

**MUGHAL BENGAL: ECOLOGY, POLITY,
ECONOMY 1605-1717**

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Introduction

A region roughly defined would be a space of land with topographical features, political organization, social and cultural traits that are peculiar to that space and distinguishes it from its neighbouring spaces. This applies for the region of Bengal which has had distinct and varied topographical features from a very early period. Its southern part comprises of one of the largest deltas of the world, formed by the river Ganga. The Ganga along with the river Bramhaputra together with their numerous tributaries and distributaries gave the Province a very fluvial character unlike any other part of the Indian sub-continent. The rivers that flowed through the region divided it into different ecological zones which also came to have over time distinct political, social and cultural practices. The lands to the east of the Bhagirathi were called *Vanga*, the lands to the west of it were called the *Rarh*. The southern part of the Province, the coastal areas were known as *Samatata* and the northern areas, lands to the north of the Padma were called *Varendra*. The eastern most areas beyond *Vanga* were known as *Harikela*.¹ It is our purpose here to discuss how the peculiar topographical features and the environmental conditions obtaining in Bengal influenced its history and gave it a certain distinctive identity, aiding in the emergence of a region with a life of its own. The period under review is roughly the seventeenth century (1605-1717) spanning the period from the beginning of the Mughal consolidation of Bengal which effectively began during Jahangir's reign with Islam Khan's campaigns in the Province till the emergence of a virtually independent Nawabi rule under Murshid Quli Khan. In 1717 Murshid Quli Khan by the payment of a *nazarana* to the Mughal Emperor Farukhsiyar had himself confirmed as a full *subadar* of Bengal. Hence forth Bengal emerged as an autonomous regional power under the *Nawabs*. It is our argument here that the emergence of Bengal as a region per se had to do with the peculiar environmental conditions obtaining in the Province.

The existing literature on seventeenth century Bengal has looked at the political, social, cultural and economic aspects of the history of the region but none have stressed on the role of natural factors in moulding its history.

¹ Jawhar Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal? The Role of Popular Cults*, Calcutta, 2005, p-120 (Map).

Literature On Political History of Bengal

Charles Stewart², the earliest of historians writing on Bengal gave an account of the political history of the Province from the first Muslim conquest of it to the defeat of the last *nawab* of Bengal at the hands of the English. Later on the theme in its political aspects was also analysed by Sir Jadunath Sarkar in his *History of Bengal*³. In a chapter entitled ‘Transformation of Bengal under Mughal Rule’⁴ the author gave a very favourable assessment of Mughal conquest of Bengal. He pointed out that the establishment of Mughal rule in Bengal ushered in an era of peace and prosperity by ending the existence of petty chieftains and their recurrent mutual conflicts. According to Sarkar the twelve *Bhuiyas* were the enemies of Mughal peace and unification and they had been wrongly glorified in provincial literature as the champions of the independence of the province of Bengal against the intruding Mughals.

According to Jadunath Sarkar the *Bara-Bhuiyas* were actually ‘upstarts’ who had grabbed at parts of the declining Karrani empire. They were ‘masterless rajas’ who settled in remote and inaccessible regions of the Province especially in Khulna and Backerganj and beyond the Brahmaputra in Dacca, Mymensingh and Sylhet. The *Bara-bhuiyans* were an impediment to Mughal consolidation of the Province but they were in no sense patriots. Sarkar styles them as ‘mushroom captains of plundering bands.’

Anirudha Ray⁵ has pointed out that the glorification of the *Bara-Bhuiyas* was a part of the agenda of the nationalist historians. The role of Pratapaditya of Jessore as the champion of Bengal’s autonomy had been particularly emphasized⁶. Anirudh Ray points

² Charles Stewart, *The History of Bengal from the First Mohammedan Invasion until the virtual conquest of Bengal by the English in 1757*, London, 1813.

³ Jadunath Sarkar, ed. *History of Bengal: Muslim Period*, Patna 1973

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 216-233

⁵ Anirudh Ray, *Adventurers Landowners and Rebels*, Delhi, 1998.

⁶ The first reference to Pratapaditya is found in Bharatchandra’s poem in 1752. In the poem, Pratap cruelly murders his uncle Basanta Ray and his family, except his nephew. The latter then complains to Man Singh the Mughal Viceroy who defeats Pratapaditya. His nephew is then made the ruler of Jessore. However Bharatchandra’s story did not mention anything with regard to the fall of Pratapaditya. Later in Ram Ram Vasu’s work Pratap was defeated at the hands of Mughals as the Goddess Kali left his side because of his oppressive nature. But it was PratapChandra Ghosh who added a nationalist tinge to the story of

out that the conflict between the *zamindars* and the Mughal power should not be seen as isolated incidents of rebellion. The British historians and the Persian historiography of the eighteenth century regarded these revolts as a 'law and order problem' because they were looking at the periphery from the perspective of the center. However he argues that these *zamindari* revolts are to be seen as the conflict between autonomous decentralized forces and the centralized forces of the Mughals. The struggle operated at a sub-regional level. But the nationalist historians put these revolts at a regional level encompassing entire Bengal which thus was a 'distorted image' suited to cater to the nationalist agenda.

Pratapaditya by depicting him as a champion of Bengal's independence against Mughal intrusion. In his story, Pratapaditya allied with the Portuguese to eliminate the Mughals. The English historian Beveridge on the contrary depicted Pratapaditya as cruel and oppressive and accused him of the treacherous murder of the Portuguese captain Carvalho. Beveridge however made no note of the Portuguese oppression in the coastal region. In his history of Backerganj the communal element was also introduced for the first time when the author argued with the help of ruins found in Backerganj that the latter place and its neighbourhood were the first places where the Mohammedans seems to have settled giving birth to the later idea that East Bengal was meant for the Muslims as they had settled there first and the west for the Hindus. Beveridge's history also brought into currency the concept of a benevolent British regime that saved India from medieval anarchy and oppression by *zamindars*. By this time Ramesh Chandra Dutta's *Banga Vijeta* had come out on the conquest of Todar Mal in 1580 in which the author pointed to the oppression of the Bengal *zamindars* as well as their love for freedom.

In the wake of the partition of Bengal by Lord Curzon, in 1905, which saw a new upsurge of the nationalist sentiment, Khirodprasad Vidyabinod wrote a drama based on the character of Pratapaditya. He highlighted the alliance between Isa Khan and Pratapaditya—a picture of Hindu-Muslim unity, fighting against the foreign Mughals. Akbar in the face of the alliance resorted to the policy of Divide and Rule, a reminder of the role that Curzon was playing in the wake of the partition. This entire context of nationalistic uprising of Bengalis against foreign rule was proved incorrect with the translation of Abdul Latif's diary and Mirza Nathan's *Baharistan* by Jadunath Sarkar. It was now conclusively proved that Pratapaditya's fall had taken place in the hands of the Mughal commander Islam Khan and the story centering around Man Singh was proved to be wrong. N.K. Bhattasali meanwhile turned away the spotlight from Pratapaditya to the Mughals and their difficulties in the process of the conquest of Bengal. He pointed out that the family of Pratap was in close understanding with the Mughals. Two close personalities of Daud Karrani got two *jagirs* from the Mughals for the secret help that they rendered to the Mughals against Daud. One of them was Katlu Khan who got the *jagir* of Orissa and another was Srihari the father of Pratapaditya who got the *jagir* of Jessore. In the opinion of Bhattasali, the Afghans like Isa Khan, Masum Khan, Usman Khan rather than Pratap, were the actual champions of Bengal's freedom. *Ibid.*, p-217-237

Anirudh Ray points out that Jadunath Sarkar had discredited the role of the *zamindars* altogether. But they were the ones making East Bengal economically prosperous. Sarkar however did not venture very far into the socio-economic aspect of the problem. He points out that not all the *zamindars* were upstarts as Sarkar had opined. The house of Bakla was very old whose origins could be traced back to the time of Lakshmansena in the thirteenth century. Sarkar also discarded a large number of documents used by the nationalist historians.

Some of the other observations of Jadunath Sarkar regarding the nature of Mughal rule in Bengal had also been contested. He argued that the Mughal conquest of Bengal ended the Provinces isolation from upper India which had occurred when Bengal Sultans threw off their allegiance to Delhi and declared themselves independent. The beginning of Mughal rule in Bengal meant the re-establishment of the contact with Upper India, and through Upper India, by the land route with the countries of Central Asia and Western Asia. From 1575-1675, the first century of Mughal rule, 'the outer world came to Bengal and Bengal went out of itself to the outer world.' The European trading Companies started their commercial activities in Bengal. This led to an influx of silver within the province as the European merchants paid for their purchases in bullion. The influx of silver led to increasing monetization of the economy. Thus the Mughal Viceroy, who sent to Delhi tribute in the form of 'elephants and art objects' could now send his dues to Delhi in cash. Moreover in the opinion of Sarkar the European Companies gave an organized structure to the industrial production in Bengal with their chain of intermediaries reaching up to the lowest marts of the province, by their system of giving advances (*dadān*) to the workmen. With the coming of Mughal rule the isolation of East Bengal was broken as well. The country had so long been out of the reach of 'Aryan influence' and inhabited by people who were Mongoloid, spirit worshipers and spoke local dialects which had no written form.

These conclusions of Jadunath Sarkar had been criticized by Tapan Raychaudhuri in his book *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*⁷. Tapan Raychaudhuri, argued that it is wrong to assert that the isolation of Bengal ended with the coming of the Mughals. He asserts that during the rule of the Surs 'Bengal formed part of the Indian Empire as any

⁷ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir* Calcutta, 1953.

other Province'. Bengal was also connected to other parts of Eastern India as an independent power. In the cultural domain, Bengal had influenced the literary forms and religious thought of Upper India during the pre-Mughal days.

Tapan Raychaudhuri also draws our attention to the foreign nature of the Mughal rule in Bengal. According to him, the Mughal Viceroy appointed to this Province regarded it as an alien land and never took any real interest in the actual affairs of the Province. A considerable part of the wealth of the Province was also drained to Upper India in the form of presents. 'To the Emperors, Bengal was merely a remote newly conquered Province which still remained to be pacified completely. Upper India for them had become very much their motherland. Bengal was never destined to become so. She remained throughout a 'hell full of bread' a place of exile for incompetent officers and in the declining days of the grand empire a milch cow to suckle the famished army and administration of the whole subcontinent.'⁸ It should be pointed out here that till the close of our period, at least up to 1720, as Om Prakash points out the drain from Bengal in the form of revenue to the exchequer at Delhi or as clandestine profits of the Governors was not substantial. The imported bullion from trade with European merchant Companies did circulate the Province. It is also to be mentioned that posting to Bengal was not always regarded as a punishment. The Province was fertile and once pacified important royal personages themselves sought the office of the *subadar* because the *subadari* of Bengal was considered a lucrative post. It was thus reported by the English factors in 1679 that Shaista Khan got back the governorship of Bengal by a present of three crores of rupees to the Emperor. Again, in February 1702 they reported that Prince Azim-us-shan retained office of *subadar* by giving thirty lacs of rupees.⁹

It is also not true that Mughal rule brought an end to the isolation and 'cultural poverty' of East Bengal. East Bengal was never really isolated. During the period of the Sultanate the two parts of Bengal were connected. Nor was East Bengal 'a cultural backwater where animism and the like alone flourished.' Orthodox Hinduism and social structure based on Kulinism had reached East Bengal at the time of Sena rule. The Sakta Tantric cult prevalent in East Bengal produced a large number of scholars of whom

⁸ Ibid, p-43.

⁹ Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal, 1650-1720*, Calcutta, 1975, p-3.

Sarvananda, Brahmananda and Purnananda deserve mention. Thus East Bengal was in no way lacking in cultural or educational refinement which is proved by the 'ovation which Chaitanya received in his academic tour' of the Province.¹⁰

It has also been pointed out that under Mughal rule European commerce flourished. The Mughal Emperors undoubtedly gave encouragement to foreign trade as it contributed to their treasury. But the development of European trade was only partly due to the policy of the government but largely due to the forces at work in Europe. The growth of European trade and the immediate wealth that it brought according to Tapan Raychaudhuri also 'undermined an alternative possibility, the growth of a native overseas trade under government patronage.'¹¹

Moreover the Mughal peace which Sarkar so gloriously speaks of did not end the sufferings of the masses. It did bring an end to the independent baronies of petty overlords but the Mughal conquest of the Province also involved it in a large number of new problems in the form of rebellions of various chieftains which the Mughals tried to subdue. Such conflicts meant losses and suffering for the masses when cultivated lands were laid waste as part of scorched earth tactics or villages looted and villagers captured in course of campaigns. Tapan Raychaudhuri cites the instance where 'a comparatively sensible man' like Mirza Nathan plundered Jessore. Moreover the Mughals were unable to check the raids of the Maghs and Portuguese on lower Bengal. Fear of their raids induced Pratapaditya of Jessore to submit to the Mughals. There was 'neither any inhabited place, nor any traffic of merchants' on the route to Jessore and few men except Maghs and Firingis were familiar with the route through the streams and *nalas* of the tract. The Firingis therefore audaciously asserted 'our salary was the imperial domain. We considered the whole of Bengal as our *jagir*.'¹² The author thus points out that the introduction of centralized administration had a 'profound qualitative change' but there was no 'quantitative change' meaning that 'although the character of the administration was fundamentally changed, but the result of this change, assessed in terms of human

¹⁰ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir* Calcutta, 1953, p-44.

¹¹ Ibid, p-46.

¹² Ibid, p-40.

happiness and suffering was far less striking.’¹³ We discuss the limits of Mughal political consolidation which was a corollary to the difficult nature of the terrain of Bengal, in course of our second chapter.

Finally Sarkar had argued that the Mughal rule had brought an overall Renaissance to Bengal but Tapan Raychaudhuri pointed out that vernacular literature did not receive patronage under Mughal rule. Krishnadas Kaviraj, Kasiramdas and Mukundaram the only outstanding products of the age were men of the earlier epoch. Under the Mughals, the poets composed the *jangnamas* in Persian and vernacular literature received a setback.

On the period of Shahjahan’s rule in Bengal we have Khondkar Mohibabul Karim’s¹⁴ work which gives us an account of the political, administrative social and cultural set up of the Provinces of Bihar and Bengal under the rule of ShahJahan. The revolt of Shahjahan in Bengal, an important episode in the political history of the province, has been also discussed by B.P. Saksena¹⁵. Saksenas’s book however does not focus on the Province of Bengal. We discuss Shahjahan’s revolt in Bengal in course of our work. From this time onwards started the trend of fugitive Princes seeking asylum in Bengal because it was remote and geographically isolated. The course of events during the revolt also illustrated the nature of politics in seventeenth century Bengal based as it was on shifting loyalties and alliances of the local potentates who with their military strength particularly their navy determined the course of political events during the seventeenth century.

The Mughal conquest of Bengal and its subsequent expansion over Kuch and Kamrup which involved it in wars with Assam has been studied by S.N. Bhattacharya¹⁶, as well as by Khondkar Mohibabul Karim in his study of Bengal and Bihar under Shahjahan. Aspects of the administrative set up of the Mughals in Bengal can be obtained

¹³ Ibid, p-45.

¹⁴ Khondkar Mahbubul Karim, *The Provinces of Bihar and Bengal Under Shahjahan*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1974.

¹⁵ B.P.Saksena *History of Shahjehan of Dihli*, Allahabad 1932.

¹⁶ Khondkar Mahbubul Karim, *The Provinces of Bihar and Bengal Under Shahjahan*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1974.

in P. Saran's *Provincial Administration of the Mughals*¹⁷. Saran, in the introduction to his work, stressed on the importance of geography in moulding administrative institutions. He says that the geography of our country helped determine the boundaries of its provinces. Also, in the context of the vast Mughal Empire, 'the physical configuration accentuated the centrifugal tendencies of some parts and centripetal tendencies of others.' Factors like 'productivity', 'fertility', 'nearness to the sea', 'presence of good harbours', 'large navigable rivers', led to economic growth and prosperity in regions possessing these factors. 'They also excited the temptation of ambitious neighbours and became 'source of good deal of ruinous warfare.' Lastly 'the exposed or protected condition of the frontier of a kingdom according to Saran is a great controlling factor of its policy and military strength and it is also responsible in shaping the character of the administration.'¹⁸ This holds true for Bengal as well. The region was intersected by a large number of navigable rivers. The rivers divided it into different cultural zones. They also made the region fertile and aided trade and commerce by acting as channels of transport. This made the region economically viable and a lucrative area for further expansion by the Mughals. In course of the seventeenth century the region therefore becomes the theater of conflict between the Mughals and the regional as well as the local powers. We come to the discussion on the effect of ecology on politics in course of our second chapter.

Works on the Economic History of Bengal

Coming to the economic history of seventeenth century Bengal, the earliest contribution to the revenue history of the province was made by James Grant in his two works, 'Political Survey of the Northern Circars (1784) and 'A Historical and Comparative Analysis of the Finances in Bengal.' Grant had worked on the records of Murshid Quli's reorganization of the revenue system of the Deccan. In his 'Political Survey of the Northern Circars' Grant analysed the measures of Murshid Quli Khan concluding erroneously that the measures undertaken by the latter were an imitation of revenue measures introduced by Todar Mal. This conclusion he applied in case of

¹⁷ Paramatma Saran, *The Provincial Government of the Mughals, 1526-1658*, Bombay 1973.

¹⁸ Ibid, p-23.

Bengal as well. Grant argued that Todar Mal made detailed assessment on the peasants throughout Bengal which Murshid Quli imitated in the Deccan. According to Grant about the year 1582 Todar Mal made his assessment and the revenue demand placed upon the peasants by this assessment was one-fourth of the average produce. The collections were to be made by *zamindars* who were 'annual contracting farmers' whose remuneration were never to exceed more than ten percent of the demand. The demand thus set forth by the state was once revised by Shuja in 1658 and once by Murshid Quli Khan in 1722 but the basic Demand remained largely unaltered except the successive levying of some extra cesses over and above the basic demand.

However in a critique of Grant's hypotheses, Moreland¹⁹ pointed out several defects in the latter's arguments. Firstly, the detailed assessment of the entire province of Bengal by Todar Mal was historically impossible. Second the system of assessment prevalent in Bengal was the *nasaq*, as stated in the *Ain* and as Shore pointed out the *nasaq* system excluded the possibility of such detailed assessment. Thirdly the fact that the state's claim upon the peasants was 1/4th of the produce was wrong because in Todar Mal's time the state's claim was uniformly 1/3rd. Moreland pointed out that the figure one-fourth Grant had probably obtained from his Deccan assessment which he wrongly thought was a copy of Todar Mal's assessment.

Moreland however made an attempt to explain and substantiate Grant's hypotheses. He pointed out that the statistics included in the *Ain*, referred to Valuation and not Demand. In case of Bengal, Todar Mal made the Valuation of a newly annexed province on the basis of data available at the time of annexation, the records perhaps of the previous regime. This hypothesis, of the statistics in the *Ain*, representing Valuation rather than Demand, also explains away the anomaly of figures of assessment being there for parts of East Bengal which had not yet been annexed by Akbar. In the later years with the conquest of these territories the actual Demand must have come nearer to the Valuation. However, the idea of Valuation had become obsolete by the time Grant took up charges in Bengal which is why according to Moreland, that Grant probably associated aggregate or *jama* (occurring in all three records consulted by him) with

¹⁹ W.H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*, Cambridge, 1929.

Demand rather than Valuation. Grant uses the terminology *Ausil Toomar Jama* to express revenue demand.

The utility of the Valuation, according to Moreland, was that it set the standard of demand from the intermediaries in the Province. This Valuation was the only means by which the Provincial *Diwan* could check the local assessors from defalcating and call for explanations if the annual assessments did not meet up to the standard as set by the Valuation figures. Moreland pointed out that during the first half of the century the annual assessments could hardly be expected to have risen beyond the Valuation figures with foreign trade languishing and the scarcity of silver which kept prices low. However in the second half of the century there was an influx of silver within the province due to the activities of the Dutch and the English East India Companies. But there was no increase however in the Demand figures, except in the levying of extra cesses representing the enhancement which was at first 'intercepted by subordinates' but 'then brought formally unto the record, and growing by degrees, until about the year 1755, when the total recorded Demand on the intermediaries was about double the original standards.' If this explanation be accepted, then we could arrive at Grant's position whereby the revenue demand remained almost static from sixteenth to the late eighteenth century with only minor adjustments at the time of Shah Shuja and Murshid Quli Khan. This explanation however as Moreland points out is conjectural. It is the peculiarity of the province of Bengal that the valuation for using in granting assignments came to be used as standard for realizing dues from intermediaries.²⁰

The analysis of the fiscal system by Grant and Moreland other than providing insights into the economy also point to the gradual extension of political authority in Bengal. The consolidation of authority enabled successful extraction of surplus from the country and one could thus see in the fiscal system how by degrees the authority of the Mughals grew over the *subah*.

In his essay on Bengal, Moreland also made certain observations upon the implications of the *zamindari* right in Bengal. These views had been criticized by Tapan Raychaudhuri.

²⁰ Ibid, p-198-199.

Moreland mentioned that in 1698, the British, consequent upon the construction of Fort William, desiring to possess some lands adjacent to the fort, obtained what they termed as the '*zamindari*' rights of the three villages of Sutanati, Govindapur and Dihi-Kolkata. But the word *zamindari*, had more than one implication. Firstly, in Bengal it implied, "'holder of the land', denoting the fact of possession, but implying nothing as to the title on which possession was based. But the word was used in a completely different sense in Northern India, where 'from the fourteenth to the eighteenth century, it denoted possession(of land) by a particular title antecedent to Moslem rule'. Taken in this sense the British cannot be said to have acquired the *zamindari* rights of "the three towns". The authorities at Delhi also did not describe the rights purchased by the company as *zamindari* rights. The *firman* of Farruksiyar, which confirmed the existing privileges enjoyed by the company referred to 'the renting of the three towns'. According to Moreland the *firman* speaks of *taluqadari* rather than *zamindari*. In a period of disorganisation following the decline of the imperial authority at Delhi, when might rather than actual right determined possession, the term *taluqadari* had come into currency in Northern India, implying simply possession whatever the title may be. Thus Moreland concludes, 'at this time Calcutta meant by *zamindari* what Delhi meant by *Taluqadari*.'²¹

The East India Company however continued to style itself as the possessor of *zamindari* rights of the three towns. The member of the Council who was placed in charge of the three towns was designated *zamindar* and the term black *zamindar* was applied to his Indian assistant. Thus the East India Company understood that the word *zamindar* denoted 'a collector of rent, remunerated by salary or commission.' In practice, the Records of the Company show, its collector granting leases at a maximum rate fixed by a superior authority, collecting rents and managing the villages. The Company also paid an annual sum of Rs. 1290 to the local revenue collectors who realized the sum from the Company in three installments on behalf of the King or for the assignee in possession. It is also clear, Moreland points out that the Company was supposed to pay a fixed sum of money which they regarded as invariable.

²¹ Ibid, p-192.

But the question arises whether the sense in which the Company understood the term *zamindar*, was the sense in which it was widely understood over the entire province. Moreland himself does not have any answer to the question but if Sir John Shore's account be taken to be accurate, then the word *zamindar* was applied in the same sense throughout Bengal as it was applied in Calcutta.²²

Shore recognized that while the *zamindars* of Akbar's time were Chiefs- 'men with claims antecedent to the establishment of the Mogul Government', most of the Bengal *zamindars* however came into existence after Akbar's reign. The official revenue collector with a fixed remuneration often morphed into the farmer, paying a stipulated sum, and profiting from any extension of cultivation; the farmer then morphed into the chief claiming hereditary rights over a piece of land and getting the designation of a *zamindar*. According to Shore, '*zamindar*' thus, became a blanket term for chiefs, farmers and collectors alike. The Bengal *zamindar* of the eighteenth century was the counterpart of the North Indian *taluqdar* that is a man in possession, whatever his title might be.

From this Moreland had concluded that 'at the time of Akbar there were some Chiefs and some old established Farmers...both classes paying fixed sums by way of Demand; and that apart from the areas so held, the officials or assignees dealt with the villages either through farmers or through headmen.' Gradually "the officials came to occupy the position of Farmers, paying the amount of the Valuation, and making what they could. As time went on, the distinction between the Chiefs, Farmers and Officials disappeared, because there was in fact no difference in the incidents of the various positions, and all alike came to be known as *zamindars*."²³

Tapan Raychaudhuri however points out that the *zamindars* did not pay fixed sums of money. They paid tribute or *peshkash* in contrast to *hast-o-bud jama* or fixed cash demands. In assuming that the *zamindars* paid fixed sums of money, Moreland has applied a later practice into the past. Secondly it is not correct that the officials or assignees dealt with the ryots always through Farmers or Headmen. The officials often employed their own men for purposes of collecting their dues from the ryots. Lastly the

²² Ibid, p-193.

²³ Ibid, p-199.

transformation of officials into Farmers and Farmers into Chiefs, so that all alike came to be termed *zamindars* took place at a much later period.²⁴

The fixed sums of money that was payable by the East India Company is characterized by Irfan Habib as the payment of *naqdi*. The *Ain* mentions that the revenue from Bengal as mainly *naqdi*. The term literally implies cash but from a close scrutiny of the sources Habib infers that *naqdi* meant tribute of a fixed sum of money in contrast to the variable annual assessment. A document records Mir Jumla having raised the tax demand arbitrarily without having enquired into the capacity of the land. The increase was meted out as a way of punishing the chiefs. *Naqdi* here would thus mean tribute levied on the *zamindars* which was fixed, in contrast to annual assessment but could be arbitrarily increased if the authorities so desired.²⁵

. Another controversy among the scholars is with regard to the interpretation of the term *nasaq*. Moreland points out that that the term *nasaq* literally means administration, but the term has also been utilized in our sources to mean, a method of assessment. The term has been contrasted to two prevailing modes of assessment the *ghallabakshi* and the *zabt*. The former term implies assessment by sharing while the latter term implies assessment by measurement. So *nasaq* therefore refers to a form of assessment according to Moreland which is neither done by sharing nor by measurement. Moreland concludes that in such circumstances the term *nasaq* might imply group assessment or farming. Moreland cites a passage in the *Ain*, where Shihabuddin Ahmed Khan on assuming the charge of the reserved lands set aside the annual *zabt* and established a *nasaq*. The reasons for rejecting *zabt* and introducing *nasaq* have been stated in the text. According to the text the work of assessing the reserved lands were heavy, honest officials scarce and the annual *zabt* involved great expense and led to corrupt embezzlement. A change of method was therefore necessary to simplify and cheapen the procedure of assessment and to check official embezzlement. These objectives could be secured by group assessment as it did not involve detailed measurement and was fixed as a stated sum of money on the village headman who

²⁴ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir* Calcutta, 1953, p-48-49.

²⁵ Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, Delhi, 1999 (reprint), p-217.

apportioned the load among the peasants in the village or group of villages under his purview.

Although group assessment is nowhere named in the text as *nasaq*, there is no separate nomenclature to describe the system of group assessment either. It is also pointed out by Moreland, in support of his view of identifying *nasaq* with group assessment, that as in group assessment in *nasaq* also arrangements could have been made with village headmen because in Akbar's instruction to his collectors he points out that in Reserved areas, *nasaq* should not be made with the village headmen as it led to inefficiency and oppression.

Thus Moreland observes *nasaq* was a system which could be made with village headmen, was simpler and cheaper than measurement, offered fewer opportunities for official corruption but involved the risk of oppression if headmen were strong and loss if they were weak.

However the possibility remains that *nasaq* could also imply farming. From the point of view of the state both group assessment and farming would appear similar as in both cases the Collector had to collect lump sum from an individual and it made little difference to the state whether that individual was an insider or an outsider with regard to the village. Therefore, Moreland observes, from the point of view of the state the same term *nasaq* could imply both arrangements of Group assessment or Farming. But *nasaq* did not exclusively mean farming because the term came to be applied in a narrower sense only during the time of Akbar. But the Emperor himself was not very keen to follow the method of Farming. So Moreland concludes that the term *nasaq* would probably mean Group-assessment but it could also imply Farming.²⁶

Irfan Habib²⁷ pointed out that *nasaq* was never stated in the text as an independent method of assessment but appears only as a 'handmaid of other methods'. The passage which Moreland has used to contrast *zabt* with *nasaq* is also used by Habib. In the passage Shihabuddin Khan, 'having set aside the *zabt-i- harsala* established a system of *nasaq* in the *khalisa* lands. Habib has interpreted this passage to mean that Shihabuddin Khan led aside annual measurement of the land (and not measurement altogether as

²⁶ W.H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*, Cambridge, 1929, pp-234-237.

²⁷ Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*, Delhi, 1999 (reprint).

Moreland supposed). In another passage from the *Akbarnamah* it is said that in the *parganahs* of the *khalisa*, the recorded area is less every year so when the cultivated land has been once measured they should increase the area from year to year' and establish a partial *nasaq*. Habib points out that though *nasaq* here implies the 'the suppression of annual measurement, the record of area measured in any one previous year continued to be used for assessment purposes.' In a third passage from the *Ain*, the revenue collector is instructed to 'keep farsightedness and justice before him in undertaking measurements. Let him add to the capacity of the cultivator everywhere, and honouring the settlement, let him not demand anything from the area cultivated in excess of it. If some desire *paimash* and others *nasaq* let him agree.' Habib interprets this passage to mean that the revenue official was to accept the previously fixed area, increase it by estimation and if some peasants did not agree they could resort to measurement, otherwise *nasaq* should be followed. From these passages Habib concludes *nasaq* as an 'alternative to annual measurement under *zabt*, signified the continuous use in successive years of the same area figures previously determined by actual measurement , but modified from time to time.'²⁸ The passage instructing the *amalguzar* not to make settlement with the village headmen, did not imply that such a practice was in force and that *nasaq* implied Group-assessment. Rather according Habib, it implied that 'the revenue officials were not to make modifications or enhancements in the standard area figures by bargaining with the leading villagers.'²⁹

We have discussed the origin and implications of the rights of *zamindari* and *taluqadari* at length because the nature of *zamindari* and *taluqadari* rights is relevant in context of our third chapter where we focus on the role of the landed gentry - *zamindars* and *taluqadars* - in the economy of the region. The system of surplus extraction also reflects on the political structure. The collection of revenue by the system of *nasaq* would have been prevalent in the *khalisa* and the *jagir* lands whereas the independent chieftains would be paying revenue as *naqdi*. The fact that the revenue of Bengal was largely *naqdi* implied the existence of many chieftains within the Province paying tribute who had been absorbed within the structure of the Mughal administrative system and yet seems to have

²⁸ Ibid, p-257.

²⁹ Ibid.

maintained their authority as chieftains. This was because when the Mughals conquered Bengal they did not exterminate the local gentry altogether but those who willingly submitted retained their possessions. These chieftains were also responsible for the collection of revenue within their jurisdictions and perhaps in extending cultivation so that after paying tribute they could profit from any improvement of their lands.

Although the economy of seventeenth century Bengal revolved mainly around agriculture, trade was also an important part of it. Since Bengal was a maritime Province a large number of European Companies entered the Province and opened up trade. The first to arrive were the Portuguese. In the historiographical context, the activities of the Portuguese in the early part of the century till the eclipse of their authority following the siege of Hughli by Shah Jahan in 1632 had been studied by J.J. Campos³⁰. In the later half of the century the Dutch and the English Asiatic trade increased in importance compared to that of the Portuguese and the activities of the former have been extensively studied by OmPrakash³¹ in three of his important works and that of the latter by Sushil Chaudhury³².

Trade with the European Companies was significant for Bengal's economy as it brought bullion to the Province leading to an increasing monetization of Bengal's economy and also an increase in production. The average annual treasure imported by the Dutch Company increased from f. 1.28 million in the 1660s to f. 2.43 million in the 1700s to f. 2.87 million in the 1710s.³³ Since there was negligible domestic production of precious metals the monetary system depended heavily on the imported bullion. The imported bullion was converted to Mughal coins leading to an increase in money supply.

³⁰ J.J.A Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, New Delhi, 1998.

³¹ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720*, Princeton, 1985. *The Dutch Factories in India, 1617-1623: A Collection of Dutch East India Company Documents Pertaining to India*, New Delhi, 1984, *European Commercial Enterprise in Precolonial India*, Cambridge, 2000.

³² Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal 1650-1720: With Special Reference to the English East India Company*, Calcutta 1975.

³³ Om Prakash, *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630-1720*, Princeton, 1985, p-249.

Although increase in money supply is usually associated with a rise in prices in the case of Bengal there was no simultaneous price rise with the influx of bullion.

Om Prakash points out that the stability in rise of prices was not due to the outflow of money from the Provinces. The *subadars* of Bengal used to carry away money from the Province as personal remittances but the drain on account of this was not large enough. A rather more important source of net outflow of funds from Bengal was in the shape of revenue payable from the Province to Delhi. But this outflow of funds from Bengal had started before the arrival of the European trading Companies and remained constant from 1658 to 1722. In the latter year it was marginally increased due to re-organization in the revenue structure. Hence the drain of funds from Bengal cannot account for the steady prices even in the face of influx of bullion from the European trading Companies.

Om Prakash argues that a rise in prices with the increase of money supply can take place only if the velocity of circulation and the number of transactions remain unchanged but in the case of Bengal the volume of transactions increased with the coming of the Europeans. Om Prakash points out that the bullion which the Europeans brought into Bengal 'were not a gift but represented payment for physical goods procured that would now have to be produced in larger quantities.' Also the European trading Companies would have carried out all their transactions in the monetized sector and a growing foreign trade would imply a growth of the monetized sector in contrast to the barter sector. So, 'monetized transactions as a proportion to the total transactions in the economy would have gone up.' Finally natural increase in population would also lead to an increase in output and the number of transactions if per capita output were not to go down. Thus all these factors checked a general rise in prices with the inflow of bullion due to the trade with the European trading Companies.³⁴ Thus the effect of the arrival of the Dutch and the English East India Company was generally favourable as it resulted in the increase in 'output, income and employment.' The most favourable aspect of this trade for Bengal was that it involved an exchange of precious metals for goods, the inflow of precious metals encouraging increased production which partly accounted for price stability. Sushil Chaudhury however argued that the bullion which the European

³⁴ Ibid, p-253.

Companies brought did not percolate down to the producers but it was appropriated by the merchant middlemen. The prices of commodities remained cheap in Bengal because of the fertility of the land and the drain of wealth from the Provinces in the form of profits made by the *subadars* and carried away from Bengal to other parts of India.³⁵ The demand of the European trade did ‘gave a fillip to the process of commercialization and extended the area under specialized industrial and cash crop production linked to export markets’, but the author argues that the impact of the European trade cannot be termed as ‘growth oriented’ as it touched only ‘the fringe of the traditional Bengal economy.’³⁶

From a political perspective, the arrival of the European Companies were particularly significant as one among these-the English East India Company went on to become the masters of Bengal and eventually of the whole subcontinent. But for our period their presence was largely commercial with occasional tussle with the local authorities. The Portuguese however were an exception as they often allied with other political powers within the region. We focus on the political context of European trading Companies in course of our second chapter. The economic consequences of their presence- the growth of trade and spread of urbanization- has been discussed in the third chapter.

Socio-Cultural History of Bengal

Turning to the context of socio-cultural history, Tapan Raychaudhuri’s work traces the growth and trends in cultural movements like the Neo-Vaishnava movement in Bengal. Using vernacular sources, Raychaudhuri also elucidates the nature of social stratification and the position and lifestyle of different classes in it³⁷.

In the context of seventeenth century Bengal, another important work linking the economic with the socio-cultural history of the Province has been that of Richard Eaton, in his book entitled, *The Rise Of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*.³⁸ The

³⁵ Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal 1650-1720: With Special Reference to the English East India Company*, Calcutta 1975, p-238-9

³⁶ *Ibid*, p-240

³⁷ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal Under Akbar and Jahangir* Calcutta, 1953.

³⁸ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, London 1993.

primary purpose of Eaton's work is to explain the presence of a vast majority of Muslim population in the far eastern corner of the Mughal Empire. But the author does so within the larger political and socio-economic contexts. Eaton is of the opinion that the presence of a Muslim population in East Bengal cannot be accounted for by the simple process of conversion. A number of factors- natural, political, social and economic were responsible for the emergence of a Muslim population in East Bengal. As Eaton himself mentions- 'In the context of pre-modern Bengal, then, it would seem inappropriate to speak of the "conversion" of "Hindus" to Islam. What one finds rather is an expanding agrarian civilization whose cultural counterpart was the growth of the cult of Allah.'

From the 13th century onwards Islam had been associated with the ruling elite of Turks, and after the Mughal conquest with urban *ashraf* class- consisting of administrators, soldiers, scholars etc. However from the seventeenth-eighteenth century onwards Islam began to be associated with the rural peasantry of eastern Bengal 'who assimilated Islam to their agrarian world view.' Agricultural growth and Islamization thus proceeded together and that they were linked to each other was due to a number of factors.

Firstly, the establishment of Mughal rule in Bengal was far from a mere change of dynasty at the center. The Mughals since the time of Akbar sought to integrate the conquered population. At the political level it meant the integration of the enemy chiefs within the Mughal elite by means of the *mansabdari* system. By this mechanism the chiefs retained their territories but were subordinated to the Emperor and made to render service for the Empire. At the same time the Mughals also sought to expand agriculture for the basis of its wealth was largely land revenue. They tried to integrate the nomadic and forest-dwelling tribes within the fold of the Mughal 'Agrarian System' by making them lead the life of settled cultivators. These were the Mughal motives in extending cultivation in the *Bhati* area thickly forested, and abode of the rebels. The process as outlined by Eaton can be witnessed in areas like Chittagong. The inhabitants of the area were neither Hindu nor Muslim in their religious practices nor were they settled cultivators but they practiced *jhum* cultivation. After the Mughal conquest of Chittagong by Shaista Khan in 1666, there was a proliferation of mosques in the area and 'a systematic transfer of jungle territory from the royal domain to members of an emerging

religious gentry who had built and/or managed hundreds of mosques or shrines (dargah) dedicated to Muslim holy men.’³⁹ Such grants of tax free lands were not limited for the upkeep of the mosque but income from them could be utilized for the personal requirements of the grantees and their heirs would also continue to enjoy the benefits from such grants. Eaton mentions that the grants set in motion important social processes, ‘forest lands became rice fields, and indigenous inhabitants became rice cultivating peasants, at once both the economic and religious clients of the new gentry.’⁴⁰

A second development in this context was the development of East Bengal that is the region of the *Bhati*, as a center of greater agricultural productivity and population growth, compared to the western parts of the delta.⁴¹ This was due to the eastward movement of the active portion of the Ganges Delta. In the fertile region of *Bhati*, the forests were cleared and the cultivation of wet rice was introduced. Rice emerged about this time as an important item of export. Along with increased agricultural productivity Bengal simultaneously witnessed a manufacturing boom. There was increased production of cotton textile and muslins especially in Dacca which found a ready market in the Mughal court as well as with the European Companies- the Dutch and the English who had been building up their trade in Bengal in course of the seventeenth century. It was because of the Dutch and the English East India Company that a large amount of silver entered Bengal. However the influx of silver did not cause a price inflation. The revenue demand from Bengal as pointed out earlier, remained more or less static between the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries except for minor increments in particular areas. The reason for the absence of price inflation, as already discussed, was not due to the outflow of species from the Province but due to an increased production necessitated by the demands of commerce and growth of population.

