



PRE COLONIAL BENGAL- A STUDY OF THE TRADING HISTORY

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ABSTRACT:

It is indeed unique that the East India Company which was in trading contact with Bengal for about a century since 1650 and which sought extraction of wealth through trade and commerce in conformity with the spirit of mercantilism, finally turned itself into rulers. It may also be noted that the colonial state that the company built in Bengal was, in fact, the first event of the kind in the age of overseas expansions. Elaborating on this otherwise unique event many scholars maintain that the British Empire in India was built in a fit of absentmindedness and that it was never consciously planned by the traders who built it; on the contrary, they were rather against it, and yet the colonial state came into being. It is true that many company directors and also the government expressed unwillingness in establishing political dominance in the east. But it is also true that practical politics in the Bay of Bengal had shaped the course of the company's history in the region more decisively than the adverse theories alluded to in the Board meetings at the centre. The conquering initiatives taken by its field servants like Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, Lord Wellesley and Lord Dalhousie and other smaller imperialists always made their conquests a fait accompli which the centre only accepted. The establishment of the company's Bengal state was not, of course, the consequence of one battle of Palashi or Buxar. It was a case of uneven development spread over more than a century. For example, ever since the company settled in Hughli in 1651, its only concern was to pursue trade and commerce and secure maximum trade privileges whenever possible. Arrogant and aggressive policy was pursued in the second phase between 1756 and 1765. In the third phase, between 1765 and 1784, came the idea of partial control of the country with the intention of extracting its revenue for financing the company's business in the 'East Indies'. The fourth and final phase, between 1784 and 1793, was marked by the positive and serious actions towards establishing a sovereign colonial state.

The discovery of sea-lanes to the eastern waters brought the western maritime people into direct contact with Bengal. It was predominantly an exporting country from ancient times; but curiously, its export trade was, for cultural reasons mainly, conducted by mostly foreigners. Being encouraged by the Mughal government the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the English and others came by sea to participate in the Bengal export trade. In the competition among themselves in lifting Bengal goods for foreign markets, the English East India Company had a decided advantage over all others. While all other companies were required to pay 2.5 percent or more customs duties to government, the English were exempted from paying any duty at all. They secured a nishan (1651) or patent from the Bengal subahdar, prince Shuja, which allowed the English to trade in Bengal without paying any customs duties in return for an annual tribute of Rs 3000 only. This extraordinary privilege was to become subsequently a major issue of conflict between the country government and the company. Partly for chronic losses in revenue and partly for pressure from other competing companies, subahdars succeeding Shuja were not equally favourably disposed to the company. With the steady growth of English trade in Bengal, the government was inclined to annul the nishan or at least modify its terms. But the company would not agree to any such proposal and considered the nishan as an irrevocable and inviolable charter of right. The dispute often led to serious conflicts between the government and the company. The protracted Anglo-Mughal war of 1686-1690 had originated from this issue.

It was a meet of two cultures, two civilisations when British and Bengal peoples met politically through Palashi. And at the end of the colonial rule we find many areas where the two cultures conformed. Bengal under colonial setting was made to receive all the governing institutions and practices of the ruling race unmixed or insignificantly mixed with local traditions. Bengal had been traditionally an exporting country. Within half a century of company rule Bengal lost its predominance in the export market. Gradually it was turned into a captive market for British industrial products and an agricultural hinterland for the supply of agricultural raw materials to the metropolitan manufactories. In the process, the former entrepreneurs became landowners by and large and artisans joined cultivation and rural labours. In the mean time, the development of communication and the rise of a consumer market (owing to the growth of urbanisation and of a middle class), had created an environment for modern industries. In the absence of Bengali entrepreneurs, the foreign elements particularly the Europeans, armenians, marwaris, Parsees came to seize the new opportunities. Until the last decade of British rule, almost all the modern industries set up in Bengal including their labour force were almost entirely dominated by the non-Bengali entrepreneurs. Even the industrial labour came from outside of Bengal.

The most distinguishing feature of the colonial rule was its project to bring a socio-cultural transformation with the object of westernising the country, a kind of attempt, which no previous regime had ever undertaken. With few passing deviations, toleration of all faiths and cultures was the hallmark of all those regimes. But the British rulers of the 19th century, imbued with the Utilitarian and evangelical ideas of human progress and emancipation, felt it their moral responsibility and obligation to 'civilise the fallen'. It was this moral and 'civilising' outlook that had animated them to enact reform Acts like abolition of sati and slavery, supressing the thugs, prohibiting child marriage, hooking in Charak Puja, sacrificing child at birth, and so on. Educational reforms had the same object in view' to make the people appreciate and adopt western values and institutions. In administration, western system of bureaucracy and local government institutions was established. Finally, attempts were made to introduce the Westminster method of representative government in phases. The result of all these exercises was that while the age-old native system of social organisation and governance was allowed to go into disuse, the transplantation of western systems found the native soil unfertile to take deep root.

INTRODUCTION:

The name of Bengal, or Bangla, is derived from the ancient kingdom of Vanga, or Banga. References to it occur in early Sanskrit literature, but its early history is obscure until the 3rd century BCE, when it formed part of the extensive Mauryan empire inherited by the emperor Ashoka. With the decline of Mauryan power, anarchy once more supervened. In the 4th century CE the region was absorbed into the Gupta empire of Samudra Gupta. Later it came under control of the Pala dynasty. From the beginning of the 13th century to the mid-18th century, when the British gained ascendancy, Bengal was under Muslim rule—at times under governors acknowledging the suzerainty of the Delhi sultanate but mainly under independent rulers.

