

**THE DYNAMICS OF FRONTIER REGIONS: ASPECTS  
OF THE NORTH EAST AND SOUTH EASTERN  
BENGAL UNDER THE MUGHALS**

**Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
The award of the degree of**

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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2008**



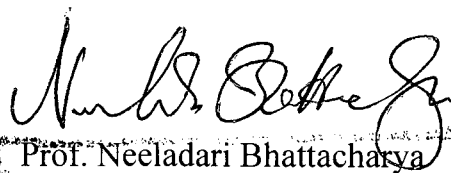
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The dissertation entitled “**The Dynamics of Frontier Regions: Aspects of the Northeast and South Eastern Bengal under the Mughals**” submitted for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** is my original work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree to this university or any other university.

  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, a small token of appreciation. I thank you for all your love, support and prayers.

Prof. Datta... thankyou for having more faith in me than I did. You stood by me through it all. I appreciate your concern.

Jarbom...I could never have come this far without you... all that you've done... and I'm also aware of the fact that there is no way of me ever repaying you.

To my friends...THANKYOU!!!

Protiva *di* for making sure I was well fed to face each new day. Gunjan, for all the *chai* which is what I live for. Tia...for not being there and letting me have the room...I owe you one. Evans thanks for your company through the summer. Rocky I'm sorry you had to bear all the moodswings and tantrums but I needed someone for that. Bhum...I'm still waiting for you to help me!

Sangmu and Deldan you guys kept me going although it was all through the phone. Shikha you never managed to infect me with a moment of nervousness...but I'd have survived even with it...I'm more worried for you when your time comes. Avi... with the work load I never plucked a single strand. Learn something from me please! Thankyou guys for encouraging me and the ..... sessions. I needed that.

Alexandre Schoudolski...you changed everything that I ever believed in.

## ABBREVIATIONS

1. **AB1**                      **Assam Buranji**
2. **AB2**                      **Assam Buranji**
3. **AHB**                      **Ahom Buranji**
4. **AIN**                      **Ain-i-Akbari**
5. **AN**                      **Akbar Namah**
6. **BG**                      **Baharistan-i-Ghayybi**
7. **DAB**                      **Deodhai Assam Buranji**
8. **Fathiyya**                **Shihab-ud-Din Talish**
9. **RS**                      **Riyaz-al-Salatin**
10. **SAB**                      **Satsari Assam Buranji**
11. **TN**                      **Tabaqat-i-Nasiri**
12. **TZ**                      **Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri**

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## Introduction

The Northeastern part of India, as it is designated today, along with the southeastern portion of Bengal came into contact with the Mughals ever since the latter rose to power in Bengal during the reign of Akbar. Jahangir from 1605-1627 and Shah Jahan from 1627-1658, were successive Mughal emperors who attempted to extend imperial hold over the kingdoms bordering Bengal. This zone was the bone of contention between the Mughals and the kingdoms on the frontier who sought to retain autonomy, and the European trading companies (in this case attention has been given to the Portuguese) who tried to control this lucrative tract. What was it that made this zone a contested region which the Mughals so keenly attempted to control from approximately the 17<sup>th</sup> century? Did this Mughal push have to do with opening an older active zone or opening new routes to the hills? Thus the frontier here is a region which is absorbant as well as porous, a melting pot of peoples, cultures, traditions and customs, inflicting upon its influences politically, economically as well as socially while simultaneously acting as a zone of contestation and pacification. Since the area taken into consideration is not a specific compact region, stretching from Bengal to present day Bangladesh, and Arakan (Lower Burma) the study is limited to specific areas which can be safely called frontier tracts from the geo-physical, economic, cultural and political point of view. Thus, suba Bengal, (as it was then collectively known), the eastern most of the Mughal empire, was one of the largest of the Akbari subas.<sup>1</sup>

The term "frontier" was borrowed into English from the French in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the meaning "borderland," the region of another country that fronts on another. The use of the term frontier to mean outside the pale of settled area is a special North American development as in the United States scholars apply the term to the "impact of the zone of unsettled land outside the region of existing settlements of Americans." As pioneers moved into the frontier they were significantly changed by the encounter. This is what American historian Frederick J. Turner in 1893 argued, that it offered a psychological sense of freedom, a sense of unlimited opportunities which in turn had many consequences. However, in the case of my study the frontier tract is an active settled area, an area with its own historical past, witnessing many migrations, aggressions, conquests yet having to adjust to historical upheavals, responding to, and, absorbing every wave of change, due to circumstantial exigencies thus giving it its fluid character due to its continuous embroilment in tussle and

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<sup>1</sup> Ahsan Raza Khan, *Chieftans During the reign of Akbar*, IAS, Shimla, 1977, p.177.

conflicting claims. As in Richard Eaton's Bengal frontier, this fluidity is not one of chaos for below it lie the economic, cultural, political frontier.<sup>2</sup> Eaton has looked at the frontier as a region of cultural intersection witnessing significant transitions where religio-cultural rooting of Islam occurs in the wake of an agrarian expansion. On the other hand, the path breaking essay of Surajit Sinha on pre-colonial Eastern and Northeastern India pointed out what earlier history writers ignored, the tribal kingdoms and the historical processes that connect these tribes to the Hindu civilisation.<sup>3</sup> This dissertation will attempt to show that the frontier kingdoms did not isolate themselves as a consequence of the Muslim onslaughts but continued to resist as well as incorporate the imperialists as need dictated. Regions such as Assam, Arakan, Chittagong, Sylhet, the Kuch region etc. have been seen as frontier tracts from the geophysical, political, cultural and economic point of view. Geophysically these tracts have many characteristics that are shared in common such as dense forests, rolling ridges, alluvial soil formed by natural inundation allowing vegetation in accordance with its topography. The political frontier has been shaped as boundaries of other states have merged, for instance Arakan or for that matter Chittagong. Prior to the Mughals the Afghans attempted at carving a hold over these regions. Following the Mughals, came the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the English thereby giving this region a particular importance thus giving further complexity and character to this frontier. The cultural arena saw a simultaneous confluence of the Islamic tradition as it moved eastward from north India along with the Sanskrit civilisation that continued its flow from Bengal through conquests and invasions bringing about a transformation in the form of Vaishnavism rooted with its creed of devotion to god or bhakti. An expanding agrarian economy provided shelter to many communities and it was not only the Mughals who attempted to hold this region for revenue but the indigenous as well as the Europeans whose cumulative efforts shaped an economic frontier as well. The following chapterization will give an overview of the various frontiers that intersected each other in order to capture the dynamism of these regions.

Although Munim Khan defeated Duad Kararani in the battle of Tukaroi on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1575 and laid the first foundation of Mughal rule in Bengal.<sup>4</sup> But it was only during the period of Jahangir that actual administrative work began. The early years of Mughal rule in Bengal was

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1206-1760*, Delhi, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Sumit Guha, "Forest Politics and Agrarian Empires: The Khandesh Bhils, c.1700-1850" *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol.33, No.2, 1996, p.133.

<sup>4</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, Manohar, Delhi, 1969, p.49.

a grim tale of an unsuccessful attempt on the part of the Mughals to create a utopia. History as narrated by Ralph Fitch who visited Bengal in 1578 referred to the troubled state of the land infested with rebels.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the author of the Ain calls Isa Khan as the ruler of east Bengal where “the khutba and the coinage were the only vestiges of imperial rule.”<sup>6</sup> The period of Akbar to the first eight years of Jahangir was an age of conquest. Mughal conquest thus opened a new era for Bengal- it re-established contact with Upper India. Through this was connected the land routes into Central Asia and Western Asia.<sup>7</sup> Her economic isolation was broken. With the opening of the sixteenth century, Goa became the seat of European power with the Portuguese soon dominating the Indian Ocean. Half a century after Portuguese conquest of Goa the adventurers-not as authorised agents of the government-secured for themselves tracts in Arakan and Sondip infesting the Bay of Bengal, the lower estuary of the Ganges all the way upto the Brahmaputra. This piratical world was broken in 1666 when the Mughals took Chatgaon.<sup>8</sup> In the cultural arena the Mughal era brought transformation in the form of Vaishnavism with its creed of Bhakti or devotion to god.

#### CHAPTERIZATION

The first chapter looks at the historical, geographical and cultural view of the northeastern and southeastern regions of Bengal. Muslim conquest of Bengal in the opening years of the thirteenth century may have been a sequel to the invasions of Mohammad Ghuri. But Bengal's contact with Muslims began much earlier, especially with regards to its coastal regions. This can be looked at keeping in mind the wider context of the rise of Islam and the subsequent spread of Arabs to different directions, Africa, Europe and Asia. Early references to Bengal are evident in the writings of Arab geographers. Abu al Qasin Ubaid Allah ibn Khurdahbih (d. 300/912) while speaking of trade interests on the coast of the Indian Ocean refers to a port called *Samandar* where rice was in abundance and aloe- wood was brought down for export from a region referred to as *Kamrun*.<sup>9</sup> Abu Abd Allah al-Idrisi (d. 561/1164) the famous twelfth century Arab geographer also refers to this port.<sup>10</sup> *Samandar* has been identified with a port in southeastern Bengal, the deltaic region with rice as the chief produce. Mention has also been made of *Kamrun* which is a variant form of *Kamrup* (Assam). This

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.82.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.82.

<sup>7</sup> Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Bengal: Muslim Period 1200-1757*, Patna, reprint, 1973, p.188.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.188.

<sup>9</sup> Mohammad Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 2 vols., Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud Islamic University Press, Riyadh, 1985, p.30.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.30.



region being abundant with aloe-wood has also been mentioned by Abul Fazl.<sup>11</sup> The first chapter closes with a look at the cultural frontier under the Mughals. If the arrival of the Mughals is seen as an extension of the spread of Islam, this frontier also witnessed a long march of the Sanskrit civilisation- Vaishnavism. The kingdoms of Assam, Koch and the Cacharis point to this. Thus, different elements are continuously at play, colonising, incorporating and expanding. All this constituted the hub of the cultural frontier.

The second chapter explores the complicated relationship that exists between the kingdoms on the frontier vis a vis the Mughals. With the frontier being fluid (as I have defined earlier), what entailed once the Mughals endeavoured to impose upon a new border and what shape would this give the elastic frontier? What relationships developed between the Mughal state and those on the frontier as an outcome of this? Did this push lead to a no mans land or did it lead to a point of deep contact between two zones? This brings us to the issue of how the frontier is contested and pacified, an area of cross-over of different types. So there is a need to look at this as an interface at different levels, for instance Koch and Assam. Here however, much of the focus will be on Assam.

Under the leadership of Sukapha, the Tai-Ahoms, a branch of the Shan race of Yunnan, crossed the Patkai range in the early years of the thirteenth century. History, from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century show that the Ahoms were fully consumed in the process of consolidating their position in Assam, extending their power and having to adjust to their neighbouring kingdoms, such as Kamata which in time transformed into the kingdom of Kuch Behar (Cooch Behar).

The regicide of 1389 which spelled a growing social contradiction has been accounted by Amalendu Guha as a stepping stone to the formation of state in Assam.<sup>12</sup> The head of the state was the king or *Swargadeo* as he was called. Although as head of the state all decisions, policies, be it war or civilian measures, titles, and honours emanated from him, he had to act in consultation with the three hereditary officers, the Buragohain, Bargohain and the

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<sup>11</sup> *Ain*, vol.ii,p. 187.

<sup>12</sup> Amalendu Guha, "The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into State Formation in Medieval Assam:1228-1800" in Surajit Sinhal (ed.), *Tribal Politics and State Formation in Pre-Colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, Calcutta,1987,p.162.

Barpatragohain. These three vested officers were so powerful they could make or unmake a king as evident after the murder of Shutupha in 1376.<sup>13</sup>

The entire adult population of the state was divided into *khels* having to render specific duty to the state. Three and later even four adult male constituted a *got*, a single male being called a *paik*. One *paik* from each *got* served the state for three months while the remaining *paiks* took to the cultivation and domestic concerns. This system rotated every three months in order that all *paiks* served the state. However, in cases of emergencies two to three *paiks* were called upon. It was this *paik/khel* system that served as the very backbone of the Ahom state.

Simultaneously with the process of state formation Assam also witnessed an intensified growth of the brahmanical influence. The ever growing number of the non-Ahom population reflects this. The growth of this Assamese speaking Hindu population led to the further division of labour within the kingdom. Territorial expansion also reflects the growth of the Hindu influence in the form of the Ahom kings taking to Hindu titles such as 'swarganarayan' or god of heaven.<sup>14</sup> The grafting of Hindu myths to Ahom legends also point to this further.

The Koch and the Cacharis like the Ahoms of Assam were a monarchical government with the king claiming divine right to kingship and tracing his origin to gods of the Hindu pantheon. The early history of the Koch kingdom is not very clear until the establishment of the kingdom by Biswa Singha. The kingdom created by Biswa and further consolidated by Naranarayan however did not last long as dissention set in which resulted in the creation of Kuch Behar on the east and Koch Hajo on the west. The Dimasa state formation took its crucial form in Maibong in the North Cachar Hills. Since its early time the Dimasas being continuously in war with its neighbours meant a necessity for an army on call at any time. Although overthrown from Dimapur (now in present day Nagaland) by the Ahoms the persistent threat of warfare always loomed large.

The third chapter locates the rise of Portuguese power in eastern Bengal. The maritime empire that the Portuguese created in India centred round the western Indian Ocean. As argued by Subrahmanyam, "bulk of the official Portuguese activity was meant to concentrate

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<sup>13</sup> AHB, p.49.

<sup>14</sup> Guha, "Ahom Political System" in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Polities*, p.136.

itself, and it was here too that the glorious 'deeds' (*feitos*) which the official chroniclers considered worthy of their pens took place, for the most part."<sup>15</sup> From the accounts of the Portuguese officials this region was the scene of order, of a formal empire, where official Portuguese presence was dominant. On the other hand the Bay of Bengal was seen as a different world, an 'alter-ego' where miscreants ruled.

But it is incorrect to see the Bay of Bengal as a world solely created by the *arrenegado* (renegades) and the *alevantado* (pirates). It was also not due to the superior Portuguese naval power. Different elements were at interplay as the political face of Bengal continued to change. Bengal witnessed a period of hostile political instability from the time of Sher Shah's occupation (1538) to the final establishment of the Mughals (1613). It was this troubled period that witnessed the height of Portuguese activities in the coastal regions. Establishment of Mughal authority did not put an end to Portuguese piratical operations carried under the aegis of the Arakan kings. Apart from plundering the wealth of Bengal, the freebooters also took away men, women, and children selling them as slaves and forcibly converting them to Christianity. But this cannot be said to be exceptional as this only reflects their activities elsewhere where commerce and proselytisation activities went hand in hand.

The last chapter focuses on the economic frontier. Bengal had been one of the most prosperous *subas* of the Mughal empire. It had also become one of the most important centres of international trade by mid seventeenth century. The last chapter however looks not at the economy of Bengal but at pockets that have been overlooked by most historians. Firstly, it deals with trade in slaves, a small and scantily studied aspect yet very dominant. Secondly, it looks at the frontier states of Assam, Kuch and Arakan.

The medieval economy of Bengal did not depend on slavery but Bengal was also not alien to this element. The flourishing coast of Arakan- Bengal thrived on the slave market. References to slave raids are found in the accounts of the Persian chroniclers to that of the traveller's. Abul Fazl mentioned that Bengal was the principal source of eunuchs for the Mughal empire.<sup>16</sup> He also states that "to the southeast of Bengal is a considerable tract called Arakan (Rakhang) which possesses the port of Chittagong..."<sup>17</sup> The expansion of the Arakan kingdom took place under Raja Minbin (1531-1553) leading to the occupation of most of

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<sup>15</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal 1500-1700*, OUP, Delhi, 1990, p.xiv.

<sup>16</sup> *Ain*, vol.i, pp.380-390.

<sup>17</sup> *Ain*, vol.ii &iii, pp.132.

eastern Bengal in the mid-1540s. He also employed the Portuguese who had superior maritime knowledge to enable him to navigate and construct boats and ravaged islands not under his possession. "Such was the extent of their depredations that the inhabitants of Dacca trembled when they heard the name of the Maghs, whose general practice was to kill the men and to carry off the women and children as slaves"<sup>18</sup> Similar echoes are heard in the account of Francisco Pelsaert.<sup>19</sup> At what point of time Bengal took to this trade is not certain but from the time of Marco Polo's visit this must have been prevalent as he does not fail to make a note of it.<sup>20</sup> Slaves were also a source of paying revenue and thus there are references to whole families or the women and children being sold off to slavery in lieu of land revenue.

Eunuchs comprised a special category of slaves. The demand for this kind of slaves was not new to Mughal Bengal. They were utilised in the imperial harems as well as of those well to do. Eunuchs were seen as trusted slaves, known for their loyalty. They were also a source of guarding the womenfolk of the royal household and the nobility. Although with the Mughal conquest of Bengal, especially with the reign of Jahangir, the Mughals attempted to put an end to this trade. But the continuation of slave trade even under the Mughals does prove that although this trade was small and infrequent, it was still a powerful one.

The Dutch played a considerable role in the slave trade. It depended much on the Bengal-Arakan coast for slave labour to feed its needs in the East Indies where the Dutch centre was located. This region also proved to be more viable for the Dutch with regards to the distance, transport, and survival rate of the slaves. Although the western Indian Ocean was also one of its sources of slaves, the Bengal coast was more lucrative.

This brings us to the need of opening up and studying the frontier region intersecting Bengal. The very location of the frontier here is contested due to the existence of groups who refuse to accept Mughal authority. A plausible explanation of a frontier is that of an area where there is a huge flow of migrants, labour, trade, exchange of ideas and information. This area, then, is not marginal, rather it is the centre of its own world, a world that has its own specific history which is still to be meaningfully explained.

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Stewart, *History of Bengal: From the First Mohammadam Invasion until the Virtual Conquest of that Country by the English A.D. 1757*, Delhi, 1971, p.296.

<sup>19</sup> W.H. Moreland and Peter Geyl (ed.), *Jahangir's India: The Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, Cambridge, 1925, p.47.

<sup>20</sup> Gavin Hambly, "A Note on the Trade in Eunuchs in Mughal Bengal", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol.94, No.1, January-March 1974, p.126.

## Chapter 1

### Historical, Geographical and Cultural Overview of Northeast and Southeast Bengal

Bengal was a frontier zone which came in the way of Turko-Mongol conquest and migration. However, the whole of Bengal will not be the focus of this chapter. Rather, the area covered will be the north east and the south east of Bengal. A geographic space that is territorially vast and yet shrouded in darkness for long. An ever changing zone that is hazy due to its fluid frontiers, where small kingdoms- Sylhet, Arakan, Assam, Koch Bihar- thrived. These kingdoms, although small, yet in terms of their wealth and commercial potential, were very wealthy. It is only from Persian annals, and accounts of expeditions launched in that area by the Bengal sultans, one gets an idea of the political units.<sup>1</sup> It is this area that we shall refer to as the northeast and southeast throughout this paper. This chapter throws light on the historiography and its geography in determining this frontier.

#### HISTORIOGRAPHY:

As the Turkish commanders entered Bengal in 1204, they were already deeply entrenched in the political ideas that had crystallised in Central Asia. It was in the wake of the decline of the Abbasid Empire and the domination of Turks, that Iranian jurists juggled to evolve a new theory which would reconcile with the classical unitary caliphal state and take into consideration the changing political scenario. The outcome was the theory of kingship according to which all spiritual and political affairs rested in the hands of the caliph. This was in theory only. While the spiritual domain was in the hands of the caliph and was symbolised by Baghdad, the latter part was wielded by those of the sword. All in all, authority was vested in the hands of the caliph not due to any divine intervention, nor his lineage, but to his ability to maintain social order and provide security to the state. Such were the ideals the Turks carried with them into eastern India- Persian ideals of kingship where societal need for a strong and able monarch was reciprocated by a just ruler as stated by Fakr al Din.<sup>2</sup>

The world is a garden, whose garden is the state (dawlat);

The state is the sultan whose gardener is the law (sharia);

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<sup>1</sup> Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, Delhi, 2006. p. 84.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1206-1760*. Delhi. 2006. pp.29. Fakr al Din (d.1209), an Iranian scholar and jurist of Herat who served the Ghurid dynasty of Turks.

It was Sher Shah who utilised Bengal as a stronghold for the last Afghan power, with its wealth as a support base and its bad climate as a barrier. Sher Shah seized Bengal in June 1538, and the last Afghan ruler of that province yielded up his realm to the Mughals in 1576, and the last independent local chieftan of that race was killed in Sylhet in 1612. But this period saw Bengal dotted with small holdings under the Afghans from whom the Mughals continued to wrest power. Sylhet proved to be one such province where the stream of Afghans continued to flow in from Orissa by way of east Bengal. A breakthrough for the Mughals under the leadership of Munim Khan came with the decisive victory on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 1575 with the defeat of Daud Khan, one of the last Afghan scions, which ruined the Afghan cause.<sup>3</sup> Once Bengal came under imperial control, Akbar perceived that the age of conquest was over and the more beneficent and enduring work of administration must begin.<sup>4</sup> Thus, Akbar decided that the subah (province) of Bengal should be divided into twelve sarkars with the necessary class of officers for regular administration. Along with the new viceroy, Muzaffar Khan (sipah salar, later called subahdar), Akbar sent departmental heads which included the Diwan, Bakshi, Mir Adl, Sadar, Kotwal Mir Bahar, Waqinavis and Todar Mal as the administrator of Bengal for the work of building up a new administration<sup>5</sup>. In addition to this, the newly appointed officers were also charged with settling the revenue of the country according to the new method adopted all over the empire to serve the interests of the state. However, we cannot state that real Mughal administration began in Bengal with the reign of Akbar. It was only after the first eight years of Jahangir's reign that administrative work began as prior to this history shows that the Mughals were mainly concerned with governors trying to subdue the various chieftans and principalities that dotted Bengal, hence more of a military occupation. Therefore, Mughal administration had not fully blossomed in Bengal and this period was not exempt from the advancing forays of other unopposed frontier kingdoms, as apparent in the numerous raids made by the Maghs (Mugs)<sup>6</sup>. While Raja Todar Mal and Munim Khan tendered to the administration of the newly created state, the Afghans who had fled into the neighbouring hinterlands continued to oppose Mughal authority. The Mughals at this time were treading on a highly combustible zone as

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<sup>3</sup> AN, v.iii, p.176. See Ghulam Husain Salim. *Riyaz us Salatin: A History of Bengal*, tr. Maulavi Abdus Salam, Calcutta, 1902. for Daud Khan, king of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 980 A.H. (1572) and reigned from 1572 to 1576 under the title of Abdul Muzaffar Daud Khan, p.154.

<sup>4</sup> Jadunath Sarkar, *The History of Bengal: Muslim Period 1200-1757*, Patna, Academeca Asiatica, reprint 1973, p.196.

<sup>5</sup> See Blochmann's tr. of AA, vol.i, p.32. The rent-roll associated with him is given in Jarett's tr. vol.ii, p.88 and also vol.i, p.336 and p.348 of Blochmann's tr.

<sup>6</sup> Arakanese

many dissident elements such as the Portuguese, the tribal chiefs and the Hindu and Muslim zamindars, all catered to the side of the Afghans.

#### The Geographical Centres: Eastern India

The province of Bengal is situated between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> degrees of the northern latitude, and between the 86<sup>th</sup> and 92<sup>nd</sup> of eastern longitude; being in breadth of about 300, and in length 400 miles.<sup>7</sup> It was in the fourteenth century that the idea of Bengal as a hell full of abundance took shape in the writings of the famous Maghrebian voyager Ibn Batuta, who visited Bengal. Similar echoes can be heard from other travellers who left behind accounts of Bengal. One such notable account is that of Bernier and his Travels in the Mughal Empire. Here he states:

“... Egypt has been represented in every age as the finest and most fruitful country in the world...but the knowledge I have acquired of Bengal during two visits paid to that kingdom, inclines me to believe that that the pre-eminence ascribed to Egypt is rather due to Bengal...”<sup>8</sup>

But Bengal was also far from the moorings of the political capital of north India. The flag of dissidence was frequently raised from here. Thus, according to Abul Fazl, Bengal was a bulghak-khanna, a ‘house of turbulence’.<sup>9</sup> It was a kind of a demotion away from the centre of power in North India, to an unknown frontier land.

Although Bengal’s geographic space has been much reduced in the recent century, it is still no doubt today a frontier zone with its fluid boundaries to the east, north and south as well. Its relationship with Tirhut (Mithila) and beyond represents its northern frontier while the eastern section relies much on its relation with Tripura, Kamta, Kamrup and Koch. However, Bengal attained its identity only after the Gupta epoch.<sup>10</sup> This is evident in the work of Herman Kulke where he states that:

majority of the early medieval states of India emerged from a process of continuous agrarian expansion and political integration...this development took place mainly in those areas of the South Asian subcontinent which had lain at the periphery or even outside the core areas of ancient state formations. This process started from the nuclei of early socio-economic and political development and increasingly came to include their hinterlands.<sup>11</sup>

I agree with Rila Mukherjee that the above statement implies that Bengal stood outside the core areas where the earliest centralised states were located. State formation occurred in Bengal through the evolution of various local nuclei which in turn incorporated their hinterlands. Thus, the post-Gupta period saw the growth of many states in Bengal. One cannot view pre-Mughal Bengal a void region, it had a different constitution from that of the north which made it seem alien to the Mughals.

The time span between the tenth and the thirteenth centuries is a dark period in the history of Bengal. As stated by Rila Mukherjee in *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, this period has been neglected by historians, as neither ancient nor medieval. Thus, it is ignored by those of the first and forsaken by the latter.<sup>12</sup> In the context of this chapter, when referring to this region, our focus primarily falls on three zones, the north eastern frontier zone ( Assam) of Bengal and the northern frontier zone (Kuch) and the eastern zone which touches up to modern day Bangladesh viz., Dacca, Chittagong, Sylhet. Abul Fazl in the *Ain* while describing Bengal states that:

Its rivers are countless and the first of them is the Ganges: its source cannot be traced. The Hindu sages say that it flows down from the hair of Mahadeva's beard.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Bowrey who toured Bengal between 1669-1679 stated that the Ganges was the principal river. He wrote that:

... the River Ganges is of large and wonderful Extent. Once I went through a Small rivulet of it called Dobra within the Isle of Cocks, and came into the great River, which rather deserves to be called the Sea of Ganges. The breadth of it there I cannot certainly affirme, but judge it is no less then 10 English leags broad, which is about 40 miles within Ganga Sagar, or the mouth of it. Certain it is that this is the Great River Ganges that Alexander

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<sup>11</sup> Herman Kulke (ed)., *The State in India 1000-1700*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, p.233.

<sup>12</sup> Mukherjee, *Strange Riches*, pp.viii-ix.