In fact since the increased money supply did not leave the Province, it percolated down to the lower levels of the social strata enabling ‘land transfers and cash advances that necessarily accompanied an expanding agrarian frontier.’ The processes detailed above coincided with the growth of a large section of Muslim peasantry with

³⁹ Ibid, p-238.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p-239

⁴¹ Ibid, p-194.

which the land reclamation of the *Bhati* took place. The peasants were usually mobilized by a charismatic *pir* and the organization and clearance of land and extension of cultivation proceeded around the institution of the mosque or a shrine.

Eaton points out that East Bengal in Mughal times lacked social organization. There existed no Muslim *biradaris* or Hindu *jatis* as in Northern India. Also, the region of East Bengal was prone to floods so the villagers made their houses on high grounds in hills or ridges, so the houses were dispersed, without any clear demarcation of the boundaries of different villages.⁴² In such circumstance the mosque provided the basis for social organization and mobilization. The process of land reclamation also proceeded centering around the mosque. Usually a *pir* or some charismatic leader with the authorization of the *zamindar* or the primary holder of a land, built a mosque and then the Mughal state authorities granted virgin lands for the upkeep of the mosque its functionaries and its large number of dependents who helped clear the virgin land and put it to cultivation. From the point of view of Mughal authorities these mosques served as agents for extending cultivation and deepening the roots of state patronage and authority in the rural society of East Bengal. But it was these mosques which helped in the ‘diffusion of uniquely Islamic conceptions of divine and human authority among the groups under its socio-economic influence.’

Thus in Eaton’s analysis, the mosques built by Muslim holy men under state patronage that were instrumental in agricultural reclamation of the fertile lands of the *Bhati* were responsible for the introduction, adaptation and assimilation of Islam within the rural society of East Bengal.

Eaton’s work is quite significant for our discussion as he has outlined the role of the natural factor in shaping the social and economic processes of the period. He has also focused on processes of land reclamation and agrarian expansion as part of his over-all attempts to explain the presence of Muslim population in East Bengal. However in so doing he emphasizes solely on the role of the Muslim religious gentry. This however is only taking a partial view of the matter because in the Jessore and Backergunj Sunderbans the grain merchant and the landlords were responsible for land reclamation rather than the *pir*. The grain merchants advanced seeds and capital to the peasants with

⁴² Ibid, p-232.

which to begin cultivation. We turn to this theme of land reclamation and agricultural expansion in the course of our first chapter. But the evidence of attempts at integration of the conquered population by means of land grants can be observed in Bengal. As Rajat Datta has shown, in parts of Bengal like Chittagong or Sylhet which were politically unsettled Mughals attempted to pacify the area and bring the conquered population under control by the distribution of *la-khiraj* or charity lands. The holders of the *la-khiraj* lands being exempted from any payment of rent were enthusiastic to extend cultivation and so profit, in these otherwise unsettled areas.⁴³ We turn to this theme in course of our third chapter on the role of the landed gentry in extending the agrarian frontiers.

To conclude the foregoing discussion we can say that although the existing literature on seventeenth century Bengal had focused on political, economic, social and cultural issues it has not attached sufficient importance to the natural factors, which were behind the political and socio-economic developments of seventeenth century Bengal. Our purpose here is to bring into forefront the role of natural factors in moulding the history of Bengal in course of the seventeenth century. In our first chapter we sketch the natural and topographical features unique to Bengal, for instance its fluvial network, its deltaic and maritime character, its flora and fauna. We also take into account the effects of the natural processes- shifting of rivers, floods and famines- on the life of the inhabitants of the Province and their response to them. In our second chapter we deal with the influence of environment on the politics of the region in terms of influencing military logistics, the character of administration and causing problems of political consolidation. We also discuss here the activities of the European trading companies whose presence in the Province in a world of extending overseas commercial networks was a natural corollary to the maritime character of the Province. In our third chapter we engage in the discussion of the relationship between environment and economy of the Province. Here we discuss the agricultural and commercial aspects of the economy of the region and how these were being influenced by the natural factors. In case of both agriculture and trade the role of the rivers of Bengal is noteworthy because they made the region fertile and also acted as channels of communication aiding the swift movement of

⁴³ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, 1760-1880*, New Delhi 2000, p-147-8.

goods from one part of the country to other. As a result trade flourished and a large number of urban centers burgeoned along the banks of the rivers, all amply illustrating the relationship between environment and economy of the region.

These in brief are the issues with which we propose to deal with in course of our work which perhaps would help emphasize the role of the natural factor in shaping the history of Bengal, hitherto neglected in seventeenth century historiography.

Chapter-1

The Ecological Background

The ecology of a region is very important in determining its politics as well as its economy. The fertility of the land determines its productive capacity and therefore its economy, while the physical features of the region may also determine its political boundaries and the character of administration. This has been the case with Bengal where the political frontier often matched with the natural.

Bengal was a riverine Province and its rivers often determined its political frontiers and administrative divisions. In ancient times the Province was divided into four regions. The lands to the east of Bhagirathi river were known as *Vanga*, the lands to the west of same river were called *Rarh*. The southern part of the Province, the coastal areas were known as *samatata* and the northern areas, lands to the north of the Padma were called *Varendra*. The eastern most areas beyond Vanga were known as *Harikela*.⁴⁴

Blochmann points out that before the time of Bhaktiyar Khilji Bengal was divided into five 'districts' as Blochmann would put it. These were (1) Radha the country to the west of river Hughli and the south of the Ganges (2) Bagdi the delta of the Ganges (3) Banga the country to the East of and beyond the delta (4) the Barendra the country to the north of the Padma and between the Karatoya and the Mahananda rivers and (5) Mithila, the country to the west of the Mahananda. Blochmann points out that we do not know for certain whether these were revenue divisions or were popular divisions of the province according to the courses of the principal rivers. But he infers that these divisions were made at the time of Ballalsen since the names of the Brahmans and the Kayasthas derived from these divisions.⁴⁵ But it is evident that the rivers were used to determine the boundaries of the different divisions of the Province which says something about the unique fluvial character of the Province.

Even in the time of Todar Mal the distribution of Sirkars depended as in the old Hindu division, on the courses of the Ganges, Bhagirathi, and Megna or as the *Ain*

⁴⁴ Jawhar Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity*, p-120 (Map).

⁴⁵ H. Blochmann, *Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal: Muhammedan Period*, Calcutta, 1968, p-3.

pointed out on the courses of the Padmawati, Ganga, and Brahmaputra which again underscores the importance of the fluvial network of the Province in shaping its politico-administrative units.

The Province of Bengal according to the *Ain-i-Akbari* was located in the second climate among the seven climates into which the Arabs had divided the globe. It extended from Chittagong in the east to Teliagarhi in the west and in breadth was about 400 kos. Its length was about 200 kos. extending from the northern mountains to the *sarkar* Mandaran in the south. When the *suba* of Orissa was added to it the additional length was 43 kos and the breadth 23 kos. It was bounded on the south by the sea, and on the north and east by the mountains and on the west by the *suba* of Behar⁴⁶. The *Akbarnamah* and the *Iqbalnamah-i-Jahangiri* state that Bengal was bounded on the south by the sea, on the north by hills (that is, those south of Nepaul, Sikkim, and Bhutan)⁴⁷, on the east by hills (that is, those of Chittagong and Arakan), on the west by the *Subah* of Behar. The *Riyaz-us-salatin* chronicled two centuries⁴⁸ later gives similar notions of the boundaries of Bengal. This would imply that the boundaries of the province would have remained more or less the same even after two centuries. Schouten says the kingdom of Bengal was 'situated in and beyond the twenty-first parallel of North latitude. On the East it is bounded by the kingdoms of Arakan and Ava; On the north by the Provinces of Mevat, Patna, and Narvat and which are part of the same Empire; On the west it is bounded by the mountains of Ratipore whose vast extent separates Bengal from Gujarat, and by the countries of Indostan, Orixia, and Golconda; On the south by the Gulf of Bengale.'⁴⁹ It is to be mentioned here that the southern boundary of Bengal was indisputably formed by the Bay of Bengal. To the east as both Abul Fazl and Schouten note it extended till the kingdom of Arakan. The *subah* of Bihar seems to have formed the western boundary and the Persian chronicles treat it as a separate *subah*. The kingdom of Orissa, Abul Fazl

⁴⁶ Abul Fazl Allami's *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. ii, translated from the original Persian by Colonel H. S. Jarrett 2nd edition further corrected and annotated by Sir Jadunath Sarkar, vol.ii, New Delhi, 1989. p-130.

⁴⁷ Cited in Ghulam Husain Salim's *Riyaz-us-salatin*, tr. Maulavi Abdus Salim, Calcutta, 1902. fn. p-9.

⁴⁸ Begun in 1786, by Ghulam Hussain on the orders of his patron the Englishman George Udny it was completed in 1788.

⁴⁹ Schouten, vol ii, p-153 cited in Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal 1669-1679*, ed. Sir Richard Carnac Temple, Delhi, 1997, p-131.

mentioned was an independent state which however during the time of Akbar was added to the *subah* of Bengal⁵⁰. The *Riyaz* elaborating on this says, 'And since in the period of Jalal-uddin Muhammad Akbar Padshah Ghazi, the Subah of Orissa was conquered by Kalapahar⁵¹ and annexed to the Empire of the Sovereigns of Delhi, and made a part of the *Subah* of Bengal, the extent of the latter *Subah* became extended by 43 *karoh* in length and by 20 *karoh* in breadth.' On the north and the east the accounts agree in that the kingdom of Bengal was surrounded by mountains. On the East, Assam formed an independent state with which the Mughals were at war in course of the seventeenth century. While the southern, northern and the western boundaries of the *subah* were more or less static, bounded as it were by the seas and the mountains, and by the *subah* of Behar which was already a Mughal possession the eastern boundary of the Province continued to be fluid, for it provided a direction for further expansion of territories and so throughout the seventeenth century the Mughals battled against the Kings of Assam and Arakan⁵².

⁵⁰ Abul Fazl, *Ain*, vol. ii, p-138.

⁵¹ He was a general of Sulaiman Karrani, *Ain* p-140. The *Riyaz* mentions Sulaiman Karrani to have acknowledged Mughal overlordship.

⁵² It seems Assam was included in the Province of Bengal in the pre-Mughal period. Maulavi Abdus Salam, in the *Riyaz*, says, 'During the reigns, however, of the Independent Musalman Kings (such as Ilyas Shah, and Alauddin Husain Shah in 1502 and his son and successor Nasrat Shah), the Musalman Kingdom of Bengal was more extensive than its geographical limits, and included northern portions of Orissa or Jajnagar, Kuch Behar, Kamrup or Western Assam with portions of Eastern Assam, and the whole of Upper Bihar (a Governor to represent the Bengal Musalman King being posted at Hajipur opposite to Patna), and the eastern portions of South Behar including Sarkars Monghyr and Behar. The whole of Orissa was conquered, and annexed to the Bengal Musalman Kingdom in the reign of Sulaiman Karrani, the last but one independent Musalman Afghan King in Bengal'. *Riyaz* p-9. But at this time Bengal was not a part of the larger Empire of the Delhi Sultanate. It slipped out from the hands of sultans and became an independent Muslim Kingdom under Ilyas Shah, Hussain Shah and later the Karrani's. The last of the independent Afghan ruler was Daud Karrani who was defeated by Akbar. When Akbar came to the throne, Bengal, with Behar and Orissa, was annexed to the Mughal Empire of Delhi. While Orissa seems to be added to the *subah* of Bengal, as mentioned in the *Ain*, the *subah* of Behar remained a separate province till Murshid Quli Khan.

A large part of the Province was hilly especially the eastern portions containing the Chittagong hill tracts and the northern portions of the Province in Kuch and Kamrup. The *Baharistan* mentions the *Hizdah* Rajas or eighteen hill chieftains in the north. The editor to the text mentions that these chiefs ruled over the strip of the level country at the foot of the Himalayas, from Darrang west-wards, in the direction of Bhutan.⁵³ These countries were called Duwars or doors through which lay the passes into the hills. There were eighteen of these Duwars, eleven of which were situated on the border of Bengal and Goalpara and seven in the north of Kamrup and Darrang. These hill-chiefs were for a long time vassals of the Ahom kings who were responsible to keep peace in the frontier. The Mughals tried to bring them under their subjugation. Later, Martin mentions ten hill-chiefs who ruled over the region to the south of the Brahmaputra, in Kamrup.⁵⁴

The southern portion of the Province was situated in the delta of the Ganges and was traversed by its tributaries and distributaries. The river Brahmaputra flowing down from the hills of Assam joins the Ganga and the two rivers with their innumerable tributaries and distributaries make the region ‘a boat country’. Regarding the deltaic region of Bengal, Bernier pointed out that in between the channels of the river Ganga were a large number of small islands which are all ‘extremely fertile’, surrounded with wood, abounding in fruit trees, and pineapples and ‘covered with verdure’⁵⁵. He however points out that some of these islands had been abandoned by its inhabitants due to the attack of the Arakan pirates. The rivers of Bengal branched off in a large number of streams at the southern end of the delta. The Mughal *subadar* Ibrahim Khan in his campaign against the *sardar* of Jessore was lost amidst this maze of streams and rivulets. He, ‘for a period of five days wandered from one stream to another and from one *nullah*

⁵³ Mirza Nathan’s *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, tr. by M.I. Borah, Gauhati, 1936, Vol. ii, p-843.

⁵⁴ R. M. Martin cited in the editors notes on *Baharistan*, p-843. The Diary of John Marshall, mentions hills near Balasore known as the Nilgiris about a distance of eight miles from the town. Near Wooderapore [Hoodrapore], Harryapore, Burgungall, Mehandipur, Caushdee, Bhim ka latte, Chitcheroul, Jahangira and Munghyr hills are found. *John Marshall in India: Notes and Observations in Bengal 1668-72* ed. Shafaat Ahmed Khan, Oxford, 1927, p- 62, 68-9, 72, p-82, 118.

⁵⁵ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire* translated on basis of Irving Brock’s version, annotated by Archibald Constable, 2nd edition, revised V.A. Smith, Delhi, (reprint) 1989, p-442.

to another by losing his way and suffered great trouble.⁵⁶ Even for the small stretch of land from Chittagong to the Feni river, the Mughal historian Shihabuddin Talish mentioned that there were about 99 nullahs which contain water in seasons other than the monsoon as well⁵⁷.

The deltaic region to the south was also covered by forests. The Mughal historians used for this region the name *Bhati*. *Bhati* according to Abul Fazl extended 400 *kos* from east to west, and 300 *kos* from north to the ocean to the south ; it thus included the *Sundarban* and the tracts along the Meghna. The *Bhati* is supposed to include the *Sundarban* and all the neighboring lowlands (even Hijely) overflowed by the tides. The Muslim historians never use the term *Sundarban*, but give the sea-board from Hijely to the Megna one name of 'Bhati,' which signifies lowlands over-flooded by tides⁵⁸.

An important natural feature of the Province of Bengal is the presence of a large number of rivers. The Ganga-Brahmaputra river-system is the lifeline of this region just as the Indus river system is in the west. The *Riyaz* mentions that due to the presence of a large number of rivers and the practice of digging tanks being very common, the people of the Province of Bengal, seldom drank the water of wells, because everywhere the water of tanks and rivers was found in abundance. The *Riyaz* also traces the course of the Ganga-Brahmaputra river system:

The best of the rivers is the Ganges (Gang), which rises from the northern mountains of Hindustan at the point called *Goumukhah*, flows through the provinces of Hindustan, Farrakhabad, Allahabad, and Behar into Bengal, and in Bengal at a place called *Qazihata*, within the *Sarkar* of Barbakabad, it is named *Padda*. From this place, a branch of the Ganges separates, flows down Murshidabad, and at Nadiah joins the Jalangi river,

⁵⁶ *Baharistan*, vol. ii, p-635.

⁵⁷ *Fathiya-i-Ibriyya* of Shihabuddin Talish, tr. Jadunath Sarkar, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. III, New Series, no.6, June 1907, p-420, cited in Radhika Chadha, 'Merchants, Renegades and Padres: Portuguese presence in Bengal in the sixteenth and seventeenth Centuries', Phd Theses, CHS, JNU, 2005 p-24-5.

⁵⁸ Grant's definition of *Bhati*, cited in *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, (fn.) p-8.

and then flows into the sea. This branch is called the Bhagirathi, and it goes towards Chittagong, flowing through the sea. The Ganges at Allahabad joins the rivers Jon (or Jamna) and Sarasati, and near, Hajipur it unites also with the Gandak, the Saru and the Son, and becomes very broad. And the place where the three rivers unite is called Trebeni by Hindus, and its Sanctity in the eye of the Hindus is immeasurable. And the Ganges, Sarasati, and Jun or (Jamna), in flowing towards Chittagong and the sea, branch off in a thousand rivulets. There is no river bigger than it in Bengal...and another of the big rivers of Bengal is the Brahmaputra, which flows from the regions of Khata towards Koch, and thence by the way of Bazuha flows down into the sea. In the environs of Chittagong, it is called the Meghna. The smaller rivers are countless. On both banks of most of the rivers, paddy is cultivated.⁵⁹

There were a number of ways in which the inhabitants of Bengal perceived the rivers which were the life-line of the region. Many legends were associated with these. Abul Fazl says that the Hindus believed the river Ganges to have originated from the hair of Mahadeva's head. Linschoten mentions one legend where a king was intrigued with the idea of the origin of the Ganga and sent men in a boat without food to investigate if the said river originated from paradise.⁶⁰ Bowrey mentions this legend to actually having been a common practice in Bengal of people sending their children up the river Ganges subsisting on raw fish and flesh to find the source of the river of the Paradise.

Since the Ganga river was the bestower of plenty, awe and reverence was associated with it. Linschoten mentions ' this [river] is holden and accounted of all the Indians to be a holy and a blessed water and they do certainly believe, that such as they wash and bathe themselves therein...all their sinnes are [cleane] forgiven them, and that from thenceforth they are so cleane and pure[from sin] as if they were born again.'⁶¹ This association of purity with the River Ganges is also mentioned by Grandpre who

⁵⁹ Ibid., p-23-24.

⁶⁰ Linschoten, *The Voyages of John Huyghen Van Linschoten to the East Indies*, vol. 1 ed. A.C. Burnell, London, 1885, pp. 92-97.

⁶¹ Ibid.

points out that a man drowning in the Ganges was hardly ever saved that act, in fact, was supposed to land him in paradise after death⁶². Grandpre also mentions that the Goddess Durga was supposed to reside in the Ganges for which it was considered holy to take a dip in the river. Grandpre however is of the opinion that this story had been circulated to emphasize on the importance of taking a bath in the tropical country...⁶³ Bowry mentions the water of the Ganges together with the seal of the Brahmans in it to have been carried as far as Gombroon where the people received it with great respect⁶⁴. Tavernier mentions that the water of the Ganges was necessary in weddings and the ritual often became difficult for those situated far away from the river⁶⁵. Like the Ganga the river Bramhaputra was also associated with purity. It was said to have originated from a place called Brahmakundo where the legendary Parasuram was said to have taken a bath and was purged of his sins. Parasuram had then cut the hills with his battle-axe so that the rest of mankind could bathe in these waters and be absolved of their sins.⁶⁶

The rivers deposited sediments that made the region highly fertile, and suitable for cultivation. They also acted as channels of transport and communication in the region, through which the surplus from this region was traded or exchanged. Thus Deloche remarks, 'Bengal's fluvial ramifications constitute perhaps the world's most complete and convenient inland navigation system. In Rennel's time the deltas of Ganga-Brahmaputra, remained predominantly boat country, lacking other lines of communication and exchange.'⁶⁷ Unlike the Indus River system in the west which often

⁶² L. De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bengal, 1789-1790 Containing An Account of the Sechelles Islands and Trincomale*, New Delhi, 1995, vol ii, p-56-7.

⁶³ Ibid., vol.ii, p-56.

⁶⁴ Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal 1669-1679*, ed. Sir Richard Carnac Temple, Delhi, 1997, p-216.

⁶⁵ Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, tr. Valentine Ball and ed. William Crooke vol. I, part ii. , p-181, cited in Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account*, p-216(fn).

⁶⁶ R.M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India, comprising the Districts of Behar, Alahabad, Bhagalpoor, Goruckpoor, Dinajpoor, Purniya and Assam*, vol. iii, 'The Zila of Rangpoor', London, 1838, p-388.

⁶⁷ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India, Prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. 2 Water Transport, Delhi, 1994, p-25.

changed its course causing wide-spread floods the rivers of the Ganga-Brahmaputra system inspite of the occasional change in their course had more or less stable channels⁶⁸.

One of the major changes brought about due to the change in course of the rivers was the silting up of the River Saraswati. Thus the port of Satgaon was overtaken by the port of Hoogly under the Portuguese when the river Hoogly diverted its current through the main channel causing the silting up of the voluminous Saraswati on which depended the port of Satgaon. Below Kalikata a significant modification was brought about by the movements of the Damodar and the Rupnarain Rivers. In the process of adapting themselves to their present beds, they transported to the Hugali, opposite to Falta large quantities of alluvium leading to the formation of the famous James and the Mary shoals of which navigators had to be mindful of. The shoals derived their name from two English ships that sank there⁶⁹. The nineteenth century survey of the district of Rangpur pointed out that the people of the areas around Brahmaputra were adversely affected by its occasional flooding and change in courses. Most of these rivers were prone to changing their courses which caused great inconvenience to the inhabitants. 'One person's property being carried away and another person's enlarged while the tax of both continues the same. The one becomes unable to pay the government demands and the other suddenly enriched with habits of expense which on the next change of rivers he is unable to relinquish.'⁷⁰ Resigning themselves to the caprice of the rivers the wealthy did not undertake the construction of stately permanent houses. But these change in course of the rivers although frequent had not caused any major damage to the population except that which occurred on the Bengali era 1194 (1789). The change took place in the Tista due to a storm which also led to a deluge because of which half of the people and cattle of the district was washed away. Thus Martin observes that while there may be a possibility of controlling the smaller rivers from flooding but to do the same with the

⁶⁸ In some cases the rivers deviated from their paths. The course of the Jalangi altered between Patkabari and Madhupur, John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, p-88, p-130.

⁶⁹ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India*, vol. 2, Water Transport, p-118.

⁷⁰ R. M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India, Comprising the districts of Behar, Alahabad, Bhagalpoor, Goruckpoor, Dinajpoor, Purniya and Assam*, vol. iii, 'The Zila of Rangpoor', London, 1838, vol. iii, p-399.

Tista or the Brahmaputra 'is beyond human industry.'⁷¹ But it was a common practice even in the seventeenth century to secure the banks of the rivers and the practice of building embankments becomes prevalent in later years.

Some of these rivers of the Province were navigable throughout the year while some were navigable only during the monsoon. Deloche makes a study of the rivers of Bengal and their potentialities for navigation⁷². He points out that the Padma was among the perennially navigable rivers. The Damodar and the Rupnarain were also regularly navigable although they swelled heavily during the monsoon. The Tista and its two branches, the Atrai and the Purnabhaba were navigable perennially where they entered the plains. The Karatoya according to Martin was a large river and at Saldanga it was capable of carrying vessels of 5-600 maunds. The Nabaganga, Citra, Kabadak and Icamati were accessible throughout in their lower courses. The Bhagirathi impaired by the deposition of alluvial deposits, was often un-usuable during the dry season. The Jalangi river too lacked depth during the dry-season. The Pagla, Mor, and Ajay also provided seasonal navigation. The Brahmaputra before joining the Meghna was a powerful river artery allowing the conveyance of large barges to as far as Guwahati. In rainy season the current was furious and it was difficult to tow the boat to the bank because of the presence of dense jungles. But in periods of low water the cargo had to be lightened. According to Martin's survey the Brahmaputra although a large river was not navigable in any season. During the monsoons its current was too strong and the wilds along the river made tracking by ropes difficult. In the dry season sands were formed in the river which made navigation hazardous⁷³. The Brahmaputra in fact formed large depositions of sand. Where the current was strong it carried away sand from both banks of the river and when it reached a point where the current was slow these sands were deposited. Where the river became stagnant due to a new-formed deposition the sand and clay which was being carried by the river subsided there. In course of time after some amount of soil had been deposited that reeds started growing which gave some stability to these new formed islands. Over time the deposition of three to four years of soil made

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p-400.

⁷² Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India*, vol. 2, pp. 25-31.

⁷³ R. M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, vol. iii, p-389-390.

them fit for cultivation. These depositions, in the common Bengali dialect, when small and not fit for cultivation were called *chora*, but when large and suitable for cultivation were called *Chor*.⁷⁴ The Yamuna was not always navigable except on its lower course. Bengal thus had an exceptional navigational network. Some of its rivers were perennially navigable while in some in spite of the formation of alluvial deposits ships could move by lightening their cargoes. In comparison the rivers of the peninsula provided only subordinate navigation routes.⁷⁵

As a result of the easy navigability of the rivers the surplus generated could be easily traded throughout the interior of the Province as well as outside it. In the sixteenth-seventeenth century river transport became even more important in Bengal. Eaton observes 'with the main waters of the Ganges now pouring through the channel of the Padma river, the combined Ganges-Padma system linked eastern Bengal with North India at the very moment of Bengal's political integration with the Mughal Empire. Geographic and political integration were swiftly followed by economic integration, for direct river communication between East Bengal and North India would have dramatically reduced costs for the transport of East Bengali products, especially textiles and food stuffs, from the frontier to the imperial metropolis.'⁷⁶ So the products of eastern Bengal could easily reach North India.

The rivers of Bengal had very wide channels and were navigable for a fairly long distance inland. Manrique mentions that the estuary of the River Hughli was so broad that it deserved the label of sea. At Sripur, again Shihabuddin Talish mentions the river to have been very broad.⁷⁷ Because of their navigability these rivers also served as networks of transport facilitating trade and exchange of the surplus from this region. River transport continued to be dominant till the late eighteenth century when Grandpre mentioned that Bengal was so intersected with rivers and canals, that 'you can go to any

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p-391.

⁷⁵ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India*, vol. 2, p-31.

⁷⁶ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, Delhi, 1997, p-198.

⁷⁷ Friar Sebastian Manrique, vol. I p-25 and Shihabuddin Talish, p. 420, cited in Radhika Chadha, 'Merchants, Renegades and Padres: Portuguese Presence in Bengal in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', unpublished Phd. Thesis, CHS, JNU, 2005, p-25.

part of it in a boat.’⁷⁸ The rivers connected the villages, the towns and the cities, together in a network and facilitated the easy transport of goods from one part of the kingdom to another.

Tilotamma Mukherjee⁷⁹ points out that the regularity in the dispatch and receipt of goods which characterized the commercial transactions in Bengal was possible in a large measure due to the presence of a large number of navigable inland rivers in addition to the presence of surface transport via a network of roads. In the deltaic region particularly where the presence of a large number of rivulets demanded the loading and unloading of cargoes if traveling by land, water transport offered an easier and cheaper means of transporting goods. The rivers however were of a seasonal nature and dried in summer or flooded in the rainy season making communication through these difficult at times. The network of roads then complimented the transport through the river routes. This was to be the pattern even till the late eighteenth century when Rennell observed that water transport carried all the salt and a major part of the food of the ten million people. The rivers carried exports and imports of about two million sterling per annum throughout the whole country⁸⁰. Transport costs on land were estimated to be 28 times more than that through the river⁸¹ prompting merchants to store grain to be transported during the navigable season. Although this implied additional cost for storage overall it was cheaper to transport goods through the water route than through the land route. The rivers also connected the intermediary markets the *hats* and the *ganjs* and were therefore crucial to the economy of the region.

A large number of urban centers also grew up in the areas around the river. In course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the focal point of these urban centers shifted back and forth from the lands in the *Rarh* near the *Bhagirathi* river to the lands in

⁷⁸ L. De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bengal, 1789-1790*, vol ii, p-17.

⁷⁹ Tilotamma Mukherjee, “Of Rivers and Roads: Transport Networks and Economy in Eighteenth Century Bengal”, ed. Yogesh Sharma *Coastal Histories: Society and Ecology in Pre-Modern India*, Delhi, 2010, pp-15-34.

⁸⁰ James Rennel, *Memoirs of a Map of Hindustan*, 3rd edition, London, 1793, p-335.

⁸¹ John Crawford cited in Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India, 1819-1835*, London, 1995, p-113.

the East in the newly reclaimed areas of the *Bhati*.⁸² The great city of Gaur along with a large number of big and small townships grew up along the river *Bhagirathi* which declined in course of the sixteenth century, when the river moved away. But the decline of Gaur and its neighbouring urban centers was not due to natural factors alone. Seventy years of fighting between the Afghans and the Mughals affected the trade of this region and as a consequence the urban centers declined.

Meanwhile under the initiative of the *Bara Bhuiyans* parts of eastern Bengal were being cleared of jungles and reclaimed for habitation and so it attracted settlers migrating from the declining urban centers around *Bhagirathi*. The choice of Dacca as the seat of Mughal power in Bengal was not accidental. It represented this eastward movement of settlements and human activity. But between the years 1575-1608 that is the intervening period between the fall of Gaur and the rise of Dacca, there was no large city in Bengal. Some small towns or *qasbahs* grew along the *Bhagirathi* which lacked the strict urban ethos of Gaur or *Saptagram*. These urban centers were not radically different from rural ones and there was no rigid town-country divide in these cities. There were no palatial buildings in these towns as in Gaur and luxury was not apparent in the lifestyle of its inhabitants. But even these failed to survive the political tension of the period. But the capitals of the settlements which grew in east Bengal under the initiatives of the *Bara-Buiyans* was in the nature of the aforesaid towns.⁸³

Saptagram which functioned as a port of Gaur also declined not just because of the silting of *Saraswati* but also due to the political uncertainties that affected Gaur and the other towns around the *Bhagirathi*. The need was felt for a port that would be away from the political disturbances and for this reason as well as natural factors that *Hooghly* took the mantle from *Satgaon*. The Portuguese who had been permitted to settle here by Akbar as a counter to the presence of the Afghans opened a successful trade in *Hooghly*. As stated earlier, an increasing number of settlements cropped up in the region of *Bhati* and this was because of the availability of surplus rice and cloth which attracted settlers from *Rarh* who were fleeing from war torn areas of the west to the more settled areas in

⁸² Anirudha Ray, "Sorosh Shotabdir Bangladeshe Nogorbinyash O Samajik Poriborton", in Anirudh Ray and Ratnabali Chatterjee ed. *Modhyojuge Banglar Shomaj O Sanskriti*, Calcutta, 1992, pp-61-86.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p-76

the east. The *zamindars* of *Bhati* like Pratapaditya of Jessore, Raja Ramchandra of Bakla, Satrajit of Bhusna or Kedar Rai of Sripur were powerful enterprising semi-independent chieftains. Like the Mughals they were also attempting to come to terms with the various powers within the Province. While the Mughals captured Sondip to check the Arakanese the Raja of Sripur Kedar Rai too defeated the Arakanese king by allying with the Portuguese under Carvalho. Pratapaditya's consent to the building up of churches by the Portuguese missionaries was a part of his strategy to use the Portuguese against the Arakanese. But when the Mughals uprooted the *Bhati zamindars* they provided no alternative arrangements to counter the attack of the Arakanese. In the interim period peace returned to the area around *Bhagirathi* and settlers again moved towards the west leaving the areas in the east that had become prone to the attack of the pirates once the *zamindars* had been removed. This westward trend of movement is represented by Shuja's shifting of the seat of governance from Dacca to Rajmahal. It was only in 1659 when Mir Jumla removed his capital once again to Dacca that the region gained back its prosperity.⁸⁴

But if one were to take a long term view, the eastern regions of the *Bhati* were becoming naturally more fertile due to the eastward movement of the Ganges delta. Kanagopal Bagchi⁸⁵ points out that in course of years the area of active delta formation had shifted towards the east making the eastern lands more fertile than the ones in the west. In the areas to the east an increase in the total population had occurred compared to the west. Bagchi points out that the northern part of the delta consisting of the districts of Murshidabad(eastern half), Nadia, Jessore, north-western part of Faridpur, and northern borders of 24 *parganas* and Khulna formed a tract which had been termed the "moribund delta". The area was once prosperous but the active stage of the formation of deltas having moved southward, the fields had become less fertile and the climate unhealthy due to which reason population in some parts had decreased. The 24 *parganas* and Khulna represent that part of the formation of deltas which had been termed "the mature" stage of deltaic formation. The rivers in these parts did not carry a heavy amount of silt and the progressive stages of deltaic formation cannot be observed here. The land supported a

⁸⁴ Ibid., p-85

⁸⁵ Kanagopal Bagchi, *The Ganges Delta*, Calcutta, 1944.

considerably large population but there was no rapid increase of it. The active parts of deltaic formation can be observed in Faridpur and Backergunj. The rivers here were still carrying alluvium and depositing it so that this area was highly fertile and supported a large population.

Richard Eaton, following Bagchi, argued that the lands in eastern Bengal had become more fertile due to deltaic movements, and these lands were newly reclaimed and put to cultivation under the initiative of Muslim '*pirs*' or other 'charismatic leaders'. In these fertile well-inundated areas the cultivation of wet rice was introduced which was labour intensive. So a large number of semi-tribal populations in these areas were peasantized and consequently also Islamized by the Muslim *pirs* in course of the seventeenth century.

But it would be wrong to suppose that all the areas to the west of *Bhagirathi* had become moribund by the seventeenth century. Natural conditions obtaining in the *Rarh* were not uniform. While the western parts were rocky, the Damodar, Ajay, Mayurakshi, Brahmani, Kunur, Banka, Kahari, Behula, Gangur, Saraswati, Kunti, Dwarekeshwar, Mundeswari, Rupnarayan, Kasai, Silai rivers deposited alluvium in the eastern parts of the *Rarh* region. Paddy could be cultivated in the *Rarh* as well. The *Aus* variety of rice could be grown here as it was a hardier variety and required less water than the *Aman* variety. Other crops like cotton, oilseeds, sugarcane and pulses could also be grown that required less water. The rivers in these parts were not mighty as the *Padma* or the *Meghna* but they were stable and provided sufficient water for agriculture. These fertile parts of the *Rarh* like the areas of the *Bhati* witnessed large scale peasantization of tribals as well as a low caste Hindus engaged in occupations like fishing or hunting who took up the plough after abandoning their traditional vocation. When Islam entered Bengal it posed a challenge to Brahmanical Hinduism because of the former's more egalitarian ethos compared to that of the latter. As a consequence it was imperative for Hinduism to be more accommodative especially towards the lower castes who would otherwise embrace Islam. The Mangalkavyas written for these purpose celebrated the God's of the lower castes. But more importantly Hinduism granted social mobility to those who took to the plough. For instance those among the fishing caste of Kaibarttas who took up agriculture abandoning their traditional occupation were called *Chasi* or *halia* Kaibarttas

in contrast to the *jalia* or fishermen *kaibarttas*. The former were higher in ritual status from the latter. Thus a large number of peasants in order to improve their ritual status took to agriculture resulting in large scale peasantization of the *Rarh* region. These peasants remained Hindus for which reason the *Rarh* region in the later British period censuses appeared to have had a Hindu majority in contrast to the East which had a clear Muslim majority⁸⁶.

A large scale peasantization in both the eastern and western parts of Bengal must have resulted in an agricultural boom. It is also to be noted here that the Sultani, Afghani and the Mughal rulers preferred to collect their revenue in cash. This meant that the merchant community could now play a more important role as they supplied the peasantry with the cash with which to pay their revenue in return for their produce. This was done not only by the traditional merchant community but also by the newly emerging farming castes. 'Though these local *byaparis* (traders) hardly required to move out of their beats or to any considerable distances from their nearest river ports, they were in a position to accelerate pan-Indian and overseas trade in agriculture and related products. The availability of ready food grains(and textiles) from the chief port of the *Rarh* Satgaon (later, Hughli) and the *haats*, (weekly markets) all over the *Rarh* countryside soon became magnets that drew the pan-Indian traders from all over and a littler later, the Portuguese as well as other colonial powers.'⁸⁷ Thus along the banks of the Bhagirathi Hooghly river we find the trading houses of these European traders who competed among themselves for the control of the trade of this region. To the East of Bhagirathi, Chittagong functioned as the principal port through which trade of this region was carried on.

Due to the large scale peasantization and reclamation work started during the sixteenth centuries and continued through the next two, agricultural activity expanded. But the cultivation of rice dominated over the cultivation of any other crop. While this reflected on one hand the extreme cautiousness on the part of the peasant at a time when the risks of dearth and famine were too great, it was also because of the fact that although

⁸⁶ Jawhar Sircar, *The Construction of the Hindu Identity in Medieval Western Bengal? The Role of Popular Cults*, Calcutta, 2005.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p-31.

agriculture prospered and expanded the peasant in Bengal continued to be poor and hardly had the capital to undertake the cultivation of high value cash crops like indigo, sugarcane, cotton or superior variety of betel. Bengal's agricultural organization 'was a classic example of petty production: household centered and labour intensive where majority of producers were perennially constrained by a shortage of productive resources' so that there existed 'the apparent predomination of the so-called subsistence sector- paddy, rice in overall production and the subservience of the so-called cash-crop sector.'⁸⁸ But the cultivation of rice in Bengal could hardly be classified as a subsistence sector. It was a highly commercialized domain. The need for rent to be paid in cash ensured the easy entry of the merchant within the domain of agriculture. The grain merchants also made cash advances to the peasants to ensure 'the advanced hypothecation of their crops before the completion of their production cycle.'⁸⁹ All this ensured 'the triadic integration of the peasant household agriculture and trade- with production for the market.'

Although the production of rice dominated, Bengal produced a wide variety of crops. But not all crops could be cultivated throughout the province. The Cultivation of rice needed sufficient supply of water. Hence rice was grown in lands near rivers and streams for these lands were subject to seasonal inundation of the rivers which deposited fertile silt on its banks. According to Taylor, 'the annual inundation, to which the soil is principally indebted for its fertility regulates the sites of cultivation, and to some measure the time of sowing and reaping.'⁹⁰ In Midnapur rice was grown on *jala* lands which were low lying and had closer access to water. By contrast lentils required a land that received optimum amount of water. Too little or much water destroyed the lentil crop. The lentils formed an important part of the diet of the people and the lentils were also an item of trade. Oilseeds were also grown in Bengal. Mustard was the most important of vegetable oils and it was grown in the alluvial plains of western Bengal. The seeds were sown on the river banks once 'the monsoonal over-flow of the water had subsided.' In general

⁸⁸ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market: Commercialization in Rural Bengal, 1760-1880*, New Delhi, 2000, p-38

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p-25

⁹⁰ Taylor cited in Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-39.

oilseeds were cultivated on higher ground. Among cash crops the important ones cultivated were betel, sugarcane, cotton. The inferior variety of betel was cultivated in the garden of the peasant and it was known as the *gachoya* pan and the superior variety of betel was however cultivated in carefully monitored conditions as the plant was very sensitive to the sun and the wind. They were cultivated in inside the *voraj* where they were protected from the sun and the wind. The lands inside the *voraj* were carefully made free of weeds and the betel plant was also protected from worms. Cotton was also grown in Bengal but it was in nature a very precarious crop. It required a thick loamy soil and a slight difference in the weather could bring down the productivity of this crop. The peasants in Bengal cultivated cotton but a large part of the cotton was also imported. Sugarcane was another important cash crop. But cultivating the crop was expensive and the crop sapped the vitality of the soil which had to be kept fallow for four years before it could recover.