Bengal enjoyed prosperity through trade and commerce from time immemorial. The multitude of rivers afforded easy communication for internal trade and Bengal's location on the Bay of Bengal offered her the opportunity of participating in sea-borne trade and commerce, the tradition of which seems to have been built up from as early as the second millennium BC. The account of Bengal's trade and commerce is given below in two sections.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

1. What was pre colonial Bengal like?
2. Which regions comprised Bengal in totality during the pre colonial period?
3. Who were the ruling authorities in Bengal before the advent of the Britishers?
4. What was socio-economical condition of the mentioned region?
5. What are the measures taken by the current government to maintain the rich cultural heritage of Bengal?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To find out the condition of ore colonial Bengal and the ruling dynasties before the advent of Britishers.
2. The social and economical condition of the people of that region.
3. The prevalence of trade in that region and the regions it traded with also the products of trade.
4. The role played by the ruling kingdoms in the growth and prosperity of the region.
5. The role of Ganges and Brahmaputra in promotion of trade in the region.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Land of Two Rivers : A History Of Bengal: A History Of Bengal From The Mahabharata To Mujib by Nitish Sengupta talks about the story of one of the most fascinating and influential regions in the Indian subcontinent. The confluence of two major river systems, Ganga and Brahmaputra, created the delta of Bengal—an ancient land known as a center of trade, learning and the arts from the days of the Mahabharata and through the ancient dynasties. During the medieval era, this eventful journey saw the rise of Muslim dynasties which brought into being a unique culture, quite distinct from that of northern India. The colonial conquest in the eighteenth century opened the modern chapter of Bengal's history and transformed the social and economic structure of the region. Nitish Sengupta traces the formation of Bengali identity through the Bengal Renaissance, the growth of nationalist politics and the complex web of events that eventually led to the partition of the region in 1947, analyzing why, despite centuries of shared history and culture, the Bengalis finally divided along communal lines. The struggle of East Pakistan to free itself from West Pakistan's dominance is vividly described, documenting the economic exploitation and cultural oppression of the Bengali people. Ultimately, under the leadership of Bangabandhu Mujibur Rahman, East Pakistan became the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1971. Land of Two Rivers is a scholarly yet extremely accessible account of the development of Bengal, sketching the eventful and turbulent history of this ancient civilization, rich in scope as well as in influence.

India: A Wounded Civilization by V. S. Naipaul says that in 1975, at the height of Indira Gandhi's "Emergency," V. S. Naipaul returned to India, the country his ancestors had left one hundred years earlier. Out of that journey he produced this concise masterpiece: a vibrant, defiantly unsentimental portrait of a society traumatized by centuries of foreign conquest and immured in a mythic vision of its past. Drawing on novels, news reports, political memoirs, and his own encounters with ordinary Indians—from a supercilious prince to an engineer constructing housing for Bombay's homeless—Naipaul captures a vast, mysterious, and agonized continent inaccessible to foreigners and barely visible to its own people.

The History of Bengal by R.C MAJUMDAR is presented in two volumes. Vol. I containing 17 chapters covers the Hindu Period and is profusely illustrated with maps and plates. This volume is edited by Prof. R.C. Majumdar who served as Vice-Chancellor of the Dacca University. Vol. II edited by Sir Jadunath Sarkar, Ex-Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University contains 26 chapters and covers the history of Bengal during 1200- 1757 A.D. starting from Muslim Conquest of Bengal and ending with the Rule of Siraj- ud-daulah. In writing this book of history the authors have strictly confined themselves to the data definitely applicable to the geographical limits of Bengal. This authentic reference book is extremely useful for the students and research workers in History.

Omnibus of North Bengal- The History and Culture of the Hills and Plains by ANITA BAGCHI explores the historical dynamics covering a wide range of issues on society, polity, economy, movements and also art and architecture that had crystallized in the Northern part of Bengal, colloquially known as North Bengal at present. The book embodies twenty research articles. Peoples' settlement patterns are generally conditioned by dictates of geography as well as of zonal linguistic groupings. Since the early period the archaeological remains at Mahasthangarh, Bangarh, Jagaddal Mahavihar, Jagajjivanpur Mahavihar, the ruins of Asuragarh have revealed horizontal extension of urban or semi urban settlement and justifiably have curved a niche in academic discourse. Simultaneous attention is needed to explore the historical process that has been going on and on through the ages in piedmont North Bengal.

Story Of Bengal And Bengalis: Ancient To Contemporary Era Of Bangladesh & West Bengal: Ancient To Contemporary Era Of Bangladesh Andamp; West Bengal by Subir says that We must learn how only a handful of Brit'sh could subjugate and

rule zillions of us for nearly 200 years! This information will help us in taking care of the mistakes committed by our ancestors. It will also prepare us to meet similar challenges in future. Yet our textbooks don't enlighten our students much on the subject. Also there are very few publications on this topic. Why? Since Brit'sh rule started with their victory at the Battle of Plassey in Bengal this story is based on that background. It uncovers some obscured chapters of our past which are crucial for us to know. Notwithstanding its Bengali antecedents the storyline has a direct bearing on the historical criminality of entire Indian subcontinent. There are many unaddressed questions about socio-political history. Who had started the Hindu-Muslim discord and how? Why following partition the displaced people from Pakistan received different treatments in different regions in India? For the booklovers in general and history buffs in particular many such thought-provoking issues are there in this book.

Print and Publishing in Colonial Bengal by Roy Tapti, Taylor & Francis is a book that reconstructs the history of print and publishing in colonial Bengal by tracing the unexpected journey of Bharat Chandra's Bidyasundar, the first book published by a Bengali entrepreneur. It examines how local enterprises engaged in producing and selling books charted out a cultural space in the 19th century.