<sup>13</sup> *Ain*,v.ii.p.133.



the Great sailed downe in the time of his great conquests in Asia...It disperseth its streams through many spacious deserts and multitudes of kingdoms and is known to be of great breath in many places Up in the Countreys of Pattana and South Tartaria...<sup>14</sup>

The Bengal delta thus is a low-lying flood plain which opens into the Bay of Bengal to the south. A range of disconnected hills surround it to the west, north and east. It is from here that that the above mentioned river (Ganges) flows out along with the Meghna and the Brahmaputra. These rivers constitute some of the largest rivers of southern Asia. Along with their tributaries, they meander their way along the delta depositing considerable amount of soil and sand, “which over the millennia have gradually built up the delta’s land area, pushing its southern edge ever deeper into the Bay”<sup>15</sup> From the ancient times these very rivers have been the main means of transport and communications while at the same time giving a definition to Bengal’s physical and cultural regions such as – Varendra, Bhagirathi-Hooghli basin, Vanga, Samatata, and Harikela (see map 1).<sup>16</sup> The Varendra territory was situated on the northwestern delta north of the River Padma. Today it constitutes the districts of Malda, Pabna, Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpur and Rangpur. Several ancient cultures formed in the Bhagirathi-Hooghli basin – Suhma, Vardhamana, Radha and Gauda. These correspond to the modern districts of Midnapur, Howrah, Hooghli, Burdwan, Birbhum and Murshidabad. East of the Meghna river in the southeastern delta was the ancient Samatata cultural zone. This is a hilly region which corresponds to today’s Comila, Noakhali and Chittagong. The delta’s northeastern hinterland covers what is today Mymensingh and Sylhet. Thus, as the horde of Turkishmen invaded this area, they found that the delta was in no way a vacuum.

Its geographical position secures it from any attacks from the outside. Along the whole northern frontier from Assam, westward, there runs a belt of low land of 10 to 20 miles breadth, covered with the most exuberant vegetation, particularly a rank weed, named in Bengal the augeah grass, which sometimes grows to the height of 30 feet, and is as thick as a

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of the Countries Round the Bay of Bengal*, New Delhi, 1997, pp.210-211.

<sup>15</sup> Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*. p.3. Also for the role of the riverine geography in determining its history.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3. See footnote for these ancient subregions.

man's wrist, and mixed with these are tall forest trees.<sup>17</sup> The river Ganges intersects Bengal in a south easterly direction and separates it into territorial divisions nearly equal in extent. The tract to the east of that river, in the case of an invasion, is exempt from the devastation of war, offering a safe zone to its inhabitants. It is the northwest which is the most accessible portion, but this area also has many points of defence. The tract of Bengal on the whole is a flat one. The tract of annual inundation was called Banga, whence probably the name Bengal was derived; the upper parts of Bengal, which are not liable to inundation, were called Barendra.<sup>18</sup>

Rice, grew luxuriantly in this country, especially in its southern districts. It sees a high yield of rice annually. It is possible to grow two to three crops a year in the same field. Tavernier attested that Bengal grew rice in abundance and furnished its neighbours as well as many other remote areas. He further states that "... it [Bengal] also abounds in sugar, so that it furnishes with it the Kingdoms of Golconda and Karnataka, where there grows very little."<sup>19</sup> This was enabled by the endless number of channels the country possessed for the conveyance of merchandise not only within but outside [see chapter 3 on the economic frontier]. Thus even the hard bitten Bernier was moved to state that Bengal abounds in everything. While at the court of Emperor Jahangir, the European traveller Thomas Roe too remarked that "should Bengala be poor, I see no reason; it feeds this country with wheat and rice: it sends sugar to all India, it hath the finest cloth and pintadoes, musk, civet, and amber..."<sup>20</sup>

Thus eastern India has been blessed with one of the most intricate riverine networks with the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta dominating its physical geography, stretching from present day Bengal to Bangladesh in its entirety. This area is characterised by the slow moving ubiquitous feature of the main rivers and its tributaries. Areas which are not a part of deltaic Bengal such as Tipperah, Sylhet and Chittagong in the east, Kuch Behar in the north and Burdwan,

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Hamilton, *Geographical, Statistical, And Historical Description of Hindoostan And the Adjacent Countries*, Oriental Publishers, New Delhi, 1971, vol.i.p.2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*,p.3.

<sup>19</sup> Tavernier, vol.ii,p.140.

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Haroun al Rashid, *Geography of Bangladesh*, University Press of Bangladesh, 1977, p.175.

Bankura and Midnapur in the west saw great amount of river transport. The centre of Bengal is marked by the riverine and deltaic plains. From the south west to the south east, its peripheries are marked by the mouth of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta with its mangrove forests known as the Bhati and the Sunderbans. The plains of the Brahmaputra valley viz., Kamrup, Kamta and Assam and the Garo and Jaintia Hills lie to the east of Kuch Behar and Bogra in Bengal. To the south east Bengal is bounded by the Chittagong hills beyond which we find the coastal plains of Arakan. This last region however is well connected to the rest of the world by sea. This set of water bodies with its plains give eastern India a highly developed network of transport. Anyone could travel from Ilahabad which is in the west to Chittagong and Arakan in the east, also from Dhubri or Patna located in the north to Hijli or Jessore tucked away in the south, by these waterways, along the rivers and coast of eastern India.<sup>21</sup> Thus, eastern India took to riverine transport due to its speed as well as its cheapness, but this does not mean that land transport took to a back seat. Land transport was always present but supplementary to that of the river. Bernier's account attests this:

In describing the beauty of Bengal, it should be remarked that throughout a country extending nearly a hundred leagues in length, on both banks of the Ganges, from Rajmahale to the sea, is an endless number of channels, cut, in bygone ages, from that river with immense labour, for the conveyance of merchandise and of the water itself, which is reputed by the Indians to be superior to any in the world.<sup>22</sup>

A variety of boats described in the accounts available to us attests to the fact that water transport was of a great magnitude and that it was a part of everyday life in this region. The account of Mirza Nathan, the *Baharistan i Ghaybi* gives a list of twenty different types of boats. These are: kusa, bajra, jaliya, dhura, khelna, sundara, bachari, patala, mahalgiri, postas, parkusas, mandkusas, maniki, katari, bathila, pashta, machua, pal, balia, piara, ghurab and the bhadia.<sup>23</sup> The patala and the bhadia were utilised for heavy cargo. The mandkusa was used for the transport of huge commodities such as the elephant. For marshy waters, the khelna was used, which was a roundish craft. This was also used for shallow waters. Unlike the khelna, the jaliya could seat many people at a time. The use of this was popular especially with the Arakanese and the Portuguese. These boats were utilised simultaneously for military as well as commercial purposes. The account of Mirza Nathan shows that very often the boats

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<sup>21</sup> See *BG*, by Mirza Nathan, 2 vols., tr. M.I. Borah, Gauhati, 1936 for the use of water transport as well as the European accounts of Manrique, Bowrey and Bernier.

<sup>22</sup> Bernier, pp.441-2.

<sup>23</sup> *BG*, vol.i, pp.51,330,395.

of the traders known as *baparis* (traders) were often borrowed or even loaned for military purposes as evident in the case of Islam Khan as he marched to Baliya. This account also mentions the review of boats where we hear of the *katari*, *maniki*, and *bachila* arranged with big cannons by Mirza Nathan for the campaign in Kuch.<sup>24</sup> The quote given below gives much weight to the use of boats for warfare:

The next morning Mirza Nathan was called in preference to all others and he was invested with the insignia of the sardarship for the suppression of the Kuch insurrection. Then he was despatched at an auspicious moment with a force of one hundred and twenty mansabdars, and one hundred and forty ferengis, eight hundred matchlock men, fifty fully equipped war boats and large equipments of war. Owing to the heavy rains of the season it was not possible for men and beasts to traverse the way except by boats. So he prayed for some more boats, saying, "The warriors of the fifty boats are accommodated in those boats. This humble self will somehow go with his own followers. But the other two to three thousand men will require boats of their own. If it is not possible to provide boats from the state, please order me to procure these boats from the Baparis (traders) either on hire or purchase or by force for the execution of imperial affairs. I will pay the money from my own purse and will also manage to secure boatmen for these boats" Ibrahim Khan agreed to this and ordered him to procure the boats from whomever he could. The Mirza returned to his residence and appointed some of his trustworthy officers to accomplish this work. The merchant-princess of Jahangirnagar who were incline to transact business with him advanced Rs. 100,000 to him against the deeds of loan (*tamassukat*). His officers brought the boats of Beparis. Those who agreed to give the boats on hire sent their own boatmen and gave security for their presence. The rate of hire was fixed and they were paid. Price was immediately paid to those who agreed to sell. Seven hundred boatmen were appointed and they were given two months' salaries in advance.<sup>25</sup>

## THE GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT: THE SOUTHEASTERN ZONE

The Sylhet region of east Bengal was outside the pale of human habitation, where there is no distinction between natural and artificial, infested by wild animals and poisonous reptiles, and covered with forest outgrowths.

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<sup>24</sup> See BG. Vol.i. pp. 48-50 for the use of boats for warfare.

<sup>25</sup> BG, vol.ii, pp.634-64.

Sylhet is a mound of flood-plain on the Surma River in today's northeast Bangladesh. The land, infested with thick forests is broken only by rivers. Since this area receives one of the highest levels of rainfall in south Asia, the inhabitants are forced to live on elevated sites. This is evident in Eighteenth Century District Records which indicate that Sylhet repeatedly repaired and renewed their embankments on farms and river banks so as to prevent the land from washing away. It was here that the Afghans fled, up through the Meghna, making it their stronghold when the Mughals conquered the provinces of Orissa and Bengal.<sup>27</sup> This was also the same area where high caste hindus had escaped the Afghans three centuries earlier. For the imperialists the conquest of this tract meant a frontier town on river highways which would inevitably act as an opening into further unconquered lands.<sup>28</sup> In this way the Mughals brought unprecedented force when in 1612 they sailed up river and conquered it.<sup>29</sup>

Sylhet, is bounded on the north by the District of the Jaintia and Khasi Hills.<sup>30</sup> This very range continues on the east for a short distance. It is also bounded by Kachar as far as the Chatrachara mountain which acts as the extreme south eastern tip.<sup>31</sup> On its south lies the District of Tipperah and the Bengal District of Mymensingh on the west.<sup>32</sup>

Ancient history has it that the king of Bengal, Adisur, wished to perform an auspicious sacrifice but finding the Brahmins of his kingdom inadequate called for five Brahmins of Kanauj (Oudh). Having finished with this encounter, the king feeling only remorse for their inadequacy took to a reckless persecution of them. In an attempt to escape this wrath many fled to the adjoining hinterland. The Sylheti Brahmins are believed to be descendents of these. The Musalmans are believed to have entered this area in the latter part of the fourteenth century. If we follow Eaton, we find that it was the horde of Turkish invaders who expelled

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<sup>26</sup> Cited in Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, p.3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.110-111, 156-8.

<sup>28</sup> David Ludden. 'Investing in Nature around Sylhet: An Excursion into Geographical History.' *Economic and Political Weekly (EPW)*, 2003, Nov.29, p. 5082.

<sup>29</sup> *BG*, pp.110-111.

<sup>30</sup> William W. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal: Assam volume*, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Calcutta, 1997, p.259.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.259.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.259.

the Hindus of Bengal into these frontier zones, especially Sylhet. Sylhet at that time was divided into three divisions- Gor (Sylhet), Laur and Jaintia. The last Hindu King, Gaur Gobind could not withstand the powerful Shah Jalal and of the former three divisions, Gaur, fell to the Afghans. It was with the coming of Akbar into Bengal that Sylhet passed into the Mughal hands and from thence on the successive Mughal emperors.<sup>33</sup>

Chittagong province is situated in the south eastern extremity of the Bengal province. To the north it is bounded by the Tipperah district; on the south by Arakan; to the east it has the Birman empire; and on the west the sea.<sup>34</sup> Its interior being remote from the sea coast has a hilly terrain much covered with jungles. What advantage this area possesses is the accessible sea port, its capital, Islamabad being well situated for external commerce as well as for the construction of ships from imported timber as well as from indigenous ones. This is proven by Abul Fazl who writes "Chatgoan [Chittagong] is a large city situated by the sea and belted by woods".<sup>35</sup> He further states that it was an excellent port and a resort of the Christians and other merchants. The Chittagong volume of the Bengal District Records is on the same lines as Abul Fazl. Walter Hamilton is of the view that Chittagong probably belonged to the independent Kingdom of Tipperah. This, being a frontier province met with two different forces, Hinduism and Buddhism. Chittagong could have taken to both these two religions, as seen in the beginning of the sixteenth century by the Afghan kings of Bengal and during the wars between the Mughals and the Afghans, it resorted to the latter. Francis Buchanan who had visited in 1798 writes

I remained at the town of Chittagong, which is very populous, and owing to the cheapness of the materials, bamboos and grass for thatch, is better built than the generality of places in Bengal. The Portuguese who formerly had a grant of the place from the Arakan kings, are still numerous, and have a church... It would seem originally to have belonged to Tipperah, who were driven out by a number of Mohammedan adventurers. These again are subdued by the Kings of Arakan, who possessed it and the southern parts of Tipperah, till the accession of the family of Timour; and it was wrested from them more by the treachery of a Portuguese adventurer, who had obtained a principality in the Gangetic islands, than by the prowess of the Hindocstane soldiers.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See BG and Tuzuk.

<sup>34</sup> Hamilton, *Geographical, Statistical, And Historical Description of Hindoostan*, vol.i.p.167.

<sup>35</sup> Ain, vol.i, p.136.

<sup>36</sup> Wliiem van Schendel (ed). *Francis Buchanan in SouthEast Bengal (1798)*, Delhi,1992.p.123.

Also evident in Bernier's account, the Arakan king kept foreigners i.e. Portuguese as "a species of advanced guard for the protection of his frontier, permitting them to occupy a sea port called Chatgoan and making them grants of land".<sup>37</sup>

Dacca was renamed Jahangirnagar in honour of the reigning monarch and made the new capital of Mughal Bengal in place of Rajmahal in 1612. This transfer however was not a preconceived plan of Islam Khan but rather the dictates of circumstances. Owing mainly to its strategic position, Dacca soon grew into economic, political and military importance. Raja Man Singh strengthened the fortifications around Dacca so much so that it began to be regarded as one of the four fortresses of Bengal. Likewise, Islam Khan's stay in Dacca transformed it from a military site to a seat of civil government consequently emerging as the official capital as well as the centre for trade and manufactures. The older capital, Rajmahal, was gradually abandoned. The city had stood on the course of the river Ganges and as a change in its course made the river recede further making it inaccessible by war-boats. Further, by this time political interests had also shifted to the eastern and southern regions of Bengal from the northern and western. This definitely would mean that the political importance of Rajmahal would have diminished. However the diminishing importance of Rajmahal alone cannot be blamed for the transfer of capital. Islam Khan was bent on subduing Musa Khan and the Twelve Bhuyans and then Khwaja Usman of Bokainagar. For this to be accomplished the transfer to Dacca was a necessity.

Eastern Bengal was also well connected further deep into southeast Asia, particularly its neighbour Arakan. The Arakanese were Burmese people who spoke the Burmese language known as Mugg, corrupted into Bengali as Mag. The Arakanese were however separated from Upper Burma though a range of mountains although it had two passes through it. From the early medieval times, especially after 1200 A.D. contact between eastern India and Arakan was closer than with the rest of Burma. Perhaps this was due to the easy access to the waterways as Arakan was well connected with the rest of the world through the sea. The relation between Bengal and Arakan was hot and cold, both taking tributes from each other

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<sup>37</sup> Bernier, p.175.

depending on the strength of the monarch and his army.<sup>38</sup>This fluctuation of fortune affected the functioning of Chittagong which often changed hands between the two.<sup>39</sup>

Arakan thus was a major player in the southeast. In 1459, Chitagon came under its rule although it was occasionally annexed by Bengal sultans as in the case of Allauddin Hussain Shah or Nusrat Shah although it remained under Arakanese control. Its contact with Bengal surged ahead during the Ilyas Shahi rule which blossomed further under the Hussain Shahi. The advent of the Mughal tenure in Bengal however was infavourable for Arakanese-Bengal relations. By the time the Mughals established themselves in Bengal, the Arakanese had well developed the port of Mrauk-U to rival Chattagram.

Chattagram-Jugdia formed its western frontier. On its north was Tripura with Pegu on the south under the King of Burma. Its eastern frontier eastern frontier was Siam. The Irrawady delta in the seventeenth century saw a resurgence for a brief time under Burma which saw Arakan being attacked continuously. The only alternative left was to move eastward into Bengal to protect its chief maritime port which meant through Chattagram-Jugdia. It is this area which is important for the history of medieval Bengal. Arakan's route to this area lay in Bhalwa (in Noakhali district of modern Bangladesh). With the onset of the Mughals in Bengal, the fight over this region between Arakan, Mughals and Tripura took a new face. The Arakanese continuously aided the zamindar of Bhalwa in the face of Mughal onslaught. The presence of the Portuguese did not help much as the local rulers enlisted them to fight against each other.

Although Qasim Khan took to an offensive expedition against Chattagram in the early seventeenth century it failed to bring the area under Mughal control.<sup>40</sup>It was only under Shaista Khan that the region fell to the Mughals in 1666 but this seems to be for a short period as in 1729, the nawabs of Bengal revolted which left Chattagram wide open. It is not sure whether Arakan held sway over this area during this time. If Chattagram was only notionally a part of Bengal, how did relations between Arakan and the Mughals remain cordial?

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<sup>38</sup> Aniruddha Ray, *Adventurers, Landowners and Rebels: Bengal c. 1575-1715*. Delhi, 1998, p.23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>40</sup> *BG*, vol.i, pp.404-08.



The account of Mirza Nathan states that Arakan possessed ten thousand war-boats, fifteen hundred elephants and one million infantry.<sup>41</sup> Thus, from this account one can argue that Arakan was a naval power and Chhattagram could serve as a deep water port which it lacked. Hence, the author of the Baharistan rightly states that Arakan installed "...seven hundred *ghurabs* (floating batteries) and four thousand *jaliya* boats..." as protection against the Mughals.<sup>42</sup> It was the importance of this western frontier against the Mughals that forced the Arakanese to enter into an alliance with the Portuguese whereby they were allowed to live and trade in Chhattagram and Dianga (the Portuguese and the frontier will be taken up in Chapter 4 of this dissertation).

### GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT: THE NORTHEASTERN ZONE

The mighty Brahmaputra, one of the largest rivers of the world, flows right through Assam nurturing its land and the complex eco-system around it. Assam, in Sanskrit means 'peerless' or 'unparalleled'. It was known as Pragjyotisha or the place of eastern astronomy during the epic period (Ramayana and Mahabharata), and later named as Kamrupa, the place where Kamdeva, the 'Lord of Love' in Hindu mythology was born. Pragjyotisha includes not only the whole of Assam but also parts of north and east Bengal (at present in Bangladesh) and the hill tracts upto the borders of China.<sup>43</sup> Today, the widely accepted opinion of the scholars is that the name Assam was derived from the original name of the Ahoms, who ruled the land for about six hundred years prior to the annexation to the British. It is the same territory mentioned in the Ain-i- Akbari as '*Asham*', '*Asam*' in the Padshahnamah, and as the Account of Asam of Francis Hamilton.<sup>44</sup>

The earliest epigraphic reference to the Kingdom of Kamrupa is found in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta. It is also mentioned as a 'pratyana' or a frontier state outside the Gupta Empire. The writings of the Arabian historian, Alberuni in the eleventh century A.D. had also mention Kamrupa, "this eastern frontier kingdom was known as Pragjyotisha and Kamrupa, and the kings called themselves as Lords of Pragjyotisha"<sup>45</sup> The years between 1205-6 is a land mark in the history of Assam, it saw the repeated attempts of the Turko-

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., vol.ii.p.710.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., vol.ii.pp.629-30.

<sup>43</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*. Publication Board of Assam, Gauhati, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition,2007. Vol.i, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> As to the origin of the name see also Gait.

<sup>45</sup> S.K. Sharma and Usha Sharma. ed. *Discovery of North East India*, Mittal Publication, Delhi, vol.11. p.ix.

Afghans of Bengal followed by the Mughals to conquer it. This continued attempts with occasional breaks lasted till the end of the seventeenth century. The powerful Koches, the rulers of Kamat and Kamrup could not stem the imperialists tide. This hot-bed was further fuelled by the rise of the Ahoms in Upper Assam, where collision only became inevitable. It was this portion of Assam that aroused the imperialists with its elephants, gold dust, fertile plains and forests.

It was in 1215 A.D. that the Tais under Sukapha entered the Brahmaputra valley. This is a well known fact documented both by tradition and records. The Tais in 1215 left Moang Mao and not Moang Mit as believed by some scholars.<sup>46</sup> The Assam Buranji translated by R.S.G.C. Barua gives a divine character to this migration. The buranji contains many legends and amongst it is the tale of the descent made by Khunlung and Khunlai through an iron ladder from heaven as the country was in turmoil. The origin of the Ahoms thus seems to be shrouded in mystery.

Assam's relations, politically speaking, with the Mughals began through Koch Behar. This kingdom in the second half of the sixteenth century, under Nara Narayan, was not only the most populous but also the most powerful state in north-east India. Its boundaries, both western and southern were contiguous to the eastern and northern frontiers of Mughal Bengal. Nara Narayan had always felt scorn for the Ahoms. The invasion of Sulaiman Kararani's general in 1568 rendered him helpless unless he allied with the Ahoms. The latter, freed from Koch tutelage had other designs. On the side of the Mughals, the defeat of Daud and the conquest of Bengal meant direct contact with the states to its northeast. This brought the Mughals and the Koches together as evident in the Akbarnamah. This alliance however could not stand the test of time. The year 1581 changed the fate of history for the Koches and marked full-fledged intervention of the Mughals on Koch soil. Raghu Dev (Patkunwar according to Abul Fazl), the son of the younger brother of Nara Narayan had been appointed heir apparent to the throne. Raghu Dev's race to the throne, however, was untimely destroyed by the late birth of Laksmi Narayan, son of Nara Narayan. The ambitious Raghu Dev however rebelled against his uncle, crossed the Manas with a few followers and built a new capital city at Barnagar. A compromise was made between the uncle and the rebellious nephew with the Sankosh river as the dividing line. Areas west of the river would remain as

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<sup>46</sup> Barpujari, H.K. *Comprehensive History of Assam*. Publication Board of Assam, Gauhati, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 2007. Vol.ii, p.51. See *Assam Buranji: From the Earliest Time to the End of Ahom Rule*, reprint, 1985, tr. RSCG Barua for Ahom migration, pp.5-25.



Koch Behar (including parts of Dinajpur and Rangpur), with its capital being Kamata, which would be inherited by Lakshmi Narayan upon the death of Nara Narayan. East of the Sankosh upto the Barnadi thus came to be known as Kamrup or Koch Hajo as in the accounts of the Persian historians. This ultimately weakened both sides. When one side sought the aid of the Mughals the other soon resorted to the Ahoms. The death of Nara Narayan added fuel to this bitter rivalry between the east and the west. The end result was a serious strain in the Koch-Mughal alliance as the relation between the two underwent serious changes.

The growing enmity between the cousins forced them to look around for allies. In order to strengthen himself and to counter balance the Koch-Mughal alliance, Raghu Dev looked to Isa Khan, the notorious zamindar of Bhati. On the other hand, Lakshmi Narayan thought to buy the Mughals to his side. This has been recorded in the Akbar Namah of Abul Fazl. At a frontier town near Ghoraghat region, the latter met with Man Singh in 1596 and offered his sister Prabhavati in marriage and accepted Mughal suzerainty.<sup>47</sup> Gait, Stewart and Jadunath Sarkar assert, perhaps on the evidence of the Akbar Namah that Lakshmi Narayan became a vassal of the Mughals.<sup>48</sup> However this source fails to mention any kind of tribute or personal service, or even both. It was only in 1609 that Lakshmi Narayan offered personal service to Man Singh at Ghoraghat. Gait, however, seems to be wrong when he states that the Koch king offered his sister in marriage to Man Singh.

The untimely death of Isa Khan in 1599 proved a disaster for Koch-Hajo. Raghu Dev's geographical position assessed would mean that he held a position between Assam in the east and Koch Behar in the west. If the marriage alliance between Man Singh and Koch Behar took place, he would be stuck in the middle. The only other possibility was a marriage alliance of a Kamrup princess with the Ahom King Sukhampha. This was a move that would calm the attacks from both sides. The Ahoms on the other hand saw that this alliance could benefit them as it would strengthen Kamrup as a buffer against Mughal imperial designs. But destiny had other designs, the imperialists, continued their policy of subjugating Koch Behar whereby Kamrup indirectly felt its hostilities. His recalcitrant son Parikshit did not do much

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.96.

<sup>47</sup> See Gait, *A History of Assam*.

<sup>48</sup> Stewart, p.119, Gait, p.64, and Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, vol.ii.p.212 assert, perhaps on the evidence of the AKN that Lakshmi Narayan became a Mughal vassal. But AKN is vague and does not mention this tribute or personal service or both. Man Singh was most conciliatory. It was only in 1609 that Lakshmi Narayan brought tribute and offered personal service to Islam Khan at Ghoraghat,p.14. Gait, p.64-5 again says that Lakshmi Narayan married his daughter to Man Singh. This is wrong.

to quell the burning situation. The age old-dynastic friction between Koch Behar and Kamrup continued to grow. In a state of desperation, Lakshmi Narayan approached Islam Khan, the Mughal governor of Bengal, for support. It is stated in volume one of the Baharistan i Ghaybi that Lakshmi Narayan expressed his loyalty through the mediation of the Raja of Susang. The text further states that Lakshmi Narayan sent a suitable *peshkash* and it was agreed upon that when an army was despatched against Kamrup, he would help bring it under subjection. With Koch under their belt, the Mughals found an outlet into Assam and Parikshit who could do nothing to help his deteriorating situation in the wake of an advancing imperial attack. The only alternative was to renew the old alliance with the Ahoms and hence Parikshit offered his daughter, Ratnamala, in marriage to Susengpha (Pratap Simha 1605-41).<sup>49</sup>

This Mughal-Kamrup war can be seen from three angles. Firstly, the dynastic quarrels between the two Koch princes referred to in the local chronicles. Parikshit's aim of grabbing his nephew's kingdom as pictured in the Persian accounts. Secondly, Lakshmi Narayan's persuasion of Islam Khan to invade Koch-Hajo was for his own subjection. The third factor, being the most decisive, seems to be Islam Khan's urge to bring Kamrup in the lower Brahmaputra valley under the imperial hold.

After Koch Behar and Kamrup, Assam was the last state in north eastern India to feel the brunt of Mughal imperialism. The conquest of Kamrup was two-fold. On the one hand, the conquest of Kamrup and Koch Behar brought the Mughals face to face with disaffected elements. On the other hand, the Ahoms fully aware of the implications of Mughal expansion readily gave support to the rebels in Kamrup. The annexation of Kamrup meant that clashes between the imperialists and the Ahoms were indispensible. A major factor here was the viceroy of Bengal, Qasim Khan, brother of Islam Khan, who dreamt of bringing his brothers' ambition in the north east to its climax. The river Bar Nadi had been the eastern boundary of Kamrup, but with its subjugation, the Mughals went up to the mouth of the Bharali, which is to the north east of Tezpur. The imperial lookout for economic objectives complicated the matter further. They had constantly desired a share in the resources of the Ahom kingdom- aloe wood, ivory, musk, pepper, bafta, gold, elephants etc. Conquest of Assam also meant an opening into unchartered territories.