Land Reclamation

Reclamation of wastelands was an important feature of the agrarian economy of Bengal for in the seventeenth century the land-man ratio was favourable and the increase of land under agriculture meant increase of the state's revenues. The process as Eaton had demonstrated had started in the sixteenth centuries in the *Bhati* region and continued for the next two centuries. Rajat Datta has given an extensive discussion on the progress of agricultural reclamation in Bengal. Due to the long term changes in Bengal's river system the areas to the east had become more productive. Eaton mentions the process to have begun in the sixteenth century and in the eighteenth century Robert Kyd remarked that the granaries of Bengal had shifted to Dhaka and Bakarganj when previously these were in Burdwan, Hughli and Rajshahi.⁹¹ Rajat Datta argues that despite the perceptible slowing down of certain old areas of high agricultural production in western Bengal new areas were opened up during the eighteenth century.⁹² Among the districts where there was large scale reclamation were Midnapur, 24 parganas, in western Bengal, and Bakarganj, Jessore and Chittagong in eastern Bengal. In Backargunj the reclamation work had been started in the early years of the eighteenth century by the combined

⁹¹ Robert Kyd cited in Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-68.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p-70.

initiative of the state or the Nizamat and the talluqdars and holders of charitable grants of revenue and by the 1750s it had become the main exporter of rice to Calcutta as well as other towns like Qassimbazar. But the progress of reclamation in Bakergunj was not a trend that had begun in the eighteenth century but was the continuation from the thirteenth century. The progress of reclamation in Backergunj in the eighteenth century is thus described by Eaton as the 'second great period of economic and social expansion.' One of the effects of 'the integration of Bakergunj's rice growing economy with regional demand in food grains' was 'the rapid reclamation of the Padma estuary under the combined initiative of the talluqdar and merchant. Between the talluqdar and the merchant there developed an intermediate social stratum, 'the Muslim religious gentry' who played an active role in imparting a great degree of stability to this expanding agrarian frontier.' The role of the Muslim religious gentry had been emphasized by Eaton but these men were not the only ones extending cultivation in the East. The role of the landed gentry that is the *talluqdar* and the merchant cannot be ignored.

In Jessore reclamation work was carried out by the landed gentry as well as by grain merchants who made advances of grain to peasants and encouraged them to cultivate new lands. In the east the estuarine forests of Jessore Sunderbans was another area that was being opened up for cultivation.⁹³ As in Backergunj, the practice of bringing wastelands into cultivation in Jessore may have begun at an early date but definite evidence for it can be gathered from eighteenth century records although one could tentatively suggest that the practice was the continuation of a process begun earlier.

These wastelands and forested lands that were being reclaimed were assessed at concessional rates to provide incentive to the peasant for undertaking reclamation work. In case of Jessore along with the *zaminders* the grain merchants played an important role in carrying out reclamation work by giving the peasants grain to sow in the newly

⁹³ In Rennell's Atlas sheet no. XX, 1761 the entire country to the south of Backergunj has been marked as a country depopulated by the Maghs. This depopulation according to Bhattasali was due to the ravages of the Magh and the Portuguese pirates who depopulated the Sunderbans in the first half of the seventeenth century. Still some other historians opine that the subsidence of the Bengal delta caused the de-population of the Sunderbans. Finally Oldham points out that the Sunderbans were depopulated because its inhabitants did not receive supply of fresh water. Kanagopal Bachi, *The Ganges Delta*, pp. 85-93.

reclaimed lands. Hence rice became the principal crop in the newly reclaimed lands of Bakergunj and the Jessore Sunderbans. A great part of the reclamation work involved embanking so that channels might not overflow their basins and join the other *khals*, and the marsh land inside could be rendered cultivable. In Jessore the process of reclamation came to a close around 1870s when 'the great forests of the estuarine Jessore had almost entirely been converted into immense rice tracts.'⁹⁴Two other areas in eastern Bengal being opened up for reclamation were Chittagong and Tipperah. Francis Buchanan testifies to reclamation work going on in Chittagong and Tipperah in 1798.

In western Bengal lands were being reclaimed in 24 *parganas* and Midnapur. In the 24 parganahs the task of reclaiming lands were given to *abadi pattadars*.⁹⁵ Here too rice was the principal crop as grain merchants made advance payments to peasants to put the land to cultivation which the peasant by himself would be unable to carry out. The city of Calcutta being a major center of consumption gave the incentive for large-scale reclamation in this area. Finally in Midnapur lands were being reclaimed around the Rupnarain rivers around 1766 when Vansittart visited it. However the lands to the south of the district called the *Jalpai* lands(liable to being submerged under water) were not cleared till the nineteenth century.

Although much of the documentation for agricultural reclamation are for the eighteenth century, it is to be noted here that in course of the seventeenth century, we see the emergence of various land tenures aimed at the expansion of agriculture as well as the growth of several towns as a consequence of flourishing commercial activities with Europe, which would have acted as major centers of consumption. Hence it might not be wrong to suggest that the process of reclamation was an on-going phenomenon that intensified with the increase in demand.

Forested Zones

In spite of the on-going process of reclamation there were substantial forested zones in seventeenth century Bengal. Evidence points us that the forest areas in the seventeenth century were in the north in the Provinces of Kuch and Kamrup and towards the deltaic areas in the south.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p-73

The *Baharistan* mentions that in course of the Mughal campaigns in the northern parts of Bengal, the defeated rebels often took shelter in the dense forests and hills. Unable to withstand an attack by the Kuch rebel Parasuram at Solmari the chief *kalawant* (musician) Maruf who was among the party of soldiers attacked fled to the nearby forests. He wandered about in the jungles for three days and nights before being rescued. He recounted his experience within the jungles thus: 'During these four or five days I have not taken anything but water and the root of *kajur* (zedoary, a Chinese root.). At nights when I lived on the tops of trees, I had no sleep owing to the fear of elephants and rhinoceros. At last God the Great brought me to the shore of safety."⁹⁶ It appears that the areas around Solmari were surrounded with thick jungles at that time. Solmari is identified by the editor of *Baharistan* to be located in the district of Goalpara.⁹⁷ The *Baharistan* also mentions that *kheda* operations were carried out in Khuntaghat which implies that this place was forested as well. Khuntaghat according to the editor is situated on the south bank of the Brahmaputra in modern district of Goalpara. The area around Tipperah was also forested since the same text mentions that when the Mughal army defeated the Raja of Tipperah he fled to the hills and jungles from where he was later captured alive.

The forests were located in the deltaic region to the south and in other parts like the *Sarkar Bazuha*. The trees of these forests being trees of ebony were used in construction of 'buildings and boats.' And mines of iron are also found in that tract. 'Sarkar Bazuha extended from the limits of Sarkar Barbakabad, and included portions of Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, and Maimansingh, and reached in the south a little beyond the town of Dacca'⁹⁸. The jungles in the southern part, in the deltaic lands were thick and impenetrable. Mirza Nathan while describing the march of Ibrahim Khan to Arakan via the lower reaches of the delta that were covered with dense forests says that these forests were 'impassable even for an ant.'⁹⁹ Throughout the way not only the others but even the

⁹⁶ *Baharistan*, vol. ii, p-513.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, notes, p-847.

⁹⁸ *Riyazu-s-salatin*, p-43.

⁹⁹ *Baharistan*, vol. ii, p-632

Khan, himself cleared the 'jungles with his own hands'. In such a terrain the horses could not proceed further and the elephants too moved with great difficulty.¹⁰⁰

Wildlife

The forests harbored a large variety of wild animals. Those in the southern part of the delta according to Bernier had antelopes, hogs and wild fowls which attracted tigers which swam from one island to another¹⁰¹. Even the boatmen while sailing through these islands needed to be careful of tigers since these creatures were generally believed to have attacked boats and carried 'the stoutest and the fattest of the party'¹⁰². Bernier here was probably giving a description of the Sunderbans. The reclamation work here was substantial only in the nineteenth century when Westland was making his survey of Jessore. It was forested even till the late eighteenth century as Grandpre writing at that time mentions of the woods of Sondry, famous for the enormous size of the tigers – the royal tiger or the tiger called Buffon. He mentions that these tigers were ferocious and deft in the pursuit of their prey and often swam across rivers to attack boats. Near Cadjery the sonder tigers were also being mentioned to have been man eaters. It was here that the boatmen had come down to collect dry wood which was in sell at Calcutta. It is to be mentioned here that in a number of places the tigers were associated with *pirs*, and other holy men. This was particularly true in the *Bhati*. Eaton mentions one *Zindah ghazi* to have been the protector of boatmen and woodcutters, who resided deep inside the forest and rode on tigers¹⁰³. Tigers were to be found at Ramchandrapore and it was reported here that every Thursday a tiger came near a *fuckeer's* tomb and made a salaam. John Marshall narrates this in his Diary¹⁰⁴. This association of tigers to holy men may probably have resulted from the fact that these beasts must have been a scourge to those venturing deep in the forest to collect wood or in clearing jungles. As Eaton mentions the *Bhati* was being cleared of jungles¹⁰⁵ which may have deprived the wild animals of their

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p-442-3.

¹⁰² Ibid., p-443.

¹⁰³ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, Delhi, 1997, p-209

¹⁰⁴ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, p-62.

¹⁰⁵ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp-194-227.

natural habitat. Tigers were to be found in Narayangarh¹⁰⁶, Pirpainti¹⁰⁷, as well. But generally the tigers avoided inhabited and cultivated places, or if they visited them it was only when compelled by hunger. Grandpre, mentions of the Clive-islands where the cultivation of sugar had forced these tigers out of the woods. On the part of the natives there were no attempts at killing the man-eaters rather they were satisfied with the fact that the man-eaters would carry away any one of the party and the rest will be left in peace. Grandpre mentions one incident where the voyagers stood unperturbed when a fellow passenger was carried away by a tiger, the brother alone of the victim seeming to be afflicted by the incident. Every time a tiger attacked, the natives only ran away to save themselves¹⁰⁸. But the armed Europeans, mentions Grandpre, had forced these beasts to retire to the woods of Sondry.

Mahesh Rangarajan had argued that till the advent of the Europeans there were no organized attempts at reducing the number of carnivores. The people venturing into the interiors of the forest put themselves under the protection of a *faqir*. Rangarajan has however argued that the conflict between the tiger and the humans was not universal. The Sundarban region had a distinctive ecology where the tigers were accustomed to using humans as prey. The tidal waters which reached into the interior of the region made the tiger 'a semi-aquatic animal.' The extent of human penetration was also increasing over the years since the forests were valuable in supplying wood, honey and bees-wax. The time for gathering forest produce co-incided with the time when the tigress had cubs. But the Sunderbans were an exceptional area in terms of conflict between the tiger and the humans. In other areas the tigers did not infringe into inhabited territories.¹⁰⁹ However it

¹⁰⁶ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, p-63.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p-96.

¹⁰⁸ L. De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bengal, 1789-1790*, vol I, p-242.

¹⁰⁹ In the northern parts of the Bengal for instance in Rangpur, the tiger was not so common. Locally called the Govagha as it carried away cattle, the tiger in this district did not cause as much damage as in the Sunderbans. In Bottrishhazari, one of the places most frequented by tigers a man was carried away every two or three years and from 16-20 cattle may be annually destroyed. Martin vol, iii 'Natural Productions of Rangpoor', p-568-599.

was with the coming of the British that a state-sponsored attempt at controlling the number of carnivores was made.¹¹⁰

Other than tigers, Grandpre mentions that elephants were found in the province of Bengal, and often the elephant was used to hunt tigers¹¹¹. The Mughals used elephants in Bengal for military purposes. Since elephants could swim across the wet terrain of Bengal they were valuable in military campaigns in the province. Horses were scarcely available in Bengal. The *Riyaz* says, 'Elephants are captured in some parts of the country, good horses are not procurable, and, if had, they cost much.'¹¹² Mentioning the armed

¹¹⁰ There were various reasons behind the British attempt to control the number of carnivores particularly tigers. Rangarajan argues that colonial officials largely equated "recalcitrant wild animals" such as tigers to "disobedient human beings" such as thugs and dacoits. Perceptions of total Indian helplessness were important to British notions of hunting in that they only saw themselves to be capable of killing tigers. The discourse of the calm, stoic British hunter ably protecting otherwise helpless and panic-stricken Indians was also portrayed in various lithograph prints that appeared in several hunting memoirs. But British tiger hunting in India, particularly before the 1870s, owed a great deal to interactions between British hunters and Indian *shikari*, for their assistance was instrumental for a safe and successful hunt. The Indians were, therefore, encouraged to be a part of the process by promising rewards and bounties for every carnivore hunted and even the native princes for lure of trophies particularly the Rajput and the Gorkhas who were regarded as the true martial races, hunted tigers extensively. That the attempt was at securing the extinction of the species is quite evident from the offer of larger bounties for the killing of female tigers and young cubs. Once the number of these creatures had sufficiently decreased that there came about a change in the attitude of the government towards the tigers. It seems that the killing of tigers seemed to have increased of attacks by herbivores, like the deer, on the cropped fields leading to the damage of crops and the subsequent deduction of revenue. The tiger was now looked upon as royal, majestic and an intrinsic part of the eco-system. The tiger helped the flourishing of agriculture by keeping down the number of herbivores. Some remorse was also felt about the total extinction of the species. Lady Curzon spoke of her remorse on watching a pregnant tigress being killed and cut up with three cubs ready to be born. But although the hunting of the tiger came to be controlled over time other carnivores like the wolf did not share the same fate. The deforestation in places for the extension of agriculture also made the survival of the tiger precarious. The tiger survived only in areas of extensive woodland. Thanks to game hunting of the British officials the tiger also suffered from a lack of prey, which was making its survival precarious. Mahash Rangarajan, *The Raj and the Natural World: The War Against Dangerous Beasts in Colonial India*, *Studies in History*, 14, 2, New Delhi/ London 1998. pp-265-299.

¹¹¹ L. De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bengal, 1789-1790*, vol ii, p-48.

¹¹² *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, p-22.

strength of the Raja of Tipperah, the text mentions that ‘The Rajah of, that place had one thousand elephants and two *lakhs* of infantry in his service. Riding horses are not available...’¹¹³ The *Riyaz* mentions that only in the neighboring mountains of Bhutan, which were to the south of Kuch- Behar that the ‘tangan¹¹⁴, ‘Bhut’ and ‘Bari’ horses were found. In the region of Assam, ‘large well-formed elephants’ could be found¹¹⁵. About Arakan the *Riyaz-us-salatin* mentions ‘The male elephant abounds there, horses are scarce, and camels and asses can be had at high prices.’¹¹⁶ In the mountains of Tibet the black deer and elephants were bred¹¹⁷. The military force of the country (of Pegu) also consisted of an elephant-corps and infantry. This suggests that the eastern and the north eastern zones of India were the natural habitat of the elephant¹¹⁸ but not of the horse. This had important consequence in terms of the military and martial logistics.

Elephants were still very numerous in northern Bengal in the nineteenth century when Martin made his survey of Eastern India. He mentions their presence in the forests of the district of Rangpur. They often caused damage to the crops. Watchmen were posted near the fields when the crops ripened and if they saw those animals they made a lot of noise to scare them away. But they killed no one. Elephants were however captured and hunted for their teeth. The natives had different ways of capturing an elephant. Sometimes a tame female elephant was sent into the forest to lure a male elephant to the captors. However the elephants captured by these means were small just about 6 1/2 feet. Elephants were also captured by means of the *dhor* or the pit fall in which a pit was made in the path and men with torches waited nearby. When an elephant fell into a pit they came out with torches to scare away the rest of the herd so that they could not come to the aid of the one caught. It was a bad manner of catching elephants as the ones which were caught in this manner got injured when they fell. The Rajbongshi,

¹¹³ Ibid., p-10.

¹¹⁴ Horses of Tangistan were called Tangan horses. The Tangan horses were ‘thirteen hands high and very active.’ Abul Fazl cited by the editor in *Riyaz-us-salatin* p-11.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p-13

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p-14

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p-14.

¹¹⁸ The *Riyaz* mentions of the white elephant being found in Pegu., p-15. Campos mentions that the King of Arakan having taken away the white elephant of the Burmese king, enmity existed between the two.

Garo, Rabha and Kachchari farmers were also employed to kill elephants for their teeth. The hunter was allowed one tooth and the other one was taken by the person employing the hunters.

The rhinoceros was also a common animal in medieval Bengal. Bowry mentions to have seen it in the woods of Patna¹¹⁹. Martin in his account of Rangpur also mentions the rhinoceros. Here the rhinoceros was common and were hunted for horn and skin. The rhino caused neither any injury to the crops nor to people but their horns and skin fetched good money for which they were hunted (the horn was worth 6 rupees on the spot and the skin sold for 2-3 rupees on spot). The employer of the hunters got the horn and the hunter *pahulwan* himself got the skin. In the eastern districts the hunters that killed the rhino and elephants were 60-70 in number and they were employed by four merchants at Dhubri. Martin mentions that one of these merchants was a 'Bengalese' and three are 'Siks'. All the hunters were farmers and they took to hunting as a part-time employment. They hunted with a 'large piece' called *Kamchunggi*, 'which requires a rest' to enable the hunter to take his aim. Poisoned arrows were used for killing the wild buffalo and the elephant but for hunting the rhino fire-arms were required.¹²⁰

Among other mammals found in the Province were deer. John Marshall in his diary mentions that at Ramchandrapur about 10 ½ miles from Balasore many wild deer, wild hogs, peacocks, hens and jackals were found.¹²¹ Jackalls were found at Lattigundy [Natidanga] and in Bastaar were found plenty of deer. The deer often proved destructive to the crops and were sometimes hunted to save the crops. Their meat was also often eaten by the farmers who hunted them. The meat of Porcupines could be taken by all classes of Hindus.¹²² Wild hogs were found in parts of the Province as in Dinajpur and the meat of the hog was also taken by the 'low' Hindus.¹²³ Among other animals hunted for eating were the tortoises.

¹¹⁹ Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account*, p-222

¹²⁰ R. M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, vol. iii, 'The Zila of Rangpur', London, 1838.

¹²¹ *John Marshall in India*, ed. Shafaat Ahmed Khan, p-62

¹²² R.M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, , vol ii Dinajpur, p-762.

¹²³ *Ibid*, p-764.

Among the birds found in this province were the vulture, eagle, crows, kites, owl and the paroquets. There was also a charming little bird called Bengali, with grey and red plumage mixed with white spots¹²⁴. At Caushdee green parrots were found¹²⁵ and near hills pelicans resided¹²⁶. Peacocks were also found in Narayangarh. The southern parts of Dacca were the home of many aquatic birds and reptiles unlike its northern part which was the habitat of mainly large species of carnivores. Among the birds found in the southern division was the tailor bird noted for its ingenuity in making its nest.¹²⁷ There were also varieties of sun bird one named the Durga Toontonee for being sacrificed at the time of the Durga Puja. The Cinnyridae or Honey-suckers were kept in cages in houses.¹²⁸ The Green parrot, woodpecker, Heron, the Darter were also found in Dacca. The Purple Gallinule was destructive to the rice-fields. Pelicans that resided in marshes were captured as they attracted fishes in rivers towards it by the smell of the secretion from their skin.¹²⁹

Even though Bengal saw large scale of peasantization in course of the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, the British surveys still point out that a large number of people made their living by hunting. Even farmers took to hunting in order to supplement their incomes. Among the animals hunted were the elephant and the rhinoceros. The wild buffalo was found in all parts of the district and hunted for their horns and skins which were sent to Dacca. 20 buffalo hides fetched 2 ½ -3 rupees.¹³⁰ Although the *Pahulwan* hunted these animals along with the elephants but a class of hunters called the *Kangri* engaged themselves in hunting the buffalo alone who get advances from merchants at Goalpara.¹³¹ Poisoned arrows are used to hunt this animal.

Among aquatic animals porpoises were found in the Bramhaputra which were hunted by the *Gangrar* fishermen for their oil which they use for lighting lamps and

¹²⁴ L. De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bengal, 1789-1790*, vol ii, p-49.

¹²⁵ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations in Bengal, 1668-1672*. p-62

¹²⁶ Ibid. p-73.

¹²⁷ James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca, Calcutta*, 1840, p-27

¹²⁸ Ibid, p-28

¹²⁹ Ibid, p-31

¹³⁰ R. M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, , vol. iii, p-577.

¹³¹ Ibid. p-576-7

occasionally for lighting torches.¹³² Porpoises were also killed by the Gurwaras of Dacca who made the spearing of otters and porpoises their living. Otter skin from Dacca was exported to Bootan and China. Their meat was also eaten by their hunters and their oil was sometimes sold to the native doctors who used it as a cure against rheumatism. In Dacca the Kingfisher both red and blue were killed for their skins. Taylor mentions that during the cold season, the Mugs hunted these birds in Dacca, Mymensingh and Backergunj, where they were employed for several months in catching these birds. Their skins were dried in the sun and treated with aspirants and exported to China via Ava where these skins were said to have been used in making court dresses.¹³³

Fishes were very common in the numerous river and lakes of Bengal and fishing was a regular occupation. In most parts the fisherman paid a duty to the proprietor of the land except in some rivers that were entirely free. Salt was found to be too expensive for preserving fish and they were often dried in the sun. The dried fish was known as *sukti*. In Rangpur, the number of men engaged solely in fishing would amount to 4,000 families in the district. In general the fishermen were very poor. In Dacca, *Bhola Pana*, *Hilsa* were caught by fishermen. The latter were caught in large quantities and often exported. Fishing here was a regular occupation. The right of fishing belonged to the *zamindar* and the fisherman had to pay rents in order to fish. The fishermen in Dacca were mentioned as have had used eighteen different kinds of nets for catching fishes¹³⁴.

¹³² Ibid. p-577.

¹³³ James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*, Calcutta, 1840, p-27.

¹³⁴ James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*, p-44. The fishermen in Bengal were very numerous and formed a class by themselves known as the *Kaibarttas*. The *Kaibarttas* worked during November and December, when the fish was most abundant and the weather was cool. Early in November a piece of land was leased by the waterside and the fishermen were supposed to bring in large quantities of *Ponti* fish. These were trampled under foot and then slowly dried in the sun. No salt was used. The product was exported to areas which did not get fish in cold weather. In Mymensingh large fish were gutted, dried in sun, and buried in pits. These were dug up in the beginning of rains and were called *sukhti* which were exported to Sylhet and Kachar where it was considered a delicacy. The *Kaibarttas* also cultivated a field of hemp. They prepared the fibre, their wives spun it and with it nets, ropes and twine were manufactured. H. H. Risley, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, vol. 1, Calcutta (reprint) 1981, p-375

Among insects were found bees which supplied bees wax and honey. A large number of shells were also collected in Rangpur to be used in the manufacture of indigo or for being used in betel that was consumed in great quantities by the natives. 477 families were employed part time in preparing shells. The best lime was prepared from a mussel known by the name of *jhinuk*. The next best was prepared from a snail called by the natives *samuk*. The worst lime was prepared from a smaller snail called *gugli* and the lime thus prepared was never chewed but used for the other purpose.

Nature of the Climate and Natural Hazards

Regarding the climate of the province of Bengal the *Ain* mentions that the summer heats were temperate and the cold season short. The rains begun in May and continued somewhat for more than six months, 'the plains being under water and the mounds alone visible.' At the end of the rains, 'the air had been felt to be pestilential and seriously affected animal life.'¹³⁵ Bernier mentions, that in Bengal the rains fell very violently for four months, in the course of which it poured during eight days and nights without the least intermission. In Bengal the rains Bernier observed, 'came from the south'¹³⁶. The air of Bengal was seldom found to be 'salubrious' by strangers particularly near the sea. The mortality rate was particularly high among the foreigners the Dutch and the English, mentions Bernier. He found at Balasore two 'fine English vessels' which had remained in that port for a year owing to the war with Holland, unable to put to the sea, since half of its crew had died. The Factory records of the English East India Company also mentioned the high mortality rate among the servants of the company in context of the death of Oxiden, a cousin of Streynsham Master on 29th September 1677.¹³⁷ Ghulam Hussain writing in the eighteenth century also complained of dampness of the climate of Bengal. He writes, 'The climate of Bengal is temperate, and owing to proximity to the sea and owing to heavy rains, is very damp. The rainy season begins from the month of *Urdu Bihisht*, (by the Persian calendar) which in Hindi is called *Jaet*, and for six months the

¹³⁵ *Ain*, vol.II, p-132.

¹³⁶ Bernier, *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, p-432.

¹³⁷ Sir Charles Fawcett, *The English Factories in India vol.2 The Eastern Coast and Bengal 1670-77*, Oxford, 1952, p-438.

rains continue ; this is unlike other parts of Hindustan, where rains set in from the middle of the month of *Khurdad*, which the Hindis call *Asar* and is till *Shahriwar* which Hindis call *Asin*, for four months. In the rainy season, the lowlands of Bengal get flooded, and the climate becomes bad, especially towards the end of the rainy season. Human beings as well as animals become sick and die. The soil contains much damp, so that in many places they build two storeyed buildings, made of lime and brick. Notwithstanding that they make the floor of lime and brick, the lower rooms are not fit for habitation, and if any one lives there he soon falls sick.¹³⁸

Bernier however points out that the controlled consumption of intoxicants and infrequent visits to the ‘Indian women, or the dealers in *arac* and *tobacco*’ could reduce the mortality rates among Europeans.¹³⁹ Good Vin de Grave or Canary and Chiras wines, taken in moderation, ‘are found excellent preservatives against the effects of bad air.’ Bernier therefore maintains that ‘those who live carefully need not be sick, nor will the mortality rate be greater among them than with the rest of the world.’¹⁴⁰

For both the Mughals and the foreign travelers coming to Bengal the unfamiliar climate of Bengal struck as particularly harsh with Abul Fazl going on to length of ascribing the political turbulence within the Province as a corollary of its climate. In 1579, he wrote ‘the country of Bengal is a land where owing to the climate’s favouring the base, the dust of dissension is always rising. From the wickedness of men families have decayed, and dominions [have been] ruined. Hence in old writings it was called *bulghakhana* (house of turbulence). From this ‘Mughal colonial discourse’ Eaton says we could find ‘a remarkable theory of political devolution: an enervating climate corrupts men, and corrupted men ruin sovereign domains, thereby implicitly preparing the way for conquest by stronger, uncorrupted outsiders. In linking Bengal’s climate with the debased behavior of people exposed to it, Abul Fazl’s theory of socio-political decay anticipated by several centuries the similar views adopted by British colonial officials.’¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, p-20.

¹³⁹ Bernier, *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, p-441.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Eaton cites the writings of Robert Orme who regarded ‘the unelastic atmosphere of the climate’ to have ‘debased all the essential qualities of human race’. The natives of Bengal were of a more ‘weaker frame’

Natural hazards like droughts and floods in pre-industrial societies caused great havoc. The destruction of crops was the immediate effect of natural disasters which brought down the availability of food per capita and a rise in prices of basic commodities, often resulting in famines. While famines were due to a large measure dependent on natural factors the man made factor was also instrumental in determining the degree of such crisis. In Bengal where the seasonal inundations and rainfall determined the success of agriculture a shortfall in rain or a flood could cause disasters. Rajat Datta has argued that a destruction of the crops led to a subsistence crisis among the population as a shortage in the availability of food led to an escalation of food prices which made it difficult for the poor to procure food. 'in famine and dearth harvest failures were only proximate causes for triggering these events. Their real magnitude can be comprehended only by looking at them as severe dislocations in the food market caused by sharp rise in prices.'¹⁴² The worst hit from such calamities were the harvest sensitive strata or the artisans and daily wage earners who did not practice agriculture. These artisans and labourers in towns depended entirely on their wages. Food shortages caused price rise but their wages remained constant.¹⁴³ In the case of Bengal importation of food from surrounding districts was also impossible as 'the Bengal monsoon prevailing throughout the inland countries with which we have any communication, they are generally involved in the same calamity and instead of being able to afford assistance, depend upon us for the supplies of their own wants.'¹⁴⁴

However, a description of a famine in the seventeenth century has been obtained from the diary of John Marshall one of the factors of the English East India Company. He gives an account of a famine in the year 1671 that started in Patna and reached Benaras

and more 'enervated disposition' than those of other Provinces. While such attitudes have been cited as instances of Orientalism, Eaton mentions that the passages like the above from Abul Fazl points out that men like Orme had gathered their ideas regarding the Province from the already existing Mughal discourse and their attitudes regarding Bengal. Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, p-168-9.

¹⁴² Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-256.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p-253-4.

¹⁴⁴ Minute of the Board of Revenue, dated 21st October 1791, cited Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-251

and Rajmahal as well.¹⁴⁵ From his account the reasons for the famine are not clear. He says that for the past few years rainfall had been irregular but he says the 'rougery' of the *nawab* was also responsible for the widespread famine at Patna¹⁴⁶. The onset of the famine was in May 1671 when the entries for 21st, 22nd, 23rd, and 31st May and 23rd August 1671 record effects of the scarcity of food in the form of there being 'dead corpse' and the 'sad noise of poor starved people'. Marshall also records that there was a steep rise in prices of food. In May 1671 the price of wheat was two and half rupee per *maund* by August of the same year the price rose to about four rupee per *maund*. The famine started around October 1670 and it continued till November 1671. From May to July about 100 persons died daily. From July onwards 300 persons died daily. Marshall obtained three estimates of total number of persons dead from the *kotwals chabutara*, the estimates being- 135,400; 103,000; and 90,720. In the case of the last estimate he points out that about 18,144 Muslims were dead and the number of Hindus who died was 72,576 which together made up a total count of 90,720 people dead. Marshall describes the famine as follows:-

June the 19th when came from Pattana to Singee, I see upon one peece of sand, about the middle way betwixt that city and the River, about 32 or 33 persons ly dead within about 10 yards compas from the middle of them, and so many by the river side that could not come on shore but [except] by very many dead corpse; ...The corpse in the river ly with their backs upwards...¹⁴⁷

Because of the famine large number of people were said to have sold themselves as slaves. Marshall writes that during the period of the famine, 'Great number of slaves to be bought for 4 *annas* and 8 *annas* per peece, and good ones for 1 re per peece; but they are exceedingly lean when bought, and if they eat but very little more than ordinary of rice, or eat any flesh, butter or any strong meat, their faces, hands and feet and codd swell

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, p150

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p-150.

immediately exceedingly; so that it is esteemed to give them at first ½ seer of rice, and those very lean 1/4th seer per day to be eaten at twice.¹⁴⁸

From Marshall's account of the famine it also transpires that the native authorities took no measures to control famines nor had any means of coping with it¹⁴⁹. Marshall writes,

In the Gaut [ghat, landing place, quay] by our factory which was not four yards round about (as I conceive) lay 50 dead corps which I could tell [count], which were driven tether in about two days time, and Mr. [Valentine] Nurse saith that the day after hee counted 122 dead corps in ditto place. Aboundance are every day drove to the side of the river, though the most persons of quality hire Hollolcores [halalkhor, sweeper] to carry them into the middle of the river with a string, and carries them into the middle of the river and then cuts the string and so lets them drive down with the streame.¹⁵⁰

What is even more strange that although the dead corpse were deposited in the river and near the Ghat lay piles of dead bodies of the victims of the famine yet the women took the water of the Ghat to drink and to cook with it which Marshall indeed found rather shocking¹⁵¹.

The famine also affected the trade of the natives as well as that of the Company, though curiously the Company's servants did not seem to have been affected by the scarcity of food. Marshall records that in August 1671, 'two merchants in Patna threw themselves into a common well and drowned themselves. Now a terrible sad cry of poor in the bazaar.'¹⁵² The Company's trade in turn was also affected due to death of its native employees. Marshall writes 'such was the laziness [languidness] of workmen in the time of famine, that in the time of making one Casmear [Kashmir] boat for the Company, Six of the carpenters died of famine.' Again Job Charnock and Robert Elwes at the

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p-150.

¹⁴⁹ Marshall, Notes to Chapter 6, p-154.

¹⁵⁰ Marshall, p-151.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p-151.

Company's factory at Singhya wrote to Walter Clavell, 'head of affairs in the Bay' about the famine. On 31st March it was written, 'We understand that many of the weavers are dead of the famine... We have already given out money for about 16,000 maunds of petre. These four months of the year being the only time of the year for making and getting in this commodity, and as yet we have gotten but 7,000 maunds. Such great rains fell last year that it was late ere any could be made, and the greatest part of the petre-men as made petre for us, and the Dutch petremen are dead in the last famine, which is another reason it is both scarce and deare... Now Pattana is so miserably decayed we cannot get what we please at interest as we could formerly.'¹⁵³ Two more letters dated 25th April 1672 and 14th June 1672 also mention the Company's inability to manufacture the required quantities of petre, due to the 'great rains and famine last year'¹⁵⁴. In 1671, the year of the great famine, the Monsoon came in Patna at the 6th of June and rained everyday till July 11th¹⁵⁵. In Allahabad 17,000 people perished in the floods¹⁵⁶. In Singhya itself the river Gunduk over flowed and caused floods and the English factory at Singhya got filled with water¹⁵⁷. Marshall also mentions the salt-petre men in Singhya sacrificed a child in the river to prevent the occurrence of floods¹⁵⁸. However from August on Marshall mentions to there being no rain¹⁵⁹ and then followed the famine. In 1671 thus the flood was followed by the famine most probably because of a short and irregular monsoon.

But an important characteristic of droughts in Bengal was their geographical asymmetry.¹⁶⁰ Drought or floods did not affect all parts of the district simultaneously. While the northern parts were more open to the effects of draught the southern parts were not. For instance the famine of 1769 which was caused by a severe draught affected the northern parts-Rajshahi, Birbhum, Purnea, Nadia, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Hooghly. But parts

¹⁵³ Ibid., p-155.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p-155.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p-137.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p-140.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p-138.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p-139

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p-138.

¹⁶⁰ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-245

of south-western and south-eastern Bengal was not affected by the drought induced famine for the famine had an asymmetrical geographical sweep.

When a drought hit usually the *colla* or the higher lands were affected which meant that the *aman* rice, and cash crops like tobacco mulberry and cotton were affected. But the *jala* lands situated in the close proximity of the rivers retained moisture for a longer period than the *colla* lands. The lands could produce a quick-ripening crop of Boro rice. Eastern and southern Bengal were most favoured in this respect. Prone to seasonal water-logging they managed to retain moisture for a longer period. Thus during the drought induced famine of 1769-70 the low-lying districts of Dacca and Backergunj continued to furnish the 'greatest supplies of grain to the Bengal Presidency.' Further west the *jala* lands of Midnapur also produced adequate amount of rice.¹⁶¹

But the southern parts of the province were prone to floods and flood induced famines while the northern parts were free from the mortality caused by flood induced famines. Thus the flood and cyclone of 1787-8 which destroyed crops and caused a famine affected parts of south western and south-eastern Bengal mainly. The other parts of the Province only suffered from the 'spill over effects' from those disasters in the form of raised prices of food as people migrated to these areas where surplus food was available. In fact migration was the technique of survival for the poor peasants and artisans and the asymmetric sweep of these natural calamities encouraged migration. Food was available in places that had not been touched by the drought or the flood but at high prices. The grain-merchants often bought surplus stocks of food in these areas leading to further escalation of prices.

A natural catastrophe for the land-holder meant falling income and desertion of the peasantry under his lands. For the peasantry, their entire existence was threatened by a natural disaster, for famines resulted in a subsistence-crisis for the poorer section of the people. For the State a natural disaster meant difficulties in collecting revenue.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p-246

¹⁶² Ibid., p-242.

Chapter-2

Ecology and Politics: Natural Barriers to Imperial Consolidation of Bengal 1576-1717

A unique characteristic of the Province of Bengal was its ecological diversity. It was a coastal Province bordered on the south by the Bay of Bengal into which the river Ganga emptied itself so that southern parts of the Province also fell within the delta of the Ganges and were on account of that very fertile. The tributaries and distributaries of the Ganga along with other large rivers like the Brahmaputra intersecting the Province gave it a very fluvial character. But its northern portions particularly Kuch Bihar and Kamrup were hilly in character. So were its south-eastern parts around Tiperrah and Chittagong. As we shall see in the subsequent sections that the nature of the terrain of the province of Bengal had much to do with the manner in which its politics was being shaped in the seventeenth century. Just as the terrain diversified itself the political processes occurring in it also took a varied trajectory. It was important for the political powers entering the Province to adapt themselves with the peculiarities of the terrain. The Mughals who entered the Province in the sixteenth century had in the process of subjugating the Province also to adjust themselves to its different environment. Their military campaigns in riverine Bengal illustrates this point. In matters of administration and political consolidation of Mughal authority in Bengal the terrain had its influence- making the process of consolidation easier in some parts while difficult in others. But before beginning our discussion in this context we may outline the political frontiers of Bengal. Following Blochmann we propose to outline the political frontiers of the Province thus:

The Northern Boundary

‘From Bhitambar, near the end of Brahmaputra, and in later times from Guahati in Kamrup over Khontaghat, the frontier passed along the southern portions of Kuch Bihar to Mahall Phatgaon or Patgram (west Koch Bihar) which is mentioned by Mughal historians as the frontier town in the extreme north, and from there along the foot of the

hills and forests of Sikkim and Nepal to the northern portions of the Purniah district...the Sarkars in the northern frontier were Ghoraghat, Panjrah, Tajpur and Purniah.’¹⁶³

The Eastern Boundary

‘The Eastern Frontier of Mohammedan Bengal extended from Sunnargaon and the Megna (but in Shahjahan’s reign, from the Phani river over southern and western Tipperah) northward, and then passed to the east including the district of Silhat. The boundary passed along the southern slopes of the Jaintiah, Khasiah, and Garo hills to Mahall Sherpur in northern Maimansingh to the right bank of the Brahmaputra near Chilmari and from here along the river to Mahall Bhitband, which formed the north eastern frontier. The sarkars that lay along the boundary were Sunnargaon, Bazuha, Silhat, and Ghoraghat; and the neighbouring countries to the east were Tipperah, Kachar, the territories of the old independent Rajas of Jaintiah, Khasiah and the Garo hills and on the left bank of the Bramhaputra the Karibari hills the *zamindars* of which were the Rajas of Sosang.’¹⁶⁴ They depended in reality on the powerful kingdom of Kuch Hajo, which according to Blochmann extended along the left bank of the Bramhaputra to Kamrup.

The Southern Boundary

According to Blochmann the southern frontier of Bengal was ‘the northern outskirts of the Sunderbans, which extended, generally speaking, in the same manner as it now does, from Hatiagarh, south of Daimond Harbour on the Hughli, to Bagerhat in southern Jessore and to Haringhata or ‘Deer-shore River;’ i.e. along the southern *mahals* of *Sirkar* Satgaon and Khalifatabad. Beyond the Haringhata or its northern portion, called the Madhumati or the honeyflowing, the frontier comprised Bakla and Fathabad, the modern districts of Faridpur and Baqarganj(north). *Sirkar* Fathabad included islands of Dakhin Shahbazpur and Sondip, at the mouth of the Megna. Tipperah, Bhaluah, Noakhali and District Chatgaon were contested ground...’¹⁶⁵ With the transfer of capital from Rajmahal to Dacca during the Mughals the frontiers of Mughal Bengal extended up till the Pheni river, which remained the frontier till the time of Aurangzeb when Chatgaon or Chittagong was conquered by Shaistah Khan and annexed to Bengal.

¹⁶³ Ibid. p-32

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p-28

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. p-18

Further south lay the whole sea coast of southern Bengal called the Sunderban which the Mohammedan historians also call *Bhati*.