The Early Annals of The English in Bengal by C.R. WILSON is another important book on pre-colonial Bengal. The Early Annals of the English in Bengal, volume one, written with great efforts by C. R. Wilson, was first published from the Asiatic Society in 1895 and its first reprint edition was released in 1996. In this work, Wilson has dealt with the history of English in Bengal during the early part of the eighteenth century. This period was initially considered as the dark age of the British India, but strenuous searches from the relevant records retained in the India Office and having consulted the research-works made by the earlier historians, Wilson could procure adequate information regarding the history of the rule of the British people over Indian territory. For the purpose of gathering information, Wilson made hurried visits to England and succeeded to copy extracts from India Office. The first part of volume two was published in 1900, the second part in 1911 and it was reprinted in 1963. Now the complete set (Vol. I and Vol. 2) is being reprinted. Wilson himself collected many new materials and possessed also old ones and having consulted all these informative documents, he constructed the historical effects of British Supremacy in India, specially in Calcutta-centred Bengal. During early years of the eighteenth century the British, settled in India as commercial people, were not aware as to how they would emerge as conquerors. In solution to this stage of uncertainty amongst the British merchants, Wilson has tried to draw their history in Bengal from 1663. The present British historian has presented us with a long series of events resulting in the British conquest of Bengal, nay India. We are confident that this reprint of C. R. Wilson's illustrious book would help modern scholars to make themselves equipped with a lot of rare information regarding a very important part of the modern history, i.e., the British conquest of India.

Awakening: The Story Of The Bengal Renai by Subrata Dasgupta talks about how in the nineteenth century, Bengal witnessed an extraordinary intellectual flowering. Bengali prose emerged, and with it the novel and modern blank verse; old arguments about religion, society, and the lives of women were overturned; great schools and colleges were created; new ideas surfaced in science. And all these changes were led by a handful of remarkable men and women. For the first time comes a gripping narrative about the Bengal renaissance recounted through the lives of all its players from Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore. Immaculately researched, told with color, drama, and passion, Awakening is a stunning achievement.

ANALYSIS OF THE STUDY:

Bengal as a territory in the early period of its history embraced the present areas of Bangladesh and West Bengal, parts of Bihar and Orissa in India, and actually denoted an aggregate of four major subregions: pundravardhana, radha, vanga and samatata-harikela. The term Bengal therefore is taken to mean here the areas lying in Bangladesh and West Bengal in India. Geography and human activities in this deltaic area of the Ganga, the largest delta in the world, were largely shaped by the hydrography of this region. This is the only true asamudrahimachala (stretching from the Himalayas to the sea) region in the entire Indian subcontinent. Its location between the middle Ganga plains and the Brahmaputra valley provides regular access to the Ganga basin in the west and the northeastern part of India. The Ganga delta opening out

to the Bay of Bengal makes the region under review the only outlet of the landlocked Ganga valley to the sea. These geographical features considerably influenced movements of men and merchandise in early Bengal.

The four sub-regions mentioned above never experienced political unification under a single power and witnessed uneven political developments. The developments in social, economic and cultural history in these units were neither uniform nor unilinear. In other words, political, socio-economic and cultural developments, which are to be taken into consideration in an examination of commercial activities, show regional features in different subregions of early Bengal.

A perusal of trade in early Bengal has to be placed in the broader context of commerce in the subcontinent. In India, as in early Bengal, the mainstay of economic life must have been agriculture. In the Brahmanical theoretical treatises, for instance the Arthashastra, however, *vartha* (the science related to occupations or *vritti*), includes *krsi* (agriculture) and *vanijya* (trade) as well. The Pali canonical literature in fact clearly underlines the greater economic advantages in trade than in agricultural pursuits (*Majjhima Nikaya*); there is also the clear recognition in the *Anguttara Nikaya* that out of trade could be derived enormous profit. It is no wonder that the great grammarian Panini (c 5th century BC) was aware of *kraya-vikraya* (purchase and sale) as the principal aspect of *vyavahara* or trade. The principal sources of our information regarding trade in early Bengal are indigenous literature (both normative and creative), impressions of foreigners (Classical, Chinese, Arabic, Persian and European), inscriptions, coins and field archaeological evidence from explored and excavated sites. These sources, though diverse, rarely throw any light on transactional activities in Bengal prior to c 6th century BC; our survey also, therefore, begins from that period. The evidence is scattered and far from adequate, providing virtually no statistical data and offering what is termed as 'qualitative data'.

It should also be pointed out that the socio-economic and political situation in Bengal did not always conform to an all Indian or even north Indian pattern. When, for instance, the northern and northwestern part of the subcontinent experienced mature urbanisation in the period from c 2500 to 1750 BC, there was no such similar development in eastern India. Similarly, Bengal was outside the scope of urban development and emergence of mahajanapadas (territorial polities) in and around the sixth century BC when the Ganga valley witnessed such significant changes. It is important to note that complex economic life in Bengal, including sedentary agriculture, diversified crafts and trade, did not emerge prior to c 4th century BC, or before the emergence of the Maurya empire. It is likely that the material culture of the Ganga valley, characterised by flourishing agriculture, different crafts, growing trade and urban centres, reached the area of Bengal with the gradual spread of the political power of Magadha under the Mauryas.

Products A discussion on this topic may begin with the listing of agricultural products. Pundra was already well known for the cultivation of *dhanya* (paddy) and *tila* (sesame) which figure in the Mahasthan stone inscription, palaeographically assignable to c third century BC. The important point here is that these two types of crops were kept in the storehouse (*kosthagara*) at pundranagara or present mahasthan in Bogra district, Bangladesh, the earliest urban centre of Bengal, and the said crops were meant for distribution among certain people afflicted by some emergencies (*atyayika*). In short, the grains stored in the granary at Pundranagara were used for relief measures. The Arthashastra too recommends the *Panyadhyaksa* (officer in charge of trade) to build up similar buffer stocks of grains and other essential commodities to be released during emergencies. Seen in this light, north Bengal seems to have experienced surplus crop production, a part of which was stored in a state granary located in an urban centre. This implies some kind of transactions in grain, especially paddy, probably under administrative supervision. Subsequent sources however do not suggest similar state initiatives in the buying and distribution of grains in Bengal.

