in the alluvial plains of the Delta..The history of the spread of the Muhammadan faith in Lower and Eastern Bengal is a subject of such vast importance at the present day as to merit a careful and minute examination.”

More curiously, Bengal conventionally fell at the frontier of the Medieval Muslim rule. Therefore by this logic the impact of political Islam should be far less than that it should be felled in the heartland of Islamic rule viz. North India particularly Delhi-Agra circuit (the seat of the Sultanate and Mughal emperors). But ironically the percentage of Muslim population was just the reverse. While the census revealed that the proportion of Muhammedan religion was hardly 15-20% in the North Indian circuit, in Bengal the peripheral region, it was more than 60% in average, rising up to >80% of the total population in Bogra district. Another mysterious thing is that the Muslim population was chiefly encircled within the peasant community of Bengal, while among the urban regions of Dhaka and Murshidabad, which historically remained as the major centers of Muslim political

rule, the Hindu population was far more than the Muslims. As expected, again the situation was exactly opposite of that in North India, where the bulk of peasantry was composed of Jat Hindu population while the minority Muslim population was mostly encircled among the foreign Turko-Afgani clans in cities.



*Distribution of Muslim population in Bengal, 1872*

So what led to this strange population distribution and how cum Islam became the religion of the majority population in Bengal, the peripheral frontier of the Muslim rule? Historian Richard M. Eaton in his monumental work “The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier : 1204-1760” tried to enlist and analyze the different

conventional theories behind the rise of Muslim population in Medieval Bengal. Let's discuss them.

---

## 1.2 Theory of Immigration

---

Theories purporting to explain the growth of Islam in India may be reduced to four basic modes of reasoning. Each is inadequate. The first of these, which Eaton termed as “the Immigration theory”, views Islamization of Bengal’s population in terms of the diffusion not of belief but of peoples. In this view, the bulk of India’s Muslims are descended from other Muslims who had either migrated overland from the Iranian-Central Asian plateau or sailed across the Arabian Sea. It states that most of the ancestors of modern day Bengali Muslims were from the Turko-Afghan stock of invaders who came to Bengal through military conquest or political rule like that during Bakhtiyar Khalji or Hushang Shah. The foreign soldiers and other accomplices who came with these early Muslim invaders gradually settled down, reproduced and led to the rise of the modern Bengali Muslim breed in the delta.

The proponents of this peculiar theory were none other but the so called non-Bengali Muslim aristocrats living in 19th century Bengal. Soon after the publication of the 1872 census findings, Abu A. Ghuznavi, an wealthy Muslim man from Mymensingh, published a report opposing any form of mass conversion of indigenous Bengali non-Muslims into Islam.<sup>1</sup> Ghuznavi proposed instead, that “the majority of the modern Mahomedans are not the descendants of Chandals and Kaibartas but are of foreign extraction”. In favor of his argument, Ghuznavi cited Arab and Turkish migration during the Sultanate’s conquest, land grants made by Sultan Husain Shah to foreigners, the dispersion of Afghans “in every hamlet” after the Mughal conquest, the greater fertility of Muslims owing to their practices of polygamy and widow remarriage. Although he conceded that there had been “some” conversions, Ghuznavi insisted that those were not been among low-caste Hindus. “Why should we speak of conversion of low-caste Hindus only?” To him those who converted were not from the “low born” but from the high-caste Hindus, like the Rajput Diwans of Mymensingh, the Majumdar Zamindars of Syllhet, etc.

---

<sup>1</sup>Abu A. Ghuznavi, “Notes on the Origin, Social and Religious Divisions and Other Matters Touching on the Mahomedans of Bengal and Having Special Reference to the District of Maimensingh”

Soon Ghuznavi's view were whole heartedly supported by other sections of the Bengali Ashraf classes of Muslims who consider themselves not Bengali but of foreign Central-Asian Persian breed, living in Bengal. In 1895, Khondkar Fuzli Rubbee published his *The Origin of the Musalmans of Bengal*. Like his predecessor Abu Ghuznavi, Rubbee denied "that the natives of this country, either from compulsion or free will, were converted to Islam, in any appreciable number at a time." Rather, he asserted, "the ancestors of the present Musalmans of this country were certainly those Musalmans who came here from foreign parts during the rule of the former sovereigns." In fact, Rubbee viewed the delta's geographic isolation as evidence for this process, arguing that the region "always enjoyed immunity from foreign invasions, and consequently it formed a great asylum for the Musulmans." Rubbee also cited numerous charitable grants (*aima*) to "venerable Muslims" in Bengal, suggesting that these became the bases of foreign settlement.

Thus, it is evident that the theory is more inclined to preserve the racial purity of Muslims, rather than to explain the mass Islamization of Bengal, guided by extreme casteism among the so called 'aristocratic' Muslims. The indigenous peasant populations of Bengal were of extreme low caste in their views. Therefore, they were furious to accept them in their Muslim society. Indeed, in medieval eras, racism and casteism played an important role in the higher circles of the Turkish Sultanates. The indigenous Hindu converts were viewed as 'low borns' and of 'impure blood' and were denied any higher assignments in the administration, despite being in the same practicing faith. Ill-treatment of converted Muslims like Kamal Mahayiar by Sultan Balban, is a good example of this.

However, coming to the relevance of this theory of migration, in certain pockets of India, which witnessed greater political engagement with Muslim governments and fell in the corridor of major Islamic invasion, this theory indeed holds some ground. As a matter of fact, the minority Muslim urban population in North India and Punjab were mostly composed of foreign stock, like Turkish, Uzbek, Afghan or Iranian origin. But in the region of Bengal this theory is completely illogical. In this connection, we may examine the work of James Wise, a veteran British civil surgeon in Dhaka, who elaborated his views in an important article entitled "The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal" (1894). Wise opened by dismissing the Immigration theory favored by *ashrafî* spokespersons like Ghuznavi. He noted that, in Muhammadan

histories, there were no mention of any large Muslim immigration from Upper India. Moreover, we know that in the reign of Akbar the climate of Bengal was considered so uncongenial to the Mughal invaders, that an order to proceed to Bengal was regarded as a sentence of punishment, among the elite Muslim circles of the Empire. Again, Rubbee viewed the delta's geographic isolation as evidence for this process, arguing that the region "always enjoyed immunity from foreign invasions, and consequently it formed a great asylum for the Musulmans." Rubbee did not explain why the same natural frontiers that had protected Muslims from foreign invaders failed to protect Bengalis from Muslim invaders. In this situation, the controversial 1901 *Census of India*, was published, which farther dismissed this immigration theory. In his report in this census, E. A. Gait concluded that probably nine-tenths of the Muslim Bengali cultivators when asked their caste—were of local origin. Gait doubted that any significant migration of Muslim settlers had taken place even within Bengal, much less from beyond the delta. Observing that Muslim settlers generally sought the higher levels of land near the old capitals, he reasoned that "they would never willingly have taken up their residence in the rice swamps of Noakhali, Bogra and Backergunge."<sup>2</sup> Soon they were replicated in the Settlement Reports and the widely influential *Bengal District Gazetteers* that began appearing in the early twentieth century. For example, the gazetteer for Noakhali District (1911) stated that the "vast majority of the Shekhs [i.e., Muslim cultivators] and lower sections of the community are descended from the aboriginal races of the district," primarily, the Chandals. Similarly, the Settlement Report of Bogra and Pabna districts (1930) traced the Muslim communities of those districts to "Hindus converted at a comparatively recent date," and stated that the majority of the populations were "descendants of the aboriginals of North Bengal, the Koches." Thus, the Theory of Immigration proposed by a section of non-Bengali and Bengali Muslim elites of British Bengal falls flat.

---

### 1.3 Theory of the Religion for Sword

---

The oldest theory of Islamization in India, which I shall call the Religion of the Sword thesis, stresses the role of military force in the diffusion of Islam in India and

---

<sup>2</sup> E. A. Gait, "The Muhammadans of Bengal," in *Census of India, 1901*, vol. 6, *The Lower Provinces of Bengal and Their Feudatories*, pt. 1, "Report" (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902)



elsewhere. Dating at least from the time of the Crusades, this idea received big boosts during the nineteenth century, the high tide of European imperial domination over Muslim peoples, and subsequently in the context of the worldwide Islamic reform movements of the late twentieth century. Writing in 1898, Sir William Muir asserts that the Arabs' (in this case the Muslim Invaders) fondness for the "scent of war," their love of "rapine" and genocide, tormented the conquered native non-Muslims to such an extent that they were forced to embrace Islam.

The theory actually proposed the view that the ancestors of native Muslim population of Bengal were forced to convert to Islam owing to tremendous oppression by the Muslim army and the Muslim administration during the Medieval ages. Indeed the Turkish invasion of 13<sup>th</sup> century under Bakhtiyar Khalji brought about an era of mass murder, genocide and oppression among the indigenous population of Bengal. Owing to superior military skills, the Muslim invaders could easily dominate large tracts of Bengal delta. Cities were plundered, villages (mostly of peasants) were looted along with large scale genocide and sexual exploitation. The trend continued in some scale during the latter Mameluk, Hussain Shahi and Iliyash Shahi Sultanates. Sometimes local Hindu Temples were destroyed and Idols were desecrated by Sultanate armies just to destroy the emotional moral of the native indigenous non-Muslim population. Along with it several taxes including Jijiyā was imposed and economic exploitation continued. As a result, large numbers of non-Muslim population converted to Islam in order to escape farther human slaughter and genocide.

The colonial officials also portrayed the rise of Islam in Bengal chiefly due to its 'militant nature'. As for example, James Wise in his report "The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal" (1894), invoked the Religion of the Sword thesis. He opined that "the enthusiastic soldiers who, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, spread the faith of Islam among the timid races of Bengal, made forcible conversions by the sword, and, penetrating the dense forests of the Eastern frontier, planted the crescent in the villages of Silhet." Furthermore, he suggested, captured slaves from the villages of eastern Bengal might have swelled the ranks of the Muslim population, since desperate and impoverished families would have been driven to sell their children to Muslims as slaves. He also suggested that Hindus might have converted "as the only means of escaping punishment for murder, or adultery.

Historiographically, the legacies of the colonial era and the independence movement were to polarize Hindus and Muslims into exclusive and even hostile categories, to project these categories into the past, and to read pre-modern Bengali history in terms of a struggle between them. Here is a lurid portrayal of the Turkish conquest penned in 1963 by the reputed linguist and historian of Bengali language S. K. Chatterjee,

“The conquest of Bengal by these ruthless foreigners was like a terrible hurricane which swept over the country, when a peace-loving people were subjected to all imaginable terrors and torments—wholesale massacres, pillages, abduction and enslavement of men and women, destruction of temples, palaces, images and libraries, and forcible conversion. The Muslim Turks, like the Spanish Catholic *conquistadores* in Mexico and Peru and elsewhere in America, sought to destroy the culture and religion of the land as the handiwork of Satan.”<sup>3</sup>

However, there are certain loopholes in this theory. As Peter Hardy has observed, those who argued that Indian Muslims were forcibly converted have generally failed to define either *force* or *conversion*,<sup>[3]</sup> leaving one to presume that a society can and will alter its religious identity simply because it has a sword at its neck. Precisely how this mechanism either worked, in theoretical or in practical terms, has never, however, been satisfactorily explained. Moreover, proponents of this theory seem to have confused conversion to the Islamic religion with the extension of Turko-Iranian rule in North India between 1200 and 1760, a confusion probably originating in too literal a translation of primary Persian accounts narrating the “Islamic” conquest of India. Nor does the theory fit the religious geography of South Asia. As Richard Eaton explains, if Islamization had ever been a function of military or political force, one would expect that those areas exposed most intensively and over the longest period to rule by Muslim dynasties—that is, those that were most fully exposed to the “sword”—would today contain the greatest number of Muslims. Yet the opposite is the case, as those regions where the most dramatic Islamization occurred, such as eastern Bengal or western Punjab, lay on the fringes of Indo-Muslim political rule, where the “sword” was weakest, and where brute force could have exerted the least influence. In such regions the first accurate census reports put the Muslim population

<sup>3</sup>Suniti Kumar Chatterji, *Languages and Literatures of Modern India* (Calcutta: Bengal Publishers, 1963), pp 160–61

at between 70 and 90 percent of the total, whereas in the heartland of Muslim rule in the upper Gangetic Plain—the domain of the Delhi Fort and Agra, where Muslim regimes had ruled the most intensively and for the longest period of time—the Muslim population ranged from only 10 to 15 percent. In other words, although this theory might be partly true for North and North-Western India, but for Bengal as a whole there is an *inverse* relationship between the degree of Muslim political penetration and the degree of Islamization.

---

#### **1.4 Theory of Religion for Patronage**

---

A third theory commonly advanced to explain Islamization in India is what I call the Religion of Patronage theory. This is the view that Indians of the pre-modern period converted to Islam in order to receive some non-religious favor from the ruling class—relief from taxes, promotion in the bureaucracy, and so forth. This theory has always found favor with Western-trained secular social scientists who see any religion as a dependent variable of some non-religious agency, in particular an assumed desire for social improvement or prestige. It is true in the earlier times of Sultanate, no non-muslims were allowed to enter into state services even among the lower ranks. However, converting to Islam might help them in this procedure. Many instances in Indian history would appear to support this theory. In the early fourteenth century, Ibn Batuta reported that Indians presented themselves as new converts to the Khalaji sultans, who in turn rewarded them with robes of honor according to their rank. According to nineteenth-century censuses, many landholding families of Upper India had declared themselves Muslims in order to escape imprisonment for nonpayment of revenue, or to keep ancestral lands in the family. The theory might even be stretched to include groups employed by Muslim rulers that assimilated much Islamic culture even if they did not formally convert. The Kayasthas and Khatri of the Gangetic Plain, the Parasnīs of Maharashtra, and the Amils of Sind all cultivated Islamic culture while meeting the government's need for clerks and administrative servants, a process that Aziz Ahmad once compared with nineteenth- and twentieth-century "Westernization." The acculturation of captured soldiers or slaves perhaps formed another dimension of this process. Severed from their families, and with no permanent socio-cultural ties to their native homes, these men

not surprisingly fell into the cultural orbit of their patrons. Again, the Jijiya tax, along with the pilgrim tax which was levied only over non-Muslims, were sometimes so severe, that it was hard for poor peasant families of the interior countryside to afford it. Under such condition, conversion to Islam even in sharp contrast to their wish, was the only escape to evade those economic exploitation and earn favours from the Muslim revenue collectors.

Although this thesis might help explain the relatively low incidence of Islamization in Bengal's Muslim political heartland, like in the regions close to Dhaka, Gaur and Murshidabad, it cannot explain the massive conversions that took place along the political fringe—of Bengal countryside. Political patronage, like the influence of the sword, would have decreased rather than increased as one moved away from the centers of that patronage.

---

## 1.5 Theory of Religion for Social Liberation

---

In addition to this, a fourth theory, which is called the Religion of Social Liberation thesis, is generally pressed into service. Created by British ethnographers and historians, elaborated by many Pakistani and Bangladeshi nationals, and subscribed to by countless journalists and historians of South Asia, especially Muslims, this theory has for long been the most widely accepted explanation of Islamization in the subcontinent. The theory postulates a Hindu caste system that is unchanging through time and rigidly discriminatory against its own lower orders. For centuries, it is said, the latter suffered under the crushing burden of oppressive and tyrannical high-caste Hindus, especially Brahmans. Then, when Islam “arrived” in the Indian subcontinent, carrying its liberating message of social equality as preached (in most versions of the theory) by Sufi shaikhs, these same oppressed castes, seeking to escape the yoke of Brahmanic oppression, “converted” to Islam en masse.

The controversial 1901 *Census of India*, farther manifested this theory. In his report in this census, E. A. Gait concluded that probably nine-tenths of the Muslim Bengali cultivators when asked their caste—were of local origin. Soon they were replicated in the Settlement Reports and the widely influential *Bengal District Gazetteers* that began appearing in the early twentieth century. For example, the

gazetteer for Noakhali District (1911) stated that the “vast majority of the Shekhs [i.e., Muslim cultivators] and lower sections of the community are descended from the aboriginal races of the district,” primarily, the Chandals. In the decade before 1947, three anthropological studies produced data corroborating the consensus view in official circles. Although differing in methodology, sampling techniques, and regions studied within the delta, they all agreed that the masses of Bengali Muslims were descended from indigenous communities and not from outsiders. In the first of them, conducted in the Twenty-four Parganas District in 1938, Eileen Macfarlane concluded that “the blood-group data of the Muhammadans of Budge Budge show clearly that these peoples are descended from lower caste Hindu converts, as held by local traditions, and the proportion remains almost the same as among their present-day Hindu neighbors.” Three years later, B. K. Chatterji and A. K. Mitra made another study of blood-group distributions comparing not only low-caste Bengali Hindus with rural Muslims, again in the Twenty-four Parganas District, but also the latter with both urban Muslims and non-Bengali Muslims. This study found an affinity between rural Muslims and their low-caste Hindu neighbors, the Mahisyas and Bagdis, and further concluded that urban Bengali Muslims were serologically closer to the distant Pathans of India’s Northwest Frontier than they were to rural Bengali Muslims, lending substance to the urban Muslims’ claims of their own descent from foreign immigrants to Bengal.

However, having said this, the Religion of Social Liberation theory also has its own limitations. It basically identifies those motives for conversion that are, from a Muslim perspective, eminently praiseworthy: the victory of social justice of Islam as against the inherent wickedness of Hinduism. But, The problem, however, is that no evidence can be found in support of the theory. Moreover, as to historian Richard Eaton, it is profoundly illogical. Firstly, as Eaton efficiently explains, by attributing present-day values to peoples of the past, it reads history backward. Before their contact with Muslims, India’s lower castes are thought to have possessed, almost as though familiar with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Thomas Jefferson, some innate notion of the fundamental equality of all humankind denied them by an oppressive Brahmanical tyranny. In fact, however, in thinking about Islam in relation to Indian religions, pre-modern Muslim intellectuals did not stress their religion’s ideal of social equality as opposed to Hindu inequality, but rather Islamic monotheism

as opposed to Hindu polytheism. That is, their frame of reference for comparing these two civilizations was theological, not social. In fact, the idea that Islam fosters social equality (as opposed to religious equality) seems to be a recent notion, dating only from the period of the Enlightenment, and more particularly from the legacy of the French Revolution among nineteenth-century Muslim reformers. As discussed earlier the Muslim higher circles in medieval age were not free from racism. The indigenous Hindu converts were viewed as 'low borns' and of 'impure blood' and were denied any higher assignments in the Turkish administration, despite being in the same practicing faith.

Secondly, Eaton argued that even if Indians did believe in the fundamental equality of mankind, and even if Islam *had* been presented to them as an ideology of social equality—though both propositions appear to be false—there is abundant evidence that Indian communities failed, upon Islamization, to improve their status in the social hierarchy. On the contrary, most of the converts simply carried into Muslim society the same birth-ascribed rank that they had formerly known in Hindu society. This is especially true of Bengal. As James Wise observed in 1883, that “In other parts of India menial work is performed by outcast Hindus; but in Bengal any repulsive or offensive occupation devolves on the Muhammadan.” So where did the fruits of social liberation theory go? What is the end result?

Finally, as with the Sword and Patronage theories, the Religion of Social Liberation theory is refuted by the facts of geography. In 1872, when the earliest reliable census was taken, the highest concentrations of Muslims were found in eastern Bengal, western Punjab, the Northwest Frontier region, and Baluchistan. What is striking about those areas is not only that they lay far from the center of Muslim political power but similarly they also fall far from the core areas of the Hindu Brahminical culture, that was mostly centered in Northern Gangetic heartland. The influence of Brahminical casteism should be minimum in the peripheral regions of Bengal. Bengal's indigenous populations had not yet, been fully integrated into either the Hindu or the Buddhist social system. In Bengal, Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbansi, Pod, Chandal, Kuch, and other indigenous groups that had been only lightly exposed to Brahminical culture. Whereas, the bulk of the Hindu low caste population in the heartland of Aryabharata, where the Brahminical domination should be the most prominent, remained attached to their ancestral faith of Hinduism.

Curiously, they didn't converted to Islam. If the theory would have been valid, then, the greatest incidence of conversion to Islam should logically have occurred in those areas where Brahminical social order was most deeply entrenched—namely, in the core region of Aryavarta. Conversely, Islam should have found its fewest adherents in those areas having the least exposure to Brahminical civilization, that is, along the periphery or beyond the pale of that civilization, i.e. in Bengal. However, the situation was quite the opposite.

---

## 1.6 Conclusion

---

Thus, discussing the four conventional theories behind the rise of Islam in Bengal delta, in our above passages, we find each of them is somewhat inadequate. Rather each is incomplete without the other. We cannot fully deny the military and political factors behind the spread of Islam, nor we can deny the theory of patronage to some extent. Again, as Eaton showed in his book, the bulk of conversion happened during the Mughals, who were less interested to waste their military force in proselytisation campaigns. In that connection, the role of local Sufi saints and Dargas comes to action in accordance with the social liberation theory.

---

## 1.7 Questions

---

- 1) What was the interesting fact revealed by the first Bengal census of 1872, in relation to the ethno-religious composition of the province ?
- 2) Name and briefly explain the four conventional theories behind the rise of Islam in Bengal.
- 3) What is the Theory of Immigration ? Why doesn't it holds ground in case of Bengal ?
- 4) Who were the major proponent of the Theory of Immigration ? What was the actual motive behind this propagation ?
- 5) Explain the theory of sword and patronage behind the mass conversion of Islam. What are it's limitations ?

- 6) Define and explain the theory of social liberation behind the rise of Islam in Bengal. What are the counter arguments put forward by Historian Richard Eaton against this particular theory ?
- 7) What according to you is largely responsible for the rise of Muslim population in Bengal ? Analyze with proper reasons.

---

## 1.8 Suggested Readings

---

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Eaton, Richard M., *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier : 1204-1760*, (Berkeley : University Of California Press, 1993)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

James Wise, "The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal," in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Part III, No. 1, (1894)



---

## **Unit 2 □ Bengal under the Mameluks (1227-87 CE)**

---

### *Structure*

#### **2.0 Objective**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

#### **2.2 Bengal at the time of Bakhtiyar's Invasion**

#### **2.3 Reestablishment of Delhi's control under Iltutmish (1227)**

#### **2.4 Articulation of the political authority**

#### **2.5 Conclusion**

#### **2.6 Questions**

#### **2.7 Suggested Readings**

---

### **2.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to understand the historical evolution of Bengal under Mameluks between 1227 and 1287.
- This unit will highlight the condition of Bengal during the invasion of Bakhityar Khilji
- The re-establishment of the Delhi's control over Bengal is another area of study in this unit.
- The learners will also learn the articulation of the political authority in Bengal during the period under review.

---

### **2.1 Introduction**

---

The historical reference of Bengal dates back to time immemorial. The earliest literary reference comes from the Vedic text of *Aitariya Brahmana*, while the *Mahabharata* describes the province of "Banga" as one of the sibling of Queen Sudeshna, the wife of legendary King Bali. However, detailed archaeological

excavations in some prehistorical sites of Midnapore and Bardhaman, clarifies the presence of human settlements and potteries much before the arrival of Vedic Age in North India. The latter Greek and Chinese sources, including the famous Geographical text of Periplus of the Erythraean Sea identify the lower Gangetic deltaic region as the 'Gangaridai' provinces. Nevertheless, in the post Gupta period, Bengal reached her highest affluence under the succeeding rule of Sasanka and latter by Pal and Sen a Kings.

Under such situation, the beginning of Muslim rule in Bengal since the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji marks an important watershed in the history of Bengal. In our following passage, we'll discuss the history of Bengal under the first phase of Muslim rulers, presumably the Mameluk Turkish dynasty of the Delhi Sultanate.

---

## **2.2 Bengal at the time of Bakhtiyar's Invasion**

---

By the time Muhammad Bakhtiyar conquered northwestern Bengal in 1204, Islamic political thought had already evolved a good deal from its earlier vision of a centralized, universal Arab caliphate. In that vision the caliph was the "successor" (Ar., *khalifa*) to the Prophet Muhammad as the combined spiritual and administrative leader of the worldwide community of Muslims. In principle, too, the caliphal state, ruled from Baghdad since A.D. 750, was merely the political expression of the worldwide Islamic community. But by the tenth century that state had begun shrinking, not only in its territorial reach, but, more significantly, in its capacity to provide unified political-spiritual leadership. This was accompanied, between the ninth and eleventh centuries, by the movement of clans, tribes, and whole confederations of Turkish-speaking peoples from Inner Asia to the caliphate's eastern provinces. Coming as military slave-soldiers recruited to shore up the flagging caliphate state, as migrating pastoral nomads, or as armed invaders, these Turks settled in Khurasan, the great area embracing today's northeastern Iran, western Afghanistan, and Central Asia south of the Oxus River. As Baghdad's central authority slackened, Turkish military might provided the military basis for new dynasties—some Iranian, some Turkish—that established themselves as *de facto* rulers in Khurasan.

The political ideas inherited by Muhammad Bakhtiyar and his Turkish followers had already crystallized in Khurasan during the several centuries preceding their entry into Bengal in 1204. This was a period when Iranian jurists struggled to reconcile the classical theory of the unitary caliphate state with the reality of upstart Turkish groups that had seized control over the eastern domains of the declining Abbasid empire. What emerged was a revised theory of kingship that, although preserving the principle that caliphate authority encompassed both spiritual and political affairs, justified a de facto separation of church and state. Whereas religious authority continued to reside with the caliph in Baghdad, political and administrative authority was invested in those who wielded the sword. Endeavoring to make the best of a bad situation, the greatest theologian of the time, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), concluded that *any* government was lawful so long as its ruler, or *sultân*, made formal acknowledgement of the caliph's theoretical authority in his domain. A sultan could do this, Ghazali maintained, by including the reigning caliph's name in public prayers (*khutba*) and on his minted coins (*sikka*). In short, a sultan's authority rested, not on any sort of divine appointment or ethnic inheritance, but on his ability to maintain state security and public order.

The only near-contemporary account of Muhammad Bakhtiyar's 1204 capture of the Sena capital is that of the chronicler Minhaj al-Siraj, who visited Bengal forty years after the event and personally collected oral traditions concerning it. At the time of Bakhtiyar's invasion Bengal was ruled by the Sena King, Lakshman Sena with his capital at Lakhnauti/Lakhshmanavati (Nadia). The story as told by Minhaj was that in 1204, Lakhsmansena vacated his capital in face of a handful Turkish horsemen and shifted to a new capital of Vikrampura in Far East Bengal, where he and his successors Virupakhyasena and Keshabasena ruled for a quiet succeeding years. However, the authenticity of this story is doubted by various historians.

"After Muhammad Bakhtiyar possessed himself of that territory," wrote Minhaj, "he left the city of Nudiah in desolation, and the place which is (now) Lakhnauti he made the seat of government. He brought the different parts of the territory under his sway, and instituted therein, in every part, the reading of the *khutbah*, and the coining of money; and, through his praiseworthy endeavours, and those of his Amirs, *masjids* [mosques], colleges, and monasteries (for Dervishes), were founded in those part."

The passage clearly reveals the conquerors' notion of the proper instruments of political legitimacy : reciting the Friday sermon, striking coins, and raising monuments for the informal intelligentsia of Sufis and the formal intelligentsia of scholars, or *'ulamâ*.

Militarily, Muhammad Bakhtiyar's conquest was a blitzkrieg; his cavalry of some ten thousand horsemen had utterly overwhelmed a local population unaccustomed to mounted warfare. After the conquest, Bakhtiyar and his successors continued to hold a constant and vivid symbol of their power—their heavy cavalry—before the defeated Bengalis. In the year 1204, Bakhtiyar himself struck a gold coin in the name of his overlord in Delhi, Sultan Muhammad Ghuri, with one side depicting a Turkish cavalryman charging at full gallop and holding a mace in hand. Beneath this bold emblem appeared the phrase *Gaudòavijaye*, "On the conquest of Gaur" (i.e., Bengal), inscribed not in Arabic but in Sanskrit. On the death of the Delhi sultan six years later, the governor of Bengal, 'Ali Mardan, declared his independence from North India and began issuing silver coins that also bore a horseman image. And when Delhi reestablished its sway over Bengal, coins minted there in the name of Sultan Iltutmish (1210-35). For neither Muhammad Bakhtiyar, 'Ali Mardan, nor Sultan Iltutmish was there any question of seeking legitimacy within the framework of Bengali Hindu culture or of establishing any sense of continuity with the defeated Sena kingdom. Instead, the new rulers aimed at communicating a message of brute force. As Peter Hardy aptly puts it, referring to the imposition of early Indo-Turkish rule generally, "Muslim rulers were there in northern India as rulers because they were there—and they were there because they had won."

---

### **2.3 Re-establishment of Delhi's control under Iltutmish (1227)**

---

From 1204-27, Bengal was ruled by the semi-independent chieftains from followers and descendents of Bakhtiyar. The Delhi Sultans' at that time were involved in dealing with the devastating Mongol influx under Chengiz Khan. But after the latter's death with a temporary cessation of Mongol menace, the Delhi Sultans once again embarked on retaking their lost territories. In 1227, Iltutmish

marched towards Bengal, crushed the rebel Turkish chieftain Tughril Khan and reestablish Delhi's monopoly over the province.

As, JC Sarkar accounts, during this period of sixty years no less than fifteen chiefs are posted in the authority of Lakhnauti, and of them ten were Mamluks of the imperial Court of Delhi. These Mamluks were men of various nationalities of Central Asia, Khitai Turk. Qipchaq and Uzbek, sold into slavery in early life. Before they became governors of Bengal, they had all arisen to the position of powerful slave general at the Mamluk Court of Delhi, and filled important offices of trust in the imperial household and also held governorships of provinces. Lakhnauti under their rule became a replica of the Imperial Court of Delhi in grandeur and magnificence, and the administrative system they introduced in the province was also a copy of the administrative system of the empire under the House of Ilutmish—a hierarchy of decentralized minor sovereignties of a feudal character.

---

## 2.4 Articulation of the Political Authority

---

Reliance on naked power, or at least on its image, is also seen in the earliest surviving Muslim Bengali monuments. Notable in this respect is the tower (*mînâr*) of Chhota Pandua, in southwestern Bengal near Calcutta. Built toward the end of the thirteenth century, when Turkish power was still being consolidated in that part of the delta, the tower of Chhota Pandua doubtless served the usual ritual purpose of calling the faithful to prayer, inasmuch as it is situated near a mosque. But its height and form suggest that it also served the political purpose of announcing victory over a conquered people. Precedents for such a monument, moreover, already existed in the Turkish architectural tradition.<sup>[17]</sup> Bengal's earliest surviving mosques also convey the spirit of an alien ruling class simply transplanted to the delta from elsewhere. Constructed (or restored) in 1298 in Tribeni, a formerly important center of Hindu civilization in southwest Bengal, the mosque of Zafar Khan appears to replicate the aesthetic vision of early Indo-Turkish architecture as represented, for example, in the Begumpur mosque in Delhi (ca. 1343).

How was the articulation of these political symbols received by the several “audiences” to whom they were directed? As late as thirty years after the conquest, pockets of Sena authority continued to survive in the forests beyond the reach of Turkish garrisons. Whenever Turkish forces were out of sight, petty chieftains with miniature, mobile courts would appear before the people in their full sovereign garb—riding elephants in ivory-adorned canopies, wearing bejeweled turbans of white silk, and surrounded by armed retainers—in an apparent effort to continue receiving tribute and administering justice as they had done before. In 1236 a Tibetan Buddhist pilgrim recorded being accosted by two Turkish soldiers on a ferryboat while crossing the Ganges in Bihar. When the soldiers demanded gold of him, the pilgrim audaciously replied that he would report them to the local raja, a threat that so provoked the Turks’ wrath as nearly to cost him his life. Clearly, after three decades of alien rule, people continued to view the Hindu raja as the legitimate dispenser of justice.



*Silver coin of Sultan Iltutmish (1210–35), struck in Bengal. (Obverse side).*

If Muslim coins and the architecture of this period projected to the subject Bengali population an image of unbridled power, they projected very different messages to the parent Delhi sultanate, and beyond that, the larger Muslim world. Throughout the thirteenth century, governors of Bengal tried whenever possible to assert their independence from the parent dynasty in Delhi, and each such attempt was accompanied by bold attempts to situate themselves within the larger political cosmology of Islam. For example, when the self-declared sultan Ghiyath al-Din 'Iwaz asserted his independence from Delhi in 1213, he attempted to legitimize his position by going over the head of the Delhi sultan and proclaiming himself the right-hand defender (*nâsôir*) of the supreme Islamic authority on earth, the caliph in Baghdad. This marked the first time any ruler in India had asserted a direct claim to association with the wellspring of Islamic legitimacy, and it prompted Iltutmish, the Delhi sultan, not only to invade and reannex Bengal but to upstage the Bengal ruler in the matter of caliphate support. After his armies defeated Ghiyath al-Din or Tughril Khan in 1227, Iltutmish arranged to receive robes of honor from Caliph Al-Nasir in Baghdad, one of which he sent to Bengal with a red canopy of state. There it was formally bestowed upon Iltutmish's own son, who was still in Lakhnauti, having just had the erstwhile independent king of Bengal beheaded. By having the investiture ceremony enacted in the capital city of the defeated sultan of Bengal, Iltutmish vividly dramatized his own prior claims to caliphate legitimacy. For the time being, the delta was politically reunited with North India, and for the next thirty years Delhi appointed to Bengal governors who styled themselves merely "king of the kings of the East" (*mâlik-imulûk al-sharq*).

However, Delhi was distant, and throughout the thirteenth century, the temptation to throw off this allegiance proved irresistible, especially as the imperial rulers were chronically preoccupied with repelling Mongol threats from the Iranian Plateau. So governors rebelled, and each brief assertion of independence was followed by their adoption of ever more exalted titles on their coins and public monuments. In 1281 Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban, the powerful sovereign of Delhi, ruthlessly stamped out one revolt by hunting down his rebel governor and publicly executing him. Yet within a week of Balban's death in 1287, his own son, Bughra Khan, whom the father had left behind as his new governor, declared his independence. Bughra's eldest son, who ascended the Bengal throne as Ruknal-Din Kaikaus (1291-1300), boldly

styled himself on one mosque “the great Sultan, master of the necks of nations, the king of the kings of Turks and Persians, the lord of the crown, and the seal,” as well as “the right hand of the vice-regent of God”—that is, “helper of the caliph.” On another mosque he even styled himself the “shadow of God” (*zill Allah*), an exalted title derived from ancient Persian imperial usage.

Exasperated with the wayward province, Delhi for several decades ceased mounting the massive military offensives necessary to keep it within its grip. In fact, the actions of Sultan Jalal al-Din Khalaji (r. 1290-96) betray something more than mere indifference toward the delta. A contemporary historian recorded that on one occasion the sultan rounded up about a thousand criminals (“thugs”) and “gave orders for them to be put into boats and to be conveyed into the Lower country to the neighborhood of Lakhnauti, where they were to be set free. The *thags* would thus have to dwell about Lakhnauti, and would not trouble the neighborhood (of Dehli) any more.” Within a century of its conquest, then, Bengal had passed from being the crown jewel of the empire, whose conquest had occasioned the minting of gold commemorative coins, to a dumping ground for Delhi’s social undesirables. Already we discern here the seeds of a North Indian chauvinism toward the delta that would become more manifest in the aftermath of the Mughal conquest in the late sixteenth century.

---

## 2.5 Conclusion

---

Thus, 13<sup>th</sup> century marked the arrival of a new political order in the history of Bengal. For the first two decades after Bakhtiyar’s invasion, Bengal was chiefly under the subjugation of Bakhtiyar’s followers. It was only from the time of Iltutmish’ reconsolidation, that Bengal became a subordinate province of the Delhi Sultanate. However, it wasn’t a centralized rule in the true sense. The MamelukIqtadarsand governors posted in Bengal enjoyed considerable autonomy in lieu of some occasional material reward to Delhi. Under the Turkish rule, Islam became the political ruling ideologyand several monumental architectures were built in different parts of the province, deliberately symbolizing its political hegemony over its subjects.



---

## 2.6 Questions

---

- 1) Write in brief about the background and significance of Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion of Bengal (1204).
- 2) How did Sultan Iltutmish reconsolidated the authority of Delhi Sultanate in Bengal ? Why did it took them so late to embark for the mission ?
- 3) Give a rough picture of how the political authorities of the Mameluks functioned in Bengal.
- 4) Was Islam the principle political ideology that hegemonised the statecraft in MamelukBengal ? Give reason behind your argument.

---

## 2.7 Suggested Readings

---

*Ali, Mohammad Mohar, History of the Muslims of Bengal, (Vol I), (Riyadh : Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985)*

*Chandra, Satish, History of Medieval India, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)*

*Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD), (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)*

---

## **Unit 3 □ Bengal Under Iliyash Shahi Dynasty**

---

### *Structure*

#### **3.0 Objective**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

#### **3.2 Foundation and the rule of Iliyash Shah (1342-58)**

#### **3.3 The successors of Iliyash Shah (1358-1415 CE)**

#### **3.4 A brief intervention of Hindu Rule under Raja Ganesh**

#### **3.5 Second Iliyash Shahi Dynasty (1435-87 CE)**

#### **3.6 Economy**

#### **3.7 Conclusion**

#### **3.8 Questions**

#### **3.9 Suggested Readings**

---

### **3.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to study the general historical development of Bengal under Illiyash Shahi dynasty.
- This unit will discuss the foundation of the Illiyash Shah rule in Bengal between 1342 and 1358.
- The successors of Illiyash Shah will also be discussed along with the rule of Ganesh.
- The learners will also learn the economic development of Bengal during this period.

---

### **3.1 Introduction**

---

Since, the middle half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, due to several internal factors, followed by the flight of the Tughlaq Sultans from Delhi prompted by the Timurid invasion in 1398, the grasp of the Delhi Sultanate over its distant provinces started

to decline. Several provincial governors and local chieftains like those of Rajputana, Multan, Jaunpur, Gujarat, Malwa, etc. utilized this opportunity and declared their autonomy from the Delhi Sultanate. Farther down the line, they soon plunged into territorial conflict between each other and thus gradually a balance of power emerged between them. Bengal in the East was such a newly emerging autonomous province under the Iliyash Shahi Sultanate.

---

### **3.2 Foundation and the rule of Iliyash Shah (1342-58)**

---

As regards to Geographical distance, Bengal was a far-flung territory from Delhi, considering the fact that much of its communication depended upon waterways with which the Turkish Rulers were unfamiliar. As a result, Bengal always remained a prone to be independent territory of the Sultanate.

Now since 1330 onwards, due to his various ‘condemned’ experiments the ruling Sultan Md bin Tughlaq became preoccupied in suppressing various rebellions in his Empire. In 1338, serious rebellions broke out in Doab and over much of Northern Plains. Owing to this tumultuous political situation, Sultanate’s grasp over Bengal farther weakened. Taking advantage, in 1342, Shamsuddin Iliyash Khan, a leading Turkish noble of Bengal, captured the provincial capitals of Lakhnauti and Sonaragon, declared his independence and ascended the throne with the title Shamsuddin Iliyash Shah. With this, the first independent Muslim dynasty in Bengal came to power.

Soon after ascending the throne, Iliyash Shah farther extended his dominions in the West annexing lands up to Gorakhpur in modern UP. This prompted the succeeding Delhi Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1351-88) to launch a campaign against the Iliyash Shahi Sultanate of Bengal. He marched through Eastern Bihar and captured the old Bengali capital of Pandua in 1353 CE. Iliyash Shah took refuge in the fort of Ekdalaand continued his campaign. After a few unsuccessful attempts to defeat or capture Iliyash, Firoz Shah Tughlaq finally settled for a peace treaty with the former. According to this treaty, the River Koshi in Bihar was demarcated as the boundary between the Delhi and the Iliyash Shahi Sultanate of Bengal. Friendly relations with Delhi were latter established and regular exchange of gifts between the two also used to take place.