The Western Boundary

Blochmann points out that in the north-west the frontier of Bengal extended a little beyond Kosi. Under the Mughals Bihar was a separate Province although under Mughal suzerainty. On the south-western frontier he says: 'south of the Ganges, the western frontier is better defined. Fort Teliagarhi or Garhi near Khalgaon (Colong) on the Ganges, was looked upon as the entrance, or key to Bengal...From Garhi the frontier passed along the Ganges to the south of Ag-Mahall (RajMahall), when it again turned westward to north-western Birbhum, passing along the boundary of the modern Santal Parganahs to the confluence of the Barakar and the Damudar, from where it went along the left bank of the Damudar to the neighbourhood of the town of Burdwan. From here again the frontier took a westerly direction, and passed along the north-western and western boundaries of the modern Hughli and Habrah (Howrah) Districts down to Mandalghat, where the Rupnarayan flows into the Hugli river.'¹⁶⁶

Blochmann points out that 'Mohammedan' Bengal excluded the Santal Parganahs and hence there were no 'Mohammedan' names to the villages and towns of this area. In spite of some attempts to establish strongholds in the area no permanent settlement was formed here. Before and after Shershah attempts were made to post some Pathan regiments on the frontier to check the incursions of the tribes of Jharkhand (Chota Nagpur) which led to the creation of the Mohammedan *zamindari* of Birbhum which gave trouble to the East India Company. In Todar Mall's rent roll along the western frontier of Bengal are Sarkar Audambar or Tandah containing Rajmahal, Sarkar Sharifabad(Birbhum), and Sirkar Mandaran containing Mahall Mandalghat at the confluence of the Rupnarayan and the Hughli at the south-western frontier.

The districts of Medinipur and Hijli were excluded from Bengal in Todar Mall's rent roll and appeared as one of the five Sirkars of Orissa. Under the Mughals Orissa had separate governors. But under Prince Shuja their power was lessened and the portion from Mandalghat to Baleswar or Balasore was permanently attached to Bengal. Towards

¹⁶⁶ H. Blochmann, *Contributions To The Geography*, pp. 14-15.

the south Hijli was annexed to the Mughal dominion around 1630. Blochmann quotes Valentyn's work which states the following, 'Hingeli which had for many years a chief of its own was conquered about 1630 by the Great Mogul. But in 1660, the lawful chief of Hingeli, who from a child had been kept a prisoner, found means to escape, and with the help of his own to re-conquer the country. But he did not enjoy it: he was in 1661 brought into Aurangzeb's power with the help of the East India Company (the Dutch Company) and was again imprisoned and better looked after than at first.'¹⁶⁷

It is to be mentioned here that parts of the jungly and the hilly frontier districts in the west had their names ending with the suffix *bhum*. Thus we have Birbhum, Sainbhum along the left bank of the Ajai or Gopibhum along the right bank of the Ajai. Similarly the frontier district between Rangpur and the Brahmaputra comprising *mahals* Bhtarband and Bahirband was called in Shuja's rent roll as 'Bangalbhum.'

In Chapter 1 we have already stated that the political boundary of the Province often co-incided with the river courses that intersected the region and divided the Province into different zones. These zones not only had natural differences but their historical trajectories also differed.

When Mughal arms entered Bengal they did not experience similar challenges all over Bengal. Eaton points out that in the regions to the West of the Bhagirathi the conquest by the Mughals was an easy task¹⁶⁸. The *zamindars* submitted without resistance. These were principally, the *zamindars* of Birbhum, Pachet and Hughli. Even Pratapaditya of Jessore submitted to the Mughals but 'when he failed to abide by the terms of his submission to Islam Khan, the chief Provincial revenue officer had no difficulty securing the written agreements of local landholders and clerks to remit the land revenue on new more stringent terms.'¹⁶⁹

Here we must remember that western Bengal was within easier reach for the northern powers than either the mountains in the north or the forested areas of the *Bhati*. Eaton points out that in western Bengal there was settled cultivation of rice producing a

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. p-18

¹⁶⁸ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, pp. 183-186

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p-184.

surplus and a means to extraction of that surplus¹⁷⁰. The community in the west had been integrated into the sultanate before the Mughals. Their economy was monetized. The landholders, peasants and artisans were securely within the fold of Brahminical religion. Hence when the Mughals conquered the *Rarh* region there was only a formal change at the apex- from the independent Sultans to the Mughals. At the intermediary level the familiar local officials continued along with the new officials of the Mughals side by side collecting taxes and depositing it at Dacca which was then sent to Delhi as tribute.

On the contrary to the north of Bramhaputra in countries of the Kuch and Kamrup the Mughals did not experience a smooth transition of power but rather they had to violently subjugate the inhabitants.¹⁷¹ The Kuch people belonged to a tribal society in which Bramhincal Hinduism had been making slow inroads. A headman of a Kuch village named Haria Mandal brought together a confederacy of tribes. His son Bisu assumed the title of Raja and his son was Naranarayan who ruled over the Kuch in the sixteenth century. The Kuch did not have a monetized economy. They did not pay land revenue but in lieu of it performed labour service-the practice being derived from neighbouring Assam.¹⁷² When the Mughals conquered the Kuch people they substituted a king for a distant governor and also imposed their own fiscal system over the Province. They imposed the collection of land revenue and granted lands to revenue farmers. A standing army was also to be maintained paid from the taxes imposed on the Kuch peasant. The Kuch people could not comprehend these innovations and revolted. The relative isolation of the Kuch people from the plains of Bengal had perhaps prevented them from emulating the customs of a more settled society with a monetized economy.

When we come to the east of Bengal the experience again is different.¹⁷³ In the east the inhabitants did not pose any serious resistance to the Mughals and accepted their authority as in the west. But in Rarh, Bramhincal Hinduism was deeply entrenched. The

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p-186

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p-186-191.

¹⁷² Eaton, Ibid., p-188. Shihabuddin Talish mentions this practice in his *Tarikh-i-Asham*. S. K. Bhuyan's article 'Studies in the History of Assam', in *Tarikhe-e-Aasham* of Shehabuddin Talesh tr. Mazhar Asif, Guwahati, 2009, p-165.

¹⁷³ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760* p-191-3.

people in the Rarh did not oppose Mughal rule but they did not absorb the religion of their conquerors either. The Mughal *ashraf* sentiment, did not insist upon conversion.¹⁷⁴ This was true in case of the east as well. But here a large section of the inhabitants assimilated into Islam. This happened due to some other forces working in the East. As mentioned in the first chapter due to the active movement of the delta the eastern regions became more fertile and the clearance and cultivation in these islands proceeded under the aegis of Muslim holy men centering on the organization provided by the mosque. These Muslim holy men were responsible for clearing the forested areas of *bhati*, introducing wet rice cultivation, with the consequent sedenterisation of semi tribal population, their peasantization and Islamization.

When we turn to the politics of the period we should keep these differences in perspective. Although Bengal was but one region, the existence of different ecological zones within it made for a differentiated history of the Province.

The politics of this period was characterized by remarkable fluidity and throughout the seventeenth century the Mughals had to encounter difficulties and obstacles in extending their control over the province. Situated as it was far off from the imperial capital at Delhi, Bengal was a frontiers zone per se, 'a house of turbulence', or the *bulghakhana*¹⁷⁵ as the Mughals would call it.

Because of its situation at the far-end of the Mughal Empire away from central control, it was difficult to administer the Province. P. Saran argues that the Indo-Gangetic plain was in nature of a fortress surrounded on all sides by hills, rivers and forests except a few passes. The Indo-Gangetic area was roughly in the shape of an irregular triangle, with its base on the west and its apex between Bihar and Bengal. Saran goes on to describe, 'the northern side of this triangle is represented by a line drawn from Peshwar(? Sp) to the River Kosi...its base is formed by a line from Peshwar south westwards to Broach' and the 'southern boundary is formed by parallel lines of Narmada and Tapti and reaching within visible distance of the Ganga below Chunar and the Benares. From here the hills and the river run parallel to each other up to head of the Rajmahal hills, leaving only a narrow passage between them which opens out like a funnel into the plains of

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p-177

¹⁷⁵ The expression is used by Abul Fazl in 1579 in the *Akbarnamah*. Cited in Richard Eaton, Ibid. p-168.

Bengal. The western mouth of this passage was commanded by the fort of Chunar and its eastern mouth which is called the pass of the Teliagarhi and the Sakrigali and which lies between the Rajmahal hills in the south and the rivers in the north, was commanded by two fortresses on each bank of the two rivers.’¹⁷⁶

The plains of Hindustan between the Rajmahal hills in the south and the Terai in the north converged to a very narrow width of about a hundred miles. This narrow passage was blockaded by a number of mighty rivers that rendered the transport of large armies through this passage difficult. Hence all the campaigns carried out from Delhi against Bengal or Orissa had to take the only convenient route lying through the two passes so that they were also known as the ‘Gate of Bengal’. Saran argues that the natural enclosure enjoyed by the Indo-Gangetic plain gave ‘compactness and security’ to its territories. The areas within this enclosure were within the easier reach of the Emperor at Delhi. On the other hand Bengal, Orissa, Khandesh, states of Central India, Kashmir which lay outside the triangular enclosure, were ‘beyond the ambit of this fortress and held more loosely by Delhi. According to Saran , ‘the cause of the repeated revolts in Bengal and the persistent turbulence of the Afghan chiefs in Orissa nearly up to the end of Akbar’s reign is to be found mainly in their physical isolation not in mere remoteness from the capital.’¹⁷⁷

The Mughals therefore were faced with a number of difficulties in consolidating Bengal. They conquered the Province in the battle of Tukaroi(1576) defeating Daud Karrani but the latter continued to give trouble to the Mughals for he and his bands of Afghans could find shelter in the forested regions of Bengal where the Mughals could not pursue effectively. The local potentates or the *Barabhuyians* were also a source of trouble for the Mughals. These local potentates and the Afghans were lodged in the *Bhati*. The *Bhati* was virtually the ‘wild east’ for the Mughals with its dense jungles and marshes that required a different sort of military tactics altogether. But they were brought to task by Islam Khan’s *Bhati* campaigns. But the Mughal governors themselves once sent to this far-off province tended to govern autonomously. Murshid Quli under whom Bengal emerged as an independent polity in the eighteenth century was

¹⁷⁶ P. Saran, *The Provincial Government of the Mughals 1526-1658*, Bombay, 1973, p- 20.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

a Mughal revenue official. A third source of trouble for the Mughals were the neighbouring powers of Assam and Arakan who wanted to check Mughal expansion towards the East. Finally the Province of Bengal being a coastal province like Gujarat was flocked by foreign traders. A large number of Europeans had settled in the province, as from sixteenth century onwards the Mughal Empire was increasingly becoming absorbed into the orbit of European commerce. The Portuguese had entered the province in the beginning of the sixteenth century (1517) even before the arrival of the Mughals¹⁷⁸, followed by the Dutch and the English. As is well-known the English emerged masters of the province post-Plassey but even before that the province had become for all practical purposes independent under Murshid Quli Khan. These centrifugal forces often allied with each other. The relations between the king of Arakan, the Portuguese and the local potentates or the *bhuyias* of Bengal was characterized by a complex system of shifting alliances against the Mughals who struggled in course of the seventeenth century to bring these centrifugal forces under control. The relative isolation and the difficult terrain allowed centrifugal forces to persist and made difficult for any one power to bring under control the entire Province.

Mughal Military Operations in the Riverine Ecology of Bengal

From the Mughal military point of view the consolidation of their authority in Bengal was particularly difficult as the province surrounded as it was by a large number of swamps and marshes was beyond the reach of the Mughal cavalry. According to Jos Gommans¹⁷⁹ Rajmahal was the resting place for the Mughal cavalry as beyond it the nature of the terrain was such that it required a different sort of military tactics consisting of ships and river vessels armed with cannons to fight the enemies. The Mughals never really turned their attention to the building up of an efficient naval fleet. They perceived the seas as dominated by the European's in the same manner as they perceived the *mawas*

¹⁷⁸ "Four centuries have sped since the Portuguese first drank of the waters of the Ganges... Babur had not come down from the heights of Kabul to found the Mughal Empire. The Portuguese had however, already established the foundation of an Eastern Empire and were already pushing their power to Bengal", Campos, p-1.

¹⁷⁹ Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, London, 2002.

territories filled with native rebels. In the rebellious territories inland, protection money was to be paid and in the seas, the same thing was done but by the means of the *cartazes*. Since the Mughals perceived the two in the same manner they never made any special efforts to build a navy they were satisfied with their mastery on land. In Bengal they did possess a *nawara* and people who supplied fleets were given *nawara* jagirs. But the Mughal *nawara* was no match to that of the Arakanese. Even the local potentates possessed a greater number of boats and river vessels than that of the Mughals. The Mughal success in Bengal could only be explained by the combined attack of the land forces and the river vessels. Instead of speedy and sudden attacks, in Bengal, as Jos Gommans points out, the campaign was slow and steady trying to bring under control the local potentates spread over a wide area. At every stage of the campaign 'logistical support' had to be provided in the form of building roads and digging canals and tanks. The land forces had to move slowly so the fleets on the rivers could keep pace with it. In this context the conquest of the *Bhati* or 'the wild east' of Bengal was of great consequence to the Mughals¹⁸⁰.

The *Bhati* area was filled with jungles and rebellious local potentates as well as the remaining Afghan chiefs took shelter in the *Bhati* region. In early part of the seventeenth century a campaign was organized under Islam Chishti (1608-13) to bring the *Bhati zamindars* under control. Some of these *zamindars* tendered submission on their own. This was true of those situated in the southern parts like the *zamindars* of Birbhum, Pachet, Hijli. Even Bhusna under the powerful *zamindar* Satrajit tendered its submission to the Mughals. These *zamindars* were restored to their territories but brought within imperial fold. In case of northern *zamindars* of the *Bhati*, their *zamindari*s were brought under more strict surveillance as they controlled areas which were closer to the marching routes at *Bhati*. Their *zamindari*s were bestowed as jagirs to the *mansabdars*. For instance the area around Sonabazu was given to Ihtimam Khan. The powerful *zamindari* of Jessore under Pratapaditya submitted to the Mughals and the forces of the rebellious Musa Khan were defeated and his forts at Jatrapur, Dakchara, Katrabo and Qadam Rasul were captured. Under the leadership of Sujaat Khan the next part of the campaign was conducted when the Afghans at Bokainagar and Sylhet were defeated

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p-170-179.

when their leader Usman Khan suddenly died even as the Afghans were on the verge of winning the battle.

According to Jos Gommans Mughal India situated as it was on the arid zone unlike Europe experienced the military revolution in the true sense after which the use of mounted archers and fighters became more important than infantry. Europe not located within the arid zone did not switch over to cavalry but sophisticated its infantry¹⁸¹. Till the Anglo-French war the importance of the well drilled infantry armed with muskets was not understood in India where the emphasis was on cavalry. The arid regions of India were ideal for breeding horses and in Mughal warfare the horses occupied a very important place. But in Bengal horses were scarce while elephants were available in considerable numbers. Hence cavalry occupied a secondary importance in land wars in the region.

According to Gommans the monsoons in India divided the sub continent into two areas-the arid zone and zones of abundant rainfall, the areas of stable agriculture¹⁸². While the Mughals needed to have control over productive areas with sedentary populations engaged in agriculture, it also needed to have control over arid regions that provided the marching space for the army and pasturage for the armies numerous horses, camels etc. These arid areas also provided mercenaries who were part time peasants. Unlike the areas in the east which received adequate rainfall so that land was continually cultivated, there being no agricultural off-season, in the arid areas there were off seasons when after the *Kharif* harvests in October and the sowing of the *rabi* crops being complete, the peasants could seek temporary employment elsewhere. Thus October ideally was the season in which campaigns begun in the sub-continent. For in October the military labour market was good there being plenty of free-booters and mercenaries who could be hired over and above the professional soldiers. The rains too having stopped it was easier for the armies to march. In the areas on the east since the peasant had no off-season, the men engaged in military were professional soldiers and not part-time peasants. This may have been the case in Bengal where the land being exceedingly fertile

¹⁸¹ Jos Gommans, 'Infantry Revolution and Colonial Conquest', *Mughal Warfare*, London 2002, pp. 203-206.

¹⁸² Jos Gommans *Mughal Warfare*, pp. 8-15.

the peasants hardly ever had an off-season. In Bengal the Mughals had to stop their campaigns in the monsoon as here also their main force was the cavalry. The Mughals however had an edge in their possession of elephants that could swim across the riverine terrain carrying men and goods. The animal belonged to the terrain itself and its importance were understood by the Mughals. The *Baharistan* records that in one of the cases the Mughals were chasing in horses the King of Arakan who along with his retinue were traveling on elephants. The Arakan king expected to cross the *jalia*, [a narrow stretch of water formed due to the rains] without trouble as he was riding on an elephant and the Mughals with their horses would not be able to follow him further. Such incidents must have convinced the Mughals of the importance of elephants rather than horses in the riverine Bengal terrain. But it is also true that elephants were difficult to maintain compared to horses since the consumption capacity of the elephants were larger than that of horses and the elephants reached adulthood when they could be trained at 24-25 years. So maintaining elephants was costlier than that of keeping horses. The Mughals acquired their supply of elephants as tribute from the chiefs of Bengal. They also imported their supply of elephants from Golconda and Bengal¹⁸³.

By far the best means of travel in Bengal was by boat and it was here that the Mughals lacked. In 1620 the Mughal commander sent by the Governor of Bengal to the Kuch country pointed out that traveling by boat had become indispensable as the state could not provide adequate numbers of them, he had to procure these from the Beparis [traders]...on hire or purchase or by force...’ Thus the *Baharistan* noted that the foremost thing necessary for [any] expedition [in the] accursed region is the fleet¹⁸⁴ But the cavalry was not altogether useless. The strength of the Mughal army also lay in its mounted archers that ‘out-flashed the enemy’s fleet’. A combination of the land forces and their small fleet explained Mughal success in Bengal and the extension of its outer frontiers. In theory the Mughal Empire was unlimited. Its rulers claimed universal sovereignty. But in practice the ‘outer frontiers’ of the empire were limited by zones that were situated far-off and were naturally impenetrable. But the fertility of these outer frontiers and their commercial wealth continued to attract the Mughals. This was the

¹⁸³ Jos Gommans, *Mughal Warfare*, p-122.

¹⁸⁴ *Baharistan*, vol. I, p-330.

policy followed when the Mughals tried to bring in control the fertile province of Bengal situated at the eastern end of the Empire. The campaign against the *bhati zamindars* was successful and Islam Chishti established a capital at Dacca. But this flourishing agricultural and commercial zone came to have a life of its own such that in the eighteenth century the English turned this frontier zone into the capital of a new imperial system.

The Progressive Institutional Consolidation

Tapan Raychaudhuri¹⁸⁵ points out that the defeat of Daud Karrani at the battle of Tukaroi was a nominal defeat as sheltered by the forests and mountains in the north and north-east Daud continued to give trouble to the Mughals. However by 1627 the Mughals were able to consolidate their hold in Bengal. By the successful campaigns in the *Bhati* by Islam Khan (1608-13), the last remnants of Afghans were rooted out and the local potentates subdued. The *bhuyias* in some cases were absorbed within the framework of the Mughal administrative system by granting them *mansab* ranks. In 1612 the capital of Bengal was shifted to Dacca. In 1615-16 the Mughals were unsuccessful in conquering either Chittagong or Assam. In 1624, peace was again disturbed due to the rebellion of Shahjahan who allied with the king of Arakan. The restoration of Jahangir's rule in 1625, and the appointment of Mahabat Khan, failed to improve the situation as Mahabat Khan was busy in the court intrigues which allowed the Maghs during this time an opportunity to ravage Dacca. But with the appointment of Fidai Khan a few years before Jahangir's death peace was returning to Bengal. By 1627, the consolidation of the province was in progress. Bengal was made a *subah* of the Mughals with a *subadar*, a *diwan* and a *faujdar* who acted as checks on each other. A *Qazi*, a *Kotwal* and a *Sadr* were also sent to Bengal. Fidai Khan also made a compulsory annual tribute to be forthcoming from Bengal. But while central control was imposed over major parts of Bengal in places like Sylhet and Jessore there was the presence of *sardars* who concerned themselves with maintenance of law and order in the newly conquered and yet rebellious territories.

¹⁸⁵ Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*, pp-1-49.

James Grant¹⁸⁶ in a review of the Mughal fiscal system from the time of Akbar to Murshid Quli Khan points out that during the initial years of Mughal conquest of Bengal revenue from the Province hardly reached the royal exchequer at Delhi. Todar Mal's initial assessment of the Province including the *jagir* and *khalsa* lands was at one *kror* and seven lacks of rupees. But even after Man Singh conquered regions of the *Bhati* and Kuch Bihar the state gained little in terms of revenue as in those early days the entire revenue of the Province was spent in further military campaigns against the Mags or the Portuguese pirates. Thus when Fidai Khan offered to pay annually to the royal exchequer at Delhi 10 lacks of rupees it was reason sufficient enough for Jahangir to make Fidai Khan the Viceroy of Bengal. In 1638 when the Assamese attacked Bengal Grant mentions that there is reason to believe that not a rupee was paid into the royal exchequer although he believes that the 'delegates' themselves would have profited clandestinely even at that stage. At this time of crisis Sultan Shuja was appointed the Viceroy of Bengal. He instituted financial reforms which led to an increase of revenues from Bengal adding substantially to the original *Toomar Jumma* or rent roll of Todar Mal. The country was divided into 34 *circars* and 1350 *pergunnahs* yielding a revenue of 1,31,15,907.¹⁸⁷ Some territories from coastal areas of Orissa from Mandelgaut to the *Bunder* of Balasore were added to Bengal in order to bring the entire maritime border under the jurisdiction of the Bengal flotilla stationed at Dacca.

Yet even at this early period when imperial consolidation was achieving stability during the long 20 years of Sultan Shujah's Viceroyalty, collections were made by the officers of the *nazim* on behalf of him in addition to the imperial dues. Grant mentions that during this period Bengal had become a very prosperous Province due to flourishing commerce and the influx of specie from America. There was a production boom in items of manufacture not only aiding commerce but also adding to the habits of luxury of the rulers. 'A country therefore dreaded for its noxious climate, or considered a place of

¹⁸⁶ James Grant, 'Analysis of the Finances of Bengal', published as Appendix 4 in the 5th Report from the Select Committee of House of Commons, 28th July 1812, vol. II, ed. W.K. Firminger, Delhi, (reprint), 2001.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p-182.

banishment was now resorted to, from the allurements of wealth and ease.’¹⁸⁸ But Grant subsequently mentions that even though the officials might have secretly profited, since his wealth went back to the state upon his ‘natural and civil death’ the state was a participant in such exactions.

During the time of Aurangzeb no further financial reforms were made except for the fact that the rents were more punctually paid for the awe which the Prince inspired on the people. During this time Kuch Bihar was completely subjugated in 1660 and Chatgaon in 1666 which Grant mentions, without however stating if it meant an increase to the Bengal revenues. The Emperor however spent the last 25 years of his life in the Deccan delegating the responsibility of the Province on Prince Azim-us-shan. He was not intent on increasing the revenue of Bengal but nevertheless in getting what was due. Hence to look after the financial matters of the Province he appointed Jaffer Khan or the later Murshid Kuli Khan as the *Diwan*. The latter made the last most important financial reforms in Bengal for our period. Some of these reforms were made before and some after he acquired the *nizamat* of Bengal from Farrukhsiyar by the payment of a *nazrana* in 1717. He reduced the household cavalry troops of 3,000 as cavalry did not effectively operate in the riverine and marshy terrain of Bengal. He also transferred some of the jagir lands in Bengal to Orissa and by these two measures he added 10 lacks of rupees to the yearly rent from the *khalsa* lands. By an investigation of the revenue paying capacity of lands in the interior districts chiefly Satgaon he managed to realize 11 ½ lacks more to the state exchequer annually. These various reforms were included in the *Jumma Kaumil Toomary* of Jaffer Khan 1722 which stood at 1,42,88,186.¹⁸⁹ From the time of Jaffer Khan as the *nazims* became more and more politically independent they started collecting new perpetual imposts known as the *abwab soubehdarry*. Murshid Quli thus collected from the zamindars *hasnovessy* or the payment of a tribute upon the renewal of their annual leases by the *khalsa mutassadies*. Among other institutional reforms of Murshid Quli was the transfer of capital to Murshidabad because of its more central and advantageous location and the division of the country into 13 *chaklas* or revenue divisions.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., p-186.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p-190.

Problems of Internal Consolidation

But the Mughals were faced with considerable difficulties in consolidating their hold on Bengal due to its geographical location at the far eastern end of the empire which made control from Delhi difficult. As mentioned earlier the Province was not only remote but isolated. The Mughal governors sent to this remote Province tended to function autonomously. Thus Islam Khan who was responsible for the conquest of *Bhati* tended to assume imperial airs in Bengal. The Emperor was displeased with both Islam Khan and Qasim Khan due to their haughty attitude and frequent tendency to quarrel. As the Governors were quite at a distance from the imperial capital they arrogated powers to themselves and often defied the Emperor's authority. Islam Khan for instance belonged to the Chishti family for which the Emperor had great regard but he was a very haughty man. He had constant conflicts with his colleagues like Ihtimam Khan¹⁹⁰, the father of Mirza Nathan who was in charge of the imperial fleet and was also a high officer. It was due to his arrogance that Musa Khan even after submitting to the imperialists decided to renew his campaigns against them. The *Baharistan* mentions that Islam Khan in course of his second meeting with Musa Khan ill-treated him which made the latter to rebel again¹⁹¹. After the successful campaigns against Musa Khan and against Usman, Islam Khan assumed a very haughty attitude. He prepared a high platform, higher than the height of two men and called it the *jharoka*. He sat on the *jharoka* and other officers were directed to pay their obeisance. Mutaqid Khan and Mirza Sayfuddin refused to do this. The latter was imprisoned by the *Bakshi* of Islam Khan for refusing to pay obeisance.

Meanwhile the Emperor probably to keep himself informed of the events in this distant Province appointed a *waqia navis* or news reporter named Yaghma Isfahani¹⁹² who was directed to send reports to the Emperor which were not accessible to the *subadar*. This measure obviously put a check to the power of the *subadar*. The *Baharistan* records that the Emperor appointed Shajaat Khan as the *subadar* of Bengal¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ *Baharistan*, vol. I, p-72.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p-62-3

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p-209

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p-211

in place of Islam Khan but due to the death of Shajaat Khan¹⁹⁴ Islam Khan was once again re-instated to the position of *subadar*.¹⁹⁵ The *Baharistan* also mentions that the Emperor decreed an ordinance containing seventeen points of admonition directed to all *subadars* but especially to Islam Khan.¹⁹⁶ In this ordinance the act of *Jharoka darshan* was not to be performed by the *subadars*. The ordinance stated that no *subadar* should sit at a higher than half a human height above the ground. No man should be forced to salute or make obeisance (*salam* and *taslim*). The *mansab* of Islam Khan was reduced by 2,000 personal and horse for his fault of not accompanying the expedition against Usman and sending instead Kishtwar Khan who died in the campaign inspite of the royal command that directed Islam Khan to treat Kishtwar Khan as his own son and look after his safety. But Islam Khan carried on the custom of sitting on the *jharoka* with the plea of holding a meeting with the high and low by standing there on foot. After some time the Emperor again received complaints from the officers that Islam Khan preferred his own men over the imperial officers.¹⁹⁷ Thus while Shaykh Kamal under the orders of Islam Khan made peace with the Raja of Kachar, the imperial officers were in favour of conquering the kingdom and sending the Raja to imperial court. An imperial decree was thus passed according to which the command of the expedition against the Kachar king was placed in the hands of Mubariz Khan instead of Shaykh Kamal. The Kachar king submitted with great humility to Mubariz Khan.

Islam Khan's brother Qasim Khan was equally haughty and also lacked the tact and ability of his brother. Due to his lack of tact the Mughals were forced to get engaged in two-front war with the Kuch and the Mags. Qasim Khan also could not secure the full co-operation of his colleagues. Like his brother he constantly quarreled with the other officers. He arrested the sons of the *Diwan* Mirza Husayn Beg. The *waqia-navis* without the knowledge of Qasim Khan was able to send a report of this event to the Emperor who censured Qasim Khan. The Emperor sent a *firman* through Saadat Khan telling Qasim Khan to pacify the *Diwan*. On the receipt of the *firman* Qasim Khan

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p-217

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p-218

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., p-213

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., p-220

returned all the properties of the *Diwan* and his son and obtained a letter of satisfaction from each one of them. However the complaint against Qasim Khan being frequent, the Emperor sent Ibrahim Kalal to verbally censure Qasim Khan and also bring back the properties of Islam Khan, which had probably escheated to the Crown upon his death, from Qasim Khan who had taken possession of them. Ibrahim Kalal was also asked to bring along with him the revenues of the Crown lands as shown in the register of cash realization.

Meanwhile the Emperor instituted the wearing of pearls by the nobles which he gifted to them. These pearl earrings were supposed to be 'the ring of obedience' that the nobles were to wear. This ring of obedience was also sent to Qasim Khan for him to wear.¹⁹⁸

But Qasim Khan once again incurred the displeasure of the Emperor when he falsely ascribed the victory over the Mags which was more accidental than real to his son Shaykh Farid. An imperial messenger named Ladla was also sent to censure Qasim Khan for ill-treating Mirza Makki¹⁹⁹ the son of the loyal imperial officer Iftiqar Khan who died in the battle against Usman. The Emperor instructed Qasim Khan to leave in amity with his colleagues and not to let arrogance and self-conceit over power him. But finally to check Qasim Khan and his activities the Emperor appointed Mukhlis Khan to the combined office of the *Diwan*, the *Bakshi*, and the *waqia-navis* of Bengal so that he could check the growing power and arrogance of Qasim Khan. With such instructions he was sent from Delhi to Bengal. But Qasim Khan had conflicts with Mukhlis Khan as well. On the failure of the expedition to Arakan Mukhlis Khan refused to finance another expedition the following year. Qasim Khan at this became angry and quarreled with Mukhlis Khan. The latter then sent a report to the Emperor on the waste of imperial revenues on unsuccessful expeditions. When this news reached the Emperor he dismissed Qasim Khan and appointed Ibrahim Khan *Fath-i-Jang* to the *subadarship* of Bengal. Qasim Khan at first protested and refused to be parted with the elephants and treasures he had gathered in Bengal but being exposed to the might of imperial forces under Ibrahim

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p-299.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p-376.

Khan he was forced to return to the imperial court in disgrace while Ibrahim Khan went on to assume the office of the *subadar* of Bengal.

While the Mughal Governors turned recalcitrant when sent to this frontier Province there were the Mughal princes, who once turned fugitive, started residing in Bengal. Thus during the time of the Viceroyalty of Ibrahim Khan Fath-i-Jung the Province of Bengal became the theater of Shahjahan's rebellion against imperial authority. Although the governor opposed ShahJahan's army he was defeated and killed in the battle and the Province passed into the hands of Shahjahan till his defeat at the hands of the imperial forces.

Khondkar Mohbabul Karim²⁰⁰ points out that an important cause for the defeat of Ibrahim Khan Fath-i-Jung was the treachery of the naval forces under Mir Shams, Tavares and Masum Khan²⁰¹. Karim observes that Shahjehan had brought no navy with himself to fight in Bengal whereas the Bengal governor had at his disposal the Bengal flotilla which was experienced in having earlier fought the Assamese and the Arakanese. But due to the treachery of the Bengal zamindars and the Portuguese the Bengal flotilla could not be properly utilized. Similarly when ShahJahan fought against the imperial army the *zamindars* and the Portuguese allies sided with the army of the Mughal Emperor and conspired against the Prince. Karim observes 'It is curious to note here that the Bengal zamindars Masum Khan and the Portuguese allies behaved in the same way with ShahJehan in such a critical period in the same way as they behaved with Ibrahim Khan in the battle of Akbarnagar. They were opportunists swinging like pendulums from one side to another and their political maneuvers moulded the course of historical events of the eastern Provinces of Bihar and Bengal during this period.'²⁰²

Bengal once again became one of the theaters of conflict during the war of succession among the four sons of ShahJahan, an account of which is provided by the foreign traveller Thomas Bowrey²⁰³. Shah Shuja, one of the sons of ShahJahan was the Governor of the province of Bengal who at the end of the war of succession was defeated

²⁰⁰ Khondkar Mohbabul Karim, *The Provinces of Bihar and Bengal under Shahjahan*, Dacca, 1974.

²⁰¹ Ibid, p-18.

²⁰² Ibid, p-34

²⁰³ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, pp.135-142.

by Aurangzeb. Shuja, was replaced by Mir Jumla as the governor²⁰⁴, since Mir Jumla was one of the loyal followers of Aurangzeb and had allied with him during the wars of succession. But Bowrey points out that the wealth of the kingdom of Bengal encouraged disobedience on part of the Governors sent to this far off province. Mir Jumla was a capable and powerful governor. He had in his possession Patna and Orissa and he also made war on Assam before he died. He made Dacca his capital to keep in check the Arakanese pirates whose destructive raids were a great menace to the merchants and rulers of Bengal. But Bowrey mentions that in spite of these successes of Mir Jumla, Aurangzeb seemed to have been displeased with his tenure as Governor since he seemed to have considered Mir Jumla as a rival. Therefore upon the death of Mir Jumla, Aurangzeb appointed his own uncle Shaista Khan as the governor of Bengal hoping that as Shaista Khan was related to him by blood he would be obedient to the emperor's cause. However once the vast amount of the riches of Bengal concentrated on the hands of Shaista Khan he refused to send to the Emperor his due share of the revenues of the province stating that, 'the treasure was as safe in Dacca as in his own exchequer in Agra or Delly'.²⁰⁵ In 1678 the son of Emperor Aurangzeb was proclaimed as the 'lawful prince' of Bengal and the nobles of the kingdom paid their obeisance to the Prince and Shaista Khan thus left Dacca for Agra with his treasure-which accounted for 60 *patellas* or flat bottomed boats laden with silver, ten with gold *mohors* along with tents, palanquins, servants and soldiery²⁰⁶.

War against the Frontier states

During the Viceroyalty of Islam Khan in Bengal the Raja of Kuch Lakshminarayan surrendered to the Mughals and the territory of Parikshit Narayan the Raja of Kamrup was brought under the subjection of the Mughals. The conquest of Kuch and Kamrup brought the Mughals into closer relations with the Ahoms. Throughout the course of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries the kingdom of Assam had started expanding and becoming more powerful. The growth of Mughal power in Bengal alarmed the Ahom King. During the Viceroyalty of Qasim Khan, the brother of Islam

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p-142.

²⁰⁵ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, p-146

²⁰⁶ Ibid., p-148.

Khan, an army was sent against the Ahoms under Sayyid Abu Bakr. But the campaign was a failure and Abu Bakr died. From then onwards the Mughals made no offensive campaign against the Assamese. The arrest of Lakshminarayan and Parikshitnarayan due to the short sighted policy of Qasim Khan had provoked the Kuch people to rise in rebellion. The Mughals were busy in subduing these rebellions in the Kuch frontier. Later on under the Viceroyalty of Ibrahim Khan Fath-i-Jang the two Kuch rajas were restored to their kingdoms to improve relations with the Kuch people.

The *Baharistan* mentions that Mirza Nathan was sent to the Dakhinkul to put a halt to the continuous rebellions there. The policy of the Ahom king was to encourage confusion in the Mughal occupied territory of Kuch and Kamrup. But the Mughals were determined to keep Kamrup under their hold and the administration of the place was not neglected. The Mughals in fact remained in Kamrup as an 'army of occupation', their presence being essentially military, collecting revenue, subduing rebellions and conducting *kheda* operations.²⁰⁷ The Ahom king tried to create a buffer state of Darrang under Baldev the brother of Parikshit Narayan between the Mughal territories in Kuch and the Ahom state. The Assamese king also gave asylum to prisoners fleeing from Mughal justice. Thus Shaykh Ibrahim Karori who had defalcated a large amount of money in Bengal was supported by the Ahom King. The latter agreed to help the Shaykh if he turned against the Mughals.²⁰⁸ The Shaykh attacked a contingent of troops under Mirza Salih. But soon afterwards his duplicity came into limelight and he was defeated in a battle and killed before reinforcements from Assam could arrive. The Ahom king however sent a large army under Samurayed Kayeth, Hati Barua, and Baldev.

A series of battles were fought between the Mughals and the forces of the Ahom King. An important consequence of these battles was the submission of the eighteen hill Rajas to whose territory Baldev had fled when he was chased by the Mughal army. The Hill Rajas tried to gain help from the Ahom King but were ultimately made to surrender to the Mughals. These conflicts seemed to be in nature of skirmishes. The next, large scale offensive occurred in 1636. The double dealings of Raja Satrajit were to some extent responsible for this. Karim points out that although initially loyal Raja Satrajit

²⁰⁷ Khondkar Mahbubul Karim, *The Provinces of Bihar and Bengal under Shahjahan*, Dacca 1974, p-97

²⁰⁸ *Baharistan*, vol. ii, p-443

intended to profit from the mutual hostilities between the Ahoms and the Mughals²⁰⁹. Because of his activities, Qasim Khan's efforts at establishing diplomatic relations with the Raja of Assam were frustrated. Balinarayan the brother of Parikshit Narayan was instigated by Raja Satrajit to attack Hajo the Mughal headquarters in Kamrup. Hajo fell to the Ahoms as Raja Satrajit offered no resistance to the Ahom army. The Ahom king had sent his own son-in-law to fight alongside Bali Narayan. The Mughals however defeated Bali Narayan and under the orders of Islam Khan, Raja Satrajit was executed. Being defeated Bali Narayan fled to Singri in Assam considering Darrang unsafe. However Bali Narayan died soon afterwards and his death put a temporary halt to the hostilities between the Mughals and the Kuch-Ahom army. A treaty was made in 1639 in which the Mughals acknowledged the independence of the Ahom king and the Ahom king recognized the superiority of the Mughals in Kuch Hajo. From 1639 to 1657-8 peaceful relations existed between the Ahoms and the Mughals mainly due to the diplomatic attitude taken by faujdar Allahyar Khan and Momali Tamuli Bar Barua.²¹⁰ Again since the Mughal Prince and governor of Bengal Shah Shuja did not embark upon a career of conquest the relations between the two kingdoms remained peaceful. It was only with the war of succession in 1658 that the Assamese again launched on an offensive. The *zamindar* of Kuch Bihar tried to recover Kamrup and the Ahoms also attacked Kamrup. The Mughal *faujdar* of Kamrup Mir Luftullah Shirazi fled to Dacca and Guwahati fell to Ahoms. However when the war of succession was over and Mir Jumla became the Viceroy of Bengal he again conquered Kuch Bihar and proceeded on a campaign against Assam in 1662. He had some initial victories and seized the Ahom capital of Garhgaon but when the monsoon arrived the Mughals suffered serious losses. Due to the rains and floods each Mughal outpost had become an island by itself unable to maintain contact with the others²¹¹. The Ahoms made incessant attacks on these outposts and the Mughals suffered serious losses in men. The superior strength of the Mughals proved decisive in the end and some of the Ahom nobles went over to the side of the

²⁰⁹ Khondkar Mahbubul Karim, *The Provinces of Bihar and Bengal under Shahjahan*, p-96.

²¹⁰ Ibid, p-107

²¹¹ Jadunath Sarkar *History of Bengal: Muslim Period*, Patna 1973, p-348

Mughals. Soon afterwards Mir Jumla himself fell ill and the Mughals sued for peace. In spite of the victory obtained Mir Jumla died of his sickness.