The recent discovery of many terracotta seals and sealings principally from archaeological sites in the South 24 Parganas and Medinipur districts, West Bengal notably from chandraketugarh and tamralipti/Tamralipta has significantly enriched knowledge in this regard. Some of these inscribed terracotta seals and sealings, inscribed in Kharosti and the mixed Kharosti-Brahmi scripts and assignable to c late 1st century BC to fourth century AD, depict sailing crafts of different types carrying either a box with stylised stalks of grain or a stylised stock of grain shown on the seal. There is also a reference to a merchant who became wealthy by selling food (possibly rice). That Bengal was known both for profusion of crops and their export to overseas destinations cannot be lost sight of. A further continuity in the trade in paddy of Bengal is clearly visible in the accounts of ibn batuta (14th century) and ma huan (15th century), both referring to the overseas export of paddy of Bengal to Maldives in exchange of cowry shells.

Besides this important cereal, Pundravardhana became so famous for the plantation of sugarcane that the very term paundraka stood for sugarcane (iksu) grown in north Bengal. There is a strong likelihood that sugarcane of Bengal was in considerable demand and was transacted as the raw material for the sugar making industry in early India.

The 'Gange' country (lower part of the Ganga delta) in the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea (c second half of the 1st century AD), an invaluable source for the study of India's long distance trade network, prominently figures for the availability of malabathrum (Sanskrit Tamalapatra, Bangla Tejapata) and nard (Sanskrit nalada, narada, probably *Nardostachys grandiflora*), a particular type of fragrant oil. The Periplus clearly suggests that these exotic items were in considerable demand among the rich in the Roman Empire. A significant corroboration of this comes from a recently discovered loan contract document written on a mid-second century AD papyrus. According to this document, Gangetic nard of considerable quantity was loaded at the famous Malabari port of Muziris (near Cranganore in Kerala) and exported to Alexandria on board the ship Hermopollon. Though the Periplus considered malabathrum and nard as Gangetic, these were not locally grown in coastal Bengal region, but were plant products of the northeast from where these reached the Bengal coast. These exotic items were sent to Malabar, obviously by a coastal route (see later), for their final shipping to the eastern Mediterranean region. Bengal was thus involved in the transit trade of malabathrum and nard.

The same 'Gange' looms large in the Periplus for the availability of the best variety of muslins, which was a major item of export from the Bengal coast. This text further refers to of the trade in Thinae (Chinese) silk floss, yarn and cloth, which went to Limyrike or Damirica (the Dravida country in far south India) via the Ganges. While the muslin was a locally manufactured item of Bengal, the transaction in Chinese silk, an extremely costly product, belonged to the category of re-export trade. The fame of the textile products of Bengal, however, goes back to the days of the Arthashastra, the earliest stratum of which dates back to c 3rd century BC. That Bengal continued to be famous for its textile products during the subsequent centuries is amply evident in the eloquent praise of the textiles of Bengal in the accounts of Arab and Persian authors (c 9th to 14th centuries), Chinese writers and Marco Polo (late 13th centuries). As many of them did not actually visit Bengal, their estimation of the excellence of the textiles of Bengal is based on their ideas/information of the quality and quantity of textiles of this region. Significantly enough, Chau ju Kua (1225 AD), a Chinese official speaks of the availability of fine cotton (tou-lo) in Pong-kielo or vangala.

Inscriptions of the period from 8th century onwards occasionally record the plantation of both betel nuts (guvaka) and betel leaves (cf the term barajika, ie the grower/seller of betel leaves), both of which must have been transacted. Coconut (narikela) plantations also figure in inscriptions of the same period, particularly in those coming from coastal tracts. Salt as an indispensable daily necessity product also appears in the copper plates of the period from c 9th to 13th centuries, especially from areas close to the coast.

Bengal was also associated with the availability of excellent aloes wood, according to Arab accounts (c 9th to 13th centuries). Arab authors labelled it as Qamaruni aloes wood, available at the port of 'Samandar' or 'Sudkawan' (located near modern Chittagong). The Qamaruni aloes wood, rated second only to the aloes wood of Multan, was a forest product from Qamarun or kamarupa and brought to Samandar for export through the river Meghna. Arabic and Persian texts also refers to the export of rhinoceros horns, an exotic and costly item, from Samandar. This forest product is likely to have reached Samandar also from Kamarupa, which is traditionally noted for rhinoceros.

The importance of Bengal in the trade of another animal has been underlined in recent decades. This is the transaction in the horse, especially the war-horse, in early Bengal. The best quality of war-horses were however generally not indigenous to India and were brought from Central Asia to north India through the northwestern frontier region. According to the account of Kang tai (3rd century AD), Yueh-chih (ie Kusana) merchants regularly brought horses to the Koying country by sea. Koying is located in the Malay Peninsula. A copper drum, found from the Sangean Island in Southeast Asia, depicts two men in typical Yueh chih dresses standing beside a horse.

The most likely point of maritime contacts between the Malay Peninsula and north India seems to have been the Bengal littorals. To this must be added the evidence of a terracotta sealing from Chandraketurgh, with a legend in the mixed Kharosti-Brahmi script (assigned to c 3rd century AD), which shows the figure of a single masted ship on which stands the figure of a horse. The accompanying legend describes the vessel as a trapyaka, which is the same as trappaga of the

Periplus and the trapayaga of the Jaina text Angavijja. This seal provides the earliest known evidence of the shipment of horses from the Bengal coast. A perusal of the Tamil Sangam texts may suggest that horses reached the ports on the Tamilnadu coast from the north, which could imply in this context the Bengal coast.