*Comparative Location of the Bengal Sultanate under Iliyash Shahis (c. 1450)*

Iliyash was said to be very popular among his subjects. He used to give liberal grants of lands to nobles and to the Muslim Clergy. As to Satish Chandra, the popularity of Iliyash Shah was one of the major reason behind the failure of Firoz's campaign in Bengal. During his stay in Bengal, Firoz Tughlaq tried various attempts to win over the local inhabitants but failed. Iliyash Shah's reign also marked the development of independent coinage system in Bengal and erection of certain architectural monuments.

---

### 3.3 The successors of Iliyash Shah (1358-1415 CE)

---

Shamsuddin Iliyash Shah was succeeded by his son Sikander Shah (1358-89). During his reign, Firoz Shah Tughlaq attempted for a second time to capture Bengal. Sikander used the same tactics of his father and continued the campaign taking refuge in the fort of Ekdala. Failing to defeat the Sultan, Firoz Shah once again had to return empty handed. It was for the last time that there would be any attempt from the Delhi Sultanate to acquire Bengal until it was finally overran by Sher Shah Suri late in 1538. Sikandar would rule for the next 30 years and built the Adina Masjid in Pandua in 1368 and Kotowali Darwaza in Gauḍa.

One of the most notable Sultan of the dynasty was the successor of Sikander Shah, Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1389-1410). He was famous for reestablishing diplomatic contact of Bengal with China, which was used to be during the Pala-Sena period. Ghiyasuddin on his own initiative sent a diplomatic mission, to the court of the ruling Ming Emperor of China, in reply to which the Chinese Emperor himself sent their emissaries under Ma Huan, to the court of Bengal in 1409. Regular gifts were exchanged with the corresponding Royal families and Buddhist monks were sent from Bengal to the court of Beijing. But more importantly, after about 200 years, it revived the overseas commercial relation between Bengal and China. As a result, the port of Chittagong in Eastern Bengal became a flourishing point of trade with not only just China but with the entire Far East in general. It became a pivotal point of the commercial route from where Chinese export commodities were sent to different other parts of the world.

Beside this Azam Shah was also known for his sense of justice and he used to operate a strict vigil over all the Qazis across his kingdom to check any misconduct from their parts. He was also a man of scholarly taste. He had close relations with various contemporary learned men of his times across Asia. Many of them, including the great Persian poet Hafiz of Shiraz used to visit his court occasionally.

After the death of Azam Shah four Iliyash Shahi Sultans succeeded the throne chronologically viz – Hamza Shah, Mohammad Shah, Bayezid Shah and Firoz Shah up to 1415. However, none of them is known for any notable works.

---

### **3.4 A brief intervention of Hindu Rule under Raja Ganesh**

---

In 1415, political confusion and weakness of the Iliyash Shahi dynasty led to it being overthrown by Raja Ganesh of Dinajpur. He was originally a leading noble of the Iliyash Shahi Rulers. As obvious, the leading Ulemasand Sufis of the state refused to accept a non-Muslim Hindu ruler as their overlord. That's why, they then invited Sultan Ibrahim Ali Sharqi of the neighboring state of Jaunpur to invade Bengal and overthrow the non-Muslim rule. Both side perpetuated steep resistance and soon a negotiation was reached under the intervention of leading Sufi saint Nur Qutab-i-Alam. Raja Ganesh's twelve year old son Jadu was converted into Islam with the new name of Jalaluddin and Ibrahim Sharqi left for Jaunpur.

Raj Ganesh however continued his rule up to 1418 before he finally died. Upon his death, his neo-converted son with the new name of Sultan Jalaluddin Shah ascended the throne and ruled until 1431. With the death of the third ruler Shamsuddin Ahmad Shah (1431-35), down the line, the dynastic rule of Raja Ganesh's family finally came to an end and the second Iliyash Shahi Rule ushered in.

---

### **3.5 Second Iliyash Shahi Dynasty (1435-87 CE)**

---

After the death of Shams-ud Din Ahmad, the rule of the Iliyash Shahi dynasty was once again restored by Mahmud Shah, a descendant of Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah. Mahmud ascended the throne in 1435 with the name of Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah I.

The Iliyash Shahi ruler RukunuddinBarbak Shah (1459-74), organized a militia of Ethiopian/African slaves (known as *Habshis*) and also appointed Arabs as his body guards. Thus, during his reign a large number of West Asian influx took place in Bengal, who were recruited in several of such military posts. Barbak's army invaded Kamrup in East, Purnea in West and strengthen control over large parts of Khulna-Jessore region.

In 1487, the last ruler of this dynasty, Jalal-ud-Din Fath Shah was killed by his Habshi commander of the palace guards, Sultan Shahzada, who ascended the

throne under the title, Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah. With this, the Ilyas Shahi dynasty's rule over Bengal came to an end. Iliyash Shahi army used to perform occasional raids and plunder in the neighboring Kamatapuri kingdom of Assam and Brahmaputra valley, penetrating up to Guwahati. But the Kamata forces offered steep resistance and recovered much of their lost territories from the Iliyash Shahis.

During this time the Iliyash Shahi Sultans of Bengal adorned their capitals of Gaur and Pandua with magnificent buildings. It gave birth to anew sort of architectural style in Bengal, quiet distinct from that of Delhi or North Indian ones. The Sultans were also fond of Bengali language and patronized several Bengali poets. Of them, the celebrated poet Maladhar Basu deserve special mention. He composed the work *Sri Krishna Vijaya* and earned the title Gunaraja Khan from the Sultans while his son earned the title Satyaraja Khan.

---

### 3.6 Economy

---

The economy of the Bengal Sultanate inherited earlier aspects of the Delhi Sultanate, including mint towns, a salaried bureaucracy and the Ijaradari system of land ownership. The production of silver coins inscribed with the name of the Sultan of Bengal was a mark of Bengali sovereignty.<sup>[54]</sup> Bengal was more successful in perpetuating purely silver coinage than Delhi and other contemporary Asian and European governments. There were three sources of silver. The first source was the leftover silver reserve of previous kingdoms. The second source was the tribute payments of subordinate kingdoms which were paid in silver bullion. The third source was during military campaigns when Bengali forces sacked neighboring states.

The apparent vibrancy of the Bengal economy in the beginning of the 15th-century is attributed to the end of tribute payments to Delhi, which ceased after Bengali independence and stopped the outflow of wealth. Ma Huan's testimony of a flourishing shipbuilding industry was part of the evidence that Bengal enjoyed significant seaborne trade. The expansion of muslin production, sericulture and the emergence of several other crafts were indicated in Ma Huan's list of items exported from Bengal to China. Bengali shipping co-existed with Chinese shipping until the latter withdrew from the Indian Ocean in the mid-15th-century. The testimony of

European travelers such as Ludovico di Varthema, Duarte Barbosa and Tomé Pires attest to the presence of a large number of wealthy Bengali merchants and shipowners in Malacca. Historian Rila Mukherjee wrote that ports in Bengal may have been entrepôts, importing goods and re-exporting them to China.

A vigorous riverine shipbuilding tradition existed in Bengal. The shipbuilding tradition is evidenced in the sultanate's naval campaigns in the Ganges delta. The trade between Bengal and the Maldives, based on rice and cowry shells, was probably done on Arab-style *baghlah* ships. Chinese accounts point to Bengali ships being prominent in Southeast Asian waters. A vessel from Bengal, probably owned by the Sultan of Bengal, could accommodate three tribute missions- from Bengal, Brunei and Sumatra- and was evidently the only vessel capable of such a task. Bengali ships were the largest vessels plying in those decades in Southeast Asian waters.

All large business transactions were done in terms of silver taka. Smaller purchases involved shell currency. One silver coin was worth 10,250 cowry shells. Bengal relied on shiploads of cowry shell imports from the Maldives. Due to the fertile land, there was an abundance of agricultural commodities, including bananas, jackfruits, pomegranate, sugarcane, and honey. Native crops included rice and sesame. Vegetables included ginger, mustard, onions, and garlic among others. There were four types of wines, including coconut, rice, *tarry* and *kajang*. Bengali streets were well provided with eating establishments, drinking houses and bathhouses. At least six varieties of fine muslin cloth existed. Silk fabrics were also abundant. Pearls, rugs and ghee were other important products. The finest variety of paper was made in Bengal from the bark of mulberry trees. The high quality of paper was compared with the lightweight white muslin cloth.

---

### 3.7 Conclusion

---

Thus, the Iliyash Shahi dynasty was the first independent Turkic Muslim ruling dynasty in late medieval Bengal, which ruled from the 14th century to the 15th century. It was founded in 1342 and continued up to 1487, with a brief interval in between.



---

### 3.8 Questions

---

- 1) Write a brief dynastic history of the Iliash Shahi rule in Bengal.
- 2) Describe the foundation of the Iliyash Shai Sultanate and the early trends of conflict with Firoz Shah Tughlaq.
- 3) What were the major achievements of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1389-1410) ?
- 4) What was the legacy of Raja Ganesh and his successors ?
- 5) How was the second Iliyash Shahi dynasty restored ?
- 6) Give a brief note on the economy of the Bengal Sultanate under Iliyash Shahis.

---

### 3.9 Suggested Readings

---

- Ali, Mohammad Mohar, History of the Muslims of Bengal, (Vol I), (Riyadh : Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985)*
- Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)
- Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

---

## **Unit 4 □ Bengal under the Hussain Shahi dynasty**

---

### *Structure*

#### **4.0 Objective**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

#### **4.2 Foundation and origin**

#### **4.3 The reign of Alauddin Hussain Shah (1494-1519)**

#### **4.4 The successors of Alauddin Hussain Shah and the decline of the Sultanate**

#### **4.5 Arrival of the Portuguese**

#### **4.6 Conclusion**

#### **4.7 Questions**

#### **4.8 Suggested Readings**

---

### **4.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to study the historical evolution of Bengal under the Hussain Shahi dynasty.
  - The learners will trace the foundation and origin of the Hussain Shahi dynasty in Medieval Bengal.
  - The unit will also study the rule of Alauddin Hussain Shah and his successors along with the decline of the dynasty.
  - The arrival of the Portuguese will also be taught.
- 

### **4.1 Introduction**

---

After the fall of the Iliyash Shahi kingdom, the Hussain Shahi dynasty ruled Bengal from 1494 to 1538. Although they weren't the direct successors of the Iliyash Shahis. There was a brief interval of Ethiopian rule. Nevertheless, the Hussain Shahis are considered as the greatest of all the independent Sultanates of Bengal for bringing a cultural renaissance during their rule.

---

## 4.2 Foundation and Origin

---

The Iliyash Shahi Sultan Barbak Shah (1459-74), had started the process of recruiting large numbers of Ethiopian/Abyssinian slaves in his army and as palace guards. As a result, most of the military posts consequently got infested with Ethiopian recruits. In 1487, it was these Ethiopian guards under Shahzada Barak Shah who toppled the Iliyash Shahis and themselves seized the power of Bengal. For the next seven years, Bengal was ruled by these Ethiopians or Abyssinians. Until in 1494, they were eventually deposed by an Arab noble who then succeeded the throne with the title Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah.

Husain Shah's original name is Sayyed Husain. According to a 1788 chronicle, *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, Husain was the son of Sayyed Ashrafi, a Sharif of Mecca and an inhabitant of Turkestan. Besides both historians, Salim (writer of *Riyaz-us-Salatin*) and Firishtah (from late 16th century) mentioned him as *Sayyed* - which indicates Husain's Arab descent. At the the time of his seizure of power, he was the acting Vazir/Wazir of Sultan Muzaffar Shah, the last Ethiopian ruler of the line. But it is not yet known how he came to Bengal and occupied the post of Vazir of Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah. Most likely, he first settled in Chandapara, a village in Murshidabad district. Because a number of inscriptions of Husain Shah's early years found in the villages around Chandapara and a mosque called *Kherur Mosque* is constructed by Sultan Husain in the same locality in 1494. Initially, he secretly sympathized with the rebels but ultimately he put himself openly as their head and besieged the citadel, where Muzaffar Shah shut himself with a few thousand soldiers. According to the 16th-century historian Nizamuddin, the Sultan was secretly assassinated by Husain with the help of the *paiks* (palace-guards), which ended the Abyssinian rule in Bengal.

As soon as he came to the throne, for precautionary measures and to resist any farther Abyssinian uprising, he replaced all the Abyssinian nobles with either Bengali Hindus or Muslims of Turko-Persian and Arab descents. With this, the Hussain Shahi Rule stepped firm in the soils of Bengal.

---

## 4.3 The reign of Alauddin Hussain Shah (1494-1519)

---

The reign of Alauddin Hussain Shah is known to be one of the brilliant period of the Bengal Sultanate. In the political arena, he not only upheld the sovereignty

of Bengal but also attempted to expand its territories. He gave refuge to the Sharqi Sultan of Jaunpur who was being chased by the despotic Delhi Sultan Sikander Lodi and secured Eastern Bihar through a peace treaty with the later.

In the Southern front, he invaded the Gajapati kingdom of Orissa. According to the *Madala Panji* (a chronicle of the Jagannath Temple), Shah Ismail Ghazi, a commander of Alauddin Hussain Shah commenced his campaign from the Mandaran fort (in the present-day Hooghly district) in 1508-9 and reached Puri, raiding Jajnagar and Katak on the way. The Gajapati ruler of Orissa, Prataprudra Deva was busy in a campaign in the south. On hearing this news, he returned and defeated the invading Bengal army and chased it into the borders of Bengal. He reached the Mandaran fort and besieged it, but failed to take it. Intermittent hostilities between the Bengal and Orissa armies along the border continued throughout the reign of Husain Shahis.

In the South East he extended the Bengal frontier up to the port of Chittagong, expelling the Arakaneese from South-Eastern coast. But his successive invasion to Tripura ended in probable failures. According to *Rajmala*, a late royal chronicle of Tripura, Husain Shah dispatched his army four times to Tripura, but the Tripura army under king Dhanya Manikya and his successors offered stiff resistance and did not yield any territory. But the Sonargaon inscription of Khawas Khan (1513) is interpreted by a number of modern scholars as an evidence of annexure of at least a part of Tripura by Husain Shah's army.

In the North East, he allied with the Ahoms and invaded the Kamtapuri kingdom in present Cooch Bihar. But the savage destruction of the capital of Kamtapur, the ravaging of the Temples, coupled with the stationing of an Afghan Muslim colony there, led to the growth of suspicion among the Ahoms. This would eventually lead to future confrontation between the two during the reign of succeeding Hussain Shahi Sultans.

In the socio-cultural context, Alauddin Hussain Shah is known to be the Akbar of Bengal. As stated earlier, within short time of his coronation, he stopped the recruitment of Ethiopians in government positions, to prevent any farther Abyssinians upsurge. Rather, taking an unusual liberal attitude all the posts were from then thrown open to Hindus and Muslims alike according to their ability. As a result, during his time, a large number of Bengali Hindus were recruited among the plum positions

of the administration. Thus, his principal secretaries, the royal physicians, the master of the mint, along with various chiefs of his bodyguards were all Hindus. The two famous Vaishanava brothers Rupa Goshwami and Santan Goshwami enjoyed high positions among his court officials. Rupa Goswami was the Sakar Mallik, Sanatana Goswami was the DABIR-I-KHAS, Jagai and Madhai were Kotwals of Navadvipa, Gopinath Vasu was his minister, Mukundadas was his private physician, Keshav Khan Chhatri was the chief of his bodyguards and one Anup was in charge of the mint. The Hindus in return honored him with the esteemed titles of Nripati Tilak (Crown of Kings) and Jagat Bhusan (Adornment of the Universe), as mentioned by Vijaya Gupta. However, contrary sources suggest that he was not very liberal towards the Hindus. Not only did he destroyed many Hindu idols in the wars of Assam and South East, but oppression of Hindus was also widespread during his times, though he himself may not have been directly responsible for it, and often turned a blind eye to those practices. It is also to be noted that during his time, a large number of Hindus converted to Islam to gain positions and social advantage. In this connection, it is worthy to mention that the famous Vaishnava saint Chaitaniya Mahaprabhu flourished in Bengal during Alauddin's time. But due to some reason or other, he was forced to leave Bengal, his homeland and took refuge in the neighboring kingdom of Orissa under Gajapati ruler Pratprudradeva.

Beside this, Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah was also a great patron of Bengali Literature. He patronized the learning and flourishing of the Bengali language and pioneered many Bengali literaturists of his time like Vijay Gupta, Shrikara Nandi, etc. The Muslim foreigners started adapting Bengali customs and culture while the Bengali Hindus in turn learned Persians to secure high positions in the administration.

<b>Name Of the Sultan</b>	<b>Reigning Period</b>
Alauddin Hussain Shah	1494-1519
Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah	1519-1532
AlauddinFiruz Shah	1532-1533
Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah	1533-1538

*A Chorological time period of the Hussain Shahi dynasty*

---

#### **4.4 The successors of Alauddin Hussain Shah and the decline of the Sultanate**

---

Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah was succeeded by his son Sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah (1519-32). He continued to hold up the legacy of the Hussain Shahi Sultanate as established by his father. He established matrimonial relationship with Delhi Sultan Ibrahim Lodi and secured his Western border from any farther disturbances from Delhi. Nusrat Shah tried to continue his father's expansionist policy and sent a naval expedition against the Ahom kingdom in the North East but was defeated.

But from 1526, Nusrat Shah had to face a new danger arriving from the West, i.e. the Mughal ascendancy OF North India under Zahiruddin Muhammad Babaur. As a result, a huge amount of Afgan influx happened in Bengal during his reign. He allied with the combined Afghan troops under Mahmud Lodi and faced Babur at the Battle of Ghahgra in 1529. But the combined Sultanate alliance was defeated by the Mughals. Nusrat Shah had to accept a temporary peace proposal with Babur, which was communicated to him by the former through an envoy. Thus, the Mughal territory now extended upto Bihar.

AlauddinFiruz Shah (1532-33) was the son and successor of sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah. At that time after the demise of Babaur, there was a temporary halt in the Mughal activities in the West. So, Firuz Shah devoted his attention to the campaign of Assam in the East. Consequently, the Bengal army entered Assam and reached Naogaon. But while the campaign is on, Sultan AlauddinFiruz Shah was secretly assassinated by his uncle Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah in 1533.

After murdering AlauddinFiruz Shah, his uncle Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah (1533-38) himself ascended the throne, who eventually happened to be the last Sultan of Bengal. Historians accuses him of having neither diplomatic foresight, nor any practical approach to the political problems which beset Bengal during his reign.

During his reign the Portuguese arrived in Chittagong in 1534, and were captured and sent to Gaur as prisoners on charges of mischief. But, in the face of enemy superiority he reconciled with them and permitted them to establish factories and commercial stations at Chittagong and Hughli.

Mahmud Shah soon had to face dual threat, viz. the Mughal influx under Emperor Humayun from the North Western borders and also the rebellions of the tribal Pashtun Afghans who have largely infested the Bengal territory by that time. But a “pleasure loving” Sultan Mahmud Shah proved to be the most incapable of handling the situation. The rebelling Afghans soon rallied around their new rising leader Sher Shah Suri. Unable to crush the rebellion, Mahmud Shah allied with Jalal Khan, the semi-independent Mughal governor of Bihar, who too was tormented by the rising power of Sher Shah. Sultan Mahmud Shah sent repeated letters to Mughal Emperor Humayun for immediate intervention, but with no response since the latter was busy in his Gujarat campaigns. Finally, in 1534, Sher Shah Suri defeated the combined Bengal army under commander Ibrahim Khan in the Battle of Surajgarh and consequently occupied the capital Gaur in April, 1538. Although, Ghiyasuddin was not present at the capital, but he died soon out of grief. Sher Shah ransacked the capital of Gaur and perpetuated a general *Quatal-i-am* (human massacre) in the city. With this, the independent Sultanate of Bengal finally came to an end and all the Bengal treasury was now looted by Sher Shah, which formed the basic chain of resources for his future campaigns against the Mughals.

---

#### **4.5 Arrival of the Portuguese**

---

It is during this Hussain Shahi period that the first batch of Portuguese merchant arrived in Bengal. Embassies from Portuguese India frequented Bengal after the landing of Vasco Da Gama in the principality of Calicut. Individual Portuguese merchants are recorded to have lived in the Bengal Sultanate’s capital of Gaur. Portuguese politics played out in Gaur as a reflection of contradictions in contemporary Portugal.<sup>[34]</sup> The Portuguese provided vivid descriptions of Gaur. They compared the affluence of Gaur with Lisbon. The city included a citadel, a royal palace and durbar, mosques, houses for the rich, and bustling bazaars. Portuguese historian Castenhada de Lopez described the houses of Gaur as being one-storied with ornamental floor tiles, courtyards, and gardens. Gaur was the center of regional politics. The Sultan of Bengal gave permission for establishing the Portuguese settlement in Chittagong. During the period of the Iberian Union, there was no

official Portuguese sovereignty over Chittagong. The Portuguese trading post was dominated by pirates who allied with the Arakanese against Bengal.

However, the Portuguese served one very important part in constructing the history of the Bengali Sultanate. The Portuguese travelers like Barbarossa gave a vivid picture of the contemporary Sultanate of Bengal and thus served as one of the important primary source of this period. They wrote about the luxury and extravagance of the Muslim aristocracy of the Hussain Shahi Sultanate. They described how they lived in brick built houses in the cities with attached bathing tanks. They also gave accounts of the contemporary cuisines and attires of the Sultanate's aristocracy, in whose hands the majority share of the country's wealth was concentrated.

---

## 4.6 Conclusion

---

Thus, the Hussain Shahi dynasty was the last independent Bengal Sultanate. The Hussain Shahi period particularly under Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah marked the beginning of the Indo-Islamic composite culture of Bengal. It was during this period that the Bengali culture and language flourished and the foreign Muslims adapted the essence of 'Bengaliness'. It marked a glorious period in the history of Bengal and the boundaries of the province reached its maximum extent.

---

## 4.7 Questions

---

- 1) How was the Hussain Shahi dynasty founded ? What was the immediate step taken by Sultan Alauddin to secure his power after accession ?
- 2) Write a brief note on the rule of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah.
- 3) What were the political achievements of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah ?
- 4) Why was Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah commonly called as the "Akbar of Bengal" ? OR Write a brief note on the socio-cultural and religious achievements of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah.
- 5) Write a brief account of the successors of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah. What was the new threat faced by Sultan Nusrat Shah since 1526 ?



- 6) What led to the final decline of the Bengal Sultanate ?
- 7) What was the importance of the Portuguese in context of the history of Bengal Sultanate ?

---

## 4.8 Suggested Readings

---

*Ali, Mohammad Mohar, History of the Muslims of Bengal, (Vol I), (Riyadh : Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985)*

*Chandra, Satish, History of Medieval India, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)*

*Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD), (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)*

---

## **Unit 5 □ Afghan rule in Bengal**

---

### *Structure*

#### **5.0 Objective**

#### **5.1 Introduction**

#### **5.2 Bengal under the Suri dynasty (1538-53 CE)**

#### **5.3 The Independent Sur Sultanate of Bengal (1553-63 CE)**

#### **5.4 The Afghan Karrani dynasty of Bengal (1563-76 CE)**

#### **5.5 The Mughal onslaught in Bengal and the defeat of the Afghans**

#### **5.6 Conclusion**

#### **5.7 Questions**

#### **5.8 Suggested Readings**

---

### **5.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of this unit is study the Bengal's history under the Afghan rule in medieval era.
  - Three distinct Afghan dynasties will be explored :
    - The Suri dynasty
    - The Sur sultanate
    - The Afghan Karrani dynasty
  - The Mughal conquest of Bengal will also be taught.
- 

### **5.1 Introduction**

---

The rule of Afghans in Bengal began in 1538 following the collapse of the Hussain Shahi Dynasty and the capture of the capital Gaur. The Afghan occupation lasted roughly for a period of 38 years from 1538 to 1576 CE. Before the occupation of Bengal by Sher Khan (Afghan) in 1538, since the time of Alauddin Hussain Shah the Afghans had influxed in large numbers and used to serve in various governmental

posts in the Sultanate of Bengal. Several thousand Afghans were recruited in the army of Sultan Muzaffar Shah (1490-1493), the last Habsi (Abyssinian) ruler of Bengal. Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah (1494-1519) also recruited a good number of officers and jawans in different branches of his armed forces. Later, during the rule of Sultan Nusrat Shah (1519-1532), Afghans played a very important role holding key positions like commander in chief.

In this backdrop, taking advantage of the Mughal incursion in Eastern India under Babur and Humayun, one rising Afghan warlord, Sher Shah conquered Bengal and ascended its throne. Consequently, all the Afghan officers and troops, who were spread over different parts of Bengal, rejoiced the victory of Sher Shah, their compatriot and accepted his command.

---

## **5.2 Bengal under the Suri dynasty (1538-53 CE)**

---

Afghans had started developing their establishment in Bihar from the beginning of 13th century. The process had reached its peak with the establishment of Lodi rule in Delhi. Meanwhile, after the death of Babur in 1530, Mahmud Lodi (the half brother of the last Afagna Sultan Ibrahim Lodi), who have taken refuge to Sultan Nusrat Shah of Bengal, again tried to rejuvenate the Afghans. But, Emperor Humayun son of Emperor Babur defeated him in the battle of Dorah in 1532. Later in April 1538 Sher Khan occupied Gauda defeating Sultan Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah, the last ruler of Husain Shahi dynasty. And thus he founded the rule of Afghan of Sur dynasty in Bengal. But responding to the appeal of Sultan Mahmud Shah for help Mughul emperor Humayun came forward and occupied Gauda without any resistance from the Afghans on 8 September 1538. He stayed there for next eight months and then left Bengal for Delhi as the fratricidal conspiracy began there over the throne of Mughal Empire. On the way Sher Khan launched a surprise attack and defeated the Mughal Emperor in that battle. Sher Khan successively defeated and killed Jahangir Quli Khan, the Governor of Bengal finally acquiring the control of Gauda in October 1539.

Realizing the importance of Bengal for the development of his empire, Sher Shah gave attention to its administrative reform and reorganization. He dismissed Khijir Khan, the first governor of Bengal, on charge of fraudulent act and divided whole

territory of Bengal including Chittagong into small units. He placed all these administrative units under a Muqtar and appointed Kazi Fajilot as the Chief Supervisor of muqtars. This plan of Sher Shah became very effective for running the administration and ultimately Afghans settled in Bengal permanently by associating themselves closely and deeply with the local environment and culture.



*An imaginary sketch work of Sher Shah Suri by Afghan artist Abdul Ghafoor Breshna*

Sher Shah also took keen interest in developing some infrastructures in Bengal and consequently started the construction of the Great Grant Trunk Road that would run from Lahore to Sonargaon of Bengal. As a result, it improved the communication system and thus commercial interaction of Bengal rose to leaps and bounds. Bengal's textile products like muslin could now easily reach the markets of North India and then to that of Central Asia more quickly and vice versa.

Islam Shah (1545-53) son and successor of Sher Shah, retained his control over Bengal. He appointed Muhammad Khan Sur as the new governor of Bengal in 1545, dismissing Kazi Fajilat to further consolidate the administrative machinery. The new governor too consolidated his own position by awarding death penalty to a rebel named Sulaiman, without even consulting Islam Shah.

### 5.3 The Independent Sur Sultanate of Bengal (1553-63 CE)

After the death of Islam Shah in 1553, Adil Shah Sur occupied the throne of Delhi. He was a weak successor and during his time disturbances arose in various parts of the Afghan Sultanate. Later, his Hindu Commander in Chief Hemachandra Vikramaditya alias Raja Himu managed to consolidate the Sultanate only in North India on behalf of the Sultan. But he could not focus beyond the Northern plains in lieu of the incoming Mughal incursion from the North-West under Humayun. Taking advantage of this situation, The Governor of Bengal Muhammad Khan Sur proclaimed independence of Bengal taking the title of Sultan Muhammad Shah Gazi and denied to recognize the authority of the new ruler of Delhi. Muhammad Shah and Bahadur



A portrait of Hemachandra Vikramaditya (alias Raja Hemu)

Shah, only two out of four sultans of Sur dynasty were able to establish themselves as eligible Sultans. Muhammad Shah not only recaptured Chittagong from the king of Tripura, he also annexed Arakan region. His authority was also recognized in Eastern Bihar. The sole authority of Muhammad Shah in Eastern India instigated him to stand against Adil Shah Sur. He occupied Jaunpur and advanced towards Delhi. But in a battle held at Chhapparghata in December 1555, Himu the commander of Adil Shah killed Muhammad Shah, the Sultan of Bengal.

After the death of Muhammad Shah, his eldest son Khijir Khan became the Sultan taking the title of Ghiyasuddin Abul Mujaffar Bahadur Shah. Soon after the coronation, Sultan Ghiyasuddin along with his forces went out for a battle against Adil Shah to retaliate his father's killing. Despite of his commander Himu's advice, Sultan Adil Shah himself led the campaign to face the Bengal Sultan. The battle took place at Fatehpur, four miles west of Surujgarh under Munger. Adil Shah's troops were defeated and the Sultan was taken prisoner. Later Adil Shah was killed. A vast area from Jaunpur to Chittagong now came under the rule of Bahadur Shah.

By this time the Afghan Sultanate of Delhi was overthrown by the Mughals led by Bairam Khan and the young *Badshah* Jalaluddin Akbar. Bahadur Shah established friendly relation with Khan-e-Zaman, the Governor of Eastern Province of Akbar. Bahadur Shah ruled Bengal till his death in 1560. His brother Jalal Shah came to power and ruled Bengal till 1563, when another Afghan Ghiyasuddin occupied Bengal by force assassinating Jalal Shah. Subsequently Taj Khan Karrani toppled the occupied forces and killed their leader Ghiyasuddin. And thus the rule of Karrani Dynasty began in Bengal.

---

#### **5.4 The Afghan Karrani dynasty of Bengal (1563-76 CE)**

---

The Afghans welcomed the rise of Karranis in eastern region of India as they had lost power to the Mughals in North India. Many Afghans fled away from the north to Bihar and Bengal for taking refuge there. The exodus strengthened the hands of Karrani rulers. Taj Khan Karrani was a seasoned politician as he joined in politics back in 1540. Famous historian Badauni termed him correctly as the most wise and

educated person among the Afghans. Sulaiman Karrani, the brother of Taj Khan Karrani was sworn in power just after him in 1563 CE. He ruled the country till his death in 1572. He shifted the state capital to Tanda from Gauda as its weather and environment became adverse and unsuitable for human being as well as animals and birds.

One of the most glorious and unique military achievements of Sulaiman Karrani was the victory of Orissa by defeating the Gajapati King Mukunda Dev in 1567. As narrated by Sujan Bhattacharyya, Mukunda Deva, the Hindu Gajapati king of Kalinga (Orissa) was an ally of the Mughal emperor Akbar and a foe of the Sultan of Bengal. Gajapati and the Sultan had two wars, the first he won, the second he lost. In this campaign the Afghan forces were led by one general called Kalapahar (alias Rajiblochan Roy) a Hindu convert. He was famous for destroying Temples and Iconoclasm. The Madala Panji of Puri Jagannath temple describes how Kalapahar attacked Odisha in 1568. The Afghan forces led by Kalapahar were linked with the notorious destruction and loot of the famous Sun Temple of Konarak. Later in 1568, Sulaiman Karrani annexed Coochbehar under his rule. Here too the Afghan forces were led by Kalapahar who advanced up to Guwahati and is said to have damaged the Kamakhya Temple. But their further advance was vehemently checked by the Assamese forces, who by then had grasped the skill of guerilla war techniques against the invading Afghan foreigners. Later, fearing a Mughal onslaught, Sultan Sulaiman Karrani didn't take the risk of alienating the Koch King and thus instigated him to join the enemy camp. So he freed the King and returned him his capital Coochbehar.

The foresightedness of Sulaiman Karrani overshadowed his relationship with Mughal Emperors. He was a highly skilled diplomat and being an experienced and tactful ruler, he used to send many types of requests to Emperor Akbar to satisfy the ego of the Mughals. Even, he often expressed his loyalty to the Mughals saying he would introduce khutba in the mosque and issue coins in the name of the Emperor.

Sulaiman Karrani, the most celebrated statesman among the Afghan rulers of East India, died perhaps in 1572 CE. He was buried at Tanda. His son Bayazid Karrani was sworn in after him. He assumed all the royal authority with the cooperation of all leading Afghan elites including Lodi Khan Karrani. Earlier, as a

crown prince, Bayazid was highly aspirant about his future position. But after becoming the Sultan he adopted a policy of repression and harassment. This situation compelled the members of his council to stand unified against him. They killed him within a month and placed prince Daud Khan Karrani, his younger brother, as the new Sultan.

After the coronation, Daud Khan Karrani observed that there were enmities and inter-power struggles among the Afghan elites. His administrative function started with the retaliation of his brothers killing. He punished his cousin Hasan, son of Khwaja Elyas Karrani, who executed Sultan Bayazid. He consolidated the sovereign power of Bengal Sultanate by introducing khutba and inscribed coins by his own name. Such steps made emperor Akbar very discontented. Daud Karrani appointed Lodi Khan Karrani as the governor of Bihar and neutralized another influential Afghan Guzor Khan. When Guzor Khan extended his support to sultan Daud, all the elements of mass uprising in Bihar subsided.

These dramatic changes in the internal politics and the resultant tensed situation were very significant to the Mughal imperialists. They were waiting to take advantage of the situation. Meanwhile, Daud Khan Karrani killed his commander-in-chief Lodi Khan and for this immature act facilitated to deteriorate the situation further. The well-wishers of Lodi Khan took his son Ismail to the Mughal governor Munim Khan to seek his security.

---

## **5.5 The Mughal onslaught in Bengal and the defeat of the Afghans**

---

Around this time, Daud Khan captured Fort Zamania, which was a frontier post of the Mughal Empire. This gave Akbar the pretext to launch a campaign against the Afghan Sultanate of Bengal. Accordingly, Akbar who was in Gujarat when he received the news of Daud's audacity, at once dispatched orders to Munim Khan the governor and representative of the imperial power in Jaunpur to chastise the aggressor. Munim Khan immediately marched towards East and laid siege on Patna, the Western frontier high command of the Afghan Sultanate. But here he was fiercely resisted by Lodi Khan, a powerful Afghan elite who was in the charge of Patna at that time. Munim Khan was old. He failed to break the Afghan command and hence



forced to sign a seize fire agreement with the former, while asking the Emperor to come in person himself. Neither of the principal parties was pleased with this. Emperor Akbar thought that the old Munim Khan had been too easy going whereas Daud was jealous of his minister Lodi Khan's power. Frustrated over the inability of the Jaunpur governor, Akbar formally deputed his Hindu Economic Minister Raj Todermal who was also his most loyal and competent official at that time, in the charge of Bihar. Meanwhile Sultan Daud Khan treacherously assassinated Lodi Khan. Due to this irresponsible act, the Afghan strength weakened.



*A miniature painting of Mughals leading the Bengal campaign*

On 15 June 1574, Akbar embarked for the river voyage from Agra to join the campaign of Bengal. He was accompanied by 19 of his ablest generals including Raja

Man Singh, Raja Bhagwan Das of Amer, Quasim Khan and also Raj Todermal, as to court chronicler Abul Fazl. It was the rainy season. He travelled through the course of Ganges and on July 1574, reached Chaunsa where his father, Emperor Humayun, had suffered a severe defeat in 1539 at the hands of these same Afghans. On 3 August 1574 he finally landed in the neighborhood of Patna and joined the siege of the city where Sultan Daud himself was encircled along with 20,000 army. The heads of the Afghan leaders killed were thrown into a boat and brought to Akbar who forwarded them to Daud as a hint of the fate, which awaited and in due course befell him. Just on the next day the city fell and the Afghan garrison was severely defeated and butchered. Enormous booty fell in the hands of Mughals and Sultan Daud Khan escaped in the guard of the darkness in a cowardice way.

However, Akbar didn't himself proceeded farther, He returned to Fatehpur Sikri, while giving the charge to finish off the Bengal campaign under the joint leadership of Munim Khan and Raja Todermal. The Mughal Army waste no time and marched into the capital of Bengal, Tanda (near Gaur), and Daud withdrew to Odisha. In the ensuing Battle of Tukaroi, also known as the Battle of Bajhaura or the Battle of Mughulmari, which took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1575 in the present day district of Balassore, the Afghan forces were completely defeated. The Afghan general Gujar Khan was killed. Sultan Daud Khan Karrani was forced to sign the Treaty of Katak in which Daud ceded the whole of Bengal and Bihar, retaining only Odisha.

The treaty eventually failed after the death of Munim Khan who died at the age of 80. Sultan Daud Khan took the opportunity and invaded Bengal. But it awsa short victory. The Mughal forces, under the leadership of Khan-i-Jahan Hussain Quli Begand Raja Todermal, finally met the Afghans at the Battle of Rajmahal on 15 July 1576, in present day Jharkhand. All the Afghan generals of Bengal rallied around Sultan Daud Khan Karrani in this battle. But the Mughals with their fire power and efficient command have a decisive victory. Most of the leading Afghan nobles like Junaid Khan Karranai, Khan Jahan Lodi and Kalapahad (alias Rajiblochan Roy), were either killed or latter mercilessly executed. Sultan Daud Khan Karrani was himself captured and executed. With this most parts of Bengal and Bihar was formerly annexed to the Mughal Crown and the Afghan rule in Bengal finally came to an end.

However, the Pashtun Afghan and the local landlords known as *Baro Bhuyians* led by Isa Khan continued to resist the Mughal invasion. The zamindars included Muslims and Hindus like Raja Pratapaditya. In 1594, Akbar appointed his most ablest military commander, Farzand-i-Mughalia, Raja Man Singh, the Hindu Rajput chief of Amer as the governor of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to crush the rebellion. Man Singh crushed the rebellions of the Zamindars of Bihar and also defeated the Afghan leaders of Orissa Qatlu Khan Lohani and his son Nasir Khan Lohani, thereby completely integrating Bihar and Orissa. He also waged wars against some of the “Baro-Bhuyias”. Later in 1612 during the reign of Jahangir, Bengal was finally integrated as a Mughal province.

---

## 5.6 Conclusion

---

Thus, the Afghans ruled Bengal approximately for forty years. Bengal witnessed a turning point during this rule when it finally got integrated into a pan Indian Administration i.e. the Mughal Empire. The Suris, the Karrani dynasty and latter the *Baro-Bhuyians* constituted some significant part in the history of Afghan rule in Bengal.

---

## 5.7 Questions

---

- 1) How was the Afghan rule established in Bengal ?
- 2) Give a brief account of Sher Shah’s administration in Bengal ?
- 3) How was the independent Suri Sultanate established in Bengal ? Give a brief account of their conflict with the Imperial Sur Sultanate based in Delhi.
- 4) Write a brief account on the expansion and achievements of Sultan Sulaiman Karrani ?
- 5) How did Sultan Daud Khan Karrani tried to maintain the balance of administration and politics ?
- 6) Give a brief account of the Mughal expedition in Bengal during the time of Akbar. How was the Afghan rule finally came to an end ?

- 7) Who were *Baro Bhuyians* ? What was the role of Raja Man Singh in the Eastern frontier of the Mughal Empire ?