So far as relations with Arakan are concerned, The Arakan state was a powerful one even before the Mughals had arrived in Bengal. The Arakanese were in possession of Chittagong. The arrival of the Mughals in Bengal and their growing power was a threat to the Arakanese. The motive of Arakan state was to check the Mughal advance towards the East. According to Thibaut D' Huebert and Jacques P. Leider²¹² the Arakan state carried out raids in the deltaic villages of Bengal as a part of its long term political and economic policies.

Most south-east Asian states the authors argue suffered from a shortage of labour and the Arakan state was no exception. Its main export consisted of rice and slaves. They carried out trade with the Dutch in these commodities. Rice was a labour intensive crop and the slaves captured in raids were used to work in rice plantations of Arakan so that the Arakanese men could be recruited in the army. Depopulation in the deltaic zone of eastern Bengal was not a corollary of raids but a deliberate policy of keeping a buffer zone between the expanding Mughal Empire and the kingdom of Arakan. Initially these raids were carried by the Arakanese themselves but later on the responsibility was given to the Portuguese. But the Arakan King had to keep a constant eye on the Portuguese mercenaries.

So far as the Mughals were concerned an attempt to conquer Arakan was made under Qasim Khan after the Arakanese had made successive raids. But the latter did not personally conduct the campaign and the campaign was a failure. A second campaign was contemplated by Qasim Khan but the *diwan* Mukhlis Khan refused to sanction funds for it. At this juncture the Mughals were in a two front war with Assam and Arakan and neither of the campaigns were successful. When Ibrahim Khan Fath-i-Jung became the Governor he prepared to carry out a war against Arakan but the campaign failed because of the lack of resources and the difficult nature of the terrain of the southern marshes of Bengal covered with thick forests.

²¹² Thibaut D' Hubert and Jacques P. Leider, "Traders and Poets at the Marak-u Court: Commerce and Cultural Links in Seventeenth Century Arakan" in Rila Mukherjee ed. *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*, Delhi, 2011, p-345-379

When Shahjahan revolted in Bengal against Mughal imperial rule the Arakanese king sent an embassy to Shahjahan supporting him. This was because of their common hostility to the Emperor at Delhi but the meeting had no long term political consequence. During the time of Khanzadah Khan the son of Mahabat Khan, who according to Karim, spent his days in pleasure and relegated his duties on his followers the Arakanese attacked and raided the deltaic villages of Bengal and the Mughal authorities could not cope with it. When Shah Shuja turned fugitive after the war of succession and decided to flee from Bengal, the Arakan king offered him asylum till infatuated by the Prince's daughter the Arakan king proposed to marry her. As Shuja refused to give his daughter in marriage to the Mag King the latter was enraged. A conflict ensued between the two and Shuja had to flee, although there were diverse opinions regarding the faith of the fugitive Prince.

The Mag king was finally brought to task in 1666 when the campaign of Shaista Khan against the Arakanese checked their raids. This was done by detaching the Portuguese from an alliance with the king of Arakan. The *Maasir-i- Alamgir* is highly eulogistic in praise of Nawab Shaista Khan. It says that he established numerous caravanserais and erected numerous bridges throughout India.²¹³ His greatest achievement in Bengal was however the conquest of Chittagong which was named by him Islamabad. The *Alamgirnama* mentions that, 'as the Mags emerging from Arrakan on war-vessels and taking advantage of the struggle for supremacy between Aurangzeb and Shah Shuja, harried the coasts of Bengal, Emperor Aurangzeb sent out orders to his Bengal Viceroy, Nawab Shaista Khan, to take immediate steps for chastising the Mags.'²¹⁴ The commanders of Shaista Khan first made Dilawar Khan, ruler of Sandwip, who sided with the King of Arakan, to submit to Mughal control. Dilawar with his followers were defeated in an engagement with the Mughals and sent as prisoners to Jahangirnagar (Dacca) in charge of Manuar, *zamindar* of Jahangirnagar, and Sandip was subdued. Nawab Shaista Khan, on getting news of the conquest of Sandip, appointed Abdul Karim, to the charge of Sandip, with 200 cavalry and 1,003 infantry. The

²¹³ *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* cited by the editor in *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, p-228.

²¹⁴ This text from *Alamgirnama* is cited by the editor of *Riyaz-us-Salatin* p-229, as the *Riyaz* itself is silent on the greatest achievement of Shaista Khan-the conquest of Chittagong.

Portuguese were at this time siding with the Arrakanese, so Nawab Shaista Khan first took steps to detach the Portuguese or the 'Feringis', from an alliance with the King of Arakan and for this purpose sent out letters to some of the leading Feringis. Some of these letters falling into the hands, a Mag, who with a fleet was in the environs of Sandip, the latter communicated it to the Rajah of Arrakan, who lost confidence in the Portuguese, and ordered them to be deported from Chittagong to Arakan.

The Portuguese of Chittagong on becoming aware of this, set fire to many of the Arakanese fleet, and fled to Noakhali in the Mughal dominions. They took shelter with Nawab Shaista Khan at Dacca (Jahangirnagar). 'The latter treated them generously.'²¹⁵ The Nawab then sent out an expedition to Chittagong in charge of his son, Buzurg Umed Khan. Two naval engagements were fought, between the Mughals and the Arakanese in which the Arrakanese were defeated. The Arakanese fleet then moved up to the Karnaphuli river. The Mughal fleet was also accompanied by a large land force. Under the orders of Buzurg Umed Khan, Mir Murtaza cutting down the jungles, and laying down a road, moved up by land to near the Karanphuli, to re-inforce the Imperial fleet. A severe naval engagement took place in the Karnaphuli river, in which the Mags were crushingly defeated, and Buzurg Umed Khan stormed Chittagong fort, captured the Arrakanese fleet, and subdued the whole tract of Chittagong, and 132 Arrakanese war-vessels, with guns, armaments and elephants, were captured. Emperor Aurangzeb ordered Chittagong to be named Islamabad, and conferred gifts on Nawab Shaista Khan, and raised his son Buzurg Umed Khan to the rank of Hazar-o-Pansadi.²¹⁶

The Rise of Murshid Quli Khan

As mentioned earlier the presence of local potentates complicated the political scenario of Bengal. These local potentates allied either with the Portuguese or the Arakanese and continued to give trouble to the Mughals. Important among these chiefs was the Rajas of Sripur, Bakla, Chandecan, Bhalua. The powerful *zamindars* of Bengal were finally brought to task under Murshid Quli Khan. The defeat of Sitaram the powerful *zamindar* of Bhusna was the culminating point of his policy of reducing the *zamindars* to subservience. Meanwhile occurred the large scale rebellion of Sobha Singh.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p-230

²¹⁶ Ibid., p-231

In 1696 when Ibrahim Khan was the Nawab of Bengal taking advantage of Aurangzeb's pre-occupation in the wars of succession, Sobha Singh a local potentate revolted. Nurullah Khan the *faujdar* of Jessore proceeded to attack and chastise the rebels but later deeming himself of being incapable to withstand the forces of the enemy he fled to the Dutch at Chinsurah. Henceforth the fort of Hughli, fell to the hands of the rebels. The Dutch came to the rescue of Hughli and unable to sustain their artillery bombardment Sobha Singh retreated to Satgaon and from there to Burdwan. Here he was murdered by a woman he had captured. But the matter did not end with the death of Sobha Singh. Soon afterwards, his brother Himat Singh and another man named Rahim Khan raised the banner of rebellion in the province. The *Riyaz* mentions that 'Rahim Khan owing to the strength of his rabble and clan, styled himself Rahim Shah. Placing crookedly on the head of pride the cap of vanity, and collecting a large number of low and ignorant *badmashes*, he redoubled the flame of insurrection, so that from Bardwan to Akbarnagar (Rajmahal) on the west of the Ganges, half the Province of Bengal was harried by him. And whoever amongst the Imperial adherents refused to submit to him was punished and tortured.'²¹⁷ But the Nawab of Bengal Ibrahim Khan was slow in reacting. However in view of the gravity of the situation, Ibrahim Khan was recalled and in his place his son Zabardast Khan was given the *subadari* of the Province. But soon afterwards, Prince Azim-us-Shan, son of Bahadur Shah was sent to the Province of Bengal as its *subahdar*, at the head of a large army to bring order to the Province. The royal army defeated the Afghans under Rahim Khan. The *Riyaz* mentions about the Afghans that, 'wherever trace could be found of their whereabouts, they were captured and slaughtered, and in a short time the districts of Bardwan, Hugli, and Jasar (Jessore) were purged of the defilement caused by the Afghan raiders. The tracts that had been desolated by the ravages of these rebels once again became fertile... *Zamindars* of that tract who had been oppressed and banished by the Afghans, were re-assured by Royal Proclamations of goodwill, and re-installed in their hereditary *Zamindaris*. Taking fresh settlements of the *Khalsah mahals* (crown lands) and of *Jagirs*, these commenced making collections of rent.'²¹⁸

²¹⁷ Ibid., p-233

²¹⁸ Ibid.,p-243.

Nawab Azim-us-Shan founded at Hughli, Shahganj which he named as Azimganj after himself. A mosque was also constructed here²¹⁹. The Prince soon after settled the affairs of administration but the *Riyaz* mentions that he engaged in certain mal-practices like the *Sauda-i-Am* and the *Sauda-i-Khas*. This meant that all the goods which were brought by mercantile vessels to the port of Chittagong was bought for the Nawab but afterwards these very same goods were sold to the merchants of Bengal having named them *Sauda-i-Am*. By way of censure and to check the mal-practices of the Prince, the King Aurangzeb reduced the Prince's *mansab* by 500.²²⁰ Although the Prince abandoned the practice, as a further measure of check the Emperor Aurangzeb appointed Mirza Hadi, the future Murshid Quli Khan, to the office of Diwan of the Province of Bengal, after bestowing on him the title of Kar Talab Khan. The *Riyaz* mentions that, 'The Mirza was a sagacious man, and an officer of honesty and integrity. He had already held the office of Diwan of the Subah of Orissa. In several *Mahals* pertaining to Orissa he had effected retrenchments in expenditure, and had thus become prominent amongst the Imperial officials. He was held matchless in probity and rectitude of purpose. Rendering eminent services, in periods of siege and war, he had got into the good graces of Emperor Aurangzeb.'²²¹ At this time the *Diwan* was independent of the *subahdar* or the *Nazim* and carried out his functions with full autonomy. The *Nazim's* jurisdiction was essentially political and he had no power over the *Diwan* nor was he allowed to meddle with the affairs of the imperial revenue. The *Riyaz* mentions that 'Both the *Nazim* and the *Diwan* were guided in the administration of the affairs of the *Subah* by a Procedure Code (the *Dastur-ul-Amal*) that was issued year after year by the Emperor, and they were not permitted to deviate from, or infringe, them by a hair-breadth.'²²²

Kar Talab Khan, having devoted himself to the administration of the fiscal affairs, the Prince's control over the income and expenditure of the Province ceased. The *Riyaz*

²¹⁹ J. Burnell at the beginning of eighteenth of century mentions having seen a dilapidated mosque in the environs of the town of Hughli. This mosque was still there in 1887 when the editor of the *Riyaz*, mentions to have seen it.

²²⁰ *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, p-247

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid*, p-248.

further mentions that Kartalab Khan, 'finding that the country was without thorns, and fertile and rich, commenced re-assessment, and deputed sagacious and thrifty Collectors to every Parganah and Chaklah and Sarkar. And after assessing accurately the Imperial revenue and *sair* taxes, he remitted one *Kror* of rupees to the Emperor, and prepared a complete Revenue-roll of the *Khalsah mahals* (crown lands) and of the *Jagirs*.'²²³

Earlier, owing to the remoteness of Bengal and its unsuitable climate, the higher officers did not care to seek for in the Province, 'as they fancied it not only fatal to human lives, but as actual haunts of demons'.²²⁴ Therefore, the Chief Imperial Diwans, by way of inducement, conferred numerous *jagirs* in Bengal on the Bengal *mansadars*. In consequence of this policy, the *Riyaz* mentions, very few *Khalsah mahals* were left in Bengal, so that the 'revenue of the *mahals* of this *Subah* did not suffice to meet either the pay of the soldiers under the Prince, or that of the *naqdi* troops. Therefore, their pay had to be provided for from revenues of other *Subahs*.' The new *Diwan*, submitted a scheme to the Emperor suggesting allotment of lands in Orissa to the Bengal *Mansabdars* in lieu of their *jagirs* in Bengal itself. Thus the *mansabdars* of Bengal were allotted *jagir* lands in Orissa, which were less fertile and less productive while the fertile and more productive lands of Bengal fell to the share of the Emperor as these were re-claimed as *khalisa* lands. 'By this ingenious stroke of policy, the Khan effected a big surplus in the Bengal revenue to the credit of the Emperor, and squeezed out the profits from the Bengal *Zamindars* and *Jagirdars*...Year after year, he enhanced the Revenue-assessments of the *Subah*, and thus became the recipient of Imperial favours.'²²⁵

But as a consequence of this, the *Riyaz* mentions, 'When the Prince ('Azimu-sh-Shan) found his control over the Bengal revenue diminished, he was constantly in a bad humour. Besides, the rewards which the Khan received for his good services from the Emperor weighed as thorns of envy on the heart of the Prince, and kindled the fire of his jealousy'.²²⁶ The Prince planned to murder the Khan with the help of the *naqdi* troops. The *diwan* having got an inkling of the intentions of the Nawab, distanced himself from

²²³ Ibid.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid, p-249

²²⁶ Ibid, p-249

him and settled himself at Makhsusabad, the later Murshidabad²²⁷. But when the news of the disturbance reached the ears of the Emperor, he recalled the Prince from Bengal and he was asked to proceed to Bihar. Kar Talab Khan, on the contrary was rewarded for his services. He was appointed by the Emperor 'Deputy to the Prince in the *Nizam* of the *Subah* of Bengal and Orissa', in addition to the office of *Diwan*. He was also given the title of Murshid Quli Khan, and further received a valuable *Khilat*, with a standard and a kettle-drum. His *mansab* was also raised. After his arrival at Makhsusabad, he improved that town, and named it after himself Murshidabad, and founded a mint there.

It was under Murshid Quli Khan that the Province of Bengal became more and more internally consolidated as the Khan rode roughshod over all the recalcitrant and defaulting *zamindars*. The *Riyaz-us-Salatin* has the following to say regarding Murshid Quli's measures of internal consolidation of the Province:

...imprisoning the defaulting *zamindars* of the *Subah*, and deputing experienced and honest Collectors of Revenue to their *mahals*...realised the outstanding Imperial revenues. And putting a complete stop to the authority of *zamindars* over the collection and disbursement of the Imperial Revenue, he limited their source of income to profits of *Nankar* tenures...And the 'Amils' (Collectors of revenue) under his orders, sent *Shiqdars* and *Amins* to every village of the *Parganahs*, measured the cultivated and waste-lands, and leased them back to tenants, plot by plot, and advanced agricultural loans (*Taqavi*) to the poorer tenantry, and put forth exertions for increase in the produce of the lands. Thus in all the *mahals* Murshid Qu.li effected not only increase in revenue, but also increase in their 'areas'... he remitted revenue, double the former amount, into the Imperial Treasury. The *zamindars* of *Birbhum* and *Bishanpur*, being protected by dense forests, mountains and hills, did not personally appear before the *Nawab*, but deputed instead their agents... and through them used to pay in the usual tributes, presents, and gifts. In consideration

²²⁷ The reason for the selection of Murshidabad was its location. The *Riyaz* mentions, that the place, 'where news of all the four quarters of the *Subah* could be easily procurable, and which, like the pupil of the eye, was situated in the centre of the important places of the *Subah*,' p-251

of the fact that Asadullah, zamindar of Birbhum, was a pious and saintly person ...the Khan refrained from molesting him. He directed his attention, however, to the chastisement of the zamindar of Bishanpur, whose items of expenditure were heavy, and whose collections of rents from mahals were low. The Rajahs of Tipra, KuchBehar, and Assam called themselves *chatar dhari*, and minted coins after their own names. On hearing, however, of the vigorous administration of the Khan, the Rajah of Assam ...offered his submission. Similarly the Rajah of Kuch Behar offered presents and tribute to the Khan. The above mentioned Khan sent Khilats for them ; and this practice was observed year after year.. His administration was so vigorous and successful that there was no foreign incursion nor internal disturbance, and consequently the military expenditure was nearly abolished. He kept up only 2,000 cavalry and 4,000 infantry, and with these he governed the Province. Through Nazir Ahmad, who was a peon, he used to collect the revenue of Bengal. ..his peons sufficed to keep peace in the country, and to overawe the refractory....The Khan did not allow petty zamindars access to his presence. ..Hindu zamindars were forbidden to ride on *palkis*... whilst the *Mansabdars* attended at State functions in their military uniforms. In his presence one could not salute another ; In administration of justice, in administration of the political affairs of the country, and in maintenance of the respect due to his Sovereign, he spared no one. And he reposed no confidence in the mutasadis, and used daily to inspect the collection and disbursement papers and the estate ledgers, and to sign them. ..Till the dues on account of those agreements were paid up into the Imperial Treasury, he caused mutasadis, 'amils, zamindars, qanungos and other officers to remain in duress in the Diwan Khana of the Chihel Satun Palace. Setting collecting peons to realize the dues, he did not allow the defaulters leave for eating or drinking or for answering calls of nature... Week after week they had to pass without food and drink, and at the same time he had them suspended, head downwards... And he converted to the

Muhammadan religion the *amlahs* of zamindars with their wives and children, who, in spite of being scourged with sticks, failed to pay up the State revenue-collections that they had misappropriated...²²⁸

Thus, while Bengal became internally consolidated but at the same time it became more and more independent of the imperial capital of Delhi which after the death of the Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, witnessed succession disputes that undermined the powers of the Emperor to control distant regions and frontier provinces like Bengal which started emerging as independent foci of power. The *Riyaz* mentions that Murshid Quli was regular in the payment of the dues of the Province to the Emperor and when the Khan's efficient administration met with the approbation of the Emperor, the former received fresh favours from the Emperor, who raised his rank and bestowed on him the title of Moatamanu-1-Mulk'Alau-d-daulah Ja'far Khan Nasiri Nasir Jang. He was also rewarded with the personal Mansab of a Haft Hazari together with the Insignia of the Mahi Order, and was raised to a higher class of the Peerage. No appointments to offices in Bengal were made without his advice. 'And Imperial Mansabdars hearing that the country of Bengal had been turned into a fertile garden without thorns, sought for offices in Bengal.' Murshid Quli appointed the applicants to offices under him. Ziau-d-din Khan, Faujdar of Hughli, was dismissed by him and he with the Emperor's sanction brought the Faujdari of that Port under his immediate authority as an appendage to the Nizamat, and appointed Wali Beg on his own authority as Faujdar of that place. It would appear the French, Dutch, and English were all backing up the dismissed Faujdar Ziauddin Khan against the new Faujdar, Wali Beg.

When Bahadur Shah assumed the throne at Delhi the posts of officers were temporarily reshuffled. Murshid Quli Khan as a temporary arrangement was made the deputy *subadar* of Bengal while the Prince Azim-us-shan was once again the *subadar* of Bengal. But the Prince was able to prevail on his aged father and keep out of Bengal his hated rival Murshid Quli Khan for two years 1708-1709. Murshid Quli was made the *Diwan* of the Deccan. He had combined in himself a number of posts which were

²²⁸ *Riyaz-us-salatin*, pp-257-9. It is said he prepared a Reservoir full of filth, and as in the language of the Hindus Paradise is called 'Baikant,' he sneeringly named this Reservoir " baikant." He used to thrust into this Reservoir the defaulting Zamindars and defaulting Collectors of Revenue.p-255

redistributed. Murshid Quli was replaced as *naib nazim* of Bengal by Farrukhsiyar, as *Diwan* of Bengal by Ziaullah Khan and as *subadar* of Orissa by Farrukhsiyar. But in 1710 Ziaullah was killed by the *naqdi* troopers and Murshid Quli was once again appointed the *Diwan* of Bengal and also the manager of Prince Azim-us-shan's estates. In 1711 Murshid Quli was appointed faujdar of Midnapur and Hughli port. In 1711 Murshid Quli was made the deputy *subadar* of Bengal. In 1714 he was made the *subadar* of Orissa with the title of Jafar Khan. From 1712 to 1717 there were frequent changes in the post of *subadar* of Bengal in consequence of the changes occurring at Delhi. But in 1717 after the accession of Farukhsiyar, Murshid Quli gave a *nazrana* of one lakh of rupees to the Emperor and was made the *subadar* of Bengal with a lofty title. He continued at this post till his death in 1727 after which a succession dispute among his relations broke out for the *nizamat* of Bengal in the lines of that at Delhi.

The Foreign Merchants

Since Bengal had a maritime ecology it was open to influences from beyond the seas. In the sixteenth-seventeenth century the orbit of European commerce was widening and Bengal because of its access to the sea and its fertile economy attracted the attention of the European traders who flocked to this rich coastal province. Politically speaking, the presence of the foreign traders made the task of political consolidation by the Mughals in Bengal difficult because the foreign merchants like the Portuguese allied with anti-Mughal and anti-imperial forces within the Province like the Arakanese or the local potentates. Hence in studying the political processes in seventeenth century Bengal we must turn our attention to the presence of foreign traders in Bengal. Among them the first to arrive in the Province were the Portuguese.

The Portuguese had arrived in the Province before the advent of the Mughals. Campos mentions that during the reign of the last of the Lodi rulers named Mahmud Shah, the Portuguese acquired the custom houses of Chittagong in Eastern Bengal and Satgaon in western Bengal. Mahmud Shah's capital was Gaur.²²⁹ He was initially suspicious of the Portuguese. The initial expeditions of the Portuguese were in fact met with great hostility. In the expedition under De Joao de Silveira, the Portuguese captured a ship whose owner was related to the governor of Chittagong. Subsequently he also

²²⁹ J.J.ACampos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, New Delhi, 1998,p-19.

attacked a rice-boat for food supplies. Campos maintains that the motive of the Portuguese was trade but the attack on ships prompted the Governor of Chittagong to retaliate and treacherously attack Silveira who had gone to the Governor to open trade negotiations. Silveira in turn paralyzed the sea trade. Since the Governor was expecting ships he entered into a truce with the Portuguese, but once his ships arrived he was bent on attacking Silveira. The King of Arakan offered help to Silveira but the latter found it to be a part of a plot to capture him and hence the expedition of Silveira could not open trade relations with Bengal but a beginning was made. From that time on it became customary each year to send a ship to Bengal. While attempts were made to open peaceful trade relations, the Portuguese captured again another ship of one Khwaja Shihabuddin. Campos points out that this was done because the ship was made in Portuguese fashion intended to plunder sea going vessels and put the blame on the Portuguese. According to Campos the Portuguese used force in India because of the initial suspicion and treachery with which they were met with by the indigenous rulers. Otherwise their primary task was trade and evangelization.

In 1528, a ship under Affonso De Mello which had accidentally reached the coast of Bengal was misguided by some fishermen and sent to Chakaria instead of Chittagong. Chakaria was under Khuda-Baksh Khan, who was a vassal of Mahmud Shah. Khuda Baksh Khan sought Portuguese help in a local feud, but after he had secured himself by virtue of the assistance which the Portuguese rendered him, he made no qualms in imprisoning them. It was this treachery on part of the native rulers which according to Campos prompted the Portuguese to constitute themselves into a military power. De Mello was however ransomed out with the assistance of the Khwaja whose ship they had captured. The Khwaja in return of his ship agreed to intercede on behalf of the Portuguese to the Governor. After this Afonso De Mello was again sent in 1533 on a second expedition to Bengal when with the help of the aforesaid Khwaja he tried to open negotiations with Mahmud Shah who, as mentioned earlier, was ruling over Bengal. An ambassador was sent to him with gifts but Mahmud Shah suspected among the presents made to him, goods which had been captured in a piratical attack. Enraged, he imprisoned De Mello and his men. The Portuguese under their Viceroy Nuna De Cunha decided to avenge this by burning a greater part of Chittagong. But Mahmud Shah

meanwhile was attacked by Sher Shah, the Afghan. In his fight against Sher Shah the Portuguese under De Mello offered help and in return of their assistance that the two custom houses in Chittagong and Satgaon were granted.

Mahmud Shah however was no longer destined to rule and was defeated by Sher Shah who along with his successors now ruled Bengal save during a brief interregnum when Humayun had temporarily captured Bengal and forced Sher Shah to take to flight and obtain refuge in Sasaram, Bihar. A defeat however was waiting Humayun who after the engagement with Sher Shah fled to his cousin Kamran in Lahore. So the Portuguese after Mahmud Shah had to deal with the successors of Sher Shah. The successors of Sher Shah held control over Bengal till the time of Islam Shah in 1553. Thereafter Bengal was fragmented till 1564 till replaced by the new Karrani dynasty. The last of these rulers was Daud Karrani who was defeated by Munim Khan on behalf of the Mughals in 1576.

According to Campos, the Mughals proved to be more liberal to the Portuguese than any of their predecessors. It was from the Mughal Emperor Akbar that the Portuguese ambassador to the Mughal court Tavares who has been referred to in the Mughal sources as Pratap Bar, obtained a very favourable *firman* to settle wherever they wished in Bengal. Akbar also granted them full religious freedom- to preach among the natives and to convert them, as well as to build churches in Bengal. This resulted in the foundation of the town of Hooghly. Friar Sebastian Manrique, the Portuguese traveler and religious dignitary, to Bengal, recounts the origin of the Hughli settlement. Manrique was sent by the Provincial of the Augustinians to the Order's monastery at Hughli in Bengal. Manrique observes that the town of Hughli, was not part of Portuguese Asia. It did not come into the scheme of fortresses from Aden to Malacca and beyond, with Goa as their central point, which guarded their flow of trade from Asia to Europe. Hughli, Manrique points out was rather engaged in the intra-Asian trade called the country trade by the English and it specifically dealt in the exchange of Asian goods and not the exchange of Asian goods for commodities and bullion from Europe.

He mentions that Mughal court was interested in purchasing luxury items from China and the Portuguese acted as intermediaries in this trade. They got permission to build ware houses in the village and later the town of Hughli. The Emperor Akbar

whose permission the Portuguese sought, gave instructions to the Viceroy of Dacca, under whose jurisdiction Hughli lay that the trade of the Portuguese should not be obstructed or interfered with, in any manner. By 1580, Hooghly had become so flourishing that Mirza Najat Khan, Akbar's *subadar* at Satgaon, being defeated by the King of Orissa, fled to Pratap Bar (identified with Tavares) at Hooghly.²³⁰

Yet, between the time of Akbar and that of ShahJahan who sacked Hooghly in 1632, relations of the Portuguese with the Mughals had deteriorated. The *Badshahnama* contemptuously records of the Portuguese the following:—"Under the rule of Bengalis, (*dar'ahd-i-Bangaliyan*), a party of Frank merchants, who are inhabitants of Sundip came trading to Satgaon. One *kos*. above that place they occupied some ground on the bank of the estuary. Under the pretence that a building was necessary for their transaction in buying and selling, they erected several houses in the Bengali style. In course of time, through the ignorance or negligence of the rulers of Bengal, these Europeans increased in number, and erected large substantial buildings which they fortified with cannons, muskets, and other implements of war. In due course a considerable place grew up which was known by the name of the port of Hughli. On one side of it was the river and on the other three sides was a ditch filled from the river. European ships used to go up to the port and a trade was established there."²³¹

One of the reasons for the deteriorating relations between the Mughals and the Portuguese was the growing power of the latter. Regarding the mode of governance at Hooghly, Franz Cabral points out that the Portuguese enjoyed absolute independence to manage their affairs in Hooghly, the Mughals being content merely with the collection of custom duties and market dues from the place. He further points out that not even the Emperor's *guazil*, could enter the Portuguese town except with the consent of the Portuguese and the Mughal ships also had to submit themselves to many regulations of the Portuguese on their port.²³² The Captain Convidor of Hooghly ruled in the name of the King of Portugal and owed allegiance to him. They were responsible to the Government at Ceylon, the distance from Goa, the seat of the Viceroy being too far away.

²³⁰ J.J.A.Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, New Delhi, 1998, p-52

²³¹ *Badshahnama*, cited in J.J.A Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, p-47-8

²³² J.J.A.Campos *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, p-62

Campos in his account of the Portuguese presence in Bengal holds the location of the Bengal province responsible for the growth in the power of the Portuguese. He says that the “the geographical position of Bengal has considerably influenced its history. Away from the heart of India, Bengal was a refuge for fugitive princes who like Humayun, Shershah and Shahjahan made it the scene of their bloody exploits. Southern Bengal woven as it was by a network of rivers were calculated to offer the seafaring people like the Portuguese the greatest scope for their instincts of navigation and love for adventure. Unfortunately this very geographical character of Bengal fostered a greed for piracy and plunder...in the labyrinth of rivers the adventurers could dive and dart, appear and disappear, ravage the country and escape with impunity.”²³³ This was particularly true for the deltaic part of Bengal like the *sunderbans* which became a ‘nest of pirates’²³⁴.

Radhika Chadha²³⁵ mentions that it was no accident that the Portuguese decided to settle in the riverine and coastal tracts of Bengal. The riverine and the coastal tracts were fertile, produced large varieties of tradable goods, were well populated, where the slave raiders could pick their prey and then disappear in the labyrinth of rivers and marshes. As expert navigators they could escape into this riverine terrain without fear of being captured or detained and finally this region lacked political stability throughout the sixteenth century. All this offered the Portuguese ‘merchants renegades and padres’ the ideal place for establishing their settlement and as we can see in the sixteenth and the early part of the seventeenth century the Portuguese in Bengal were a power to reckon with.

The independence which the Portuguese enjoyed at Hughli as well as their growing power may have become a source of danger for the Mughal authority in Bengal. The Mughals themselves had tried to bring the Portuguese under control by peaceful means in offering the Augustinian brethren lands to subsist on, but as Manrique says these offers were refused by the Augustinians. The reason, he says is that ‘most of these Asiatic monarchs and Princes merely extend such graciousness to strangers as an offset to

²³³ Ibid, p-24

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Radhika Chadha, ‘Merchants, Renegades and Padres: Portuguese presence in Bengal in the sixteenth and seventeenth Centuries’, Unpublished Phd Thesis, CHS, JNU, 2005.

expected services and benefits...they hope owing to the presence of the brethren that their country will more readily attract Christian merchants. But when they find that they are not receiving the benefits they expected, being un-willing to expend money without any return, they seek an opportunity for expelling them.²³⁶ The Augustinian missionaries thus prefer to subsist on the alms made to them by the Christians and on the grants received by them from the King of Portugal²³⁷. They never take help from the Mughal Emperors although the Emperor Akbar and his son Jahangir repeatedly requested them cash allowances and other such benefits. Their refusal to be brought under the Mughal umbrella as well as their simultaneous growth in power and independence alarmed the Mughals about the Portuguese presence in Bengal.

The Portuguese also embittered their relations with the King of Arakan over the question of the possession of the island of Sandwip. The King of Arakan was so far an ally of the Portuguese. In the sixteenth century Chittagong and Dianga was under the ruler of Arakan and he leased out the ports to the Portuguese. The Mughals were in a relation of perpetual animosity with the Arakanese. The motive of the Mughals was to extend their frontiers eastwards and the task of the Arakanese was to check the Mughal drive towards the East. As mentioned earlier the nature of the terrain of the province of Bengal was such that it was prone to the raids of pirates and the Arakanese and Portuguese engaged in piracy. The Arakanese, came as far as the city of Dacca in their 'Gylyars', 'through the rivers to Dacca'.

The Portuguese, though settled in Hughli as traders, carried out piracy and in collusion with the Arakanese they engaged in slave trade of the native inhabitants made captive during their raids of the coast. This town of Hughli was not subject to the viceroyalty of Goa, so other than the merchants a number of mercenaries and adventurers settled there who were engaged in piracy. Particularly the Portuguese at Dianga engaged in slave trade. Dianga port was under the jurisdiction of the king of Arakan who had leased it to the Portuguese private merchants for the purposes of trade. The vessel which

²³⁶ *Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique 1629-1643*, vol. 1, Oxford, 1926, p-47-48

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p-48.

was supposed to carry Manrique from Hughli to Dianga had a cargo of slaves²³⁸. The slaves were obtained by raiding the delta villages of Sunderbans. Because of these raids the Saugar islands became almost un-inhabitable. Bernier too mentions the southern islands to have been un-inhabitable due to the raids on part of the Arakanese. The prisoners of these raids were sold at Hughli and other ports of India or to the Arakanese who used them to plough and reap the rice crop.

Even though the Portuguese at Dianga engaged in piracy and slave trade, the Arakanese king, utilized their services in guarding its north-west frontier. Their slave raids towards the west was, in fact, encouraged by the Arakanese king as part of his policy to trouble the Mughals and so discourage them from an advance towards the East. Even a regiment of the Arakanese King's bodyguard was composed of the Portuguese. Some had risen to high rank in the Arakanese service. Philip de Brito, for instance was appointed in 1600, Governor of Syriam, the port of Pegu, after the most successful incursion, the Arakanese ever made into Burma, when they carried off the Burmese king's white elephant and his regalia²³⁹. In an opposite case Dom Martim, an Arakanese Prince who had fled the country was baptized by the Augustinians at Hughli and later at Goa when Manrique was staying there. The Dianga Portuguese like the ones in Hughli did not acknowledge the right of the Viceroy at Goa to give them orders. Their only connection with Goa was through the Augustinians²⁴⁰. The Viceroy at Goa was on friendly terms with them but did not interfere in their affairs. As slave raiders into the territory of the Mughals the Portuguese were a source of embarrassment to the Viceroy and he did not want himself to be regarded as an accomplice of the slave traders in the eyes of the Mughal Emperor. Manrique mentions that the Viceroy at Goa informed Shah Jahan that the Portuguese at Hughli were not subject to his jurisdiction as they used to choose their own captains. Linschoten refers to Hughli as *Porto Pequeno* and Chittagong as *Porto Grande*, adding that these places have no *fortes*, nor any government nor *policie*

²³⁸ Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image: Being experiences of Frair Manrique in Arakan*, New Delhi, 1995, p-86

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.88.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p-89.

as in India.” The Portuguese in these places appealed to Goa when in trouble, but would not submit themselves to its control.

The presence of numerous waterways aided the slave raids of the Portuguese. The villages near the banks of the rivers were particularly vulnerable to these raids compared to the villages in the interior. The Mughal historian Shiab-ud-din Talish describes these slave-raids²⁴¹. The Arakan pirates who were both Portuguese and native, used constantly to come by water and plunder Bengal. He writes,

they carried off such Hindus and Moslems as they could seize, pierced the palms of their hands...shut them huddled together in the decks of their ships. Every morning they flung down some un-cooked rice, as we do for fowl...Many noblemen and women of family had to undergo the disgrace of slavery or concubinage...not a house eventually was left inhabited on either side of the rivers leading from Chittagong to Dacca...the sailors of Bengal flotilla were so terrified of the pirates that if a hundred armed boats of the former sighted but four of the latter, their crews thought themselves lucky if they could save themselves by flight.

Half of the booty of these pirates went to Arakan.

Manrique in his capacity as a Friar was sent amongst the Portuguese of Dianga to relieve the previous Friar, Domingos De La Purificacao, who was a vicar of that district. Manrique’s job was to convert the captives of the slave-raids to Christianity²⁴². Manrique says on the average 3,400 persons were kidnapped annually and brought to Dianga. Of these he was able to baptize some 2,000 a year. These slave raids provoked the Mughals and urged them to retaliate against the Portuguese pirates. Hence in 1632 the Mughals attacked and captured Hughli under the Portuguese. Manrique points out that the slave raid of 1629 in which a Moslem lady of the Saiyad family, the wife of a senior commander of the Mughal forces was captured, converted and later married to a Portuguese, enraged the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, this being one of the reasons for his attack on Hughli in 1632. In course of their raids the Portuguese in their galleys came

²⁴¹ Shihabuddin Talish, cited in Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image: Being experiences of Frair Manrique in Arakan*, New Delhi, 1995, p-89.

²⁴² Ibid., p-90.

up to within a few miles of Dacca, the seat of the Mughal Viceroy of Bengal. So a check on their piratical activities became necessary.

Another reason, for Shah Jahan's orders for the seizure of Hughli, was that unlike Jahangir with whom the Portuguese were on cordial terms, ShahJahan as a rebel Prince taking refuge in Bengal had sought the assistance of some of the Portuguese captains but the latter had refused to him help on account of his being a rebel. Moreover the Portuguese had not sent him the customary presents upon his accession as the ruler²⁴³. Large custom dues were paid to the Mughal by Hooghly but it used to sell a quantity of gunpowder and arms to the Portuguese mercenaries at Dianga, who raided Bengal with the support of the King of Arakan.

But over the question of the possession of Sandwip, the Portuguese embittered their relations not only with the Mughals but also with the king of Arakan²⁴⁴. In 1590, Antonio De souza Godinho captured Sandwip and made Chittagong tributary to it. The King of Arakan was enraged at the Portuguese capture of Sandwip. By 1602 the Portuguese established complete control over the island of Sandwip.

But the island was coveted by the Mughals as well who had obtained it from Kedar Rai of Sripur. Sandwip, located at the mouth of the Ganges, in the district of Noakhali was coveted by all as it supplied salt to the whole of Bengal. Here annually 200 ships were laden with salt to be traded throughout Bengal. The Portuguese who had for long an eye over this island finally captured it in 1602 under Carvalho. But the natives of the island rose against the Portuguese whereupon Manuel de Mattos governor of Portuguese at Dianga came at the assistance of Carvalho.

The king of Arakan deeply resented the capture of Sandwip by the Portuguese. He allied with Kedar Rai, the raja of Sripur to whom the island had belonged originally and decided to attack the Portuguese. The King of Arakan prepared a fleet of 150 *jaleas*, *caturs*, and other larger vessels well equipped and armed with guns and cannons. Kedar

²⁴³ Ibid, p-180.

²⁴⁴See J.J.A. Campos, 'Portuguese settlements in Eastern Bengal,' in *History of the Portuguese*, pp-66-80.

Rai on his part sent 100 *cosses*²⁴⁵. Initially the Arakanese were victorious. The inhabitants of Dianga, as well as Chittagong whose ruler was the uncle of the king of Arakan fled. At Dianga the King of Arakan captured four Portuguese vessels. However two days after the Arakanese victory, Carvalho came with help from Sandwip. He came with 150 vessels consisting of two *foists*, four *caturs*, three *barques*, and the rest being *jaleas*.²⁴⁶ They captured 149 Arakanese vessels with all the ammunition, arquebuzes, muskets and other implements of war. Many Arakanese lost their lives in this engagement including the uncle of the King of Arakan, who was the ruler of Chittagong. The people of Chittagong fled in fear of the Portuguese but the Portuguese did not capture the fort of Chittagong.

