

THE DELHI SULTANS AND THEIR RELATIONS WITH BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Political aspirations of Bengal took its origin long ago, since the beginning of the history of the land. From times immemorial, the people of Bengal were conscious and proud of their distinct entity in the body politic of the sub-continent. This consciousness was based upon certain peculiar characteristics.

Firstly, the main bulk of the people of Bengal formed a homogenous ethnic group. The geographical contiguity, which was not fully realized in ancient Bengal, also played a role in shaping the history of the land. The linguistic affinity is another factor which also helped in the growth of regional consciousness in Bengal. The economic self-sufficiency of the region and a well-knit social system helped in the process of achieving a political unity and a distinct national life amongst the inhabitants of the land. This consciousness of the people of Bengal encouraged them to maintain the sanctity and independence of the land against the onslaught of the invaders.

Keywords: Gaur, Lakhnauti, Slave-viceeroys, Paramountcy, Paiks.

With the success of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, the history of Medieval Bengal began. The political power that he built up in Bengal was theoretically and for all practical purpose independent and sovereign. The striking of coins and reading of Khutba in the name of Bakhtiyar is a sufficient evidence of a distinct political status for the first Muslim ruler of Bengal and the kingdom that he founded. Thus, the success of Bakhtiyar Khalji strengthened the tradition of Bengal's aspirations for political independence.

The Delhi Sultanate under Aibak could do nothing to assert Delhi's suzerainty over Bengal till the Khaljis of Lakhnauti themselves became involved in some sort of a civil war for the throne. This time, Tajuddin Khalji was on the throne of Bengal, who tried to continue the same tradition of independence and sovereignty. But Ali Mardan Khalji, the assassin of Bakhtiyar, betrayed the cause and interest of the land. He escaped to Delhi and persuaded Aibak to assert Delhi's suzerainty over Bengal. Aibak army crossed the river Koshi, Malik Husamuddin Iwaz Khalji, who was the fief-holder of Gangotri betrayed the cause of Khalji Bengal and joined the Turkish army of Delhi. As a result the supremacy of the Turks of Delhi over the Khalji Kingdom of Bengal was established for the first time at least in theory. Bengal was to be governed by a protege of the Turkish Sultan of Delhi. Iwaz Khalji was assigned with the iqta of Devkot as a reward for his treachery.

Ali Mardan Khalji also got the reward from Delhi for his betrayal. Aibak appointed him as the viceroy of Bengal to strengthen Delhi's suzerainty over the province. But after the death of Aibak he declared independence and took the title Sultan Alauddin. This is a special feature of the Medieval History of Bengal. Delhi again and again tried to maintain their hold over this part of the country by appointing their slaves as governors but these slave-viceroy whenever got the opportunity raised the standard of independence.

However, soon Ali Mardan's greed and cruelties provoked the Khaljis, who rose up in arms against him and the local people helped them to dispose him from the throne.¹ They murdered him and crowned Husammudin Iwaz Khalji; who assumed the title of Sultan Ghiyasuddin and sanctified his status by procuring the investiture from the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad. Infact, Iwaz Khalji was the first Muslim ruler in India, who secured a formal recognition from the caliphate.

But the Turkish rulers of Delhi again and again attempted to reduce the independent Bengal to subjection. The Sultans like Iltutmish and Balban made repeated attempts in that direction. They adopted the policy of appointing their slaves to the office of Viceroy to bring Bengal under permanent subjection. But this policy of the Turkish Lords of Delhi was also frustrated as whoever was put on the 'takht' of Bengal soon revolted against Delhi under favourable circumstances. Of all these rebellions, Tughril's rebellion against the overlordship of Delhi shook the very foundation of the Turkish Sultanate of Delhi. Balban devised a new policy to keep Bengal under subjection by appointing his slave Tughril as the deputy governor of Bengal.

But this policy of Balban did not work well. Tughril soon drove out the Governor of the province, assumed the title of Sultan and issued coins in his own name. As a result, Balban himself had to march towards Bengal to suppress the rebellion. Balban now adopted a new policy to maintain their suzerainty over the province. Instead of appointing a slave governor, Balban now appointed his son Bughra Khan as the viceroy of Bengal. But this policy also did not succeed. After the death of Balban, his son also declared independence and hence Bengal became a nightmare to the rulers of Delhi.

With the rise of the Khaljis at Delhi the situation changed. They did not interfere in the affairs of Bengal and hence Bengal enjoyed virtually independence during the period.

But with the accession of Ghazi Malik Tughlaq to the throne of Delhi, situation took a new turn. Sultan Ghiyasuddin taking the uncertain political condition as an opportunity, invaded Bengal and conquered it. He divided the country into two administrative units to bring Bengal under permanent subjection. But Muhammad bin Tuglaq divided the province into three territorial units, each under a governor appointed by the Sultan. He also adopted an effectively policy of checks and balances towards Bengal to maintain, Delhi's paramountcy over the province.

Sultan Firoz Shah of Delhi personally led two expeditions against Bengal, one in 1353 A.D., when Ilyas Shah frustrated the attempt of Delhi and again in 1358 A.D. when Sikandar Shah defended Bengal's independence. It is to be noted that Firoz Shah's invasions were resisted tooth and nail not only by the Muslim subjects but also by the Hindus and Hindu generals. As a matter of fact, Firoz Shah was deeply

impressed by the spirit of independence of the people of Bengal and he virtually acknowledged it. The Delhi Sultan virtually recognised Sultan Sikandar as a sovereign ruler of Bengal and thus ended the last attempt to incorporate Bengal in the Delhi Sultanate.