---

### 5.8 Suggested Readings

---

Ali, Mohammad Mohar, *History of the Muslims of Bengal, (Vol I)*, (Riyadh : Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985)

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

## **Module II**

### **Eastern India : Political Development (1575-1757)**



---

## **Unit 6 □ Mughal Conquest of Bihar and Bengal**

---

### *Structure*

#### **6.0 Objective**

#### **6.1 Introduction**

#### **6.2 The early Mughal onslaught on Bengal and the fall of Afghani Karrani dynasty**

#### **6.3 Early years of Mughal governorship in Bengal (1576-80)**

#### **6.4 The Coming of Mirza Raja Man Singh as the new governor of Bengal**

#### **6.5 Conclusion**

#### **6.6 Questions**

#### **6.7 Suggested Readings**

---

### **6.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to understand the establishment and consolidation of the Mughal rule in Bengal.
  - The Mughal governorship under the early Mughals will also be discussed.
  - The role of Man Singh in the Bengal's history will also be taught in this unit.
- 

### **6.1 Introduction**

---

Bengal was a very lucrative province. Situated entirely in the Ganga-Brahmaputra deltaic region, the fertile lands of Bengal yield a good quantity of agricultural revenue since the Early medieval days of Sasanka and Palas, from when the systematic clearance of Bengal forests has begun. As such any ambitious ruling dynasty who wish to build up an Empire in North India generally wanted to incorporate Bengal within their territory, be it the Palas, the Muslim Turks, the Afghans or later the Mughals. The Mughal onslaught in Bengal first started during the reigns of Emperor Humayun, which eventually locked him in a violent struggle

with Sher Shah Suri. After the temporary demise of Mughal rule, and the establishment of Afghan Karrani dynasty (1563-76), there was short halt in this Mughal-Afghan rivalry in Bengal, for the time being.

But it again started from the reign of Akbar. Up to 1575, Akbar was busy in consolidating his Empire in North India and also in conflict with Maharana Pratap in Rajputana. After the Battle of Haldighati (1576), Akbar now turned towards East to recover the lost territory of Bengal. Around this time some irresponsible action from Daud Khan Karrani, the reigning Afghan Karrani Sultan of Bengal, gave Akbar the ideal opportunity to invade Bengal.

---

## **6.2 The early Mughal onslaught on Bengal and the fall of Afghani Karrani dynasty**

---

In 1574, Daud Khan captured Fort Zamania, which was a frontier post of the Mughal Empire. This gave Akbar the pretext to launch a campaign against the Afghan Sultanate of Bengal. Accordingly, Akbar who was in Gujarat when he received the news of Daud's audacity, at once dispatched orders to Munim Khan the governor and representative of the imperial power in Jaunpur to chastise the aggressor. Munim Khan immediately marched towards East and laid siege on Patna, the Western frontier high command of the Afghan Sultanate. But here he was fiercely resisted by Lodi Khan, a powerful Afghan elite who was in the charge of Patna at that time. Munim Khan was old. He failed to break the Afghan command and hence forced to sign a cease fire agreement with the former, while asking the Emperor to come in person himself. Neither of the principal parties was pleased with this. Emperor Akbar thought that the old Munim Khan had been too easy going whereas Daud was jealous of his minister Lodi Khan's power. Frustrated over the inability of the Jaunpur governor, Akbar formally deputed his Hindu Economic Minister Raj Todermal who was also his most loyal and competent official at that time, in the charge of Bihar. Meanwhile Sultan Daud Khan treacherously assassinated Lodi Khan. Due to this irresponsible act, the Afghan strength weakened.

On 15 June 1574, Akbar embarked for the river voyage from Agra to join the campaign of Bengal. He was accompanied by 19 of his ablest generals including Raja



Man Singh, Raja Bhagwan Das of Amer, Quasim Khan and also Raj Todermal, as to court chronicler Abul Fazl. It was the rainy season. He travelled through the course of Ganges and on July 1574, reached Chaunsa where his father, Emperor Humayun, had suffered a severe defeat in 1539 at the hands of these same Afghans. On 3 August 1574 he finally landed in the neighborhood of Patna and joined the siege of the city where Sultan Daud himself was encircled along with 20,000 army. The heads of the Afghan leaders killed were thrown into a boat and brought to Akbar who forwarded them to Daud as a hint of the fate, which awaited and in due course befell him. Just on the next day the city fell and the Afghan garrison was severely defeated and butchered. Enormous booty fell in the hands of Mughals and Sultan Daud Khan escaped in the guard of the darkness in a cowardice way.



*A miniature painting of Mughals leading the Bengal campaign*

However, Akbar didn't himself proceeded farther, He returned to Fatehpur Sikri, while giving the charge to finish off the Bengal campaign under the joint leadership of Munim Khan and Raja Todermal. The Mughal Army waste no time and marched into the capital of Bengal, Tanda (near Gaur), and Daud withdrew to Odisha. In the ensuing Battle of Tukaroi, also known as the Battle of Bajhaura or the Battle of Mughulmari, which took place on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1575 in the present day district of Balassore, the Afghan forces were completely defeated. The Afghan general Gujar Khan was killed. Sultan Daud Khan Karrani was forced to sign the Treaty of Katak in which Daud ceded the whole of Bengal and Bihar, retaining only Odisha.

The treaty eventually failed after the death of Munim Khan who died at the age of 80. Sultan Daud Khan took the opportunity and invaded Bengal. But it was a short victory. The Mughal forces, under the leadership of Khan-i-Jahan Hussain Quli Beg and Raja Todermal, finally met the Afghans at the Battle of Rajmahal on 15 July 1576, in present day Jharkhand. All the Afghan generals of Bengal rallied around Sultan Daud Khan Karrani in this battle. But the Mughals with their fire power and efficient command have a decisive victory. Most of the leading Afghan nobles like Junaid Khan Karranai, Khan Jahan Lodi and Kalapahad (alias Rajiblochan Roy), were either killed or latter mercilessly executed. Sultan Daud Khan Karrani was himself captured and executed. With this most parts of Bengal and Bihar was formerly annexed to the Mughal Crown and the Afghan rule in Bengal finally came to an end.

---

### **6.3 Early years of Mughal governorship in Bengal (1576-80)**

---

With the defeat and death of Daud, the last of the Karrani commanders in 1576 at Rajmahal, Bengal formally became a *subah* or province of the Mughal Empire. It remained so until around the first quarter of the eighteenth century when Murshid Quli Khan, nominally a governor, no doubt, but a de facto sovereign in Bengal, established some sort of independent monarchy. During the earlier years, the Mughals ruled from fortified towns like Dhaka or Tanda, while the countryside was under the effective control of powerful Hindu zamindars or Pathan overlords, often operating in concert and having an uneasy relationship with the nawab.

The first two *subedars*, viz. Khan-i-Jahan (1575-78) and Muzaffar Khan (1578-80), were shadowy figures. Their advent coincided with the first serious revolt Akbar faced in Bengal-Bihar region. It was partly from orthodox Islamic elements protesting against Akbar's secularism and perceived heterodoxy and partly from rebellion by vested interests that felt threatened by some of Akbar's new centralizing measures, including pay cuts of soldiers and revocation of unauthorized alienation of lands and false muster rolls of horses. The rebels supported Akbar's brother Mirza Hakim's claim from Kabul to the imperial throne. This was termed by Abu'l-Fazl 'as a revolt of the Bengal officers', by Jesuit Monserrate as 'war against the religion of Christ which had influenced Akbar' and by R.D. Banerjee as 'really another Afghan war'. It started at Tanda on 28 January 1580. Bengal rebels crossed the Ganga at Rajmahal and were joined by Bihar rebels. Akbar's governor, Muzaffar Khan, was defeated and a *khutbaw* was read in Mirza Hakim's name. By 1582 Akbar was in a position to assert his authority and sent Khan Azam as subedar along with TodarMal as his deputy to reclaim the province. Khan Azam defeated the Afghan forces led by Masum Khan Kabuli at Teliagarhi; but the campaign remained indecisive as Masum Kabuli ganged up with Isa Khan, one of the twelve warlords or *Barobhuyians*. Akbar then appointed a new subedar, Shahbaz Khan, but even he was not successful, as Khan Azam remained unreconciled. Shahbaz set up his capital at Tanda, but the Afghans overran the whole country up to Malda. The jealousy between Khan Azam and Shahbaz Khan delayed the recovery of Bengal for the Mughals. Meanwhile, Qutlu Khan Lehani, Daud's general, immortalized in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Durgesh Nandini*, occupied Orissa and advanced up to Burdwan, but he was defeated near Burdwan and surrendered to the Mughals (1584).

Once Qutlu withdrew to Orissa, Shahbaz Khan left him alone. The new Mughal administrative set-up was introduced in Bengal under the subedar, also called *sipahsalar*. Several key officials were appointed in charge of departments like dewan (revenue), *sadar* (justice), qazi (criminal justice), *bakshi* (military accounts) and kotwal (in charge of towns). Shahbaz Khan defeated the Pathan forces under Masum Kabuli and pursued them up to Bikrampur in Dhaka, which was controlled by Isa Khan, and asked Isa Khan to surrender. Isa Khan deluded him for several months with false promises and then launched a surprise attack on him on 30 September 1584. Shahbaz Khan was defeated and was forced to retreat to Tanda. Shahbaz Khan

turned to diplomacy and money power and by 1586-87 won over some of the Pathan warlords. Isa Khan, now isolated, made peace with the Mughals. Masum also sent his son to the Delhi court and himself went to Mecca. By 1587 Akbar's sovereignty was acknowledged all over Bengal.

From that time till the subedarship of Murshid Quli Khan from 1717 onwards, Bengal was just a province of the Mughal Empire and ruled by a governor who took orders from Delhi.

---

#### **6.4 The Coming of Mirza Raja Man Singh as the new governor of Bengal**

---

After Shahbaz Khan, Akbar sent Raja Man Singh Khacchawat of Ajmer (Rajasthan) as the new governor. Now Man Singh was an able Rajput general of the Mughals and



*Raja Man Singh Khacchawat*

also one of the Navaratnas of Akbar's court. He was a very close compatriot of Akbar and had successfully led various Mughal campaigns in Rajputana, Kashmir and in North West. Irrespective of being a Hindu Rajput he received the auspicious title of "Farzand" (a sort of adopted son of the Emperor) and "Sipah-i-salarMughalia". Due to his commendable military and strategic skills, Man Singh is said to be one of the last resort of Akbar to face any adverse campaign from the part of the Mughal Army. The rule of Man Singh in Bengal, was thus important in the sense that he made the maximum impact in subduing the recalcitrant warlords who effectively ruled Bengal till then. Man Singh was appointed governor of Bengal in 1593 and stayed in overall control till 1605 despite the temporary governorship by his two sons on two occasions under his overall charge. Ultimately, he was to be recalled by Emperor Jahangir on his accession in 1605.

Immediately after his arrival at Tanda, the Bengal capital, Man Singh sent his army in different directions to suppress the rebels. His son Himmat Singh occupied the Bhushana Fort (April 1595). On 7 November 1595, Man Singh laid the foundation of a new capital at Rajmahal and named it Akbarnagar. He first proceeded against Isa Khan and forced the Pathans to fall back to the east of the Brahmaputra River. Most of the zamindari of Isa Khan fell to the Mughals and the rebellion in other parts of Bengal was suppressed too. In 1596 Man Singh became seriously ill in his camp at Ghoraghat and, hearing of it, the other rebels got together a naval force and proceeded against the Mughal army in large boats. As the Mughals had no navy, the rebels came within 24 miles of Ghoraghat without any resistance, but they were forced back due to a fall in the level of the water. On his recovery from illness Man Singh sent an army against the rebels who retreated to the forest tract in Egarasindur in Mymensingh.

Isa Khan joined up with Kedar Roy of Sripur, another of the barobhuiyans. Raja Lakshmi Narayan of Koch Bihar was on the side of the Mughals, but his cousin Raghudeb sided with Isa Khan and they invaded Koch Bihar; Lakshmi Narayan sought help from Man Singh. At the end of 1596, when Man Singh advanced with his army against Isa Khan, the latter ran away, but again invaded Koch Bihar as soon as the Mughal army left.

To counteract the move, Man Singh sent his son, Durjan Singh, with an army and naval force to occupy Isa Khan's fortified residence at Katrabhu. On 5 September

1597, the huge naval force of Isa Khan and Masum Khan surrounded the Mughal army. Durjan Singh was defeated and many Mughal soldiers were captured. But soon out of fear from Raja Man Singh's possible revenge, Isa Khan released the captives, withdrew from Koch Bihar and entered into a treaty with the Mughals by accepting the suzerainty of the emperor. Two years later, Isa Khan died (1599).

Meanwhile, Man Singh's other son, Himmat Singh, had conquered Bhushana, but he died of cholera shortly thereafter. After the death of two of his sons, Man Singh, with the emperor's permission, went to Ajmer to rest in 1598, and his eldest son, Jagat Singh, was appointed governor in his place. But Jagat Singh died of heavy drinking at Agra. Man Singh's young son, Maha Singh, was now appointed governor of Bengal under Man Singh's overall authority. Taking this opportunity, the Pathans in Bengal again raised their head, successfully fought the Mughal army on several occasions and occupied extensive territories, including a portion of Orissa.

These reverses forced Man Singh to return to Bengal. The rebels in eastern Bengal were routed in 1601. Next year, Man Singh set up his camp at Dhaka. Meanwhile, Kedar Roy, zamindar of Sripur, surrendered to Usman (nephew of late Qutlu Khan, the Pathan ruler of Orissa) who had shifted his operation to the east in the trans-Brahmaputra region, crossed the Brahmaputra River, defeated the Mughal commander in charge of the outpost there and forced him to take shelter in Bhawal. Man Singh at once moved to Bhawal and defeated Usman. Many Pathans were killed, many Pathan gunboats captured and a large quantity of ammunition was seized. In the meantime, Kedar Roy revolted and joined forces with Musa Khan, son of Isa Khan, Daud Khan, son of the wazir of Qutlu Khan and some other zamindars.

Man Singh, on reaching Dhaka in 1602, sent a force against the insurgents, but it could not cross the turbulent Ichhamati River despite repeated attempts. Man Singh himself went to Shahpur and crossed the river on his elephant. The Mughal cavalry followed him across. After this act of bravery, Man Singh attacked the rebels and defeated them. He chased them for a long distance.

This time there was a new menace—the Mug pirates of Arakan who started cruising on the rivers near Dhaka and looting villages. Man Singh moved against them, defeated them and forced them to take shelter in their boats. Kedar Roy joined the Mugs with his navy and attacked the Mughal outposts at Srinagar. Man Singh sent a force with cannon to relieve the outpost. In a fierce battle near Bikrampur,

Kedar Roy was wounded and captured, but died before he could be taken to Man Singh (1603). Many Portuguese pirates and Bengalee sailors under Kedar Roy were killed and the Arakan king was forced to return to his country. Man Singh prepared for a showdown with Usman, but the latter fled to the east beyond the Mughal's control. Thereafter peace and tranquillity returned to Bengal.

On Akbar's death (1605), his son, Salim, succeeded him on the throne and assumed the name of Jahangir. Sher Afghan was at the time the *faujdar* of Burdwan. His wife, Meherunnisa, was reported to be a rare beauty.

According to a popular belief, which is not supported by any historical evidence, Jahangir was captivated by her beauty even before her marriage and after becoming emperor wanted to possess her. It seems that with the object of making it easier for him to get her he removed Man Singh and appointed, as subedar of Bengal, a trusted man, Qutb-ud-din Khan Koka, the son of his foster-mother. Sher Afghan was accused of disloyal intentions and, in order to sort out the matter, Qutb-ud-din met Sher Afghan at Burdwan for a discussion. From an altercation they came to blows. Sher Afghan killed Qutb-ud-din and was killed by the latter's followers. Sher Afghan's widow was taken to the Mughal imperial harem at Agra and after four years she was married to Jahangir (1611). She was given the name 'Nur Jahan'. She was destined to become the real power behind the throne and go down in history as the famed Empress Nur Jahan.

---

## 6.5 Conclusion

---

So by the time of Akbar's death (1605) most of the Bengal up to the Western Bank of Brahmaputra had come under Mughal suzerainty. The architect of this Mughal consolidation of Bengal however largely goes to the claim of Governor Man Singh Kachchawad of Rajputana.

---

## 6.6 Questions

---

- 1) What made Emperor Akbar to venture for the conquest of Bengal in 1574CE ? How did he consolidated the Mughal power in the territory in his initial campaigns ?

- 2) What are the circumstances that led to the final battle of Rajmahal ? What was the impact of this battle ?
- 3) How did the Afghan Karrani dynasty of Bengal finally came to an end ?
- 4) Describe the military and strategic effortsemployed by Raja Man Singh Khacchawat for the final Mughal consolidation of the Bengal Subha.

---

## 6.7 Suggested Readings

---

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)



---

## **Unit 7 □ Bengal under Jahangir and Shah Jahan**

---

### *Structure*

#### **7.0 Objective**

#### **7.1 Introduction**

#### **7.2 Murder of Qutubuddin Koka**

#### **7.3 Consolidation under Governor Islam Khan and Musa Khan's rebellion**

#### **7.4 War with Raja Pratapaditya**

#### **7.5 Shifting of the capital to Dhaka**

#### **7.6 Invasion of Kamrup**

#### **7.7 Governorship of Qasim Khan and Ibrahim Khan**

#### **7.8 Conclusion**

#### **7.9 Questions**

#### **7.10 Suggested Readings**

---

### **7.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to study the history of Bengal during the period of Jahangir and Shah Jahan.
- The learners will be given an idea of the war and revolts against the Mughal aggression in Bengal.
- The rise of Dhaka as the capital of the Bengal will also be analysed.

---

### **7.1 Introduction**

---

By the time of Akbar's death in 1605 CE, the Mughal consolidation of Bengal was mostly complete and the fertile lands of Bengal has already started yielding good revenues for the Mughal treasury. So, to maintain their hold over Bengal remained one of the vital task for the Mughal authority all through the 17<sup>th</sup> century.



*Emperor Jahangir*

On Akbar's death (1605), his son, Salim, succeeded him on the throne and assumed the name of Jahangir. Sher Afghan was at the time the *faujdar* of Burdwan and Raja Man Singh Khacchawat, the related cousin brother of Salim, was the old Subedar.

---

## 7.2 Murder of QutubuddinKoka

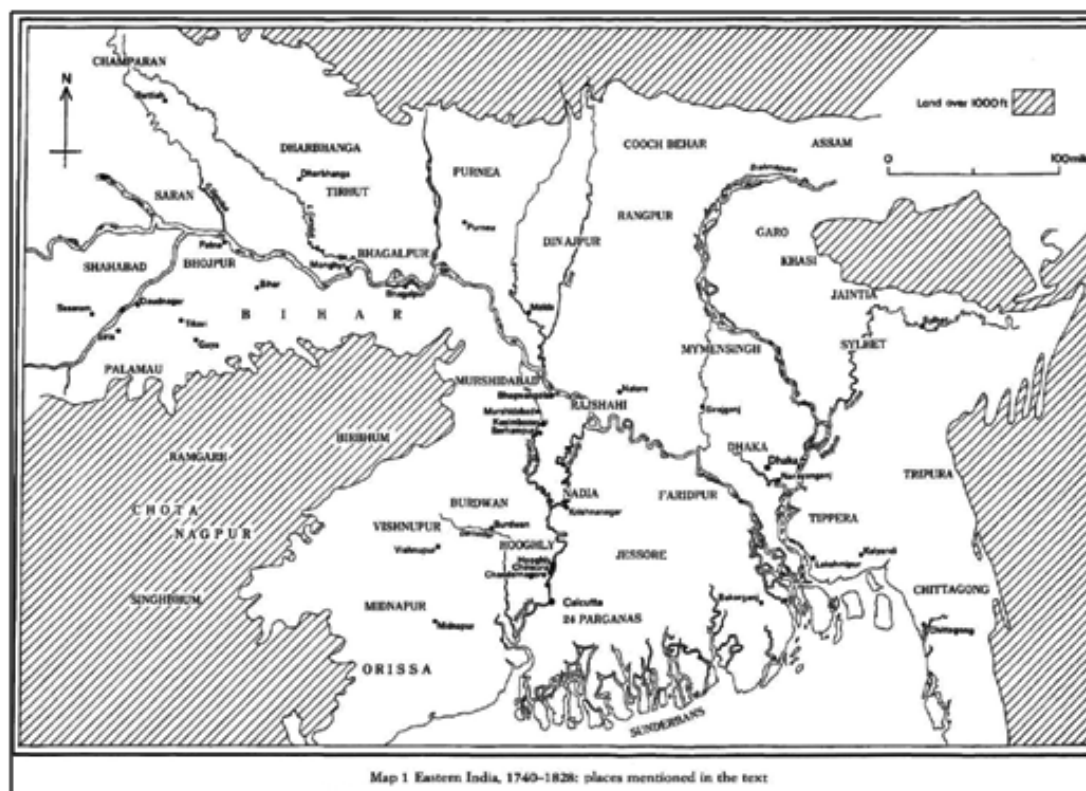
---

On Akbar's death (1605), his son, Salim, succeeded him on the throne and assumed the name of Jahangir. Sher Afghan was at the time the *faujdar* of Burdwan. His wife, Meherunnisa, was reported to be a rare beauty. According to a popular belief, which is not supported by any historical evidence, her beauty, even before her marriage and after becoming emperor wanted to possess her, captivated Jahangir? It seems that with the object of making it easier for him to get her he removed Man Singh and appointed, as subedar of Bengal, a trusted man, Qutb-ud-din Khan Koka, the son of his foster-mother. Sher Afghan was accused of disloyal intentions and, in order to sort out the matter, Qutb-ud-din met Sher Afghan at Burdwan for a discussion. From an altercation they came to blows. Sher Afghan killed Qutb-ud-din and was killed by the latter's followers. Sher Afghan's widow was taken to the Mughal imperial harem at Agra and after four years she was married to Jahangir (1611). She was given the name 'Nur Jahan'. She was destined to become the real power behind the throne and go down in history as the famed Empress Nur Jahan.

### 7.3 Consolidation under Governor Islam Khan and Musa Khan's rebellion

On June 1608, Jahangir appointed his trusted Islam Khan as the new Bengal Subedar. Islam Khan had earlier manifested his military skill during the tenure of Raja Man Singh, when the Mughal army was suppressing various insurgencies. He never personally commanded any army in battle, but was a great strategist. By 1613 when he died, Mughal administration was firmly established in Bengal. When Islam Khan joined his post, the writ of the Mughals ran only in the capital Rajmahal, a few well-guarded thanas or outposts under the faujdars and the regions immediately surrounding them.

Shortly after Islam Khan arrived, the veteran Pathan warlord, Usman Khan, became active and suddenly attacked and occupied the Mughal outpost of Alapsingh. Islam Khan immediately sent an army and recovered the outpost; but this drove home



*Map of undivided Bengal*

the lesson that Mughal authority in Bengal was still shaky. He launched a systematic campaign to consolidate the Mughal hold and establish peace. His first success came with the willing submission of Raja Pratapaditya to Mughal authority. It was agreed that Pratapaditya himself would meet Islam Khan at Alaipur with his army and war equipment and join the campaign against troublesome Musa Khan. His son Sangramaditya was to stay in Islam Khan's durbar as hostage to ensure Pratapaditya's good behaviour. After the rains, Islam Khan proceeded towards lower Bengal from Rajmahal with a big army and navy and a large number of guns in big boats. Reaching Gaur, Islam Khan sent his army against the three recalcitrant zamindars in the region to the west of the Bhagirathi. Of these, Raja Hambir and Salim Khan surrendered without a fight and Shams Khan surrendered after a fortnight's battle. Islam Khan marched southwards through Murshidabad, crossed the Padma and arrived at Alaipur within the present district of Rajshahi (1609). There various Zamindars including that of Putia, Ananta, Bhaturia Bazaar and Ilahi Bux, zamindar of Alaipur surrendered.

Raja Pratapaditya kept his promise and joined Islam Khan at Atrai. It was agreed that he would fight Musa Khan along with the Mughals and send a navy comprising 400 boats and that this navy under the command of his son Sangramaditya would fight along with the Mughal navy. Thus, with the joining of Raja Pratapaditya the Mughal Army, which was seriously lacking with good manpower, now became strong enough to challenge the Afghan insurgents. Islam Khan, with the main Mughal army, marched south along the Karatoya River and came to Katasgarh at the confluence of the Padma, the Dhaleshwari and the Ichhamati rivers. The Mughal navy also came up and anchored there. Musa Khan had a strong fort close to Katasgarh on the river Ichhamati, which was the main objective of the Mughal forces. The Mughals repeatedly attacked the fort, but the fort fell to them only after a long-drawn battle involving major damage. This undermined Musa's power significantly. The Mughals occupied Dhaka.

From Dhaka, Islam Khan sent armies against Sripur and Bikrampur. Musa Khan, after arranging for the protection of his capital Sonargaon, collected his navy in the river Lakhya. The Mughal army stationed itself on the other bank of the river facing the enemy and stayed there for a few days before launching a night attack on Katrabhu, Musa Khan's ancestral home. Under successful command of Sangramaditya,

son of Raja Pratapaditya, Katrabhu was occupied by the Mughal navy, and a few other forts also fell within a short time, one after another. Musa Khan was forced to run away, leaving Sonargaon an easy prey to the Mughal army. He took shelter on an island on the river Meghna. The zamindars who were his allies in the war deserted him and surrendered one by one to the Mughals. Only, Raja Anantamanikya, the Hindu Zamindar of Bhulua stayed loyal, and didn't deserted Musa Khan's alliance, despite being given several lucrative offers by the Mughals. So, Islam Khan sent his army against Anantamanikya. The king of Arakan came to the latter's assistance. Anantamanikya heroically fought from his fort and the Mughals failed to destroy his defense. They bribed one of the principal officers of Bhulua and, with his help, managed to undermine the defense of the fort and capture it. Anantamanikya fled to Arakan, leaving his kingdom and his possessions in the hands of the Mughals.

Musa Khan realized that further insurgency would be futile and surrendered to the Mughals. Islam Khan magnanimously let him and his allies keep their territories as jagirs. Mughal soldiers were deputed to protect the jagirs. The jagirdars' own forces were disbanded and their gunboats formed a part of the Mughal navy. Musa Khan was kept under surveillance in Islam Khan's durbar. This was the end of the longest insurgency against the Mughals in Bengal.

---

## **7.4 War with Raja Pratapaditya**

---

Though Pathan resistance was not completely crushed, Islam Khan postponed further action against them and thought it more important to proceed at once to subdue Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore who had gone back on his earlier promise to join Islam Khan in his war against Musa Khan. Pratapaditya understood that the real intention of the Mughals was to wipe out the entire old leadership of Bengal and to post their puppet subordinates there. In this connection, Islam Khan then sent a large army against Pratapaditya and simultaneously another against his son-in-law, Ramachandra, king of Bakla. The navy sailed along the Padma, the Jalangi and the Ichhamati rivers and arrived at Salka (modern Tibi) situated 10 miles to the south of Bongaon near the confluence of Jamuna and Ichhamati rivers. Here Pratapaditya's eldest son, Udayaditya, was waiting with the major portion of his army, many elephants, cannon and 500 gunboats. He attacked the Mughal navy and incurred

heavy losses on the Mughals. However, due to heavy shelling by the Mughal army from both banks of the Ichhamati, Udayaditya's navy could not advance far and retreated on the death of its commander Khwaja Kamal. Udayaditya escaped, leaving the greater part of his navy and ammunition in the hands of the Mughals.

Meanwhile, the expedition against Bakla had also ended successfully. Its young king, Raja Ramachandra, ignoring his mother's advice to make peace with the Mughals, fought them from one of his forts for a whole week. Then the fort fell. His mother threatened to take poison unless he made peace with the Mughals. Ramachandra surrendered and was taken to Dhaka as a captive. Bakla became part of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal army marched eastwards to meet Raja Pratapaditya. Pratapaditya resisted the Mughals valiantly from his new fort at Kagarghata 5 miles to the north of his capital, Dhumghat. But after a month's resistance the fort fell to the superior generalship and tactics of the Mughals, and Pratapaditya surrendered. It was agreed that the Mughal general Ghyan Khan would himself accompany Pratapaditya to meet Islam Khan and that he would be treated respectfully.

Udayaditya would also stay at Dhumghat. But, contrarily, afraid of Raja Pratapaditya's military skills and acceptance among the local masses, Islam Khan passed orders for the imprisonment of Pratapaditya and direct annexation of his kingdom, to prevent any farther insurgence. According to popular tradition, Pratapaditya



(Left) Jassheswari Kali Temple built by Raja Pratapaditya at Jessore. (Right) An imaginary portrait of Raja Pratapaditya

was kept confined in an iron cage at Dhaka and was being transported to Delhi when he died on the way at Benares, but there is no historical evidence for this. Bengali literature has depicted Pratapaditya as a national patriot who resisted the Mughal invaders. Pratapaditya was undoubtedly a very powerful chieftain who fought the Mughals with valor. However, his portrayal in Rabindranath Tagore's play *Bauthakuranir Haat* as a calculating, self-centred person seems more realistic. According to another popular tradition prevailing in Jaipur (Rajasthan), Man Singh defeated Pratapaditya and had the family deity, Jashoreshwari (Goddess Kali) removed to his fort at Ajmer. While the shifting of the image is probably true, there is no historical evidence of a direct encounter between Man Singh and Raja Pratapaditya. With the defeat of Raja Pratapaditya, the Mughal rule was thus firmly established in Bengal by Islam Khan.

---

## 7.5 Shifting of the capital to Dhaka

---

Islam Khan's other important action was shifting the capital from Rajmahal to Dhaka. At that time, Rajmahal was the serving Mughal headquarter in Bengal Subha. However, the Subedar himself had been living in Dhaka city all this time. Man Singh had lived in Dhaka earlier for two years (1602-04) and had fortified it. Islam Khan built a new fort and connected it with good roads. Due to a change in the current of the Ganga, big gunboats could not go up to Rajmahal and Dhaka was strategically better situated than Rajmahal for dealing with the incursions of the Mug and Portuguese pirates and for generally controlling riverine East Bengal. It was in these circumstances that Islam Khan shifted the capital of Bengal from Rajmahal to Dhaka in April 1612 and renamed it Jahangirnagar to perpetuate the name of the emperor.

---

## 7.6 Invasion of Kamrup

---

After Mughal authority had been well established in Bengal, Islam Khan turned his attention to Kamrup. The king of Koch Bihar had conquered the kingdom of Kamrup and a branch of the Koch Bihar royal family was at this time ruling over the independent kingdom, which extended from the Sankosh River on the west to Baranadi on the east. The reigning king, Parikshitnarayan, possessed a large army, a

navy and numerous elephants. He fought with the Mughals, but was defeated and Kamrup was annexed to Bengal subah (1613). Islam Khan invaded Koch Bihar, although it was under Mughal protection, and annexed a portion of it. He also imprisoned the members of the family of the king of Susang (Mymensingh) who had earlier submitted to the Mughals. It was at the instigation of the king of Susang that he invaded Kamrup.

Shortly after the annexation of Kamrup, Islam Khan died at Bhawal near Dhaka. He had shown unparalleled ability, courage and statesmanship by consolidating Mughal imperial authority over the whole of Bengal within a period of five years, thus completing a process started by Man Singh.

---

### **7.7 Governorship of Qasim Khan and Ibrahim Khan**

---

Islam Khan's younger brother, Qasim Khan, succeeded him as subedar, but he had neither the wisdom nor the competence of his elder brother. He behaved ungraciously towards his officers and the defeated kings. He broke the undertaking given by Islam Khan to the kings of Koch Bihar and Kamrup and imprisoned them. This led to revolts in both the kingdoms and these could be put down only with difficulty. An army had to be sent against Cachar's king Satrudaman who had revolted against the Mughals, but this campaign was unsuccessful, and for a long time Satrudaman maintained his independence. The zamindars of Birbhum also turned to insurgency. Qasim Khan sent an army against them, but without any success. The territory of Bhulua was ravaged by a joint attack launched by the Mug king of Arakan and the Portuguese pirate Sebastian Gonzales, who controlled Sandip (1614). Next year the king of Arakan again led an invasion, although got defeated eventually through Mughal trickery.

Qasim Khan also sent an army for the conquest of Assam, but it was defeated by the Ahom king. An army sent against Chittagong also returned after sustaining defeat. All these reverses weakened the Mughal administration in Bengal during Qasim Khan's regime (1614-17).

During the governorship of the next subedar, Ibrahim Khan, overall, Bengal experienced peace and tranquility and the authority and prestige of the Mughal



emperor was re-established. Ibrahim Khan faced a dilemma when Prince Khurram (Shah Jahan) rebelled against his father in 1623. After his defeat by the imperial forces, the prince retreated towards Bengal, determined to carve out an independent kingdom there with the help of the sons of the old rebel Musa Khan, the king of Arakan—the perpetual enemy of the Mughals—and the Portuguese pirates. Ibrahim Khan at first hesitated to fight with the emperor's son, but when Khurram occupied Rajmahal, he felt duty-bound to resist. In the battle that followed, he was defeated and killed. Prince Khurram who occupied the capital Jahangirnagar for some time, began to rule there as an independent king (April, 1624). He had already occupied Orissa and he next occupied parts of Bihar and Awadh. He was, however, shortly afterwards defeated by an army sent by the emperor and fled towards the south (October, 1624) where he became governor of the Deccan after reconciliation with his father. On Jahangir's death in 1628, Khurram ascended the imperial throne at Delhi.

---

## 7.8 Conclusion

---

Thus, the first half of 17<sup>th</sup> century was an age of consolidation for the Mughals in Bengal. The territories that were achieved by Akbar and Man Singh, was successfully kept hold by their succeeding subedars. However, there were occasional challenges by the insurgencies of Musa Khan and Raja Pratapaditya.

---

## 7.9 Questions

---

- 1) How did Islam Khan consolidated the Mughal rule in Bengal? In this connection describe Musa Khan's rebellion.
- 2) What was the intention behind the shifting of the capital to Dhaka?
- 3) Write in brief about Raja Pratapaditya's struggle to maintain his sovereignty? How did it finally came to an end?
- 4) Do you believe that Raja Pratapaditya was a "true patriot of Bengal", who tried his utmost to preserve its sovereignty from the foreign domination of the Mughals?

- 5) Write a brief note on the governorship of Qasim Khan and Ibrahim Khan.

---

### **7.10 Suggested Readings**

---

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 8 □ Bengal under Aurangzeb**

---

### *Structure*

#### **8.0 Objective**

#### **8.1 Introduction**

#### **8.2 Conflict with the Portuguese and Ahoms of Burma**

#### **8.3 The rise and fall of Shah Shuja**

#### **8.4 Mir Jumla as the new governor and his conflict with Kooch Bihar**

#### **8.5 Bengal under governor Sayesta Khan (1664-88)**

#### **8.6 Conclusion**

#### **8.7 Questions**

#### **8.8 Suggested Readings**

---

### **8.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit will study the history of the eastern India in general and the history of Bengal in particular between 1575 and 1757.
- The Mughal's conflict with the Portuguese and the Ahoms will be discussed.
- The history of Shah Suja, Mir Jumla and Sayesta Khan in respect of Bengal will be presented before the learners.

---

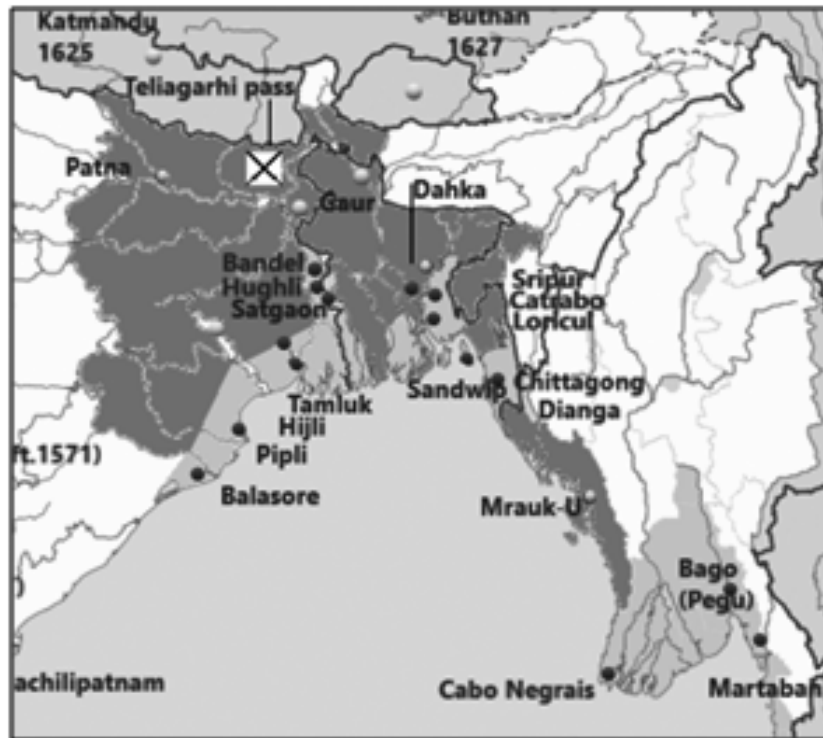
### **8.1 Introduction**

---

On the whole, peace and prosperity prevailed in Bengal from 1628 when Shah Jahan ascended the throne till Aurangzeb's death in 1707. Three principle subedars who governed Bengal during the greater part of this period were Shah Jahan's son, Shuja (1639-59), Shayesta Khan (1664-88) and Aurangzeb's grandson, Azim-ush-Shan (1697-1712).

## 8.2 Conflict with the Portuguese and Ahoms of Burma

Towards the beginning of Shah Jahan's reign, the Portuguese were driven away from the Hooghly port [Portuguese : Porto Piqueno] (1632). Since the time of Montserrat, both Akbar and Jahangir had given Portuguese various privileges to enjoy undisturbed maritime commerce and establish make-shift temporary settlements in Bengal. Thus, several Portuguese settlements and factories came up in Hughli, Chittagong and Satgaon.



*Various Portuguese outposts and settlements in Bengal province*

However, the Portuguese became infamous for their several coercive methods in the region. From looting merchant ships and destabilising the maritime commerce, to forceful enslavement of local people including indiscriminate conversion to Christianity, all these notorious activities to gain short term wealth, earn them the title of “Firingipirates” among the local populace. Thus, Emperor Shah Jahan in his early tenure ordered his governor Sayesta Khan to ousted the Portuguese from

Bengal. The port of Hughli was occupied in 1632 and by the time of Aurangzeb's reign all the Portuguese pirates up to Chittagong port were exterminated. Many of their ships were burnt down by Mughal and local Zamindari forces.

There was also a war with the Ahoms of Assam. In 1615 the Mughal army was defeated by the Ahom king. Meanwhile, there was a revolt in Kamrup on the death of King Parikshitnarayan in 1615. His younger brother, Balinarayan, took shelter with the Ahom king and this led to a long-drawn war between the Ahom kings and the Bengal subedar. Balinarayan at one stage routed the Mughal army and captured the faujdar of Kamrup, but ultimately the Mughals won, Kamrup was re-conquered and the war was ended by a treaty with the Ahom king (1638). The rivers Baranadi on the north and Asurali on the south were fixed as the boundary between Bengal and Kamrup.