Defeated by the Portuguese in the sea the king of Arakan decided to revenge him on land by the attacking the Portuguese of his kingdom. However a truce soon followed. But the king nevertheless felt alarmed at the rapid rise of the Portuguese to power in the east. By this time the Portuguese under Fillipe Brito e Nicote had established themselves at Pegu. The king therefore decided to launch a second attack on Sandwip. An enormous fleet of 100 vessels consisting of *frigates*, *caturs* and *cosses* were sent against the Portuguese. Carvalho, the Portuguese captain with only 16 vessels destroyed the whole fleet of the Arakan king. About 2,000 Arakanese were killed in the engagement and 130 of their ships were destroyed. The Portuguese sustained loses of only six men. Even if these statistics given by Campos are exaggerated it is beyond a doubt that the resources of the king of Arakan were larger than that of the Portuguese. The Portuguese however inspite of their successes realized that they would not be able to sustain a second attack and therefore left the island of Sandwip to the king of Arakan and transported themselves to their other minor settlements- Sripur, Bakla, Chandecan. Carvalho himself with thirty frigates stayed at Sripur, the seat of Kedar Rai. The Mughals whom the Portuguese had deprived of Sandwip now sent 100 *cosses* under Mandarai against Kedar Rai. But Carvalho defeated the Mughals as well. Thereafter with 30 *jaleas*

²⁴⁵ *Caturs* were light rowing vessels 60 to 80 ft. long used in sea-fights, the word, according to Campos is probably the origin for the English marine term cutter. *Cosses* were light boats suitable for fighting on the rivers and not at sea. Campos, *History of the Portuguese* p-69.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p-69.

he proceeded towards Hooghly to gain sufficient reinforcements to re-conquer Sandwip. This won for him a legendary reputation in Bengal and Arakan. The king of Chandecan Pratapaditya however coveted the friendship of the king of Arakan. He therefore treacherously murdered Carvalho and sent his head to the Arakan king. It should be mentioned here that in the sixteenth century the king of Arakan was a substantial rival of the Mughals in Bengal. He styled himself as ‘the highest and the most powerful king of Arakan, of Tippera, of Chacomar, and of Bengala; Lord of the Kingdoms of Pegu, etc.’ Thus the local potentates whom the Mughals were trying to subdue may have found a ready ally in the king of Arakan, as did the king of Chandecan, Pratapaditya.

Though the King of Arakan was well disposed towards the Portuguese till 1602, he however took them to task for their conquest of Sandwip. In 1607 he ordered a massacre of the Portuguese at Dianga threatened as he was by their ever increasing power. But the massacre of Dianga instead of putting an end to Portuguese power instead opened up an era of piracy under one captain named Sebastio Gonsalves Tibao²⁴⁷ who had escaped from the massacre and had become the leader of the survivors of Dianga. Gonsalves allied himself with another local potentate the King of Bakla and tried to re-conquer Sandwip. Campos who mentions that Sandwip had been restored to the King of Arakan however further on says that the island was under Mattoes who had given the charge to a treacherous man named Fateh Khan who captured the island during the former’s absence and it was from Fateh Khan and not the King of Arakan that Tibau captured Sandwip. He became the sole master of the island independent of either Hooghly or Goa. He also set up a custom house in Sandwip where the merchants had to pay custom dues. The king of Bakla with whom he had allied, he also made an attack on, instead giving him half the revenues of the island which he had promised to give.

In 1609 a dispute broke out between the heir-apparent of Arakan and his brother Anaporan. Tibau sided with Anaporan and also married his daughter. After Anaporan’s death he became master of his treasures. Campos points out that there took place many such marriages between the Portuguese and the royal family of Arakan. Gradually Tibau formed an alliance with the Arakanese against the Mughals who by 1610 had overthrown the *bhuyias* and were gradually consolidating in the region. They

²⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 81-7.

were planning a conquest of Bhalua which was near both Sandwip and Arakan. So Tibau and the Arakanese allied together against the Mughals as the situation demanded and the Mughals were driven out of Bhalua, but Tibau proved to be treacherous meanwhile and allowed the Mughals to pass to Bhalua up the river and thus the latter successfully attacked the King of Arakan. He fled to Tipperah his vassal state but Tipperah too rose in rebellion. With great difficulty the Arakanese king managed to reach Chittagong where in revenge of Tibau's treachery he impaled the latter's nephew whom he had kept as hostage²⁴⁸. Regarding the motives of Gonsalves' treachery it is not clear says Campos whether he decided to avenge the massacre of Dianga or simply took advantage of the opportunity to harass the Arakanese king. However in view of the growing power of the Portuguese the Mughals decided to react.

Accordingly, Shahjahan in 1632, ordered the sack of Hughli²⁴⁹. About 300 Portuguese men used to live in Hughli. Their wives or mistresses were Eurasian or Indian and rest of about ten thousand were Indian traders, shop-keepers, sailors and slaves, the slaves being in a majority. The Jesuit Fathers who saw copies of Shahjahan's order sent an urgent warning to Hughli. The Viceroy of Bengal was Qasim Khan. Qasim Khan hesitated in launching an attack upon the city, in view of the fact that for the past 100 years the Portuguese were not defeated. But a renegade Portuguese captain Martim de Mello provided assistance, and finally Qasim Khan made elaborate preparations of capturing Hughly, with 150,000 men with artillery and boats. Collis Davies points out that that Qasim Khan should make such elaborate arrangements against a handful of Portuguese reflects badly on the military strength of the Mughals.

The Portuguese initially tried to open negotiations with the Mughals. The Mughals wanted a search of the city for captive Indians. Many such captive and converted Indians were there in Hughli. So the Portuguese said they would resist such a search.²⁵⁰ Negotiations thus broke down and the attack was launched on 2nd July at dawn²⁵¹. It came from every side both by land and water. Although initially the Mughals

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p-87.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 128-140.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p-183.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p-183

suffered losses due to the accurate musketry fire of the Portuguese however the siege was pressed on for nearly three months and the Portuguese tried to evacuate Hughli by ships via the river route. But the wind was contrary and the water shallow. With great difficulty the Portuguese fled from Hughli to the island of Sagor. The king of Arakan having heard of the attack proceeded towards Hughli but was delayed owing to the absence of favourable winds. He was able to recover only a part of the loot which the Mughals had obtained from Hughli.. With the sack of Hooghly the Portuguese power in Bengal began to decline. In 1633, by a *firman* of ShahJahan the Portuguese returned to Hooghly, but they were not as powerful as they were before the sack of 1632.

Campos points out that, from 1632, started the decline of the Portuguese. He points out that the Portuguese who came to Bengal in the early sixteenth century were the real heroes. But those who came later, in the seventeenth century, were the ‘refuse of Portugal’²⁵². The wealth of Bengal which had been achieved at the cost of the labours of the early heroes had ‘pampered’ the Portuguese who came later and made them indolent. Moreover the unification of the Spanish and the Portuguese crown meant that Portugal came under the fetters of a foreign rule while simultaneously the Dutch overthrew the foreign yoke and emerged an independent nation. When the Spanish king decided to close Portugal’s market to the Dutch ships, since the Dutch had broken away from the Spanish yoke, the former decided to sponsor voyages to the east by their own²⁵³. Thus while the Portuguese declined, other European nations like the Dutch rose to prominence followed by the English.

The Dutch East India Company that was founded in 1602 made a good profit from its intra-Asian trade. Though Indian goods did not figure prominently in its export to Europe, the policy of the Company was to use the precious metals that came from home to buy Coromondal textiles and then exchange the textiles for spices in the Indonesian archipelago. From the records of the Dutch East India Company it is also evident that at this time the Company also involved itself in the trade of slaves in the East. There was a thriving market of slaves in the seventeenth century. The main participant in this trade in human cargo was Arakan and the Portuguese who captured a

²⁵² *Ibid.* p-121.

²⁵³ *Ibid.* p-123.

large number from the deltaic region of Bengal. At a time when taxes on overseas trade varied between 5% and 16.5% on different commodities in the different ports of the Indian Ocean, the Portuguese paid the Arakan King duty to the tune of 25% per slave²⁵⁴.

John Marshall mentions that even during the time of the Patna famine of 1671, people sold themselves as slaves out of starvation²⁵⁵. At Barh, Marshall mentions that a father came to sell his 12 year old son, but 'being so old and a Sheak Mussulman' Marshall did not buy the lad but gave him 4 pice and sent him away²⁵⁶. However at Gunsarpore *sarai*, Marshall bought a slave Brinchee [Banarasi] of (from?) his eldest brother Banisee [Bansi]. Marshall further states he agreed to pay 8 *annas* for the boy but ended up paying a rupee and also gave sweetmeats worth 4 *pice* which he says was customary when buying slaves. 2 *pice* more was paid to the landlord of the *sarai* and 1 pice to the barber for shaving the boy's head²⁵⁷. In 1671, he bought again a Brahman slave boy for 4 rupees whose name was Managah. Marshall gave him the new name of Abraham. His height when bought was 43 inches and he was just seven years old. All this probably implies that there was a thriving market of slave trade in Bengal although slavery itself as an institution did not flourish in Bengal.

The Dutch entered into relations of trade with the King of Arakan and they primarily engaged themselves in slave trade. In 1607 Pieter Williemsz and Jan Gerritsz Ruyl tried to explore possibilities of trade in Arakan. The King allowed duty free trade in return of assistance in expelling the Portuguese from Chittagong. A Dutch factory was established at Mrauk-u in 1610. But the venture was not successful and the Company was called back to Pulicat in 1619. However it was the plan of Jan Pieterz Coen to procure a large number of slaves needed for working in the nutmeg and mace plantations in Amboina and Banda and to populate the Dutch colonies in Indonesia. Coen in 1622 in a long letter to Andries Soury and Abraham van Uffelen at Masulipatam underscored the necessity of trading in slaves by the Company. Coen wrote that '...A large number of boys and girls from various quarters of Asia were needed to populate Batavia, Amboina,

²⁵⁴ Radhika Chadha, *Merchants, Renegades and Padres*, p-16.

²⁵⁵ John Marshall,, *Notes and Observations*, p-150.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p-125.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p-126.

and Banda with servile people. Even hundreds and thousands of such people would be welcome. It was instructive to consider the Portuguese precedent of how they had populated their possessions. It was also useful to consider how the Muslims had extended their rule over Asia. They had obtained manpower from the enemy and had also purchased it. The Dutch had been so imprudent as to ignore these precedents.”²⁵⁸

But the Company’s attempt to procure slaves in Arakan along with rice and elephants was not met with success. High mortality rate among the slaves thus procured on the way to Coromondal and from Coromondal to Batavia frustrated their schemes.²⁵⁹ In 1628 the Company’s factors at Arakan were called back. But the Company’s records show that in the years 1620, 1624, 1625 ships from Masulipatam went to Arakan. Conversely in 1625 a ship of the *kotwal* of Arakan reached Pulicat²⁶⁰. In 1627, a ship belonging to the king of Arakan carrying 13 elephants, eight on account of the Arakan king, three on that of the *kotwal* of Arakan, and two on the account of the Governor of Pulicat also reached Pulicat. In 1628 again two ships came from Arakan carrying elephants and rice besides 48 male slaves on account of the Company. The VOC in fact had a flourishing trade in coastal Burma, Arakan and Pegu being the partner ports and the primary interest of the Company in Arakan was procurement of slaves. Om Prakash cites a letter in the form of instructions to the Dutch official Dirck van Haps captain of the frigate going from Pulicat to Arakan in April 1624, to procure persons between 12-30 years of age as slaves for the Company. On his way the Captain was instructed to attack Portuguese ships but not to join any local feud on behalf of the King of Arakan but he

²⁵⁸ Om Prakash, *The Dutch Factories in India, 1624-27, A Collection of Dutch East India Company Documents pertaining to India*, vol. II, Delhi, 2007, p-33.

²⁵⁹ In 1624, out of the 400 slaves brought, 100 died on the way. In 1625 of the 10,000 slaves that were brought by the Arakanese fleet, 4000 died of epidemic. Of the 544 slaves bought by the Company out of the surviving ones, 86 died soon after in Arakan itself. Some more died on the way so that in Coromondal the number of slaves reached was no more than 130. At Coromondal itself 4 more slaves died and another 26 was reported to be too old to travel. In the end when the ship sailed from Coromondal for Batavia she had on board just 100 slaves of the 544 bought by the Company. This put an end to the Company’s desire to involve themselves in slave trade and it also points out to the inhuman condition in which the slaves captured from deltaic Bengal were kept.

²⁶⁰ Om Prakash, *The Dutch Factories*, vol. II, p-35.

might help the aforesaid king against the Portuguese. Van Haps was also curiously forewarned against venturing out of his ship too often and asked to keep his interactions with the natives to a minimum²⁶¹. In August 1624 another ship was going from Masulipatam to Arakan for the procurement of rice which if not available cheaply in Arakan it was to be procured from Bengal where rice was cheaper than that in Arakan. However the council of the vessel was also to enquire with the King of Arakan as to how many slaves could be brought from there annually. Japanese unminted silver worth 6,000 *rials* of eight were being provided to facilitate the procurement of slaves²⁶².

One of the reasons for there being a flourishing slave market in Bengal as well as Arakan was probably the intensive paddy cultivation in both these two places which required a large amount of manual labour and the slaves could be made to work in the fields. Manrique mentions that slaves in Arakan were used to harvest the rice-crop. The general absence of strong centralized administration in deltaic region stimulated the success of the slave raids and the need for cheap agricultural labour probably created a ready market for these slaves. One of the motives of the Dutch in procuring slaves, as mentioned earlier was also to procure labourers for agricultural production particularly to acquire additional helping hands for the cultivation of mace and nutmeg.

But coming to Dutch trade in Bengal, the province figured prominently in the intra-Asian trade of the Company. The Company's transactions worked on the principle of bullion-for-goods,²⁶³ that is the Company's purchases in India were paid mainly in bullion. The Indian textiles bought at Coromondal were used to procure spices from the Spice Islands. The costs of procuring the textiles were met with in bullion. In Coromondal the Company paid in gold and in Gujarat the Company paid mainly in silver. Japan at this time emerged as the major supplier of precious metals in Asia due to the discovery of new silver mines in the sixteenth century. The VOC obtained precious metals from Japan to purchase textiles at Coromondal. But Japan in return demanded Chinese silk. In Bengal the VOC found an alternative supplier of good quality silk that could be used to trade with Japan.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p-94-5.

²⁶² Ibid., p-113.

²⁶³ Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise in Pre-Colonial India*, Cambridge 2000, p. 84-5.

Om Prakash writes that Bengal became a part of the Dutch Company's efforts to widen its silk trade. The factory records of the English also record Dutch trade with Bengal for the years 1622-23²⁶⁴. Three *firman*s from Shahjahan between the years 1636-38 allowed the Company to trade freely in Bengal, but the rate of custom duty payable by the VOC was not clearly spelt out.²⁶⁵ The Company was also exempted from the payment of transit duties (*rahdari*) in Bengal. In 1679 the custom duties in Hughli was lowered from 4 to 3.5% probably to keep the rate in tandem with that at Pipli and Balasore, where the Company was being charged at the rate of three percent. Again by a *firman* from Bahadur Shah the rate of custom duties payable at Hughli was further reduced from 3.5 to 2.5%. Bahadur Shah's successor Jahandar Shah too confirmed these rates of custom duties and the exemption of the Company from the payment of *rahdari* or transit duties.

From 1651 on the English East India Company began to establish itself in Bengal. In the said year they established a factory in Hughli and then proceeded on to establish others at Balasore, Kassimbazar, Patna, Dacca, Malda. In 1686 the Company moved to Sutanati, the nucleus of the later city of Calcutta owing to the confrontation with the Mughals. From the very beginning the English were in a position of advantage in the trade of Bengal due to the fact of having obtained a privilege of carrying out duty free trade in Bengal subject to an annual payment of rupees three thousand to the Mughals. This had been obtained by the 1651 *nishan* of the Prince Shah Shuja who was Governor in Bengal. Om Prakash mentions that this concession from Shuja was obtained by a misrepresentation of facts pertaining to the *firman* granted by Emperor Shahjahan in 1650. From 1656 onwards the Company had to pay the said amount to the port authorities at Hughli to continue enjoying privilege of carrying duty free trade. In 1691, the *wazir* Asad Khan again confirmed the English in this privilege and it finally received royal

²⁶⁴ Mathew Duke, Francis Fulter, and John Dod at Masulipatam wrote to the Surat factory on 31st December 1622, that the dutch were expecting the vessel Schiedam, with purchase from the coast of Bengala. She is to be laden for Holland. Foster, Factory Records, 1622-3, P-178. Probably this vessel only arrived in January for the factors record that Dutch ship expected from Bengal had arrived (Jan. 24th 1623), and is now to be laden for Holland. P-186. In Nov. 12 1623, the English factors at Surat again wrote to the President and Council at Surat that the Dutch were expecting a ship and two frigates from the coast of Bengal.p-317.

²⁶⁵ Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise*, p-133.

sanction in 1717 from Emperor Farrukhsiyar. Om Prakash mentions that between the years 1711-20 the amount from which the East India Company was exempt from payment in Bengal would have amounted to approximately at rupees 120,000²⁶⁶.

It may be mentioned here that there was a difference in the manner of trading of the Portuguese traders and those who arrived later in Bengal like the Dutch and the English. Neil Steensgaard in his *Asian Trade Revolution* had argued that the Portuguese Estado da India was a 'redistributive enterprise' than a strictly mercantile one because unlike the 'rational profit-oriented trade' of the English and the Dutch, the trade of the Portuguese operated on the basis of force and monopoly. Steensgaard theory has been critiqued on the ground that both the Dutch and the English companies in their mercantile dealings made a 'judicious use of violence' as well²⁶⁷. For the years 1622-3 the English and the Dutch seemed to have been in some sort of a partnership against the Portugals²⁶⁸. The factory records mention that during this time the Portuguese lost Hormuz due to the help the English rendered to the Shah of Persia. The English and the Dutch also attacked Portuguese vessels and from one wrecked and captured a vessel a sum of about 68,000 *rials* of eight was taken and this was equally divided between the English and the Dutch.

But the English did not limit themselves to the Portuguese. Under Bickley a ship coming from Lahari Bandar bound in its way for Persia, was captured by the English. In spite of being Asaf Khan's protégées an order of arrest was immediately issued by Asaf Khan of the two factors at Agra, Hughes and Parker. The two were later

²⁶⁶ Ibid, p-134.

²⁶⁷ Omprakash points out that the Dutch East India Company followed the pass system of the Portuguese in keeping out Asian competitors from trade in monopoly products such as spices and to regulate their trade in others such as Malayan tin. The VOC's seizure of two of the Genoese East India Company vessels in the Sunda straits in April 1649 was a clear example of the use of force to keep a potential competitor out, although the pretext used was that the ship was carrying Dutch crews and merchants. Again in the 1720s the Dutch and the English companies successfully formed a coalition both in Europe as well as in Bengal to keep the newly formed Ostend Company out of the lucrative Bengal trade. It was the pressure of these two Companies which led to the abolition of the Ostend Company. Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise*, p-82-83.

²⁶⁸ *The English Factories in India, 1624-9: A Calendar of Documents in the India Office etc.* ed. William Foster, Oxford, 1909, Introduction pp-v-xiviii.

released and the factory at Agra closed and the English decided to concentrate on Surat. Foster points out that the closing of the factory at Agra and concentration of activities at Surat was part of the English plan to capture Indian junks returning from the Red Sea which would put them in a bargaining position with the authorities. Soon afterwards a contract of peace was made with Mr. Rastell, captain of the English nation, by which the English were allowed to trade freely in Surat, Cambay, Broach, Goga, with the liberty to import and export all sorts of goods. The house of Khwaja Hussain Ali could be used by the English Company for trade purposes. But while the English invincibility at the sea put them in a position to bargain, on land they were completely vulnerable and hence they had to be in good terms with the authorities.

In the earlier part of the seventeenth century, the primary interest of the English, in Bengal, seems to be trade and in their negotiations with the political authorities, the strategy is one of compromise and co-operation. To Sir Thomas Roe should be given the credit of following the policy which the English in India followed at least during the formative period of building up their trade. 'Let this be received as a rule', said Roe, 'that if you will profit, seek it at the sea and in quiet trading, for without controversy it is an error to seek garrisons and land wars in India.' A letter written by Sir Thomas Roe to ShahJahan in 1616 is reflective of this policy of compromise that the English had opted for initially with regard to their trading in India. The letter as preserved in the English Factory Records is reproduced below:

Most royal Prince, I cannot but confess and acknowledge the great justice you have done our nation in the debts and extortions of Zulphecarcon...but I cannot but grieve when I consider that your highness' good opinion and grace towards us is averted by some misfortune or misinformation, which by many circumstances is manifested to me, principally in that favour your Highness hath declared to the Portugall, our enemies. But if your Highness was pleased to regard the difference between our proceedings and theirs, that we only desire open trade for all nations, to the enriching of your Highness kingdoms and

the advancing of your customs, whereas they have ever sought to keep in subjection your subjects suffering none to traffic but themselves and exacting duties for license to pass upon your seas contrary to all honour and justice, calling their king in Europe King of India...

After stating the difference of their official policy vis-à-vis the Portuguese, Roe points out to Price Khurram that the trade with the English would be more profitable for the Mughals, in contrast to their dealings with the Portuguese. He says,

...for curious and rare toys we have better means to furnish Your Highness than any other, our kingdom abounding with all arts, our shipping trading into all the world,...secondly for profit, our kingdom naturally the most fruitful in Europe...;besides which Your Highness, I suppose, knows not we yearly bring into your port in ready money 50,000 *royalls* of eight, for which we only carry away calicoes and indigoes to the enriching of your Highness' kingdoms with silver...

Roe here probably refers to the bullion which flowed into Hindostan as a result of the trade with the Europeans. As mentioned earlier, the European goods did not have a market in Asia. Therefore in return of the goods purchased in Asia, the European Companies had to pay in bullion. In the last part of the letter Roe acknowledges to pay custom dues in return for the Mughals protection. He writes,

'...whereby we shall be enforced to trouble your Highness with daily complaints, we are desirous to rent our customs of Your Highness at one payment of 12,000 rupees for our said customs, so that Your Highness will be pleased to discharge us off all other duties and troubles, which I suppose is a greater sum than ever your officers made you any account...²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ W. Foster, ed. *Letters Received by the East India Company from its Servants in the East, transcribed from the 'Original Correspondence' series of the India Office Records, vol.4.* 1616, London, 1900, p-101.

Foster says that this offer came to nothing, but the conciliatory note of the letter is obvious throughout. Om Prakash is of the opinion that the peaceful trade relations which characterized the seventeenth century was the result of the tacit acknowledgement on the part of the native rulers of the total mastery of Europeans over the sea²⁷⁰ and their total vulnerability on land. In case of conflicts both sides saw to the fact that it did not escalate beyond a point.

In fact, for nearly half a century the English who were to become masters of the province post-Plassey, followed a policy of co-operation, compromise and conciliation to the native authorities as enunciated by Sir Thomas Roe. Peaceful profit-oriented trading formed the guiding principle of the English Company in India, and particularly in Bengal, where they had to enter far into the interior to secure commodities for trade. Instead of seeking to gain their ends by force, they preferred to rely on concessions which they could win by fair dealing and good will or by the judicious bribing of the officials.

But the Company's trade was too often open to the exaction of the Mughal officials and the officials of the Nawab. At Delhi, Asaf Khan the patron of the English had himself 'taken into his custody' 47 pieces of tapestry and had been deferring their payment²⁷¹. In the end due to the rebellion of Shah Jahan and later that of Mahabhat Khan which put Asaf Khan in a tricky situation that his sister the empress Nurjahan paid the Company the dues of her brother²⁷². The Factory Records also mention Shaista Khan, the Mughal Governor in Bengal, as being interested in nothing but making money for himself. Malik Kasim, the governor of Hughli stopped the English and the Dutch boats from proceeding to Patna, Dacca and elsewhere so that both of them had to appeal to the *Nawab* of Dacca against the exactions of Malik Kasim. As mentioned the Company enjoyed the privilege of duty free trade in Bengal by the *nishan* of Shah Shuja. In 1672,

²⁷⁰ Thus the *faujdar* of Balasore pointed out that the Emperor Aurangzeb would not be able to help the King of Maldives in imposing a ban on Dutch and English shipping to the island, because the Emperor was the master of land not of the seas. Om Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise*, p-140.

²⁷¹ *The English Factories in India, 1624-9: A Calender of Documents in the India Office etc.* ed. William Foster, Oxford, 1909, pp.-151-153.

²⁷² *Ibid*, pp-151-3.

Shaista Khan, the Nawab of Bengal, confirmed it permitting an exemption from customs for the Company's trade in Bengal and Orissa and a free passage of boats owned or hired by them. This privilege however remained mostly in paper as the events of the subsequent years show. In 1673, we hear of the Company trying through its agent Roy Nundalal, to obtain a *parwana* for the safe transit of the Company's goods between Hughli and Balasore implying that inspite of the Nawab's *parwana* of 1672, in 1673, the exactions imposed upon the Company continued. Around this time a war with the Dutch also resulted in capture of some English boats from Masulipatam by the Dutch²⁷³. In 1674 the new *diwan* of Patna completely ignorant of the aforesaid *parwana* of Shaista Khan wrote to the 'King' that the English and the Dutch carry out extensive trade without paying customs²⁷⁴.

In 1674, itself, thus the factors at Hughli complained, '...in countreyes of such arbitrary and corrupt government managed by slaves and eunach(s) what justice or favour almost to be hoped for without bribes and charges to a great value.'²⁷⁵ At Kassimbazar, in 1674, new impositions were laid on the Company's boats by the *mir-bahr*(harbour-master).²⁷⁶ Malik Kasim who had re-instated himself as the governor at Balasore was also opposed to the Company's trade since the Company was against his appointment as the Governor of Balasore being familiar with his exactions at Hughli.

This tussle between the Mughal officials and the Company's trade privileges was a characteristic of seventeenth century politics. However from the middle of the seventeenth century there was a distinct change in the policy of the East India Company. The civil war at the time of Aurangzeb's accession, and the lack of central control over the provinces had forced the English to consider how they would protect themselves and their trade, irrespective of local officials. Gerald Aungier in 1669, thus recommended a 'severe and vigorous policy to ensure the stability of the trade of the Company', "that in violent distempers violent cures are only successful; that the times now require you to

²⁷³ Sir Charles Fawcett, *The English Factories in India vol.2 The Eastern Coast and Bengal 1670-77*, Oxford, 1952, p-357.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p-374.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p-376

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p-376

manage your general commerce with your sword in your hands.”²⁷⁷ The Company under Joshiah Child in 1681 thus continued to dominate the policy from London until his death in 1699 advised that the policy followed was to be bold and constructive. Henceforth there was a definite departure from the policy of peaceful trade of Roe.

As mentioned earlier in 1678, Shaista Khan was recalled from Bengal. But before his departure Shaista Khan to the disappointment of the factors at Dacca did not confirm the promised *parwana* of the freedom of trade. In 1680 the Emperor himself issued a *firman* regarding whose interpretation the local officials had a conflict with the Company. The Company pointed out that the Emperor had relieved them of the three and half percent duties on custom or poll money but the local officials denied it. The Company factors were now determined to have fortified military settlements near the mouth of the Ganges to ensure the movement of their trade. These precipitated a war with the English of the Mughals in 1686. As a consequence the English had to abandon and evacuate Hughli. In 1690 peace was concluded with Aurangzeb and Job Charnock returned to Bengal as the agent of the Company. Aurangzeb feared the English might damage the passage of pilgrimage to Mecca and conflict with them would also imply a loss of revenue to his treasury. In 1691 thus the Emperor ‘forgave’ the English who were allowed to carry duty free trade in return of the payment of the *peshkash* of Rs. 3,000 annually. The rebellion of Sobha Singh in 1696 secured the permission, for the Dutch and the English to fortify their settlements. The Dutch dismantled the fortifications at the end of the rebellion²⁷⁸, but the English, took this opportunity to fortify Calcutta. In 1698 the English bought the three villages of Sutanati, Govindapur, Kolkata which ensured flow of a definite revenue to the Mughal exchequer and in 1702 there took place the amalgamation of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ English companies under the style of the ‘The United Company of Merchants of England trading into East Indies.’ By the eighteenth century the Company was sufficiently powerful to affect the trade of the native merchants.

²⁷⁷ Sukumar Bhattacharya, *The East India Company and the Economy of Bengal From 1704-1740*, Calcutta, 1969, p-14.

²⁷⁸ The Dutch fortified Chinsura in the eighteenth century and named it fort Gustavas.

Ashin Dasgupta however points out that the native merchant did not lose the competition to the English traders at the high seas but in the hinterland. The Mughals could not succeed in imposing their control over these European powers. Ashin Dasgupta points out that ‘the river in Bengal had always been the strength of the Europeans. It was impossible for the Mughals to police the southern marshes where their cavalry did not operate. The Europeans could and did block the river when the occasion demanded.’²⁷⁹ In the early eighteenth century the power of the Mughals to deny the English markets in the hinterland also declined. The English had also built up an alternative system of supplying their river port at Calcutta. Even the native merchants operating in the hinterland, particularly along the river to the markets in Bihar, preferred this alternative route. The Indian shipping at Hooghly had already declined and so did the Gujarat fleet due to changes in the hinterland of Surat. Thus the way was prepared for the success of the Calcutta fleet. Thus the failure of the Mughals to establish effective political control over the province was a potent reason for the success of the English. Sukumar Bhattacharya points out that the European traders were particularly attracted to the trade in Bengal because the province was situated at a distance from the Mughal capital and was not therefore prone to the interference of the Mughal officials.²⁸⁰ Not only was the province far off but it was naturally bountiful. Control over its resources was therefore something to vie for.

²⁷⁹ Asin Dasgupta ‘India and the Indian Ocean in the Eighteenth Century’ in Ashin Dasgupta and M.N. Pearson ed. *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500-1800*, Calcutta, 1987, p-145

²⁸⁰ Sukumar Bhattacharya, *The East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*, p-4.

Chapter-3

Ecology and Economy

Agriculture: Patterns of Land Use and Crops Cultivated

The nature of the Bengal terrain- a level land intersected with a large number of rivers depositing fertile alluvium made Bengal one of the most agriculturally fertile regions of the Mughal Empire in the seventeenth century. The *Ain* remarks that in the *subah* of Bengal, 'harvests are always abundant'²⁸¹. The *Riyaz* points out that 'owing to excessive humidity, the soil of Bengal has much power of sprouting ... most of the lands grow three crops in a year...'²⁸² Almost all foreign travelers coming to Bengal in the seventeenth century unanimously declared Bengal as a land of plenty. Bowrey refers to the kingdom of Bengal as the 'largest and the most potent kingdoms of Hindostan.'²⁸³ Bernier, mentions that Bengal is much more fertile than the kingdom of Egypt, which has been regarded as the most prosperous kingdom of the world by contemporaries.²⁸⁴ Grandpre writing later in the eighteenth century confirms the observations made above. He mentions that 'the ground is un-commonly fruitful; there is no such thing as a bad crop.'²⁸⁵ Because of its economic prosperity Ghulam Husain styled Bengal as "*Jannat-ul-bilad*," or 'Paradise of Provinces.'²⁸⁶

The principal commodity produced in Bengal was rice. The plains of Bengal intersected by a large number of rivers depositing fertile alluvium were ideal for the cultivation of rice which required well watered plains and abundant rainfall in order to thrive. Abul Fazl mentions that there were various kinds of rice grown in Bengal such

²⁸¹ Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, vol. ii, p-134.

²⁸² *Riyazu-s-Salatin*. p-20.

²⁸³ Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account*, p-131.

²⁸⁴ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p-437.

²⁸⁵ L De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bay of Bengal* vol ii, New Delhi, p-50.

²⁸⁶ *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, p-3

that if a single grain of each kind collected, they would fill a large vase²⁸⁷. The *Riyaz* mentions that ‘the crop of that country [Bengal] is all paddy, whether fine or coarse. Other crops, such as wheat, barley and pulse, &c, are scarce.’²⁸⁸ The *Risala-i-Ziraat* mentions that in Bengal the cultivation of paddy is predominant and the cultivation of wheat etc. is secondary.²⁸⁹ From the sixteenth-seventeenth century there was an eastward movement of the Bengal delta so that the region of the *Bhati* became more fertile than the areas located to the west of Bengal. The *Bhati* area was covered by dense jungles which were cleared and the cultivation of wet rice was extended to this region.²⁹⁰ But in the areas to the west of Bhagirathi although not as fertile as the areas to the East the cultivation of rice was still carried out. As mentioned in our first chapter the rivers in the western part of the delta made possible the cultivation of the *Aus* variety of rice.

The eighteenth century regional surveys also point to the fact that the region of Bengal was well suited for the cultivation of rice. Taylor in his survey of Dacca mentions that the extent of inundation determined the ground of cultivation. Rice was grown generally in well inundated lands of a lower elevation²⁹¹. The southern division of Dacca was particularly fertile and ‘during the rains it is an extensive plain growing rice through which boats sail from one part of the country to another.’²⁹² In Jessore and Backergunj located in deltaic parts of Bengal rice was also extensively cultivated. Westland in his survey of Jessore mentions that there was a large flow of rice from Jessore and Backergunj Sunderbans to Calcutta. When Westland was making his survey of Jessore parts of the forested areas in the south- the Jessore sunderbans were being cleared for the cultivation of rice. Towards the west in the district of Midnapur, rice was grown on *jala* or low lying lands because of their close access to water and these *jalas* were further subdivided into eight different types depending on each one’s elevation, and different

²⁸⁷ *Ain*. vol. ii , p-134

²⁸⁸ *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, p-21

²⁸⁹ *The Risala-i-Ziraat* by anonymous author, tr. in Harbans Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History*, New Delhi, 1993, p-268.

²⁹⁰ This is the argument which Richard Eaton makes in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, Delhi, 1997, pp. 194-227.

²⁹¹ James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*, Calcutta, 1840, p-124

²⁹² *Ibid*, p-7

types of rice were grown in it.²⁹³ Rice was here the most important crop. Different varieties of it were cultivated in the district²⁹⁴. The first was the *Aus* or the Autumn rice which itself had sixteen different varieties. The *Aus* variety was sown broadcast in dry land in April, May, June and harvested in August-September. The second variety was the *Haimanti* or the winter rice which had 31 varieties. This crop was sown in June, July August and reaped in November-December. The third principal variety of rice was the *Boro* rice which was sown broadcast on low marshy land in October-November and harvested in March-April.

Towards the north in Dinajpur, rice cultivation thrived in the *Doangash* or mixed soil region (where the common ash coloured stiff soil had sand particles making it looser and easier for the plough to operate) which could produce two crops of rice. The quality of the rice crop and the labour required depended on the levels of elevation of the *Doangash* soil. The lowest parts of the *Doangash* soil were eagerly sought after by farmers and these produced the finest varieties of rice while in the higher parts of the *Doangash* soil, if rice was being cultivated it required double the usual labour and the quality was not superior to the one grown in regions of lower elevation²⁹⁵. In such areas of higher elevation *pat* and *Son* plants used for making cordage was cultivated. Even the areas of stiff soil which were not as amenable to cultivation as the mixed soil region could at least produce one crop of rice. If it rained during the winter and spring months, this soil could produce a second crop of rice as well. As a principle, the coarser variety of winter rice was grown on heavily inundated lands while the finer varieties were transplanted on higher lands.

As in Midnapur, in Dinajpur also the kinds of rice cultivated were numerous but there were three principal varieties²⁹⁶. The first variety was the *Boro* rice which ripened in the hot weather of Spring. It was sown in the inundated lands and marshes.

²⁹³ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-39

²⁹⁴ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, vol. iii, part 1, *Statistical Account of the District of Midnapur*, (reprint) Calcutta, 1997.

²⁹⁵ R.M. Martin, *The History Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, vol ii, Dinajpur, p-586-87

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p-816-819.

The second variety was the Bhaduyi or the summer rice which is a coarser variety of rice that was consumed by the labourers in the farm and were seldom sold. The winter rice was called the *Henguti* which was cut in the cold months. The winter rice itself consisted of a large variety. The coarsest kinds were consumed by the poor and these were also used for the manufacture of puffed rice and flattened rice or *muri* and *chira* as called by the natives. Rice was also used to manufacture liquor.²⁹⁷ Manrique also mentions the production of scented rice and rice-liquor²⁹⁸ in Bengal.

The number of times a land had to be ploughed depended on topography. Thus in the western parts of Dacca where the land consisted of red kunkur and of different strata of clay the aman rice land needed to be ploughed sixteen times whereas in the soil in the western banks of Hughli it was enough to plough the soil twice. In 24 parganas the land for rice cultivation was prepared 'by barely scratching the superficies of the earth.'²⁹⁹

Overall if one were to consider the long-term trend of agricultural production in Bengal, the cultivation of rice was the most significant and over and above the cultivation of any other food or commercial crop. The plant was well suited to the climate and topographical conditions and hence its cultivation dominated over any other crop. The eighteenth century regional surveys bring out this fact most clearly but there can be no doubt that the production of rice was dominant even in the seventeenth century. It was the most important article of commerce in the seventeenth century.

Rice was carried up the Ganges to Patna and exported to Masalipatam and many other ports on the coast of Coromondal and to Ceylon and the Maldives. Grandpre thus thought, Bengal was 'the granary of rice to all India.'³⁰⁰ The Dutch records mention Bengal rice to be cheaper than that of Arakan, another major rice producing area. In the sixteenth century Bengal was one of the principal rice –surplus area and regions like Maldives totally depended for their rice export on Bengal. Small wonder then, if Pyrrard De Laval regarded Bengal the nursing mother of neighboring regions. He writes 'The

²⁹⁷ Om Prakash, *The Dutch Factories in India*, vol II, p-113.

²⁹⁸ Manrique, vol. 1, p-56.

²⁹⁹ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-39.

³⁰⁰ L De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bay of Bengal 1789-1790*, vol ii, New Delhi, 1995, vol ii. p-51.

country ...is so wonderous fertile that one lives there for almost nothing, and there is such a quantity of rice, that besides supplying the whole country, it is exported to all parts of India, as well as to Goa and Malabar, as to Sumatra, to all of which lands Bengal is a very nursing mother, who supplies them with their entire subsistence and food.³⁰¹

Among other food grains wheat and barley were grown though in small quantities. In Dinajpur, Martin mentions that the cultivation of wheat was not significant. But it was grown in parts of the Doangash soil that were neither too high nor too low. Wheat was cultivated on grounds from which a summer crop of rice had already been taken. Similarly barley was also scantily cultivated and mainly consumed by farmers who raised it. In Midnapur, other than rice, the other major cereals produced were wheat and barley sown on dry land in October and reaped in March-April. Jowar and Bajra were sown on homestead lands. Taylor mentions millet among the list of crops cultivated in Dacca.

Pulses and oil-seeds were also grown though in smaller quantities. In Midnapur, *matar* or peas, *chola*, *mug*, *tisi* (linseed), *Sorisha* (mustard), *arhar*, *khesari* were all grown as winter crops, sown on dry lands from which the *Aus* or the autumn rice had already been harvested. In Dinajpur pulses and oilseeds were mostly grown in association with other crops. A variety of pulses like the thakuri kolayi, khesari, oror, field pea (kata motor) were cultivated in Dinajpur. Some like the thakuri kolai were cultivated on highlands with loose soil while some like the khesari was cultivated on low moist land and a free soil among the growing rice. Among oil seeds mustard was cultivated generally on higher ground in order to prevent excessive penetration of water. Mustard was grown in the alluvial plains of Gangetic West Bengal, where it was sown on the banks of the river after the monsoonal overflow of its water had subsided and had deposited fertile alluvial sediments on its banks. Robert Kyd in his survey of western banks of Hughli observed the cultivation of *ser song* and *teel* or mustard and sesame in a raised land called *dangeah* which was also used for the cultivation of sugarcane.³⁰² Next in importance to food grains, pulses and oilseeds were vegetables among which Martin includes turmeric and ginger. Ginger was grown in high lands with poor soil conditions.