One may therefore logically see Bengal's participation in the maritime transportation of horses to Southeast Asia and/or Tamilnadu coast in and around the 3rd century AD. The need for the horse as major war machinery in Bengal could have increased as a result of the rise of Bengal as a formidable regional power in north India under the Palas and the Senas (c 750-1205 AD). An impression of this can be seen in the epigraphic account of the gift of countless cavalry to the Palas by rulers from the northern quarter (udichinananeka-narapati-prabhritkrta-prameyahayavahini). Though it is stereotypical and eulogistic in nature, the account suggests that the Palas perceived the northern quarter (Udichi or Uttarapatha) as the principal supply zone of war-horses for their cavalry. This suggestion gains ground in the light of the annual horse-fair (ghotakayatra) at Prthudaka (modern Pehoa in Haryana), figuring in an inscription of 848 AD. The tabaqat-i-nasiri of Minhajuddin (13th century) leaves little room for doubt that excellent Arab horses were brought to Nudiah (probably nadia near modern Navadwip in the Nadia district, West Bengal) during the Sena period. In fact, the arrival of the Arabian horse-dealers at Nudiah was so regular that when some of bakhtiyar khalji's soldiers reached Nudiah, they were mistaken as horse merchants and they hardly raised any suspicion. Apart from this centre of horse trade in the Radha region, Lakhnawti or Laksmanavati, the capital of laksmanasena (1179-1206) also received the supply of horses from Karambattan or Karampattan, which is identified either with Kera Gompa in southwest Bhutan or an area in the northern fringe of Tibet. Horses were thus imported to Bengal both from the northwest and also the northeast. A recent study of 15th century Chinese annals points to the possibility of the overseas shipping of horses from the Bengal coast to China under the Ming rulers. It is likely that Bengal exported to China some of the horses, which were brought to Bengal from the northwest and/or the northeast.

Among other imported items to Bengal mention may be made of cowries, which were profusely used as a medium of exchange in Bengal, particularly during the 750-1300 AD phase. Best quality cowries were, however, not native of Bengal. These were in fact brought from the Maldives, obviously across the sea, as informed by Ibn Batuta and Ma Huan. The cowry must have been transported in bulk, almost in the nature of ballast. It logically follows that cowries were integrally integrated to the overseas trade network in the Indian Ocean. Among precious metals gold and silver, used for minting coins, appear to have been brought to Bengal from elsewhere. One of the possible sources of silver could have been the area around Arakan and Pegu.

The rapid overview of the exchangeable products in early Bengal highlights their impressive diversities, ranging from cereals, cash crops, agro-based products and other daily necessity objects to precious and exotic commodities catering to the needs of the moneyed communities and the ruling groups.

Market centres and merchants An understanding of trade centres and traders is closely related to the study of exchangeable commodities in early Bengal. Available evidences suggest that there were specific types of market places and merchants.

Major urban centres in early Bengal like Pundranagara, kotivarsa, Mangalkot, karnasuvarna, Ramavati and vikramapura appear to have combined the functions of politico-administrative centres and commercial centres. These seem to have occupied the top position in the hierarchy of market places in early Bengal. Closely connected with the markets at principal urban centres were ports, generally called pattanas and velakulas. The foremost port of Bengal from the late centuries BC to the eighth century AD was certainly Tamralipti, the major outlet for the landlocked Ganga valley. Located on the Rupnarayan and generally identified with Tamruk in Midnapur in West Bengal, Tamralipti is noted in early literature as a velakula. Archaeological remains, though not matching the profusion of literary references to it, point to its flourishing conditions. Ptolemy called it Tamalites while Pliny named the same as Taluctae. The importance of Tamralipti (cf Tan-mo-li-ti of hiuen-tsang) as a port of international trade, especially in the Bay of Bengal maritime network, is clearly highlighted by fa hien (travel in India 399-414 AD) and Hiuen-Tsang (travel in India 629-45 AD).

The Periplus of the Erythraen Sea and Ptolemy's Geography (c 150 AD) mention a port called Gange located on the river Ganga close to the confluence of the Ganga with the sea. This port is generally, but not unanimously, identified with the well-known archaeological site of Chandraketugarh in South 24 Pargana district, West Bengal. That Chandraketugarh,

located on the river Vidyadhari, was a flourishing port is unmistakable on the basis of a number of visual representations of water crafts of various types on inscribed terracotta seals and sealings discovered from Chandraketurgarh and datable to the first three centuries of the Christian era. These unique materials from Chandraketurgarh yield depictions of ordinary boats, trapyaka type of coastal vessels and ocean going (larger?) ships (jaladhisakra, literally Indra of the ocean) fit for distant journeys (trideshayatra). While Tamralipti was undoubtedly the port par excellence in ancient Bengal, Gange/ Chandraketurgarh is likely to have played the role of an important feeder port to Tamralipti.

It appears that the last known definite epigraphic reference to Tamralipti does not go beyond the eighth century AD, after which the port seems to have declined mainly because of the siltation in the Rupnarayan. The gradual fading away of this premier port may have adversely affected the commercial activities of ancient Bengal, which according to some scholars experienced as its consequence a closed and self-sufficient rural economy in sharp contrast to the erstwhile trade based urbanism in Bengal. However, the southeastern most part of Bangladesh or Samatata-Harikela region was coming to recognition for long-distance overseas communications to southeast Asia, as is evident from Hiuen-Tsang's accounts of early seventh century. The combined evidence of several Arab (Sulaiman, Ibn Khordadbeh, Al Masudi, Al Idrisi, Al Marvazi and Ibn Battuta to mention the outstanding writers), Persian (Hudud al Alam) and Chinese (Chau ju Kua and the accounts of the voyages of Cheng ho) texts indicate the remarkable rise of a port, variously called Samandar, Sudkawan and Sattigaon, probably located near present Chittagong. The loss of Tamralipti seems to have been considerably compensated by the emergence of Samandar/Sudkawan as the premier harbour in the Bengal coast, to be ultimately given the status of porto grande by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century.