---

### 8.3 The rise and fall of Shah Shuja

---

It was a tradition among the Mughals to appoint the various members of the Imperial family as Subedars of important provinces. Shazada (prince) Muhammad



*Prince Shah Shuja*

Shah Shuja was the second son and child of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and his queen Mumtaz Mahal. Shah Shuja was appointed by Shah Jahan as the Subedar of Bengal and Bihar from 1641 and of Orissa from 25 July 1648 until 1661. Shah Jahan, also appointed as his deputy, the Rajput prince of Nagpur, Kunwar Raghav Singh (1616-1671). During Shuja's long and peaceful rule, trade and industry flourished in Bengal and the province became rich. He also built the official residence, Bara Khatra, in the capital Dhaka.

In 1658, when Emperor Shah Jahan fell seriously ill, there was a tussle among his sons Dara, Shuja, Aurangzeb and Murad, each staking his claim to the throne. In this war of succession, Aurangzeb first ganged up with Murad and defeated Dara. The emperor was kept a prisoner in Agra Fort. Shuja, who had been assured of being allowed to retain Bihar and Bengal by Aurangzeb, challenged his brother and marched towards Agra, but he was defeated by Aurangzeb's forces in the battle of Khajua (1659). The Mughal general, Mir Jumla, followed him and took possession of Dhaka (May 1660). Shuja fled to Arakan and arrived there on 26 August 1660, and were greeted at the capital, Mrauk U, with courtesy. The Arakanese king, the powerful Sanda Thudamma, had previously agreed to provide ships for Shuja and his family to travel to Mecca, where the prince had planned to spend the remainder of his life. The half dozen camel-loads of gold and jewels that the Mughal royals had brought with them was beyond anything that had previously been seen in Arakan. But after few months where he was slain by the same Arakanese on the charge of having conspired against the king of Arakan (1661).

---

#### **8.4 Mir Jumla as the new Governor and his conflict with Koch Bihar**

---

Mir Jumla was appointed subedar of Bengal (June, 1660). While Shuja had been busy fighting Aurangzeb, the king of Koch Bihar seized the opportunity to occupy Kamrup. Similarly, Gauhati was occupied by the Ahom king (March, 1659). These two kings later fell out, and the Ahom king ousted the king of Koch Bihar and took forcible possession of Kamrup (March, 1660).

On taking charge of the subah, Mir Jumla sent a large force against Kamrup and Koch Bihar (1661). The king of Koch Bihar having fled, that kingdom was easily

occupied. He proceeded against the Ahom king, who also ran away. His kingdom too, was occupied by Mir Jumla (March, 1662). With the outbreak of the monsoon, however, the whole country was flooded. The Mughal outposts being separated from one another, the problem of maintaining lines of communication and supply of provisions became very real. The Mughal camp was submerged, horses died of starvation and an epidemic broke out. The Ahom king took advantage of the situation and repeatedly attacked the Mughal camp. The end of the monsoon brought relief and Mir Jumla once again advanced against the Ahom king. He was, however, suddenly taken ill, and this forced him to enter into a treaty with the Ahom king and to return to Bengal with his army. He died when he was within a few miles of Dhaka (March, 1663). In the midst of the confusion, the king of Koch Bihar recovered his kingdom, though not his entire territory. Scattered pockets remained inside Mughal held territories that still owed allegiance to the Koch king. Similarly, some pockets remained inside the Koch Bihar kingdom that owed allegiance to Dhaka. Presumably, this was how the Koch Bihar enclaves started, what we called “Chitmahals” in Bengali, a pertinent territorial dispute between latter India and Bangladesh. The vexed issue could only be resolved permanently during the recent NDA regime in 2016.

---

### **8.5 Bengal under Governor Sayesta Khan (1664-88)**

---

In March 1664 Shayesta Khan joined as subedar. He governed Bengal for a period of twenty-four years. He used to live an ostentatious life with royal grandeur and kept the emperor happy by sending him huge sums of money collected by fleecing the people. A huge income was derived from the monopolies in trade that Shayesta Khan had introduced. Contemporary accounts by Englishmen speak of his avarice and he is said to have collected thirty-eight crore rupees during the first thirteen years of his rule as subedar. His daily income was said to be two lakh rupees and his expenses amounted to a lakh a day.

Shayesta Khan himself never took part in battle. He spent his days in comfort in his harem, but had the instinct to choose competent officials who carried on the administration with an iron hand and also fought battles successfully. He brought Koch Bihar back to subjugation after driving away the rebel king and also put down

some petty rebellions here and there. The principal event of his rule was the conquest of Chittagong, which had been occupied from about the middle of the fifteenth century by the king of Arakan and had become the main centre of the Mug and Portuguese pirates operating in collaboration. Shayesta Khan first captured the island of Sandip (November 1665) that was being used as a base by the marauders for slave trading. About this time the Mugs and the Portuguese fell out. Shayesta Khan won over the Portuguese by bribe and offer of shelter, and all the *firangees* of Chittagong, along with their families, took shelter in Mughal territory. With their help he conquered Chittagong (January 1666). Under orders of Aurangzeb, Chittagong was renamed Islamabad and a Mughal faujdar was posted there. Subsequently, Shayesta Khan quarreled with English merchants of Hooghly on the issue of whether the private trade of the East India Company should be exempt from customs duties as allowed to the Company's official trade by Shah Shuja. As the controversy remained unsettled, the English, in a fit of rashness, declared war on the Mughal Empire. The Mughals attacked the factory at Hooghly, forcing the English to abandon it and withdraw to their boats on the river. The English even made a foolhardy attempt to



*An imaginary portrait of a typical European factory settlement in Bengal*



seize Chittagong and eventually took shelter on the Hijli island at the mouth of the river. Negotiations succeeded in 1690 when they were allowed to restart their factory in Bengal in a new location, Calcutta.

Shayesta Khan, whose rule ended in June 1688 is still remembered in Bengal. It is said that during his rule rice used to sell at five *maunds* a rupee. East Bengal produced an enormous quantity of rice and the price of rice is an index of the real value of the reputed daily income of two lakh rupees of Shayesta Khan. His wide popularity was also due to extensive building programmes, his pomp and grandeur, and the liberal gifts, donations and the patronage to the needy. All this largely accounted for the daily expenses of a lakh of rupees incurred by him. It is established that it was the revenue from Bengal that largely sustained the Mughal Empire. But Bengal was much more than the main source of revenue for the empire. It was also the centre for manufacture of fine luxuries such as muslin. Through its traders and entrepreneurs, Bengal took active part in maritime commerce controlled by foreigners.

The reigns of latter Subedars were adorned with occasional disturbances. As for the major tenure of Ibrahim Khan's Subadari was rocked with the rebellion of Raja Shobha Singh, the Zamindar of Midnapore and Rahim Khan Pathan of Orissa. Finally the old Emperor Aurangzeb send his grandson Azim-us Shan (1697-1712) to thwart the rebellion, which he did successfully. But during the last years of Aurangzeb's tenure (1700-07), Azim us Shan, fearing a possible anarchical situation after the Emperor's death himself restored to accumulation of wealth by various illogical ways and oppressing the common people. The situation was utilized by the young aspiring dewan Murshid Quli Khan. He established good relation with the new Emperor Bahadur Shah Zaffar (1707-12) and with Delhi's consent, himself became an almost autonomous Nawab in 1717.

---

## 8.6 Conclusion

---

On the whole, Bengal during Aurangzeb's reign was largely a period of prosperity. Although, there were occasional disturbances by Shah Shuja's fall and Ahomi and Kooch Behari incomings. Under the Mughals, it was ruled by semi autonomous Subedars including members of Imperial Family. They enjoyed relative autonomy but unlike the latter Nawabs their position wasn't hereditary. This period also marked the

first conflict with the European naval powers particularly the Portuguese and the British. With the demise of Aurangzeb, the Mughal control over this once lucrative province, eventually declined.

---

## 8.7 Questions

---

- 1) Describe in brief the conflict of the Mughals with the Portuguese and the Ahoms in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.
- 2) Write in brief about the rise and fall of Shah Shuja.
- 3) How did the Kooch Behar enclaves came into occurrence ? Describe Mir Jumla's struggle in the background.
- 4) Who was SaystaKhan ? How did he came into conflict with various European powers in Bengal, namely the British and the Portuguese ?
- 5) How did Bengal became a prosperous revenue yielding territory during the 17<sup>th</sup> century Mughal rule ?

---

## 8.8 Suggested Readings

---

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## Unit 9 □ The Rise of Murshid Quli Khan

---

### *Structure*

#### 9.0 Objective

#### 9.1 Introduction

#### 9.2 Initial years of Murshid Quli and his conflict with the Mughal central authority

#### 9.3 The Revenue administration of Murshid Quli Khan

#### 9.4 The growth of commercial economy during Murshid Quli's reign

#### 9.5 Conclusion

#### 9.6 Questions

#### 9.7 Suggested Readings

---

### 9.0 Objective

---

- The present unit will study the rise of Murshid Quli Khan in the history of Bengal.
  - Two basic themes will be discussed :
    - Murshid Quli Khan's relationship with the Mughal central authority
    - The characteristic features of the revenue administration of Murshid Quli Khan
  - The growth of commercial economy during the Murshid Quli Khan's rule will also be a matter of discussion.
- 

### 9.1 Introduction

---

With the death of Aurangzeb and decline of Mughal authority, several regional powers raised their heads. One such regional kingdom was Bengal; which became a semi-independent viceroyalty under its official *Dewan*, alias Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. However, as to historians like Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Bengal similar to

Awadh never officially severed their ties with the Mughal Empire. They always accepted the Mughal Emperor sitting in Delhi as their 'official overlord' and paid formal allegiance to him. But, behind the scene, in reality they exerted their full autonomous powers in matters of the statecraft.

---

## **9.2 Initial years of Murshid Quli and his conflict with the Mughal central authority**

---

Born in a Hindu Brahmin family, Murshid Quli Khan's previous name was Surya Narayan Mishra. In 1670, one Mughal noble Haji Saphi assassinated his family, took him as a slave and forcefully converted him to Islam. Later, he was recruited in the Mughal military. Eventually, Murshid Quli Khan became a trusted general of Aurangzeb who initially appointed him as the Dewan (collector of revenue) of Bengal, to streamline the huge income from the lucrative province. But with the death of Aurangzeb, Murshid Quli, started exerting his authority in every matter of the state. He was only "Dewan" in the name, but practically he became a semi-autonomous monarch.

Aurangzeb's successor, Emperor Bahadur Shah, who was busy in recovering the decayed affairs of the state elsewhere, didn't want to go for a clash with the Bengal Dewan. In fact, Murshid Quli till then, were one of the very few provincial Dewans of the Mughals, who haven't yet stopped the revenue inflow to the Mughal Central treasury. That's why, Bahadur Shah re-appointed Murshid Quli to the post of Dewan in 1710.

But things started changing with the rise of Farrukshiyar, the future Emperor (1713-19), in the court of Delhi. Farrukshiyar, a rival of Jahandar Shah, the ruling Emperor, was interested to do away with the old Mughal provincial elites and took control of the lost powers in whole of North India. In addition, relation between him and Murshid Quli in personal level was never good. Thus, few months before he ascended the throne he sent his trusted general Rashid Khan to depose Murshid Quli and took control of Bengal. But Rashid Khan along with his troops were defeated and killed by the Bengal Dewan in May 1712. Thus, Farrukshiyar had no other option but to accept the semi-suzerainty of Murshid Quli, who further consolidated his power

in the province. In 1717, he founded the new city of Mukshudabad (latter day ~ Murshidabad) and transferred his capital to there from Dhaka.

In 1717, Murshid Quli Khan was formerly appointed by Emperor Farrukshyiar, as the *Nazim* (the governor) of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa province. Thus, as to Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, with the unprecedented privilege of holding the two offices of Dewan and Nazim simultaneously, the division of power by the age old Mughal system of checks and balances, was done away with and Murshid Quli Khan became the virtual dictator of Bengal. Soon this simultaneous holding of these two official titles of Dewan and Nazim would combine to form the new post of Nawab for Murshid Quli and his successors.



*Murshid Quli Khan*

However, having said that, Murshid Quli Khan never formally severed his all ties with the Mughal central authority. He still accepted the Mughal crown as his titular overlord and continued to sent a part of the provincial revenue (although very small in proportion) to the Mughal Imperial treasury, regularly. Indeed, as to Bandyopadhyay, that Bengal revenue, whatever little amount it be, was often the only regular income for the beleaguered Mughal Emperors in those days of financial uncertainty. But behind this little bit of former allegiance, Murshid Quli khan enjoyed full autonomy in every affairs of Bengal province and initiated almost a dynastic rule. Indeed he was the last governor of Bengal to be ‘truly’ appointed by the Mughal Emperor.

---

### **9.3 The Revenue administration of Murshid Quli Khan**

---

The pillar of Murshid Quli Khan's power was his efficient revenue administration. Even in those days of political turmoil of 18<sup>th</sup> century, Bengal was a surplus revenue producing area. Bengal, being a fertile deltaic region, almost whole of the revenue comes from the agrarian ecosystem of the province. To harness the efficient collection of revenue, Murshid Quli Khan built up a powerful system of intermediary Zamindars. The Zamindars held sway over the peasants and their agricultural lands in their respective area and were responsible for the collecting the revenue to the Nawab. Thus, in lieu of this Zamindari system Bengal's land revenue increased by 20% between the periods 1700-22. To farther ease the collaboration, Murshid Quli encouraged the rise of few handful of big Zamindars, rather than several small ones. Indeed, by the time of his death in 1727, about 60% of total agrarian land in Bengal wrested in the hand of only fifteen powerful Zamindar families.

However, behind this façade of apparent affluence, there laid an immense dark side. In order to extract the land revenue, the Zamindars and the Murshid Quli Khan administration inflicted huge oppression over the peasants. As to the words of Historian Clarke, the wealth of the Nawab and his beneficiaries were simply squeezed out of the toil and miseries of the impoverished peasants. They had to pay a huge revenue within a stipulated time. No excuses were recognized, even in times of natural famines. Else, they could be whipped, their lands could be croaked and their families could be exterminated. As a result, in many places, the peasants had to just flee from their lands and took refuge in the forests, chased by the soldiers of Nawab and Zamindars.

---

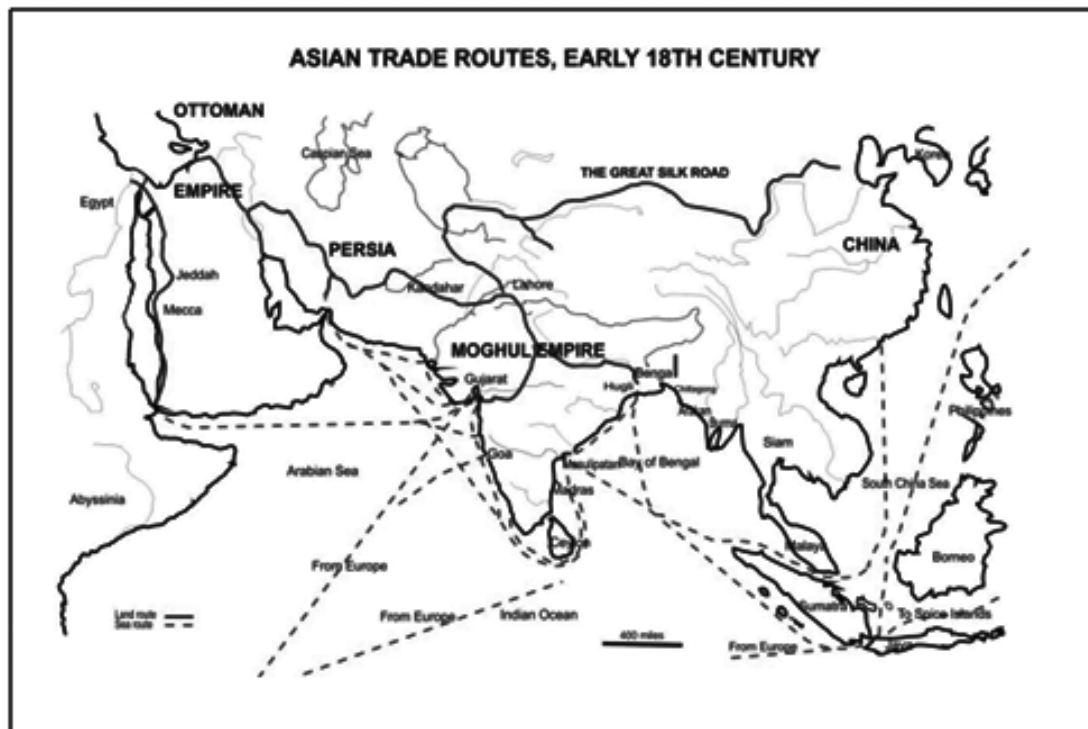
### **9.4 The growth of commercial economy during Murshid Quli's reign**

---

Apart from agrarian economy, Bengal during Murshid Quli's time also had a growing importance of trade and commerce as well as the merchant community. The Bengal made cotton and silk textiles, oil and sugar had high demand in the markets of Persia, Afghanistan and East Asia. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, when overland routes were

facing disturbance due to political chaos, the exports found a new way out through trans-oceanic commerce. Europe became a new lucrative market for Bengali goods and several European companies established their trading outposts in the province to carry out this import-export commerce. The Indian merchants were no less important in this trans-oceanic commerce. Mention may be made of powerful Hindu merchants like Umi Chand or the Armenian Khawaja Wajid. During the period of Murshid Quli Khan, about 2.3 crore of merchandise was exported out of Bengal. The Qasimbazar factory alone produced around 70 lakh rupees of silk commodities. Similar figures were recorded by the Murshidabad custom office. As a result of this economic activities cities like Dhaka, Calcutta and Qasimbazar grew in size and population.

While in the other hand, such huge monetary exchanges gave rise to the emergence of powerful financing and banking communities. Mention may be made of the family of Jagat Seth, a well reliable banker for Murshid Quli Khan, who eventually became the head of the provincial treasury in 1730. Again, sometimes the constant pressure over the Zamindars, by the Murshid Quli administration to pay revenue in times, made the former to take loans from these newly emerging bankers.



Thus in various steps of transactions and exchanges these banking communities provided securities and necessary investments. Not only in private sectors but this financiers also supported the state administration with necessary monetary support in lieu of loans, during emergencies. As stories suggests even during Maratha pillage, it were these bankers and financiers like Jagat Seth who provided the temporary monetary support on immediate basis to the Nawabi administration to run the state economy, despite their own losses.

However, although the trade and commerce had a lucrative fortune in Bengal, the Murshid Quli Khan administration on its part never formally invested properly to develop the commercial sectors. The Nawab never took any effective steps to build up a proper navy as to provide securities to its Indian merchants from pirates and European interferences in the water route, nor did he took any proper investments to promote home the grown industries and indigenious capitalists through state patronage. As a result, the European competitors unofficially got an edge over their Indian counterparts to capture the commercial sectors of Bengal in near future.

---

## 9.5 Conclusion

---

Thus, from the above passage it is evident, although Murshid Quli Khan never formally severed his ties with the Mughal Emperor, yet he enjoyed an almost autonomy in every matters of his statecraft in the province of Bengal. During his time the Commercial and agrarian revenue sectors flourished immensely, partly owing to his successful revenue administration, which includes the vigorous growth of the Zamindari system. However, behind this faced of apparent affluence and efficiency, there remained a dark side also.

---

## 9.6 Questions

---

- 1) Describe the rise of Murshid Quli Khan briefly.
- 2) Was Murshid Quli Khan an autonomous ruler ? In this connection write in detail about the various ups and down in the relation between him and the Mughal Central administration.



- 3) Write in brief about the agrarian revenue administration of Murshid Quli Khan.
- 4) How was the commercial scenario of Bengal during his reign ?

---

## **9.7 Suggested Readings**

---

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition : A History of Modern India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2004)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## Unit 10 □ The development of Nawabi Bengal as a Regional Power

---

### *Structure*

#### 10.0 Objective

#### 10.1 Introduction

#### 10.2 Shujauddin Muhammad Khan (1727-39)

#### 10.3 Alamuddwala Haidar Jung or Sarfaraz Khan (1739-40)

#### 10.4 Alivardi Khan (1740-56)

#### 10.5 The Maratha Invasion (1742-51)

#### 10.6 Relation with English merchants

#### 10.7 Conclusion

#### 10.8 Questions

#### 10.9 Suggested Readings

---

### 10.0 Objective

---

- The objective of the present study is to understand the growth of a regionally oriented political authority as Nawababi rule in Bengal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- The rule of Shujauddin Muhammad Khan, Sarfaraz Khan and Alivardi Khan will be discussed in detail.
- Two other aspects of the Bengal's history will also be covered :
  - The repeated Maratha invasion to Bengal
  - Bengal's relationship with the English merchants.

---

### 10.1 Introduction

---

The Bengal Subah was the wealthiest subah of the Mughal Empire. There were several posts under the Mughal administrative system of Bengal since Akbar's conquest in the 1500s. *Nizamat* (governorship) and *diwani* (premiership) were the

two main branches of provincial government under the Mughals. The *Subahdar* was in-charge of the *nizamat* and had a chain of subordinate officials on the executive side, including *diwans* (prime ministers) responsible for revenue and legal affairs. The regional decentralization of the Mughal Empire led to the creation of numerous semi-independent strongholds in the Mughal provinces. In 1717, the Mughal Emperor Farrukhsiyar replaced the imperial viceroy of Bengal with the position of a hereditary Nawab. Murshid Quli Khan, a former prime minister, became the first Nawab. The Nawabs continued to issue coins in the name of the Mughal Emperor. But for all practical purposes, the Nawabs governed as independent monarchs.

---

## 10.2 Shujauddin Muhammad Khan (1727-39)

---

Murshid Quli Khan had no heir. So he nominated his daughter's son Sarafaraz to the throne. But after the former's death in 1727, his son in law Shujauddin outstated his son, and himself ascended the throne of the Nawabate.

Shujauddin was not so experienced administrator, so he appointed a group of principal advisers, composed of both Hindus and Muslims, to assist him in important matters of statecraft, viz. Rai-Rayihan Alamchand, an able financier, Jagat Seth the famous banker, who soon became the master of treasurer, and two Muslim officers, Alivardi Khan and his brother Haji Ahmad. As a result, during his reign merchant, bankers and Zamindars became very dominant and became symbols of local powers. As to the words of Historian, Philip Calkins, "the government of Bengal began to look more like a government by the cooperation of dominant forces in Bengal".

In 1733, by a royal decree of the then Mughal Emperor Muhammad Shah Rangila, the province of Bihar was incorporated into Bengal Subha. This made Shujauddin the de-facto ruler of a large province composing Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Like his predecessor, Shujauddin too didn't officially severed his ties with the Mughal central authority and occasionally used to send revenues to the Delhi treasury.

---

### 10.3 Alamuddwala Haidar Jung or Sarfaraz Khan (1739-40)

---

After the death of Shujauddin, his son Sarfaraz Khan ascended the throne peacefully assuming the title Alam-ud-dwala Haider Jung. But despite of this high sounding title, he was a very weak ruler with little interest in administration. Most of his times were spent in the company of alcohol or with the prostitutes in the Harem. This made him highly unpopular among the Nawabi aristocrats and Zamindars. As a result a military coup was organized in April 1740, under General Alivardi Khan with the support of those nobles and Zamindars, including Jagath Seth. They dethroned and assassinated the Nawab and thus Alivardi Khan ascended the throne. With the death of Sarfaraz, the house of Murshid Quli Khan came to an end.

---

### 10.4 Alivardi Khan (1740-56)

---

Born in one of the cities of the Deccan in 1676, he was originally given the name Mirza Muhammad Ali. His father, Mirza Muhammad Madani, was of either foreign Arab or of Turkish descent, while his mother belonged to the Turkic Afshar tribe



*Jagath Seth and Nawab Shujauddin*

of Khorasan. In 1707, the family fell into poverty. They migrated to Cuttack in Orissa, then under the deputy-governorship of Shuja-ud-Din, finding employment with the latter. In 1728, Shuja-ud-Din promoted Muhammad Ali to *Faujdar* (General) of Rajmahal and entitled him as *Alivardi Khan*. In 1733, he was assigned as the *Naib Nazim* (Deputy *Subahdar*) of Bihar. A year later, he was titled *Shuja-ul-Mulk* (Hero of the country) and the rank of *Paach Hazari Mansabdar* (rank holder of 5000) by Nawab Shujaud-Din and returned to Azimabad.



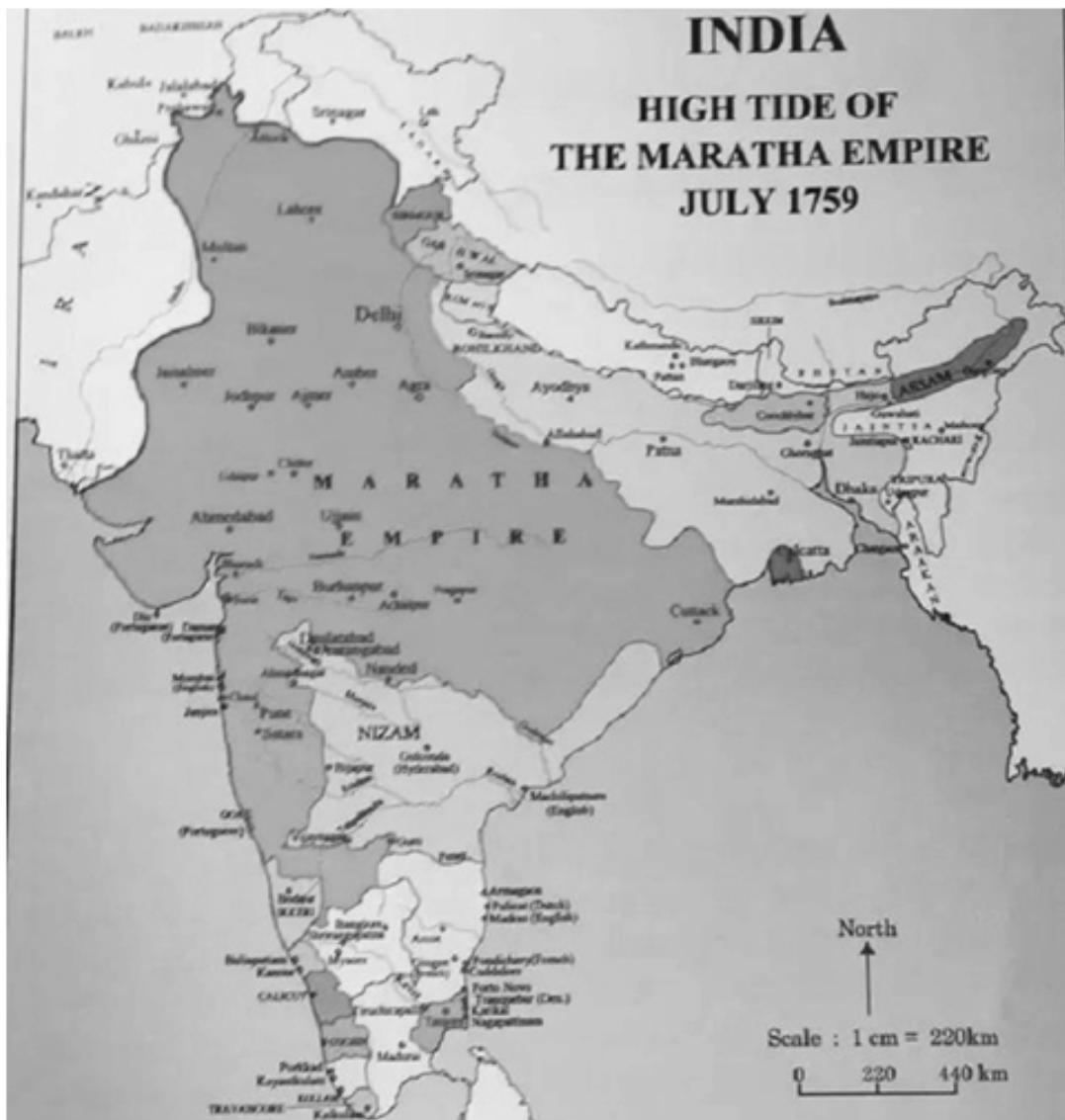
*Alivardi Khan*

Alivardi aspired for larger authority. On 10 April 1740 in the Battle of Giria, he defeated and killed Shujaud-Din's successor, Sarfaraz Khan. Thus, he took control of Bengal and Bihar. Alivardi Khan's family was essentially foreign to Bengal and both his mother tongue and court language was Persian.

As to historians like Sekhar Bandopadhyay, it was Alivardi Khan's reign, that marked the formal break with the Mughal central authority. All major appointments were now made without any formal reference of the Mughal Emperor and finally the occasional flow of revenue to Delhi was also stopped. Alivardi became the master of his own subjects and himself never wished for any formal nomination of the Mughal emperor for his own post.

## 10.5 The Maratha Invasion (1742-51)

Within a few months of his accession by the power of sword, as mentioned earlier, Rustam Jung, Nawab Shuja-ud-din's son-in-law, who was naib nazim of Orissa, challenged Alivardi Khan's rule. Alivardi defeated him in a battle at Falwari near Balasore (March 1741) and left for Murshidabad, leaving his own nephew as naib nazim of Orissa.



*Maratha Empire*

But the disgruntled Rustam Jung sought the help of General Raghoji Bhonsle, the Maratha ruler of Nagpur, and re-conquered Orissa with the help of Maratha soldiers. Alivardi returned to Orissa and again defeated Rustam Jung (December, 1741). But, having once discovered how easy it was to access the wealth of Bengal through lightning raids, the Marathas were now tempted to invade Bengal over and over.

Although it is said that the Marathas plundered Bengal countryside, but essentially the main targets of the Marathas were the accumulated wealth of the ruling Zaminadars and the local Muslim generals and elites. Now, having lost their hoarded wealth the Zamindars in turn started oppressing the peasants to make up their lost revenue and the vicious cycle follows. Thus, even before Alivardi could reach Murshidabad, a Maratha cavalry under Bhaskar Pandit was sent to Bengal by Raghoji Bhonsle. It entered Burdwan through Panchet and started looting the countryside. The Marathas had been joined by Mir Habib, Rustam Jung's cunning naib, who provided them with valuable information about the countryside and with logistic support.

For about ten years the specter of 'Bargi' (Martha horsemen) invasion and large-scale plundering of the countryside dominated western Bengal. Maratha horsemen would appear every year, plundering the whole territory west of the Hooghly River from Rajmahal in the north to Midnapore and Jaleswar in the south. On at least two occasions (1742 and 1745), they came up to Murshidabad and looted the capital city, including the mansions of the legendary merchant prince, Jagat Seth. Bengal had witnessed political conflicts earlier also. But for the first time now even the local power elites like Zamindars and the Muslim nobles became afraid. Whoever be the master of Bengal, these wealthy magnets would use to mould them with their hoarded wealth. But now their same wealth is in danger.

Contemporary chroniclers also left vivid descriptions of the Bargi terror, their hit-and-run tactics and the helplessness of the nawab's army in effectively checking them in the face of their unwillingness to be engaged in pitched battles. Alivardi's soldiers were unable to move fast and keep pace with the speed and easy maneuverability of the Maratha horsemen who moved like the wind in any direction they chose, outflanking the Nawab's army and merrily plundering West Bengal's prosperous towns and villages. In any case, their object was not occupation but plundering. They would often do the vanishing trick before the nawab's forces came

in hot pursuit. Only the Ganga–Bhagirathi River line proved an effective barrier to their movements. They crossed over to the eastern side only on a few occasions. It was the fear of Maratha attack that made the English in Calcutta dig the Maratha ditch, cutting across the only pathway in the north of Calcutta through which invasions by land were possible. Initially, when the Maratha menace appeared, Alivardi did not take it very seriously. Also, after the victory in Orissa, he had disbanded his troops temporarily. When Alivardi realized the full magnitude of the invasion, he was confused. As the Maratha way of fighting consisted of fleeing in the face of attack and then catching the enemy unawares, Alivardi's advisers counselled him to make up with the enemy, who appeared to be invincible. Bhaskar Pandit, on the advice of Mir Habib who accompanied him, went as far as Murshidabad. As Alivardi came in hot pursuit, the Maratha army withdrew after having plundered the city and taking away three lakh rupees in cash from the house of Jagat Seth. By that time, the entire territory from Malda in the north, on to Balasore, Midnapore and Orissa in the south, came under Maratha occupation. Only Murshidabad and the territory on the eastern side of river Hooghly remained in the possession of the nawab.

The official pretext of the forces of Bhonsle of Nagpur led by Bhaskar Pandit was that the emperor of Delhi had promised the Maratha sovereign, King Shahu, the right to realize *chauth*, i.e. one-fourth, of the revenues from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and Shahu had assigned that right to King Raghuji Bhonsle. We have vivid description of the Bargi invasion from contemporary sources. One of the sources is the *Maharashtra Purana* composed by one Gangaram, of which only one canto entitled *Bhaskara Parabhaba* has survived. It gives a somewhat ingenious explanation about the original *raison d'être* of Maratha invasion. Goddess Bhavani (Durga) appeared in a dream before the Maratha Emperor Shahu in Poona and asked him to rescue Bengalee Hindus from the oppression of the 'Muslim tyrant Alivardi'. It was following this that Shahu asked Raghuji Bhonsle to invade Bengal. However, in contrast, the Maratha raids equally affected both Muslims and Hindus of Bengal.

Ultimately in 1751, Alivardi established contact with Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao or Nansaheb I, the supreme commander of the Maratha forces. Now at that time the Peshwa's relation with Raghoji Bhonsle was not good. the Peshwa of Poona sent one of his commanders, Bala Rao Pandit, to chastise Raghuji Bhonsle and Bhaskar



Pandit. Bala Rao met the nawab near Murshidabad. The nawab gave him the usual gifts of elephants, pearls, etc., and a formal alliance was entered into against Raghuji Bhonsle. The unified forces marched against Raghuji and defeated and expelled him as well as Bhaskar Pandit from Bengal. Bala Rao returned to the Deccan and the nawab also went back to Murshidabad.



*Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao*

Alivardi was piqued. His entire objective in giving a huge sum of money to the Peshwa as a price for preventing the Marathas from disturbing Bengal had been frustrated. He had no money in his treasury and the Marathas were back to their old game. Finally, on May 1751, a formal peace treaty was signed between Alivardi and the Marthas (Raghojiand Peshwa both were signing authorities). According to this treaty ~

1. All the territory beyond the Subarnarekha River would be under Maratha occupation and the Maratha army would never cross this river.
2. Mir Habib was to become naib nazim of Orissa, nominally under Alivardi, but paying the surplus revenue of the province to Raghuji Bhonsle for the cost of the Maratha army.
3. The nawab would give Raghuji twelve lakh rupees as *chauth* every year drawn from the revenue of Bengal.

A year after this treaty, the Marathas killed Mir Habib and formally incorporated Orissa in the dominion of Raghuji Bhonsle.

The Marthas invasion led to an economic decline in Bengal. Agriculture, overland trade, home industries, etc every sector was affected. The Marthas Invasion gave the Europeans easy pretext to fortify their settlements, particularly Calcutta and Chandanangore, which was vehemently opposed by Alivardi. Those attacks, coupled with administrative and economic problems along with family problems, made the last days of Alivardi unhappy. He finally died in April 1756.

---

## **10.6 Relation with English merchants**

---

The history of English settlements in Bengal Subha dates back to 1633, when they opened up a small factory in Hariharpur near the mouth of River Mahanadi. In course of time three English factories were set up in Qasimbazar, Hughli and Balasore. Ultimately, in 1690, Job Charnock laid the foundation of Calcutta (debatable) in the erstwhile village of Sutanuti (present day Sovabazar area). From now on Calcutta would become the Eastern high command of the English merchants.

We have earlier discussed how Bengal commodities like cotton and silk textiles had high demands in the foreign markets of Europe and Middle East. Now, with the decline of overland trade due to political instability in North India, the European merchants in Bengal quickly replaced the focus into trans-oceanic trade thereby increasing their profits in large scale. The sudden affluence of the English merchants irked Murshid Quli Khan who in 1713 imposed several restrictions on them and asked them to pay the same trade tax as equal to the local Indian merchants.

Dissatisfied with this, the English cunningly went for a strategic solution, by sending a delegation under John Surman to the court of the then Mughal Emperor Farrukshiyar. The English delegates were well aware with the skills to win over the Emperor. Thus, by the infamous Farrukshiyar's Firman of 1717, The English were granted duty free trade in Bengal along with the right to lease 38 villages in and around Calcutta.

Now Bengal was still officially under the Mughal Empire and Murshid Quli hadn't yet severed his ties with the Imperial court. So, all decrees of the Empire were

theoretically valid in the province. But having said that, Murshid Quli was unofficially autonomous in all matters of his statecraft. Therefore, he accepted the duty free right of the English but didn't allowed them to lease the 38 villages and opposed the fortification of Fort William.

The status quo continued during the succeeding Nawabs. The English has to occasionally pay the Nawab with precautionary fees to continue their commercial activities undisturbed. Alivardi Khan was well aware of the fact that how English and the French exerted their rival political competition in the inter-politics of Carnatic states and that they could do the same in Bengal too. So he tried to exercise some controls over them. He compared the Europeans with "hive of bees, whose honey you might reap for benefit, but if you disturbed their hive they would sting you to death." The Marthas invasion considerably changed the scenario. In one hand the Nawabate became busy in tackling that problem, thereby giving a pretext to the Europeans to fortify their settlements while in the other hand, it completely shifted the overland trade to trans-oceanic waters.

---

## 10.7 Conclusion

---

So the Bengal Nawabi of 18<sup>th</sup> century was a place of occasional stability and upheavals. In one hand we find the replacement of the Murshid Quli Family with the Turko-Persian dynasty of Alivardi Khan, while in the other hand there was the horrors of Marthas Invasion and rise of Europeans.

---

## 10.8 Questions

---

- 1) Describe in brief about the rule of Nawab Shujauddin and Sarfaraz Khan.
- 2) Why is it said that it was during Alivardi Khan's reign, that marked the formal break with the Mughal central authority ?
- 3) What were the context and causes for the Marthas Invasion in Bengal ?
- 4) Describe the horrors of Marthas Invasion in brief ? Why did Alivardi despite his repeated efforts miserably failed to check the Marthas forces in Bengal ?

- 5) How did the Maratha Invasion come to an end ? In this context, mention the terms of the Bengal-Maratha Treaty.
- 6) How was the initial relation between the Bengal Nawabi and the English merchants ? Describe in brief.

---

### **10.9 Suggested Readings**

---

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition : A History of Modern India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2004)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 11 □ Bengal under Shiraj-ud-dwala**

---

### *Structure*

#### **11.0 Objective**

#### **11.1 Introduction**

#### **11.2 Initial challenges and Family disputes**

#### **11.3 Early confrontation with the British and attack on Calcutta**

#### **11.4 The final conspiracy and Shiraj's last days**

#### **11.5 Shiraj-ud-dwala's character and the other side**

#### **11.6 Conclusion**

#### **11.7 Questions**

#### **11.8 Suggested Readings**

---

### **11.0 Objective**

---

- The present unit will study the history of Bengal under the rule of Shiraj-ud-dwala.
- Attempts will be made to understand the difficulties and challenges faced by Shiraj.
- Shiraj's relationship with the English East India Company will be elaborated.
- This unit will also study the character of Shiraj-ud-dwala.

---

### **11.1 Introduction**

---

Mirza Muhammad Siraj-ud-Daulah (1733-2 July 1757), was the last independent Nawab of Bengal. The end of his reign marked the start of British East India Company rule over Bengal and later almost all of the Indian subcontinent. Siraj's father Zain Uddin was the ruler of Bihar and his mother Amina Begum was the youngest daughter of Nawab Alivardi Khan. Since Alivardi had no son, Siraj, as his grandson, became very close to him and from his childhood was seen by many as

successor to the throne of Murshidabad. Accordingly, he was raised at the palace, where he was given the education and training suitable for a future Nawab. Alivardi Khan in 1752 officially declared his grandson Crown Prince and successor to the throne, creating no small amount of division in the family and the royal court.