³⁰¹*The Voyage of Francois Pyrard of Laval To the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*, tr. by Albert Grey and assisted by H.C.P. Bell, vol. 1, London, 1887, p-327.

³⁰² Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp.42-3.

Turmeric required a free soil and it was in Dinajpur sometimes cultivated along with cotton. Ginger and turmeric were also grown in lands near the farmyard in parts of the mixed soil. Vegetables and fruit trees in Dacca were grown on artificially raised highlands called *bhetee*.³⁰³

Among other important and valuable production of Bengal were sugar, betelnut, tobacco. Laval mentions that Bengal ‘... abounds with sugar-cane, which they eat green or else make into excellent sugar, for a cargo to their ships...’³⁰⁴ According to Bernier, Bengal was rich in the production of sugar, with which it supplies the kingdom of Golconda, and the Karnatic, Arabia, Mesopotamia and even Persia³⁰⁵. The eighteenth century surveys once again bear out the fact that sugar was one of the most important cash crop produced in Bengal. In Dinajpur sugar was cultivated in homestead lands of the Doangash soil. Martin points out that, ‘Sugarcane requires a rich free soil, sufficiently elevated to be entirely exempt from inundation, but not so high as to be deprived of moisture or so as to encourage the growth of white ants (termes).’³⁰⁶ The lands in the district of Dinajpur were ideally suited for the production of sugar cane and hence it was cultivated in great quantities. The *khagra* and the *Kajoli* varieties of sugarcane were cultivated. The cultivation of sugarcane required great labour and capital. Martin observes that on the whole that the farmers in the districts where sugarcane was cultivated were not richer than where grain was the only produce.

Jessore was important for production of date sugar. Those engaged in this trade were quite prosperous. Westland observes that in Jessore the production of date sugar had outdone the production of cane sugar. The production and trade in date sugar was by and large in the hands of the natives. The Europeans even though they had given the initial boost to the trade in sugar, they had not been successful in it. There was a great demand for sugar among the natives but they did not care to refine sugar as thoroughly as done in

³⁰³ James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*, p-124.

³⁰⁴ Pyrard Laval vol. 1, p-328. Sugarcane, pepper, betel nut, cotton and silk-stuffs of Bengal are also appraised in the *Riyaz.*, p-23

³⁰⁵ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p-437.

³⁰⁶ R.M. Martin, *The History Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, vol ii, Dinajpur, p-857

the European factories. Sugar manufactured at the European refineries was good for the European markets. But the high duty levied on imported sugar in Europe had closed the European market to imported sugar from India. Although sugar was manufactured all over the district the principal sugar country was the western part which may be considered to be included between Kotchandpur, Chaugacha, Jingagacha, Trimohini, Keshabpur, Jessore, and Khajura. These places were the principal marts for its production and export. There were two chief places to which export was made-Calcutta and Nalchitti(a commercial center in Backergunj). Dhulua sugar or the less refined variety was sent to Calcutta and Nalchitti and from Calcutta, Pucka sugar, the finer and clearer variety was sent over to Europe.

Since a date tree took seven years to grow so as to produce *goor*, the demand could not in this case produce supply till the lapse of some time. In such case the price of the raw material rose from which the ryot profited but the merchant buying at inflated rates was sure to be limited in his profits. Thus as Westland mentions there was a temporary slump in the trade of date sugar in Jessore but the trade was beginning to recover since then. In Dacca sugarcane was also grown in partially inundated lands in highlands above inundation.

However the cultivation of sugarcane was capital intensive and required labour. It required extensive manuring and the costs of production were so great that it was beyond the reach of the ordinary cultivator. The produce was small in the first year compared to the capital invested and ryot could hope to profit until the end of the second year. The plant also sapped the vitality of the soil for three years and the land had to be kept fallow for more than four years in order to recoup.³⁰⁷ The ryots thus preferred the cultivation crops that gave more immediate profit. Since the production of sugarcane was an expensive business the ryots accepted money in advance from merchants or money lenders. The evidence of this practice could be found from the eighteenth century

³⁰⁷ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, pp. 45-6

records³⁰⁸, but the problems of cultivation being inherent to the nature of the crop, the system of receiving advances could be prevalent in the seventeenth century as well.

Another important valuable cash crop was betel. The leaf was an article of luxury consumption by the natives. The *Baharistan* is replete with references to the giving of the betel-leaf as a mark of alliance and goodwill. The production of the plant was therefore of great importance in the seventeenth century as well as later on. Betel was produced in Dacca. In Dinajpur tanks were dug to store water. The banks of the tanks Martin mentions were good for the cultivation of betel. About 700 *bighas* of the entire district of Dinajpur was given to the cultivation of betel.³⁰⁹ The plant was cultivated in what is called a *voraj* by the natives which signified an arbour and great pains were taken to protect the plant inside the *voraj* from sun and wind for the plant was very delicate. It also required manuring and weeding. It was a labour and capital intensive process and since high costs were involved cultivation of betel was carried out by only the richer classes. In Midnapur, betel was cultivated on lands with black soil. The production of betel was capital intensive. The annual expenditure of betel cultivation was 73 rs and 10 *annas*.³¹⁰ Martin points out that no cultivation in Bengal gave as much returns as the cultivation of betel.³¹¹

Tobacco was produced in Dacca and Dinajpur. In the latter place, the tobacco raised was not adequate to meet supply. About 1,500 *bighas* of the district were cultivated with tobacco. The plant generally required a light soil. But in Dinajpur it could be cultivated in three different situations. First, in rich spots of land immediately contiguous to the farmers' houses so as to command their constant attention. These areas also received a good amount of manure. Here the cultivation was therefore most productive. Secondly the cultivation of tobacco could be done in rich high land fit for the cultivation of sugarcane where it could alternate with the production of sugar cane. Thirdly tobacco

³⁰⁸ Prinsep's testimony regarding the cultivation of sugar in 1793 points out that the cultivator took advances from the 'mahagen' who charged an interest of one anna monthly for every rupee advanced. Cited in Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-46.

³⁰⁹ R.M. Martin, *Eastern India*, vol ii, p-863-4

³¹⁰ Ibid.

³¹¹ R.M. Martin, *Eastern India*, vol ii, p-865.

was cultivated on the banks of the rivers where the soil was inundated during the rainy season. Here the production was scanty. But the district producing maximum tobacco was Rangpur and tobacco grown here was sent to Dacca and Murshidabad.³¹² Tobacco required the highest and richest lands. The crop was capital and labour intensive which meant that the ryots took advances from merchants. Rangpur's tobacco was contracted for in advance by the merchants of Dacca, Murshidabad, Calcutta.³¹³

Among the important fibre crops cultivated in Bengal were Pat or flax and Son or hemp, but most importantly cotton. The foreign travelogues point to the excellent cotton manufactures of Bengal. Manrique mentions the muslins to have been exported to Khurasan, Persia, Turkey and many other countries. These muslins were so fine that they were contained within hollow bamboos 'about two spans long'³¹⁴ and thus secured were traded to distant places. Linschoten mentions a number and variety of linens called *Sarampuras, Casas, Comsas, Beatillias, Satopassas*.³¹⁵ In 1530s Joao De Barros reported to the King of Portugal that in Bengal, 'They pick so much cotton, have so many artisans and they weave so much of cotton cloth that they 'might dress the whole of Europe'. And that ' whoever wishes to dress with fine clothes is obliged to have those of Bengal,'³¹⁶ the weavers also did some very fine needle work which was so exquisite Linschoten was of the opinion that these could not be mended anywhere throughout Europe. Grandpre writing in the late eighteenth century mentions among the productions of the soil of Bengal- salt-petre and cotton³¹⁷. From the cotton of Bengal fine Muslins were made that were exported to Europe.

The British surveys of later period also refer to the production of cotton in Bengal. The policy of the Company was to encourage the production of cotton in Bengal. About 80,000 *bighas* of land in the district of Dinajpur were given to the cultivation of plants that give cordage. Important among these were Pat, Son, Kankhura and Cotton.

³¹² Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-50.

³¹³ Ibid, p-50

³¹⁴ Manrique, vol 1, p-56-7.

³¹⁵ Linschoten

³¹⁶ De Barros cited in Radhika Chadha 'Merchants Renegades and Padres', p-34.

³¹⁷ L De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bay of Bengal 1789-1790*, vol ii, p-50.

The cultivation of finer variety of cotton Martin observes needed encouragement³¹⁸ as the quantity of the crop cultivated within the district was inconsiderable. In some places cotton of bad quality was sown and production was 'as much as the farmer's wife can spin for family use.' Good quality cotton was grown in south eastern parts of the district but it was seldom cultivated alone sometimes grown alongside oilseeds like Sorisha and sometimes grown with pulses. The finer variety of cotton was raised on stiff clay land. However the natural conditions for production of cotton prevented it from being cultivated on a large scale although there was great demand for the cotton goods of Bengal. Cotton required a thick loamy soil in higher and drier grounds. It was a labour intensive crop and hence the initial capital investments were large. Additionally cotton was a precarious crop. Slight changes in the climate-excess rainfall or a drought could destroy the crop or reduces its output so that 'the same number of plant which yield one year ten maunds will at another year produce only four.'³¹⁹ Hence the peasant was reluctant to increase the production of cotton goods. Since there was two feet distance between the plants even the intervening spaces were sown with turmeric, vegetables or ginger³²⁰.

However, the manufacture of cotton goods was particularly important in Dacca and Dacca cotton goods played an important role in Bengal's trade with the outside world. James Taylor in his *A Descriptive and Historical Account of Cotton Manufacture of Dacca* wrote that the total export of Dacca cotton goods was worth rupees 50 lakhs. The weaving of cotton was carried on in the district and her neighbouring areas to a greater or lesser extent in every village but weavers in certain places acquired greater skills in the craft and these places became the manufacturing points of the finest muslins of Dacca points out Abdul Karim³²¹. The coarser variety of fabrics produced in the district was meant for the common people while the finer ones called muslins were reserved for the use of the upper classes and for exports. Of these finer varieties the finest were reserved for the use of the Emperor and the Nawab. Those reserved for the use of

³¹⁸ R.M. Martin, *Eastern India* vol ii, p-853

³¹⁹ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-53.

³²⁰ Ibid, p-53.

³²¹ Abdul Karim, *Dacca The Mughal Capital*, Dacca, 1964, p-83

the Emperor were called *malbus khas* and those reserved for the nawab was called *sarkar-i-ali*. A daroga was appointed by the government to supervise the production of muslins for procuring the finest muslins for the Emperor and Nawab. Often the daroga however stopped the weavers for weaving muslins for the Company. After the grant of Diwani to the East India Company the post of the *darogha* was abolished and manufacture of these finest varieties on muslins of which the *nawab* and the nobles were the principal buyers also came to an end.

A very important production and manufacture of Bengal was silk. Mulberry was cultivated in different parts of Bengal which were used as food for the silk worms. In Midnapur, mulberry was cultivated on home stead lands. The sowing was done in September October and the leaves were gathered as food for silk worms in May-June. In Dinajpur mulberry was a valuable crop that was sown in homestead lands of the mixed soil. The silk of Bengal was an important article of commerce. Pyrard de Laval also mentions of Bengal silk. The silk of Bengal was in great demand with the Dutch as well as the English. Bengal silk formed an important item of the intra-Asian trade of the Dutch. The English were also in search for the Bengal silk with the result that in 1622 probably the first boat carrying Bengal silk arrived at Masulipatam and the owner charged 30 pagodas for it. The factors mention that this boat having arrived they were acquitted from any further search for the Bengal silk³²². A few years later, the President Brockedon and his Council at Batavia, wrote to the factors at Masulipatam to buy 20 seer of *Muga* and sent to Batavia by the ship Unity. It was also asked to advice, at what prices the same may be brought when the junks arrive from Bengal, what quantity was to be procured annually and 'inquire (if you can) whereof the said *moga* is made, how it growth, and the manner of curing it, for the like is thought to grow in Virginia, which they call it silk grasse'³²³ The *muga* as Foster points out was a strong and coarse variety of silk obtained in Bengal and Assam from the *muga* silk-worm. Kassimbazar in Bengal was known for its silk trade as Dacca was for the trade of cotton goods. The East India Company made good profit in its trade at Kassimbazar and Dacca. In Kassimbazar the silk trade of the Company was brisk. The best time for buying the silk was in

³²² Foster, *Factory Records, 1622-3*, p-45

³²³ Foster, *Factory Records, 1624-9*, p-25-6.

December³²⁴. The Company sent musters or samples to the *paikars* who stipulated to bring a certain quantity within a certain period and rupees twenty a bale was given short to them which was adjusted when they brought in the goods. In Dacca the Company engaged in cloth trade. The most proper season for giving out money for Cossaes, Mulmulls etc. made in and about Dacca was the month of January. The Company advanced money to the brokers to deliver the required quantity of cloth within four months. The brokers in turn gave the money advanced to them to the Paikars, the latter in turn advance money to the weavers so that the ‘only security of the Paikars are the weavers, of the Brokers the Paikars and of the Honourable Company’s money the Brokers.’³²⁵

Certain varieties of fruits were also grown in Bengal. The *Riyaz* mentions that the ‘best fruit of this country is mango, which in some parts is, large, sweet...and tasty, and has a small stone. And the tree of three years' growth—of the height of a man- bears fruit. And large oranges, which are called *kaumla*, and small oranges, which are called *narangi*, grow well in this country. And varieties of citrons are available. And lemons, pineapples, cocoanuts, betelnuts, palm-fruits, jack-fruits and plantains have no end.’³²⁶ The *Riyaz* mentions that ‘grapes and melons, &c, do not grow here; though the seeds of melons and grafts of vines have been often planted in this country, they have never thrived.’³²⁷ Marshall mentions to have tasted grapes at Singee which were grown at Hadgipore³²⁸. But Manrique mentioned that there were no vineyards in Bengal, for which reason people took recourse rice liquor rather than wine made from grapes which was imported by the Portuguese from Portugal³²⁹.

Trade and Transport in Riverine Bengal

³²⁴ *The Diary of Streysham Master, 1675-1680*, ed. R.C.Temple, London, 1911, vol. ii, p-10.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p-14.

³²⁶ *Riyaz-us-salatin*, p-23.

³²⁷ *Ibid*, p-23

³²⁸ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, p-142.

³²⁹ Manrique, vol. 1 p-55.

From the above discussion it is apparent that Bengal had a flourishing agriculture producing a variety of crops and a surplus of food grains and other commodities. This surplus production could be carried from one end of the province to another by means of transport that was essentially water-borne. A peculiarity of the Province of Bengal was the dominance of the fluvial network over land carriage.

Transport costs on land were estimated to be 28 times more than that through the river³³⁰ prompting merchants to store grain to be transported during the navigable season. Although this implied additional cost for storage overall it was cheaper to transport goods through the water route than through the land route. Thus Martin in the context of Dinajpur observes, that the district is intersected everywhere by rivers which serve as channels for transport and communication. During the rainy season travel by land was nearly suspended and the rivers provided an alternative means of communication. The traders did not export or import commodities during the dry season. During this time the export goods were stored in warehouses located on the banks of the river from where they were carried to their destinations during the rainy season when the rivers could be used as means of communication. The imports too were made during the rainy season and during the dry season they were distributed to the various market places of the Province. The rivers also connected the intermediary markets the *hats* and the *ganjs* and were therefore crucial to the economy of the region. The *ganjs* and the *hats* were usually established at points where the transport of goods and the assemblage of buyers and sellers were facilitated by the existence of roads and waterways.³³¹ Tilottama Mukherjee writes that ‘The sinews of the transport organization bolstered and sustained the integrated yet decentralized commercial economy.’³³² Direct river routes existed to the four cities of Calcutta, Dacca, Murshidabad and Patna. There was also a kind of hierarchy based on the extent of connectivity where places like Chittagong, Dinajpur, Lakshmipur, Rangpur, Kumarkhali and Sylhet occupied a higher rung as compared to the rest.

³³⁰ John Crawford cited in Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India, 1819-1835*, London, 1995, p-113.

³³¹ Tilottama Mukherjeem ‘Of Roads and Rivers’, p-33-4.

³³² *Ibid*, p-22

The over dependence on water transport however had its disadvantages. This was manifested in case of change in river courses. Martin writes in context of Dinajpur, that in case of a change in the course of a river, which was bound to occur in country 'so level and so loose a soil,' 'the vicinity of the new course is deluged with water from the smallness of the channel, and the banks of the old course are often deprived of fertility, and still more certainly of the means for conveying their produce to the market. The towns must therefore disappear...' Besides this difficulty navigation in the rivers of Bengal was not a simple task.

Trade and Ecology: Problems of River Navigation

In spite of providing extensive means of internal communication, navigating these rivers was problematic. Bengal had a 'treacherous coastline' with as many sand bars and islands 'under water as above it'³³³, which made navigation in these waters a difficult task requiring expertise and experience. Almost all foreign travelers refer to the problems of navigation in Bengal. Bernier in his voyage from Pipli to Hughli, in the 'seven-oared' scallop mentions that not a day here passed without some 'extra-ordinary accident or adventure.' The fish was delicious and Bernier was also fortunate to have witnessed 'a lunar rainbow' but on the third day he was lost among the channels and perhaps would not have recovered had they not met some Portuguese, 'who were employed in making salts on one of the islands.' On the fourth day of his journey the weather was suffocating and hot and on the fifth day a dreadful and 'perilous' storm broke out. The fears of the Indian boatmen overcame them and Bernier and his 'two Portuguese' survived the tempest by clinging on to a tree for a span of two hours while the storm raged. They arrived on Hughli on the ninth day, the pace of their voyage here must have been quickened by the storm for a voyage from Hughli to Patna generally took about a month. By the time the journey was concluded, Bernier laments, 'my trunk, however, and all my wearing apparel were wet, the poultry dead, the fish spoilt, and the whole of my biscuits soaked in rain.'³³⁴ The storms which Bernier encountered were common on the eastern

³³³ G Bouchon and L.F. Thomaz ed. Voyage dans les deltas du Gange et de L' Irraouaddy, Relation Portugais Anonyme (1521), 1988, para 3., p-310.cited in Chadha, p-22.

³³⁴ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, p-446.

coast. Balthazar Solvyns mentions ‘*Kalbaishakhis*’, which were common on the eastern coast and in Bengal particularly in the month of April.³³⁵ Pyrard de Laval was of the opinion that Bengal would ‘be the fairest, most pleasant fertile and profitable in the whole world,’ had it not been for the problems of navigation in its waters.³³⁶

Manrique also mentions that navigation in Hughli river was particularly difficult. He points out that this river was used by all steamers going to Calcutta. But the pilot service of that city was composed of men who have specialized in its navigation, which is notoriously dangerous with shifting banks and quick-sands that ‘have swallowed many a ship.’ In the seventeenth century it was known as the ‘Braces of Bengala’,³³⁷. These Braces are mentioned in the Factory Records as well, the word implying the fatal embrace of the quick-sands. His own ship St. Augustine itself wrecked near the Orissa coast. Despite the serene sky and favourable winds, the ship St. Augustine slid into a bank by chance and the ‘shock of running aground’ strained her timbers. The seams opened and water began to pour in.³³⁸ It was a general practice mentions Manrique, that the territory in which a ship-wreck occurred, the cargo of that wrecked ship belonged to the ruler of that territory. Following that practice, the cargo of St. Augustine belonged to the Nawab of Dacca. The Governor of Hijli however was ready to allow the ship to pass safely if a bribe was offered to him. Negotiations were therefore made with him and an amicable solution was reached but meanwhile the Governor of Dacca received the news of the ship-wreck and his messengers arrived to claim the Nawab’s share of the ship’s cargo. The Nawab had a group of skilled runners called the *Jalabdars* who could cover enormous distances, almost 50 miles a day. These runners had informed the Nawab of the ship-wreck so that the Nawab was able to send his messengers to Hijli within a week of his receipt of news of the ships wreck.

L. De Grandpre, the French traveller to eighteenth century Bengal points out that navigation in the Ganges was a formidable task, the author himself having faced strong winds and the mist near the Bay of Basore and on his voyage down the river was

³³⁵ Balthazar Solvyns, *Boats of Bengal: Eighteenth Century Portraits*, New Delhi, 2001.

³³⁶ Pyrard Laval, p-332.

³³⁷ Manrique’s voyage as narrated in Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image*, p-69.

³³⁸ *Ibid*, p-70

threatened by the presence of shoals and sandbanks that projected from the mouth of the river to the seas which made navigation difficult in the Ganges³³⁹. Grandpre also mentions the strong currents of the river³⁴⁰. During the south-west monsoon the force of the wind over the river was so strong as to carry a vessel at the rate of six leagues an hour. A wrong stroke on the part of the pilot could force him to digress from his direction and put his vessel in jeopardy. But for the safety of the navigators Grandpre mentions that buoys were placed to mark the course which the pilots should adhere to. In case of the north-east monsoons navigation on the contrary became much slower and tedious given the nature of the contrary winds. But the voyage during this season was less dangerous and required no exceptional skills on part of the navigator.

In his journey down the Hugly River on board the ship *Santa Cruz*, in 1676, Thomas Bowry, mentions that the vessel was driving down the river at a swift and violent rate and past Jno. Perdo, where she encountered 'freshes' and was caught in an eddy and driven towards the shoals of the River Tombolee, (Tumlook, or the Rupnarain). This was the dreaded shoal of "James and the Mary" at the junction of the Hugli and Rupnarain rivers. The island of Jno. Perdo was, in fact, infamous for the 'freshes' which hindered navigation. The Diary of Streynsham Master, 11th Sept. 1676 records that there was no hope of getting the sloops higher than the island of Janperdo, by reason of the 'strength of the Freshes.' Bowry however points out that difficulties encountered by him would have been avoided if the 'Ganges Pilot' had been 'ingenuous'. The river had many areas which were easily navigable and the eddies and streams could be avoided if one was careful. Bowry says that he has discovered this fact 'by experience'. The navigation on the Ganges required the expertise and experience of the navigator without which the ships and boats were bound to get into danger. The lack of experienced pilots were a subject of constant complaint in this period. In the Diary of Streynsham Master, Walter Clavell in his "Account of the Trade of Hughli" remarks: "Our ships if wee had more Pilotts whome wee could oblige to stay after they had obtained some experience either by engaging them in families, or by giving them good wages might with much more ease goe over the braces and come up Hughli river..."

³³⁹L De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bay of Bengal 1789-1790*, vol i, pp.234-6

³⁴⁰ Ibid. p-239.

The Factory Records of the English East India Company for the seventeenth century also point to similar difficulties of navigation in the Ganges, upstream. In 1670, the Company had five factories for trade in the Bay of Bengal region. These were located in Balasore, Hughli, Kasimbazar, Patna and Dacca, the factory at Balasore being the seat of the 'Chief and his Council'. But the records point out that the intention of the factors was to transfer this to Hughli³⁴¹ which was a 'more convenient trade center'. But Hughli was located further upstream on the river and the masters of the Company's ships were reluctant to bring their ships to Hughli in view of the 'perils of navigation' in the estuary of the Ganges. Thus although Bridges and his council moved to Hughli the ships refused to follow suit and the Bay Council had to divide its time between Balasore and Hughli.

The Company however was not deterred in its attempts to navigate upstream. Two *pinnaces* of the Company- The *Diligence* and *Madras* were employed on the 'discovery' of the channels³⁴², but the problems of navigation still persisted as the commanders employed for the purpose, 'no sooner had they got experience of the river than they wanted to return home'³⁴³. Six great can-buoyes with chains and mill-stones to ride them by were prepared for buoying the channels but nevertheless the commanders refused to navigate unless their vessels were indemnified against dangers of mis-carriage. In 1673 the records lament the death of John Floyd who was among the 'small number of men who were thoroughly acquainted with the River Ganges'.³⁴⁴ The Records which close in 1677, still mention the problems the Company encountered in navigating in the Ganges up-stream to Hughli. In October, 1677 Captain Erwin commander of the New London came to Hughli and carried out a survey of the river, its channels and the 'braces' or shoals that lay at its entrance. This he did on the sloop 'Lilly' for some days, in company with the chief pilot, George Hacon, observing the tides, sands, soundings etc. of the river. After the investigation he was satisfied that any ship then in the road might be safely brought up the Ganges. But the fact that such a investigation had to be carried out

³⁴¹ Sir Charles Fawcett, *The English Factories in India vol.2 The Eastern Coast and Bengal 1670-77*, Oxford, 1952, p-325.

³⁴² *Ibid*, p -329.

³⁴³ *Ibid*.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid*. p-355.

as late as 1677 meant that inspite of the vessels having started to ply upstream to Hughli, the Company was still struggling with the problems of navigation in the Ganges³⁴⁵.

Shallow water was another factor which made navigation in the rivers at times difficult. The factories were mostly located besides the river probably to allow the easy transport of goods by boat to the Company's ships or to other markets inland. But Marshall mentions that at Rajmahal he could not go up to the 'English House' situated on the bank of the river due the shallowness of water³⁴⁶.

Inclement weather added to the difficulties of navigation and ships often 'disappeared'. The records mention that Bridges was lucky to sail by *Coast Frigate* rather than the earlier ship, the *Happy Entrance*, which left on 5th November 1670 but disappeared in the Bay between Balasore and Masulipatam. Even if their fate was not as tragic as that there were often delays of supply. Violent winds and heavy floods caused delays of supply of salt-petre to Patna. In October, Charnock records that "so violent hath been the winds here these several months that when it (the saltpetre) was aboard, we could hardly secure our boates from breaking lose afore our factory; and as we last wrote you, the river broke out into such floods that it drowned the whole country, and we had much ado to save a great part of saltpetre from its violence³⁴⁷." Marshall who had journeyed from Hughli to Patna in May, mentions these high winds and heavy floods as well.

In accordance with the orders that the ships should go up to Hughli, the *Rebecca* a vessel of 200 *tonnes* was sent up the river in charge of Captain Hacon. She made the journey with *Diligence* and returned in safety although the voyage proving to be difficult owing to her encountering strong downstream 'freshes'. It seems that from experience the chief of the factory concluded the period from mid-July to mid-December as being unfavourable for navigation upstream. The factors added that a Dutch vessel earlier trying to make an experiment had met with a tragic fate. The rain and floods also

³⁴⁵ In 1674 two boats carrying salt-petre were lost in Hughli, the other 15 boats arrived safely. Fawcett, p-375.

³⁴⁶ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, p-71.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 334-35.

damaged the buildings at Singhiya³⁴⁸ in Patna from where Charnock managed the salt-petre business. On 2nd October 1674, the *pinnacle* Madras which was in a leaky condition, was wrecked in a severe storm which broke on Balasore roads and drove her ashore. About 12 *tonnes* of salt-petre were lost with her while 2-3 *tonnes* more had to be jettisoned from another sloop in the same storm.

Duration of the Voyages:

The speed of the journey by water in the seventeenth century was variable as it depended on the availability or the lack of favourable winds, the strength of the currents etc. But generally traveling by water was faster than by land. P.J. Marshall observes that speed was an important factor in country trade because the capacity of most of Bengal's markets was limited and they were easily glutted. So the ship which arrived first made the most profitable voyage³⁴⁹. This could apply very well in context of internal trade within the Province as well. The money to finance a voyage was borrowed at a very heavy rate of interest, and hence a delayed voyage meant heavy loss. The following two tables will give an idea of the duration of river voyages³⁵⁰.

A. On the Ganga: No. of Kilometers covered in one day on a *bajara* (according to memoirs of Rennell , p-230-61)

With the stream		Against the stream	
Low water	High water	Low Water	High Water
65	80-110	27 or 32	60

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.353

³⁴⁹ P.J. Marshall, *East India Fortunes: The British in Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford, 1976, p-60.

³⁵⁰ The two tables have been cited in Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communication in India, Prior to Steam Locomotion*, vol. 2 Water Transport, Delhi, 1994 vol ii, p-176.

Transit by land was also common but water route was more favoured. The country being intersected by a large number of rivers construction of roads posed difficulty. Also the journey by the river route was not as time taking as the journey by land. The following table from Deloche³⁵¹ demonstrates time taken in land transit by foot couriers in Mughal period.

B. Transmission of Despatches by Foot Couriers during the Mughal Period: Several Examples

Stages		Distance covered in Kms.	Number of Days	Daily Average in Km.	References
From	To				
Hugali	Balesvara	264	4-6	66-44	1679, Streynsham Master Diaries, vol.ii, p-262,278,347
Hugali	Dhaka	283	7-9	40.4 to 31.4	1679, <i>Ibid.</i> p-252, 268, 281,355
Hugali	Patna	601	11-15	54.6 to 40	1679, <i>Ibid.</i> p-272, 279, 322.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p-282.

If we compare table A with column 4 (daily average in Kilometers) of table B. we find that that the daily distance traveled by land transit did not exceed more than 66 km. whereas by water route in case of high water flowing with the stream one could cover as much as 80-110 kms. Even in going against the stream which took a longer time than in going with the stream one could cover as much as 60 kms. in times of high water. In unfavourable circumstances (going against the stream in low water) distance covered was 27 to 32 km. In case of land transit the lowest distance covered as given in the above table was 31.4 meters.

However the speed of land transit was not uniform. The private *qasid* could cover as much as 40-60 kms. Daily and Express Couriers could cover about 80 km. and messengers relaying at each stage could cover more than 100 kms. But these messengers were professionally trained to cover large distances. The speed depended on the quality of roads, security etc. Deloche points out that the greatest daily distances traveled were from Agra to Lahore, as it was the best maintained road on Hindustan where travelers could cover as much as 40 km/day and with trade caravans as much as 30 km. Conveyance by palanquin or saddled craft on road was much rapid and covered but the maximum speed was 60 km/day and this was not commonly achieved as one had to adapt oneself to the slow rhythm of the pack animals. On an average it may be said the distance covered on road was 35 or 40 km per day.

Commercial and military traffic was much more slower³⁵². Whichever mode of transport be taken commercial traffic usually moved at a pace of 20km a day and military traffic was even more slower moving at a pace of 18.7 km a day or sometimes as low as 5.2 km a day. It is to be also mentioned here that Indian roads were never metalled. That according to Deloche was because in India particularly in the alluvial plains no hard materials could be found with which to metal the roads. There were no stones for metalling the surfaces rather there was clay which when hardened into bricks were used to make roads. These *kacha* roads were particularly susceptible to floods and other weather conditions. In regions favourably endowed with waterways the roads necessarily submitted to the network of navigable waterways³⁵³. The imperial highway from Delhi to

³⁵² Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India*, vol. 1, p-284.

³⁵³ Jean Deloche, *Transport and Communications in India vol. 1* p-115.

Bengal did not depart from the banks of Jamuna and the Ganga except for short stretches.³⁵⁴ Deloche points out 'that this submission to hydrographic network, an indication of inferiority, had as a consequence the multiplication of deviations and considerable lengthening of distances.'³⁵⁵ But this was a consequence also of the nature of the terrain. It was also to the credit of the merchants that they could advantageously use the waterways for quick transportation. Comparatively freight traffic in eighteenth century France seldom went beyond 3-4 km per hour and passenger traffic in England was 3.3 kilometers per hour in c.1700.³⁵⁶ (much slower than in Bengal)

The roads were maintained generally by local authorities. There were no state-sponsored attempts at clearance of jungles and building of roads. During campaigns roads were built to facilitate the movement of the armies but given the hurry in which these tracks were made these must have been of temporary nature. At the close of the rainy season the peasant concerned himself with the repair of roads of which they were considered to be the primary users. In the event of appearance of any noble or any imperial personage the local authorities repaired the roads in a hurry with local assistance. This was in contrast to the Assamese system where the state forced its citizens to render compulsory labour in building and maintaining roads throughout the country. Thus Assam had a more intensive and well maintained network of roads than Bengal.³⁵⁷

Martin in his survey of Dinajpur mentions that for the purpose of commerce there were few roads that could be utilized. The need for the construction of roads was felt but the landholders who would probably be responsible for constructing these did not pay adequate attention to their construction and repair and often embezzled money sanctioned by the government for that purpose. Martin observes that the roads built by the Mohammedan conquerors were numerous and well maintained but since their time had gone to ruin. In the eighteenth century Rennell mentions a few important route

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p-116.

³⁵⁶ I am grateful to Prof. Rajat Datta for providing me with this detail to be found in Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: The Five Revolutions that Made Modern Europe, 1648-1815*, London, 2007, pp 8, 11.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p-117-18.

links³⁵⁸ that ran between Patna, Assam and Chittagong. On Renell's map, from the position of the criss-crossing routes it would appear at first glance itself that Murshidabad was the focus of all routes whether running in east west or North-South direction.

The usual mode of conveyance of goods on land was the oxen in back loads. There were also carts drawn by oxen which could carry a burthen from seven to ten *maunds*. Many of the *Paikars* or petty traders kept such oxens for conveying their goods to and from the warehouses.

Expanding the Agrarian Frontier: State and the Landed Gentry

The expanding agrarian frontier of the seventeenth century demonstrated greater control over the landscape. In the seventeenth century the economic base of the state continued to be land revenue, so that agricultural expansion meant the enrichment of the coffers of the state. Richard Eaton underscores the role of the Muslim gentry in extending agriculture in East Bengal. Due to the eastward movement of the active portion of the Ganges Delta the regions in the west did not receive adequate quantities of fresh water and silt. The habitations along the banks of the abandoned channels of the rivers declined being affected by diseases associated with stagnant waters while the east became increasingly more fertile. The waters of the Ganges abandoning its former channels in the southern and the western portions of the delta, started pouring its waters into the Padma, enriching the eastern parts of Bengal which is proved by the increasing revenue rates and population growth in these parts. In these parts of eastern Bengal agricultural expansion occurred. This agricultural expansion in the *Bhati* region proceeded under the aegis of the Muslim *pirs*. The process of land reclamation also proceeded centering around the mosque. Usually a *pir* or some charismatic leader with the authorization of the *zaminder* or the primary holder of a land, built a mosque and then the Mughal state authorities granted virgin lands for the upkeep of the mosque its functionaries and its large number of dependents who helped clear the virgin land and put it to cultivation. From the point of view of Mughal authorities these mosques served as agents for extending cultivation and deepening the roots of state patronage and authority in the rural society of East Bengal. But as a corollary it was these mosques which helped in the 'diffusion of uniquely

³⁵⁸ See map VI in Deloche adjacent to p-46.

Islamic conceptions of divine and human authority among the groups under its socio-economic influence.’

According to Anirudh Ray the Bara-bhuiyans or the *zamindars* at the beginning of Mughal conquest of Bengal were responsible for making the *bhati* region economically prosperous by clearing jungles and extending settlements. In fact the role of the landed gentry particularly the *zamindar* in extending cultivation in Bengal deserves to be noted. B.R. Grover³⁵⁹ based on a reading of the Baharistan pointed out that the *zamindars* who existed before the time of Akbar were subdued by Islam Khan. Those who submitted willingly were confirmed in their estates. Those who offered resistance received only parts of their *zamindari*s while the rest of it was given to *jagirdars*. Under the Mughals the *Zamindars* were meant to perform certain duties. They were required to provide military assistance to the Mughals as and when required. They were supposed to be personally present at the court of the Viceroy or the imperial court. They had also to provide an annual *peshkash* to the Viceroy though some of them gave a stipulated sum as revenue from their lands and most importantly they were to act as collectors of revenue. Grover regarded the *zamindars* as collectors of land revenue rather than as independent owners of landed estates.

The origins, duties, function and position of a *zamindar* were a source of lively debate for the British administrators who succeeded the Mughals. The Company state in the initial years tried to make sense of the various land tenures existing in Bengal and the rights and duties of the *zamindars*. The problem was whether to regard the *zamindars* as owners of their estate or as functionaries of the state entitled to remuneration granted in the form of a piece of land or a share of the produce of the land in return for services rendered to the state which primarily entailed the collection of land revenue from his estate on behalf of the state.

Rajat Datta points out that the landed gentry in Bengal consisted of the *zamindar*, the *taluqdar* and the *la-kharaj* holder. In the last category could be included the holy *pir* of Richard Eaton who were responsible for extending cultivation in East Bengal. But the holders of *la-kharaj* lands formed only a part of landed gentry of Bengal.

³⁵⁹ B.R. Grover, “Bangladeshe, Jamidari Bibartan o taluqadari Pratha” in Anirudha Ray and Ratnabali Chattopadhyay ed. *Modhyojuge Banglar Shomaj o Sankskriti*, Calcutta, 1992, p-87-108.

Rajat Datta critiques Tapan Raychaudhuri's assertion that the zaminders in pre-British Bengal acquired their territorial acquisitions by usurpation in course of the uncertainties following the transition of authority from the Afghans to the Mughals in Bengal. He also disputes some of the East India Company documents which assert that acquisitions of property in pre-British period were made when certain individuals collaborated with the state to suppress rebellions and were in reward granted those territories. Such acquisitions, he points out, were temporary and could be revoked as and when the state desired if the actual heir to the land put forth his claim. Thus neither usurpation nor collaboration could explain the origin of a *zamindarry*. But, the formation of *zamindaries* in Mughal and Nawabi Bengal 'was by a combination of state action and individual initiative.'³⁶⁰ This point is illustrated by the presence in Bengal of different kinds of *Zamindarries*. These include *jungalbari* or *zamindari* of a land obtained by means of clearance of a waste land for cultivation, *inteqali* or transfer of right and *a-hukumi* by order of the authority. In the last case a *zamindari* was obtained when the state removed a *zamindar* and settled another in his place. *Zamindarries* were also obtained by purchase called *kharida* zamindarries. In case of *jungalbari* and *kharida* zamindarries the state had rights only to the rent whereas in case of *sunnudi* *zamindaries* that is those *zamindars* who were established by the state, the latter exercised a more closer control. Thus *zamindaries* were created both by the state from above and as well as 'from below when individuals became *zamindars* either by reclaiming or purchasing a land.'

On the origins and perquisites of a *zamindari* the members of the Phousdarry court at Chitpoor pointed out, that '*zamindaries* are of two kinds. One of the nature of a Public Office without property as for instance a person obtains a *firman* from the king, setting forth that he is appointed to the office of the zamindary of such... District or Division and he may transact the business thereof and [make efforts] in the improvement of the cultivation, the increase of the crops, the observance of beneficial practices and Customs and the payment of revenue. Under such tenure it is usual for governments to dispossess and appoint and in case of death to settle people in the land who have no title to it by rights of inheritance, and in the *firman*...of such person no mention is made of his being the first cultivator or the heir, or of any similar circumstances which are the

³⁶⁰ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-136

requisites of property. In other words it appears to be a Public office, and not a Property. The second kind as Property are acquired by purchase, donation, the improvement of waste or uncultivated land, or by perpetual grants from his Majesty or similar circumstances which [can] and are a requisites of Property. In the first case it is the king who chooses the successor to the property and whosoever he chooses is the successor. In the second case the heirs could succeed to the property.’ In the same context, Reza Khan pointed out that according to the law of the Koran, a son had the right to succeed his father in a *zamindarry* independent of any *sunnud* from the king. Nor was it within the king’s power to dispossess an heir from his *zamindarry*. The king’s right was only over the revenues of the estate. The questionnaires put to the Phousdarry committee bore out the fact that the right of succession was inherent in the nature of *zamindarry* tenure and the custom of granting a *sunnud* was only to ensure ‘protection against lawless power.’ As Raja Shitabroy pointed out in context of the same issue, that ‘the revenue belonged to the king but the land to the *zamindar*.’³⁶¹

On the other hand, James Grant refused to admit the *zamindars* as the possessor of landed property in Bengal. Grant criticized an earlier work entitled, “Original Minutes of the Governor General and Council 1776 with a Plan of settlement of the Revenues of Bengal.” This work had affirmed that the lands of the Provinces under the East India Company did not belong to it as the sovereign representative but to the *Zamindars* and other classes of natives who owed to the government only a fixed part of the net produce described in the work as ‘quit-rent tribute’ or land tax. Grant however pointed out as he did in case of his work on the Northern *Circars* that ‘the sovereign in Hindostan...is declared to be the sole virtual proprietor of the soil not in the European feudal fashion where the King is the supreme fictitious landlord from whom the other smaller landlords derive their tenure, but in Hindostan the King is in right and fact, the real acting landlord entitled to and receiving from the ryots and husbandmen a certain portion of the gross yearly production in money and kind’³⁶² which in Bengal was customarily 1/4th of the

³⁶¹ WBSA, Khalsa Records 5th November to 30th December 1777, vol 2, 18th October, 1776.