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<sup>49</sup> See Gait's *History of Assam*.

The first maiden Mughal offensive under Aba Baqr, in Assam, proved to be disastrous.<sup>50</sup> According to the Baharistan, this was due to Aba Baqr's military incompetence and personal defects:

From that place the imperial army in six marches reached the bank of the river Bharali (Bharari according to original text) and raised a fort and halted there. They began the construction of a bridge of boats; but the work done by them from morning to evening was undone at night by the rapid rise of the water of the aforesaid river. They again began construction the next morning. Everyday a regiment under the command of a general used to go to loot the adjacent villages and the ryots of the adjoining places were brought as captives. The bridge could not be completed. The enemies became informed through their spies that the fort built by Saiyid Aba Baqr was of sand and it was being damaged by wind and rain in different places, and the jungles near about the fort as well as in its interior had not been cleared and his men were passing all their time in negligence.<sup>51</sup>

Three or four days previously, the enemy began to clear the jungles from a distance of two or three *kos* from the fort till they reached the bank of the ditch of the fort by clearing four routes. In the last part of the night, two or three *gharis* before morning, the enemy fell upon the fort in such a way that all at once seven hundred elephants and three hundred thousand dextrous and bold infantry entered the fort. They began to fight and one by one, they reached the camp of Saiyid Aba Baqr and attempted to enter his tent when Saiyid Aba Baqr awoke from his slumber of negligence and arrogance and ran out with bare hand and feet and sank in the lane of non-entity before the enemy could recognise that he was the Sardar. In this way every camp they visited was absolutely destroyed... the arsenal was already destroyed and the elephants were seized.<sup>52</sup>

Although the Ahom king, Pratap Simha, did not intervene in the Mughal-Kamrup war, he now stood in line to check Mughal aggression. His position was strengthened by the capture of Mughal spoils- elephants, horses, war boats, guns, swords and munition. He had a fort constructed at Samdhara and had his exploits inscribed on rock (1616), as *visama samara vijayana*.<sup>53</sup>

This victory of the Ahoms meant that the Mughals had to halt their imperialistic policy for some time and instead take to a cautious defensive policy. It also meant the anti-Mughal elements of Kamrup were keen on overthrowing the Mughals, albeit with Ahom help. This victory boosted Ahom morale and generated a desire to subvert Mughal authority in Kamrup

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<sup>50</sup> BG, pp.364,396.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p.395.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p.396

<sup>53</sup> Barpujari, *History of Assam*, vol.ii, p.152.

as a potential danger to Assam. It was in 1636, after a twenty-one year halt that hostilities resumed. On the Assamese side, Pratap Simha realised that indirect hostility through aiding anti-Mughal elements, as was the policy followed till 1620, was not very successful.<sup>54</sup> For the Mughals, the causes were several, but one was deep-rooted. The Mughal government in Bengal had sent ten to twelve thousand *paiks* to Kamrup and granted *jagirs* for maintaining *khedahs* to catch wild elephants. These *paiks*, however, defaulted. Qasim Khan, the governor in Bengal, thus called them to Jahangirnagar where they were confined.<sup>55</sup> Although, they were released after a heavy fine, the humiliating gesture irked them, and thus, two chiefs, Santosh Lashkar and Jairam Lashkar avenged themselves by seeking asylum from the Ahom king.<sup>56</sup>

The first round of war took place in 1636. This Ahom war of Shah Jahan's reign was forced on the Mughals for the defence of their territory of Kamrup against the ambitious policy of the Ahom monarch, Pratap Simha, an exceptionally able ruler who ascended the throne in 1603. His rule (1603-1641) covers the entire period of Jahangir and the first half of Shah Jahan's reign. It was concluded with the Treaty of Asurar Ali in 1639.<sup>57</sup> By the treaty, the river Barnadi in *Uttarkul* and the causeway (Ali) of Asur in *Dakhinkul* became the boundaries of Mughal Kamrup and Assam on both sides of the Brahmaputra. Geographically, Kamrup was divided into two by the Brahmaputra: *Uttakul* to its north; and *Dakhinkul* to its south. For the first time, the Ahom monarch recognised Mughal suzerainty in Kamrup and agreed not to interfere.<sup>58</sup> However, the years following Shah Jahan's reign saw the causes of enmity multiply quickly, for every rebel, revenue defaulter, enemy of the Mughals, found shelter in the Ahom monarch.<sup>59</sup> Prince Shuja's absence from Bengal following the illness of Shah Jahan with his land and naval forces, gave ground for the Ahoms and the Koches to rise. This ill-defined frontier also saw disputes regarding smuggling, harbouring of fugitives, encroaching each other's territory.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the Mughal general, Mir Jumla, was sent to deal with these dissident elements in the northeast as Mughal authority was wiped out on both banks of the Brahmaputra.

Mir Jumla was destined to supervise north-eastern policy of the Mughals under Aurangzed.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.153.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.153.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.153, Gait, p.112.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.164.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.164.

<sup>59</sup> Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, p.329.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.329.

His expedition in 1661-1663 against Kuch Bihar and Assam has been termed by the historian Shihabuddin Mohammad Talish as *Fathiyya i Ibriyya*, or the 'conquests that serve as a warning about the emptiness of human glory.'<sup>61</sup> Thus, Sarkar in *History of Bengal: Muslim Period* writes, "The Assam expedition of Mir Jumla unfolded itself like a Greek tragedy. Here all the wisdom and energy of a superman were foiled by an invisible Fate. His splendid conquest of two large and rich kingdoms within the space of three months were snatched away from him and the thread of his life was cut off amidst misery and chaos not by human foe, but by the elemental forces of flood, famine, and pestilence. The unbroken triumphs of his life brought to him in the end only dust and ashes."<sup>62</sup> This was noted in the account of Bowrey:

...Emir Jemla hath now the government of Bengala, Orixia, and Pattana, firmly by Phyrmand Setled Upon him with an absolute Power and title of Nabob...no Sooner he is Settled in this Kingdome, but begins a warre with the Radja of Acham, a Stronge and Potent Neighbouring Prince. Makeinge Use of the best of time, his army beinge now well Seasoned to warre and Martila Discipline, he makes hay while the Sun Shines, and with all speed marcheth into the Countrey, ransacks and Subdues all before him, fortifieth many stronge holds, and in a Small time brought the Kinge of that Countrey to such a Straite that he was forced to flee, and leave it to the mercy of this great Heroe...<sup>63</sup>

## THE CULTURAL FRONTIER

This section explores the cultural transformation that took place along the frontier under Mughal rule. One must keep in mind that this frontier had witnessed a long east-ward march of Sanskritic civilisation in the Bengal delta. Thus, we see either an egalitarian society organised around Buddhist monastic institutions or a hierarchical society presided over by Brahmin priests. As pointed out by Eaton in 'The Rise of Islam', our understanding of this frontier should not be biased by Persian scholarship on the Turkish conquest, which speak of a stark opposition between 'Islam' and 'infidelity'. Also, one must keep in mind that the eastern delta being less Hinduized and peasantized seems biased. A pre-thirteenth century land grant in the modern district of Sylhet states that the territory lay "outside the pale of human habitation, where there is no distinction between natural and artificial; infested by

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.345.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p.345.

<sup>63</sup> Bowrey, *A Geographical Account*, pp.142-143.

wild animals and poisonous reptiles, and covered with forest out-growths".<sup>64</sup> Grants of uncultivated land were made in favour of groups of Brahmans or Buddhist monasteries with a view to colonise and bring it under cultivation. By the thirteenth century, western deltaic Bengal was well integrated into the Hindu social and political values unlike the eastern region. Non-Aryan tribes inhabited the area east of the Karatoya and west of the Padma. It was this region that served as an asylum when Muhammad Bhaktiyar's cavalry invaded Bengal in 1204. It was this very region, again, where subsequent pioneers flocked as Bengal's frontier continued to move eastward.

With respect to Bengal, the Mughals saw themselves as distinctively alien. Accompanied to this was a sense of superiority. The *Riyaz al Salatin* reflects the *ashraf* view regarding Bengal:

And the food of the natives of that kingdom, from the high to the low, are fish, rice, mustard oil and curd and fruits and sweetmeats. They also eat plenty of red chilly and salt. In some parts of this country salt is scarce. The natives of this country are of shabby taste, shabby habits, and shabby modes of dress. Meat of goats and fowls and clarified butter do not agree with their system. And there are many amongst them who, if they eat the same, cannot digest them and vomit them out. The dress of both males and females, both of upper and lower classes, consists of one strip of cloth just sufficient to cover their private parts. The Bengali females do not observe *pardah*, and go out of their houses for the performance of evacuations and other household duties. And the wildness and habitation of this country are similar, in that the people erect huts of thatch, made up of bamboos and straw.<sup>65</sup>

Assam's contact with Bengal can be traced to the ancient times. It was connected through three waterways and one land route. The water route connected the two through Goalpara via the Jennai river from Jamalpur leading to the Pabna river reaching the Ganges. The dak (postal line) was the first land route connecting Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad, Rangpur, Goalpara and Bogra. The second route ran through Jamalpur, Singimari, Goalpara, to Dacca. The last one was through Gauhati, Nongkhlow, Ranigaon, Momphlang and Cherra which connected Kamrup, Khasi hills and Sylhet. Movements across these lines had affected Assam's ethnic composition since the ancient times. With the dawn of the medieval age such was changed by planned military invasions. The earliest Muslim intrusion can be traced to

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<sup>64</sup> Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p.18.

<sup>65</sup> R S, tr. Maulavi Abdus Salam, *Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1902, pp.121-122.



1205 when Mohammad Bakhtiyar from Bengal invaded Assam. Hence, Kamrup and its neighbouring areas were not left out from the effects of Muslim invasions until the coming of the Ahoms.

The followers of military invaders can thus be regarded as the Muslim pioneers of Assam. Although Kamrup was free from any serious invasions till the end of the fifteenth century, it continued to see occasional raids by Muslims from Mymensingh. The earliest Muslim settlement grew around Hajo following the unsuccessful invasion of Allauddin Hussain Shah in 1498. However, the Koch-Mughal conflict was the real determining factor in bringing the Ahoms and the Mughals into a clash. In 1690, Mir Jumla, the Mughal governor of Bengal was sent with orders to punish the lawless zamindars of Assam and Arakan. His invasion led to a large number of Muslim settlements permanently in Kamrup and Darrang area. Also when the Ahoms established themselves in the Brahmaputra valley they neither expelled nor liquidated the native people. There was no need for this as the Ahoms were aware that they were in a sufficient number to establish themselves as a ruling class. They were also aware that any atrocities of such kind would not lead to a peaceful assimilation. Thus the only alternative was to opt for a plural society. This is very evident in the process of Ayanisation in Assam.

The Hindu religion first made its inroads during the reign of Sudangpha Bamuni Konwar (1398-1407).. As he was brought up in a Brahmin family it was natural that when he was crowned king he took this Brahmin into court with him. Along with this the family of the Brahmin was also accorded important posts in the state machinery. He was also the first Ahom king to take to Hindu coronation rites (these will be discussed further in the second chapter on State Formation). Following him succeeding Ahom monarchs such as Suhumung (1497-1539), Susengpha (Pratap Singha 1603-1641), Sutamla alias Jayadhvaj Singha (1648-1663) and Rudra Singha (1696-1714) came to increasingly patronise the Hindu religion.<sup>66</sup> Hinduisation played a civilising role although the Ahom were politically adept and had experience. They also had the potential of a surplus production with the wet-rice cultivation that they practised. Their society was also egalitarian. It was Hinduisation that helped this further. First of all this is evident in the replacement of the regnal title from *Chom-deo* to *Swargadeo* as it seems more befitting of the Ahom king whose power was constantly on the rise. The image of the Ahom king being inviolable and infallible was also created as they had

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<sup>66</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol.iii, Publication Board of Assam, Gauhati, second edition 3004, p.248.

to be elated above the Brahmins. This was also a pre-requisite for the king to extract surplus as well as to resort to warfare in order to build up a nascent state. This is evident in the grafting of various Ahom myths and legends to that of Hinduism, for instance, Ahom god *Lengdon* with *Indra*. We must also not forget that the neighbouring kingdoms such as the Chutiyas were Hindus. When the Ahoms annexed the Chutiya kingdom as well as that of the Kachari kingdom, Hinduism was a well means to assimilate and interact with them and to bring the population under a common polity.

Since the Ahom were ruling over a territory that constituted Hindu as well as non- Hindu it was the brahmanical influence through its divine right theory helped the Ahoms in this development. A divine right to rule also meant that the subject population could be ruled over without the use of force. However, this Hinduisation process saw contradictions later in the age with the emergence of the *Vaishnava- Sakta* cults. Sankaredeva's (1449-1568) *neo-vaishnavite* movement took to the simple bhakti cult which appealed to the majority of the sections of society who were appalled by the caste-ridden brahmanic Hindu religion. This movement also was a more liberal means as against the authoritarian state. The emergence of this cult fiercely shook the divine right theory on which the concept of Ahom sovereignty had rested.

Thus, Bengal's frontier was moved by its own dynamics. The political frontier moved by the use of force and arms, there was also the process of colonisation, the incorporation of indigenous communities as the frontier expanded. It possessed several frontiers all which were porous and fluid in nature. All of its frontiers were, as pointed out by Eaton, super-imposed by a much older east-ward march of the Sanskrit civilisation in the Bengal delta.

## Chapter 2

### STATE FORMATION ALONG THE FRONTIER

The process of state formation along the frontier was varied over time and geographical space. The kingdoms of Assam, Jaintia, Cachar and Manipur emerged as sovereign states in the medieval period and continued to survive up to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. These kingdoms provide us with opportunities to study the emergence of states along these fluid frontiers. When did these tribal societies begin to transform? Is it possible then to identify stages in their development that we can point as leading to the transition from tribalism to state? The focus here will be on Assam as this is an area with ample source material, also as signifying a specifically north eastern variant of the state. However, a comparative dimension is necessary to show how small kingdoms along the frontier take shape.

Sir Edward Gait states that in the early thirteenth century a group of hillmen wandered into the Brahmaputra valley, not so much by any desire to conquer but by chance.<sup>1</sup> These people, he argues were the progenitors of the Ahoms, an off-shoot of the great Tai or Shan race of Upper Burma and Western Yunnan. According to Amalendu Guha, the identity of the Tai-people were first noticed in Yunnan. Further, he states they were described in Chinese annals as, "people living in rich-watered plains, practiced wet-rice cultivation through terracing and irrigation with the help of water buffaloes and oxen. It was these people, who later branched out over many parts in southeast Asia along with their cultural traits, Tai language, and their patriarchal social organisation."<sup>2</sup> P. Gogoi and S.K. Bhuyan state that it was in the early part of the thirteenth century A.D. that the Tai kingdom laid its foundation in the Brahmaputra valley.

#### THE NAME ASSAM

The Ahom kingdom of Assam roughly corresponds to the five districts of the Brahmaputra valley division: Kamrup, Darrang, Nowgong, Sibsagar and Lakhimpur, and portions of the Sadiya Frontier Tract.<sup>3</sup> The foundation of the Tai-Ahom kingdom in Assam was laid by

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<sup>1</sup> Nagendra Nath Acharyya, *The History of Medieval Assam 1228-1603*, Gauhati, 1984 reprint, p.38.

<sup>2</sup> Amalendu Guha, "The Ahom Political System: An Enquiry into State Formation in Medieval Assam: 1228-1800" in Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics and State Formation in Pre-Colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, Calcutta, 1987, p.152.

<sup>3</sup> Surya Kumar Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, Gauhati, 1949, p.1.



Chao-Lung Hso-Ka-Hpa, the third son of Phu-Chang-Khang *alias* Chao-Changnyeu, a scion of the Mong-Ri Mong-Ram line of kings.<sup>4</sup> The 'Tai' is a generic term denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia.<sup>5</sup> They have come to acquire local appellations wherever they have spread and it is this branch that is known by the local name 'Ahom' in the Brahmaputra valley. However, much history writing on the Tai is still obscure, as the race being very ancient, and is based on legendary accounts. Professor M. Terrien de Lacouperie, based on his study of Chinese records assert that "the cradle of the Shan race was in the Kiulung mountains, north of Setchuen and south of Shensi, in China proper."<sup>6</sup> He assumes that this group migrated to the south due to hardships of the semi-desert north of Mongolia following the course of the Yellow river at an early period. According to Max Mueller, the Tai were originally from Central Asia and from here they migrated south and began to settle along the Mekong, Menam, Irrawaddy and the Brahmaputra.<sup>7</sup>

Various explanations have been set forth by scholars on the origin of the term 'Tai', however, none seem to be conclusive. Some believe this term comes from the ancient Chinese word 'Ta', meaning great.<sup>8</sup> Edward Gait has postulated a similar meaning by which the 'Tai' meant 'glorious', which corresponds to the Chinese 'celestial'.<sup>9</sup> P. Gogoi, however, refutes this definition as the term 'Tai' if taken in the above context could not be of Chinese origin. For the Chinese, according to P. Gogoi, these people were 'southern barbarians'. Nai Likhit Hoontrakul traces the origin of the racial term to an ancient official title whereby the holder was given special rights and privileges such as imposition or collection of duties on the Hwang-Ho or the Yellow river.<sup>10</sup> Thus, as the term first appeared in ancient Chinese history, it meant a hereditary title or rank conferred on the highest aristocracy in ancient China. The 'Tai' then, was for Hoontrakul, "a high stage or tower or a respectable or an independent personage."<sup>11</sup> This implies someone of great position, a sense of power, and freedom from subjection.

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<sup>4</sup> Padmeshwar Gogoi, *The Tai and the Tai Kingdoms: With a Fuller Treatment of the Tai-Ahom Kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley*, Gauhati, 1968, p.251.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Gogoi, *Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, p.2.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Gogoi, *Tai and the Tai Kingdoms*, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> Gogoi, *Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Gait, *History of Assam*, Calcutta, 1924, p.246.

<sup>10</sup> Gogoi, *Tai and the Tai Kingdom*, p.5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

The word 'Ahom' is a variation of 'Asam' or 'Asama', which is a Sanskritised variation of *Asam*, a form of Bodo origin.<sup>12</sup> The *A* here means land or country and when the Tai people conquered the upper part of the Brahmaputra valley and established their kingdom in it, the Bodo people called it *A-sam*.<sup>13</sup> Many of the Assamese buranjis refer to the Ahoms or Assam as *Asam*, *Acam*, *Asyam*, *Asam*, or *Acam*. P. Gogoi states that these terms were written from the actual *A-sam*, the land of the Sams or its Sanskritised version *Asam*, meaning 'peerless' or 'unequaled' as utilised by pundits in their accounts of the Ahoms. Such were the terms according to P. Gogoi that were corrupted into *Aham*, *Aham* or *Ahom* during the early British period. It is this form that is used to refer to this race instead of the country.

Robinson contends that the term Assam is derived from the Sanskrit term 'asama' whereby 'a' and 'sama' (equal) signify 'unequaled' or 'unrivalled'. In Robinson's opinion this variation was an invention of the Brahmins after the conversion of the Ahoms to the brahmanical faith. Sir Edward Gait suggests that 'Asam' is a Sanskritised form and hence the Tais could not have been accustomed to it.<sup>14</sup>

#### THE EARLY AHOMS: AT THE TRESHOLD OF STATE FORMATION

Upper Burma and Western Yunnan at the beginning of the thirteenth century was occupied by the people of Shan origin, who formed a group of petty states. Sukapha was the leader of the Shans who founded the Ahom kingdom in Assam. The name Sukapha or Hso-Ka-Hpa (1226-1268) means 'a tiger from heaven'.<sup>15</sup> It is difficult to conjure up a history of Sukapha's ancestry, his homeland and the reason for the migration into the Brahmaputra valley as the chronicles of the Ahoms do not corroborate with one another. According to the *Deodhai Assam Buranji*, Sukapha was the son of Pameupung, the king of Mungjamungji. The same buranji also states that Bakal- Khamdeng was Sukapha's father, who had been brought up in his maternal uncle's house in Maolung or Maulung.<sup>16</sup> This indicates a clear form of matrilineal society which is prevalent even today amongst the Khasis in northeast India. According to the *Ahom Buranji*, Taolulu, the eldest son of Khunlung, became the king of Mungrimungram. It is stated in this buranji that;

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>14</sup> William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1841, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Acharyya, *History of Assam*, p.62.

<sup>16</sup> Surya K., Bhuyan (tr & ed.) *DAB*, Gauhati, 1930, p25.

In the olden time Khunlung and Khunlai were sent down by the Lord of thunder from heaven to the earth. They arrived in Mungrimungram... Taolulu, the eldest son of Khunkung, became king of Mungrimungram. There he reigned till his death.<sup>17</sup>

Sukapha came from this line of kings that ruled Mungrimungram. But the *Ahom Buranji* does not state why Sukapha left the country and migrated westward. All that this account states is;

The great king Sukapha, marched to Mungdun and reached the country. He had to fight his way out by giving battles to the inhabitants of different places. Half of the people submitted to the king and paid him homage by offering tribute. The king allowed these people to remain peacefully in their respective places. A number of these men also accompanied the king. After great struggles the great King, Sukapha arrived at Mungdunshunkham and made himself king there. He had three sons, of whom Shuteupha succeeded him<sup>18</sup>

N.N. Acharyya states that according to Sir Edward Gait's Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam, Sukapha, accompanied by a number of people went westward, conquering the Nagas and other hill tribes reached Upper Assam, where he established his kingdom. The *Purani Assam Buranji* gives a different account. It states that Tyaochangneng, a descendent of Khunlai settled in the kingdom of Mungkhamungja, who was later driven to the Moran kingdom by enemies. Similar fate fell upon him and thus he left for the Nara kingdom. It was the Nara princess that he married and Sukapha was the outcome of this union. However, soon after a son, Sukranpha, was born to the Nara king, Sukapha's maternal uncle. Having his claim to the throne curtailed, Sukapha migrated westward and founded the Ahom kingdom in the Brahmaputra valley. Although these accounts differ, we can conclude that Sukapha was royal by birth and that his country was from a region in Upper Burma.

Just as the origin, ancestry and reasons for migration are shrouded in mystery, historians have debated over the date of Sukapha's birth and the time of his invasion. Sukapha may have been a Shan prince but Shan chronicles do not refer to the facts disputed by historians. The Deodhai Assam Buranji states that Sukapha was born in 1211 and that he invaded Assam in 1228.<sup>19</sup> For Haliram, 1195 was the year in which Sukapha was born, and that he invaded Assam in 1246 while Kasinath and Gunabharam do not mention the date of Sukapha's birth

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<sup>17</sup> Golap Chandra, Barua (fr. & ed.) A B, Gauhati, 1985 reprint, p.24.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.25.

<sup>19</sup> DAB, pp.4-5.

but they state that he invaded Assam in 1228.<sup>20</sup> Dr. Nagendra Nath Acharyya asserts that it was roughly in the early part of the thirteenth century that Sukapha invaded Assam.

The *Ahom Buranji* is the only surviving record written in Ahom that we have at our disposal. It is a history of the Ahoms from the earliest times to the reign of Purandar Singha (1832-1838). There seems to be quite a consensus on the accuracy of the dates given in this buranji. It states that;

Sukapha, the great, having had a consultation with his grandfather, migrated westward, leaving the country to be ruled by his brother, Sukanpha. He brought with him three thousand matangs (cooking pots). Each pot was sufficient to have three men's food cooked...In lakhni Mungkeu, he constructed a town at Charaideu adjacent to a small hill. He, in order to propitiate the gods, sacrificed a horse in the north and another in the south. He worshipped the three spirits, Kamle, Rangle, Rangmlao near a tree. Clearing off the place at the foot of the tree, he adored the gods by offering a vessel full of silver. Then they remained there in that city near the hill. In lakni, Taongi (i.e. in 1268), the great king Sukapha died. He reigned full forty-one years.<sup>21</sup>

Sukapha conquered practically the whole of Upper Assam, the tract south-west of the Chutias and the east of the Kacharis to the Patkai range at the border of Upper Burma, and founded his capital at Charaideo, in the modern district of Sibsagar, which possessed the advantage of being situated at the centre of his directly governed territory.<sup>22</sup> It must also be pointed out that throughout his march from his ancestral land into Assam, Sukapha, had been conquering countries and appointing his nobles to rule over them. As Sukapha left his homeland the wars that he endured on his move to the west prove that he was an enterprising person, there was a need for supremacy in him, a hunger for power. He was also a very far-sighted king. His army consisted of males who took along with them *matangs* (cooking pots) that could hold sufficient food for three persons. Also the Ahom as well as the Assamese sources do not talk of women leaving with him. It was only later that his men inter-married with the women of the subdued countries.

Having given an account of the Tai-Ahom heritage, it would not be wrong to ask when and why exactly did the Ahom polity reach a stage of state formation? Amalendu Guha has

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<sup>20</sup> Acharyya, *Medieval Assam*, p.66.

<sup>21</sup> AHB, pp.44,47.

<sup>22</sup> Acharyya, *Medieval Assam*, p.69.



rightly pointed out that the early history (1228-1407) has been encapsulated in the form of myths and legends. Such information cannot be authenticated and is mostly allegoric and symbolic, concerned mostly with its moral significance. Yet Guha argues that a myth may be true or false but they are important sources of information, for it may contain something historical in character. Thus, he attempts to search for something historical in the myths and legends of the Ahoms.

A chronicler viewed the stateless stage of society as a golden age (satya-yuga) when Love was the order of the time. Man used to take food in the same dish like sons of the same mother; and nobody entertained any jealousy or hatred towards any person.<sup>23</sup>

The chronicler's argument implies that this golden age came to an end with the accumulation of family wealth and the social contradictions that entail this. The writer asserts "due to conflicting interests later in the treta-yuga, the strong pressed the hard against the weak".<sup>24</sup> It was to take control of such a situation that the founding fathers of the Tai kingdom (Khunlung and Khunlai) were sent down from heaven to earth as evident in the *Ahom Buranji*;

There are an innumerable number of people there in the country. The country is full of *Tais* and slaves. They cannot distinguish right from wrong. There they are in the habit of taking other's property and wives by force. They steal each other's property. No one is punished for this crime. The males and females are not beautiful to look at. No one takes any notice of the origin of a girl whom he may take as his wife. They speak an unintelligible tongue.