---

## 11.2 Initial challenges and Family disputes

---

In 1750, Siraj revolted against his grandfather, Alivardi Khan, and seized Patna, but quickly surrendered and was forgiven. Latter Alivardi considered his faults and nominated him as his heir. But Shiraj's nomination ushered severe disputes and clashes among his family members. His coronation was challenged by two rival claimant to the throne, Shaukat Jung (his cousin) and Ghaseti Begam (the eldest daughter of Alivardi and Shiraj's step mother). However, despite this opposition, Shiraj was finally coronated after Alivardi's death on 9 April 1756 at the age of eighty.

Ghaseti Begum possessed huge wealth, which was the source of her influence and strength. Apprehending serious opposition from her, Siraj ud-Daulah seized her wealth from Motijheel Palace and placed her under confinement. The Nawab also made changes in high government positions giving them his own favorites. Mir Madan was appointed *Bakshi* (Paymaster of the army) in place of the old Mir Jafar. Mohanlal was elevated to the rank of peshkar of his Dewan Khana and he exercised great influence in the administration. These sudden alterations, automatically anguished some of the old aristocratic circles of the Murshidabad court. Eventually, Siraj suppressed Shaukat Jang, governor of Purnia, and assassinated him, an act termed by many as early signs of despotism in the young Nawab.

---

## 11.3 Early confrontation with the British and attack on Calcutta

---

Siraj, as the direct political disciple of his grandfather, was aware of the global British interest in colonization, and hence resented the British politico-military presence in Bengal represented by the English East India Company. He was angered

at the company's alleged involvement with and instigation of some members of his own court to a conspiracy to oust him. His charges against the company were broadly threefold. Firstly, that they strengthened the fortification around the Fort William without any intimation or approval. Secondly, that they grossly abused trade privileges granted them by the Mughal rulers—which caused heavy loss of customs duties for the government. And thirdly, that they gave shelter to some of his officers, for example, Krishnadas, son of Rajballav, who fled Dhaka after misappropriating government funds.



*Nawab Shiraj ud-Dwala*

Hence, when the East India Company began further enhancement of military strength at Fort William in Calcutta, Siraj ud-Daulah ordered them to stop. The Company did not heed his directives. Consequently, Siraj retaliated and by the Battle of Alinagar, captured Kolkata (for a short while renamed it Alinagar, after his grandfather's name) from the British in June 1756. The Nawab gathered his forces together and took Fort William also. The captives were placed in the prison cell as a temporary holding by a local commander, but there was confusion in the Indian chain of command, and the captives were left there overnight, and many died. This is called the Black Hole Tragedy. Actually, the East India Company tried their best

to propagate a false story of black hole killing among the people to raise them against Nawab Siraj ud-Daula. Sir William Meredith, during the Parliamentary inquiry into Robert Clive's actions in India, vindicated Siraj ud-Daulah of any charge surrounding the Black Hole incident.

---

#### **11.4 The final conspiracy and Shiraj's last days**

---

Meanwhile in early 1757, the British attacked the French bastion of Chandannagore. The Nawab was infuriated on learning of the attack on Chandernagar. His former hatred of the British returned, but he now felt the need to strengthen himself by alliances against the British. The Nawab was plagued by fear of attack from the north by the Afghans under Ahmad Shah Durrani and from the west by the Marathas. Therefore, he could not deploy his entire force against the British for fear of being attacked from the flanks. A deep distrust set in between the British and the Nawab. As a result, Siraj started secret negotiations with Jean Law, chief of the French factory at Cossimbazar, and de Bussy. The Nawab also moved a large division of his army under Rai Durlabh to Plassey, on the island of Cossimbazar 30 miles (48 km) south of Murshidabad.

Popular discontent against the Nawab flourished in his own court. The Seths, the traders of Bengal, were in perpetual fear for their wealth under the reign of Siraj, contrary to the situation under Alivardi's reign. They had engaged Yar Lutuf Khan to defend them in case they were threatened in any way.<sup>[18]</sup> William Watts, the Company representative at the court of Siraj, informed Clive about a conspiracy at the court to overthrow the ruler. The conspirators included Mir Jafar, the paymaster of the army, Rai Durlabh, Yar Lutuf Khan and Omichund (Amir Chand), a Sikh merchant, and several officers in the army. When communicated in this regard by Mir Jafar, Clive referred it to the select committee in Calcutta on 1 May. The committee passed a resolution in support of the alliance. A treaty was drawn up between the British and Mir Jafar to raise him to the throne of the Nawab in return for support to the British in the field of battle and the bestowal of large sums of money upon them as compensation for the attack on Calcutta. On 2 May, Clive broke up his camp and sent half the troops to Calcutta and the other half to Chandernagar.



Mir Jafar and the Seths desired that the confederacy between the British and himself be kept secret from Omichund, but when he found out about it, he threatened to betray the conspiracy if his share was not increased to three million rupees (£300,000). Hearing of this, Clive suggested an expedient to the committee. He suggested that two treaties be drawn—the real one on white paper, containing no reference to Omichund and the other on red paper, containing Omichund's desired stipulation, to deceive him. The Members of the Committee signed on both treaties, but Admiral Watson signed only the real one and his signature had to be counterfeited on the fictitious one. Both treaties and separate articles for donations to the army, navy squadron and committee were signed by Mir Jafar on 4 June.

Finally the two forces met at the battle of Plassey, where Shiraj was defeated and captured latter. It is said that in the Battle of Plassey, Siraj ud-Daulah faced off against the British, apparently with overwhelming force, but at the critical time Mir Jafar's men stood watching passively while the soldiers of Siraj ud-Daulah were decimated by the smaller but much better armed British forces. Despite serious provocation of treachery Shiraj's two most trusted generals, Mir Madan and Dewan Mohan Lal, his Hindu adviser always stood by him and attained martyrdom. It is also said that after the death of Mir Madan, Dewan Mohan Lal wanted to attack the British army rapidly and advised Siraj ud-Daulah that the decision of retreat may be fatal for the Nawab. But the Nawab was already misguided by Mir Jafar did not consider Mohanlal's opinion. Siraj-ud-Daulah was executed on 2 July 1757 by Mohammad Ali Beg under orders from Mir Miran, son of Mir Jafar in Namak Haram Deorhi as part of the agreement between Mir Jafar and the British East India Company. Siraj-ud-Daulah's tomb is located at Khushbagh, Murshidabad. It is marked with a simple but elegant one-storied mausoleum, surrounded by gardens.

---

### **11.5 Shirajud-dwala's character and the other side**

---

Although proclaimed as a freedom fighter in modern India, Bangladesh and Pakistan for his opposition to the British annexation, many historians of the period report that he was cruel and his opposition to the British was not out of any nationalistic fervor, but an expression of his desire to strengthen his own

power. Actually, his character appears to be painted in more positive or in less favorable color depending on who creates the portrait. On the one hand, Indian writers do not tend to claim that he was especially competent or even a very pleasant person but not do they depict him as totally corrupt, despotic and cruel, which is how the British describe him. While for the British historians, Siraj's moral character serves to a great extent as a justification for removing him from power.

As a teenager, he led a reckless life, which came to the notice of his grandfather. However, keeping a promise he made to his grandfather on his death bed, he gave up gambling and drinking alcohol totally after becoming the Nawab. Several contemporary sources testify the young Nawab to be incompetent and whimsical in his decisions. For example, replacing of rival court aristocrats with one's own trusted generals is a normal procedure for a Nawab. But that should be done systematically one by one very cautiously, not all of a sudden like what Siraj did. Again, before replacing an old elite, one should have first testified whether the wisdom of that person could be still utilized and whether after all there is any chances of future disloyalty in them. For example, persons like Mir Jafar, or Jagt Seth were serving under the Nawabate for decades and had not initially any enmity with the new Nawab. But his sudden casual decisions of diminishing their power, made them fearful and offended against the young Nawab.

Again there is a popular narrative that ShirajudDwala was "the last independent Bengali Ruler". For in its true sense, Shiraj was neither a Bengali nor an Independent ruler, at least theoretically. First of all Bengali was not his mother tongue in anyway, but that was Persian, which was his language used for all official purposes. In addition, he was of Turko-Afgan descent as regards to his parents. Again, the Nawabate of Bengal was officially still a feudal province of Mughal Empire based in Delhi. Various old Mughal laws were still applied in the state and the Nawab was always advised by various court officials in every matters of the statecraft.

---

## 11.6 Conclusion

---

Regardless of his moral character or competency, it was the British who rebelled against and deposed the legal ruler of Bengal, not Siraj who rebelled against his

sovereign (technically, Bengal was still part of the weakening Mughal Empire). There is a large literature on Siraj in Bengali, in which he is regarded more as a victim than a weak or despotic ruler. It was largely due to treachery that he failed to defeat Clive. Although the British were better trained and equipped, if the whole of Bengal's army had confronted Clive the result of Plassey may very well have been different.

---

## 11.7 Questions

---

- 1) What were the initial challenges faced by Shiraj after his coronation ? And how did he overcome them ?
- 2) Mention the background and impact of the Battle of Alinagar (1756).
- 3) What led to the battle of Plassey ? In this context describe the fall of ShirajudDwalla.
- 4) Do you think the stories of bravery around Shirajuddwallha one sided ? Give your own analysis.

---

## 11.8 Suggested Readings

---

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition : A History of Modern India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2004)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 12 □ The Battle of Plassey (1757) : Impact**

---

### *Structure*

#### **12.0 Objective**

#### **12.1 Introduction**

#### **12.2 Background**

#### **12.3 The Battle**

#### **12.4 Conclusion : Aftermath and Impact**

#### **12.5 Questions**

#### **12.6 Suggested Readings**

---

### **12.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of this unit is to study the battle of Plassey in detail.
- This theme will be studied in three distinct but interrelated parts :
  - The background of the battle. Here we will study the causes and factors behind the battle of Plassey.
  - The learners will also be offered to investigate the Battle itself : its course and destiny.
  - Attention will also be paid for the understanding of the aftermath and impact of the battle.

---

### **12.1 Introduction**

---

Battle of Plassey was a major turning point in modern Indian history that led to the consolidation of the British rule in India. This battle was fought between the East India Company headed by Robert Clive and the Nawab of Bengal (Siraj-Ud-Daulah)

and his French Troop. This battle is often termed as the ‘decisive event’ which became the source of ultimate rule of the British in India. The battle occurred during the late reign of Mughal empire (called later Mughal Period). Mughal emperor Alamgir-II was ruling the empire when the Battle of Plassey took place. A few historians, while answering the question as to when did the British rule start in India, cite the Battle of Plassey as the source.

The Battle of Plassey was a decisive victory of the British East India Company over a much larger force of the Nawab of Bengal and his French<sup>[1]</sup> allies on 23 June 1757, under the leadership of Robert Clive. The first British victory in South Asia, the battle helped the Company seize control of Bengal. Over the next hundred years, they seized control of most of Indian subcontinent, Myanmar, and Afghanistan.

The battle took place at Palashi (Anglicised version: *Plassey*) on the banks of the Hooghly River, about 150 kilometres (93 mi) north of Calcutta and south of Murshidabad, then capital of Bengal (now in Nadia district in West Bengal). The belligerents were Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, and the British East India Company. He succeeded Alivardi Khan (his maternal grandfather). Siraj-ud-Daulah had become the Nawab of Bengal the year before, and he had ordered the English to stop the extension of their fortification. Robert Clive bribed Mir Jafar, the commander-in-chief of the Nawab’s army, and also promised to make him Nawab of Bengal. Clive defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah at Plassey in 1757 and captured Calcutta.

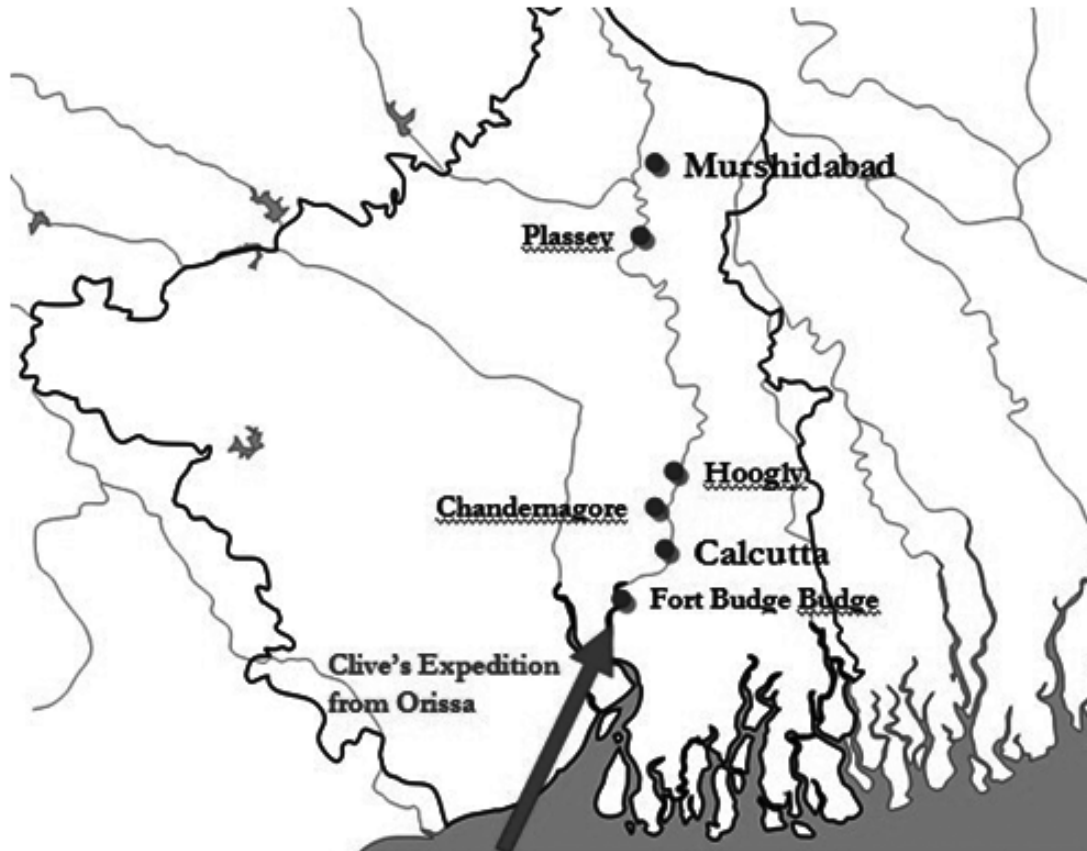
---

## 12.2 Background

---

In April 1756, Alwardi Khan died and was succeeded by his twenty-three-year-old grandson, Siraj-ud-daulah. His personality was said to be a combination of a ferocious temper and a feeble understanding. He was particularly suspicious of the large profits made by the European companies in India. When the British and the French started improving their fortifications in anticipation of another war between them, he immediately ordered them to stop such activities as they had been done without permission. When the British refused to cease their constructions, the Nawab led a detachment of 3,000 men to surround the fort and factory of Cossimbazar and

took several British officials as prisoners, before moving to Calcutta. The defences of Calcutta were weak and negligible. The garrison consisted of only 180 soldiers, 50 European volunteers, 60 European militia, 150 Armenian and Portuguese militia, 35 European artillery-men and 40 volunteers from ships and was pitted against the Nawab's force of nearly 50,000 infantry and cavalry. The city was occupied on 16 June by Siraj's force and the fort surrendered after a brief siege on 20 June. The



*Location of important places on the map of modern West Bengal*

Nawab's army and navy also plundered the city of Calcutta and the other British factories in the surrounding areas.

When news of the fall of Calcutta broke in Madras on 16 August 1756, the Council immediately sent out an expeditionary force under Colonel Clive and Admiral Watson. A letter from the Council of Fort St. George, states that "the object

of the expedition was not merely to re-establish the British settlements in Bengal, but also to obtain ample recognition of the Company's privileges and reparation for its losses" without the risk of war. It also states that any signs of dissatisfaction and ambition among the Nawab's subjects must be supported. Clive assumed command of the land forces, consisting of 900 Europeans and 1500 sepoys while Watson commanded a naval squadron. The fleet entered the Hooghly River in December and met with the fugitives of Calcutta and the surrounding areas, including the principal Members of the Council, at the village of Falta on 15 December. The Members of Council formed a Select Committee of direction. On 29 December, the force dislodged the enemy from the fort of Budge Budge. Clive and Watson then moved against Calcutta on 2 January 1757 and the garrison of 500 men surrendered after offering a scanty resistance. With Calcutta recaptured, the Council was reinstated and a plan of action against the Nawab was prepared. The fortifications of Fort William were strengthened and a defensive position was prepared in the north-east of the city.

The attack forced the Nawab into concluding the Treaty of Alinagar with the Company on 5 February, agreeing to restore the Company's factories, allow the fortification of Calcutta and restoring former privileges. The Nawab withdrew his army back to his capital, Murshidabad.

Meanwhile, concerned by the approach of de Bussy to Bengal and the Seven Years' War in Europe, the Company turned its attention to the French threat in Bengal. Clive planned to capture the French town of Chandernagar, 20 miles (32 km) north of Calcutta. Clive commenced the attack on the town and fort of Chandernagar on 14 March. The French expected assistance from the Nawab's forces from Hooghly, but the governor of Hooghly, Nandkumar had been bribed to remain inactive and prevent the Nawab's reinforcement of Chandernagar. The fort was well-defended, but when Admiral Watson's squadron forced the blockade in the channel on 23 March, a fierce cannonade ensued with aid from two batteries on the shore. The naval squadron suffered greatly due to musket-fire from the fort. At 9:00 on 24 March, a flag of truce was shown by the French and by 15:00, the capitulation concluded.

The Nawab was infuriated on learning of the attack on Chandernagar. His former hatred of the British returned, but he now felt the need to strengthen himself by

alliances against the British. The Nawab was plagued by fear of attack from the north by the Afghans under Ahmad Shah Durrani and from the west by the Marathas. Therefore, he could not deploy his entire force against the British for fear of being attacked from the flanks. A deep distrust set in between the British and the Nawab. As a result, Siraj started secret negotiations with Jean Law, chief of the French factory at Cossimbazar, and de Bussy. The Nawab also moved a large division of his army under Rai Durlabh to Plassey, on the island of Cossimbazar 30 miles (48 km) south of Murshidabad.

Popular discontent against the Nawab flourished in his own court. The Seths, the traders of Bengal, were in perpetual fear for their wealth under the reign of Siraj, contrary to the situation under Alivardi's reign. They had engaged Yar Lutuf Khan to defend them in case they were threatened in any way. William Watts, the Company representative at the court of Siraj, informed Clive about a conspiracy at the court to overthrow the ruler. The conspirators included Mir Jafar, the paymaster of the army, Rai Durlabh, Yar Lutuf Khan and Omichund (Amir Chand), a Sikh merchant, and several officers in the army. When communicated in this regard by Mir Jafar, Clive referred it to the select committee in Calcutta on 1 May. The committee passed a resolution in support of the alliance. A treaty was drawn up between the British and Mir Jafar to raise him to the throne of the Nawab in return for support to the British in the field of battle and the bestowal of large sums of money upon them as compensation for the attack on Calcutta. On 2 May, Clive broke up his camp and sent half the troops to Calcutta and the other half to Chandernagar.

Mir Jafar and the Seths desired that the confederacy between the British and himself be kept secret from Omichund, but when he found out about it, he threatened to betray the conspiracy if his share was not increased to three million rupees (£300,000). Hearing of this, Clive suggested an expedient to the committee. He suggested that two treaties be drawn—the real one on white paper, containing no reference to Omichund and the other on red paper, containing Omichund's desired stipulation, to deceive him. The Members of the Committee signed on both treaties, but Admiral Watson signed only the real one and his signature had to be counterfeited on the fictitious one. Both treaties and separate articles for donations to the army, navy squadron and committee were signed by Mir Jafar on 4 June.



### 12.3 The Battle

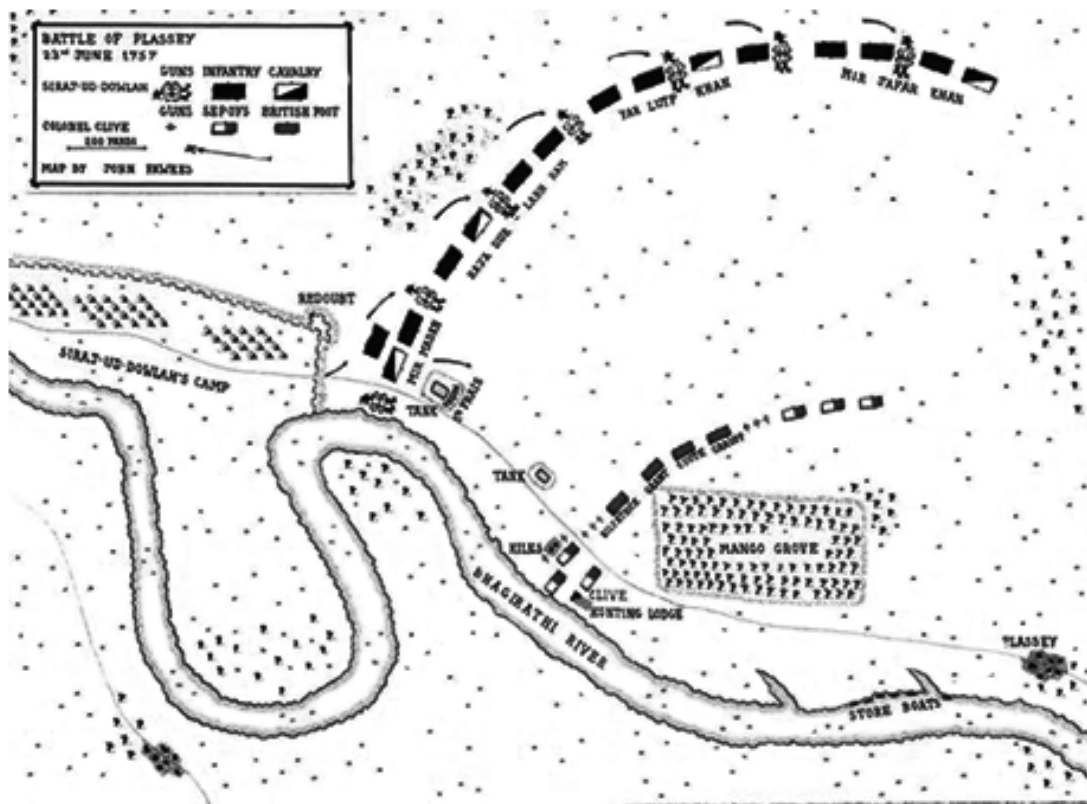
Strength of East India Company's army	Strength of Nawab's army
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 750 British soldiers</li> <li>● 100 Topasses</li> <li>● 2,100 Indian sepoy</li> <li>● 100 gunners</li> <li>● 50 sailors</li> <li>● 8 cannon (six field artillery pieces and 2 howitzers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 7,000 infantry</li> <li>● 5,000 cavalry of Siraj ud-Daulah</li> <li>● 35,000 infantry (5,000 defected)</li> <li>● 15,000 cavalry of Mir Jafar (inactive)</li> <li>● 50 French artillerymen</li> </ul>

Clive gave the army orders to cross the Bhagirathi River (another name for the Hooghly River) on the morning of 22 June and quickly occupied their position in the mango forest behind the village of Plassey. At daybreak on 23 June, the Nawab's army emerged from their camp and started advancing towards the grove. Their army consisted of 30,000 infantry of all sorts, armed with matchlocks, swords, pikes and rockets and 20,000 cavalry, armed with swords or long spears, interspersed by 300 pieces of artillery, mostly 32, 24 and 18-pounders. The army also included a detachment of about 50 French artillerymen under de St. Frais directing their own field pieces. The French took up positions at the larger tank with four light pieces advanced by two larger pieces, within a mile of the grove. Behind them were a body of 5,000 cavalry and 7,000 infantry commanded by the Nawab's faithful general Mir Madan Khan and Diwan Mohanlal. The rest of the army numbering 45,000 formed an arc from the small hill to a position 800 yards (730 m) east of the southern angle of the grove, threatening to surround Clive's relatively smaller army. The right arm of their army was commanded by Rai Durlabh, the centre by Yar Lutuf Khan and the left arm closest to the British by Mir Jafar.

At 8:00, the French artillery at the larger tank fired the first shot, killing one and wounding another from the grenadier company of the 39th Regiment. This, as a signal, the rest of the Nawab's artillery started a heavy and continuous fire. By 8:30,

the British had lost 10 Europeans and 20 sepoys. The rate of casualties of the British dropped substantially due to the protection of the embankment.

At the end of three hours, there was no substantial progress and the positions of both sides had not changed. Clive called a meeting of his staff to discuss the way ahead. It was concluded that the present position would be maintained till after nightfall, and an attack on the Nawab's camp should be attempted at midnight. Soon after the conference, a heavy rainstorm occurred. The British used tarpaulins to protect their ammunition, while the Nawab's army took no such precautions. As a result, their gunpowder got drenched and their rate of fire slackened, while Clive's artillery kept up a continuous fire. As the rain began to subside, Mir Madan Khan, assuming that the British guns were rendered ineffective by the rain, led his cavalry to a charge. However, the British countered the charge with heavy grape shot, mortally wounding Mir Madan Khan and driving back his men.



*Plassey battle plan*

Mir Jafar immediately sent word of this encounter to Clive, urging him to push forward. Following Mir Jafar's exit from the Nawab's tent, Rai Durlabh urged Siraj to withdraw his army behind the entrenchment and advised him to return to Murshidabad leaving the battle to his generals. Siraj complied with this advice and ordered the troops under Mohan Lal to retreat behind the entrenchment. He then mounted a camel and accompanied by 2,000 horsemen set out for Murshidabad. Dewan Mohan Lal advised Shiraj, not to retreat, but he didn't paid heed to him. This was the turning point of the battle. With Nawab's departure, most of his army got confused with their moral down, while the remaining bulk portion under Mir Jafar remained completely inactive. Clive launched a direct assault and within hours the British were victorious and the battle was over.

---

#### **12.4 Conclusion : Aftermath and Impact**

---

In the evening of 23 June, Clive received a letter from Mir Jafar asking for a meeting with him. Clive replied that he would meet Mir Jafar at Daudpur the next morning. When Mir Jafar arrived at the British camp at Daudpur in the morning, Clive embraced him and saluted him as the Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. He then advised Mir Jafar to hasten to Murshidabad to prevent Siraj's escape and the plunder of his treasure. Mir Jafar reached Murshidabad with his troops on the evening of 24 June. Clive arrived at Murshidabad on 29 June with a guard of 200 European soldiers and 300 sepoys in the wake of rumors of a possible attempt on his life. Clive was taken to the Nawab's palace, where he was received by Mir Jafar and his officers. Clive placed Mir Jafar on the throne and acknowledging his position as Nawab, presented him with a plate of gold rupees.

Siraj-ud-daulah had reached Murshidabad at midnight on 23 June. He summoned a council where some advised him to surrender to the British, some to continue the war and some to prolong his flight. At 22:00 on 24 June, Siraj disguised himself and escaped northwards on a boat with his wife and valuable jewels. His intention was to escape to Patna with aid from Jean Law. At midnight on 24 June, Mir Jafar sent several parties in pursuit of Siraj. On 2 July, Siraj reached Rajmahal and took shelter in a deserted garden but was soon discovered and betrayed to the local military governor, the brother of Mir Jafar, by a man who was previously arrested and

punished by Siraj. His fate could not be decided by a council headed by Mir Jafar and was handed over to Mir Jafar's son, Miran, who had Siraj murdered that night. His remains were paraded on the streets of Murshidabad the next morning and were buried at the tomb of Alivardi Khan.

According to the treaty drawn between the British and Mir Jafar, the British acquired all the land within the Maratha Ditch and 600 yards (550 m) beyond it and the zamindari of all the land between Calcutta and the sea. Besides confirming the firman of 1717, the treaty also required the restitution, including donations to the navy squadron, army and committee, of 22,000,000 rupees (£2,750,000) to the British for their losses. However, since the wealth of Siraj-ud-daulah proved to be far less than expected, a council held with the Seths and Rai Durlabh on 29 June decided that one half of the amount was to be paid immediately—two-thirds in coin and one third in jewels and other valuables. As the council ended, it was revealed to Omichund that he would receive nothing with regard to the treaty, hearing which he went insane.

As a result of the war of Plassey, the French were no longer a significant force in Bengal. In 1759, the British defeated a larger French garrison at Masulipatam, securing the Northern Circars. By 1759, Mir Jafar felt that his position as a subordinate to the British could not be tolerated. He started encouraging the Dutch to advance against the British and eject them from Bengal. In late 1759, the Dutch sent seven large ships and 1400 men from Java to Bengal under the pretext of reinforcing their Bengal settlement of Chinsura even though Britain and Holland were not officially at war. Clive, however, initiated immediate offensive operations by land and sea and defeated the much larger Dutch force on 25 November 1759 in the Battle of Chinsura. The British then deposed Mir Jafar and installed Mir Qasim as the Nawab of Bengal. The British were now the paramount European power in Bengal and the Bengal Nawabs became puppets in their hand.

---

## 12.5 Questions

---

- 1) What were the causes and background of the Battle of Plassey ?
- 2) What was the turning point in the battle ?

- 3) Why did Shiraj suddenly retreated to Murshidabad, while the battle was still continuing ?
- 4) What were the immediate impacts of the Battle of Plassey ?

---

## **12.6 Suggested Readings**

---

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition : A History of Modern India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2004)

Chaudhary, Sushil, *The Prelude to Empire : Plassey Revolution of 1757*, (New Delhi : Manohar Publication : 2000)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)



## **Module III**

### **Medieval Bengal : Economy and Society**





---

## **Unit 13 □ The Medieval Agrarian Structure : Evolution of the Zamindar Class and Talukdari System; Peasant Society and Process of Peasantization**

---

### *Structure*

#### **13.0 Objectives**

#### **13.1 Introduction**

#### **13.2 Early development of Agriculture in pre-Muslim Bengal**

#### **13.3 Establishment of the Muslim Sultanate and their attitude to Bengal's agrarian society**

#### **13.4 The agricultural expansion during Mughal rule and the Role of Sufi saints**

#### **13.5 Sources**

#### **13.6 The peasants of Medieval Bengal**

#### **13.7 The major cultivated crops**

#### **13.8 The Zamindari system**

#### **13.9 Conclusion**

#### **13.10 Questions**

#### **13.11 Suggested Readings**

---

### **13.0 Objectives**

---

- The objective of this unit is to understand the agrarian system prevalent in Medieval Bengal
  - Students will get an idea about the process of Agricultural expansion from Early Medieval times to Mughal Empire
  - The other important themes related to Bengal agriculture such as the role of Sufi saints, condition of Peasants, major cultivated crops and the Zamindari system would also be discussed.
- 

### **13.1 Introduction**

---

Geographically Bengal being situated in the deltaic confluence of Ganga and Brahmaputra Rivers naturally suits as a harbinger of agriculture. In fact, the silt

deposition by the perennial rivers makes the soil of Bengal delta one of the most fertile regions in South Asia. Hence, Agriculture is endemic to Bengal since the beginning of human civilization in this region.

During the Medieval times, despite a slow and steady process of urbanization, about 90 per cent of the population of Bengal lived in its villages. Both peasants and landed elites were involved in agricultural production and claimed rights to a share of the produce. This created relationships of cooperation, competition and conflict among them. The sum of these *agrarian* relationships made up rural society.

At the same time agencies from outside also entered into the rural world. Most important among these was the Mughal state, which derived the bulk of its income from agricultural production. It is a well established fact, that among all the Mughal Subhas, Bengal was the most prosperous in terms of agricultural output. Since the reign of Akbar, a large portion of the total agricultural revenue of the Mughals used to be supplied from Bengal's output. Agents of the state – revenue assessors, collectors, record keepers – sought to control rural society so as to ensure that cultivation took place and the state got its regular share of taxes from the produce. Let us now discuss the development of the agrarian system and its primary features in Medieval Bengal.

---

### **13.2 Early development of Agriculture in pre-Muslim Bengal**

---

Bengal was chiefly a forested land, which was traditionally outside the periphery of mainland agrarian civilization of North India. But since the Gupta Age, land reclamation and gradual penetration of the Agrarian society into the interior heartland of the Riverine delta started in Bengal. After all the fertile region and the humid pro-cultivation climate of Bengal was bound to attract agriculturalist.

However, during the Early Medieval period, particularly after the establishment of the independent Gauda kingdom under Maharaja Sasanka the expansion of agriculture in Bengal Delta received a new boost following the process of land grants or land donations. The process of Reclaiming forested lands to cultivable productive land, was now directly promoted under direct or indirect state patronage.

The concept of granting lands is something new in Indian socio-politics. It is not at all mentioned in Ashokan edicts. We first came to know about the practice only from the Satvahana Age, when certain Land Grants were made by Satavahana ruler Gautamiputra Satakarni. But in this case, the king at least beheld the administrative & military rights over the granted lands & they were very few in numbers.

But from the Gupta & post-Gupta period large scale land grants were began to be made to Brahmin & Political beneficiaries. These lands are called *Brahmadaya* lands. In this settlement created by the Royal decree, the Brahmin beneficiary holds absolute right over the donated lands. Here the lands were not only made tax-free, but more importantly the entire administrative & governing rights were also transferred to the hands of the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries obtained total rights to enjoy all the productions levied from the donated lands including realization of taxes from the peasants & artisans residing there. Thus along with the land the people living in it were also transferred from the former jurisdiction of the King to the granted beneficiaries. It is upto them to deal with the residents on their own terms, turning them to land lords. Even the Government forces would be forbidden to disturb these donated lands, without permission. Eg. In the Nalanda Land grant Inscription of Samudra Gupta or in the Khalimpur Copper Plate of Pala King Dharmapala, residents were asked by their king not only to pay the customary tax to the beneficiaries but also to obey their commands. Thus this lands became semi independent enough to rise as new source of local authority, a precursor of the later day Zamindari system in Bengal.

According to Historians like D.C. Sircar, BD Chattopadhyay etc. the system of land grants led to the expansion of agricultural society in Bengal. Because in most cases the granted lands were uncultivated fallow lands or lands which were not in a position to realize revenue (particularly forests). It is now the task of the Brahmins/grantees to make it productive. Hence it gradually led them to venture for the greater tribal diasporas of the interior. Thus, in this age we find many of the tribes were settling down as cultivators & plough agriculture was introduced in greater parts of the interior, which resulted in greater interaction between the tribal and the sedentized Brahminical society. It was not that only the tribal societies got “Hindusized”, but also several tribal elements also penetrated into the Brahminical culture. The best example among them is reflected in the rise of worship of the Jagannath cult, which

clearly has tribal origins. That's why Historian B.D. Chattopadhyay argued that the major historical process of EMA is the expansion of the Agricultural state society. In Eastern India the Pala Kings used to patronize these land grants to Brahmins. Of the Khalimpur & Munger Land grants of King Devpala (810-850 CE) is the most notable ones. The tradition continued in the post-Pala Age also. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta Sahitya Parishad Copper-plate inscription denotes, the Sena ruler Vishwarupsena granting 11 plots of land to a Brahmin named Halayudh.

By 13<sup>th</sup> century, Eastern India, particularly Bengal became the storehouse of Rice cultivation. Many of The Ancient literary sources like *Raghubanshan* of Kalidasha, Khana, *Krishi Parasara*, etc. described the extent & magnitude of Rice cultivation her. The region included modern day Eastern Bihar, Orissa, Bengal up to Brahmaputra Valley & Kamrup. Chinese travelers like Ma Luan or Fa Hien mentions the export of Rice from Bengal to as far as Malaysia & S.E. Asia. During the reign of Ahom Kings particularly Damodar Dev, Shankar Dev, etc. better irrigation & farming technology was introduced in Assam & rice cultivation flourished more. However mention of Rice export from Andhra is obtained since the days of Arab traveler, Ibn Khurdabaleh (9<sup>th</sup> century). The *Krishi-parashar* of Bengal written between 950-1100 CE. mentions the different advanced techniques for Rice cultivation.

Thus, already before the establishment of Muslim Sultanate rule in Bengal, large tracts of Western Bengal had been reclaimed from forests and agrarian system has been established.

---

### **13.3 Establishment of the Muslim Sultanate and their attitude to Bengal's agrarian society**

---

After the establishment of Turko-Muslim rule in Bengal (1206 CE), for centuries the early Turkish elites were devoid of any socio-cultural connection with vast masses of Bengali peasant population. Neither, did they have any intention to do the same. They were mainly centered in some specific urban towns like Gaud, Pandua, etc, with their only target being political consolidation & territorial extension. They considered the local non-muslim agricultural masses as 'lowborns' and had no interest in accommodating them in their cultural domain. They were simply the source of revenue for the early Turko-Muslim administration.

Situation started changing from the Hussain Shahi period. Shah, who was the most important Sultan in the Turko-Afghan period, had, however, other priorities. He, like Iliyash Shah and other major Sultans, was, no doubt, keenly aware of the need to consolidate the political foundation of the Sultanate in an alien province like Bengal. However, his main concern was to strengthen the land revenue administration with the cooperation of the local Zamindars who were overwhelmingly Hindu by religion. A contradiction was emerging between the imperial authorities in Delhi and the provincial Sultans of Bengal in respect of sharing of the land revenue surplus from Bengal, which was considered to be one of the prosperous provinces of the country. Husain Shah was deeply concerned to have the steady cooperation of the Zamindars of Bengal in his thrust to sustain a kind of autonomous position in matters of land revenue administration of Bengal, which would not be subservient to the increasing demands of the imperial authorities in Delhi. Thus, during Sultanate time the agricultural output of Bengal increased rapidly and Bengal soon became one of the most lucrative territory in Sultanate India in terms of Land revenue.

---

### **13.4 The agricultural expansion during Mughal rule and the Role of Sufi saints**

---

The processes continued during the Mughal era. The Mughals in turn situated their capital not in Gaud but deep in Dhaka, which was more interior & central to the agricultural peasant belt of deltaic Bengal. During Mughal period, more focus over agriculture grew up & the Mughal Subedars devoted special attention to farther uplift the agricultural production to increase its revenue. In fact, Bengal at that time became the highest agricultural productive state among all the Mughal subhas.

This focus on agriculture paved the way for Sufi immigration & spread of Sufi mystic philosophy among the peasant society of Bengal. Concerned with the need for bringing stability to their turbulent and underdeveloped eastern frontier in Bengal, the Mughal state deliberately encouraged several good orators, clerics & philosophers, (called as “forest pioneers” by historian Atis Dasgupta) to migrate & permanently settle down into the interior agricultural heartland of Eastern Bengal. The Mughals also granted favorable or even tax-free tenures of land to these industrious individuals who were expected to clear and bring into cultivation undeveloped forest tracts. The

policy was basically intended to promote the emergence of local communities that would be both economically productive and politically loyal. Now, these immigrants got permanently stationed there, build local mosques or majaras under direct or indirect state patronage & started gathering the local populace around them. Their primary function was to motivate the local population with agricultural expansion, forest clearance & farther penetration into Eastern delta. As a result, these forest pioneers started gaining local influence & their *masjids* & *majahars* became local community centers.