Like Tamralipti of the earlier centuries, Samandar too had a few feeder ports in the form of inland riverine ports. Two such prominent ports were devaparvata and Vangasagarasambhandariyaka. Devaparvata, located in Mainamati, figures in a few inscriptions of 7th-10th centuries as being encircled by river Ksiroda, on which plied many boats and described as sarvatobhadra (approachable from all sides). Apart from being a riverine port it also served as a jayaskandhavara or a politico-administrative centre of the Khadga and Deva rulers of Samatata. That there was another riverine port near Savar (Sabhar) has been suggested on the basis of the reference to Vangasagarasambhandariyaka in a Chandra inscription of 971 AD. The place was so named because it offered warehousing facilities (sambhandara) and also provided a linkage with the Bay of Bengal (Vangasagara). The very name Savar is probably a survival of the ancient name sambhara or collection of merchandise.

In 1196, according to the Sundarbans copper plate of Srimaddomanapala, there existed close to the Ganga's confluence with the sea, a place named Dvarahataka. It was obviously a small riverine market centre (hataka, ie hattaka) functioning as a dvara or gateway to the sea. These inland riverine market centres/ports, whether in Vanga-Samatata area or in the lower regions of Radha, were less prominent than Tamralipta or Samandar, but provided the crucial linkages between the littorals and the interior in a nadimatrka region like Bengal. The navigability of the many rivers, including the Ganga, in the Bengal delta is unmistakably evident from the epigraphic account of fleets of boats on the Bhagirathi (sa khalu Bhagirathipathapravartamana nauvata) and the description of Vikramapura in Vanga as a navigable tract (Vange Vikramapurabhage navye).

In the interior must have existed a number of market places, generally designated as hattas or hattikas, which first appeared in the copper plates of the 5th century but actually proliferated in the landgrants from the 8th century onwards. The term hatta, corresponding to the present hat generally stands for a rural level market centre where transactions usually take place once or twice in the week. As periodic or weekly market places in rural areas hattas can be placed at the base of the hierarchy of market centres in early Bengal. However, the term hattavara may suggest a centre of trade larger than an ordinary hatta. Devapaladevahatta was located close to Nalanda and being named after the Pala ruler, must have been more important and perhaps larger also than an ordinary hatta.

An occasional mention of shops (apana) figures in the Khalimpur copperplate of dharmapala. Copper plates belonging to the last phase of the Sena rule refer to the chaturaka, not known before twelfth century. The term chaturaka may denote a place situated at the junction of four roads or quarters. The location of chaturakas at the crossroads probably implies that they served as nodal points in locality level and regional trade. One such chaturaka was Betaddachaturaka (with the Ganga as its eastern boundary - purvve Jahnavisima), identified with modern Batore in Howrah district, West Bengal. One may logically infer that larger hattas and chaturakas could have provided significant linkages between the

large urban centres and major ports on the one hand and rural-level periodic market places on the other. Similar commercial linkages were provided also in more or less contemporary north India, the Deccan and the far south by the middle-tier trade centres like mandapika (mod. mandi), pentha (mod. peth) and nagaram.

At these market places and ports thrived merchants, who like the centres of trade, were not an undifferentiated category. Terracotta seals and sealings from Chandraketugarh and other sites in deltaic West Bengal speak of merchants dealing in paddy. The Sanskrit generic terms vanik and vaidehaka refer to the trader in general and also possibly to a petty merchant. In many Jataka stories leaders of caravans (sathavaha or sarthavaha) appear as undertaking distant journeys (puvvanta-aparanta) between Puskalavati (Charsadda in Pakistan) and Tamralipta. Caravan traders and nagarashresthis prominently appear in Kotivarsa according to the five Damodarpur copper plates, dated in c 444-544 AD. The term nagarashresthi literally means a very rich merchant in the nagara or town of Kotivarsa. The shresthi, lauded in early Indian texts as possessing fabulous wealth, was also a financier who invested a part of his wealth in various commercial ventures. It will be difficult to miss from these records that the sarthavaha and the nagarashresthi were members of the district board (visayadhisthanadhikarana) for at least a century, though they were by no means government functionaries. One may therefore logically infer that the sarthavaha and the nagarashresthi were representatives of their respective professional groups and enjoyed considerable social pre-eminence. Individual merchants became a rarity in inscriptions of subsequent centuries. Jambhalamitra, a vrddhasartha, is known to have donated an image of Ganesha in Samatata in the late 10th century.

The term vrddhasartha may be taken to mean an old caravan trader, or on the basis of the analogy of the term vadduvyavahari in more or less contemporary Tamil inscriptions may be considered as a senior caravan merchant. The lack of references to merchants in the records of 8th-13th centuries have led some scholars to perceive a decline of trade and traders in Bengal during the period from 600 to 1300 AD. The image of languishing trade, a marker of the emergence and consolidation of feudal formation, has however been effectively countered by several historians who do not view a slump in trade in Bengal during this phase.

Trade routes It has already been stressed that Bengal's geography and physical features endow the region with considerable facilities of communications, overland, riverine and maritime. Pundravardhana offers the major connections with the middle Ganga valley through the Rajmahal corridor. It is therefore no wonder that Pundravardhana was the first area in early Bengal to have witnessed the advent of the Northern Black Polished Ware and urbanism in c 4th-3rd centuries BC, both being major features of the material life of the middle Ganga plains.

An eloquent testimony to Bengal's overland communications with the Ganga valley and the northwestern extremities of the subcontinent is available from the discovery of Kharoshti and Kharosti-Brahmi documents. The principal zone of the use of Kharosti being the north-western part of the subcontinent, the presence of Kharosti-using people in West Bengal during the early centuries of the Christian era amply illustrate the linkages between the northwest and the Ganga delta. That this communication must have been maintained through the Ganga valley, especially the middle Ganga plains, is well driven home by the discovery of Kharosti inscriptions at Chunar near Banaras in UP and also the finding of a terracotta plaque with a Kharosti inscription from the Kumrahar excavations. The inclusion of Srichampa (Bhagalpur in eastern Bihar) in Kaniska I's realm, as evident from his Rabatak inscription, may indicate that the eastward spread of the Kusana empire from its base in the northwestern borderlands to the middle Ganga plains could have facilitated the advent of Kharosti in Bengal. Such cultural contacts were usually not bereft of commercial significance and may explain the regular availability of horses in Bengal, imported possibly from the northwest.