The tradition of Bengal's existence as an independent kingdom continued upto the period of Alauddin Hussain Shah and his son Nusrat Shah. Sayyid Sultans of Delhi were too much busy with their own affairs of Bengal. But with rise of the Lodis, Bengal was again dragged into the affairs of northern India due to Lodi-Sharqi conflict on the succession of the throne of Delhi. Sultan Alauddin very successfully tackled the problems and succeeded in maintaining the sovereignty of the independent kingdom of Bengal.

Barani writes that since the time when Muhammad Ghori conquered Delhi, every governor that had been sent to Lakhnauti took advantage of the distance, and of the difficulties of the road, to rebel. If they did not rebel themselves others rebelled against them, killed them and seized the country. The people of this country had for many long years evinced a disposition to revolt, and the disaffected and evil disposed among them generally succeeded in alienating the loyalty of the governors.²

Afif has described two principal causes for the failure of Delhi to subdue Bengal permanently. Firstly, Bengal was a land of undaunted fighting men and secondly, the nobles of the country passed their lives in their islands.³ Moreover it is also said that the bravery of Paiks mostly Hindus and landed militia of the province, who according too Barani, were perpetually bragging of their valour and had picked up the betel of self immolation made the task of conquering Bengal for any outsider.⁴

But perhaps these are not basic causes for the success of the Bengalis against the Delhi rulers. These are not the factors for which Bengal again and again hoisted the flag of independence. It was the economic self-sufficiency of the province that lured the Delhi rulers and their subordinate governors of different neighbouring provinces of Bengal to invade the region. This economic self sufficiency, on the other side, encouraged the Bengal kings to maintain and hoist the flag of independence and sovereignty of the country.

This economic prosperity of the land was not destroyed due to the incessant invasions of the Delhi rulers and their subordinate governors are proved from the narratives of Ibu Battuta who visited Bengal during the reign of Fakruddin. "The African traveller had passed through civilised and prosperous hubs of humanity in Africa and Asia, visited Cairo, Basrah, Isfahan, Bukhara, Sumarqand, Balkh but nowhere else in the world he seen such low prices and such comfortable abundance of rice as he saw in Bengal. Bengal was a paradise of plenty in that age."⁵

There is a number of interesting records on the exchange of embassies between Bengal and China during the first half of the 15th century, where from one can get an idea about the economic condition of Bengal of the time.⁶

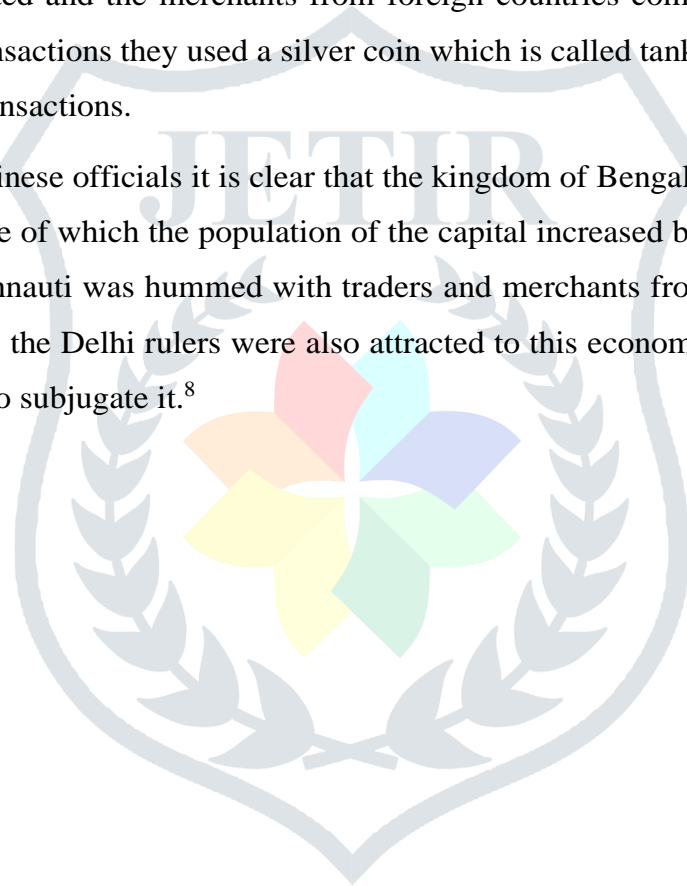
P.C. Bagchi, on the basis of chinese records describes the economic condition of the then Bengal. The chinese visitors describe the people of Bengal as very generous and courteous and say, "Bengal is rich

and civilised. To our ambassador they presented golds and silver. To our officials of the ministry of foreign affairs they presented golden bells. Our soldiers got silver coins. If they had not been rich how could they do it in such an extravagant way.⁷

The Chinese speak of the various industries of Bengal, paper, sugar, cotton and silk. The most important industry was however, the cotton industry and the Chinese accounts mention a number of cotton fabrics of Bengal.

The Chinese accounts tell us that the people had a big trade. The market place in the capital was full of different types of shops where all sorts of things were available. The Chinese trade with Bengal consisted of gold, silver, satins, silk, copper, iron etc. Ocean going ships which carried goods to foreign countries were made in Bengal. And the country had a sea-port at the mouth of the sea, called Cha-ti-Kiang where certain duties were collected and the merchants from foreign countries come from outside and anchor there. In all large scale transactions they used a silver coin which is called tanka, but they used sea-shells, called Cowrie for small transactions.

From the records of the Chinese officials it is clear that the kingdom of Bengal in those days was rich and prosperous. In consequence of which the population of the capital increased by leaps and bounds and the large market place of Lakhnauti was hummed with traders and merchants from the different parts of the country. On the other side, the Delhi rulers were also attracted to this economic property of the land and attempted time and again to subjugate it.⁸



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