Land management was particularly strong during the regime of Akbar (1556-1605). His Revenue Minister Raja Todarmal formulated and implemented elaborated methods for agricultural management on a rational basis. The Mughal administration emphasized agrarian reform, which began under the Sur emperor Sher Shah Suri, the work of which Akbar adopted and furthered with more reforms. The civil administration was organized in a hierarchical manner on the basis of merit, with promotions based on performance. A major Mughal reform introduced by Akbar was a new land revenue system called *Zabti* system. He replaced the tribute system, previously common in India and used by Tokugawa Japan at the time, with a monetary tax system based on a uniform currency. The revenue system was biased in favour of higher value cash crops such as cotton, indigo, sugar cane, tree-crops, and opium, providing state incentives to grow cash crops, in addition to rising market demand. Under the *zabti* system, the Mughals also conducted extensive cadastral surveying to assess the area of land under plow cultivation, with the Mughal state encouraging greater land cultivation by offering tax-free periods to those who brought new land under cultivation.

---

### 13.5 Sources

---

For information on agricultural conditions in medieval times one has to rely on the accounts of foreign travelers and local literature. Indeed, foreign travelers praised the fertility of Bengal soil and the state of its agriculture. For example, a Chinese account of 1349/50 stated, 'The seasons of Heaven have scattered the wealth of the Earth over this kingdom'. At about the same time Ibn Batuta visited east Bengal. He mentioned that as he travelled from Sylhet and Sonargaon by rivers for 15 days he

saw on his right and left orchards, water wheels, prosperous villages and gardens, ‘as if we were passing through a market’. During Shaista Khan’s time Bernier came to Bengal. He noticed on both sides of the Ganges ‘extremely fertile’ fields producing a whole variety of crops. Apart from travelogs, official accounts like *Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazl gives us important account of the agrarian scenario in Bengal. Abul Fazl informed us that a particular variety of rice was ‘sown and reaped three times in the same year without little injury to the crop’.

---

### 13.6 The peasants of Medieval Bengal

---

The term with which the Indo-Persian sources of the Mughal period most frequently used to denote a peasant was *raiyyat*. In addition, we also encounter the terms *kisan* or *asami*. Sources of the seventeenth century refer to two kinds of peasants – *khud-kashta* and *pahi-kashta*. The former were residents of the village in which they held their lands. The latter were non-resident cultivators who belonged to some other village, but cultivated lands elsewhere on a contractual basis. People became *pahi-kashta* either out of choice – for example, when terms of revenue in a distant village were more favorable – or out of compulsion – for example, forced by economic distress after a famine.

Seldom did the average peasant of north India possess more than a pair of bullocks and two ploughs; most possessed even less. In Bengal, five acres was the upper limit of an average peasant farm; 10 acres would make one a rich *asami*. Cultivation was based on the principle of individual ownership. Peasant lands were bought and sold in the same way as the lands of other property owners.

---

### 13.7 The major cultivated crops

---

Agriculture was organized around two major seasonal cycles, the *kharif* (autumn) and the *rabi* (spring). This would mean that most regions, except those terrains that were the most arid or inhospitable, produced a minimum of two crops a year (*do-fasla*), whereas some, where rainfall or irrigation assured a continuous supply of water, even gave three crops. This ensured an enormous variety of produce. For

instance, we are told in the *Ain-i-Akbari* that the Mughal provinces of Bengal produced 50 varieties of rice alone.

However, the focus on the cultivation of basic staples did not mean that agriculture in medieval Bengal was only for subsistence. We often come across the term *jins-i kamil* (literally, perfect crops) in our sources. The Mughal state also encouraged peasants to cultivate such crops as they brought in more revenue. Crops such as cotton and sugarcane were *jins-i kamil* par excellence. whereas Bengal was famous for its sugar. Such cash crops would also include various sorts of oilseeds (for example, mustard) and lentils. This shows how subsistence and commercial production were closely intertwined in an average peasant's holding.

---

### 13.8 The Zamindari system

---

Our story of agrarian relations in Mughal India will not be complete without referring to a class of people in the countryside that lived off agriculture but did not participate directly in the processes of agricultural production. These were the Zamindars who were landed proprietors who also enjoyed certain social and economic privileges by virtue of their superior status in rural society. Caste was one factor that accounted for the elevated status of Zamindars; another factor was that they performed certain services (*khidmat*) for the state.

The origin of landed tributary chiefs can be traced back to pre-Muslim Bengal as discussed in the first section. However, during the Mughal Age the Zamindari system emerged as the dominant agrarian system all across Western & interior Deltaic Bengal. As historian, WH Moreland stated that the Mughal administration brought about the special system of Watan Jaigirdars, whereby certain landed elites were given the right to enjoy their estate along with all its resources hereditarily. These Jaigiradars cannot be evicted from their lands and the Mughal state would seldom interfere in the internal affairs of their state. They enjoyed all the land revenue rights in their properties including absolute control over the peasants residing there. In return of their autonomy, they would chronologically pay a share of the revenue to Imperial treasury. However Moreland argued that the Zamindari system in particular is specially endemic to Bengal region. Bengal was a peripheral state for the Mughals. In one hand the Mughal officials were completely foreign to



this Deltaic forested land, while in the other hand they had a major compulsion to expand agriculture and squeeze out the maximum revenue from this region in order to sustain their bureaucratic Empire in North India. Hence, they became more and more dependable over the tributary intermediate landed chieftains of Bengal. These chieftains enjoyed more autonomy than the watan jaigiradrs and were came to be known as Zamindars.

Zamindars also derived their power from the fact that they could often collect revenue on behalf of he state, a service for which they were compensated financially. Control over military resources was another source of power. Most zamindars had fortresses (*qilachas*) as well as an armed contingent comprising units of cavalry, artillery and infantry.

More important were the slow processes of Zamindari consolidation, which are also documented in sources. These involved colonization of new lands, by transfer of rights, by order of the state and by purchase. These were the processes which perhaps permitted people belonging to the relatively “lower” castes to enter the rank of zamindars as zamindaris were bought and sold quite briskly in this period. A combination of factors also allowed the consolidation of clan- or lineage-based zamindaris. For example, the Rajputs and Jats adopted these strategies to consolidate their control over vast swathes of territory in northern India. Likewise, peasant-pastoralists (like the Sadgops) carved out powerful zamindaris in areas of central and southwestern Bengal.

Zamindars spearheaded the colonization of agricultural land, and helped in settling cultivators by providing them with the means of cultivation, including cash loans. The buying and selling of zamindaris accelerated the process of monetization in the countryside. In addition, zamindars sold the produce from their *milkiyat* lands. There is evidence to show that zamindars often established markets (*haats*) to which peasants also came to sell their produce.

---

## 13.9 Conclusion

---

Thus, our above discussion shows how Bengal became one of the most prosperous territories in respect of agricultural output during the Medieval times. Although

naturally situated in the Deltaic fertile land, it was primarily covered by thick forest. The land reclamation procedure started since the Early Medieval days which received farther acceleration during the latter Sultanate and Mughal times. The Sufi saints and Zamindari establishment played major roles in this process of agricultural expansion in Bengal.

---

### 13.10 Questions

---

- 1) Describe the process of Agricultural expansion in Bengal in the pre-Muslim days.
- 2) What was the role of the Hussain Shahis & the Sufi saints in the expansion of the agrarian society in Bengal ?
- 3) Write a brief note on the development and typical features of the Zamindari system in Bengal.
- 4) What were the major crops cultivated in Medieval Bengal ?
- 5) How was the condition of peasants in a nut and shell ?

---

### 13.11 Suggested Readings

---

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition : A History of Modern India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2004)

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Moreland, WH, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India : A Historical Essay with Appendices*, (London : Cambridge University Press, 2011)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 14 □ The economy : The Indigenous trade and role of foreign companies**

---

### *Structure*

#### **14.0 Objective**

#### **14.1 Introduction**

#### **14.2 Flourishment of trade and commerce during Mughal Era**

#### **14.3 Commercial economy during Murshid Quli's time**

#### **14.4 Bengal's indigenous ports**

#### **14.5 The advent of European merchants and the rise of Euro-centric trans-Oceanic commerce**

#### **14.6 Early relation between the English Merchants and Bengal Nawabate (pre-Shirajdwala period)**

#### **14.7 Conclusion**

#### **14.8 Questions**

#### **14.9 Suggested Readings**

---

### **14.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of this unit is to study the role of indigenous trade as well as the role of the foreign companies in the economy of Bengal.
  - It will be studied that the indigenous trade flourished in the Mughal era.
  - The role of the Nawabs of Bengal in the development of commercial economy will also be analyzed.
  - The advent and impact of the EICs on the economy of Bengal will also come under discussion.
- 

### **14.1 Introduction**

---

Bengal has manufactured textiles for many centuries, as recorded in ancient hand-written and printed documents. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mentions

Arab and Greek merchants trading between India and the Red Sea port of Aduli (in present-day Eritrea), Egypt and Ethiopia in the second century CE. Cloths including muslin were exchanged for ivory, tortoiseshell and rhinoceros-horn at that time. Muslin was traded from Barygaza—an ancient port of India located in Gujarat—to different parts of Indian subcontinent before European merchants came to India.

The Romans prized muslin highly, using bullion and gold coins to buy the material from Deccan and South India. They introduced muslin into Europe, and eventually it became very popular. A Chinese voyager, Ma Huan, wrote about five or six varieties of fine cloths after visiting Bengal in the early fifteenth century; he mentions that Bengal muslin was highly priced in China at that time.

Muslin, a cotton fabric of plain weave, was hand woven in the region around Dhaka, Bengal (now Bangladesh), and exported to Europe, the Middle East, and other markets, for much of the 17th and 18th centuries.

---

## 14.2 Flourishment of trade and commerce during Mughal Era

---

The Bengal Subah had the largest regional economy in the Mughal Empire. It was described as the *paradise of nations*. Fifty percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the empire was generated in Bengal. The region exported grains, fine cotton muslin and silk, liquors and wines, salt, ornaments, fruits, and metals. European companies set up numerous trading posts in Mughal Bengal during the 17th and 18th centuries. Dhaka was the largest city in Mughal Bengal and the commercial capital of the empire. Chittagong was the largest seaport, with maritime trade routes connecting Arakan, Indonesia, Far East, Malaya, Arabia, Middle East, Makassar, Ceylon, Bandar Abbas, Mocha and the Maldives.

During Shah Shuja's long and peaceful rule, trade and industry flourished to a great extent in Bengal and the province became rich.

Shayesta Khan, whose rule ended in June 1688 is still remembered in Bengal. It is said that during his rule rice used to sell at five *maunds* a rupee. East Bengal produced an enormous quantity of rice and the price of rice is an index of the real value of the reputed daily income of two lakh rupees of Shayesta Khan. His wide

popularity was also due to extensive building programmes, his pomp and grandeur, and the liberal gifts, donations and the patronage to the needy. All this largely accounted for the daily expenses of a lakh of rupees incurred by him. It is established that it was the revenue from Bengal that largely sustained the Mughal Empire. But Bengal was much more than the main source of revenue for the empire. It was also the centre for manufacture of fine luxuries such as muslin. Through its traders and entrepreneurs, Bengal took active part in maritime commerce controlled by foreigners.

Under Mughal rule, Bengal was a center of the worldwide muslin and silk trades. During the Mughal era, the most important center of cotton production was Bengal, particularly around its capital city of Dhaka, leading to muslin being called “daka” in distant markets such as Central Asia. Domestically, much of India depended on Bengali products such as rice, silks and cotton textiles. In addition, Bengal also exported cotton and silk textiles to markets such as Europe, Indonesia and Japan. Bengal produced more than 50% of textiles and around 80% of silks imported by the Dutch from Asia, for example. Overseas, Europeans depended on Bengali products



*Mughal nobles wearing fine Bengal muslins*

such as cotton textiles, silks and opium; Bengal accounted for 40% of Dutch imports from Asia, for example, including more than 50% of textiles and around 80% of silks.<sup>[7]</sup> From Bengal, saltpeter was also shipped to Europe, opium was sold in Indonesia, raw silk was exported to Japan and the Netherlands, and cotton and silk textiles were exported to Europe, Indonesia and Japan.

Bengal had a large shipbuilding industry. Indrajit Ray estimates shipbuilding output of Bengal during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries at 223,250 tons annually, compared with 23,061 tons produced in nineteen colonies in North America from 1769 to 1771. He also assesses ship repairing as very advanced in Bengal. Bengali shipbuilding was advanced compared to European shipbuilding at the time. An important innovation in shipbuilding was the introduction of a flushed deck design in Bengal rice ships, resulting in hulls that were stronger and less prone to leak than the structurally weak hulls of traditional European ships built with a stepped deck design. The British East India Company later duplicated the flushed deck and hull designs of Bengal rice ships in the 1760s, leading to significant improvements in seaworthiness and navigation for European ships during the Industrial Revolution.

In the early sixteenth century, a Portuguese apothecary named Tomes Pires mentioned that Bengal muslins were traded to Thailand and China. Bengali muslin was also traded throughout the Muslim world, from the Middle East to Southeast Asia. By 1580, some Portuguese traders settled at Dhaka and Sripur, from where they started exporting muslin, cotton and silk goods to Europe and Southeast Asia. During Ottoman rule from the sixteenth century onwards, large quantities of muslin were exported to the Middle East. The Ottoman Turks were fond of Bengali muslins. In the sixteenth century, Portuguese started trading textiles from the Indian subcontinent through the Persian Gulf including high quality of muslins. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese trade declined.

---

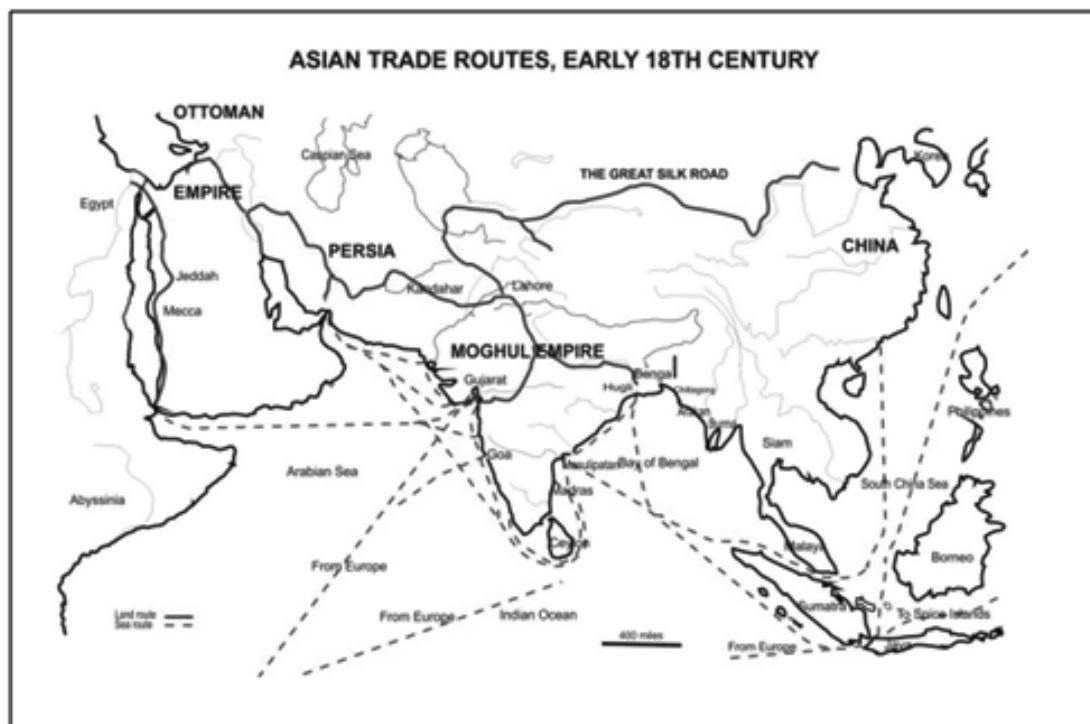
### **14.3 Commercial economy during Murshid Quli's time**

---

Apart from agrarian economy, Bengal during Murshid Quli's time also had a growing importance of trade and commerce as well as the merchant community. The Bengal made cotton and silk textiles, oil and sugar had high demand in the markets

of Persia, Afghanistan and East Asia. In 18<sup>th</sup> century, when overland routes were facing disturbance due to political chaos, the exports found a new way out through trans-oceanic commerce. Europe became a new lucrative market for Bengali goods and several European companies established their trading outposts in the province to carry out this import-export commerce. The Indian merchants were no less important in this trans-oceanic commerce. Mention may be made of powerful Hindu merchants like Umi Chand or the Armenian Khawaja Wajid. During the period of Murshid Quli Khan, about 2.3 crore of merchandise was exported out of Bengal. The Qasimbazar factory alone produced around 70 lakh rupees of silk commodities. Similar figures were recorded by the Murshidabad custom office. As a result of this economic activities cities like Dhaka, Calcutta and Qasimbazar grew in size and population.

While in the other hand, such huge monetary exchanges gave rise to the emergence of powerful financing and banking communities. Mention may be made of the family of Jagat Seth, a well reliable banker for Murshid Quli Khan, who eventually became the head of the provincial treasury in 1730. Again, sometimes the constant pressure over the Zamindars, by the Murshid Quli administration to pay



revenue in times, made the former to take loans from these newly emerging bankers. Thus in various steps of transactions and exchanges these banking communities provided securities and necessary investments. Not only in private sectors but this financiers also supported the state administration with necessary monetary support in lieu of loans, during emergencies. As stories suggests even during Maratha pillage, it were these bankers and financiers like Jagat Seth who provided the temporary monetary support on immediate basis to the Nawabi administration to run the state economy, despite their own losses.

However, although the trade and commerce had a lucrative fortune in Bengal, the Murshid Quli Khan administration on its part never formally invested properly to develop the commercial sectors. The Nawab never took any effective steps to build up a proper navy as to provide securities to its Indian merchants from pirates and European interferences in the water route, nor did he took any proper investments to promote home the grown industries and indigenous capitalists through state patronage. As a result, the European competitors unofficially got an edge over their Indian counterparts to capture the commercial sectors of Bengal in near future.

---

#### **14.4 Bengal's indigenous ports**

---

Till the middle of the 16th century, Satgaon was the most important port. According to poet Mukundaram, it used to attract so much foreign trade that the merchants of Satgaon did not have to leave their town and could earn fortune just staying home as 'the outside world came to them' for trade. As the chief mart of Bengal, Satgaon attracted merchants from different parts of India and diverse other countries. It was the chief emporium of Portuguese trade since 1537, known as 'portopiqueno'. Even in 1569 Caesar de Fredericki found Satgaon 'a remarkable faire citie' from where every year thirty or thirty-five big and small ships, laden with diverse commodities, went to various places.

But the historic port of Satgaon began to decline mainly due to the silting of the river Saraswati that made navigation extremely difficult. Hence not only the Portuguese but the local traders too left Satgaon and settled in Hughli, which took the place of Satgaon as the principal port of Bengal and remained so till the middle of the 18th century. Even the inland trade was mostly diverted to Hughli, though Satgaon



remained the royal port and the seat of the governor and the imperial customs house till 1632, when Hughli took its place officially as the royal port.

The Hughli port flourished with amazing rapidity under the Portuguese. It soon rose to the position of the 'richest, the most flourishing and the most populous' of the various 'bandels' or trading ports in Bengal. It became the common emporium of trade where, as Fr John Cabral wrote in 1533, the vessels of India (Portuguese India), China, Malacca and Manila repaired in great numbers. He also mentioned that not only the 'natives of the country, but also Hindustanis, the Mogols, the Persians and the Armenians came there to fetch goods'. Van Linschoten and Ralph Fitch noted Hughli's flourishing trade in the 1580s. The *Ain-i-Akbari*, completed in 1596-97, states that Hughli was a more important port than Satgaon.

---

### **14.5 The advent of European merchants and the rise of Euro-centric trans-Oceanic commerce**

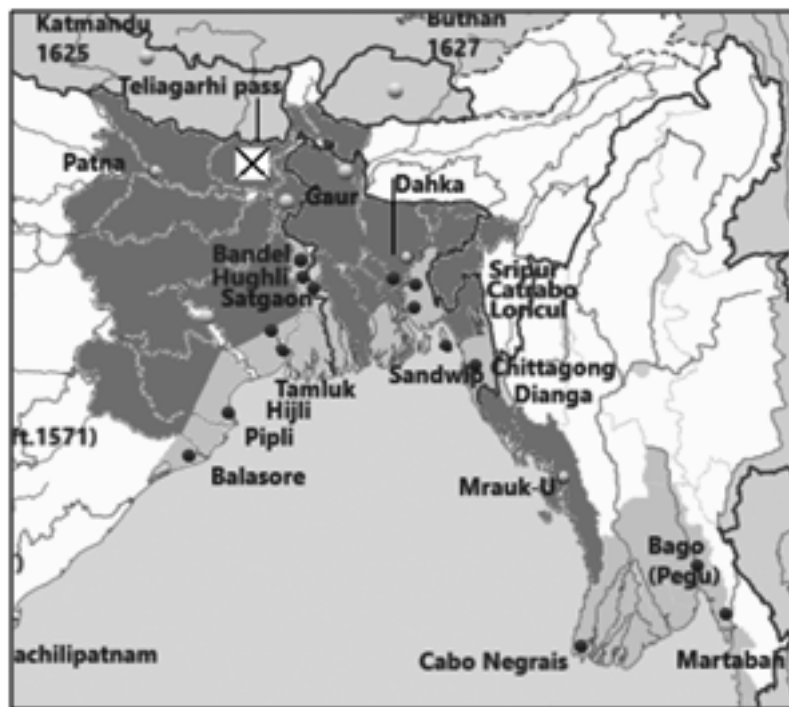
---

The first Europeans to arrive in the coast of Bengal were the Portuguese in the latter half of 16<sup>th</sup> century. Since, the voyage of Vasco da Gama to Calicut (1498), the Portuguese were making steady inroads in Indian trans-oceanic commercial circles. Already in the 1570s Portuguese Christian missionaries cum their royal ambassadors like Monseratte had already appeared in the Mughal court of Akbar asking for commercial favors. Since then, both Akbar and Jahangir had given Portuguese various privileges to enjoy undisturbed maritime commerce and establish make-shift temporary settlements in Bengal. Thus, several Portuguese settlements and factories came up in Hughli, Chittagong and Satgaon.

A good idea of the extent, composition and direction of the Portuguese trade in Bengal can be gathered from Manrique, who was in Bengal during the hey-days of the Portuguese. The articles imported by them from 'southern India' (ie Sumatra, Borneo, Moluccas, etc) were a large amount of 'worked silks, such as brocades, cloth, velvets, damasks, satins, taffetas, muslins', etc. They also brought cloves, nutmegs and mace from Moluccas and Banda, and highly precious camphor from the Isles of Borneo. From the Maldive islands they imported cowris (sea shells) which were then current in Bengal as small currency, 'chanquo' or bigger shells from

Tuticorin and the coast of Tinnevelly, pepper from Malabar and cinnamon from Ceylon (Sri Lanka). They also brought from China great quantities of porcelain, valuable pearls and jewels, many kinds of gift articles such as bedsteads, tables, boxes, chests, writing desks, etc. From the kingdom of 'Salor' and 'Timor' they imported great quantities of sandalwood, both red and white varieties, which in Bengal was a precious commodity.

The Portuguese exported from Bengal a wide variety of merchandise such as cotton goods, gingham made of grass, and silks of various shades as well as sugar, ghee, rice, indigo, long pepper, saltpeter, wax, lac and other articles, which were abundant in Bengal. Rice formed one of the chief articles of Portuguese export to other parts of India and the East Indies. A rough idea of the value of the Portuguese trade in Bengal could be formed from the fact that they paid over Rs. 100,000 yearly as customs duties to the Mughals at the rate of 2.5 per cent on the value of goods exported and imported. In other words, the annual value of their trade in Bengal was around Rs. 40 lakh. So no doubt the Portuguese carried on a very lucrative trade in Bengal and almost monopolized the external as well as coastal trade, while in inland trade they were formidable competitors of the country merchants and other foreigners.



*Various Portuguese outposts and settlements in Bengal province*

But the golden days of the Portuguese trade in Bengal came to an end in 1632. The Portuguese became infamous for their several coercive methods in the region. From looting merchant ships and destabilising the maritime commerce, to forceful enslavement of local people including indiscriminate conversion to Christianity, all these notorious activities to gain short term wealth, earned them the title of “Firingi pirates” among the local populace. Thus, Emperor Shah Jahan in his early tenure ordered his governor Sayesta Khan to oust the Portuguese from Bengal. The port of Hughli was occupied in 1632 and by the time of Aurangzeb’s reign all the Portuguese pirates up to Chittagong port were exterminated. Many of their ships were burnt down by Mughal and local Zamindari forces.

The English and the Dutch East India Companies began their Bengal trade from around the middle of the 17th century with the establishment of their factories in Hughli. The French East India Company was founded later and began its operations only in the 1680s. Among other Europeans, the Ostend Company and the Danish Companies came to Bengal only in the early 18th century and their trade was on a very modest scale. In the early period the European attention focused mainly on the spice trade and both the Dutch and English wanted to procure spice from the so-called Spice Islands in the eastern archipelago. The companies went to these islands to buy spices with silver obtained from the ‘New World’. But to their utter astonishment, they found that it was not silver but cheap and coarse Indian calico that was in demand there. So they turned to India for textiles to exchange for spices in the Indonesian archipelago. First, their attention was drawn to the Coromandel Coast which produced large quantities of cheap and coarse textiles greatly in demand in the Spice Islands. But soon war, famine and political instability rendered the Coromandel trade risky, uncertain and expensive. So the companies eventually turned their attention to Bengal.

Bengal offered particular advantages to the companies. It was the largest producer of coarse and cheap calicoes—much cheaper and of better quality than others. Secondly, Bengal silk was a highly lucrative and profitable commodity for the companies as there was a growing demand for it in Europe, replacing Italian and Persian silk, because of its comparative cheapness and good quality. Moreover a third lucrative item for trade was saltpeter, highly in demand in Europe and which could

also be profitably used as ballast for Europe-bound ships. So the Companies began their Bengal trade in right earnest.

It was from around the 1670s that the trade of the companies in Bengal became significant with a boost in the export of raw silk from Bengal. But it was actually the big boom in the export of Bengal textiles from around the early 1680s that revolutionized the pattern of the Asiatic trade of the companies. This was in fact in response to a revolution in the consumer taste in England and Europe where suddenly Indian textiles, especially the textiles from Bengal, had become the irresistible fashion and consequently there followed an unprecedented demand for Bengal textiles. As a result, Bengal became the most dominant partner in the Asiatic trade of the companies and from around the 1680s until the mid-eighteenth century, the Dutch and the English East India Companies played a significant role in Bengal's maritime and international trade. The French company played an important role only in the 1730s when Dupleix was in charge of the company in Bengal. The trade of other European companies was not at all significant compared to that of the Dutch and the English. It was, however, a different story after The Battle of Plassey (1757).



*An imaginary portrait of a typical European factory settlement in Bengal*

The English company and its servants by virtue of their political and economic control over Bengal began to wipe out all other European and Asian rivals in the Bengal trade and tried to monopolize it for themselves.

The importance of Bengal in the Asiatic trade of the companies can be seen from the fact that Bengal's share in the average annual value of Asian commodities exported to Holland by the Dutch company was around 40 percent in the early eighteenth century. Again, more than 50 percent of the total value of Dutch textile exports from Asia was in the form of Bengal textiles. Thus Bengal became the most important theatre of the activities of the Dutch company not only in India but the whole of Asia. No different was the case with the English company. The English factors regarded Bengal as 'the flower of the Company's garden' and the 'choicest jewel'.

Between 1650 and 1720, the Dutch were much ahead of the English but thereafter the English trade in Bengal picked up and almost equaled the value of the Dutch exports, although the Dutch trade including the trade to their other Asian factories was still higher than that of the English. The English company's exports to Europe increased substantially from the early 1730s and picked up in the period 1740-45.

---

### **14.6 Early relation between the English Merchants and Bengal Nawabate (pre-Shirajdwala period)**

---

The history of English settlements in Bengal Subha dates back to 1633, when they opened up a small factory in Hariharpur near the mouth of River Mahanadi. In course of time three English factories were set up in Qasimbazar, Hughli and Balasore. Ultimately, in 1690, Job Charnock laid the foundation of Calcutta (debatable) in the erstwhile village of Sutanuti (present day Sovabazar area). From now on Calcutta would become the Eastern high command of the English merchants.

We have earlier discussed how Bengal commodities like cotton and sil textiles had high demands in the foreign markets of Europe and Middle East. Now, with the decline of overland trade due to political instability in North India, the European

merchants in Bengal quickly replaced the focus into trans-oceanic trade thereby increasing their profits in large scale. The sudden affluence of the English merchants irked Murshid Quli Khan who in 1713 imposed several restrictions on them and asked them to pay the same trade tax as equal to the local Indian merchants.

Dissatisfied with this, the English cunningly went for a strategic solution, by sending a delegation under John Surman to the court of the then Mughal Emperor Farrukshiyar. The English delegates were well aware with the skills to win over the Emperor. Thus, by the infamous Farrukshiyar's Firman of 1717, The English were granted duty free trade in Bengal along with the right to lease 38 villages in and around Calcutta.

Now Bengal was still officially under the Mughal Empire and Murshid Quli hadn't yet severed his ties with the Imperial court. So, all decrees of the Empire were theoretically valid in the province. But having said that, Murshid Quli was unofficially autonomous in all matters of his statecraft. Therefore, he accepted the duty free right of the English but didn't allowed them to lease the 38 villages and opposed the fortification of Fort William.

The status quo continued during the succeeding Nawabs. The English has to occasionally pay the Nawab with precautionary fees to continue their commercial activities undisturbed. Alivardi Khan was well aware of the fact that how English and the French exerted their rival political competition in the inter-politics of Carnatic states and that they could do the same in Bengal too. So he tried to exercise some controls over them. He compared the Europeans with "hive of bees, whose honey you might reap for benefit, but if you disturbed their hive they would sting you to death." The Marthas invasion considerably changed the scenario. In one hand the Nawabate became busy in tackling that problem, thereby giving a pretext to the Europeans to fortify their settlements while in the other hand, it completely shifted the overland trade to trans-oceanic waters.

---

## 14.7 Conclusion

---

So, on the whole Medieval Bengal had a flourishing commercial economy. Bengal's products particularly cotton textiles and muslins had high demands in the

foreign markets of Europe, Middle East and Far East. About 25% of the total Asian trade was supplied from Bengal. Probably this became her sole object of dilemma. As the greed of this flourishing commercial fortunes attracted the European traders who came running to the Bengal delta thereby monopolizing the trans-oceanic trade from and to Bengal.

---

## 14.8 Questions

---

- 1) How Bengal's commercial economy flourished during Mughal era ?
- 2) Write a short note on Bengal's ship building industries.
- 3) Give a brief view on the trade and commerce scenario of Bengal during Murshid Quli Khan's era.
- 4) Write short notes on the ports of Satgaon and Hugli.
- 5) Describe the rise and fall of Portuguese in Bengal
- 6) How did the trans-oceanic trade to and from Bengal was monopolized by the Europeans ? Mention the role played by each European nation separately.
- 7) How was the relation between the early English merchants with the Bengal Nawabs in pre-Plassey period ?

---

## 14.9 Suggested Readings

---

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar, *From Plassey to Partition : A History of Modern India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Pvt. Ltd., 2004)

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 15 □ Urbanization in Medieval Bengal**

---

### *Structure*

#### **15.0 Objective**

#### **15.1 Introduction**

#### **15.2 Lakhnauti : A case study of the Capital and the chief trading town of Bengal**

#### **15.3 Cultural cause : Role of the Sufi mystic order**

#### **15.4 The minting towns**

#### **15.5 Trade and Commerce**

#### **15.6 Conclusion**

#### **15.7 Questions**

#### **15.8 Suggested Readings**

---

### **15.0 Objective**

---

- The urbanization of Bengal is the theme of the present unit.
- Two basic aspects will be highlighted :
  - The growth of politico-commercial towns in medieval Bengal
  - The role of Sufi mystic order in urbanization process

---

### **15.1 Introduction**

---

During the advent of the Muslims in Bengal the old urban were already in a decaying atmosphere, e.g.Lakhnauti, Satgaon, Sonargaor and Pandua. Scholars working on medieval Indian History observe that with the advent of the Muslims as ruling elite, in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, remarkable changes took place in the city planning. M. Habib’ a pioneer in this respect, formulated the theory of “urban revolution” which is entirely based on growth and multiplication. K.A. Nizami confirms that the immediate and the most significant effect of Turkish occupation was the liquidation



of old pre-Muslim system of city planning. K.M. Ashraf while evaluating the Muslim contribution to urbanization says that, the only contribution of the new Turkish rule was addition of some infrastructural activities namely the constructor of palaces, mosques, tanks to the already established Hindu towns.

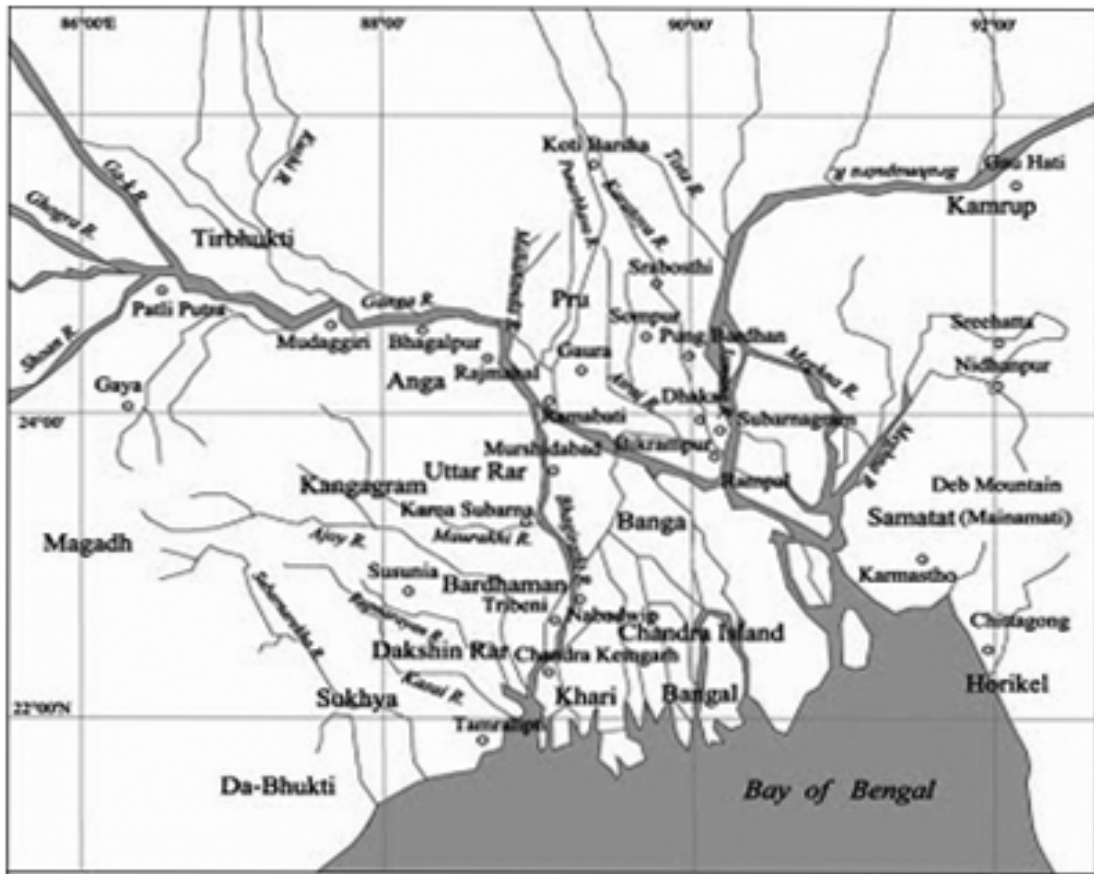
However with the growth of agrarian economy and revival of land and maritime trade in the earlier part of fourteenth century a visible change was seen in the urban areas of the Sultanate. Let us see how was the process of Urbanization in Medieval Bengal and what were the factors that casted their impact over this process.

---

## **15.2 Lakhnauti : A case study of the Capital and the chief trading town of Bengal**

---

Lakhnauti also known as Gaur, lie in the north of Ganges and south of the modern district of Malda in West Bengal. It was build during the pre-Muslim Hindu Sena period, presumably during the reigns of Raja BallalSena. For centuries it served the capital of the Senas and greatly flourished during their times. After the Turkish invasion, Lakhnauti continued to be the hub of all round activities of the Muslim rule and administration throughout the Sultanate period. It was the capital of the kingdom for a period of more than two and a half centuries, from the time of BakhtiyarKhalji (A.D. 1206-11) to Qadr Khan (A.D. 1326-41) and again in the reign of Nasiruddin Mahmud. During the Sena period, Lakhnauti had already became a good centre of trade and commerce. That's why when Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji entered the city with a small number of troops (around two hundred) the people thought them to be traders. Zia-ud-din Barani refers to the market place of Lakhnauti, which was one mile in length, on each side of which the shopkeepers sold their commodities. Several foreigners resided in Lakhnauti. Some stayed there for carrying on trade while the others had joined as functionaries in the administration. Many of them settled there in search of good livelihood. It is true for any trading centers of pre-Muslim India. They were basically very accommodative and provided a good shelter for the foreign immigrants coming from the under-developed tribal regions of West and Central Asia. The Khaljis, the Isfahanis, the Sistanis, the Abyssanians and the Afghans, came to Bengal, even prior to Bakhtiyar. A large number of them settled there, held high posts, became governors and even Sultans.



*Some urban centers of Early Medieval Bengal*

During the Sultanate era, the importance of Lakhnauti, as a trading centre increased. Joas de Barros, a Portuguese historian describes the streets are broad and straight and the main streets have trees planted in rows along the walls to give shade to the passengers. The population is so great and the streets so thronged with the gathering and traffic of people that they cannot force their way past one another. Verthem, another European who visited Gaur in A.D. 1508 comments that the population of the city had reached up to forty thousand and it was home to some of the richest merchants of that time. About a decade later Durate Barbosa found wealthy Arabs, Iranians, Abyssinians and Indians in Gaur. The Portuguese ambassador to Gaur in A.D. 1521 found the streets and lanes of the town are paved with brick like the Lisbon New Street. The market is everywhere and everything including food and other goods alike is in plentiful supply and cost effective. The streets and cross

lanes are so crowded that is impossible to move. The streets are well mapped out and arranged. All the arms, swords, lances, coats of mail, silver plated hauberks and plate helmets are sold in streets, which specialize in these goods. There is also a saddlery, which sells horse, harnessing and in another street all colors of fabric such as silk and other cloth can be found.

The above description shows that Lakhnauti remained a big urban centre under the Bengal Sultans at least till the time of Ghiyas-ud-din Mahmud Shah VI, the last ruler of the Husain Shahi dynasty. It would not appear unreasonable to call it a metropolitan city because what Delhi was to north India Lakhnauti was to Bengal.