The contacts between the Ganga delta and the Ganga basin continued in subsequent centuries. Fahsien's overland journey from Magadha to Tamralipta is a clear pointer to that. Hiuen-Tsang's itinerary in Bengal may also throw interesting lights on this subject. Hiuen-Tsang started from Nalanda and reached Kajangala near the Rajmahal hills. From there he proceeded eastwards to Pundravardhana and continued further east to Kamarupa. From Kamarupa in the Brahmaputra valley he came down southeast to reach Samatata from where he travelled westwards to Tamralipta. From Tamralipta he journeyed northwards and arrived at Karnasuvarna, the capital of shashanka.

The pilgrim finally left Bengal for Odra or Orissa; the final leg of his overland journey from Karnasuvarna in Radha region to Orissa must have been undertaken through ancient Dandabhukti (mod. Danton in the Medinipur dist, West Bengal).

His travels in Bengal demonstrate that existing routes of communication connected different areas within early Bengal. Bengal's overland connections with the neighbouring regions of Magadha, Kamarupa and Odra have also to be taken into consideration. In the eighth century three merchant brothers undertook an overland journey from Ayodhya to Tamralipta. The Dudhpani inscription, recording their activities, suggests that they planned their return trip from Tamralipta to the middle Ganga valley through the present Hazaribagh region. The Ghoshrawan inscription of the time of devapala indicates the very long overland journey by Viradharadeva from Nagarahara (mod. Jalalabad) to Mahabodhi (Bodhgaya).

The interesting point here is that Viradharadeva is said to have been happy as he saw many of his countrymen at Nalanda. This cannot but underline the regularity of communications between southern Bihar and the northwestern extremities during the 9th century. The regular arrival of horses and their dealers from the northern quarter to Bengal during the Pala-Sena period also strongly suggests the continuity of commercial linkages between the two areas. That coastal Bengal could be reached from Coromandel coast is clearly illustrated by the descriptions of Chola Rajendra's celebrated Gangetic campaign (c 1022-23AD) in Tandabutti (Dandabhukti), Takkanaladham (Daksinradha), Uttiraladham (Uttararadha) and Vangaladesa (southern and coastal areas of Vanga). Rajendra's forces arrived from Coromandel Coast through coastal Andhra, Orissa and entered Bengal through the Medinipur region in West Bengal. One may see here the continuity of the overland connections between Bengal and the Coromandel Coast, previously undertaken by Hiuen-Tsang in the 7th century. The frequent mentions of the gamagamika (officer in charge of arrival and departures) and shaulkika (officer in charge of the collection of tolls and customs) in the records of the Pala-Sena period further highlight the possibilities of commercial contacts both within Bengal and beyond.

Above survey of ports has already driven home the importance of the Bengal coast as an outlet to the landlocked Ganga valley and also its significant position in the overseas trade network, particularly in the Bay of Bengal. The frequent use of terms like nau-khata, nauyoga, nau-yogakhata, nau-dandaka, nau-bandhaka, nausthiravega, nauprthvi in copper plates ranging from 6th-13th centuries demonstrates that inland water transports regularly plied on numerous rivers, including of course the Ganga. A sure index of Bengal's growing participation in the trade along the entire length of the East Coast is furnished by the distribution of Rouletted Ware sites. The Rouletted Ware, now datable to 2nd century BC - 200 AD period, has been found from many coastal sites in the eastern sea-board, such as Alaganakulam, Kaveripattinam, Arikamedu, Vasavasamudram, Kanchipuram (Tamilnadu), Amaravati, Salihundam, Kalingapatnam (Andhrapradesh), Sisupalgarh (Orissa), Tamluk and Chandraketugarh (West Bengal).

In 414 AD Fahsien began his voyage to China from Tamralipta. He boarded a merchant vessel and reached Sri Lanka from where he sailed to Java and finally to China. His accounts leave little room for doubt about the direct overseas route between the Bengal coast and Sri Lanka with further connections to Southeast Asia. Hiuen-Tsang explicitly mentions that Samatata maintained maritime contacts with several areas in Southeast Asia: eg Pegu, Sriksetra, Dvaravarti and Yamanadvipa. This is clearly corroborated by Itsing's arrival at Harikela in 675 AD by a maritime voyage from Southeast Asia. On such maritime routes must have plied the master mariner (mahanavika) Buddhagupta, a resident of Raktamrttika (near Karnasuvarna), who figures in a sixth century inscription from the Malay peninsula. Another instance of maritime contacts of Bengal with Southeast Asia is seen in the request of the king of Yavadvipa, Balaputradeva, to Devapala to grant some lands to the Nalanda monastery. Such cultural exchanges speak of intimate commercial linkages too. According to the Arab accounts of the period from 9th-13th centuries, there were regular sea voyages between Samandar on one hand and Silandib (Sri Lanka), Kanja (Kancipuram) and Uranshin (Orissa) on the other. From the second half of the 12th century, a new sea-borne network connected Bengal with the Maldives. Ibn Batuta used this route to come to Bengal. For his return journey from the Bengal coast to Java (Sumatra) he boarded a Chinese junk from sonargaon and from Java he finally reached China. Ma Huan's celebrated accounts of the voyages of the Ming admiral Cheng ho leave little room for doubt that the Chinese fleet visited Sattigaon (ie Chittagong) no less than four times during the period from 1404 to 1433 AD. All these bring to limelight the maritime network between the Bengal coast (especially the littorals of Samatata-Harikela) and Southeast Asia in which the Strait of Malacca seems to have played a crucial role.