³⁶² James Grant, “Analysis of the Finances of Bengal”, in W. K. Firminger ed. 5th Report From the Select Committee of House of Commons on the Affairs of the East India Company , Calcutta, 1917, vol. II, Appendix 4 p-170.

whole produce according to the settlement of 1582 done by Todar Mal and followed up to the British period more or less unchanged in principle. From this it follows according to Grant that the *zamindars*, cannot be regarded as the proprietor of the soil as had been done so long. He defines the *zamindars* as ‘annual contracting farmers or receivers of public rents, with stated allowances in the nature of a commission on the receipts, and a small estate or portion of their territorial jurisdictions set apart for constant family subsistence, whether in or out of office, but never exceeding in the whole by an universal prescriptive law of the empire, ten percent on the *mofussil* collections.’³⁶³

The view of Grant on the issue of the rights of the *zamindar* was criticized by Boughton Rouse. In his *Dissertation Concerning Landed Property in Bengal* Rouse affirmed the existence of landed property in the Province. Rouse pointed out that the *zamindars* in Bengal were holders of landed estates which were permanent and hereditary. The basis of Rouse’ argument was the *firman* of Farukhsiyar in which the Emperor confirmed the grant of three villages (Sutanati, Govindapur and Dihi-Kolkata) and permission for the possession of thirty eight others to the English. In this document while the Emperor unconditionally granted to the English the three villages they had already bought but the *taluqadari* of thirty eight villages were given under the condition that the Company was required to purchase these lands from their proprietors with their consent, before the grant came into effect³⁶⁴. That the Emperor did not interfere with the rights of the established landholders, by dispossessing them and giving away their lands to the Company, bore out the fact that the landholders under the Mughals had absolute rights to their holdings.

Every *Zamindar* held his *zamindari* under a patent or *sanad* from the government³⁶⁵ describing the lands under his *zamindari*. Rouse pointed out that the institution of the *sanad* may have originated during the time of Aurangzeb but the *Ain-Akbari* testified to the existence of *zamindars* at the time of Akbar as the text mentions *zamindars* as possessing ‘considerable armies, with great extent of country and a large

³⁶³ Ibid, p-170

³⁶⁴ Charles William Boughton Rouse, *Dissertation Concerning the Landed Property of Bengal*, London, 1791, p-154-5, and p-104.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, p-38

revenue.³⁶⁶ Rouse therefore opined that the *zamindar* as class 'existed from antiquity but the *sanad* upon which their title to land had been recognized was of recent origin.'³⁶⁷ The *zamindars* as a class were not created by the *sanad* but existed independent of it.

Rouse pointed out that in case of Bengal, history had shown that because of its peculiar position all conquerors had to make peace with its established landholders. Therefore even if it is hypothetically assumed that landed property did not exist elsewhere in Hindostan it would still exist in Bengal³⁶⁸. The proof of this suggestion lay in the fact that a large portion of the province was in the hands of original Hindus and very few Muslims were to be found in possession of *zamindari*s.

From the above discussion, inspite of differences of opinion on the origins of a *zamindarry*, a consensus at least emerges that the *zamindars* as a class performed important functions in the rural economy of Bengal. Firstly *zamindars* were responsible for advancing agricultural loans or *taqavi* to the peasants. He was also charged with the maintenance of embankments or *pulbandi*. According to the Report of the Select Committee among the disbursements noted by the Company was 'a sum of rupees 35,600 given to the Rajah of Burdwan to repair the banks of rivers broken by the heavy rains and to enable him to assist the ryots in their cultivation.'³⁶⁹

The *zamindar* was responsible for the development of cultivation in his estate and also for bringing wastelands under cultivation in order to increase the revenue of his estate. The state also indirectly profited from the increase of such revenue. All these purposes are most pronounced in case of *jungal-bari* tenures, where *zamindars* were given *sanads* 'on condition that within the Boundaries, the jungles should be cleared, embankments and water courses made, inhabitants brought from other places and land put in a state of cultivation.'³⁷⁰ The *zamindars* were also in charge of maintenance of embankments made by the state that were termed *khas pulbandy*. The *zamindar* was also

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p-41.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid*. p-60

³⁶⁸ *Ibid*. p-142.

³⁶⁹ WBSA, Proceedings of the Select Committee 9th January to 31st December, 1766, vol 2A, 28th October, 1766.

³⁷⁰ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-156

responsible for providing the means of irrigation by digging tanks and wells that could provide water to crops during the dry season. The *zamindars* also possessed extensive personal lands or *khamar* lands in lieu of his services. These lands were free from the interference of the state and hence here ‘the *zamindar* could hope to make improvements without inviting the financial attentions of the state.’³⁷¹

But the *zamindar* was one among the landed gentry of Bengal. Towards the end of the seventeenth century and in the beginning of the eighteenth the role of *taluqdars* in the rural economy of Bengal became important. According to B.R.Grover the term *taluqa* was prevalent in the pre-Akbari period but when the Mughals conquered Bengal the *taluqdars* were brought within the regulations of the revenue system of the Mughals. The word *taluqa* meant ‘a holder or possessor of a dependancy’.³⁷² They ‘were positioned below the *zamindars* in the hierarchy of landed property.’³⁷³ The taluqs were of two different types, *huzuri* and *mazkuri*. “The *huzuri taluqdars* held their rights under, and paid revenue directly to the state, whereas the *mazkuri* ‘hold their tenures under a *zamindar* or *chowdhuri* to whom they pay their rents.’”³⁷⁴ The tenure ‘was a product of two specific requirements of the agrarian economy. It was at one level, a direct manifestation of the desire of the *zamindars* and the provincial government to effect an extension of cultivation. At another level, it was one way in which the *zamindars* could get hold of ready cash by selling such rights.’³⁷⁵ It therefore follows that the extension of cultivation was an important duty of the *taluqdar*. Like the *zamindars* the *taluqdars* are said to have advanced agricultural loans to the peasants. As the motive of the *taluqdars* was to improve the cultivation of the lands under their supervision the peasants in the *taluqas* were treated more leniently than their counterparts under *zamindar* tenure. But evidence suggests that there were cases when the *taluqdars* were themselves poor and bankrupt and could do little for the benefit of the peasantry in the form of advancing loans.

³⁷¹ Ibid, p-158-59

³⁷² John Shore’s definition of a *taluqdar* cited in Rajat Datta, Ibid, p-138

³⁷³ Rajat Datta, *Society, Economy and the Market*, p-138

³⁷⁴ Ibid, p-138.

³⁷⁵ Ibid,p-161

A third form land tenure was *la-khiraj* property. *La-khiraj* lands were charity lands that were exempt from the payment of revenue. Such lands were granted by the Mughals and later by the Nawabs as religious donations or for reclaiming wastelands. Rajat Datta points out that ‘the pressing need to extend cultivation and its connection with the creation of various types of landed properties is nicely borne out by the spread of *la-kharaj* lands in the frontier regions of the Province in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.’³⁷⁶ He cites Chittagong or Sylhet as the two frontier tracts of Bengal where *la-kharaj* property were common. In Chittagong the Mughal campaign against the Mags in 1666 had disturbed the region so that the affluent migrated and those needy persons who applied to the government easily obtained lands in charity by promising to extend the cultivation in the district. Sylhet was another unsettled area prone to ‘the incursions of the hill people.’ A *faujdar* was appointed for this area entrusted with the task of bringing order. The *faujdar* thus granted lands in this area to his dependants in charity who would be responsible for cultivating lands given to them.

Thus the resultant effect of the prevalent land tenures in Bengal was a widespread expansion of the agrarian frontier as forest areas and wasteland started to be brought under the plough. Since in seventeenth century land revenue continued to be the most important source of income for the state the expansion of the agrarian frontier was encouraged by it and the landed gentry- the *zamindar*, the *talluqdar* or the holder of the *la-kharaj* property were instrumental in bringing this about.

Commercial Growth and Emergence of Urban Centers

Seventeenth century Bengal witnessed commercial growth. As mentioned in the previous chapter the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English entered the Province and opened up successful trade with Asia as well as with Europe. The Portuguese had entered Bengal in the sixteenth century and here they had two important trading centers at Satgaon (later Hughli) and at Chittagong. In Bengal the official Portuguese presence was not as important as the presence of the Portuguese private traders. Sanjay

³⁷⁶ Ibid, p-147

Subrahmanyam³⁷⁷ points out that in Bengal the official crown voyages were replaced by concession routes to Chittagong and Satgaon-Hughli and Pipli in Orissa. Because of the presence of so many private Portuguese traders the crown voyages were found to be less profitable. These concession voyages were not monopolistic in nature but the grants entitled the 'Captain-Major' or concessionary 'the privilege of buying and selling first at the port of destination.'³⁷⁸ The long distance trade from Bengal was dominated by private Portuguese merchants and operated along three routes. One was to Melaka where the Portuguese traded in textiles and rice. The second and most favoured trade route was from Bengal 'through Nagapattinam-to the ports of Sri Lanka, and on the other to Cochin and Goa.'³⁷⁹ The principal trade from Cochin was in pepper and cauris from the Maldivian islands. Besides, silver was also exported to Bengal from Goa and the Portuguese settlements south-west India. In return Bengal exported sugar, preserves, rice and textiles. The third trade route was to Ormuz. The items exported included textiles both cotton and silk and sugar which was substantially imported by Persia.

But in Bengal the Portuguese had more than a trading presence for they were engaged in slave trade and piracy and were often in political alliance with one or the other political players within the region. Sushil Chaudhury has argued that the supremacy of the Portuguese rendered the opening up of trade in Bengal difficult for the Dutch and English East India Companies,³⁸⁰ but Sanjay Subrahmanyam suggests that the Portuguese presence in the Bay was not monopolistic in nature. Even the concession voyages to Bengal, unlike in the Coromandel did not reflect an attempt at monopolization and the Asian merchants continued to carry on trade. He suggests that 'what deterred the VOC from entering Bengal upto the 1630s was not Portuguese commercial dominance, but the continuing vivacity of the Asian trade.'³⁸¹ The Dutch at Masulipatam were supplied with Bengal goods at tolerable prices by their trade from Pipli and felt no need for opening a

³⁷⁷ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvise Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal 1500-1700*, Delhi, 1990.

³⁷⁸ Ibid, p-111.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, p-114.

³⁸⁰ Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal 1650-1720: With Special Reference to the English East India Company*, Calcutta, 1975, p-9.

³⁸¹ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvise Empires*, p-127.

center for trade in Bengal until the Japanese market for Bengal silks provided them the incentive to do so.

Portuguese power however declined after the sack of Hughli in 1632 and the vacuum was filled by the rise of the commercial activities of the Dutch and the English East India Companies. But it was not just the European trading Companies but the native merchants of Bengal who also carried out trade with Ceylon, Achin, Maldives, in goods such as butter, oil, sugar, ghee and piece goods and other articles like long pepper, opium, silk, saffron etc. They imported in turn elephants which were in high demand in the Province among the Nawab and the *zamindars*. Other articles of import included tin, cauris, cinnamon, copper, nutmeg, arrack, porcelain and gold.³⁸² The two merchants Khemchand and Chintaman were among the important native traders engaged in overseas trade. Moreover in Bengal the ruling elite- the *subadars* and the *faujdars* also participated in trade. For instance Shah Shuja the Mughal prince and *subadar* of Bengal participated in overseas trade. But while the European Companies were joint stock enterprises trading by Bengal merchants were based on individual risk and initiative.³⁸³ As for the European Companies the Dutch came to Bengal mainly for raw silk which was an important item for its intra-Asian trade. As for the English East India Company it exported from Bengal textiles, raw silk, and other bulk goods like salt-petre, sugar, borax, turmeric, cauris, redwood, and gumlac.³⁸⁴ Bengal started to surpass other centers of trade of the English East India Company so that while the stock sent to Madras in 1710 was £80,000 the stock sent to Bengal was £180,000 and in 1717 while £130, 000 was sent to Madras the stock sent to Bengal was £270,000.³⁸⁵

As a consequence of Bengal's flourishing commerce particularly with Europe, a large number of wealthy cities thrived in sixteenth- seventeenth century Bengal which were centres of trade of native and European merchants. Towards the end of the seventeenth century there was the rise of coastal cities as a direct result of European trade in India. These coastal cities were different from their predecessors due to the fact that

³⁸² Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation*, p-90.

³⁸³ *Ibid*, p-97.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p-155.

³⁸⁵ Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal*, p-59

they did not depend upon the hinterland for administrative or military functions. The coastal cities which rose towards the end of the seventeenth century- Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, combined in them administrative as well as commercial functions breaking the earlier trend of their being a reciprocal relation between the hinterland and the port cities³⁸⁶. Located in an alien and hostile atmosphere these cities were almost always being fortified. Following the hostilities with the Mughals, the English had fled to Sutanati, and after the cessation of hostilities, the English in 1698 bought *zamindari* rights of the three villages of Sutanati, Govindapur, and Dihi-Kalkatta against a sum of 1,300 rupees paid to the existing *zaminders*. Also by a *muchleka* the Company agreed to deposit 1,195 rupees annually into the imperial treasury. Thus was born the city of Calcutta, one of the greatest urban centers, just at the close of our period. But in the seventeenth Calcutta was still a trading post and had not acquired the importance which it did post-Plassey.

But while studying the urban environment in seventeenth century Bengal it is important to note that the urban spaces were not what they are today. The cities were located near forests. For instance, 3 ½ kos. from Balasore tigers were found in Ramchandrapur which must have had substantial forest areas, so that tigers could roam in there. The buildings were often made of thatched houses as Marshall saw at Rajmahal. The *Riyaz* mentions, that ‘the wildness and habitation of this country are similar, in that the people erect huts of thatch, made up of bamboos and straw. Their utensils are generally earthen, and few are of copper. Whenever quitting one place they migrate to another, straightway they erect a thatched hut, similar to their former one, and collect earthen utensils.’ Even in Calcutta founded towards the end of our period, the urban space was not really ‘urban’ as scavengers roamed around in the city.³⁸⁷

But the towns performed certain economic functions. To a smaller extent they were manufacturing centres. We find evidence of production within the towns itself in case of Hughli and Dacca. But largely the towns were commercial centers from where specialized goods were exported. A large amount of commodities were also imported for the internal consumption of its inhabitants. The towns were located mostly beside the side

³⁸⁶ Om Prakash , *European Commercial Enterprise* p-146.

³⁸⁷ Grandpre, vol. ii, p-8.

of the rivers as transport was mainly water-borne. Thus the trading stations of the European Companies were all located on either side of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly river.

In the sixteenth century Satgaon was the chief port and trading station in western Bengal and Chittagong was the chief trading station in the east. Satgaon was located 100 miles upstream on the Saraswati that branched off from the Ganges and later rejoined it. In the sixteenth century Satgaon was the *porto pequeno* and Chittagong the *porto grande* of the Portuguese whose chief centres of trade in the sixteenth century was these two places. Sanjay Subrahmanyam however points out that in course of the sixteenth century the focus of the Portuguese trading activities shifted from the East in Chittagong to the west in Satgaon-Hughli. One of the reasons for this was that Chittagong was 'over-supplied' so that trade there was no longer profitable. The Portuguese shippers came in large numbers to Chittagong during the trading season. A second more important reason was the decline of Gaur in the 1540s with which the port of Chittagong was closely associated. A third reason for the decline of Chittagong was the simultaneous rise of the port and capital of Marak-u which according Sanjay Subrahmanyam could have diverted 'capital, prestige, and eventually commerce from Chittagong.' By the 1570s the Portuguese concession route to Chittagong was rarely asked for and accepted.³⁸⁸

Chittagong remained with the Hussain Shahi sultanate from 1498 to 1535. In between in 1513 it was wrested from the Bengal sultan by the Rajah of Tipperah, and in 1516, by the ruler of Arakan. In 1519 it was re-conquered by Sultan Nuzrat Husain Shah and renamed Fathabad to commemorate the conquest. In the last quarter of the 16th century Chittagong however passed on to the ruler of Arakan. It emerged as profitable center of slave trade. Throughout the seventeenth century Mughals tried to conquer Chittagong and the Arakanese king finally lost it in 1666 when Shaista Khan conquered the port and annexed it to the Mughal Empire.³⁸⁹

Due to the decline of Portuguese shipping at Chittagong trade concentrated initially at Satgaon. Thus the Venetian Ceasar Fedrici, who visited Satgaon in the 1560s described it as 'a remarkable faire citie [where]...every yeare they lade thirtie or five and

³⁸⁸ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empires*, p-112.

³⁸⁹ Chadha, 'Merchants, Renegades Padres', p-38.

thirtie ships, great and small, with rice, cloth of Bumbast of divers sorts, Lacca, great abundance of sugar...and many other sorts of merchandise.'³⁹⁰

Both the cities of Satgaon and Chittagong were well served by waterways. The houses in Chittagong were described as being low-lying and built just on the water-front. Though this was a common characteristic of houses of urban areas since the Portuguese embassy while traveling along the riverine route from Chittagong to Gaur noted that there were houses whose door opened right on the water.³⁹¹ Among the two ports of Satgaon and Chittagong, the former declined due to the silting up of the River Saraswati. From Satgaon the mantle was taken over by the Portuguese town of Hooghly- the most important city in the seventeenth century.

Hooghly was a large city, commercially important, so much so that as Campos points out- seven nations fought for supremacy near it. It primarily rose to prominence under the Portuguese and was only overshadowed with the rise of Calcutta. Because of its rising importance it suffered a Mughal attack in 1632. According to Campos the town of Hughli did not have any fortifications although the *Badshahnama* mentions of it having 'substantial buildings'. The *Riyaz* mentions that the English were absolutely prevented from fortifying Hughli.³⁹² The *Riyaz* also mentions that the *faujdar*s of Hughli were appointed by the Emperor at Delhi but from the time of Murshid Quli Khan as mentioned earlier the *faujdar* of Hughli came to be appointed by the Nawab of Bengal.³⁹³ This had led to the dispute between Wali Beg and Zia-ud-din Khan.

It was during this period that J. Burnell a servant of the English Company being dismissed from Madras had arrived in Bengal. Burnell points out that Wali Beg being unable to bring the rebel Zia-uddin Khan under control he was replaced by Abu Talib under whom Burnell took service. Burnell on his visit to the town of Hughli points out, that Hughli was a populous town. 'The house and the buildings were not magnificent but the merchants made a more splendid appearance.' Burnell who was writing towards the close of our period, in the early years of the eighteenth century mentioned that in the

³⁹⁰ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire*, p-109

³⁹¹ Chadha , 'Merchants Renegades and Padres', p-38.

³⁹² *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, p-30

³⁹³ Ibid.

settlement of Hughli there was a 'moors garrison'. There was also a 'castle' in it which had 'patteraroes and murderers' and a 'hoop gun' or a 'demi-cannon',³⁹⁴. Given the fluid political situation of the day the city of Hughli seems to be heavily armed. There was also a bazaar on the main street and stalls or shops which were lined on either side of the streets. So far as the Portuguese were concerned they were residing in Bandel that was at a distance of ½ a miles walk from Hughli. Burnell mentions that the Portuguese of Bandel were very lawless and without discipline. Burnell writes that the settlement of Bandel, was 'vilest, wickedest and the most profane spot of ground under the scope of heaven. All the sins that brought down vengeance from heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah, are here daily and hourly practiced without any detection or restraint, being a nest of banditti.'

The *Riyaz* mentions that Murshid Quli did not allow *faujdar*s to oppress the merchants at Hughli but at the same time he prevented the English from fortifying Hughli. Walter Clavell mentions that at Hughli were present weavers who wove cotton and silk and from the adjoining areas were brought silk, sugar, opium, rice, wheat, oil, butter, course hemp, gunneys. These goods could be procured by giving advances to the merchants who bought these commodities at places where they were cheapest. The Company issued passes to these merchants so that they could bring these goods free of customs to Hughli. Passes were also issued to the merchants while selling goods to them otherwise the merchants demanded an abatement in the prices of goods probably to keep their profit intact.³⁹⁵

Clavell mentions that the Dutch also had a flourishing trade at Hughli. They brought gold and copper from Japan, Tin from Malaya, Pepper, "Chank"(sankh or conch shell), betel nuts, Elephant and elephant teeth cloves mace, nutmeg, Gaunce (bell-metal) and also brimstone, vermilion, quicksilver and cloth. From Bengal, the Dutch procured,

³⁹⁴ These were the names of small guns and cannons respectively. John Burnell, *Bombay in the Days of Queen Anne*, description of Hughli, London, 1933,p-149-151.

³⁹⁵ Walter Clavell's Account of Hughli in *Streynsham Master Diaries 1675-1680*, vol ii, ed. R.C. Temple, London, 1911, p-79-84

rice, oil, cloth, raw silk, silk wrought, saltpeter, opium, turmeric, gingham, sugar, long pepper, and bees wax.³⁹⁶

The Portuguese who made Hughli a great center of trade, suffered a reversal in fortune when in 1632, ShahJahan laid a siege on Hughli and ousted the Portuguese from there. Although the Portuguese returned next year, their trade was no longer as brisk as it used to be. Walter Clavell who was writing an account of Hughli in 1676, mentions that 'The Portuguese though numerous in Hughli are reduced to a very low and mean condition.'³⁹⁷ Their trading activities were negligible and most of them derived their income as soldiers in the Mughal army.

Hughli was the center of the East India Company trade in Bengal. The Council chose Hughli over Balasore as the seat of its Chief and Council. It was argued that 'Hughli being the key ...of Bengala, where all goods pass in and out, to and from all parts, and being near to the Company's business, is more commodius for receiving of advices from and issuing of orders to all subordinate Factoryes.'³⁹⁸

The *Riyaz* mentions that the port of Hughli was overshadowed by that of Calcutta when the exactions of the *faujdar* of this place increased in comparison to that of Calcutta which flourished due to the 'liberality and protection afforded by the English, and the lightness of the duties levied there.'³⁹⁹

The other important cities of Bengal were Rajmahal and Dacca and Bowrey mentions the latter being 'a fairer and stronger citty' than Raj Mahal⁴⁰⁰. Tavernier mentions that the city of Rajmahal was located on the right hand side of the Ganges which was formerly the 'residence' of the governors of Bengal it being a great place for hunting as well as a commercial entrepot. John Marshall in his diary gives an account of the town and the palace of Shah Shuja⁴⁰¹ which was inside it. He says the town was quite large and had many stone houses in it 'tarassed at top,' and there were also thatched

³⁹⁶ Ibid, p-83

³⁹⁷ Ibid, p-84

³⁹⁸ *Streynsham Master Diaries 1675-1677*, vol i, p-500.

³⁹⁹ *Riyaz-us-salatin*- p-30

⁴⁰⁰ Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account of the Countries Round the Bay of Bengal, 1669-1679*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple, Delhi, 1997, p-143.

⁴⁰¹ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, ,p-70.

houses with walls of brick-‘the pitiful ones’. The house of Shahshuja was very long and it had a garden adjoining it and both together cost 25 lakhs of rupees. The house having cost 16 lakhs and the garden 9 lakhs. The garden however had an elaborate system of drainage complete with ‘leaden pipes’ which brought water from the source which was in a cistern outside the garden. There were also banqueting rooms near the palace.

Marshall felt that the town of Rajmahal was about 2 kos. long. He also mentioned of there being a mint here under Mughal authority.⁴⁰² The English East India Company’s treasure was coined here as well.⁴⁰³ The English had an establishment in Rajmahal called the English house which supervised the minting of the Company’s treasure there. But the carriage of bullion from Hughli to Rajmahal via Kassimbazar was hazardous as sometimes boatloads of bullion were lost either due to bad weather or robbery.⁴⁰⁴ The Company alternatively tried to coin its bullion at Madras or the mint at Murshidabad although none of these arrangements were satisfactory. The English house located near the river consisted of three little ‘small rooms’ and one little, ‘upper room’.

However the river Ganges it appears from Tavernier’s account to have shifted its course about a good half a league from the city. Marshall also mentions that in Rajmahal the streets were paved with cobbled stone but at the time of his visit much was broken and the town demolished. Thus under Islam Khan the vice-regal capital was shifted to Dacca, and remained so till Shah Shuja had again shifted it back to Rajmahal. Mir Jumla when he became governor of the Province had shifted the capital to Dacca once again.

The *Riyaz* mentions that the Mughal dominions in Bengal had considerably extended eastwards and therefore Rajmahal no longer remained located at the center of the *subah*.⁴⁰⁵ Thus the decision was made to move the capital to Dacca. It also served the purpose of putting a check on the Arakanese and the Portuguese pirates who made excursions to Dacca and ‘retired to mouths of the Ganges’. This was done during the governorship of Mir Jumla. While Rajmahal was called Akbarnagar, Dacca received the

⁴⁰² Ibid, p-10.

⁴⁰³ Ibid, p-22.

⁴⁰⁴ Sushil Chaudhury, Sushil Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organisation in Bengal 1650-1720: With Special Reference to the English East India Company*, Calcutta, 1975, p-108.

⁴⁰⁵ *Riyaz-us-salatin*, p-39

name Jahangirnagar after the Mughal Emperor Nuruddin Jahangir. Tavernier mentions Dacca as a 'large city, and a town of great trade.' Bowrey says, 'the city of Dacca is a very large spacious one, but standeth upon low marshy, swampy ground, and the water thereof very brackish'⁴⁰⁶. The brackish water was a source of inconvenience as the water could not be used for purposes of drinking. But the navigability of the river that ran close to it, was a great factor contributing to the prosperity of the city of Dacca. For ships weighing 5-600 tonnes could ply through it and the river being 'an arm' of the Ganges could probably be used for drinking purposes but the distance being about 40 English miles from some part of the city it was difficult to fetch the water.

Dacca was a bustling city with magnificent buildings and 'a multitude of Inhabitants'. Probably because of constant raids carried out by the Portuguese and the Arakanese, a large army was permanently stationed at Dacca with a number of war elephants. Both the English and the Dutch had each a factory at Dacca, but their investments here Bowrey mentions were small. Nevertheless, the presence of the factory was significant as here they were near the Prince and the court and under the protection of his *firman*, and thus free from the harassment of the governor or any native merchant. Dacca is also mentioned to have had a mint by Bowrey⁴⁰⁷. Abdul Karim in his study of the city of Dacca, points out that the very situation of Dacca, the central place being connected to the adjoining areas by means of water routes, made it a commercial entrepot of significance. A *shahbandar*, at Dacca, was also established by the Mughals, to control the trade and commerce of the region, for receiving taxes and issuing *rawanahs*(passes or permits) to the traders. Karim mentions that Dacca served a double purpose in relation to the country's commerce- the town as a manufacturing station and marketing place and the port as a place for receiving and dispatching both country and imported goods.

Karim draws a list of goods which formed articles of trade. These included, cotton goods, chattys(chati, home made lamp), gunnys (jute bags), chunam (lime), black cumin seeds, oil, shell, elephant's teeth, betel nut, betel leaf, tobacco, mat, cussom flower, cotton thread, coppas(cotton), rice, cossari (khesari, a kind of pulse), mug(a kind of pulse), mussore(pulse), cooloy(kalai, pulse), boot (a kind of pulse), muttor(mator,

⁴⁰⁶ Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account*, p-150.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid*, p-217.

peas), mustard seeds, onion, sugar, jaggery (gur or unrefined sugar), ghee(refined butter), salt, turmeric, ginger, chilly, chira(crisp rice), aubeer(abir, ointment), coconut, fish, charcoal, plank, timber, boat, wooden furniture, ink, paper, earthen pots, gold, silver, tootenague, iron and brass works, tin(iron sheets), honey, stone, bamboo, basket, rattan, opium, cloves, vegetables, straw and fruit. Some of these goods were imports from foreign countries, some were home manufactured goods, and the rest were agricultural, forest and river products of the country. The imports of the foreign country included mostly metal like iron copper brass and tin. These European companies paid mostly in bullion for the vast amount of goods from Dacca exported by them. As for the manufactured goods a portion of them were manufactured in the city itself which is indicated by names of some of the localities within the city, for instance Tantibazar or Sankharibazar, which in the local language would respectively imply the weaver's mart and the shell-workers mart. But so far as the agricultural products were concerned they came from places outside Dacca as well, from the neighbouring districts save a small amount vegetables that could have been grown locally. Karim mentions that the places marked as gardens in Rennel's Atlas- English garden, Dutch garden etc. were invariably vegetable and fruit gardens. The main districts which produced a surplus of certain agricultural products and sent them to Dacca for trading purposes were Sylhet which supplied *chunam* or lime, opium from Patna through Murshidabad and Calcutta, coppas from Dacca, Faridpur, Tippera and Noakhali districts, tobacco from Rangpur, jaggery from Faridpur, Noakhali, Bakerganj and Jessore districts. Rice came primarily from Bakerganj. But Dacca was most noted for its cotton goods. It achieved a world-wide fame for its fine muslins and for its coarse and fine fabrics. A description of the production and manufacture of cotton goods have been already outlined.

Fulta, was another important city and a Dutch possession which earlier received large vessels but when Grandpre was writing, the Dutch commerce consisted only of a Galliot that transported some goods from Chinsura. At Chinsurah the Dutch held authority while at Chandernagore the French had established themselves in 1673. The French settlement was to assume importance later under Governor-General Dupleix. At Srirampur the Danes had established their factory and settlement. At Mayapur the vessels of the French company stopped as they were unable to proceed to Chandernagore due to

the lack of the depth of water. But Mayapur, the French settlement deteriorated as did Fulta, although Grandpre does not mention if it was due to the changes in the depth and course of the river.

Kassimbazar was another 'famous and pleasant town'.⁴⁰⁸ It was famous for its flourishing commerce and great market, from which it got its name⁴⁰⁹. The English and the Dutch both had a factory here but the factory of the English was of more consequence than that of the Dutch, the chief at Kassimbazar being the 'second' in the management of the affairs of the East India Company⁴¹⁰.

Balasore was also another 'great, stragling town' according to Marshall⁴¹¹. But the houses of this town were made of dirt and thatch. Also near Balasore one could find buffalo, tigers, etc.

Towards the end of our period the town of Murshidabad under Murshid Quli Khan became important being the vice-regal seat of the Nawab who was gradually becoming autonomous of the authorities at Delhi. The author of the *Riyaz* mentions that in the beginning the city of Murshidabad was called Makhsusabad after the name of a merchant who established a settlement here. Later on when Murshid Quli Khan owing to the differences between him and the Prince Azim-us-Shan decided to separate himself from the latter and removed himself to Makhsusabad he renamed the city as Murshidabad, after his own name. He cleared the jungles at Dughariah and built a palace there and the 'Board of Revenue (*Diwan khana*) and Court of Exchequer were also established at this place.' When he was permanently conferred on the *subadar* of Bengal and Orissa in addition to his position as the Diwan he established a mint in Murshidabad and had 'struck at Murshidabad' inscribed on them. The author of the *Riyaz* mentions that it was a beautiful city and the inhabitants of it in society with the subadars had become refined and sophisticated in their manners and conversation which was like those of the people of Hindustan and different from that of rest of Bengal.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p-213.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Kasim meant husband or chief and bazaar a market. Kassimbazar was thus the chief of all markets.

⁴¹⁰ Thomas Bowry, *A Geographical Account*, p-213.

⁴¹¹ John Marshall, *Notes and Observations*, p-62.

But by far the most important English town was Calcutta. Regarding the foundation of Calcutta the *Riyaz* mentions that during the time of the Nawab Murshid Quli Khan the English factory at Hughli collapsed whereupon the English purchased a plot of land in Lakhoghat and started building a factory there. But the 'nobility and gentry of the Sayyid and the Mughal tribes' of the place opposed the scheme of building a factory there. They petitioned to Mir Nasir the faujdar of Hughli that the construction of the said factory should be stopped as the Europeans from the terraces of the yet unconstructed factory would interfere with the privacy and sanctity of their females. The faujdar communicated the matter to Murshid Quli and the latter gave orders to the faujdar 'prohibiting absolutely the English from placing a brick over a brick and from laying a timber over a timber...' The English decided to oppose the order whereupon hostilities broke out between the nawab and the English. The *Riyaz* mentions, 'Charnock decided upon a fight but the authority of the Nawab being over-powering he 'raised the anchor of the ship.' The English then started for the Dakhin. At this time the Marathas with whom the Emperor Aurangzeb was engaged in a protracted fight had cut off the supplies of the Emperor. The English at this juncture provided the Nawab and his troops with the necessary supplies and won the Emperor's favour. As a result they got permission from the Emperor to build a factory in Bengal and a remittance from all customs duty upon an annual payment of rupees three thousand to the royal customs house. Thus was born the city of Calcutta of which the *Riyaz* mentions, 'Calcutta is a large city on the banks of the river Bhagirati. It is a large port, and the commercial emporium of the English Company, and is subject to them. Small ships, called sloops, always every year come to that port from China, England, and other parts, and many remain there. At present, this city is the place of residence of the English Chiefs and officers and employes.' About Calcutta Grandpre mentions that Calcutta was the only European settlement of any importance on the right bank of the Ganges while the rest were all fixed on the left side. But the location was of inconvenience as the ground was not sufficiently above the water-level. The air of Calcutta was not healthy the place being marshy and the port being located 'exactly at the turn of two points, which augment the violence of the current in every state of the tide' Calcutta was situated so as to receive the whole force of the bar, which sometimes and especially in the spring tides was very great. As the place was located near the sea the

Riyaz mentions that it was damp and the houses though commodious and well ventilated were made of two or three stories where the groundfloor was unfit for dwelling due to dampness of the climate and the soil. He also mentions that water of the wells of this city was very salty and brackish and therefore unfit for drinking. The sea was only 40 kurohs distance from the city. The climate of Calcutta was not unhealthy during the four months of winter but during the rest of the eight months of the year especially during the monsoons the climate of the place was very unhealthy. The English also had a fort at Calcutta. But the town was impressive and the author of the *Riyaz* had verses dedicated to it.

About the city Grandpre mentions that it had a ship-building industry where vessels were made. However Grandpre complains of the unhealthy atmosphere of the city in terms of the lack of adequate methods of waste disposal and other municipal functions. Often the corpses of animals and sometimes even humans were dumped on canals that ran along two sides of the street along which also carried the entire municipal waste. This inconvenience was caused by the high water table in Calcutta where it was impossible to dig 'without finding water'⁴¹². The filth also attracted a lot of flies and mosquitoes⁴¹³. From Grandpre's account it seems that the jackals and the ravens, the natural scavengers, took the duty of keeping the city clean and protecting the city and its inhabitants from the clutches of plague and other diseases. These animals co-habited with the inhabitants of the city, roamed about without impunity in the streets of Calcutta and often landed in the middle of the crowd to take their prey⁴¹⁴.

To sum up our discussion, seventeenth century Bengal shows the growth of an interwoven network of an expanding agrarian frontier, an agricultural boom with expanding trade and commercial activities within Asia as well as with European trading Companies that arrived in Bengal during this period. An efficient and quick transport system by interlinked rivers and roads knit together the different production and manufacturing centres and aided the movement of goods from one part of the province to another. This encouraged trade and commerce particularly with the coming of the

⁴¹² L De Grandpre, *A Voyage in the Indian Ocean and To Bengal*, vol.-ii, p-6.

⁴¹³ *Ibid*, p-10-11.

⁴¹⁴ Grandpre, vol. ii, p-8.

European trading communities who set up their trading houses in different parts of Bengal. This period also saw the growth of important urban centers in different parts of Bengal as a result of growing commercial activities within the Province.

Conclusion

It is evident from the foregoing discussion that natural factors played an important role in shaping the history of Bengal. The region in the seventeenth century witnessed a production boom. Due to natural causes certain parts of the Province became more fertile than the others. In general the areas located near the large number of rivers that intersected Bengal were more fertile. In these areas the cultivation of maximum varieties of rice was carried out.

In the regions of eastern Bengal that were becoming more fertile due to the movement of the Ganges delta, forests were cleared, and new lands were put to cultivation. Here too the crop cultivated was rice, for the natural conditions suitable for the cultivation of rice were found in Bengal. Bengal not only produced enough rice to sustain its inhabitants but as we have seen rice was also a commodity for export to other countries. Other than rice Bengal was a major producer of textiles. In fact the availability of food grains and textiles at reasonable prices, attracted the European traders-the Portuguese, the Dutch and the English- to the Province. Bengal being a coastal Province, was engaged in overseas trade, but the presence of a large number of rivers acting as channels of transport and communication, also encouraged inland trade. The relative isolation of the Province from the imperial capital at Delhi made the European traders prefer this Province over the others, although throughout the seventeenth century we see the tussle between the native authorities and the traders.

From the political point of view the flux that we see in the politics of seventeenth century Bengal was due to its geographical location. It was a Province located outside the direct and effective control of the Emperor at Delhi, so that a number of centrifugal forces operated within it. In spite of the attempts at consolidating the Province, the native governors tended to rule autonomously and even the royal princes once turned rebels started taking shelter in the province. The southern portion of the region that is the deltaic region was so covered by forests and intersected by streams and rivulets that it made impossible for the Mughal cavalry to operate there. But these same areas gave shelter to the sea-faring Portuguese who engaged in piracy in the deltaic region but could also escape with impunity as the Mughals could not operate effectively in the southern marshes. In the declining days of the Mughal Empire the Province

became practically autonomous under the Nawabs and passed on finally to the hands of the English East India Company whose power was growing within the Province since the second half of the seventeenth century.

From the economic point of view, the frontiers of agriculture expanded in the seventeenth century. There was a proliferation of large number of landed tenures that aimed at bringing new lands to cultivation. Surplus production encouraged trade by the European trading Companies as well as the native traders which proved to be very beneficial for the Province. Trade with Europe brought in bullion leading to the increasing monetization of its economy. The efficient network of transport which the rivers of Bengal provided aided the quick dispatch and receipt of goods so that in the seventeenth century trade and commerce flourished. A large number of urban centers, that acted as sites for receipt and redistribution of goods also grew along the banks of the rivers. These urban centers were flocked by European as well as Asian traders and as centers of consumption their pull also encouraged production.

Thus we find in case of Bengal a province economically buoyant though politically remote in location. Because of this the Province could not be easily consolidated within the imperial framework. Its situation outside the Indo-Gangetic 'fortress' made it difficult to be administered from Delhi. Yet in the seventeenth century, Bengal, though remote and isolated from the point of view of the Emperors at Delhi, was connected to the world-wide trading networks due to its maritime ecology. The prospects of profitable trade attracted traders from all over the world. The Province due to natural factors already discussed was a land of plenty, so even in the declining days of the Mughals at Delhi, this remote Province continued to retain its prosperity and economic viability.

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