---

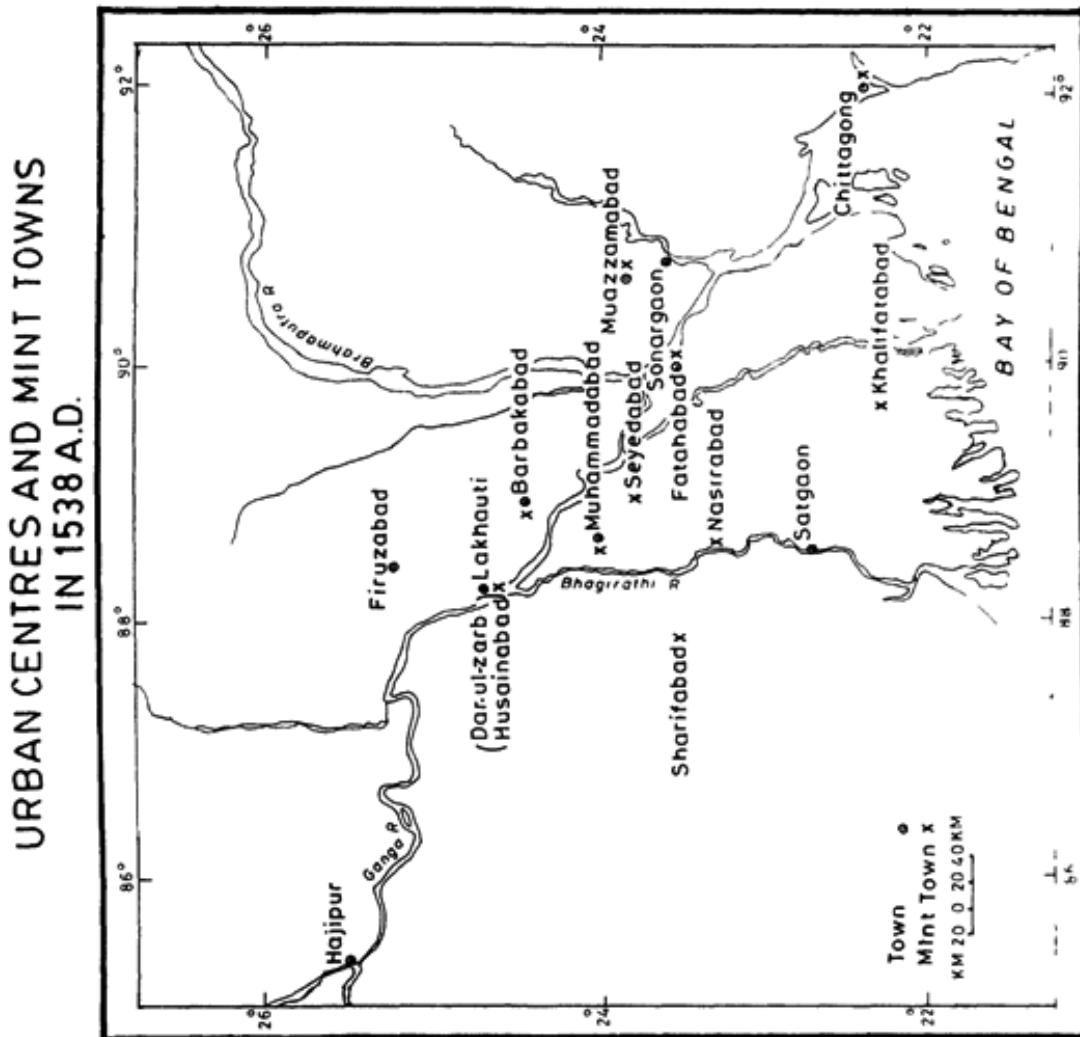
### 15.3 Cultural cause : Role of the Sufi mystic order

---

There were cultural reasons that contributed to growth of towns with limited commercial activities as the immigrant Muslims particularly the Sufis began to construct mosques, *Khanqahs*, *Dargahs*, and *Madarasas*. The Religious settlements of Sufi order were one of the important factors that led to the rise of some urban centers like Lakhnauti. Sunargaon. Satgaon, Chatgaon oi Chittagong, Pandua or Firuzabad.

In Islam Mosques, Madarasas and Khanqah's (hospices) play important roles. Their existence indicates compact conglomeration of inhabitants. The Jami or congregational mosque requires a fixed settlement with a permanent population, of whom at least forty legally responsible men must be present to make the ceremony valid. Tabaqat-i-Nasiri credits Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji for constructing mosques, Madrasas and Khanqahs. This is supported by an Inscription given in the preface of an Arabic version of Sanskrit book on the science of yoga entitled Amrit Kund written by an early thirteenth century Kamrup's philosopher named Bhojar Brahmin, who witnessed a Friday mosque at Lakhnauti during the time of Ali MardanKhalji. It is epigraphically established that not less than a dozen Jami mosques were built alone in Lakhnauti from the time of Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah to Ghiyasuddin Mahmud Shah (1533-8).

Sunargaon was also an important urban centre during the Sultanate period. The city of Sunargaon or Subarnagrama now falls in the NaryanganJ subdivision of



Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. In the first half century of the Sultanate rule Sunargaon is nowhere mentioned. Sunargaon was for the first time mentioned by Zia-ud-din Barani in *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* in the context of Balban's pursuit of Mughis-ud-din Tughril who revolted against the former. At that time, Sunargaon was ruled by a Hindu King, Danuj Rai, probably a descendant of Damodaradeva of the Deva dynasty, which disposed the Sena dynasty in Vikrampur. There are ample evidences to establish that Danuj Rai accepted the over lordship of Balban and paid tribute to him, to his son Bughra Khan and to the other rulers of Lakhnauti. But Sunargaon did not become an integral part of the kingdom or a seat of government till the end of

the thirteenth century. It was Shamsuddin Firuz Shah (1301-16), who completed the conquest of Sunargaon and made it a seat of his kingdom in 1302 CE.

However, Sunargaon soon became a centre of learning and an abode for the Sufis especially in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century. Many Sufis thronged there in the beginning of the last quarter of the thirteenth century, most likely after Balban's departure from Bengal. During this time, Shaikh Abu Tawwama, the great medieval Sufi visited the Sunargaon and settled there permanently." He established there a Madrasa, that is an academy for the students and a monastery for his disciples and maintained them till his death, A.H.700 (A.D. 1300-1). He was accompanied by Hazrat Sharaf-ud-din Yahya Maneri (A.H.661-782) the famous Sufi of Bihar who stayed at Sunargaon for about twenty two years and studied Tafsir, Hadis, and Jurisprudence and other branches of Islamic learning under the able guidance of Abu Tawwama. Hou-Hien in 1415, writes that in Sunargram all the bazaars and shops were well arranged. Sunargaon continued to be a centre of learning for a long period, at least till the time of Husain Shahi dynasty. As a result of this Sufi connection the urban population of Sunargaon increased considerably.

Sources tend to suggest that all these Khanqahas and Madrasas i.e. educational institutions were surrounded by well-qualified people and as such the population around them was very dense. As a result of this dense population a well-planned bazaar (market or shopping centers) got established in the city for buying and selling essentials. The factors related to the cultural aspect reflect the penetration of the Muslims in the city and, thus, contributed to the process of urbanization.

---

## **15.4 The minting towns**

---

To flourish the Business transaction it is necessary to have an organized coinage and currency system. On the eve of the foundation of the Sultanate rule, Bengal did not have a fully organized currency. Sultanate of Bengal instituted an organized currency system, their coinage was based on the principle of bi-metalism, i.e. gold and silver. In later times, some copper pieces were also issued. So whenever the Sultanate rulers incorporate any region into their territory, they issued commemorative coins and established a new center of mint in that place which resulted in the development of a town.

With the capture of the capital at Lakhnauti, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji established a mint house there. Numismatic evidence shows that Lakhnauti continued to issue coins up to the time of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1389-1410 A.D.) The city of Pandua became a mint town in 1342 A.D. during the reign of Ala-ud-din Alam Shah (1338-1342 CE) and continued minting coins till the time of Rukn-uddin Barbak Shah (1459-1474). Sunargaon started minting coins from 1305 CE and continued till the time of Sikandar Shah (1358-1389 CE). Satgaon became a mint town during the time of Muhammad bin Tughlaq in 1329 CE, and had the unbroken continuation up to 1428 CE.' The mINT not only produced coined money but the very existence of its office enlivened the towns from official point of view.

It is certain that the Bengal rulers issued these gold coins occasionally to commemorate an event. They were not issued to facilitate trade or commerce. E.g. Bakhtiyar Khalji issued coins on the occasion of conquest of Gauda. Alauddin Hussain Shah issued gold coins at the time of his victory over Kamrup, Kamta, Jaj Nagar and Orissa. Besides, gold coins were also minted to recognize the sovereignty of the Sultans of Delhi. Coins of Ghiyas-ud-din Iwaz are the best example of such types of coins. Apparently these coins have nothing to do with commercial activities. Neither was there any urge among the early Bengal Muslim rulers to utilize this monetary currency to facilitate commercial activities. Trade although flourished but that was mostly on its own and not for any direct patronage of the Sultans. However, there were instances when these gold coins were given as presents to the Sultans of Delhi as well as to the envoys of the foreign countries.

During the later part of Ilyas Shahi dynasty, as many as twenty mint towns existed. Out of twenty. Fizuzabad, Klannatabad. Satgaon, Fatehabad, Muazzamabad and Chatgaon continued from earlier while Khalifatabad (Bagerghat in Khulna district), Sitpur or Shantipur (in Nadia district), Barbakabad (in modern Dinajpur district) and Muhammadabad (tentatively identified with modern Murshidabad) were new establishments.

So we can say that as a result of such establishment of Mint house at any place by the Sultans, people started to assemble there and the new towns emerged with dense population. This was followed by the development of well-arranged market or Bazaars having all the essentials for the people. All of this coupled together

and led to the creation of urban centers. The establishment of mint towns evolved in such a way that it paved the way for urbanization. It could also be said that the foundation of a considerable number of such mint towns indicate the automatic revival of Bengal's trade and commerce and the consequent establishment of her connection with the different parts of the world. Thus the introduction of money economy partly brought about a second phase of urbanization in Medieval Bengal.

---

## 15.5 Trade and Commerce

---

Last but not the least is the role of trade and commerce behind the process of urbanization. Account of the foreign travelers and a large number of numismatic evidences suggest that by the beginning of 14<sup>th</sup> century, trade and commerce received a new impulse. The information found in the Tahaqali-Nasiri that the invading troops under Bakhtiyar Khalji were mistaken to be the party of horse traders by the inhabitants of Nadia and that all the Tanghan horses which reached Lakhnauti were brought from the cattle market of Karpattan (presumably modern Kathmandu) through the well known route of Mahamhaidarah. This may shed light on the existence of a brisk overland trade in pre Sultanate period.

But during the first century (i.e. the thirteenth century) of the Sultanate rule this impulse was negligible. This was mainly due to political instability as well as non-existence of a standard currency system. There were occasional rivalry and bloodshed between the Muslim Turkish Iqtadars that hampered the peace and stability of the region. Again, the governors and a few rebels who turned independent Sultans issued coins but the purpose of the issuance of such coins was limited, they were the insignia of sovereignty. It was from the dawn of the fourteenth century when the political situation stabilized from the time of Shamsuddin Firuz Shah (1301-16 CE). It is thus from the beginning of the fourteenth century that a new dimension in internal as well as external trade is visible. Almost all the agricultural and non-agricultural products have been sold and purchased in the markets for local consumption. While discussing the prices and cheapness of commodities Ibn Battuta has mentioned that, the demands of certain articles like rice, sugar and cloth. He also refers to ghee, sesame oil and rose water, were so high, that were not exported but

were sold locally. Evidence shows that there were regular markets in Lakhnauti, Sunargaon, Pandua and Satgaon. While mentioning the crafts of Bengal, the Chinese accounts narrate, that all kinds of artisans who were skilled in hundred types of crafts, gathered in the market and possessed different shops there. The Chinese visitor Hou-hien who came to Bengal in 1415 CE has mentioned Sunargaon bazaars where business in all kinds of goods was carried out. He has also referred to the bazaars of Pandua where the shops were arranged side by side. As a result of this enhanced commercial activities, several market towns rose up in different places of Bengal, that attracted more settlements surrounding it, facilitating the process of urbanization.

*Qashba* or smaller towns established links between the city markets and countryside. The term *Qashba* has been found in some coins and Inscriptions such as *Qashba Ghiyaspur*, *Qashba Firuzabad*, etc. The city markets exclusively depended on the surplus produce of the rural areas and the *Qasba* ensured or facilitated the supply of surplus produce to the city markets. Cowries or small shells largely served the purpose of small money in local trade.

In international scenario, It is fairly certain that Bengal was enjoying much prominence as a centre of textile. Cotton production was in large scale and the local merchants generally made it into finished goods. Bengal had developed trade and cultural relations with Indonesian and Malay Peninsula during the period under review.

Evidence has been found in the *Ejaz-i-Khusrau*, written by Amir Khusrau, that the town where the big markets existed became a busy flourishing commercial centre during the Sultanate period. Amir Khusrau, while describing the cheapness and availability of different items, such as slaves and cattles, wearing apparels, books, fruits, prayer carpets, etc., highlights the too much overcrowding in Bazars. The information recorded in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century Chinese accounts suggests that all goods were collected and distributed at Sonargaon and Pandua. It further indicates that rural communities raised their products in nearby towns where from the traders and dealers used to procure and assemble them in the nearby capital city or port city for their further disbursement to different towns and cities.



---

## 15.6 Conclusion

---

From our above discussion, we can conclude that towns and cities existed in Bengal since the pre-Muslim period. However, during the Sultanate period, particularly since the beginning of 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, the process of urbanization received a new boost. Several factors like the arrival of Sufi mystic orders, establishment of minting towns and the growth of trade and commerce were responsible behind this. Among the famous urban centers of Medieval Bengal, Lakhnauti, Pandua, Sunargaon and Satgaon deserve special mention.

---

## 15.7 Questions

---

- 1) What were the factors leading to urbanization in Medieval Bengal ?
- 2) Write a short note on Lakhnauti, the capital of Bengal.
- 3) What was the role of Sufi saints behind the process of urbanization ?
- 4) How did trade and commerce facilitate the rise of urban centers in Medieval Bengal ? Describe with examples.

---

## 15.8 Suggested Readings

---

Alam, Md. Khurshid, *Urbanization Under The Sultans Of Bengal During 1203-1538 A.D.*, (Aligarh : Centre Of Advanced Study Department Of History AMU, 2006)

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 16 □ Society and Literature : An Overview**

---

### *Structure*

#### **16.0 Objective**

#### **16.1 Introduction**

#### **16.2 Pre-Chaitaniya period (1350-1500 CE)**

#### **16.3 Chaitaniya era (1500-1700 CE)**

#### **16.4 Conclusion**

#### **16.5 Questions**

#### **16.6 Suggested Readings**

---

### **16.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of this unit is to understand the development of literature in medieval Bengal.
  - Two major aspects will be covered :
    - The development of literature in Bengal in Pre-Chaitaniya era.
    - The development of literature in Chaitaniya era
  - All the major trends of the Bengal literature during the medieval period will be covered in this unit.
- 

### **16.1 Introduction**

---

Bengali Literature dates back to almost 8th century CE. It may be divided into three main periods : ancient, medieval, and modern. The different periods may be dated as follows : Ancient period from 700-1200 CE, medieval period from 1200-1800 CE, and the modern period from 1800 onwards. The medieval period may again be divided into three periods : Early Medieval also known as the period of transition from 1200-1350 CE; High Medieval from 1350-1700 CE, including the pre-Chaitanya

period from 1350-1500 CE and the Chaitaniya period from 1500-1700 CE; and late medieval from 1700-1800 CE.

In our following passage we will mainly focus on the Bengali literary traditions of the High Medieval Period, which roughly corresponds to the Muslim Rule in Medieval Bengal.

---

## **16.2 Pre-Chaitaniya period (1350-1500 CE)**

---

During this period, Bengali literature developed in three main areas : Vaishnava literature, Mangala literature and translation literature. This period also saw the beginning of Muslim Bengali literature in the form of romantic and narrative poems.

The greatest of Vaishnava writers was the poet Baru Chandidas (14th century) who rendered Jaydev's Sanskrit lyrics about Radha and Krishna into Bengali. The names of several poets who went by the name of Chandidas have been found in the middle Ages viz. Adi Chandidas, Kavi Chandidas, Dvija Chandidas and Dina Chandidas. The confusion about whether there were one or several poets called Chandidas is known in Bengali literature as the 'Chandidas riddle'. Chandidas has been credited with over a thousand lyrics. The introduction to *srikrnakirtan* edited by Basantaranjan Ray Vidvadvallabh and published in 1916 by bangiya sahitya parisat mentions the name of Baru Chandidas. He was perhaps the original Chandidas who composed verses in 1350.

The patronage provided by the Muslim rulers, particularly Sultan Alauddin Hussein Shah, his son Nasrat Shah and commander-in-chief, Paragal Khan, in promoting Bengali literature is specially noteworthy. The 45-year rule of the Hussein Shah dynasty (1493-1538) in Bengal not only led to political, social and cultural prosperity, but also nurtured Bengali Language and literature. It was during the rule of Hussein Shah that some Bengali poets began composing lyrics in Brajabuli. It was also during his rule that Kanka wrote *Vidyasundar Kahini* in praise of satyapir (c 1502).

Padavali or lyrical literature were based on the story of Radha and Krishna and were written by innumerable poets, Hindu and Muslim, including some women

poets. Among the padavali poets were Chandidas, Lochandas, Govindadas, Raysekhar, Sasisekhar, Balaram Das, Narottam Das, Narahari Das and Radhamohan Thakur.

*Translated literature* Maladhar Basu composed Srikrisnavijay, a free translation of the Sanskrit Srimadbhagavata. The poem is also known as Govindamangal or Govindavijay and is believed to be the earliest translation work in Bengali. Several poets translated the Sanskrit Bhagavata, Ramayana and Mahabharata into Bengali during this period. krttivas ojha (15th century) was the first to translate the Ramayana into Bengali. He was followed by several other poets. In the 17th century, Chandravati, daughter of Dwija Bansidas, the composer of Manasamangal, wrote Ramayanagatha. The first Bengali version of the Mahabharata was possibly Kavindra Parameshwar's Mahabharata or Kavindra Mahabharata (1525). Sanjay and Srikar Nandi also wrote versions of the Mahabharata. Popularly, the most important Bengali Mahabharata was, however, composed by Kashiram Das around 1602-10. It is probable, however, that other poets also contributed towards the final version that was printed at Serampore Press in 1801-3. Because of its refined language and feelings of devotion, this version became more popular than other Bengali versions.

*Mangalkavya* The oldest of the extant mangalkavyas is Manasamangal, by Vijay Gupta, composed perhaps in 1494-95. According to the bhanita, or signature piece, Vijay Gupta was a resident of the village of Fullasri in barisal. Vijay Gupta's contemporary, Bipradas Piplai, also wrote a poem titled Manasavijay (c 1494). Another version of Manasamangal is Narayan Dev's Padmapurana. These narrative lyrics describe the greatness of the gods and goddesses, but also provide vivid pictures of a land oppressed on the one hand by kings and on the other by floods, famines, epidemics, snakes, and tigers. Another important genre of mangalkavya is Chandimangal. Its first composer, Manik Datta, perhaps belonged to the pre-Chaitanya era. He was followed by the poet Madhavacharya towards the end of the 16th century. Two other famous poets of Chandimangal were Mukundaram Chakrovorty and Dvija Madhav.

In the context of Muslim Bengail literature, the poems written by Muslims during the Middle Ages can be divided into 6 groups: narrative poems (based on Muslim and Indian stories), religious poems, poems on cultural links, dirges, poems on astrology and poems on musicology. The greatest contribution of the Muslims to Bengali literature during this period was, however, the introduction of narrative and

romantic poems, many of them being free translations or adaptations of Arabic or Persian romances.

Shah Muhammad Sagir (c 1400) was one of the earliest of the Bengali Muslim poets. Though his work Yusuf-Zulekha (a romantic couplet) contains no signature piece identifying him, he is generally regarded as being from East Bengal as copies of his poems have been found in the Chittagong-Comilla-Tripura region. Other epic poets include Jainuddin, Muzammil, Sheikh Faizullah, Daulat Uzir Bahram Khan. Jainuddin became famous with Rasulbijay, his only epic. Muzammil became famous mainly for his three poetic works : Nitisastravarta, Sayatnama and Khanjancharita.

Donagazi's Saifulmuluk Badiuzzamal (mid-16th century) is written in simple language and reveals the influence of Prakrit. Sheikh Faizullah occupies an important place among the Muslim poets of the medieval period with Goraksavijay, Gazivijay, Satyapir (1575), Zainaber Chautisa and Ragnama. Goraksavijay, which is based on Kavindra's poem, is in two parts. Part one describes how Gorakhnath rescued his guru, Minanath, while part two describes the ascetic life of King Gopichandra. Zainaber Chautisa narrates the sad story of Karbala in the form of Zainab's lament. Daulat Uzir Bahram Khan's only extant work, Laila-Majnu, evidently composed between 1560 and 1575, is a thematic translation of the Persian poet Zami's Laily-Majnu.

Several Muslim poets were influenced by Vaishnavism, among them Chand Kazi (15th century), and Afzal Ali (17th century). Chand Kazi was the Kazi of Nabadwip under Sultan Hussein Shah (1493-1519) when Vaishnavism spread to Nabadwip. Afzal Ali's Nasihatnama is composed in the Vaishnava style.

Other medieval Muslim poets include SYED SULTAN (c 1550-1648,) Sheikh Paran (c 1550-1615, Nurnama, Nasihatnama), Haji Muhammad (c 1550-1620, Nur Jamal, Suratnama), Nasrullah Khan (c 1560-1625, Musar Sawwal, Shariatnama, Hidayitul Islam), Muhammad Khan (c 1580-1650, Satya-Kali-Vivad-Sambad, HanifarLadai, MaktulHusein), Syed Martuza (c 1590-1662, Yog-Kalandar, padavali), Sheikh Muttalib (c 1595-1660, Kifayitul-Musallin), Mir Muhammad Shafi (c 1559-1630, Nurnama, Nurkandil, Sayatnama) and Abdul Hakim (c 1620-1690, Lalmati-Sayfulmuluk, Nurnama). Poets who composed between 1600 and 1757 include Nawaj Khan, Qamar Ali, Mabgal (Chand), Abdul Nabi, Muhammad Fasih, Fakir Garibullah,

Muhammad Yakub, Sheikh Mansur, Muhammad Uzir Ali, Sheikh Sadi and HeyatMamud. Syed Sultan's Nabibamsa, Muhammad Khan's MaktulHusein and SkChand's Rasulbijay are known as Islamic Puranas.

---

### 16.3 Chaitaniya era (1500-1700 CE)

---

Chaitanyadev not only introduced the Gaudiya school of Vaishnavism in Bengal, but also inspired a powerful group of writers to write biographies about him, among them Govindadas Karmakar's Govindadaser Kadacha, Jayananda's Chaitanyamangal (end of the 16th century), Brndabandas' Chaitanyabhagavat (1573), Lochandas' (1523-1589) Chaitanyamangal and Krsihnadas Kaviraja's *chaitanyacharitamrta* (1615). Several other biographies were also written about Chaitanyadev's followers including Narahari Chakravarti's Bhaktiratnakar (biographies of Chaitanya followers) Nityananda Das Premavilas (biographies of Srinivas, Narottam and Syamananda) and Isan Nagar's Advaitaprakas (1568-69). Chaitanyacharitamrtais considered to be the best biography of Chaitanyadev. This scholarly book contains his life story, his philosophy and devotion, all expressed in simple language. Jayananda's Chaitanyamangal contains many interesting facts of the period, for example, how the Hindus were learning Persian and wearing Muslim outfits.

In the socio-cultural context, Alauddin Hussain Shah is known to be the Akbar of Bengal. As stated earlier, within short time of his coronation, he stopped the recruitment of Ethiopians in government positions, to prevent any farther Abyssinians upsurge. Rather, taking an unusual liberal attitude all the posts were from then thrown open to Hindus and Muslims alike according to their ability. As a result, during his time, a large number of Bengali Hindus were recruited among the plum positions of the administration. Thus, his principal secretaries, the royal physicians, the master of the mint, along with various chiefs of his bodyguards were all Hindus. The two famous Vaishanava brothers Rupa Goshwami and Santan Goshwami enjoyed high positions among his court officials. Rupa Goswami was the Sakar Mallik, Sanatana Goswami was the Dabir-i-Khas, Jagai and Madhai were Kotwals of Navadvipa, Gopinath Vasu was his minister, Mukundadas was his private physician, Keshav Khan Chhatri was the chief of his bodyguards and one Anup was in charge of the mint. The Hindus in return honored him with the esteemed titles of Nripati

Tilak (Crown of Kings) and Jagat Bhusan (Adornment of the Universe), as mentioned by Vijaya Gupta. Beside this, Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah was also a great patron of Bengali Literature. He patronized the learning and flourishing of the Bengali language and pioneered many Bengali literaturists of his time like Vijay Gupta, Shrikara Nandi, etc. The Muslim foreigners started adapting Bengali customs and culture while the Bengali Hindus in turn learned Persians to secure high positions in the administration. However, contrary sources suggest that he was not very liberal towards the Hindus. Not only did he destroyed many Hindu idols in the wars of Assam and South East, but oppression of Hindus was also widespread during his times, though he himself may not have been directly responsible for it, and often turned a blind eye to those practices. It is also to be noted that during his time, a large number of Hindus converted to Islam to gain positions and social advantage. In this connection, it is worthy to mention that the famous Vaishnava saint Chaitaniya Mahaprabhu flourished in Bengal during Alauddin's time. But due to some reason or other, he was forced to leave Bengal, his homeland and took refuge in the neighboring kingdom of Orissa under Gajapati ruler Pratprudradeva.

Bengali literature in Arakan : Towards the end of the Middle Ages, there was considerable cultivation of Bengali literature in the independent and semi-independent states on the borders of Bengal. Arakan became a tributary state of Gaud in 1430. For the subsequent 200 years the rulers of Arakan patronised Bengali language and literature. Among those who wrote poetry in Bengali under the patronage of the Arakan court was Daulat Qazi (about 1600-1638) whose *Satimayna O Lorchandrani* was the first Bengali romance. Daulat Qazi was unable to complete the poem which was later completed by Syed Alawal (c 1607-1680). Apart from *Padmavat*, believed to be his finest poem, Alawal also wrote *Saifulmulk Badiuzzamal*, a Bengali rendering of a Persian narrative about the romance of prince Saifulmulk and the fairy princess Badiuzzamal. Arakan's other poets include Maradan (about 1600-1645) who wrote *Nasirnama*, and QuareshiMagan Thakur who wrote *Chandravati*, a fairy-tale narrative.

---

## 16.4 Conclusion

---

Therefore, we can conclude that the literary traditions in Bengal were deep routed. Already lots of works were done in the pre Chaitaniya period. After 1500 CE

it received new boost from the upcoming Vaishnava Bhakti literatures influenced by Chaitaniyadev's philosophy.

---

### 16.5 Questions

---

- 1) Describe the literary traditions of Medieval Bengal in the pre-1500 CE period.
- 2) How does the appearance of Chaitanyadev influenced the Bengal literary tradition in the post-1500 scenario ?
- 3) Who was called Nripati Tilak and what was his contribution in this context ?

---

### 16.6 Suggested Readings

---

Ali, Mohammad Mohar, *History of the Muslims of Bengal, (Vol I)*, (Riyadh : Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985)

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Chatterjee, Suniti Kumar, *The origin and development of Bengali Language*, Vol 1 (Calcutta, 1975)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)



## **Module IV**

**Eastern India : Medieval Eastern India :  
Religion and Culture**



---

## **Unit 17 □ Religious Traditions**

---

### *Structure*

#### **17.0 Objective**

#### **17.1 Introduction**

#### **17.2 The pre-Muslim Sahajiya sect of Hinduism in Bengal**

#### **17.3 The Hindu states in the midst of Muslim Sultanates in Bengal**

#### **17.4 The foreign immigrant Muslim population**

#### **17.5 Arrival of Sufism in the Bengali countryside and spread of Islam**

#### **17.6 Relation between the Muslim Sultanates and Hindu subjects**

#### **17.7 Conclusion**

#### **17.8 Questions**

#### **17.9 Suggested Readings**

---

### **17.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to understand the religious traditions of medieval Bengal.
  - Attempt will be made to study the pre-Islamic religious sects of Bengal.
  - The role of the Hindu sects will also be discussed.
  - The growth and spread of Sufism in the rural Bengal and its relationship with the rise of Islam will be a matter of analysis.
  - The learners will also come to know the relationship between the Muslim political authority and the Hindu subjects in medieval Bengal.
- 

### **17.1 Introduction**

---

The term “Medieval Bengal” generally denotes to the Islamic rule in the Bengal delta. Muslims ruled Bengal for approximately five and a half centuries beginning

with Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji's (military general of Qutb Uddin Aibak of Turkic origin) arrival in 1206 CE until the East India Company's take over in 1757 by defeating Nawab Sirajud-Daulah. The Medieval Bengal (1206-1757 CE) is not present Bangladesh and the West Bengal of India only, it also included parts of Tripura, Bihar, Assam, and Orissa where Bengali is the mother tongue. In the context of religion, for centuries Bengal hosted the culture of various sects and communities. Although Medieval Bengal occasionally witnessed both Religious oppressions and religious tolerance simultaneously, buton the whole it is argued by various scholars that Medieval Bengal had given its own indigenou taste to all the thriving religions in its territory. That is to say, that all the religions that grew up in Bengal delta be it Hinduism, Islam or Buddhism, undergrew its own Bengal-centric version which was quiet different from the same practiced elsewhere particularly in the heartland North India. Let us discuss the development of various religious tradition found in Medieval Bengal.

---

## 17.2 The pre-Muslim Sahajiya sect of Hinduism in Bengal

---

Due to its peculiar Geographical location, the Bengal delta always happens to be at outside the frontier of the orthodox Brahminical Hinduism prevailing in North India. Hence in Bengal there developed a more liberal heterogeneous version of religious philosophy which can be called the Sahajiya sect of Hinduism.

The *Sahajiya sadhana* or religious tradition was brought into focus through philosophical formulation of the Buddhist Sahajiyas at the popular level under the Pala rule in Bengal during the period from the 8th century to the 11th century. It continued in the Sena period too. The Sahajiyas would proceed in a direction opposite to what was advocated by sectarian scholastic scriptures. They would avoid all forms of institutional religion in which the natural piety of the soul was overshadowed by the useless paraphernalia of ritualism and pedantry. The ultimate object of the 'reverse' journey of the Sahajiyas was to return to one's own self, which was '*sahaja*' or inborn in nature. This approximation to one's real self was fundamentally based on the method of self-realization. In this context, it is worthy to mention that, the *Bauls* emerged from this earlier Sahajiya background and

enriched the movement with their own '*nirguna*' characteristics, which would subsequently provide a crucial element for discourse with the incoming Sufis of Islam.

Thus, long before the coming of Islam, the Bengal society had developed a non-orthodox variant of Hinduism that became popular among its countryside local populace. The culture and the philosophical base of its society was thus quiet different from the caste based orthodox Hinduism prevalent in mainland North India. Therefore, this clears the ground for the future acceptance of Sufi liberal philosophy among the Bengali masses. It is also worthy to mention one thing here, that there is a concept among some historians that frustrated by the casteist oppression from the Brahminical sections, the lower classes of Hindus latter converted in mass during the Islamic period. But it should be better pointed out that orthodox casteism and caste based oppression as such was never prevalent in Bengal delta as it was elsewhere. From the very beginning, the Hindu community in Bengal was more accommodative and affiliated to liberalized philosophy of Hinduism rather than the conservative one prevalent in North or Western India. So conversion due to caste based oppression in Hindu society was basically out of question in Medieval Bengal.



*Jor Temple at Bishnnupur (Left); Intrinsic terracotta curvings in the Temples of Mallabhum (Right)*

---

### **17.3 The Hindu states in the midst of Muslim Sultanates in Bengal**

---

In the midst of the Muslim rule in Medieval Bengal, there were several Hindu states established in and around Bengal during the medieval and early modern

periods, whose history are very little discussed. These local kingdoms, which maintained a symbiotic relationship with the ground level peasant population, contributed a lot to the economic and cultural landscape of Bengal. Extensive land reclamation in forested and marshy areas were carried out and intrastate trade as well as commerce were highly encouraged. These kingdoms also helped introduce new music, painting, dancing and sculpture into Bengali art-forms as well as many temples were constructed during this period. Militarily, they served as bulwarks against Portuguese and Burmese attacks. These states includes the principalities of Maharaja Pratapaditya of Jessore, Raja Sitaram Ray of Burdwan, Raja Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia Raj and Kingdom of Mallabhum. The Kingdom of Bhurshut was a medieval Hindu kingdom spread across what is now Howrah and Hooghly in the Indian state of West Bengal. Maharaja Rudranarayan consolidated the dynasty and expanded the kingdom and converted it into one of the most powerful Hindu kingdom of the time. His wife Maharani Bhavashankari defeated the Pathan resurgence in Bengal and her reign brought power, prosperity and grandeur to Bhurishrestha Kingdom. Their son, Maharaja Pratapnarayan, patronized literature, art, trade and commerce, as well as welfare of his subjects. Afterwards, Maharaja Naranarayan maintained the integrity and sovereignty of the kingdom by diplomatically averting the occupation of the kingdom by the Mughal forces. The Koch Bihar Kingdom in the Northern Bengal flourished during the period of 16th and the 17th centuries as well as weathered the Mughals and survived till the advent of the British. The Mallas of Mallabhum deserves special mention for their contribution in the development of the peculiar Bishnupur style of Terracotta Hindu Temples like Jor Temple, Radha Madhab Temple, Shyam Ray Temple, etc.

---

#### **17.4 The foreign immigrant Muslim population**

---

After the establishment of Turko-Muslim rule in Bengal (1206 CE), The Muslim population in Bengal comprises two composite identities—the immigrant Muslims and the converted Muslims. The Muslim immigrants are mainly Arabs, Persians, Turks, Mughals, and Afghans. The converted Muslims are from the local Hindu and Buddhist populations. During the eighth century, when the growth of Islam reached India, it expanded to Bengal. The conquest of Nadia, the capital of the last Sena

empire of Bengal, by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji opened the gate of Bengal for Muslim immigrants mentions that from the time of Bakhtiyar Khalji, the number of immigrant Muslims increased. Muslims of different nationalities entered Bengal as administrators, soldiers, preachers, teachers, traders, physicians, artisans, masons, and fortune seekers. From the beginning of the 13th century to the middle of the 18th century, whenever the Muslims held political power in Bengal, as to historian A Ahmed, they were mainly from “Turko-Afghan, Abyssinian, Mughal, and Persian origins”. Later on, many other immigrants from Central Asia and upper India settled in Bengal. During the Turkish Sultanate, a considerable number of the Turks settled in Bengal. They were a major element of the Muslim immigrants of Bengal and had a notable contribution toward the socio-cultural development of Muslims in Bengal.

After the establishment of Turko-Muslim rule in Bengal (1206 CE), for centuries the early Turkish elites were devoid of any socio-cultural connection with vast masses of Bengali peasant population. Neither, did they have any intention to do the same. They were mainly centered in some specific urban towns like Gaud, Pandua, etc, with their only target being political consolidation and territorial extension. They considered the local non-muslim agricultural masses as ‘lowborns’ and had no interest in accommodating them in their cultural domain. They were simply the source of revenue for the early Turko-Muslim administration.

---

### **17.5 Arrival of Sufism in the Bengali countryside and spread of Islam**

---

Situation started changing from the Hussain Shahi period. Shah, who was the most important Sultan in the Turko-Afghan period, had, however, other priorities. He, like Iliyash Shah and other major Sultans, was, no doubt, keenly aware of the need to consolidate the political foundation of the Sultanate in an alien province like Bengal. However, his main concern was to strengthen the land revenue administration with the cooperation of the local Zamindars who were overwhelmingly Hindu by religion. A contradiction was emerging between the imperial authorities in Delhi and the provincial Sultans of Bengal in respect of sharing of the land revenue surplus

from Bengal, which was considered to be one of the prosperous provinces of the country. Husain Shah was deeply concerned to have the steady cooperation of the Zamindars of Bengal in his thrust to sustain a kind of autonomous position in matters of land revenue administration of Bengal, which would not be subservient to the increasing demands of the imperial authorities in Delhi. In this crucial context, Husain Shah was not at all inclined to hurt the religious sensibilities of the Hindu Zamindars of the province. However, it was also true that Husain Shah responded to the requests of the orthodox Ashraf clerics to some extent. Thus, he extended his cooperation to build mosques and Madrasas, patronized Islamic scholars, gave support to Islamic religious endowments, and appointed qazis or Islamic judicial officers. Thus from Hussain Shahi period the Bengal Sultanate gradually started penetrating its domain into the interior countryside of Bengal and among its subaltern non-Muslim peasant population.

The processes continued during the Mughal era. The Mughals in turn situated their capital not in Gaud but deep in Dhaka, which was more interior and central to the agricultural peasant belt of deltaic Bengal. During Mughal period, more focus over agriculture grew up and the Mughal Subedars devoted special attention to farther uplift the agricultural production to increase its revenue. In fact, Bengal at that time became the highest agricultural productive state among all the Mughal subhas.

This focus on agriculture paved the way for Sufi immigration and spread of Sufi mystic philosophy among the peasant society of Bengal. Concerned with the need for bringing stability to their turbulent and underdeveloped eastern frontier in Bengal, the Mughal state deliberately encouraged several good orators, clerics and philosophers, (called as “forest pioneers” by historian Atis Dasgupta) to migrate and permanently settle down into the interior agricultural heartland of Eastern Bengal. The Mughals also granted favorable or even tax-free tenures of land to these industrious individuals who were expected to clear and bring into cultivation undeveloped forest tracts. The policy was basically intended to promote the emergence of local communities that would be both economically productive and politically loyal. Now, these immigrants got permanently stationed there, build local mosques or majaras under direct or indirect state patronage and started gathering the local populace around them. Their primary function was to motivate the local population with agricultural expansion, forest clearance and farther penetration into Eastern delta. As a result, these forest



pioneers stated gaining local influence and their *masjids* and *majahars* became local community centers.

Now as they developed their popularity among local peasant population, side by side, these new settlers also started preaching the philosophical ideas of Sufism and the mystic form of Islam among these non-Muslim village populations. Now the minds of these population was still fresh and tender, since until then, they were living beyond the peripheries of any establish Hindu religion. The only popular cult prevailing among them was the Sahajiya version of Hinduism. So it became easy for those forest pioneers cum new Islamic immigrant clerics to mould their mind and attract them to the Sufi mystic form of Islam. It is worthy to mention here was what they were preaching were not the political form of mainstream orthodox Islam, but a more moderate form of Sufi Islam, whose mystic values were very close to the liberal Sahajiya version of Hinduism with whom the local peasant populace were so long familiar with. Thus, these forest pioneers or agriculture promoters soon rose as the new Sufi saints or *Pirbabas* for the local village centric peasant masses of Eastern Bengal.

---

## **17.6 Relation between the Muslim Sultanates and Hindu subjects**

---

During the Sultanate period, the majority populations of India were still Hindus while having the long leadership period by many Muslims in the region, which indicates that non-Muslims had religious freedom, and they were not forced by the Muslim rulers to accept Islam (Eaton, 1993). In their administration, sultans appointed many non-Muslims. O'Connell (2011) mentions that although the rulers were Muslims, their non-Muslim subjects were illustrious in learned professions, business, and revenue collection. Many of them held key positions in the government. Zami and Lorea (2016) argued that this policy of inclusion of Hindus in the administration process resulted in the development of powerful landlord (*zamindar*) system among the Hindus. The reign of Alauddin Husain Shah (1494-1519 CE) is regarded as a golden period in Bengal for his liberalism and tolerance toward the Hindus, where he allowed many vital positions to be led by Hindus. In addition, Alauddin Husain

Shah's *wazir* (prime minister) was a Hindu. Also, Rupa and Sanatana Goshwami (two Hindu brothers) assumed the position of *dabir-i-khas* (the Sultan's secretary) and *sakarmalik* (state minister) respectively during his reign.