...If a person commits a crime do not kill him at once without fair trial. Cleanse him if he offers a feast by killing a cow. You must confiscate all his properties. If you find a person having unlawful intercourse with the sister of his mother or of his father, or one depriving his father of his property by force, you must drive him away from the country. If you do not punish such a person, others will be demoralised by his example...there are people of various communities on the earth. It is very thickly populated. You must rule with a firm hand. I advise you to do justice...I send you down with these essential advises. The *Tais* are dwelling there. The country is not good. If any of them lives by oppressing others, he should be sent to exile...In Munglung (now Assam) there are no pure things.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Sinha, *Tribal Politics*, p.153.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

<sup>25</sup> *AHB*, pp.15-16.

This proves that the legends and myths were agencies of reordering society. Societal decadence had led to contradictions and these myths were seen to have been divinely ordained. The origin myths and legends also give a superior identity to the plough using Tai agriculturists over their non-Tai neighbours who practised jhum cultivation (slash and burn). They believed that their own ancestors sent down from heaven as;

There is no ruler on the earth. There are no kings in the countries under the skies. Large fields are lying fallow. These may be well cultivated. The people of up and down countries are in constant warfare with each other and whoever gets victory rules the countries for the time. They are the people who came out of the pumpkin. Their forefathers used to rule the countries. They cannot distinguish right from wrong. If an ordinary being be sent down to the earth, he will not be a worthy ruler. He whose forefathers were never rulers can hardly be expected to be a king. He can never get homage from others. Annual tributes will not be regularly paid to him.<sup>26</sup>

The above citation is enough proof to argue that the Tai's had a sense of superiority and a divine mission of civilising the earth that had gone wild.

#### EMERGENCE OF THE STATE

Amalendu Guha takes the regicide of 1389, the long interregnum that followed it, and the revolts of the three subordinate Ahom chiefs of Mung Khamjang, Mung Aiton, and Mung Tipam, which occurred one after another towards the end of the fourteenth century, as a sign of growing social contradiction.<sup>27</sup> After the murder of Shutupha in 1376 the country had been ruled by its nobles for four years. They then elected Chaopha Taokhamti who ruled for nine years until his death in 1380.<sup>28</sup> The country was thus without a king for nine years. During this interregnum, the councillors ruled the country. A letter written by Chaopha Shushang regarding the rebellious nature of the subordinate chiefs is as follows;

The people of Aiton, Khamjang and Tipam did not pay their annual tributes for eight years. I wish. Therefore, to destroy these countries which are in a rebellious spirit.<sup>29</sup>

Political authority was further consolidated during the reign of Sudangpha Bamuni Konwar (1397-1407) which saw the revolts finally subdued and the boundary line between Ahom and the Narang territories being firmly delimited according to A. Guha. This is recorded in the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp.10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Guha, "Ahom Political System", in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics*, p.162.

<sup>28</sup> AHB, p.49.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.51..

Ahom Buranji where the Tipam chiefs dissatisfied with the new regime of Sudangpha conspired to get rid of him. The king however, came to know of the plot and invited them to a feast. During the course of the feast, the chiefs were caught unaware, where some of them were put to death. As a way of conciliating what he had done, Sudangpha then married the daughter of one of the chiefs named Khuntai. But an affair between Sudangpha's newly married bride and Chao Tshulai caused tension. Chao Tashuli quickly fled to the Nara king, Shurunpha, who sent an army against the Ahom king. On learning of the approaching Nara army, the Ahom king gathered his own army and gave the Naras a good defeat. The Naras were pushed as far back as the Patkai. A treaty was concluded in 1401, as a result of which, the Patkai was fixed as the boundary line between the two countries.<sup>30</sup>

Sudangpha is remembered as the 'Brahmin Prince' as he was brought up by a Brahmin family whom he took to court when he was made king.<sup>31</sup> This marks the early stage in the influence of the brahmanic order amongst the Ahoms. This Brahmin from the Habung<sup>32</sup> country became one of his closest confidante and his sons and relatives were appointed to high posts in the court. It is from this point that one begins to see the growth of Brahmanic influences on the Ahoms. From here on the Ahom court becomes highly Hinduised. Hindu rites and customs thus became a regular feature in the capital. Sudangpha also founded the Singarighar festival which was followed by later Ahom kings, and was the first Ahom king to mint coins.<sup>33</sup> It is the Assam Buranji of Haliram K. Barua which speaks of the king assuming the Hindu royal title of 'Maharaja' and 'Rajeshwar Chakravarti'. He also made Charga on the Dihing River as his new capital. All this is very significant as this brought the Ahom polity to a highly developed social organisation, paving way to the threshold of state formation. The Ahom supremacy began to be recognised under his rule from the Patkai to the river Karatoya in Bengal. His untimely death in 1407<sup>34</sup> was a great loss to the history of Assam.

However, as rightly pointed out by A. Guha, even as late as 1493, primordial clan loyalties were difficult to suppress and completely subordinate. Instances of such clashes continued, which were only dealt with by the use of force and the loss of human life. Although the information provided by the buranjis are scanty and varied it would be a useful exercise to

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.50. Also see AB, pp.18-19.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49.

<sup>32</sup> An ancient Brahmin settlement situated at the mouth of the Dihing river.

<sup>33</sup> Haliram K. Barua, AB, Calcutta, 1906, pp.18-20.

<sup>34</sup> AHB, p.51.

refer to one such dispute. It occurred between the chief of a village of the Tai- Turung clan and the king over customary rights. As all Ahoms did, the Tai-Tarung people contributed labour for the maintainance and construction of the royal pile-house and dutifully contributed labour as paiks. This is evident in the Satsari Buranji. Here the Tarung people were charged of theft from the king's granary and were heavily fined in connection to the theft. Angered by this, the Tarung clansmen when called upon for the customary duty at the royal house murdered the king.

Suhumung Dihingia Raja came to the Ahom throne in 1497. His reign saw a new intensified brahmanical influence. He was called 'Dihingia Raja' on account of the embankment he constructed on the Dihing after he shifted the capital to Bakata.<sup>35</sup> In 1512, the king marched to Habung and annexed the entire Chutiya kingdom along with parts of the now Nowgong district, which then, had been ruled by the bara-bhuyans and the Dimasa king.<sup>36</sup> But in 1520, the Chutiyas resumed their offensive only to be defeated by the Ahom king who had remained passive for the past two years, at the Sessa river. Suhumung then erected a fort at the Tiphao river to commemorate his victory. He also created a new administrative post to administer the Chutiya kingdom, known as the 'Sadiya -Khowa Gohain'. The Ahom Buranji states that in order to permanently root the Ahom flag, he ordered three hundred Ahom families to emigrate there.

Apart from subduing recalcitrant chiefs on the frontier, Suhumung engaged himself in the internal administration of his country. In 1526, he promoted Mungtao, a Miri soldier, perhaps for his efficiency and loyalty.<sup>37</sup> Another noble named Mungklamg was appointed as Bargohain and posted at Dihing. His soldiers if they proved their worth were promoted.

Suhumung had just turned his attention towards the eastern frontier, appointed important officers to make his mark and consolidate the region when his focus was suddenly shifted to the west by Muslim incursions. In the same year that the Chutiya rebellion took place [1527], the Ahom Buranji speaks of the first Mohammadan invasion. Although the Muslims name is nowhere given he is mentioned in the Ahom Buranji as 'a man of the great Ujir'.<sup>38</sup> The battle was fought near the river Burai where the Ujir was completely defeated. The Muslim had invaded with an efficient naval and cavalry force. We also hear for the first time of the use of

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<sup>35</sup> Acharyya, *Medieval Assam*, p.87.

<sup>36</sup> DAB, p.15 & AHB, p.54.

<sup>37</sup> Acharyya, *Medieval Assam*, p.91.

<sup>38</sup> AHB p.66.

cannons in battle.<sup>39</sup> From then on the use of gun-fire seems to be a common feature. A second Muslim invasion occurred just after the Kacharis rose in rebellion in 1531 under their king Khunkara who was defeated. Peace was made with the marriage of a Kachari princess to an Ahom prince.<sup>40</sup> This time the Muslim-Ahom hostilities occurred with the attack of one Muslim commander named Turbak in 1532 who invaded with thirty elephants, one thousand horses and many guns and cannon and other war weapons at Singri on the opposite bank of the Brahmaputra.<sup>41</sup> Suhumung saw a great need to strengthen his naval forces to fight the Muslims and thus ordered for a strong navy to be prepared. In 1533, fortune turned towards the Ahoms who crushed the Muslims in a naval engagement near Duimunisila. It is stated in the Ahom Buranji that two thousand and five hundred men of the Muslim army lost their lives along with twenty ships and a large number of big guns. It is stated by Dr. S.K. Bhuyan that to commemorate this victory the Ahom king erected a stone pillar with an inscription which says; "One who will occupy this country without battle will send his fore-fathers to hell, he will be broom-beaten by Hari (sweeper), and he will wear the mekhla of women."<sup>42</sup>

However it is surprising that the above invasions are not mentioned in the chronicles of the Muslim writers. Thus, Gait contends that these invasions may not have been enforced by the Sultan of Bengal but rather by the numerous local chiefs of the outlying territories there.<sup>43</sup> But this seems a little confusing with regards to the large quantity of arms and army involved in the attacks which a local chief might have possessed. Could it be that the attacks were led by the Sultan of Bengal? We are not to know of this as there are no references to these in any of the chronicles written by the Muslims. Or was it not recorded to conceal their defeat by a small kingdom on the frontier whom the ashraf Muslims saw as inferior to them?

Thus the reign of Suhumung seems to be very fruitful. He seems to be a very tactful ruler who expanded the Ahom dominion in all possible directions. It was during his time that the Chutiyas were subdued for good and annexed to the Ahom kingdom. He also transferred a number of the Ahom population to the Chutiya territory, a thoughtful measure he undertook to strike Ahom roots there. Acharyya has pointed that great social changes also occurred during his time as evident in the import of artisans from the Chutiya country as well as elsewhere. He continues to state that the Saka era was introduced for the first time to replace

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.72.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp.64-66 & DAB, pp.24-26.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.68.

<sup>42</sup> Surya Kumar Bhuyan, SAB, Gauhati University, 1960, pp.16-17.

<sup>43</sup> Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, second edition, Calcutta, 1926. p.94.

the system of calculating dates.<sup>44</sup> Suhumung also made a great departure from tradition with the creation of a new office which resulted in the number of the chief councillors from two to three. Right below the monarch were the three Gohains, the third being added by Suhumung regardless of the stiff opposition from the other two. They were the Bura Gohain, the Bor Gohain and the newly instituted Barpatra Gohain. It is evident from buranjis that these three had the power to make and even unmake a king. Guha says this third post had been borrow<sup>45</sup>ed from the Chutiya kingdom where the local ruler had the title of Vrhat-Patra. The first to take up this office was the half-brother of the king. With this Suhumung to preserve the balance of power created the novel theory that "Kingship is the golden platter, the two Gohains constitute its two silver legs and a third one is needed to balance it."<sup>46</sup> The opposition came with the earlier two Gohains refusing to part with their military units and hence, the king himself transferred a portion of his own non-Ahom military unit to the newly created Gohain. Guha states that to appease the older Gohains the king reserved the posts of frontier governors for the members of the two aggrieved Gohains. This was a success which the king needed for the administration was expanding but more so as his position required strengthening as much of his victories came through war.

Another important aspect of Suhumung's reign that needs to be highlighted is the state census that took place of the adult male population in 1510. The need for a census was important as he was constantly involved in war-fare, a survey of the clans and their crafts was a necessity to determine the nature of their duty for state service.<sup>47</sup> It was the *paik* system that lay at the root of the Ahom socio-political system. Although its evolution is obscure the norm was that the *paiks* were grouped, according to the services they rendered to the state and hence divided into two broad classes, soldiers and labourers. Here the archers, who fought during war time were the most important, during peace, they took to public services such as cultivation. The others were assigned duties according to their profession or occupation.

#### PAIK/KHEL SYSTEM

When Sukapha migrated westwards he had a body of followers along with him. However, it is not possible that these followers constituted the *paik*. Personal service, in lieu of revenue was a slow growth. This system in its broad essentials was introduced by Suklemung (1539-

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<sup>44</sup>Acharyya, *Medieval Assam*, p.99.

<sup>45</sup> Guha, "Ahom State Formation", in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics*, p.164.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.165.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.165.

1552).<sup>48</sup>The *paiks* were originally organised into a unit or *got* of three *paiks*.<sup>49</sup>It was only later that this was revised into four.<sup>50</sup>One man (*mul*) was supplied to the state at all times from the *got* as militia, two (*dewal*) were called upon for public service and in grave situations such as war, even three men (*tewal*) had to render service.<sup>51</sup>Each individual served the duty called for, for three months a year by rotating amongst themselves. This was a mechanism whereby the state could mobilise a large number of people at short notice. The *paiks* made up the overwhelming majority of the masses, and was the backbone of all the productive activities the state undertook.

This body of *paiks* were organised into *khels*<sup>52</sup> or guilds. It was a system by which they maintained themselves while simultaneously providing service such as to the royal household, of the aristocracy, of the state (both military and civil). They were grouped according to an occupational and territorial basis.<sup>53</sup>The evolution of such a mechanism reflects the ability of the state to adapt to changing situations and demands of the time.

Cultivation has been the main occupation of the people of Assam from the earliest times. In lieu of the services rendered, each *paik* received two *puras* of *gamati* (about 2 and two third acres) rent free land. This however, was not heritable but rather transferable to another *paik* if the king wished for it was the property of the state. He also received garden (*barimati*) land for household requirements. This was hereditary and was exempted from direct taxation by the state.<sup>54</sup>However, when no service was required, it was the *paik* who paid Rs. 2.<sup>55</sup>Thus, the *paik* system was an aspect of the socio-economic cum military organisation of the state. Such a system was designed to eliminate unemployment or to curtail the birth of a landless peasantry. As opined by Barpujari, it was a “compromise between state ownership and private ownership in practice”.<sup>56</sup>

The *paiks* were further divided into the *kanri paik* and the *chamua paik* due to the growing needs of the state as that of special tasks. Thus, there were those whose duty was fixed, apart from cultivation and did not have to go to war. These were goldsmiths, artisans, or office

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<sup>48</sup> Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, p.37.

<sup>49</sup> One *paik* became a *poa* or *powa*.

<sup>50</sup> Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, p.137.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.

<sup>52</sup> This system is said to have been invented during the reign of Raja Pratap Singh (1603-1641) by Mumai Tamuli Barbarua

<sup>53</sup> Surya Kumar Bhuyan, "The Administrative System of the Ahoms", in

<sup>54</sup> Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, p.91.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.91.

holders who were attached to specific *khels* and had to undergo training.<sup>57</sup> They were not remunerated by cash or land grants but were given *paiks* at the expense of the state.<sup>58</sup> But there were those who paid a tax money in lieu of manual labour, this was very rare though.<sup>59</sup> These were *chamuas* but belonged to a superior birth or caste. The majority of *paiks* fell under the *kanri* category (ordinary *paik*). But their merit was recognised when need be and could be promoted to a *chamua*. Thus, merit was given its due importance amongst the *paiks*. As a check on the *paiks* the state maintained registers whereby all aspects pertaining to the *paik* was maintained.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the *paik/khel* system was the nucleus of all Ahom administration. Under the Ahoms, in Assam, not only the soil but the subjects were the property of the state. Much of the state revenue was realised from the soil and through the use of manual labour.

Looking at his period religiously, Suhungmung's reign was equally important. This has also been pointed out by Guha. This period saw an intensified growth of brahmanical influence. With the annexation of the Chutiya territory in 1512 into the Ahom kingdom, a number of the defeated chiefs were absorbed as warriors and scribes in the lower rungs of the state machinery.<sup>61</sup> By this time the Ahom dominion had expanded to twice its original size. What is more important was that the Assamese speaking Hindu population now outnumbered the Ahoms themselves. This according to Guha resulted in a wider availability and a wider scope for the division of labour within the kingdom.

This expansion into regions Hinduised such as the Chutiya kingdom saw its impact in the form of the king himself taking to Hindu titles such as 'swarga- narayan' (god of heaven) which later came to be addressed as 'swarga-deva' in Assamese.<sup>62</sup> As pointed out earlier, Suhungmung also introduced the use of the Saka era. Guha even argues based on some chroniclers that from then on the Ahom kings began to strike coins to mark their coronation. The Ahom acceptance of Hinduism thus can be traced to the early sixteenth century, some became adherents of Vaishnavism while others took to Saktism. However, the Ahoms did not do away with their original religious beliefs and practices. The Ahoms on the one hand paid homage to Hindu deities and observed principal Hindu rites such as the obsequial and

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>59</sup> Nirode Barooah, *David Scott in Northeast India*, p.89.

<sup>60</sup> Gait, *History of Assam*, p. 251.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., pp.87-96.

<sup>62</sup> Guha, "Ahom Political System", in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics*, p.163.



marriage rites, while on the other hand, some continued with their age-long tradition of marriage.<sup>63</sup> They also did not discard their age-old principal diety, *Somdeo*, *Lengdon* the chief of paradise and other gods and goddesses according to the custom.

Another aspect of the Hindu influence is very evident in the grafting of Hindu myths on Ahom legends. This may have been done with a view to identify all principal Tai deities with gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, for example *Lengdon* with *Indra*. When this took place, it is not possible to pin-point as sources do not touch on this. Gait, argues that there could have been a possibility of the Tai's being exposed to the Hindu colonizers of Southeast Asia. But he also points out that that some chronicles attempt at tracing the Ahom king's origins to *Indra's* intimate relation with a celestial women (*vidyadharii*), who was incarnated in the form of a tribal woman, was a much later phenomenon.<sup>64</sup>

Robinson stated that there seems to have been little or no distinction of castes from professions and each caste or tribe practised all the arts that were known to the country.<sup>65</sup> He further states that they were traders, blacksmiths, farmers, carpenters, potters, weavers, extractors of oil, dyers but they do not seem to have the art of bleaching, leather-working, making of sweet-meats, butter or ghee.<sup>66</sup> H.K. Barpujari argues that barring a few, all professions could be practised irrespective of caste or creed. For instance the art of weaving was practiced by all sections of society right from the top to the lowest rungs of society.<sup>67</sup> However there seems to have been some restrictions such as the brewing of alcohol, fishing and selling of fish, making pottery and that of sweepers were not practised by the higher class Hindus.

As seen in the first chapter, the invasion of Mohammad Bhaktiyar in 1206 set off a community of Muslim, although small. In time these Muslim settlers took completely to the Assamese way of speech, dress and customs. This is reason enough for the remark of Shihab-ud-din;

As for the Muslims who had been taken prisoners in former times and had chosen to marry here, their descendants are exactly in the manner of the

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<sup>63</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, vol.iii, Gauhati, 2nd edition, 2004, p.174.

<sup>64</sup> Gait, pp.73-77.

<sup>65</sup> William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Assam*, Calcutta, reprint 1975, p.264.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p.264.

<sup>67</sup> Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, p.177.

Assamese and have hearts of Islam except the name; their hearts are more inclined towards mingling with the Assamese than towards association with the Muslims. The Mohammadans who had come here from Islamic lands were engaged in the performance of prayer and fasting, but were forbidden to chant the call of prayer or publicly recite the word of God.<sup>68</sup>

Talish's remark seems to show that the Muslims in Assam were more sympathetic towards their Hindu counterparts than their co-religionists in other parts of the country.

The growing power of the Ahoms however suffered a setback with the two immediate successors of Suhmung at the hands of the Koches who founded their kingdom on the ruins of Kamata in the early part of the sixteenth century. The division of the Koch kingdom in 1581 and the rivalries between these two paved way for both Afghan and Mughal intervention into eastern India. The annexation of Koch Behar and Koch Hajo into Mughal India brought the Ahoms directly in contact with the Mughals.

#### CHANGE IN THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

The highly ritualistic and priest-ridden brahmanic religion was unknown and unsuitable for the majority of the Assamese people of non-Aryan ethnic group. It was at this precise juncture that Sankaradeva ushered in the neo-Vaishnavite movement.<sup>69</sup> He was a student at the Sanskrit *tol* (sanskrit school) of Mahendra Kandali. His movement took root first in Lower Assam and became widespread even in upper Assam regardless of the persecution it faced. Guha calls his movement an agency of social change, a change from animism to Hinduism, from pile-house to mud-house dwelling, from the practice of burial of the dead to cremation, from Tai and tribal languages to Assamese and most importantly from jhum-cultivation to the practice of wet-rice cultivation.<sup>70</sup> Also by 1714, the Ahom royal family was initiated into the Sakti cult.

Ahom expansion into the Koch kingdom meant an efficient state system to regulate an ever growing and expanding Ahom dominion. The Ahom state structure received its final shape in the reign of Pratap Sinha (1603-1641). This according to Guha was the state structure that Talish and years later, Wade, found. The two new offices of Barbarua and Barphukan were introduced during his reign.<sup>71</sup> They were created to control the newly conquered territories.

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<sup>68</sup> Shihab-ud-Din Talish, *Fathiyya-i-Ibriyya*, in Jadunath Sarkar, "Assam and the Ahoms in 1600 A.D." *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, Vol.1, pt.2, p.193.

<sup>69</sup> Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, p.231.

<sup>70</sup> Guha, "Ahom State Formation" in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics*, p.166.

<sup>71</sup> Francis Hamilton, *Account of Assam*, Calcutta, 1808, p.71.

These two were next in rank to the three great Gohains. These appointments were not hereditary. Thus, the five members constituted the *Patramantri* reflecting the final stage in the evolution of the Ahom administration.

## ECONOMY AND STATE FORMATION

Agriculture was the mainstay of Assam for the period under review. Wet-rice culture of the Ahoms was one of the determining elements of the state. Pre-Ahom Assam saw that much of the cultivation was done through ploughless jhum cultivation (slash-burn). However, for a state formation one of the pre-requisites is a considerable extension of land along with a shift from jhum cultivation to that of permanent cultivation. This is important as a surplus is required for any state to maintain itself. The process of political consolidation overtime has enabled this.

Shihab-ud-din Talish who accompanied Mir Jumla in his expedition of 1662-63 noticed that

“from the village of Koliabar to the city of Garhgaon, houses and orchards full of trees stretched in unbroken line... and from the rear of the bamboo grooves upto the foot of the hills there are cultivated fields and gardens. From Lakhugarh to Garhgaon, also, there are roads, houses and farms in the same style.”<sup>72</sup>

Since rice was the staple food of the people, greater attention was paid to its cultivation. The alluvial deposits on both banks of the Brahmaputra along with the abundance of rainfall greatly facilitated the cultivation of rice. The mode of cultivation was dictated by ecological conditions. Two of the major rice varieties were the *ahu* and *Sali*. The *ahu* being short maturing required no standing water and no ridges to be built into the fields.<sup>73</sup> On the otherhand, *Sali* was more productive and long maturing. It also required wet conditions for transplantation. For this kind a slope was a necessity for the fields to be artificially flooded from the streams available nearby.<sup>74</sup>

Here the militia played an important role as it was very intricately webbed to the economy on the whole. As stated earlier, the evolution of the *paik* system is obscure. All male population

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<sup>72</sup> Fathiyya, p.185.

<sup>73</sup> Irfan Habib & Tapan Ray Choudhury (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of India: 1200-1750*, vol.i, Cambridge/Orient Longman,1982,p.479.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.479.

from the age of sixteen to sixty constituted a unit (*got*).<sup>75</sup> A *got* was made up of four adult males, initially three, and was responsible for a year's service to the state. While on service these men rotated in turns so that there was always someone to look after their individual cultivation. The men of noble birth, priests and slaves or serfs attached to the royalty were however exempt from this. However, in times of war or when need be more than one *got* was called upon by the state on duty.

The *paik* households were not exempt from the use of forest lands, fisheries and grazing grounds. There were also three types of private land that it held: garden lands for growing the bare essentials, inferior lands for the cultivation of the *ahu* rice and wet-rice lands.<sup>76</sup> The first two were more of subject to clan control, there were no obligations to the state. Also the inferior land going to waste could be claimed by any family and there seemed to be no restriction on the quantity. The wet-rice land however, belonged to the state. This was the land relegated to the *paik* in return for the service to the state, also it could be redistributed at any time. The reign of Pratap Singha saw a degree of sophistication with the *paik* being split horizontally into divisions known as *khel*. These *khels* were hierarchically arranged with the lowest holding a *got* of twenty. Under this revised system, each *paik* served the state for the duration of three months a year.

This system of the Ahoms meant that atleast one-third or one-fourth of the militia was always readily available. Details for the militia system in the non-Ahom territories however, are not available to us. A somewhat similar system of extraction may have prevailed in the Koch and Kachari kingdoms and also in the neighbouring kingdoms of Jaintia. But the coming of the Mughals brought changes to this system. The Mughal administration demanded revenue in cash in lieu of the traditional militia service. Shihab-ud-din Talish had observed that;

“if this country were to be administered like the Imperial dominions it is very likely that forty to forty-five lakh rupees would be collected from the revenue paid by the *ryots*, the [price of] elephants caught in the jungles and other sources [*sair-i-mahsulat*]. It is not a custom in this country to take any land tax (*kharaj*) from the cultivators”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p.483.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.483.

<sup>77</sup> *Fathiyya*, p.187.

It is stated by Guha that in 1681-1751, a country wide survey was conducted by the Ahoms.<sup>78</sup> This could have been to detect whether there were any taxable wet-rice lands being given away to the *paiks* in excess. This was also done keeping in mind the new possibilities of taxation

Thus, this system constituted the basis of Ahom society, polity and economy. The state that came up looks more oppressive with its system of extraction through the utilisation of the militia for all purposes. The state as it came up took to the role of surplus extractor, extracting surplus labour for the purpose of redistributing within the ruling class itself. The state that was created can thus be summed as a product of society. But these again are formal requirements of a state. Religion in the form of Hinduism also played a major role. The Ahom rulers took to Hinduism and patronised it but this does not mean that it was out of zeal for this religion as such. It is probable that this was so more as a way of legitimizing their rule. Thus, Hinduisation also played its part in the process of sophistication of the state. The Ahom rulers treated the different religious sects equally is enough proof. The Ahom traditional rituals were not done away but kept alive through its ceremonies and rituals. They also did not impose their religion as a state religion nor enforce it on its subjects. Thus, the Ahom state was not an importation from their homeland nor was it an entire autonomous growth as different aspects interplayed to produce the state.