Media of exchange Prior to the advent of minted metallic pieces as a medium of exchange in c 3rd century BC, it is likely that exchanges in ancient Bengal probably took the form of barter. From the 3rd century BC onwards punch-marked

coins, in regular circulation in north India since c 600 BC, began to appear in many of the excavated urban centres of early Bengal, like Mahasthan, Bangarh, Chandraketurgarh, Mangalkot, Tamralipta etc. The recent discovery of punch-marked coins from wari-bateswar in Bangladesh highlights the possibilities of the spread of money economy and therefore, trade, in the eastern part of the delta. These silver species were struck on the karsapana standard of 32 ratis or 57.6 grains.

The introduction of coinage in Bengal since the 3rd century BC certainly suggests burgeoning trade in the region. The epigraphic reference to the filling up of the kosa or treasury at Pundranagara with ganda and kakini may imply, according to some scholars, the circulation of gandaka and kakini types of coins. An alternative interpretation of the same account, however, points to the possibility of the use of cowries counted in the unit of four (ganda). The latter interpretation implies that cowries could have been used as a medium of exchange right from the 3rd century BC. In addition to the silver punch-marked coins copper and bullion punch-marked coins were introduced to Bengal in c 2nd century BC. There are not only full-unit coins, but half unit and quarter unit pieces too. These uninscribed cast copper coins were based on the silver karsapana standard. Die-struck coins were introduced to Bengal during the Kusana age. In lower parts of Radha and Vanga a new series of cast copper coins merged in the 2nd century AD. These were developed on the basis of the Kusana devices and they followed karsapana weight standard. As a medium of exchange, these copper coins, labelled as Kusana-Radha/ Kusana-Vanga coinage, have some correspondence to the so-called Puri-Kusana coinage of Kalinga. This indicates the likelihood of a trade network in the Vanga-Kalinga zone.

The political presence of the imperial Guptas in several regions of early Bengal during the 5th and first half of the 6th centuries AD paved the way for the circulation of the Gupta gold coins, known for their superb execution. Several Gupta copper plates from north Bengal refer to coin-terms dinara and rupaka. The two terms respectively denote gold and silver coins of the Guptas. A Gupta inscription from north Bengal suggests that the Gupta dinara could be exchanged with 15 or 16 rupakas or silver coins. The Gupta gold coin was issued on the weight standard of 124 grains; Skandagupta introduced a heavier weight standard of 144 grains, but the heavier suvarna coins became increasingly debased after the reign of Narasimha Gupta Baladitya. Gold coins struck on the suvarna standard were issued by rulers of Vanga before the emergence of Shashanka in c 600 AD and also by Shashanka (c 600-37? AD) himself. The suvarna standard continued to be based in gold coins of rulers of Samatata of the seventh and early eighth centuries. In most of these species, struck on suvarna standard, metallic purity of the gold coin is appreciably low. After this gold coins faded out from the monetary scenario of Bengal for at least four or five centuries.

CONCLUSION:

The period from c 750 to 1200 probably witnessed a complex monetary system in Bengal. One has to note here the curious position that while the Palas and Senas did not strike any coin, the Samatata-Harikela region experienced the uninterrupted minting and circulation of high quality silver coins (the issuing authorities of these coins are unknown) for six centuries -from the 7th to the 13th centuries. The steady maintenance of the weight standard and metallic purity of these silver coins certainly implies the active role of an effective authority ensuring the quality of the silver coins. These silver pieces corresponded to the well-known purana or dramma standard of 57.6 grains. Coin terms like purana and dramma do appear in the copper plates of the Palas and the Senas. It has also been observed that the Harikela silver coins after the 10th century became lighter in weight and broader in its flab with legends and motifs only on one side. The changes in the Harikela issues are suggested to have had some conformity with the reformed Arab currency system. This would once again speak of intimate linkages between the Bengal Coast and the trading world of the Arabs. The overseas contacts of the Bengal Coast with the Arab world are further demonstrated by the discovery of coins of the Abbasid Caliphs Harun-or-Rashid (8th century) and Mustasim Billah (12th century) from the excavated sites respectively of Paharpur and Mainamati.

The lively scenario of trade in early Bengal, including long distance overseas trade from and to the Bengal littorals, does not uphold the image of a languishing trade and 'monetary anaemia', projected in the construction of Indian feudalism.

Landgrants and minted currency system were not mutually incompatible, but they could coexist in a given region. Possibilities of the easy convertibility of one silver coin of purana or drama variety with 1280 cowries have been stressed, on the basis of a medieval Bengali arithmetic table. Attention has been drawn to the use of a term churnni, which began to appear in the Bengal records since the Sena times, hyphenated with kapardaka or cowry-shell. This implies that the term churnni and/or kapardaka-churnni are to be associated with a medium of exchange.

The term churnni has been rightly interpreted as dust of pure silver or gold. In other words, the records offer the image of the introduction of dust currency, of equal weight to the purana (silver) standard and suvarna (gold) standard. Such a dust currency would be preferable to merchants when gold or silver coins were either relatively rare or of uncertain weight standard and metallic purity. The gold or silver dust currency could be logically exchanged with a gold or silver coin struck on dinara/suvarna or drama/karsapana standard; the dust currency of equivalent weight as a purana or suvarna coin could also be converted to kapardakas or cowrie shells. The above discussions suggest the gradual development of a complex monetary system in early medieval Bengal. A three tier monetary system has been perceived, consisting of the cowry shell (kapardaka) at the base, the minted metallic pieces (especially in precious metals) at the top and the newly introduced dust currency in between the two.

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KEYWORDS:

Bengal, Colonial, Britishers, Ganges, Brahmaputra, trade, Guptas, Arthashastra, Mahastan, Arab.