However, having mentioned these examples there was also a contrasting side to this approach. Time and again the Muslim Sultans were criticized for their certain religious intolerance. In this connection, the oldest theory of Islamization in India, which Eaton called 'the Religion of the Sword theory', stresses the role of military force in the diffusion of Islam in India and elsewhere. The theory actually proposed the view that the ancestors of native Muslim population of Bengal were forced to convert to Islam owing to tremendous oppression by the Muslim army and the Muslim administration during the medieval ages. Indeed the Turkish invasion of 13<sup>th</sup> century under Bakhtiyar Khalji brought about an era of mass murder, genocide and oppression among the indigenous population of Bengal. Owing to superior military skills, the Muslim invaders could easily dominate large tracts of Bengal delta. Cities were plundered, villages (mostly of peasants) were looted along with large scale genocide and sexual exploitation. The trend continued in some scale during the latter Mameluk, Hussain Shahi and Iliyash Shahi Sultanates. Sometimes local Hindu Temples were destroyed and Idols were desecrated by Sultanate armies just to destroy the emotional moral of the native indigenous non-Muslim population. Along with it several taxes including Jijya was imposed and economic exploitation continued. As a result, large numbers of non-Muslim population converted to Islam in order to escape further human slaughter and genocide. As for instance, historian Dulal Bhowmik (2007) asserts the Muslim rulers not only destroyed Hindu temples but also built mosques with temple-stones. He mentions that stones carved with the Hindu gods and goddesses were used in building the Zafar Khan mosque, the tomb of Sultan Jalaluddin at Eklakhi, etc. Sometimes mosques were allegedly built over pre-existing destroyed Hindu Temples. As for example, the Adina Mosque in Malda was allegedly built at the same place after destroying the magnificent Adinath Shiva Temple of the Pala-Sena period. Distinct architectural and archaeological features of a pre-existing non Islamic (Hindu) religious structure is still clearly visible in the walls of Adina Mosque.

---

## 17.7 Conclusion

---

Thus, Medieval Bengal developed as a convergent point of different religions. Although the region simultaneously witnessed both Religious oppressions and religious tolerance, but on the whole it is argued by various scholars that Medieval Bengal had given its own indigenous taste to all the thriving religions in its territory. That is to say, that all the religions that grew up in Bengal delta be it Hinduism, Islam or Buddhism, undergrew its own Bengal-centric version which was quiet different from the same practiced elsewhere particularly in the heartland North India.

---

## 17.8 Questions

---

- 1) Describe in brief the different religious traditions visible in Medieval Bengal ?
- 2) How the process of agricultural expansion facilitated the spread of Sufism in Bengal, particularly during the Mughal period ? Was it linked to a religious process or chiefly an economic one ?
- 3) What were the importance of the intermediate Hindu kingdoms that developed in the midst of Sultanate rule in Bengal ?
- 4) Describe in brief about the early Muslim immigrants in Bengal. Why did they failed to attach themselves with the bulk of peasant masses in the beginning ?
- 5) How was the relation between the Hindu subjects and the Muslim Sultanates on the whole in Medieval Bengal ?

---

## 17.9 Suggested Readings

---

Bhowmik, Dulal, State, religion and Culture: Hinduism. In E. Ahmed and Harun-or-Rashid (Eds.), *State and culture: Cultural survey of Bangladesh* Vol. 3, (2007), pp. 341-369

Dasgupta, Atis, "Islam in Bengal : Formative Period", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 32, No. 3/4 (Mar.-Apr., 2004), pp. 30-41

Eaton, Richard M., *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier : 1204-1760*, (Berkeley : University Of California Press, 1993)

Elius, Mohammad and Khan, Isha, “Muslim Treatment of Other Religions in Medieval Bengal”, *Sociology of Religion*, (Sage, October 2020), pp 1-14

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 18 □ Sufism in Bengal**

---

### *Structure*

#### **18.0 Objective**

#### **18.1 Introduction**

#### **18.2 The pre-Muslim Sahajiya sect of Hinduism in Bengal**

#### **18.3 Early Muslim rule and its indifference to countryside populace of Bengal**

#### **18.4 Renewed interest into agricultural countryside from Hussain Shahi period**

#### **18.5 Arrival of Sufi mystic order in the Bengali countryside**

#### **18.6 The Sufi mystic principles and their closeness with pre-Muslim Sahojiya tradition**

#### **18.7 The tradition of songs ('sama')**

#### **18.8 Conclusion**

#### **18.9 Questions**

#### **18.10 Suggested Readings**

---

### **18.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of this unit is to study the rise and spread of Sufism in medieval Bengal.
- To understand the theme, the learners will be first offered to know the pre-Islamic religious developments, especially the sahajiya sect of Hinduism.
- The present unit will also help the learners to understand the attitude of the Muslim rulers to the rural Bengal.
- The spread and diffusion of Sufism in rural Bengal and the principles of Sufi mystic order will also be covered in this discussion.
- The present unit will also elaborate the characteristic features and functional aspects of Sufism.

---

## 18.1 Introduction

---

The questions relating to the initial identity of the Bengal Muslims in the formative period during the tenure of the Turk-Afghan and the Mughal rulers have stimulated renewed interest among the historians over the last two decades. Among them, the research work of Rafiuddin Ahmed and Richard Eaton on the Bengal Muslims, deserves special mention. Their pioneering work, however, did not deal with the philosophic domain of religious discourse, which was taking shape in Bengal between the *Sahajiya* syncretistic tradition and Sufism of Islam during the period from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In our following article, rather than plain description, we will rather deal with the chronological process that led to the development of the peculiar Bengal centric Sufi traditions in the light of Muslim rule in Bengal.

---

## 18.2 The pre-Muslim Sahajiya sect of Hinduism in Bengal

---

Due to its peculiar Geographical location, the Bengal delta always happens to be at outside the frontier of the orthodox Brahminical Hinduism prevailing in North India. Hence in Bengal there developed a more liberal heterogeneous version of religious philosophy which can be called the Sahajiya sect of Hinduism.

The *Sahajiya sadhana* or religious tradition was brought into focus through philosophical formulation of the Buddhist Sahajiyas at the popular level under the Pala rule in Bengal during the period from the 8th century to the 11th century. It continued in the Sena period too. The Sahajiyas would proceed in a direction opposite to what was advocated by sectarian scholastic scriptures. They would avoid all forms of institutional religion in which the natural piety of the soul was overshadowed by the useless paraphernalia of ritualism and pedantry. The ultimate object of the 'reverse' journey of the Sahajiyas was to return to one's own self, which was '*sahaja*' or inborn in nature. This approximation to one's real self was fundamentally based on the method of self-realization. In this context, it is worthy to mention that, the *Bauls* emerged from this earlier Sahajiya background and

enriched the movement with their own '*nirguna*' characteristics, which would subsequently provide a crucial element for discourse with the incoming Sufis of Islam.

Thus, long before the coming of Islam, the Bengal society had developed a non-orthodox variant of Hinduism that became popular among its countryside local populace. The culture and the philosophical base of its society was thus quite different from the caste based orthodox Hinduism prevalent in mainland North India. Therefore, this clears the ground for the future acceptance of Sufi liberal philosophy among the Bengali masses. It is also worthy to mention one thing here, that there is a concept among some historians that frustrated by the casteist oppression from the Brahminical sections, the lower classes of Hindus later converted in mass during the Islamic period. But it should be better pointed out that orthodox casteism and caste based oppression as such was never prevalent in Bengal delta as it was elsewhere. From the very beginning the Hindu community in Bengal was more accommodative and affiliated to liberalized philosophy of Hinduism rather than the conservative one.

---

### **18.3 Early Muslim rule and its indifference to countryside populace of Bengal**

---

The Sena dynasty was mostly ousted in the first decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Turk-Afghan invaders. The important Muslim groups, who accompanied the Turkish chieftains, consisted of long distance traders, administrators, leaders of imperial corps, orthodox mullahs and maulavis. These immigrants of foreign blood, coming across the Khyber, who sought to adopt Perso-Islamic life style and cultivate Arabic and Persian literature, were denoted as Ashraf or Muslim aristocratic classes. Though they were minority in the midst of the vast majority of non-Muslim population in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal, the Ashraf classes began to hold crucial political and administrative positions in the new ruling hierarchy. Their major goal was to consolidate their own political power under the Sultan or the provincial ruler in a territory which was almost entirely non-Muslim. The orthodox mullahs and maulavis, belonging to the Ashraf classes, tried to prevail on the Sultans to build up a religious infrastructure, which could expedite the process of political consolidation.

Although there were some forms of forced conversion in the early period, but overall they were mostly limited to few areas and on few non-Muslim classes. The foreign Turkish Muslims largely were devoid of any connections with the vast countryside local non-Muslim populace of Bengal who were chiefly agriculturist. Neither have they any interest to do so. They were exclusively centered in certain urban centers like Gaur, Pandua, Satgaon, Sonargaon, etc. and their chief target was political consolidation and forceful extraction of revenues from bigger landed intermediaries. Moreover, these early Turkish elites Muslims were highly racists. They considered the local non-muslim population of villages to be 'low borns' and 'outcastes'. Thus to preserve the 'purity' of their Islamic race they had no intention to welcome them to their religion and even if they converted out of military oppression they could hardly attain the same socio-economic status similar to the Turko-Persian ruling classes. Thus, in the early eras of Muslim rule (particularly during the Iliyash Shahi and Abyssinian rule), political Islam hadn't yet penetrated into the lower level of peasant population in Bengal.

---

#### **18.4 Renewed interest into agricultural countryside from Hussain Shahi period**

---

Situation started changing from the Hussain Shahi period. Shah, who was the most important Sultan in the Turko-Afghan period, had, however, other priorities. He, like Iliyash Shah and other major Sultans, was, no doubt, keenly aware of the need to consolidate the political foundation of the Sultanate in an alien province like Bengal. However, his main concern was to strengthen the land revenue administration with the cooperation of the local Zamindars who were overwhelmingly Hindu by religion. A contradiction was emerging between the imperial authorities in Delhi and the provincial Sultans of Bengal in respect of sharing of the land revenue surplus from Bengal, which was considered to be one of the prosperous provinces of the country. Husain Shah was deeply concerned to have the steady cooperation of the Zamindars of Bengal in his thrust to sustain a kind of autonomous position in matters of land revenue administration of Bengal, which would not be subservient to the increasing demands of the imperial authorities in Delhi. In this crucial context, Husain Shah was not at all inclined to hurt the religious sensibilities of the Hindu



Zamindars of the province. It should be noted that he cordially inducted Rupa and Sanatan Goswami, the two eminent Vaishnava scholars, to take charge of the highly responsible positions in land revenue administration of Bengal. It was also true that Husain Shah responded to the requests of the orthodox Ashraf clerics to some extent. Thus, he extended his cooperation to build mosques and Madrasas, patronized Islamic scholars, gave support to Islamic religious endowments, and appointed qazis or Islamic judicial officers. Thus from Hussain Shahi period the Bengal Sultanate gradually started penetrating its domain into the interior countryside of Bengal and among its subaltern non-Muslim peasant population.

The processes continued during the Mughal era. The Mughals in turn situated their capital not in Gaud but deep in Dhaka, which was more interior and central to the agricultural peasant belt of deltaic Bengal. During Mughal period, more focus over agriculture grew up and the Mughal Subedars devoted special attention to farther uplift the agricultural production to increase its revenue. In fact, Bengal at that time became the highest agricultural productive state among all the Mughal subhas.

---

### **18.5 Arrival of Sufi mystic order in the Bengali countryside**

---

This focus on agriculture paved the way for Sufi immigration and spread of Sufi mystic philosophy among the peasant society of Bengal. Concerned with the need for bringing stability to their turbulent and underdeveloped eastern frontier in Bengal, the Mughal state deliberately encouraged several good orators, clerics and philosophers, (called as “forest pioneers” by historian Atis Dasgupta) to migrate and permanently settle down into the interior agricultural heartland of Eastern Bengal. The Mughals also granted favorable or even tax-free tenures of land to these industrious individuals who were expected to clear and bring into cultivation undeveloped forest tracts. The policy was basically intended to promote the emergence of local communities that would be both economically productive and politically loyal. Now, these immigrants got permanently stationed there, build local mosques or majaras under direct or indirect state patronage and started gathering the local populace around them. Their primary function was to motivate the local population with agricultural expansion,

forest clearance and farther penetration into Eastern delta. As a result, these forest pioneers started gaining local influence and their *masjids* and *majahars* became local community centers.

Now as they developed their popularity among local peasant population, side by side, these new settlers also started preaching the philosophical ideas of Sufism and the mystic form of Islam among these non-Muslim village populations. Now the minds of these population was still fresh and tender, since until then, they were living beyond the peripheries of any established Hindu religion. The only popular cult prevailing among them was the Sahajiyā version of Hinduism. So it became easy for those forest pioneers cum new Islamic immigrant clerics to mould their mind and attract them to the Sufi mystic form of Islam. It is worthy to mention here was what they were preaching were not the political form of mainstream orthodox Islam, but a more moderate form of Sufi Islam, whose mystic values were very close to the liberal Sahajiyā version of Hinduism with whom the local peasant populace were so long familiar with. Thus, these forest pioneers or agriculture promoters soon rose as the new Sufi saints or *Pirbabas* for the local village centric peasant masses of Eastern Bengal.

The state played decisive roles in this religious development of the region, as one of the conditions for obtaining a grant for these settlers was to build on the land a mosque, to be supported in perpetuity out of the wealth produced on site. Grants authorizing the establishment of mosques or shrines thus tended to integrate such communities into an Islamic-ordered cultural universe. These Sufi Mosques or shrines thus became the major component of the newly constructed religious establishments in the villages. These rural mosques were not architecturally comparable with the great stone or brick religious monuments, which the Mughal rulers themselves built in the cities. These were, rather, humble structures built on thatching and bamboo. Nonetheless, such simple structures exercised considerable influence among the indigenous people living in the villages of eastern Bengal.

Long after the founding pioneers of the local mosques died, the same establishments they had built would continue to diffuse Islamic religious ideals among local communities, since Quran readers, callers to prayer, and preachers were supported in perpetuity according to terms specified in the foundational grants. In consequence, many pioneers, who had obtained the land grants, mobilized labor, and

founded these rural mosques, passed into subsequent memory of the local communities as powerful saints or *pirs*.

---

## **18.6 The Sufi mystic principles and their closeness with pre-Muslim Sahojiya tradition**

---

However, as stated earlier the spread of Sufi tradition in Bengal was greatly facilitated by the closeness of its philosophical discourse with pre-existing liberal Sahojiya version of Hinduism prevalent in Bengal's countryside. The Sufis and Sahojiyas shares the ground that they both opposed the orthodox version of established religions be it Brahminical Hinduism or religious intolerance of conservative Muslim clerics of the Turkish Sultanates. The 'nirguna' Sahojiyas led by the Bauls of Bengal, on the one hand, and the Sufis and mystic *pirs*, on the other hand, played a crucial role in this historic process of syncretism. The Islamic faith, which the Bengal Muslims had assimilated, was basically influenced by Sufism and not by the orthodox Islamic scriptures advocated by mullahs and maulavis. Sufism in Bengal, in turn, was also conditioned by its proximity to humanist Sahojiya tradition of pre-Islamic Bengal.

It is worthy to mention here that the villagers who accepted Islam, in this process did not make any dramatic break from their past. The villagers, even after accepting Islam, maintained their Sahojiya roots deeply anchored in the countryside. The influence of pre-Muslim Sahojiya tradition were so profound that the culture and religion of these Bengali Muslims often appeared to absolutely different from that Islam practiced in Indian heartland and elsewhere. In fact the Turkish nobility in Bengal Nawabate and the Ashrafi Muslims in the court circles refused to identify themselves with this Sufi form of Muslim practitioners residing in the interior villages of Bengal.

As to the words of Rabindra Nath Tagore, both the Bauls and the Sufis, in their ecstatic wonder at the expression of the Infinite manifested through the human finite form, compared it with the movement of an 'unknown bird'. This brought in the concept of Achin Pakhi (meaning 'the unknown bird'). The 'unknown bird' or Achin Pakhi lived in the cage of the human body for while, but it soon went out and floated in the boundless sky.

---

## 18.7 The tradition of songs ('SAMA')

---

Another area where the creative interrelationship between the Sahajiyas and the Sufis could be witnessed was in the Baul tradition of out-pouring of the heart through their melodious songs. In this we find, the influence of Chaitanyadeva's Vaishnavism, which had attached much importance to the kirtan form of music as the medium of communication. The influence of this Bhakti tradition of songs gave rise to the Sufistic method of *sama* which combined song and dance as a mode of syncretistic religious communication with the common people. The effect of such music, the Sufis held, would help both the performing mystics and the listeners in passing into *fana*—a stage of religious ecstasy. During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, the orthodox Islamic clerics tried to prevail on the Turk-Afghan imperial government to ban the syncretistic practice of *sama*, calling it un-Islamic. However, the orthodox strategy could not make much headway in the face of rising popularity of the Sufis. At *sama* gatherings, Persian poetry began to be relegated to the background as Hindawi poetry, with its Vaisnavite and other Bhakti imagery, came to the fore.

---

## 18.8 Conclusion

---

Thus, from our above discussion we can conclude that the rise of Sufi Islam in Medieval Bengal was less a religious process but rather was more an economic process linked to the expansion of Agriculture particularly in Eastern Bengal, during the Mughal ages. Moreover, the spread of Sufism in Bengal was directly related with the pre-existence of the moderate Sahojiya version of Hinduism among the countryside peasant population of Bengal. Thus Sufism gave rise to such an moderate version of Islam in Bengal, that was very specific to the deltaic region and quite different from the established orthodox variant of the same practiced in North India and elsewhere.

---

## 18.9 Questions

---

- 1) Describe step by step the process leading to the arrival of Sufism in Bengal.
- 2) How the process of agricultural expansion facilitated the spread of Sufism in

Bengal, particularly during the Mughal period ? Why it was chiefly called an economic process rather than a religious one ?

- 3) Why did the early Muslim Turkish Sultanate failed attach themselves with the bul of interior peasant population of Bengal ?
- 4) How did the pre-existence of Sahojiya version of Hinduism among the non-Muslim masses of Bengal helped the process of Sufi Islamization latter ?
- 5) What were *Samas* ? What was their significance ?

---

### 18.10 Suggested Readings

---

Dasgupta, Atis, “Islam in Bengal : Formative Period”, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 32, No. 3/4 (Mar.-Apr., 2004), pp. 30-41

Eaton, Richard M., *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier : 1204-1760*, (Berkele : University Of California Press, 1993)

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 19 □ Rise and growth of Vaishnavism : the Bhakti Cult**

---

### *Structure*

#### **19.0 Objective**

#### **19.1 Introduction**

#### **19.2 Coming of Sri Chaitaniya**

#### **19.3 Early life**

#### **19.4 The Vaishnava Hindu movement under Sri Chaitaniya**

#### **19.5 Latter days**

#### **19.6 Vrindabanand some related associations of Chaitaniya's Bhaktism**

#### **19.7 Conclusion**

#### **19.8 Questions**

#### **19.9 Suggested Readings**

---

### **19.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to study the development of Bhakti cult in medieval Bengal.
- This unit will discuss the theme of Bhakti with special emphasis on Chaitaniya.
- The unit covers the following aspects of the Bhakti cult :
  - The early life of Chaitaniya
  - The Vaishnava movement led by Chaitaniya
  - The diffusion of Bhakti movement in Bengal and elsewhere.

---

### **19.1 Introduction**

---

An important landmark in the cultural history of medieval India was the silent revolution in society brought about by a galaxy of socio-religious reformers, a revolution known as the Bhakti Movement. It was a Hindu revivalist movement. The

leader of this Hindu revivalist movement was Shankaracharya, a great thinker and a distinguished philosopher. And this movement was propounded by ChaitaniyaMahaprabhu, Namadeva, Tukaram, Jayadeva. The movement's major achievement was the deletion of various superstitious and ritualistic practices among the Hindu society including the orthodox caste based segregations that has crept in during the Medieval ages.

---

## 19.2 Coming of Sri Chaitaniya

---

In Bengal the Bhakti movement was basically led forward by Sri Chaitaniya Mahaprabhu. Chaitaniya was a 15th century Indian saint, considered God, and founder of *Achintya Bheda Abheda*. Devotees consider him an incarnation of Krishna. Chaitaniya Mahaprabhu's mode of worshipping Krishna with ecstatic song and dance had a profound effect on the common masses, who gradually got attracted to Vaishnava Hinduism. He was also the chief proponent of the Vedantic philosophy of Achintya Bheda Abheda. Mahaprabhu founded Gaudiya Vaishnavism. He expounded Bhakti yoga and popularized the chanting of the Hare Krishna Maha-mantra. He composed the *Shikshashtakam* (eight devotional prayers). He is sometimes called Gauranga or Gaura due to his molten gold like complexion. His birthday is celebrated as Gaura-purnima. He is also called Nimai due to him being born underneath a Neem tree.

---

## 19.3 Early life

---

The word "Chaitaniya" means one who is conscious" (derived from Chetana, which means "Consciousness"); *Maha* means "Great" and *Prabhu* means "Lord" or "Master". Chaitaniya was born as the second son of Jagannath Mishra and his wife Sachi Devi. Mishra migrated from a small village in Sylhet and Devi was the daughter of NilambaraChakravarti, another Brahmin of Sylhet. Jagannath's family lived in the village of Dhakadakshin in Srihatta. The ruins of his ancestral home still survive in present day Bangladesh. According to *Chaitaniya Charitamrita*, Chaitaniya was born in Nabadwip (in present-day West Bengal) on the full moon night of 18 February 1486 and named as Bishwambar Mishra.

A number of stories also exist telling of Chaitaniya's apparent attraction to the chanting and singing of Krishna's names from a very young age, but largely this was perceived as being secondary to his interest in acquiring knowledge and studying Sanskrit. When travelling to Gaya to perform the shraddha ceremony for his departed father, Chaitaniya met his guru, the ascetic IshvaraPuri, from whom he received some significant spiritual teachings. This meeting was to mark a significant change in Chaitaniya's outlook<sup>1</sup> and upon his return to Bengal the local Vaishnavas, headed by Advaita Acharya, were stunned at his external sudden 'change of heart' (from 'scholar' to 'devotee') and soon Chaitaniya became the eminent leader of their Vaishnava group within Nadia.



*An imaginary portrait of Sri Chaitaniya singing devotional Sankirtans among his followers*

---

## **19.4 The Vaishnava Hindu movement under Sri Chaitaniya**

---

After leaving Bengal and receiving entrance into the sannyasa order by Swami Kesava Bharati, Chaitaniya journeyed throughout the length and breadth of India for



several years, chanting the divine Names of Krishna constantly. However his actual objective was to feel the pulse of the country and its common masses. Upon returning to Bengal, He travelled on foot covering a lot of places like Baranagar, Mahinagar, Nadia, Hooghly, Bardhaman, Jessore and, at last, Chhatrabhog along with his companions and inmates, chanting Hare-Krishna *Sankirtan* (chorus devotional songs) all the way.

All along his journey, he preached the simple forms of devotion to God, without any ritualistic complications. That's what we call the Sahajiya form of Hinduism, the most acceptable version for the common masses of Bengal. Like Buddha, he sometimes stationed himself, gathering followers and preaching them with spiritual teachings like sermons. He denounced any form of orthodox caste based segregations and in fact most of his companions were from the lower stratasand depressed castes of the society including some who were believed to be converted from lower classes of Muslim families, like Yavana Haridas or Haridas Thakur. The GaudiyaVaishnavism preached by Sri Chaitaniya teaches that Lord Krishna did not need one to perform costly rituals to invoke Him, but simple devotions and love of the follower can help to attain the same. As a result of these preachings,a large number of common masses in the Bengali countryside got attracted to Chaitaniya'ssimplistic form of Vaishnava Hinduism. The ecstatic tune of Hare Krishna *Shankirtan* spread far and wide in interior Bengal where Chaitaniya travelled. His teachings were later carried forward to even greater number of places by his disciples latter. Another plus point of their preachings was that the medium of their communication was essentially archaic Bengali, which was the language of the common masses.As a result, large number of Vaishnava devotees began to appear in the Bengali countryside by the beginning of 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is also argued by some historians that Sri Chaitaniya's successful expansion of the Sahojiya Vaishnava Hinduism in Bengali countryside imposed some form rival obstacle to the spread of Sufi Mystic order in the spiritual domain of Bengal and thus somewhat prevented the conversion of large masses of Hindu lower classes into Sufi Islam.

---

## 19.5 Latter days

---

The time when Chaitaniya was preaching his Bhaktism, Bengal was under the rule of Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah (1494-1519 CE). Quiet obviously the orthodox

Muslim clergies and the Turkish nobles in the political circles were highly dissatisfied with this type of Bhakti movement being unfolded in rural Bengal. Not only was it a religious issue as opposed to their Islamic hegemony, but the Turkish ruling circles probably also feared that Sri Chaitaniya's popularity among the masses along with the spread of his new ideology might lead to a rival political challenge, a type of dual state in the interior. So the local Sultanate governors started harassing the Vaishnava saints in various occasions, which ranges from demanding illogical levies to sometimes putting them in jail. The Muslim Moulavis of the courtcircle on the other hand, put pressure over Sultan Alauddin to take steps against Chaitaniya and his growing popularity. As a result of these continuous threats and obstacles, Chaitaniya Dev finally decided to leave Bengal. After staying one night he set for Puri by boat with the help of Local Administrator Ram Chandra Khan. He spent the last 24 years of his life in Puri, Odisha, the great temple city of Jagannath, in the Radhakanta Math. The Gajapati king, Prataprudra Dev, regarded Chaitaniya as Krishna's Avatar and was an enthusiastic patron and devotee of Chaitaniya's recitation (*sankeertan*) gatherings.

Chaitaniya requested a select few among his followers (who later came to be known as the Six Gosvamis of Vrindavan) to systematically present the theology of bhakti he had taught to them in their own writings. The six saints and theologians were Rupa Goswami, Sanatana Goswami, Gopala Bhatta Goswami, Raghunatha Bhatta Goswami, Raghunatha Dasa Goswami and Jiva Goswami, a nephew of brothers Rupa and Sanatana.

---

## **19.6 Vrindaban and some related associations of Chaitaniya's Bhaktism**

---

Vrindavan, the land of Radha Rani, the "City of Temples" has more than 5000 temples to showcase the pastimes of Radha and Krishna. The essence of Vrindavan was lost over time until the 16th century, when it was rediscovered by Chaitaniya. In the year 1515, Chaitaniya visited Vrindavana, with the purpose of locating the lost holy places associated with Lord Sri Krishna's transcendent pastimes. He wandered through the different sacred forests of Vrindavana in a spiritual trance of divine love. It was believed that by His divine spiritual power, he was able to locate all the

important places of Krishna's pastimes in and around Vrindavan including the seven main temples or *saptadevalay*, which are worshiped by Vaishnavas in the Chaitaniya tradition to this day Gaudiya Vaishnavas consider Chaitaniya to be Lord Krishna himself but appearing in the covered form (channa avatar) who appeared in the Kali Yuga as his own devotee to show the easiest way to achieve Krishna Consciousness. In this connection, it is also worthy to mention that, according to Chaitaniya Bhagavat, which gives a detailed description of Mahaprabhu's life, Mahaprabhu made a prediction that the holy name of Krishna will be sung in every town and village of the world and this is evident in the history. The International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), which was started by Srila Prabhupada in the USA, proved the prediction to be correct.

Chaitaniya is not known to have written anything himself except for a series of verses known as the *Siksastaka*, or "eight verses of instruction", which he had spoken, and were recorded by one of his close colleagues. The eight verses created by Chaitaniya are considered to contain the complete philosophy of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in condensed form. There are numerous biographies available from the time giving details of Chaitaniya's life, the most prominent ones being the *Chaitaniya Charitamrita* of Krishnadasa Kaviraja, the earlier *Chaitaniya Bhagavata* of Vrindaban Das. (both originally written in Bengali), and the *Chaitaniya Mangala*, written by "LochanaDasa". These works are in Bengali with some Sanskrit verses interspersed. In addition to these, there are other Sanskrit biographies composed by his contemporaries. There is also *Caitanya Caritâm[taMahâkavya* by Kavi Karnapura and *ÚrîK[cGaCaitanya Carita Maha-Kavya* by Murari Gupta.

In the early 17th century KalachandVidyalankar, a disciple of Chaitaniya, made his preachings popular in Bengal. He travelled throughout India popularizing the gospel of anti-untouchability, social justice and mass education. He probably initiated 'Pankti Bhojon' and Krishna Sankirtan in the eastern part of Bengal. Several schools (*sampradaya*) have been practicing it for hundreds of years. The Dalits in Bengal, at that time a neglected and underprivileged caste, readily accepted his libertarian outlook and embraced the doctrine of Mahaprabhu. His disciples were known as *Kalachandi Sampraday*, who inspired the people to eradicate illiteracy and casteism. Many consider Kalachand as the Father of Rationalism in East Bengal.

---

## 19.7 Conclusion

---

Thus, we can conclude that Sri Chaitaniya Mahaprabhu was the precursor of the Bhakti cult in Bengal. The Gaudiya Vaishnavism preached by him was a type of Sahojiya version of Hinduism prevalent in contemporary Bengal. It talked about simple devotion to God (Sri Krishna) through love and devotional songs (*Sankirtan*), without any ritualistic complications and expenditure. Bhaktism also denounced any caste based segregation in the Hindu society, along with criticizing certain other superstitious rituals that crept in the same during the Medieval ages. As a result of this, large masses of interior rural Bengal got attracted to this Bhakti cult, a Sahajiya version of Hinduism.

---

## 19.8 Questions

---

- 1) Who was Shri Chaitaniya and what was his actual name ?
- 2) Why was he called the precursor of Bhaktism in Bengal ?
- 3) Describe Sri Chaitaniya's preaching of Guadiya Vaishnavism. How did a large number of common people get attracted to his philosophy ?
- 4) Why Chaitaniya was forced to leave Bengal ?
- 5) Mention the significance of Vrindaban in context of Shri Chaitaniya.
- 6) Mention the literary works and other contributions of some his disciples.

---

## 19.9 Suggested Readings

---

Bhowmik, Dulal, State, religion and Culture : Hinduism. In E. Ahmed and Harun-or-Rashid (Eds.), *State and culture : Cultural survey of Bangladesh* Vol. 3, (2007), pp. 341-369

Das, Khudiram, *Sri Chaitanyia o Gaudiya Vaishnava Dharama* (Bengali),

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)

Sengupta, Nitish, *Land of Two Rivers : A History of Bengal from the Mahabharata to Mujib*, (New Delhi : Penguin Books, 2011)

---

## **Unit 20 □ The Jagannatha Cult : Formation, Features and Impact**

---

### *Structure*

#### **20.0 Objective**

#### **20.1 Introduction**

#### **20.2 Agrarian expansion & absorption of tribal cultures during EMA**

#### **20.3 The political attachment of Lord Jagannath with the Orissan dynasties**

#### **20.4 Lord Jagannath as the centre of religious syncretism in Orissa**

#### **20.5 Conclusion**

#### **20.6 Questions**

#### **20.7 Suggested Readings**

---

### **20.0 Objective**

---

- The objective of the present unit is to study the rise of Jaganath Cult under the broad heading of religion and culture of medieval eastern India.
  - The present unit will discuss the socio-economic perspectives of the rise of the Jagannath cult.
  - It will also analyze the political attachment of Lord Jagannatha with the medieval political authority of Orissa.
  - The unit also highlight the articulation of Lord jagannath as the centre of religious syncretism in Orissa.
- 

### **20.1 Introduction**

---

Orissa is one of the cradles of all major religions that flourished in India through ages. It witnessed the rise and growth of both orthodox (Shaivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism) and heterodox (Jainism and Buddhism) religious sects and provided a hospitable climate for their peaceful co-existence. The local autochthonous deities were also brought within the fold of Hinduism by the process of sanskritization,

sheltering them in the Hindu temples. The rulers of Orissa surpassed in showing their benevolence for the peaceful co-existence and development of all religions and their sects.

The most important feature in the history of Hinduism in Orissa is religious syncretism. Though the orthodox as well as the heterodox religions flourished side by side, there is no evidence of sectarian rivalry in Orissa. Royal patronage was never lacking. Still there were hardly any record of religious bigotry nor has any religious persecution been noticed in the annals of Orissan history. In this context let us discuss the rise & development of the worship of Jagannath deity that still encompassed a large part of the cultural domain of Orissa & Eastern India.

---

## **20.2 Agrarian expansion and absorption of tribal cultures during EMA**

---

One of the typical features of Early Medieval Age (EMA) in India (6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century CE) was indiscriminate land grants by the Regional kingdoms & feudal elites to religious & non-religious persons or institutions. During this time the rising regional local powers used to donate lands to different religious institutions including Brahmins & Temples to earn spiritual favors & legitimization. Couple with this was the payment of salary to state functionaries in form of kind (land donation) due to absence of money economy. This is been testified by the availability of several land grant inscriptions found during those times. The Khalimpur & Bardhaman Copper Plate Inscriptions of the Pal kings deserves special mention among them. Now as to Historians like Upinder Sing, D.C. Sircar, etc. granting lands not necessarily always meant inordinate loss of Revenue or political power for the monarchs. Because in most cases the granted lands were uncultivated fallow lands or lands which were not in a position to realize revenue (particularly forests). It is now the task of the Brahmins/grantees to make it productive. Hence it gradually led them to venture for the greater tribal diasporas of the interior. Thus, in this age we find many of the tribes were settling down as cultivators & plough agriculture was introduced in greater parts of the interior. That's why Historian B.D. Chattopadhyay argued that the major historical process of EMA is the expansion of the Agricultural state society.

This Agrarian expansion, in turn led to greater interaction between the Brahminical & tribal cultures & transformation of the tribes into peasants & their introduction to Hindu society. The period witnessed the expansion of the peripheries of the sedentarized states of both North & South India. This obviously led them to a conflict with adjacent tribal societies. These conflicts ultimately led to the displacement & integration/absorption of the tribal societies into the sedentarized Hindu societies. However it also led to greater interaction between tribal & Brahminical cultures. It was not that only the tribal societies got “Hindusized”, but also several tribal elements also penetrated into the Brahminical culture. This penetration of the tribal cultures is best reflected in Orissa with the rise of worshipping the Jagannath cult, which clearly has tribal origins. Hinduism in those days was a extremely inclusive religion. As to historians like BD Chattopadhyay, Lord Jagannath might be used to be tribal deity among the Orissan tribes. During the Gajapati kingdom as these tribes were absorbed into Hindu sedenterized society of the plain lands, Jagannath cult was also easily absorbed into the Hindu religious folds. Thus, now Lord Jagannath became an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, & started being addressed with the mainstream Brahminical rituals & Sanskrit mantras.



*Jagannath Temple, Puri*

---

### 20.3 The political attachment of Lord Jagannath with the Orissan dynasties

---

As to historian Sishir Kumar Panda, the advent of the Later Eastern Gangas not only marked the expansion of Orissa into an empire but also led to the establishments of Gajapati kingship ideology with the patronization of cult of Jagannath as imperial deity or '*rastra devata*'. Anantavarman Chodaganga Deva who conquered central Orissa, later on expanded the Ganga kingdom from the river Hoogly (Ganga) in north to the river Godavari in the south. In order to legitimate his rule, he patronized local cult Purusottama (Jagannath) by constructing the monumental Jagannath temple at Puri and gave it imperial status. Later on, king Anangabhimadeva-III, in order to save his empire from the Turko- Afghan invasion declared himself as the deputy of lord Jagannath and dedicated the empire to Him. In this way, the Later Eastern Gangas used the cult of Jagannath for political purpose, which was followed by the Suryavamsi Gajapatis after their downfall. However, after the fall of Orissa in the hands of the Turko-Afghans in 1568 A.D. later on by the Mughals in 1592, the cult of Jagannath and Puri did not lose its importance. Although the Jagannath Temple received certain destructions at the hands of the Muslim armies under Firoz Tughlaq & later Hussain Shahi dynasty of Bengal, but that couldn't undermine its glory among the local populace. During the Mughal period, Akbar raised Ramachandradeva, the local zamindar of Khurda as Gajapati king of Orissa and made him the custodian of the Jagannath cult for political and economic purpose. In spite of this, there started a struggle between the king of Khurda and the Muslim Subedars of Cuttack for control of Puri. In 1751, the Marathas invaded Orissa and occupied Puri and Khurda. In these critical hours, the Khurda kings tried desperately to gain support of the feudatory states by sharing the cult of Jagannath with them through *Chhamu Chitaus* or Royal letters. The feudatory chiefs who came for worship to Puri Jagannath were given special privileges through royal letters. *Chhamu Chitaus* were the royal letters addressed to the temple superintendent of Puri by the Khurda Gajapati kings regarding the visit of the feudatory chiefs of Orissa or the kings of outside Orissa to the Jagannath temple, allowing them to perform worship and offerings to the temple.



---

## 20.4 Lord Jagannath as the centre of Religious syncretism in Orissa

---

Historian Kishor Chandra Mishra opined that it was because of the peaceful co-existence of many religious systems that there evolved a predominant religious force in the Cult of Jagannath during the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. with its centre at Puri. A stupendous stone temple with its rare artistic and architectural skill enshrines the Jagannath triad i.e., Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra symbolizing the religious syncretism in Orissa. Though Jagannath is considered to be the manifestation of Vishnu, yet a keen scholar after observing the rituals and the iconographic details comes to a definite conclusion that the cult has not been derived from any particular religious system but it is a synthesis of the many religious thoughts and ideas prevailing in the land from the early days. One can easily see the presence of the Jaina concept of transmigration of soul as a consequence of Karma, the Buddhist belief of nirvana and the Hindu theory of incarnation on the philosophy centering the Jagannath Cult.

---

## 20.5 Conclusion

---

Thus the rise of the Jagannath cult in Eastern India symbolizes the greater inclusion of tribal cultures into sedenterized Hindu society marked by a typical atmosphere of religious syncretism in Orissa. Lord Jagannath today stands as the supreme deity of the Hindus and which its centre at Puri as one of the four *dhams* attracts pilgrims and scholars from different parts of the world justifying its nomenclature as the Lord of the Universe (Jagannath).

---

## 20.6 Questions

---

- 1) Describe the rise of Jagannath cult in Eastern India.
- 2) How was the appearance of Jagannath cult related with the agrarian expansion in Eastern India vis a vis Early Medieval Land donations ?

- 3) What were *ChhamuChitaus* ? Write in brief about the political upheavals witnessed by Lord Jagannath Temple of Puri since its establishment during the Gajapati kingdom.

---

## 20.7 Suggested Readings

---

Chandra, Satish, *History of Medieval India*, (New Delhi : Orient Blackswan Private Ltd, 2007)

Chatterjee, Suniti Kumar, *The origin and development of Bengali Language*, Vol 1 (Calcutta, 1975)

Mishra, Kishore Ch., “Religious Syncretism And The Jagannath Cult In Orissa”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 2000-2001, Vol. 61, Part One, (Indian History Congress, 2001), pp 144-151

Panda, Shishir Kumar, “Gajapati Kingship And The Cult Of Jagannatha : A Study On The Chhamuchitaus (Royal Letters)”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* , 2008, Vol. 69, (Indian History Congress, 2008), pp. 225-229

Sarkar, Jadunath (ed.), *A History of Bengal, Muslim Period (Vol II) (1200-1757 AD)*, (New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2017)