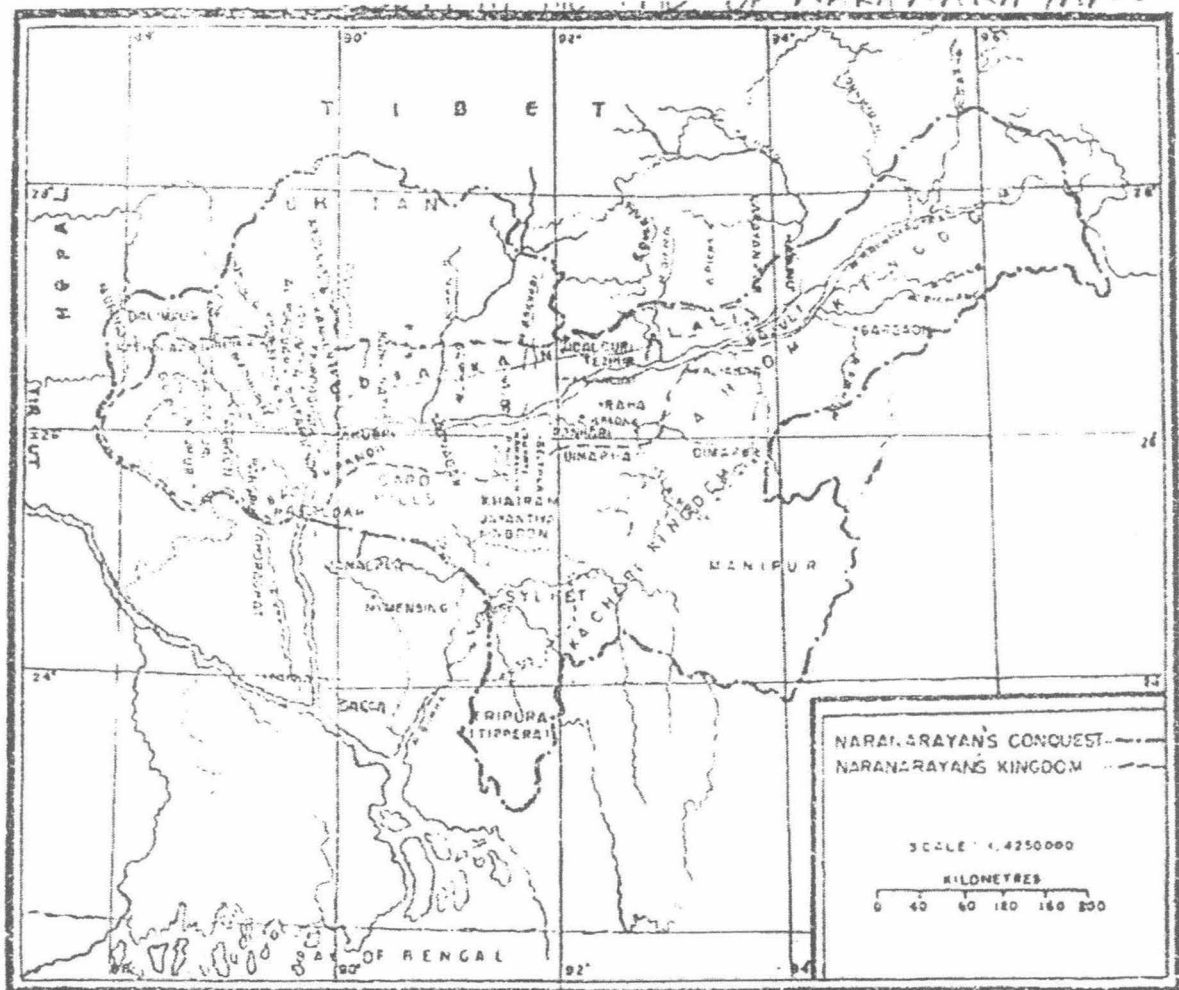
## THE KOCH KINGDOM

This section will look at state formation in the Koch kingdom but focus will be on the period of the first two Koch rulers who took the state to its heights. Following these two, as evident right from chapter 1, that dissention set in on the Koch camp due to rivalries between brothers which finally led to its annexation by the Mughals. There has been considerable controversy regarding the origin of the Koches. There is a general agreement amongst scholars that the Koches include the Kacharis, Meches, Bodos, and Garos etc. but regarding their racial origins there seems to be some tussle. Risley argues that the Koches are “a large Dravidian tribe of north eastern and eastern Bengal among whom there are grounds for admixture of Mongolian blood.”<sup>79</sup> Supporting this contention are Oldham and Dalton both

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<sup>78</sup> Habib & Raychaudhuri, *Cambridge Economic History*, p.485.

<sup>79</sup> Cited in D. Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom: 1515-1616*, Delhi, 1989, p.2.



Source: D. Nath, History of the Koch Kingdom

arguing for a Dravidian line.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, we have those who propose a complete Mongoloid line, such as Hodgson. For Hodgson the Koches are a “distinctively marked type of the Mongoloid family”.<sup>81</sup> The account of Minhaj-ud-din Siraj Juzjani describes the first two expeditions of Bhaktiyar Khilji to Kamrupa (ancient Assam) in the early thirteenth century. Here he states that this region was peopled by the Kunch (Koch), Mej (Mech) and the Tiharu (Tharu) having Turk countenance.<sup>82</sup>

In the thirteenth century the Ahoms established themselves in the extreme southeast of the Brahmaputr valley and emerged as masters of the entire eastern section of the valley. This valley saw continued attacks from the successors of Alaud-din Husain Shah, as the Afghans on the western border of the Koch kingdom conquered the kingdom of Kamata in 1498 under Alaud-din Husain. It was in this hostile environment that Biswa Singha founded the Koch kingdom in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. The existence of the Koch from the 1200-1500 A.D. is not very clear but it is probable that they did have some amount of political influence until Biswa Singha established the Koch kingdom. His period is marked by success and by the time of his death he was able to leave a strong kingdom able to withstand foreign incursions as well as take aggressive military expeditions.

#### ADMINISTRATIVE SETUP

Raja Biswa appointed his brother Sisu as the *Raikot* or the Chief of the Fortress. His duty also included the holder of the royal umbrella over the king during the coronation. This implied that he was next in power to the king. Biswa also created a council of ministers called *Karjis*<sup>83</sup> whom he recruited from the twelve important families of his tribesmen.<sup>84</sup> They were the head-men of the twelve chief families and were to serve as commanders of the army. He also created a cabinet consisting of the *Raikot* and two important and trustworthy *Karjis* and these members were known as *Mantrins*.<sup>85</sup> The Raja was also well aware of the need to maintain a regular army and thus created the office of the *Senapati* (commander of army).

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.2.

<sup>81</sup> Cited in Nath, *History of the Koch*, p.2.

<sup>82</sup> Minhaj-i-Siraj Juzjani, *TN*, H.G. Raverty (tr.), vol.i, reprint, Delhi, 1970, p.560.

<sup>83</sup> Also called *patra* or *amartya*.

<sup>84</sup> Nath, *History of Koch*, p.29.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p.29.

The Raja was farsighted and he saw the need for a census to estimate the population for revenue and military purposes.<sup>86</sup> There are no records to point to exactly when this census occurred. But after the census the Raja organised his administration on military lines whereby creating a gradation of officers. Like in the case of Ahom Assam, able bodied men were termed as *paik*. But the system in Koch was not all similar to that in the Ahom kingdom. The number of *paiks* allotted to his officers depended on their grades. Twenty *paiks* were controlled by the *Thakuria*, hundred by the *Saikia*, thousand by the *Hazarika* and three thousand by the *Omra*.<sup>87</sup> Each of these officers were remunerated for their services in terms of land. Next the Raja created a home department with officers such as the *Purohita* (royal priest), *Daivajna* (astrologer), *Vaidya* (royal doctor), *Supkar* (chief of the royal kitchen), *Bhandari* (store keeper cum treasurer), *Majmndar* (secretary to the king), and a group of *Char* or *Dut* (spies).<sup>88</sup> Despite Biswa's acceptance of Hinduism we do not find that he appointed any Brahmin as minister or gave important positions except that of the *purohita* whose duty was to be purely religious. Thus, the administration created by Biswa was controlled mainly by the tribal people who in return gave him full support and co-operation. Details about the land revenue administration seem to be lacking. Land seems to have been divided into cultivable and uncultivable, the latter included forests, waste-lands, swamps, marches etc.<sup>89</sup> There were two kinds of cultivable lands, the *khalsa* (rented) and the *kangi* (rent-free). The former were categorised according to the nature of their productivity. There was the *baotali* (very low land), *maghuwatali* (for *rabi* crops), *ahutali* (for *ahu* rice), *rupit* (for *sali* rice).<sup>90</sup> The latter consisted of lands given to temples, Brahmins or mosques. Also the rate of assessment and the actual procedure of assessment is not known for the Koch kingdom.

After having founded the Koch kingdom in Chikaner, he shifted the capital to Kamatapur (Kantanagar), which later came to be called Koch Behar. This was a well thought plan. The new capital was strategically located as it was safe from the recurring invasions of the Bhutiyas. The new capital was also a safer region in terms of external aggression. This continued to be the capital even under his successors.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p.30.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p.124.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 125.



Biswa was succeeded by Naranarayan whose accession saw a period of military glory and success. This was the time when Sher Shah Sur (1540-1545) founded the Sur dynasty by defeating Ghyas-ud-din Mahmud, the last ruler of Husain Shahi Bengal in 1538. In north India, Humayun was succeeded by his minor son Akbar who extended the eastern frontier of the Mughal Empire as far as the Son River in Bihar. According to the *Akbar-Namah*, the western boundary of his kingdom touched even the Mughal dominion of Tirhut.<sup>91</sup> His kingdom also expanded in the south as far as Ghoraghat, and to the north it touched lower Tibet.<sup>92</sup> Like Biswa, Naranarayan did not annex most of the territories that he conquered and instead allowed the defeated rulers or chiefs to continue enjoying autonomy and pay him annual tribute. It was only the regions extending from Tirhut in the west to Narayanpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra that he directly administered. His sovereignty extended on the south of the Brahmaputra upto the river Kalang. Thus, territorial extension was not followed up by direct consolidation.

Naranarayan's friendly overtures towards the Mughals is evident in the *Akbar-Namah*. This account refers to Raja Mal Gosai (Naranarayan) submitting to Akbar with gifts from his country.<sup>93</sup> Abul Fazl describes the Koch raja as 'zamindar of Koc'.<sup>94</sup> The reasons for the actions of the Koch are not given by Abul Fazl. However, the Koch raja may have felt the need to side the Mughals on account of two reasons. Firstly, this was the time when the Ahoms in the east shaken off the Koch and secondly, to recover the lost Koch prestige after the defeat at the hands of Gaur in 1568. This would mean that formal relation had taken place between Akbar and the Koch raja prior to 1576, by which time Daud Kararani was killed by the combined forces of the Mughals and the Koch. By the time of Daud's challenge to Mughal presence in Bengal, Bengal was already a haven for Afghan fugitives and other chiefs of Bengal and Bihar. The refusal of the Koch to give asylum to these elements also point towards the growing relationship between Akbar and the Koch raja.

In the political field, the first two rajas succeeded in bringing about political integration atleast in the areas that were directly under them. But it also had its effects on the autonomous regions. The large army that Naranarayan and his chief Chilarai commanded in the extensive conquests were not drawn only from the regions they administered but those of the tribal chiefs and the Bhuyans. In this way the soldiers in the course of their expeditions

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<sup>91</sup> Abul Fazl, AN, H. Beveridge (tr.), vol.iii, reprint, Delhi, p.1067.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p.1067.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p.349.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p.349.

influenced the social relations of the communities of the region thereby aiding the process of cultural and political integration. There was also the constant threat from its western neighbour Bengal, this further intensified the need for integration. The period of the first two rajas also saw significant changes brought about by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement which received direct state patronage. This movement enabled the unity of different tribes and communities under a common fold giving them a common identity.

The Koch state was a monarchical state with the kings tracing their line of descent to Siva. This is why king Biswa was compared to a hosts of different gods such as Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Indra, Aditya, Varuna etc. and his successors beginning with Naranarayan took the title 'narayan' the name of the supreme god of the Hindus.<sup>95</sup> As the rulers of Assam, the Koch rajas also took to fictitious divine origin of kingship so as to gain respect and submission of the people. Succession to the throne was hereditary but the rule of primogeniture was not always practiced as Biswa gave the throne to his second son, Naranarayan.

The heights the Koch kingdom reached during the reign of Naranarayan was not to last long. The death of his chief commander Chilarai was the turning point. Disintegration soon set in which led to fraternal rivalries and the subsequent partition of the kingdom into Koch Behar on the east and Koch Hajo on the west.

#### DIMASA STATE FORMATION IN CACHAR

Cachar or Heramba-rajya has three administrative divisions, i.e, south (Cachar plains), north (hills division) and central (Nowgong section).<sup>96</sup> These three divisions saw a varied ethnic character. The north and central region was peopled by the Dimasas, Mikir, Hojai, Lalung and other tribes while the south saw mainly a Bengali concentration. The transformation of this tribal polity to a monarchical state was made possible by the Hindu-based Aryan civilisation which generated through the plains of Bengal. About the middle of the sixteenth century they founded their capital in Maibong in the north Cachar hills. Due to its close proximity to Sylhet, it appears that parts of the outlying territories may have been a part of the Sylhet *sarkar*. But no contemporary accounts refer to this.

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<sup>95</sup> Nath, *History of Koch*, p.110.

<sup>96</sup> Hamilton, *Account of Assam*, p.83.



Dimasa was the ruling Cachari tribe of the Bodo Tibeto-Burman linguistic sub-family.<sup>97</sup> This ruling tribe is also known by the name 'Kachari' although they prefer to be called Dimasa, 'sons of the great river'.<sup>98</sup> They were known "to the Ahoms as Timisa, clearly a corruption of Dimasa, so that this name must have been in use when they were still in the Dhansari valley."<sup>99</sup> There has been some controversy regarding the word Kachar or Kachari. S.K. Bhuyan suggests that an onlooker would believe that Cachar was the homeland of the Kacharis where they experimented with the task of state-building.<sup>100</sup> According to Gait, 'Kachar is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning a 'broadening region.' The district of Cachar may have got its name directly from this word.'<sup>101</sup>

One of the earliest inhabitants of the Assam valley were the Dimasas. Their legends speak of the political turmoil they faced in ancient Kamrupa and to escape this crossed to the Bid River (Brahmaputra).<sup>102</sup> It is probably after their expulsion from Kamrupa that they attempted to build an independent state. At the time of the Ahom arrival into the Brahmaputra valley the Dimasa territory extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra valley. From Cachar, the Dimasas shifted to Dimapur (now in Nagaland), probably due to conflicts with the legendary prince of Upper Assam, Arimatta and his son Mangal Balahu.<sup>103</sup> Remains of the Dimasa palace, forts and tanks are found today in Dimapur suggestive of the prowess of the state. To quote Gait;

The ruins at Dimapur which are still in existence, show that, at that period, the Kacharis had attained a state of civilisation considerably in advance of that of the Ahoms. The use of bricks for building purposes was then practically unknown to the Ahoms, and all their buildings were of timber or bamboo, with mud plastered walls. Dimapur, on the other hand was surrounded on three sides by a brick wall of the aggregate length of nearly two miles, while the fourth or the southern side was bounded by the Dhansari river. On the eastern side was a fine brick gate-way, with a pointed arch and stones pierced to receive the hinges of double heavy doors. It was flanked by octagonal turrets of solid brick, and the intervening distance to the central archway was relieved by false windows of ornamental moulded brick-work...there are representations of the elephant, deer, dog, duck, and

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<sup>97</sup> J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Dimasa State Formation in Cachar" in Surajit Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics*, p.177.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p.177.

<sup>99</sup> Gait, *A History of Assam*, p.298.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p.177.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p.298.

<sup>102</sup> Bhattacharjee, "Dimasa" in Sinha (ed.) *Tribal Politics*, p.178.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p.178.

peacock, but nowhere is there a human form or head. The inference seems to be that, at this time, the Kacharis were free from all Hindu influences.<sup>104</sup>

The Dimasas however failed to retain their hold over this territory. Conflicts with the expansionist Ahoms have been recorded since 1490. In 1536 the Ahoms sacked Dimapur and thus the Dimasa capital was shifted to Maibong (North Cachar Hills).<sup>105</sup>

It was in Maibong that the process of state formation took a crucial form. An important factor here being the influence of Hinduism. This is evident in the son of Dersongpha, who led the Dimasas to Maibong, taking a Hindu name of Nirbhoyanarayana and was then proclaimed as the raja.<sup>106</sup> It is believed that Nirbhoyanarayana chanced upon a Brahmin and took him as his *dharmadi guru*. This guru was then given an important position in court as he interpreted the law of the Shastras and advised the raja on all important matters.<sup>107</sup> This Brahmin played an important role in legitimising the line of Nirbhoyanarayana and according them divine origin. The tutelary deity, Kachai Kati was also given a Sakti form.<sup>108</sup> The effects of Brahmanical Hinduism is evident in the coins struck by the Dimasa rajas which they issued to mark their coronation or victory in wars as they were often locked in prolonged wars with the Ahoms. The coins written in Bengali script contain Hindu legends. For instance, the coins of Pratapnarayana dated to 1606, claims the raja to be a worshipper of Siva.<sup>109</sup>

The Dimasas were from the beginning literally locked in war with their neighbours. This was another factor that aided the process of state formation. There was an acute need to raise an army to be ready at all times and this meant that all able-bodied male had to fight. Although the Ahoms had sacked Dimapur they continued their offensive against the Dimasas. Thus they continued to look for solace in Ranachandi (deity) which they began to identify with Kali as the war goddesses and protector of the state.<sup>110</sup> The creation of new offices by the Ahom kings to take charge of the frontier can be seen in this situation.

It was under Jasanarayana (1583-1613) that the Dimasa state saw its territorial limits at its height.<sup>111</sup> Mention must be made that under him the Dimasas defeated the Ahom king Pratap

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<sup>104</sup> Gait, p.302.

<sup>105</sup> AB, pp. 21-22 ; AHB, pp.66-68.

<sup>106</sup> Bhattacharjee, "Dimasa" in Sinha (ed.), *Tribal Politics*, p.180.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.180.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.181.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p.183.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p.184.

Singha, in 1606, and following this changed the name of his capital, Maibong to Kiritipur.<sup>112</sup> It was under him that Jaintia for some time became a Dimasa vassal. A portion of the Cachar valley that bordered his state was also wrested by him and pushed his boundary into the Mughal district of Sylhet.<sup>113</sup> Following this he took the name Indrapratapnarayana and established forts in the section of the state that he took from Sylhet (at Pratapgarh and Asuritkar) and issued a coin (1602) which proclaimed him as the conqueror of Sylhet (Shrihattavijayini).<sup>114</sup>

In the plains the Dimasa had taken to plough cultivation but in the hills a continuation of the primitive method of jhum cultivation prevailed. The Central Cachar division was a very fertile tract and even today it is known as the granary of Assam. The Cachar Rajas controlled trade and levied a transit duty and collected land revenue from the plains while the hill regions paid revenue of four cowries per house as evident during the time of Raja Mayuradhvaja (1695-1696).<sup>115</sup> In the early times tax was collected in the form of a male goat, a pair of fowls, a duck and two coconuts per holding but by the time of Kirtichandra tax was raised to Rs.3.<sup>116</sup> The raja was the head of the state and was aided in administration by his ministers known as the *patra* and *bhandari*. The latter was the head of the council of ministers who were selected from the Dimasa tribe.<sup>117</sup> The tribes were called *sengfong* and each *sengfong* sent a representative (*mel*) to the royal court.<sup>118</sup> The representatives to the *mel* were a powerful group and could even elect or dethrone a king. However, an individual selected must belong to the royal clan.

The process of state formation reached its height under Chandranarayan.<sup>119</sup> He is known to have been assisted in the administration by fifty *patras* and also appointed an officer (*uzir*) to administer South Cachar and another officer as the head of (*aditya*) Central Cachar (now Nowgong district).<sup>120</sup> Brahmins conducted his coronation ceremony and it is also presumed, according to vedic rites. But the final phase can be seen in Khaspur where Sanskritisation of the royal family and the use and patronisation of the Bengali language played a major role. Here the royal family and the aristocracy came to constitute a Hindu caste known as Barman

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<sup>112</sup> BG, vol.i, p.172.

<sup>113</sup> Bhattacharjee, "Dimasa" in Sinha (ed.) *Tribal Politics*, p.184.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p.184. & BG, vol.ii, p.690.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p.186.

<sup>116</sup> William W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam, Assam volume*, London, 1879, p.415.

<sup>117</sup> Bhattacharjee, "Dimasa" in Sinha (ed.) *Tribal Politics*, p.187.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p.187.

<sup>119</sup> 1735-1745.

<sup>120</sup> Bhattacharjee, "Dimasa" in Sinha (ed.) *Tribal Politics*, p.189.

which the Brahmins recognised as Kshatriya and thus allowed the use of the sacred thread.<sup>121</sup> However even then the Dimasa traditional practices were not completely done away with for there were some sacrifices that were allowed to be performed only by the native Cachari priests.<sup>122</sup>

It was through the adoption of Hindu symbols and by bringing the tribes under the Hindu fold that this tribal polity reached its monarchical form. It was in Maibong that this process reached its crucial stage. Likewise, the brahmanical religion that was spreading through the plains of Bengal left its mark on the Ahoms and the Koches. It was there brahmanical myths and legends that gave the ruling chiefs or clans a divine status and descent whereby they could command respectability and support from all sections of society. On the other hand we see a growing number of the Brahmins in the state offices and playing a greater role in state administration, manipulating court politics. It was only in the Koch kingdom that we find Brahmins in the state office restricted strictly to the *purohita*. None of these kingdoms also leaped to statehood. The transition was slow. Statehood emerged when these kingdoms were able to yield a surplus beyond that of self-sufficiency and for the sustenance of a non-producing section of the public. It is also evident that in this region much of these early state formations were based on wet-rice cultivation, which was possible without the use of cattle power unlike the other parts of India. The concept of property, whether in the form of private or communal, existed. This was to continue exploitation while at the same time reconcile class antagonisms.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p.190.

<sup>122</sup> Hunter, *Statistical Account*, p.395.

## Chapter 3

### THE PORTUGUESE AND THE FRONTIER

The Portuguese were not the only Europeans to have come to India, but they were surely one of the first to have made a mark in eastern Bengal. Although this chapter does not focus on the Portuguese trade in eastern India, they were surely pioneers in this region and truly paved the way for other European nations to establish various ventures.

It was in the closing years of the fifteenth century that the Portuguese appeared on the coast of Malabar. Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May, 1497 with a two-fold mission, to seek for spices and Christians.<sup>1</sup> He journeyed to the east round the Cape of Good Hope, thus liberating trans-Atlantic trade from Muslim domination and control. The ill-attitude of the Portuguese against the Muslims was due to the well known state of continuous war between Christendom and Islam.<sup>2</sup> At the time of the Portuguese arrival, the Indian Ocean was still a no-man's territory, not under any state or ruling monarch. This is reflected in the writings of Gaspar Correa, the Portuguese historian and official, who utilised memoirs of Hindus and Muslims of Cannanore, who were surprised at seeing things they had never seen before.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Portuguese had penetrated India, even before Babur laid the foundation of his empire, and were pushing into Bengal. But for almost twenty years after the discovery of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese did not have any definite commercial relations with Bengal. Modern writers agree that D.Joao Silveira was the first Portuguese to lead an expedition into Bengal, but he was not the first to come to Bengal. Rather, Joao Coelho was present in Chittagong before Silveira<sup>4</sup>. Many other Portuguese from Malaca had come as traders in Moorish ships. There were also those who had settled in Pipli, (Orissa) in 1514 and had visited Hijli (Western Bengal) at about the same time.<sup>5</sup> This expedition of de Silveira landed him in Arakan in 1517.<sup>6</sup> Sanjay Subramaniam argues that the maritime empire created by 1515 in Asia, was scaled down in favour of the western Indian Ocean. Much of Portuguese activity centred here. What occurred on the east according to G.D.Winius, 'The "shadow

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<sup>1</sup> Tapan Ray Chaudhury & Irfan Habib (ed.) *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol.i, Orient/Longman, 1982, p.383.

<sup>2</sup> K. N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, p.63.

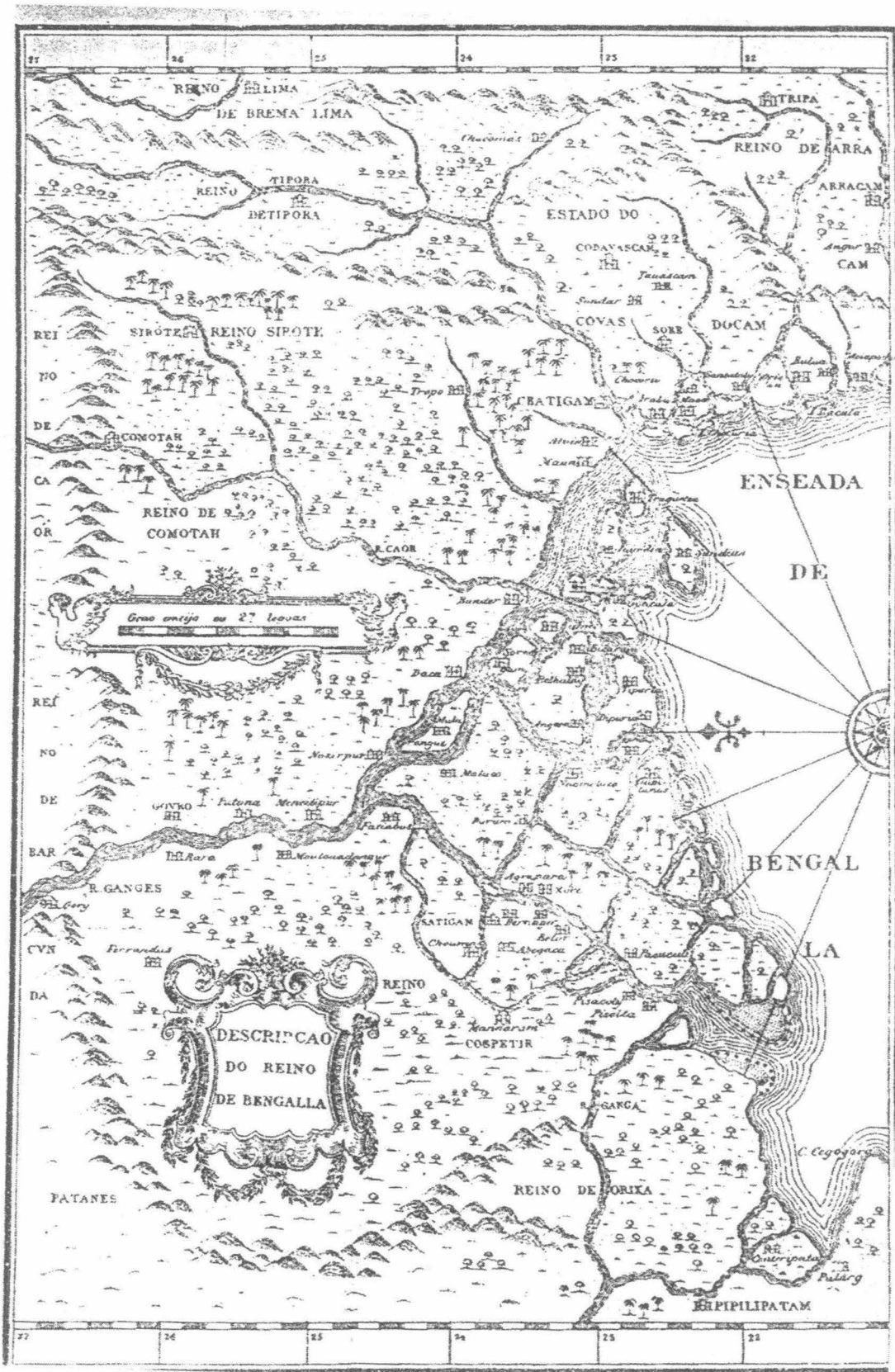
<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>4</sup> Joaquin, J. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, Manoharlal Publications, New Delhi, 1996, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.





Source: J.J. Campos, History of the Portuguese in Bengal

empire” of Goa in the Bay of Bengal’: a universe ruled by adventurers and brigands. Whether this is true or not, Subramaniam does not see the Bay of Bengal, especially in the early years as solely belonging to the *arrenegado* (renegades) or *alevantados* as there existed other groups such as the *solados* (soldiers) or the *casados* (civilian traders).<sup>7</sup> It was the presence of this rather large social group that tended to alter the structure of power in the Bay. Society was also structured in terms of two groups, “men of high and low birth”.<sup>8</sup> The *figalgos* at the higher end were the captains, the squires, principal persons or those associated with the royal household. The lower end consisted of those nameless men such as the soldiers, mariners, oarsmen etc. The presence of other social groups such as the “infidel” or “Moors” i.e., Muslims as they were called, the Hindus, and the other Europeans such as the Dutch cannot be ignored. Thus, the frontier did have bands of mobile people interfacing with political honoraries. Also unlike western India, politics on this frontier implicated the Portuguese as they have no clear cut empire, it was the frontier that allowed them a kind of a ‘local power’ in the Bay.

#### BACKGROUND AND EARLY EXPEDITION

In the early part of the sixteenth century shipping between the Coromandel-Melaka route was owned both by the traders of Coromandel and Melaka. It was the *Keling* and the Gujarati trading communities there who were the principal traders. With the capture of Melaka, it was the *Kelings* who emerged dominant as the Portuguese depended on them. This was also the time that the *Fazenda Real* or Royal Treasury of Portugal entered commercial realms in partnership with Melaka’s merchants thus acting as a merchant amongst merchants.<sup>9</sup> The time span between 1510 to 1520 also saw the growth of private Portuguese trade with Coromandel as well as the ports of Chittagong and Satgaon in the Bay of Bengal. It was only logical that the Portuguese settle in the cosmopolitan centre of Pulicat. Thus, Manuel de Frias was appointed as the first Portuguese Captain of the Coromandel and Fishery Coasts.<sup>10</sup> He was ordered by the Crown to issue *cartazas* or passes for navigation for shipping operating in and around Coromandel.

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<sup>7</sup> Sanjay Subramanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Structure in the Bay of Bengal*, OUP, Delhi, 1990, p.xv.

<sup>8</sup> Maria Augusta Lima Cruz, “Exiles and Renegades in early Sixteenth century Portuguese India”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol.xxiii, No.3, July-September, 1986, p.253.

<sup>9</sup> Subramanyam, *Improvising Empire*, p.22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

It was the port of Satgaon and Chittagong where major part of overseas trade passed from Bengal. However, it was Chittagong that seemed to be more favourable due to its proximity to the city of Gaur. Also by this time like Coromandel and Gujarat, Bengal was also a major exporter of textiles to regions in Asia as well as grain (rice). But the early history of the Crown's relations with Bengal seems to be somewhat obscure. There were captains such as Diogo Rebello in 1535, Afonso Vaz de Brito in 1537 and Vasco Peres de Sampaio in 1538 who operated under the Crown's name.<sup>11</sup> Besides these by 1530s licenses were granted to individual Portuguese to trade with Bengal.

When the Portuguese first came to Bengal, its geography was totally different from what it is today. At that time, Chittagong (modern-day Bangladesh), was its main port as well as the main gate-way to its capital city, Gaur, under Syed Husain Shah.<sup>12</sup> When Silveira arrived in Bengal he found Joao Coelho in Chittagong. Silveira's expedition did not achieve anything but it became an established custom for the Portuguese to send annually to Bengal a ship with merchandise. Following Silveira were many expeditions from whose difficulties arose the need for defence by arms. Eventually, this grew into the idea of conquests for the Portuguese. An expedition under the command of Martim Affonso de Mello in 1528 landed him by a curious chance on the coast of Bengal.<sup>13</sup> From here, he proceeded on his journey to Colombo whereby a storm drove his ships adrift and stranded him near the island of Negamale, opposite the city of *Sodoe*. It has been argued by J.J. Campos that neither Negamale nor *Sodoe* had been marked by de Barros in his Map of Bengal. According to Campos, the town of *Sodoe* referred to, is that of Sandoway, in Arakan (Burma). Misguided by a group of fishermen, de Mello was taken to Chakaria, under the Governorship of Khuda Baksh Khan, a vassal of King Mahmud Shah III, the last independent ruler of Bengal. Khuda Baksh had promised to free de Mello if he won a feud with one of his recalcitrant neighbouring chiefs. The victory was de Mello's but the promise was not kept. Instead, he and his men were imprisoned in the city of Sore.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.105.

<sup>12</sup> Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, p.20.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.31.

<sup>14</sup> Sore has been marked by de Barros in his Map of Bengal as placed southeast of Chittagong, but further in the interior.

Of the ships of de Mello that had gone adrift, two reached Chakaria under the command of Duarte Mendes Vasconcellos and Joao Coelho. J.J. Campos opines that this Coelho may be the same Coelho that joined Silveira in Chittagong. An escape was planned to flee with de Mello but it only landed the Portuguese in a tragedy. Tragedy ensued due to the Brahmins of the area who had vowed to sacrifice the most handsome of the Portuguese. It is not known as to what led to the Brahmins to keep this vow. J.J. Campos points that the vow of the Brahmins under a Muslim government reflects to some degree the power the Brahmin minority had in the land. Some other historians on the Portuguese, however, argue that these were obtained by bribes to the Muslims. The ill-fate, thus, befell on the nephew of de Mello, Goncalo de Mello.

Another expedition took off with Nuno da Cunha whose long dream it was to secure the trade of Bengal and at the same time gain a hold on its shores. The annual shipment of Portuguese merchandise that began with the expedition of Silveira was first sent under Ruy Vaz Pereira. Pereira on his arrival in Chittagong saw a ship that belonged to one Khwaja Shihab-ud-din. It was built in the manner of the Portuguese ships, to plunder and lay the blame on the Portuguese. Wasting no time, Pereira immediately captured this ship. Taking his chance, the Khwaja approached da Cunha and agreed to ransom de Mello for 3000 *cruzados*<sup>15</sup> if he got his vessel. As agreed, the ransom was made in 1529. Part of the deal was to aid the Khwaja flee to Ormuz, from the trouble he got into with Nusrat Shah, the Sultan of Bengal, and in return he was to deliver his influence on the king to grant the Portuguese trade facilities and permission to build a fort in Chittagong.

In order to realise his long cherished dream, da Cunha chose de Mello to undertake another expedition in 1533. The object was not only to aid the promise given to the Khwaja but through his influence, to open commerce with Bengal. Upon his arrival in Chittagong, de Mello sent an embassy to Gaur. King Mahmud Shah, however decided to put to death all the men that had come in the expedition. Therefore, he sent one man named Guazil<sup>16</sup> to finish off the Portuguese. In the mean time, a quarrel had broken out between de Mello and the Moorish customs officers. This Guazil interfered and invited the Portuguese for dinner. De Mello and his forty-men, unsuspecting of the treachery, immediately agreed. In the course of

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<sup>15</sup> A *cruzado* was a Portuguese coin, named from the cross-mark on it.

<sup>16</sup> Blochmann identifies him with Alfa Hussaini of Baghdad in "Geography and History of Bengal", *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1873, p.298. De Barros identifies him as a Moorish judicial officer.

dinner de Mello and his men were attacked and finding themselves in a hopeless situation, surrendered. This incident is high-lighted by de Barros;

“Ten Portuguese were killed including Christovam de Mello, the nephew of the Governor Lopo Vaz de Sampayo. Affonso de Mello himself was wounded. Thirty Portuguese who survived were tied up and put in a dark room. Their wounds were not attended to for some days and then they were forced to march six leagues during one whole night until they reached a place called Mava. They were eventually taken to Gaur and were treated not like men but like beasts. Duarte d’Azavedo and his twelve men who had gone to Gaur as envoys were also confined in hell...”<sup>17</sup>

On hearing of the disaster, Nuno da Cunha sent in 1534 an expedition under Antonio da Menezes, to wage “fire and blood” in case de Mello and his men were not returned. On reaching Chittagong, Menezes sent a message from da Cunha, the Governor of Goa, that if any harm were to be caused to his men, or that if they were not returned within a month, a war would be waged against him. Unyielding to the demand, Mahmud Shah requested of the Governor a number of carpenters, jewellers and other workmen. A month had elapsed before these negotiations were worked. Thus, as told, Menezes wasted no time in setting upon fire a great part of Chittagong and killed a number of people. Campos has pointed to another account that differs a little to that of de Barros whereby Mahmud Shah had demanded £15,000 as ransom, which seemed too exorbitant and hence, Chittagong was bombarded. From the continuous ill-fate that had befallen on de Mello, one would expect that his days were numbered. But destiny had much more in store for him, as new developments took place in Bengal.

Sher Shah’s invasion of Bengal in 1535 began with a campaign against Mahmud Shah.<sup>18</sup> The latter, finding himself helpless turned to the very man he intended to kill. In this hour of need arrived Diogo Rebello, the Portuguese captain and factor of the Coromandel pearl fisheries, not at Chittagong but Satgaon.<sup>19</sup> Upon his arrival, the port at Satgaon also saw the arrival of two ships with merchandise from Cambay. Rebello, without any harm caused to the ships forced them to leave the port and forbade them from trading. This incident reflects the stance taken by the Portuguese to destroy Arabian trade and claim exclusive trading rights over the whole of the Indian Ocean. An envoy was sent to Gaur requesting the freedom of the

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<sup>17</sup>Cited in Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, p.35.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Stewart, *History of Bengal*, Oriental Publishers, Delhi, 1971, p.142.

<sup>19</sup> Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, p.37.

prisoners. This was also the first time that the Portuguese had moved up the Hooghly to Gaur instead of the Meghna from Chittagong. Mahmud Shah seeing no other alternative asked for Portuguese help in return for which he would grant land to build fortresses in Satgaon and Chittagong. Sher Shah's intention was to enter Gaur through two passes, Teliagarhi and Sikligali, near Colgong.<sup>20</sup> Resistance was offered by the Portuguese. Some Portuguese historians state that they even managed to capture a particular elephant of Sher Shah that Mahmud Shah wanted. According to de Barros, Sher Shah entered Gaur by another route with 40,000 cavalry, 1,500 elephants, 200,000 infantry, and a fleet of 300 boats. As evident, Mahmud Shah did not come out victorious. Peace was made with Sher Shah through thirteen lakhs of gold or 525,000 *pardaos*.<sup>21</sup>

Mahmud Shah did not fail to recognise Portuguese but finding himself secure from Sher Shah began to have second thoughts about allowing the grant of land to build fortresses in Chittagong and Satgaon. Castanheda gives a description of this;

...and the King seeing himself free, or for some other reason, changed the wish of which he had of giving fortresses to the King of Portugal in Chittagong (Chatigao) and Satgaon (Satigao) but not of giving the custom-houses with houses of factories, and thus he told Martim Affonso who reminded him that he promised fortresses; and he seeing that the King would not assent to this, did not like to dispute it and told him to give whatever he liked. And at his request the King made Nunu Fernazes Freire the chief of the custom-house of Chittagong giving him a great circuit of houses in which the Moors and the Hindus lived in order that it might bring him rent as also the custom-house of Chittagong [might bring him rent] and gave him many other powers at which all in the land were surprised, as also at the King being such a great friend of the Portuguese whom he wanted to settle (*arreigar*) in the country. And the custom-house of Satgaon which was smaller, he gave to Joao Correa and soon he and Nuno Fernazes Freire went to these two cities to perform their offices, for which the Guazils of these two cities were very sad for the power that they had was taken, chiefly of Chittagong which was bigger.<sup>22</sup>

However, de Mello was allowed to build factories and was offered custom houses. He also appointed Nuno Fernandez Freire as the chief of the custom house of Chittagong along with land containing many custom houses whereby he could realise rent from the Moors and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>21</sup> According to Campos, Castanheda in *Historia do Descobrimento e Conquista da India pelos Portuguezes*, 8 vols. Is not definite as to what coins these "thirteen lakhs of gold" were paid in.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Campos, *History of Portuguese*, p.45.

Hindus dwelling there. The custom house of Satgaon was allotted to Joao Correa. This was the beginning of the Portuguese establishments in Bengal. By this time Bengal had turned out to be a hot bed of Portuguese activities. But here in Bengal initiative came from the private traders unlike in Goa or Coromandel which had an overseer. This grant reflects this initiative from the private entities. Also the *carreira de Bengala*, was facing falling Crown capital investment, this was also the problem in Coromandel but was more pronounced here. The case of D. Jeronimo de Noronha in 1548 and Simao Botelho a few years point to this as official waste of shipping and capital.<sup>23</sup>

Sher Shah, not satisfied, invaded again in 1538,<sup>24</sup> his reason being that the sum earlier paid to him was not enough and he wanted to realise a larger sum as tribute. Without the assistance of de Mello, Mahmud Shah had no option but to flee to Hajipore, from thence to Chunar, where Emperor Humayan was waiting to punish Sher Shah. Proclaiming himself emperor of Bengal in 1538,<sup>25</sup> Sher Shah marched against Humayaun, ousted him from the throne of Delhi, but could hold on to it only for a short period of five years. Da Cunha had promised to aid Mahmud Shah this time again, but help arrived under Vasco Peres de Sampayo a little too late. By this time, Sher Shah had taken Bengal. Faria y Souza has claimed that 'Sampayo arrived too late to be of any help to Mahmud Shah, and in fact he arrived after the latter had died of wounds in Chunar.' Thus, the Portuguese had obtained through Mahmud Shah, a custom house in Chittagong with a large establishment and a smaller one in Satgaon.

#### EARLY SETTLEMENTS: HUGHLI

Prior to the advent of the Portuguese, Hooghly was almost just as any insignificant village would be while Satgaon was a flourishing town which dated back to many years. The foundation of the town of Hooghly has been ascribed to the Portuguese. According to Campos, three Portuguese settlements grew in this area. The first was Satgaon, which evidently is not in Hooghly proper. It was founded by de Mello and not Sampayo as stated by Rev. Long. The works of de Barros and Correa are also silent on the activities of Sampayo. Castanheda had given a vivid account of Sampayo's expedition but has nothing to say of his presence in Hooghly. The second settlement in Hooghly proper was founded through the *farman* of Emperor Akbar (1579-1580) by Taveres. Under the *farman* of Emperor Shah

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<sup>23</sup> Subramanyam, *Improvising Empire*, p.107.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41.

Jahan, granted in 1633, the third settlement was founded in Bandel. From the quotation in the previous page, it is evident that Castenheda, in no way directly states that the Portuguese erected a factory in Satgaon. However, the fact that Mahmud Shah did give some kind of custom house and factories does point to the Portuguese eventually erecting some sort of a factory. The statement of Castenheda has also been confirmed by Correa. The only difference in the two occurs whereby according to Correa, Nuno Fernanzen was given the lucrative in Satgaon and that instead of Joao Correa, Christovam Correa was given the custom house of Chittagong with ample rent as well as power over the people.

Portuguese settlement predated the time of Akbar. This has been accounted by Abdul Hamid Lahori in the *Badshahnamah*;

Under the rule of the Bengalis (*dar ahd-i-Bangaliyan*), a party of Frank<sup>26</sup> 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 transactions in buying and selling, they erected several houses in the Bengali style. In the 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, 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. The markets of Satganw declined and lost their prosperity. The villages and the district of Hughli were on both sides of the river and these the Europeans got possession of at a low rent.<sup>27</sup>

From the above statement it is apparent that the Portuguese had settled in Satgaon before Akbar. The question arises as to whose reign this could have taken place. According to O'Malley this took place during the time of Suleiman Kararani. Campos, however, argues that this has nothing to give it weightage. Fr. H. Hosten S. J. states;

The Portuguese first settled at Hughli under a farman from Fatehpur Sikri between 1578 and 1580. Until that time they had not been allowed when

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<sup>26</sup> According to Campos, *Frank* is the parent word of *Ferenghi* by which name the Indian born Portuguese were known. The Arabs and the Persians called the French crusaders by the name of *Frank*, *Ferang*, a corruption of France. When the Portuguese and other Europeans came to India and the Arabs applied to them the same name *Ferang*, and then *Ferenghi*.

<sup>27</sup> Sir H. M. Elliot, *History of India as told by its own Historians*, 8 vols., London 1867-1877, vol.iii, pp.31-32.



coming up the river to do more than build godowns in bamboo and thatch which were burnt down every year when they returned to Goa<sup>28</sup>

It is evident that this statement of Fr. Hosten was based on the account written by It is evident Caesar Federici, who wrote at about the same time,

Every year at Buttor they make and unmake a village with houses and shops made of straw, and with all things necessary to their uses; and this village standeth as long as the ships ride there, and till they depart from the Indies, and when they are departed, every man goeth to his plot of houses and there setteth fire on them which thing made me to marvel. For as I passed upon Satagan, I saw this village standing with a great number of people, with an infinite number of ships and bazaars, and at my return coming down with my captain of the last ship for whom I tarried, I was all amazed to see such a place so soon raised and burnt and nothing left but the sign of burnt houses.<sup>29</sup>

Campos argues that if Castanheda and Correa are to be believed, the Portuguese did build more than just houses made of bamboo and thatch prior to their great settlement in Hughly before the time of Akbar.

## CHITTAGONG

Prior to Mughal conquest, Chittagong was a perpetual site of warfare. It switched hands between the Sultans of Bengal, Hindu Rajas of Tipperah, and the Kings of Arakan. It is evident that the Mughals had a clear idea of it as evident in the writings of Abul Fazl;

Chittagong is a large city situated by the sea and belted by woods. It is considered an excellent port and is the resort of Christians and other merchants<sup>30</sup>...Its (Bengal's) length from Chittagong to Garhi (Teliagarhi) is four hundred *kos*<sup>31</sup>...To the southeast of Bengal is a considerable tract called Arakan which possesses the port of Chittagong.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, p.49.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Campos, pp.49-50.

<sup>30</sup> *Ain*, vol.ii, tr. H.S. Jarett, 1947, p.137.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp..129-130.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

The second line shows that the writer was well aware that it belonged to Bengal. The last line provides that he no doubt had knowledge of who then possessed the sovereignty of Chittagong. Infact, Chittagong came under the Arakan kings from 1459-1665 and 1666.<sup>33</sup>

Chittagong was the *Porto Grande*,<sup>34</sup> a vast centre of trade, which ultimately passed into the Portuguese hands by 1590.<sup>35</sup> Early writings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and especially those of the Portuguese speak of the “city of Bengala” which according to Campos is supposed to have been Chittagong. History of the original Portuguese settlement of Chittagong however, must be ascribed to Sebastiao Gonsalves Tibau, who shook off the authority of the Governor of Goa and established an independent territory. He had arrived in India as a soldier but quickly took to trading and thus journeyed to Dianga.<sup>36</sup> His timing seemed unfortunate as the Arakan king in 1607 ordered a massacre of the Portuguese settled there. Towards the end of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese established in Chittagong, began to extend their activities to Dianga. Both these ports belonged to the King of Arakan. The friendly relationship fell out following the Portuguese conquest of Sondip in 1602.<sup>37</sup> It was only after 1615 that Dianga was resettled by Portuguese who were taken into the service of the King of Arakan as adventurers. Until this juncture, the Portuguese of Chittagong and Dianga were loyal subjects to the Crown of Portugal. Thus a new age dawned; the age of piracy, led by the King of Arakan.

This history of the early Portuguese settlements in Bengal has seen a series of studies with the likes of J.J.Campos, Tapan Raychaudhuri and recently Sushil Chaudhuri who seem to agree that the Portuguese succeeded in the early years of the sixteenth century in replacing much of the maritime trade in Bengal due to their superior military forces. But the early history also shows that Portuguese presence was more individual and private. It is through the studies of Charles Boxer, Micheal Pearson and Sanjay Subramanyam that we can come to the

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<sup>33</sup> Abdul Karim, “Revenue Accounts of Chittagong in the *Ain-i-Akbari*”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, vol. 16, No.1, April, 1971, pp. 243-248.

<sup>34</sup> Chittagong in the pre-British days was a great centre, a centre of commercial importance. The Arabs, Portuguese flocked there every year, and from the Portuguese it acquired the name *Porto Grande*, i.e., the great port in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as distinguished by *Satgaon*. By the beginning of the seventeenth century however, the prosperity of the port was on the decline due to the invasions of the Arakanese and Portuguese pirates.

<sup>35</sup> Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, Manoharlal, Delhi, 1963, p. 95.

<sup>36</sup> Dianga, part of the Kingdom of Arakan, along the western coast of Lower Burma.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.68.

conclusion that there were different elements with different motives that shaped the contours of the frontier.

It was in the middle of 1560s that official Portuguese approach to Bengal took a change. This however has to be seen in the light of changes made with respect to Portuguese Asia as a whole –concessions system-and not only conducive to Bengal.<sup>38</sup>This system put an end to the Crown shipping in Bengal as reflected in the writings of Simao Botelho in 1522;

One should see to it that in the voyages to Bengal, no ships of His Highness go, and that those who have the voyages[in grant] should go as captains Major, and in their own ships, and His Highness would not have to undertake so many expenses with no profit of any sort, because this year, there went to Bengal one large galleon, and another ship which was purchased [by the Treasury] for this purpose alone<sup>39</sup>

The first concession went to Chittagong, second to Satgaon and the third to Pipli. By late 1560s all three grants assumed the same form with the grantee being the Captain-Major and without a monopoly right over the voyage.<sup>40</sup>The Satgaon concession was estimated at about 3,000 *cruzados*, and that of Chittagong at 2,000 *cruzados* which were sold off to private elements.<sup>41</sup>

In the case of private trade we can identify at least three important lines of trade if we look at long distance commerce. Firstly, there was the trade to Melaka which constituted rice and textiles.<sup>42</sup> This trade by the late sixteenth century came to be completely dominated by the private Portuguese. The second route passed through Nagapattinam to ports in Sri Lanka and on the other to Cochin and Goa.<sup>43</sup> Thirdly, there was direct trade involving Portuguese private traders with that of Ormuz.<sup>44</sup> Although this trade was small it was significant as it proved to be a rare link between the heart of the Bay and the western Indian Ocean. Thus, Portuguese trade in and from Bengal following the expedition of Joao de Silveira thus developed in different paces and directions.

## GROWTH OF PORTUGUESE AND ARAKANESE RELATIONS

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.109.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire*, p.109.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.116

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.116.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p.116.

Portuguese sources speak of Satgaon and Chittagong as two of Bengal's chief ports in the early sixteenth century.<sup>45</sup> But within Bengal itself after 1540 we see a slow shift from the eastern section more towards the western. However, despite the decline of Chittagong, private Portuguese presence continued to thrive in the suburbs of Dianga. At the same time this period also witnessed Arakanese westward expansion under Min Bin (1531-1553) leading to Arakanese occupation of much of eastern Bengal.

The problem here lies on the issue of primary sources for the reconstruction of Arakanese history. First of all, these sources are unobtainable and secondly, if they were accessible, the problem lies with the language in which they were written. The sources, written in old Burmese have not been translated nor taught outside of Burma. The indigenous accounts available according to authorities are not trustworthy prior to the period of 1400. We do have Friar Manrique with his in-depth observations but his account corresponds to seventeenth century Arakan when the kingdom was beginning to see its decline.

The Portuguese shipman were a mere handful...but as they were unopposed on the sea, they found themselves in command of the sea, some point; d'appui on land for trade and refitting was essential...The Arakanese, their wits sharpened by experience, saw that here was one of those chances given to nations and individuals, which if boldly exploited yield a great profit. It seemed that a mutually agreeable understanding could be arranged. While the Portuguese were able to provide mastery of seamanship, with a modern knowledge of arms and fortifications, the Arakanese could throw into the bargain territorial concessions and trade openings.<sup>46</sup>

When Min Bin died in 1553...His sea-power...was the terror of the Ganges region, and his country was on the threshold of the greatest period of her greatest history. But her somewhat spectacular rise was hardly due to the genius of her rulers. It coincides with a period of weakness in Bengal...for Min Bin leashed to the ferenghi who took under his flag the port of Dianga.

<sup>47</sup>

The above quotations show that much of the credit was given to the foreigners but the role of King Min Bin has also been acknowledged here. The quote also shows that Arakan, although

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>46</sup> M.S.Collis & San Shwe Bu cited in Micheal Charney in " Arakan, Min Yazagyi, and the Portuguese: The Relationship between the Growth of Arakanese Imperial Power and Portuguese Mercenaries on the Fringe of Mainland Southeast Asia 1517-1617", *School of Oriental and African Studies Bulletin of Burma Research (henceforth SOAS)*, vol.3, No.2, Autumn,2005,pp.974-1140.

<sup>47</sup> DGE Hall cited in Ibid., p.974.

pressed between two large kingdoms, that of Pegu and Bengal, did not remain isolated in herself. Rather, she chose to open even if it threatened the very existence and the safety that her geographical location provided. The initial contact between the Arakanese and the Portuguese can be traced to the time of Joao da Silveira, who arrived in Mrauk-U in 1518.<sup>48</sup> At that time, Arakan was under Min Yaza (1501-1523) of the Mrauk-U dynasty.<sup>49</sup> Duarte Barbosa in the early sixteenth century observed that

This king is very rich in money and, powerful from the number of men at arms: he is often at war with his neighbours, and some of them obey him against their wills, and send him tribute. He lives in great luxury, and possesses very good houses in all the towns where he resides, which have got many pools of water, green and shady gardens, and good trees.<sup>50</sup>

Silveira however did not forget the treatment meted out to him when he arrived at Chittagong, and thus was surprised at the cordiality of the Arakan king. Thus, keeping in mind the treachery of Chittagong, Silveira was unresponsive and nothing materialised out of this.

#### THE DAWN OF PIRACY

“A pirate is a sea robber acting on his own accord. It is as old as maritime trade. It found the optimum conditions for growth where states did not exist or were not interested in naval power.”<sup>51</sup> This is the definition provided by K.N. Chaudhuri but the following paragraphs will prove that although the Arakanese were termed pirates their involvement in the politics on the frontier implicated the Portuguese in shaping the frontier. Jadunath Sarkar states that the period of Gonsalves’s career covered a period of ten years.<sup>52</sup> He further states that although he was trained to be a great leader, the environments around him were more conducive to making a pirate out of him.<sup>53</sup>

It was not only piracy but also the Portuguese *cartaz* system that was to determine the fate of Asian trade. To control as well as tax Asian traders the Portuguese in order to operate from a position of dominance which they based on their naval power instituted the *cartaz* system.

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<sup>48</sup> See Campos

<sup>49</sup> Charney, "Arakan, Min Yazagyi and the Portuguese" *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, vol.3, No.2, Autumn 2005, p.1015.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1016., BG,2 vols., tr. M.I. Borah, Gauhati, also testify to the glory, splendour, great forces of the kings and pre-eminence of the Arakan.

<sup>51</sup> Denys Lombard and Om Prakash (ed.), *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal: 1500-1800*, Manohar, Delhi, 1999, pp. 116-118.

<sup>52</sup> Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Bengal: Muslim Period, 1200-1757*, vol.ii, Patna, 1973, p.363.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p.363.

Thus, all ships trading in Asia were to have a pass or *cartaz*. They were issued from at least 1502 onwards.<sup>54</sup> It meant that the ship could only trade at a Portuguese fort, or call on a Portuguese fort to pay its duties before it proceeded to its destination. If a ship was found without it was captured by the Portuguese along with the goods. But was this to full control trade or was it instituted for some other reason. The passes or license was not given freely to all. Subramanyam has also pointed this system was to offset the increase in duties at Melaka which was followed by exit duties in the late sixteenth century.<sup>55</sup>

The beginnings of piracy in the form of raids can be traced to the time of Akbar. In his time much of these raiders came under the banner of the Arakan king. The Mughals since the fall of Daud Kararani were in possession of Bengal and Orissa, but they had not yet penetrated into Arakan. Their sights were held fast on Bhulua.<sup>56</sup> From the Mughal perspective it would seem that due to this regions close proximity to Sondip and Arakan, Mughal presence there was inevitable to control the raids. Charles Stewart has a different take on this. He argues that the alliance between the Arakanese and the Portuguese was due much to their plan of dividing Bengal for themselves and thus it was agreed that that the King of Arakan would proceed by land with an army while the Portuguese took to the seas. It was an opportunate invasion until at the critical moment when the tide of favour went on the side of the Mughals. In the course of the war the alliance between the Portuguese and the Arakanese broke due to treachery on the part of the Maghs according to the *Baharistan-i-Ghayybi*.<sup>57</sup> According to Campos who utilised the account of Boracco, the fault lay with the Portuguese.<sup>58</sup> Due to the ferenghi treachery, the Arakan King was left alone to face the onslaught of the Mughals. Thus, he fled to Chittagong where he left a strong garrison and proceeded to his kingdom. This was a major set-back for Arakan as the Mughals could now take Bengal upto Chittagong. It was also a threat on Dianga which was closer to Bengal than the Arakanese kingdom. Gonsalves decided to attack Arakan at this ripe moment when her forces were left completely vulnerable by the Mughal onslaught. It was inevitably a victory on the part of Gonsalves who destroyed all of Arakan's fortresses. It also left exposed the kingdom of Min Yazagyi exposed to the ferenghis in Sondip and the growing Mughal power in Bengal. The relationship between Arakan and Tipperah was also swiftly deteriorating. The only

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<sup>54</sup> M.N.Pearson, *Merchants and Rulers in Gujarat*, p.40.

<sup>55</sup> Subramanyam, *Improvising Empire*, p.285.

<sup>56</sup> Largest pargana in the Noakhali district of Bengal.

<sup>57</sup> *BG*, vol.ii,pp.629-633.

<sup>58</sup> Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, p.87.

alternative open to Min Yazagyi was to strengthen his hold over Chittagong, the loss of which would mean disaster for his kingdom. Taking advantage of this situation as well as the ever encroaching Burmese threat in 1615, the Mughals sent an army consisting of cavalry and navy in 1616.<sup>59</sup> The final battle took place in 1617 under the Arakanese King Min Khamaung who forced the retreat of the Mughals, attacked Sondip and re-claimed all the previous strongholds in northern Arakan that had fallen under Portuguese.<sup>60</sup>

The actual period of the rise of piracy is seen from the time of the fall of Gonsalves, 1615-1616, upto 1665.<sup>61</sup> This is the time span when the history of the Portuguese in Bengal is seen in its worst form. The method of plundering the territories of one another was an accepted norm. From the Afghan kings of Bengal to that of Arakan and Tipperah, all participated in this act of avenging one another. But the Portuguese introduced a new element to this whereby depredations began to be carried from the sea and the vast rivers of the Bengal delta.

One cannot however ascribe to the Portuguese as the originators of this. The Mughals, Maghs, the Kings of Tipperah, and the Bengal Sultans were all great plunderers. However, one must not forget that it was the eastern and not western part of Bengal that grew to become the haunt of the pirates.

As regards to the Portuguese of the eastern sector, this is what Mannuci had to say;

they had reached the very acme of evil doing and at one time even a priest named Frei Vicente acted as their leader. The horror of their practices can better be imagined than described. Yet they held a secondary place to the Maghs.<sup>62</sup>

Another account is evident in the writing of Bernier. He says;

For many years there have always been Portuguese in the kingdom of *Rukan* (Arakan) or *Mog*, and with them a great number of their Mestices or Christian slaves and other Franguis gathered together from all parts. This was the retreat of fugitives from Goa, Ceylon, Cochin, Malacca and all other places once occupied by the Portuguese in the Indies. Those who had fled from their convent, those who had married twice or three times, assassins-in

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<sup>59</sup> Charney, *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research*, p.1123.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1123. Also see Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, p.293.

<sup>61</sup> Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, p.157.

<sup>62</sup> Niccolao Manucci, *Storia do Mogor*, vol. ii, tr. William Irvine, 4 vols., Delhi, 1981 (reprint), p.117.

a word, outlaws and ruffians, were here welcomed and held in repute, and led a detestable life, utterly unworthy of Christians, going so far as to massacre and poison each other with impunity, and to assassinate their own priests, who were often no better than themselves. The King of *Rakan*, in perpetual terror of the Mughal, kept these people for the defence of his frontier at a port called *Chatigon* (Chittagong) assigning them lands and letting them live and follow their own devices. Their ordinary pursuit and occupation was theft and piracy. With small and light half-galleys called *galleasses* they did nothing but sweep the sea on this side; and entering all rivers, canals and arms of the Ganges, and passing between the islands of Lower Bengal- often even penetrating as far as forty or fifty leagues into the interior- they surprised and carried off whole villages and harried the poor gentiles, and other inhabitants of this quarter at their assemblies, their markets, their festivals and weddings, seizing as slaves both men and women, small and great, perpetrating strange, cruelties and burning all that they could not carry away. It is owing to this that at the present day are seen so many lovely but deserted isles at the mouth of the Ganges, once thickly populated but now infested only by savage beasts, principally tigers.<sup>63</sup>

Bernier's attitude, however bitter is correct with regards to the atrocities committed but he is wrong as these were not committed only by the Portuguese. The Maghs are as much to be blamed as the Portuguese. This has been taken into consideration by Campos who by using Rennel's map of Bengal published in 1794, makes note of, "this part of the country has been deserted on account of the ravages of the Maghs."<sup>64</sup> This was written by Rennel in the map showing the portion of the Sundarbans, south of Bakarganj.

The viceroyalty of Nawab Shaista Khan, 1664, in Bengal, shows that it was not the Portuguese alone who carried out these frightful depredations. The author of the *Riyaz us-Salatin* has but given a very meagre account of the achievements of Shaista Khan unlike the *Akbar-Nama* and the *Maasir-i-Alamgiri*. The *Maasir-i-Alamgiri* lists the extirpation of the Magh pirates as one of Shaista Khan's greatest achievements. The *Akbar-Nama* points to Shaista Khan defeating the Maghs, who, taking advantage of the struggle for supremacy between Aurangzeb and Shah Shuja had raided the coasts of Bengal.

It was the conquest of Chittagong by the Mughals that finally broke the Portuguese adventurers. But this was not an easy task for Shaista Khan who was well aware of the fact that Chittagong could not be wrested as long as the Portuguese defended it. The only alternative was to present them with terms and conditions that were better than they accrued

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<sup>63</sup> Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mughal Empire*, tr. Archibald Constable, Delhi, 1968, pp.174-175.

<sup>64</sup> Campos, *Portuguese in Bengal*, p.163.



from the Arakan King. The *Alamgir-Nama*, however differs, according to it not all Portuguese agreed to side with the Mughals and news of this inevitably went to the Arakan King. Thus, the Chittagong attack of the Mughals took place in 1665.<sup>65</sup>

## THE SLAVE TRADE

The period from 1599-1610 saw the Arakanese state take territorial leaps with the help of the Portuguese into the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta. This expansion brought her in direct conflict with the Mughals. It increasingly became ruled by a war economy by the seventeenth century. Arakan also had no trade items to offer except for rice in the coastal plains and elephants in the interior. The former again proved to be uncertain due to the annual flooding of the Lemro and Kaladin river basins. She realised, although late that commerce was vital for her. Also to benefit from the increased trade in the Bay of Bengal, she had to take on an aggressive commercial policy. Slave-trade entered at this point. Southeast Bengal was the epicentre of this. It was a region over which the Arakanese had considerable influence. It was also contiguous to Arakan.<sup>66</sup>

External as well as internal compulsions forced the Arakanese state into this activity. The wars of expansion under taken by the state was a major cause. Also there was considerable Portuguese and Dutch demand for slaves thereby turning Hughli, Pipli, Chattagram-Dianga, and Mrauk-U as slave ports. The shortage of man power added to this. They were increasingly utilised as craftsmen or to clear the jungles for cultivation. The slave trade took to a new form in the seventeenth century. It became a symbol of social status in Arakan. The state also introduced a new system whereby Arakanese nobles could claim slaves as booty.<sup>67</sup> Rila Mukherjee has points to Jacob Black-Michaud's Feuding Societies whereby scarcity is categorised in two different forms: material, which is perceived and moral which is felt. He argues that a society experiences a total scarcity, be it material or moral. It is in response to these that societies, such as in the case of Arakan, take to raiding. Arakan took to raiding as the monarchs realised that there was much manpower needed in order to sustain her economy. But Arakan was not the sole entity geared to this kind of trade. In sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Bengal, especially Sylhet and Ghoraghat, were according to Abul Fazl

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>66</sup> Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of Southeast Asia*, Delhi, 2006, p.143.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.143.

conducive to this trade.<sup>68</sup> The exact time that Bengal took to this trade is uncertain but from the time of Marco Polo this was prevalent as described by him. Much of Arakanese slave trade occurred was also carried on under the Dutch. A detailed outline of this trade will be looked at in chapter 4 dealing with the economic frontier.

## MISSIONARIES

It is often said that no foreign nation came to India with a more religious zeal than the Portuguese. This is evident from the very beginning of Portuguese arrival, to seek for spices and Christians. Thus, the sword always allied itself with the cross. All Catholic religious orders played a great role in the Bay. Here in the Bay of Bengal the Augustinians unlike the Order of Jesuits in the Coromandel that seem to have been of significance.

Saint Francis Xavier and the Order of the Jesuits were the first to arrive in 1542, although before them the Dominicans and the Franciscans had begun evangelisation.<sup>69</sup> Antonio Vaz and Pedro Dias, both Jesuit Fathers reached the shores of Bengal in 1576.<sup>70</sup> Mention has also been made of a vicar in Satgaon in 1578, a priest by the name Juliano Pereira.<sup>71</sup> According to J.J. Campos, the latter was invited to the court of Akbar in Fatehpur-Sikri to explain the tenets of Christianity.

Early mission work is evident in the letters of Father Nicolau de Pimenta in Goa. Letters that he received from the Jesuits throw light for the period 1598-1600. In Bengal, Hughli was the first scene of evangelism with a church, a school and a hospital being erected by Francisco Fernandes and Domingo de Souza.<sup>72</sup> From Hughli they moved on to Chittagong, which at this time was under Arakan. Chandecan however was the first to have a church formally consecrated in 1599 with Father Fernandes.<sup>73</sup> This initial success soon too came to an end with the disputes between the Portuguese and the Arakanese.

It was the Augustinians who accomplished the most important work after their arrival in India in 1572. Manrique asserts that they settled in Hughli in 1580. The *farman* granted by Akbar to Taveres permitted them to openly preach, erect churches and baptize. Augustinian mission

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<sup>68</sup> *Ain*, vol.ii, pp.389-390.

<sup>69</sup> Campos, p.100.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p.101.

activity extended to Chittagong in 1621.<sup>74</sup> This was the time when the Portuguese were in the service of Arakan. Thus, with the Maghs, all along the Sunderbans, slaves were captured and baptised. J.J. Campos states that between 1621 and 1624, the Portuguese brought to Chittagong 42,000 slaves to be baptised. The siege of Hughli was a major setback to this growing missionary activity. It was only in 1633, with the grant of 777 *bighas* of land from Shah Jahan that the Augustinians were restored as their churches were all desecrated during the siege of Hughli. In 1640 the Jesuits revived themselves in Bengal but without a church until the intervention of the historian Mannucci. The *Storia do Mogor* states that Mannucci spoke with the Mughal Governor Mirzagol.<sup>75</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Portuguese were thus pioneers. They, in the beginning of the seventeenth century acquired a position in eastern Bengal whereby they were able to settle and establish factories in the principal ports, such as Chittagong and Hughli. The other Europeans that followed suit, English and the Dutch for example, established themselves, naturally, at the very places where the Portuguese had found openings. As evident in the case of Gonsalves, some of the Portuguese settlements in Bengal became virtually independent of the rulers of Mughals as well as the Portuguese government in Goa. They were also the first to introduce Christianity in Bengal. The most enduring influence thus can be seen even today in the churches. The Kingdom of Arakan, now in present day Burma, has also been a major focus in this chapter. Arakan was a major player in the history of the Portuguese in eastern Bengal. Portuguese history in this delta has been shaped much by her relations with Arakan. The rise and fall of Arakan thus, played a major role in shaping Portuguese power in the delta.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.104.

<sup>75</sup> Mannucci, *Storia do Mogor*, vol.ii, p.90.

## Chapter 4

### THE ECONOMIC FRONTIER

This chapter looks at three different elements moving in the frontier as the Mughals attempt at closing it. One aspect of the chapter is the trade in slaves. It also looks briefly at Assam and the Koch Kingdom on the northeast and tries to locate how even as the Mughals enclosed upon them, they continued to open themselves in whatever little way they could to the regions around them. And lastly, is a section on Arakan dealing with the way in which the Arakanese Kingdom tried to exploit the political conditions around them for their own economic growth. The trade in spices, precious metals, textiles and diamonds have been dealt with extensively by maritime historians. The commercial traffic in slaves in the Indian Ocean however has been dealt with scantily. Also as Arasaratnam pointed out, the nature of this trade in the Indian Ocean is scanty and periodic which could reflect the very nature of this trade.<sup>1</sup> Although a powerful one, slave trade in the commerce of the Indian Ocean had been an isolated segment. The eastward movement of the Mughals brought them face to face with Arakan and its coastal allies, the Portuguese and the Maghs.

The Portuguese at Sundiva were becoming an immediate threat to the Arakanese and it was at this time that the Dutch were becoming most dependent on trade relations with Arakan;

There was a constant demand for slaves in the Dutch factories in the Archipelago, Dutch merchants soon became the king's chief customers for these unhappy human beings (Bengali prisoners of war). They also came to Arakan for rice. Their factories in the spice growing districts were in constant need of food supplies, and their agents were constantly busy wherever rice was to be had, and especially in Siam and Arakan.<sup>2</sup>

Deshima, a Dutch outpost near Nagasaki in Japan employed slaves. This quote paints a Japanese picture of the Dutch factory in 1696;

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<sup>1</sup> Arasaratnam, "Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century" in Mathew (ed.) *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans*, Delhi, 1995, p.195.

<sup>2</sup> D.G.E. Hall cited in Micheal Charney, "Arakan, Min Yazagyi, and the Portuguese: The Relationship between the Growth of Arakanese Power and Portuguese Mercenaries on the Fringe of Mainland Southeast Asia 1517-1617", *School of Oriental and African Studies Bulletin of Burma Research (henceforth SOAS)*, vol.3, No.2, Autumn, 2005, pp.974-1140.

“There was constant movement of Indian Slaves to the “eastward”, not only from raids such as those carried out in Bengal by pirates from Arakan but from the common practice of selling Indian children into slavery, especially in times of famine. There was a similar movement westward, chiefly under Dutch auspices of slaves of Malay origin... The horrors of the middle passage” were not entirely confined to the Atlantic. In July 1732, the Dutch company’s supercargoes in the yacht “Binnewyssel” bought 190 slaves in Madagascar for 1570 pieces of eight, 124 buccaneer guns, 505 pounds of gun-powder, sundry pieces of goods and presents to tribal chieftans. In November, the yacht arrived in Sumatra with 100 men and fifty-four women, having thrown overboard the bodies of twenty-five men and eleven women. On October 13, 1752, the English company’s factors at Madras “sent to Madagascar per ship Delawar” thirty-six chests of guns for the purchase of slaves accompanied by “30 negroes’ collars, 3 travelling chains, 150 pairs handcuffs, 300 rivettes, 250 feetschackles.”<sup>3</sup>

## SLAVERY IN BENGAL

Medieval and early modern India were not slave societies, in the sense that the economy did not depend on slave labour nor were the majority of the producers slaves.<sup>4</sup> But European trading companies in Asia participated in this kind of trade. The VOC was a fore-runner in this. It is evident in the letter written by Goen, the Governor General in the 1620s,

“If the slaves are purchased at reasonable price, they render incomparably more profit than cloth...If we could secure some hundred thousands, not one would be refused.”<sup>5</sup>

Even as early as 1615, the Dutch were on the lookout for labour which they could employ at their fortifications in the east as their own labourers could not adjust to the heat there. In the initial days the VOC would send for slaves to Madagascar and the Mozambique Channel to procure from the major slave centres there. This however, proved to be a loss as the long journey took a toll on the slaves. In 1685 for example, out of 274 slaves bought in Madagascar only 108 survived the journey to Batavia, although the price of slaves was much

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<sup>3 3</sup> Sudeshna Chakravarti, “The Dutch East India Company and the Slave Trade in Seventeenth Century India: An Outline by Pieter van Dam, An Advocate of the Company”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society (henceforth JAS)*, vol.xxxix, No.2, 1997.p.85.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.81.

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Chakravarti, “Dutch East India Company”, *JAS*, vol.xxxix, No.2, 1977, p.83.

cheaper.<sup>6</sup> This reflects the poor survival rate which was not very conducive to the Dutch. For the Dutch the most effective source of slave labour was the Arakan-Bengal coast.<sup>7</sup> This flourishing market was fed by the often combined raids of the Maghs and the Portuguese. The Dutch woke to the potential this market provided and which was controlled by the king of Arakan. In 1626, the VOC sent four ships to Arakan for slaves and rice which returned to Coromandel carrying 250 slaves and another brought in about 130 slaves.<sup>8</sup> The Arakan king had a licence to purchase and export slaves which he sold in his territories as well as those of the Portuguese i.e. Chittagong and Dianga, when they had control over these regions, with a tax of twenty percent per head.<sup>9</sup> The Dutch were granted one such licence by the king and was allowed to export a limited amount of slaves.

The VOC sometimes resorted to slave raids in the Coromandel region as well as its neighbouring areas. But in Coromandel, the company sold fewer slaves. The price per slave was eighteen to twenty *rials*. It was only with the famine of 1646 that both demand and supply grew. Demand for slaves came from Batavia for slaves within the age group of eight to twenty. In 1652 demand for slaves came from the Indies. But the end of the famine meant a decline in this short period of boom. A short-lived boom in slave trade in 1659-61 in Coromandel existed due to the Tanjore famine.<sup>10</sup> Only a quarter of the supply could be procured by the VOC due to lack of provisions and as the famine ended the supply began to dry up. For the VOC, slaves of the age-group 15-35 constituted the able-bodied, children between 2-7 were counted as half a piece, three slave children between 8-14 made two pieces, three slaves between 35-45 counted as two and those above forty-five were not considered suitable for productive labour.<sup>11</sup>

After having set-up factories in Masaulipatnam and Coromandel, the VOC began looking towards Bengal. The company entered the Bengal-Arakan region sometime in the early 1630s. This region proved to play a pivotal role in the VOC's Asian trade for the next half a

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<sup>6</sup> Arasaratnam, "Slave Trade" in Mathew (ed.) *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans*, p.200.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.201.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.201.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.201.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Chakravarti, "Dutch East India Company", *JAS*, vol.xxxix, No.2, 1997, p.84.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.85-86.

century. Nearly forty percent of the company cargo sent to Holland came from Bengal. It provided muslin, rice, cotton-goods and a variety of food stuffs.<sup>12</sup> The piracy carried on by the Arakanese and the Portuguese was very vital for the company's slave trade. Three times in the course of the seventeenth century, Dutch factories in the Arakan capital were opened, closed and re-opened. These ups and downs did not deter the Dutch from Arakan who were in the seventeenth century, one of the biggest slave markets in Asia. The VOC shipped its slaves to south India and even Ceylon, but majority of the demand came from the East Indies, the centre of Dutch power and commerce in Asia. The silver and gold mines of Western Sumatra needed labour to work in the mines. Silver was an important commodity in providing exchange for these Asian commodities. The slaves were also needed to work on the lands from where the natives had been dispossessed. Other markets also felt the growing importance of Arakan's chief commodity: slaves. The following table shows the number of slaves shipped from Arakan to Batavia in the years 1636-1662:

1636	216
1644	600
1647	1046 (from Arakan and Pegu)
1654	311
1655	200
1656	288
1658	153
1659	407
1660	421
1662	101

The decline seen in the table is due to the Arakanese king in 1645 forbidding the export of slaves which eventually saw a reduction in the Dutch numbers of slaves they procured. Due to the uncertainty of this trade the Dutch decided to abandon their factory in Arakan in 1647 but increasing demands from Batavia forced them to re-establish this trade in Arakan in 1649 which resumed till 1662.<sup>13</sup>

The Dutch were also growing a substantial trade in the ports of Hughli and Balasore which was threatened by the Mughals. Thus, to avoid Mughal wrath, the policy adopted was to allow Dutch traders to carry on trade in their own ships direct from Batavia which some carried on successfully.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.86

<sup>13</sup> Arasaratnam, "Slave Trade" in Mathew (ed.) *Mariners, Merchants and Oceans*, p.202.

The account of Pieter van Dam gives details of this much sought after trade. As evident in the previous chapter, the Arakan kings had on occasions raided and even annexed portions of southeastern Bengal. This seems more likely to reflect the nature of slave raids as had been pointed out by Arasaratman.<sup>14</sup> Pieter van Dam also seems to be aware of the “voluntary” source of slavery, especially during famines as he speaks of the company buying slaves during famines, i.e., Tanjore. 1658 saw a continuous succession of wars, failed harvests, pestilence and tyrannical regimes in the southern part of the Coromandel.<sup>15</sup> Till June, 1660, thousands of slaves were brought to Nagapatnam where most of them were shipped off the Sri Lanka keeping in mind the easy journey.<sup>16</sup> This trade was short-lived as the economic scenario improved. In the years to come, the trade never attained the heights that it did during this period.

Mughal conquest of North India did not take place with the help of military slaves as did the Delhi Sultanate. North India was not governed with the help of slave commanders and every attempt was made to curb slavery within its frontiers. Akbar in 1562 abolished the practice of enslaving war captives.<sup>17</sup> Until Shaista Khan’s conquest of Chittagong in 1666 and the conquest of Hughli in 1635 this menace could not be rooted out. After this, Hughli ceased to be a centre for slave trade. But it is not very certain how far the Mughals went in this endeavour as another feature of the slave trade, the trade in eunuchs, continued. The Portuguese were also not completely halted as those who settled in the islands of the delta continued as freebooters after they withdrew from Hughli. They continued to raid under the aegis of the Arakanese king. It is in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries that Bengal began to enjoy an enviable reputation as the source of eunuchs. But this does not mean that Bengal grew to be an exclusive centre. Eunuchs could be manufactured anywhere but some degree of skill was required as Hambly points out, “some degree of surgical skill (implying a tradition) was necessary if the death rate was not to be astronomical. Hence, certain regions on the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p.195.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.204.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.204.

<sup>17</sup> Indrani Chatterjee & Richard Eaton (ed.), *Slavery and South Asian History*, Indiana University Press, 2006, p.13.



fringes of *Dar al Islam*-Bengal, Java, Nubia for example became associated with the trade.”<sup>18</sup>

It is not easy to pin point when this trade began but as early as the thirteenth century when Marco Polo visited he stated that;

There are many eunuchs and from this province all the nobles and gentlemen and from the neighbouring provinces are provided with them...Indian merchants come to this province and buy the eunuchs I have mentioned, and many slaves, and then take them to divers to other countries and sell them again. Eunuchs and slaves are very numerous, because all those taken prisoners by those people, are straightaway castrated, and then sold.<sup>19</sup>

Two centuries later, Duarte Barbosa wrote in a somewhat more informative way and confirmed that this trade was firmly established and wide-known. He wrote;

The Moorish merchants of this city [Bengala] oftentimes travel up country to buy Heathen boys from their parents or from other persons who steal them and castrate them, so that they are left quite flat. Many die from this; those who live they train well and sell them. They value them much as guardians of their women and estates and for other low objects. These eunuchs they hold in high esteem as men of upright character, and some of them become their lord's factors, and some Governours and Captains of the Moorish kings, so that they become very rich and have great estates.<sup>20</sup>

The demand for this category of special slaves was not a new phenomenon in medieval Bengal rather it dates further back into the ancient times. As Hambly points out, firstly, they were needed as guards of the harems by those who were affluent enough to do so as well as servants to watch over the master.<sup>21</sup> But it was at the close of the twelfth century, with the establishment of an independent sultanate by Mubarak Shah that the demand for eunuchs in Bengal increased. The eunuchs in the Bengal harems were of two kinds, native and foreign.<sup>22</sup> It was the latter that was regarded as extremely exotic. In the Mughal period the practice of

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<sup>18</sup> Gavin Hambly, "A Note on the Trade in Eunuchs in Mughal Bengal", *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (henceforth JAOS), vol.94, No.1, January-March, 1974,p.125.

<sup>19</sup> Cited in Hambly, "Trade in Eunuchs", JAOS, p.126.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.126.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p.127.

<sup>22</sup> Habshi slaves constituted the foreign eunuchs who were shipped from Abassynia and east Africa.

sending eunuchs to the Imperial harem can be traced to the time of Firuz Shah Tughlak according to Hambly and that it was Jahangir who attempted to discontinue this practice.<sup>23</sup>

Emperor Jahangir's orders to put an end to the practice of "eunuch tribute" whereby the children of Sylhet were castrated and sent to *subah* headquarters in lieu of revenue payment. Thus, Islam Khan was ordered by the Emperor to put an end to this kind of practice in 1608 which was customary since the fourteenth century.<sup>24</sup> However, regardless of Jahangir's orders this practice continued throughout the seventeenth century. Francois Pyrard, a French traveller, just before Jahangir issued the *farman* to put an end to "eunuch tribute" wrote;

"One of the greatest trades in Bengal is in slaves; for there is a certain land subject to the king [Sylhet?] where fathers sell their children and give them to the king as tribute; so most of the slaves in India are got from hence. Many of the merchants castrate them, cutting them when they are young, and not only the testicles but also the entire organ. I have seen many of this kind, who appeared to have little but a hole for the passage of water. This is in order to put them in charge of the women, and the keys of the house; they trust them in all things and never their wives."<sup>25</sup>

The merchants who took part in this trade were generally Muslims who bought the children from the parents or from the people who kidnapped them and had them castrated. It was a long established custom in the Mughal Empire to sell children or even the entire family into slavery if they were revenue defaulters. More so, since eunuchs acquired a healthy position later in life, it could also have been an issue of prestige to be sold off as a slave. But there is certainly information lacking as the *Ain* lists only three kinds of eunuchs prevalent in Bengal, *sandal*, *badami*, and *kafuri*. In the case of the *sandal*, the entire genitals were removed and they were also called *atlas*, the second group had part of their penis left functioning, and the third, the testicles were wholly removed.<sup>26</sup>

However, sources do not tell us how this practice died out or did it even die out is the question? It does not seem to have stopped completely. Regardless of their attempt to curb enslavement, the Mughals continued to participate with Central Asia in an ancient trade

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.128.

<sup>24</sup> Jahangir Padshah, *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*, 2 vols., tr. A. Rogers, rev. H. Blochmann., reprint, Delhi, 1987, vol.i, pp.150-151, p.168 and 247, vol.ii pp.194-5, 201.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Hambly, "Eunuch Trade", *JAOS*, p.129.

<sup>26</sup> *Ain*, 3 vols., tr. H. Blochmann, vol.i, Calcutta, 1927-1949, pp.389-390.

where slaves figured prominently.<sup>27</sup> Revenue defaulters were continued to be deported to Central Asia as “rebels” in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. The Ghakkar community of Punjab for instance were middlemen in the export of Indian slaves to Central Asia in exchange for war horses.<sup>28</sup> This continued to Jahangir’s reign where men captured in the Agra region were bartered in exchange for horses in Kabul.<sup>29</sup> Slave trade also did not develop into a very integral part of the overall trading system as demands and supply were steady. There were also ideological constraints such as Hinduism and Islam which prohibited this kind of trade. These constraints were always in the backdrop even when the profits and the prices were very favourable. Mughals curbed the use of slaves in its frontiers as a political instrument to prevent any officers from transforming slaves into retainers or for that matter enriching themselves. Behind the slave raids was also the European merchant capital threatening to remove Bengali cultivators from the tax base of the Mughal empire.

#### ASSAM/BENGAL WATER-BORNE TRADE

Due to lack of resource material as well as data one cannot come to a definite conclusion on the nature of trade in the early medieval period. It is only with the annexation of Assam by the British that we see a huge amount of records and data to ascertain this problem. Tavernier had written that “the kingdom of Assam is one of the best countries in Asia, for it produces all the necessary to life of men and there is no need to go for anything to the neighbouring states.”<sup>30</sup>

Shihab-ud-din Talish also wrote;

Only traders who used to sit in the bazaar besides a narrow road in the Ahom metro-polis were the betel-nut sellers...it was the practice to buy any of the articles of food in the market and all the inhabitants store in their house one year supply of food of all kinds and were under no necessity to buy or sale any eatable.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Chatterjee & Eaton, *Slavery*, p.11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>30</sup> Jean Baptiste Tavernier, *Travels in India*, reprint, Delhi, 1977, pp.218, 220.

<sup>31</sup> Jadunath Sarkar, “Assam and the Ahoms in 1660 A.D.” *Journal of the Bengal and Orissa Research Society*, vol.i, pt.1-2, December. 1915, p.194.

It is true what the foreign observers have stated but this manner of life is common in all the tribal communities of the northeast i.e. the simple self-sufficient life. Ahom Assam like all other states in the northeast was a subsistence driven economy. Yet we do find, no matter how small, the existence of internal as well as external trade.<sup>32</sup> Buranjis mention the promotion of internal trade by the Ahom monarchs who set up *hats* or markets in places that were convenient. Dihingia Raja (1497-1539) set up a hat in Dalaugiri while his successor Suklenmung (1539-1552) set one up at the banks of the Dikhow river.<sup>33</sup> Nariya Raja (1644-1648) set up a mart at Marangi to help develop healthy relations with the Cacharis. More marts developed with the increase in population in order to meet the demands of the people. This would also mean a need for certain articles by certain sections of people, places or amongst the people around whom the markets developed. The surplus that was brought to the market was usually bartered or exchanged through a medium of *cowries*.<sup>34</sup>

Assam's traffic with Bengal was water-borne, the Brahmaputra being the main artery of trade. This river was navigable from Bughwah for over four hundred miles to Upper Assam.<sup>35</sup> The difficulty of commercial transactions due to the rains apart, repeated Muslim attacks from Bengal made the Ahoms ever vigilant. Thus, S.K. Bhuyan remarked that "from the time of Mohammad bin Bakhtiyar's invasion in 1205 Assam was subject to frequent attacks by the Mohammadans from Bengal; and consequently all men from Bengal and other parts of India were considered by the Assamese as a potential source of danger. No outsider was allowed a footing in Assam lest he should become too influential and disturb the loyalty of the subjects or bring other complications."<sup>36</sup> The Ahom rulers followed a closed door policy but in spite of this the prevalence of gold, ivory, elephants, musk-deer etc. caused an excitement to its neighbours. According to Barpujari, the first Ahom-Mughal conflict arose in 1615, when a Muslim merchant, Ratan Shah trespassed leading to seizure of his merchandise.<sup>37</sup> The king, Pratap Simha also refused to negotiate peace terms for this. It was

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<sup>32</sup> H.K. Barpujari, *Comprehensive History of Assam*, 5 vols, Gauhati, second edition, 2003, vol.iii, p.122.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.122.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.128.

<sup>36</sup> Cited in Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, vol.iii, p.128.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p.128.

only with the expulsion of the Mughals in 1682 that the Ahom rulers changed their attitude and commercial relations with Bengal was laid. The Assamese began to import garments of various kinds, salt, salt-petre, spices and sulphur in exchange for elephants, pepper, musk, yak-tails, aloe-wood and aromatic plants.<sup>38</sup> The Assam or Hadira Chokey (1669) was erected to keep the Asam-Bengal trade open. It was the Tungkhungias, especially with the coming of Rudra Simha that this process was hastened. His attitude is seen in his ridicule of a Mughal faujdar in 1713, who sought to establish trade relation with Assam and was willing to send a few boats with goods. The Ahom monarch replied;

...if it be limited to the import of a few *maunds* of salt from Bengal and the despatch of two or four boats from our place? If the Nawab is intent on the establishment of regular commercial intercourse with us he should send his merchants to Jogighopa and Goalpara and our leading traders will proceed to Kandahar Chokey with large quantities of valuable articles. If matters could be arranged on this line then only they can deserve the status of hat-bat or trade...<sup>39</sup>

The Ahom monarch was deeply taken to the idea of commercial intercourse with his neighbouring countries.<sup>40</sup> However, the volume of trade with Bengal seems to be rather small.

	IMPORTS	
COMMODITIES	QUANTITY( <i>maunds</i> )	VALUE
Salt @Rs. 5 ½	35,000	1,92,500
Fine Pulse		800
Ghee	100	1,600
Sugar		2,000
Stone beads		1,000
Coral		5,000

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.129.

<sup>39</sup> Cited in Barpujari, p.129.

<sup>40</sup> Ib, pp.31-32.

Jewel and Pearls		500
Cutlery Glassware(European)		1,000
Spices		1,000
Paints		500
Copper		4,800
Read Lead		1,000
English Woolens		2,000
Tafetas		2,000
Banaras silk		500
Satin		1,000
Gold and Silver Cloth		1,000
Shells		1,000
Muslin		10,000
TOTAL		2,28,300

The following table is a list of imported commodities listed by Hamilton.<sup>41</sup>

In the list recorded by Hamilton, salt seems to be the most valuable article of exchange and the rest are luxury items which were meant for the aristocracy. Of the exports, lac constituted the most important commodity, which was exported out of Assam in its natural state i.e, stick-lac, from an insect called *coccus ficus*. This seems to have been followed by cotton and mustard. In 1809, 7,000 maunds of cotton was exported from cotton but there seems to be no

<sup>41</sup> Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *Account of Assam, Gauhati*, 1940, pp.45-46.

estimates for mustard. According to Robinson, mustard formed about one-fifth of the total export.<sup>42</sup>

Duties, both import as well as export were collected at the Kandhahar Chokey<sup>43</sup> but there seems to be quite a discrepancy regarding the actual amount. Hamilton's estimates state that it was at Rs. 45,000<sup>44</sup> while Welsh's estimates fall at Rs. 90,000.<sup>45</sup> Duties varied from about six to ten percent.<sup>46</sup>

## KOCH COMMERCIAL RELATIONS

Koch traders consisted of both big and small traders. The former took to riverine trade and were known as *sadagars*, whereas the smaller ones were known as *beparis*, but the term *mudoi* referred to all types of traders.<sup>47</sup> Assam was seen by these Koch traders as a place where all valuable trade commodities could be procured in good qualities and at a considerable low price. Trade with the Ahom country was conducted through the Brahmaputra. Both the Ahom and the Koch kings were also known to have constructed roads to facilitate trade. The most important of this is the *Gosai Kamal Ali*, constructed during the reign of Naranarayan.<sup>48</sup>

However, on the whole, both the Ahom and the Koch kingdoms were predominantly agrarian kingdoms with agriculture being the mainstay of the people during the period under review. Since rice was the staple food of these kingdoms greater attention was given to the cultivation of this than any other cereal. In conformity with the land, seasonal change of climate, both these kingdoms saw three different types of rice being sown, the wet or transplanted, the dry and the jhum or shifting. Agricultural implements, including the plough was of the simplest

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<sup>42</sup> William Robinson, *A Descriptive Account of Account of Assam*, Calcutta, reprint, 1975, p.201.

<sup>43</sup> Kandar or Kandhahar, at the mouth of the river Manah opposite to Goalpara.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, *Account of Assam*, pp.45-46.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, p.130.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

<sup>47</sup> D. Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom: 1515-1615*, Delhi, 1989, p.155.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.157.

kind since the prime aim was to loosen the soil and uproot the weeds. It may be noticed that in the Koch kingdom even after the plough was introduced, majority of the people continued to take to shifting cultivation as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> However, it has come to notice that industries and crafts on the whole remained undeveloped in these two kingdoms. It could possibly be due to the lack of incentive by the state for further demand beyond what was required for self-sufficiency. The testament by Shihab-ud-din Talish that there was hardly any difference between towns and villages, also failed to produce any large non-producing class who would demand supply of products from the rural to the urban centres.<sup>50</sup> The money-oriented economy that did give some impetus to trade was only in the regions bordering Bengal. Had introduction of improved technology and crafts from neighbouring Bengal been introduced, these kingdoms could have clearly improved in their produce as well as quantity. But this need never seemed to be advantageous to these kingdoms as they were constantly into armed conflict with the Mughals in Bengal and amongst themselves as in the case of Koch, where fratricidal warfare dictated the deterioration that set in after the death of Naranarayan.

#### ARAKAN LITTORAL

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Arakan's economic opportunities were limited. They were a vassal of Bengal and had no large ports although they were noted for their seamanship. Its capital, Mrauk-U was sixty miles upriver of the Arakanese estuary. It would seem that the Bengali overlord had monopoly over trade in this region.<sup>51</sup> Thus, it had no choice but to resort to land trade which was also the key to its defence strategy. It was the fall of these land routes, Bengal succumbing to civil wars and gradually losing its hold over the Bay of Bengal trade that led to economic opportunities for the Arakanese state in the Bay. It was the economic developments that enabled the Arakanese kings to make their presence felt beyond their shores.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p.148.

<sup>50</sup> Barpujari, *Comprehensive History*, p.120.

<sup>51</sup> Micheal Charney, "Arakan, Min Yazagyi, and the Portuguese: The Relationship between the Growth of Arakanese Imperial Power and Portuguese Mercenaries on the Fringe of Mainland Southeast Asia: 1517-1617", *School of Oriental and African Studies Bulletin for Burma Research*, vol.iii, No.2, Autumn, 2005, p.1004.



Arakan's place in the Bay was as a secondary hub of trade. Arakan external trade was under the control of the monarch. This is evident from the orders given to the VOC who were on a trade mission in June 1698;

Having come well in Arakan (you) shall deliver our accompanying missive and presents to the king there with the requisite compliments, and with all kinds of services and offices try to obtain His Majesty's favour and assistance as much as possible in the collection of a good quantity of rice.<sup>52</sup>

This shows that Arakanese trade fell under the monopoly of the monarch and those who wanted to trade had to buy a share of the market from the monarch. The two great alluvial plains of the Kaladan and Lemro rivers, north of Mrauk-U was an ideal place for wet-rice cultivation. This enabled Arakan to produce sufficient rice as an important item of export. Thus, Arakan was on a strategic trade route between India, Bengal and Pegu. All that was left was for the Arakanese kings to exploit this potential. But what was it that was curtailing this? At this point Arakan seemed more to be disinterested in external trade. Was this refusal to take up the opportunity a way of self defence for fear of becoming an economic threat or was Bengal openly restricting Arakan initiative?<sup>53</sup> This was also an opportune time as eastern Bengal was enveloped in the conflicts between Humayun and Sher Shah during the time of Min Bin (1531-1553).

It was only by the latter half of the sixteenth century that Arakan geared itself to take advantage of the maritime trade in the Bay of Bengal. By mid-sixteenth century Arakan was also exporting rice to Portuguese trading stations in Asia. However, the Portuguese soon replaced Bengali control of trade with the Portuguese pass system whereby any ship trading in the Bay of Bengal had to purchase a pass or face destruction. This system seemed more advantageous to the Arakanese for under the Bengali system, the export trade of Arakan was suppressed due to Bengali competition. The Portuguese intervention meant a break from the suppression as the Arakanese kings were now free to trade as they wished.

Min Setya (1564-1571) saw that with the arrival of Akbar in Bengal his territories in the eastern regions of Bengal were threatened. The Mughal Empire also considered all of Bengal as a part of their domain. In this situation Min Setya turned to the Portuguese traders to guard

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<sup>52</sup> Cited in Charney, p.1005.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p.1007.

his western border from Mughal threat.<sup>54</sup> Min Setya thus used the Portuguese settlement of Dianga for this plan. This is seen in the account of Federici;

[We] came to Chatigan the great port of Bengala, at the same time when the Portugales had made peace and taken a truce with the Governours of the towne, with this condition that the Chiefe Capatine of the Portugales should depart without any lading; for there were then at that time 18 ships of the Portugales great and small...[He] contented to depart...rather than he should seeke to hinder so many of his friends as were there...In this time there came a messenger from the King of Rachim [Arakan] to this Portugale Captaine, who saide in behalf of his King, that he had heard of the courage and valour of him, desiring him gently that he would vouchsafe to come with the ship into his port [Mrauk-U], and coming thither he should be very well intreated. This Portugale went thither and he was very satisfied with the king.<sup>55</sup>

This was done at a very convenient time as the Governor of Chittagong Nusrat Khan had been troubling the Arakanese king and at this very moment he was killed by the Portuguese. This was how Min Setya used the crisis to foster new relations with the Portuguese. In exchange for this the Portuguese received trade concessions and also raided the Bengal coast for slaves which they sold to the Arakanese king who was in an ever greater need of man power. The Portuguese inclination to aid the Arakanese in protecting their frontier can also be seen as a means by which the Portuguese glorified themselves. To this Manrique had to say;

Portuguese in defending the frontier of Arakan against the Mughal were, in effect, continuing the age-long crusade against the Moslem infidel, which had been the glory of Portugal for so many centuries and had inspired da Gama in his voyages eastward.<sup>56</sup>

Thus, Chittagong came to the linchpin in Arakan's northwest defence system. The Arakanese fully made use of the economic frontier as a way of shaking of the age old inward looking perspective they had. The threat from the Mughal Empire and the growing Pague Empire brought Arakan to the realisation that unless they changed their outlook they themselves would be responsible if in any case they were to be conquered by any of these two neighbours. The Arakanese managed to play a great role in the growth of their economic power. As they were cut off from the land-based trade in the sixteenth century they took to

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.1029.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Charney, p.1030.

<sup>56</sup> Maurice Collis, *The Land of the Great Image: Being the Experiences of Friar Manrique in Arakan*, London, 1946, p.90.

maritime trade. They turned towards Chittagong at first as it was a rich port as well as was tied to the Portuguese trade system. Arakan political expansion as seen in the previous chapter was only a tool the state used to access itself to maritime trade.

This implies that slave trade in the frontier was possible as the zone was raided easily. Slaves changed hands in a variety of ways—through purchase, as tribute, war captives, as gifts—although it originated through warfare and impoverishment. In the 1630s and 1640s, the Arakanese imported from the Dutch merchants Chinese porcelain, textiles, iron and firearms in exchange for slaves and rice.<sup>57</sup> These slaves were then shipped to the Moluccas islands and Java as agricultural labourers. This activity occurred in the lower Bengal delta where the Arakanese raided and captured whole Bengali communities in concert with the Portuguese. It was in order to put an end to this traffic that the Mughals in 1632 expelled the Portuguese from the port of Hughli and the Mughal conquest of the port of Chittagong in 1666 was also aimed at removing the Arakanese slave raiders from Bengal.<sup>58</sup> Dutch slave trade with Arakan came to a complete standstill in the 1660s when the former were made to choose between their Coromandel fisheries or trade with Arakan by the Mughals in their desperate attempt to end slave raids. In this backdrop can also be seen the lurking European merchant capital which threatened to remove Bengali cultivators from the tax base of the Mughal empire as stated earlier. Mughal condemnation of slavery is evident also in the accounts of Shah Jahan's siege of Hughli and that of Lahori and Khafi Khan. Lahori's description of Portuguese slave trade states that:<sup>59</sup>

These hateful practices were not confined to the lands they occupied but they seized and carried off everyone they could lay their hands upon along the sides of the river [Hughli]

This account points to the fact that slavery was condemned but could there also be a possibility of Portuguese role in the decay of Saptagram where prosperity was redirected to Hughli? But the account of Khafi Khan does not implicitly emphasize the economic role of the Portuguese:<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Chatterjee & Eaton, *Slavery*, p.12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>59</sup> Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Padshah Nama* in Elliot & Dowson, *History of India*, vol.7, LPP reprint, 1990, Delhi, p.32.

<sup>60</sup> Khafi Khan, *Muntakhab-I-Lubab* in *Ibid.*, pp.344-345.

Their [Portuguese] greatest act of tyranny is this. If a subject dies, leaving young children, and no grown up son, the children are considered wards of the state...

They built villages and in all matters acted very kindly towards the people and did not vex them with oppressive taxes.

Slave trade was carried on by other Islamic states but Mughal condemnation to this could be the Arakanese-Portuguese role as opposed to this trade being a royal trade.<sup>61</sup> The Arakanese-Portuguese combination may have been offensive to the Mughals who saw the Arakanese as no less than animals. As noted by Jahangir in 1613 that the Arakanese were animals who resembled humans. Arakanese habits such as eating of fish or raw food, marriage within siblings etc. were found to be repulsive to the *ashraf* Mughal tastes.<sup>62</sup> This would only deem the trade in slaves as ignoble.

The Arakanese attempt at maritime expansion here is of a peculiar kind, a “piggy-back” ride on Portuguese freebooters. Arakan utilised Portuguese captives from Sundiva captured for instance in 1617, along with Arakanese slave-raiders raiding Lower Bengal as far as Hughli and Jassore in search of labour and slaves.<sup>63</sup> This was Arakan’s attempt at meeting Dutch demands for labour and foodstuffs. To meet Dutch demand for rice, the Arakanese increased cultivation in the Danya-waddy by supplementing indigenous labour with additional war captives. Unlike Burma’s population, that of Arakan was low and an increased cultivation would mean additional manpower. Thus, Bengali slaves were diverted from export trade and sent to the agricultural zones of the Danya-waddy region. Dutch trade records bear witness to much of Dutch purchases of slaves and rice to have taken place during this period i.e., 1630-1664.<sup>64</sup> A rival *entrepot* Chittagong, was established to rival Mruak-U in Arakan which was

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<sup>61</sup> Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches: Bengal in the Mercantile Map of South Asia*, Delhi, 2006, p.72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

<sup>63</sup> Micheal Charney, “Crisis and Reformation in a Maritime Kingdom of Southeast Asia: Forces of Instability and Political Disintegration in Western Burma (Arakan), 1603-1701” *Journal of the Economic and Social History Review of the Orient*, vol.41, No.2, 1998. See Bernier, 1947, p.147 & Bowrey, 1904, pp.211-212.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.202.

lost to the Mughals in 1664.<sup>65</sup> Adding to this was the decline in Dutch trade in the 1660s meaning a considerable drop in commercial revenue.

The Koch as well as Assam-Bengal trade points to the existence of commerce along the frontier although this may not be voluminous. Assam's economic conditions from the late sixteenth century can be ascertained from the first set of local coins (gold) to be issued by an Ahom king in 1543.<sup>66</sup> Since no Ahom coins were further issued in the century the Koch kings thereafter filled the vacuum in 1555 followed by the Kachari kings.<sup>67</sup> It was only in the mid-seventeenth century that the Ahoms resumed minting of coins.<sup>68</sup> This indicates both demand for trade and exchange to be growing over the years 1500-1750. Assamese traders took the riverine route to Dacca or the land route to Sylhet across the Jaintia Hills to trade with Bengal in the early seventeenth century.<sup>69</sup> The Ahoms also maintained trade relations with the Mughals due to their insatiable need for elephants and aloe-wood or *agar*. Every year pepper, musk, aloe wood, gold and a variety of silk were exchanged for salt, salt-petre and sulphur at the Ahom-Mughal check post.<sup>70</sup> This trade was small in quantity and in favour of Mughal India.

All the above mentioned regions show agricultural expansion. In the case of Arakan the slave raids into Bengal were a major source of man-power as her population was low. Slaves that were funnelled into cultivation enabled the Arakan kingdom to meet the demands of slaves and rice from outside entities. Slave input in cultivation was thus a means to acquire surplus for this purpose. Koch, Assam, and the Kacharis were not left untouched by the eastward march of the Sanskrit civilisation. This saw the inclusion of the tribal people on the frontiers, natural population growth and a diffusion and intensification of wet-rice culture and the production of surplus food grains. Thus we find here a system geared towards production of wet-rice and a religious ideology conferring special meaning on agrarian life.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.209.

<sup>66</sup> Amalendu Guha, *The Medieval Economy of Assam*, in Irfan Habib & Tapan Raychaudhuri (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India 1200-1750*, p.488.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p.488.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.488.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p.490.

<sup>70</sup> Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Calcutta, second edition, 1926, p.144.

## CONCLUSION

Bengal's political isolation from north India ended with Akbar's attempts to incorporate the entire delta into the Mughal Empire. It had stood outside the core areas where the earliest centralised states were located. But Mughal conquest did not mean a monolithic frontier. During different historical periods the boundary of Bengal had changed. Each of her frontier was moved by its own dynamics.

The political frontier was a hotly contested zone. Prior to Mughal conquest, Turkish commanders had entered Bengal in 1204. Sher Shah used Bengal as the last resort for Afghan power. Even after Mughal establishment Bengal continued to be pocketed by small Afghan holdings. Sylhet was one such hotbed that continued to see a flow of Afghans by way of east Bengal. Sylhet was also a safety haven for the high caste-Hindus who escaped persecution at the hands of the Afghans prior to the Mughals. Until the defeat of Daud Khan in 1575, Bengal did not formally come under the imperial authority formally. However, being far from the political moorings of the capital in north India, this frontier continuously threw up the flag of dissidence from here.

Eastern Bengal was also well connected to Southeast Asia. Connection between eastern Bengal and Arakan was closer than with the rest of Burma. The port of Chittagong continuously changed hands between the two. The contacts between the two surged ahead under the Ilyas Shahi and the Husain Shahi sultans of Bengal. The advent of the Mughals saw an attempt to close the eastern deltaic region open to the Arakanese but with Siam on the east and the rise of Burma in the seventeenth century, the only alternative open to the Arakanese to protect their chief port of Mrauk-U was to expand eastward into Bengal, through Bhawla (Noakhali district of modern day Bangladesh). The onset of the Mughals saw a continuous warfare involving the Arakanese, Tipperah and the Mughals.

The defeat of Duad Kararani meant a direct opening in the north east for the Mughals. The fratricidal wars in the Koch kingdom only furthered the Mughal cause marking full-fledged Mughal intervention in the Koch territory leading to the division of Koch Behar in the west and Hajo in the east. The marriage alliance between a princess of Koch Behar and the Ahom king Sukampha however threw the Mughals off side as Kamrupa now acted as a buffer

between Mughal imperial designs for the northeast as well as an opening into unchartered territories.

The economic zone saw the rise of Arakan as a major player in the Bay of Bengal. The Arakanese kings utilised both the Portuguese and the Dutch in their attempt to satiate Arakan's growing demand for man-power if she was to break out of her self-isolation and gear herself against Pegu and Bengal. Mughal conquest of Chittagong was also not conducive to Arakanese plans as this would mean a closer proximity of Dianga to the Mughals. Chittagong and its deltaic regions were also a major source of slaves which saw a powerful trade in the maritime history of Asia. Arakan was a major player in this.

This frontier also saw the growth of Portuguese in the maritime trade of the Bay of Bengal. The Portuguese presence here was unlike that in the western Indian Ocean. Here there was no formal presence of the Estado to regulate the activities of trade. It was only the *cartaz* system acted as a representative of the formal Portuguese power. There were private traders, renegades and mercenaries in Chittagong and Satgaon and even further in-land, an extensive private Portuguese presence. The Bay saw a see-saw process with the decline of Chittagong and the westward movement to Hughli and Pipli and the decay of Gaur simultaneously occurring with the rise of Mrauk-U, diverting commerce from Chittagong. The Portuguese experience of the Bay was not an exception, the different elements present such as the Arakanese, the Dutch, the Mughals all played their part.

The state formation processes that occurred in the Ahom, Koch and the Dimasas in Cachar was in par with the Sanskritic civilisation that spread through Bengal. All these kingdoms saw an adoption of the Brahmanical religion with its acceptance as proven by the use of the Hindu titles, grafting of gods of the Hindu pantheon into the tribal pantheon. Mughal conquest of Bengal was also an opener to these kingdoms that in order to defend themselves from the imperialistic designs of the Mughals, they too had to transform to such a level as to be able to out-do the Mughals. All these kingdoms saw a rapid transformation in their administrative set-up, many new offices created, the able-male being mobilised to serve the state and the production of a surplus to meet the demands of the non-producing section of the society.

Thus, the process of colonisation, the incorporation of indigenous communities, the spread of the Sanskritic culture moved due to the interplay of the different frontiers. The strength of the

frontier and its dynamism, was its fluidity as well as its capacity to absorb and synthesise the different elements present.



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