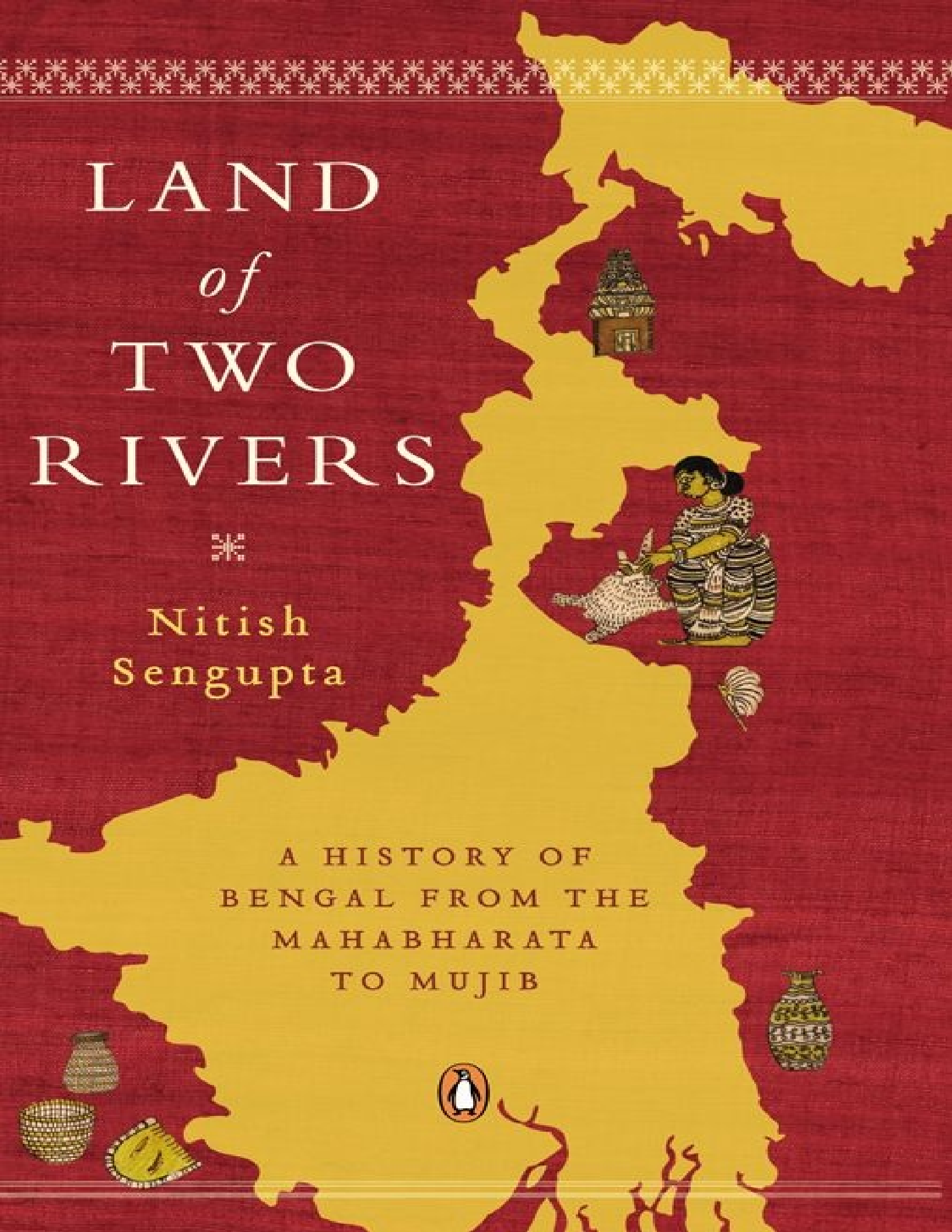
LAND *of* TWO RIVERS



Nitish Sengupta

A HISTORY OF BENGAL FROM THE MAHABHARATA TO MUJIB

Penguin

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Academician, administrator, politician and author, Nitish Sengupta studied at Presidency College, Kolkata, winning a gold medal for his master's in history. He began his career as assistant professor of history and joined the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) in 1957. He held key posts in the Union government including revenue secretary and member-secretary, Planning Commission. After completing his doctorate in management from Delhi University, he lectured at several universities and leading management schools in the country. After his retirement, he was director-general of the International Management Institute, New Delhi.

Nitish Sengupta has represented India at various UN bodies and was elected chairman of the UN Commission on Transnational Corporations. He joined politics in 1996 and was elected to the Thirteenth Lok Sabha, where he served as member of several key committees, notably the Public Accounts Committee. He was also general secretary, All India Trinamool Congress. Currently, he holds the position of chairman, Board for Reconstruction of Public Sector Enterprises, New Delhi.

He has been a regular columnist in leading dailies and is the author of twelve books, including several related to management. As a historian, his well-known works are *History of the Bengali-speaking People*, *Dr B.C. Roy, Biography* and *Bengal Divided*. He has also authored *Unshackling of Indian Industry, Government and Business*, *Inside the Steel Frame* and *My Times—A Civil Servant Remembers.*

Dedicated to the fond memory
of Sunanda,
my life partner who is no more

Preface

This is by far the only book that covers the history of Bengal from the earliest times until the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 as an independent country. Bengal, or ‘Bangla Desh’, as it is called by all Bengalis in the cultural sense (as distinct from the post-1971 country of Bangladesh in the political sense), has gone through many changes across centuries. There was the first partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon which was resisted by the majority of the people. There was also the second partition in 1947 when a majority of the people called for a partition of the province into a Hindu-majority segment and the Muslim-majority segment, the former going to India and the latter going to Pakistan. From that point the two Bengals ceased to share a common political history and the Bengali-speaking people were split between the province of East Bengal (known as East Pakistan from 1956 till 1971) and the Indian state of West Bengal. In 1971 East Pakistan revolted against West Pakistan and seceded to create a new nation state known as Bangladesh.

During the last four decades I have been known as an author on management, economics and related subjects. It will surprise many friends to know that I majored in history and started my career by teaching history in Presidency College, Calcutta, in 1956–57 before I joined the Indian Administrative Services (IAS). I was then gradually sucked into the world of management science and applied economics and took a PhD in management from the University of Delhi.

I have to express my gratefulness to Sunanda, my life partner who is no more, for encouraging me to return to serious study of history. The present work was completed during the last seventeen years after I retired from government, in the midst of political and academic preoccupations. This is my ‘private sector’ effort outside my ‘public sector’ activities in management and in politics. I shall consider my labour amply rewarded if those who speak Bengali, about 250

million in number, despite being politically separated, take an active interest in their common political history, their shared composite culture and, above all, the common language they take pride in.

The study starts with the geographical background of Bengal's history, the origin of the Bengalee race and the growth of Bengali language. The unity of language was a major factor in the emergence of Bengal as a distinct political and cultural entity. The history of Bengal is sketched right from the days of the Mahabharata, through the Maurya, Gupta, Pala and Sen dynasties, the Turkish conquest and the Turkish phase of medieval Bengal, the Mughal period and the British conquest of this province in the eighteenth century. Thereafter, it sketches the Bengal Renaissance, the growth of nationalism, the growth of Muslim separatist politics, the attempts at forging a united Bengali nation and eventually the failure of these efforts leading to Partition. It especially analyses the factors that created misunderstanding among the Muslim Bengalees and the Hindu Bengalees despite a lot of goodwill and commonality between the two which made Bengal's second partition in 1947 unavoidable.

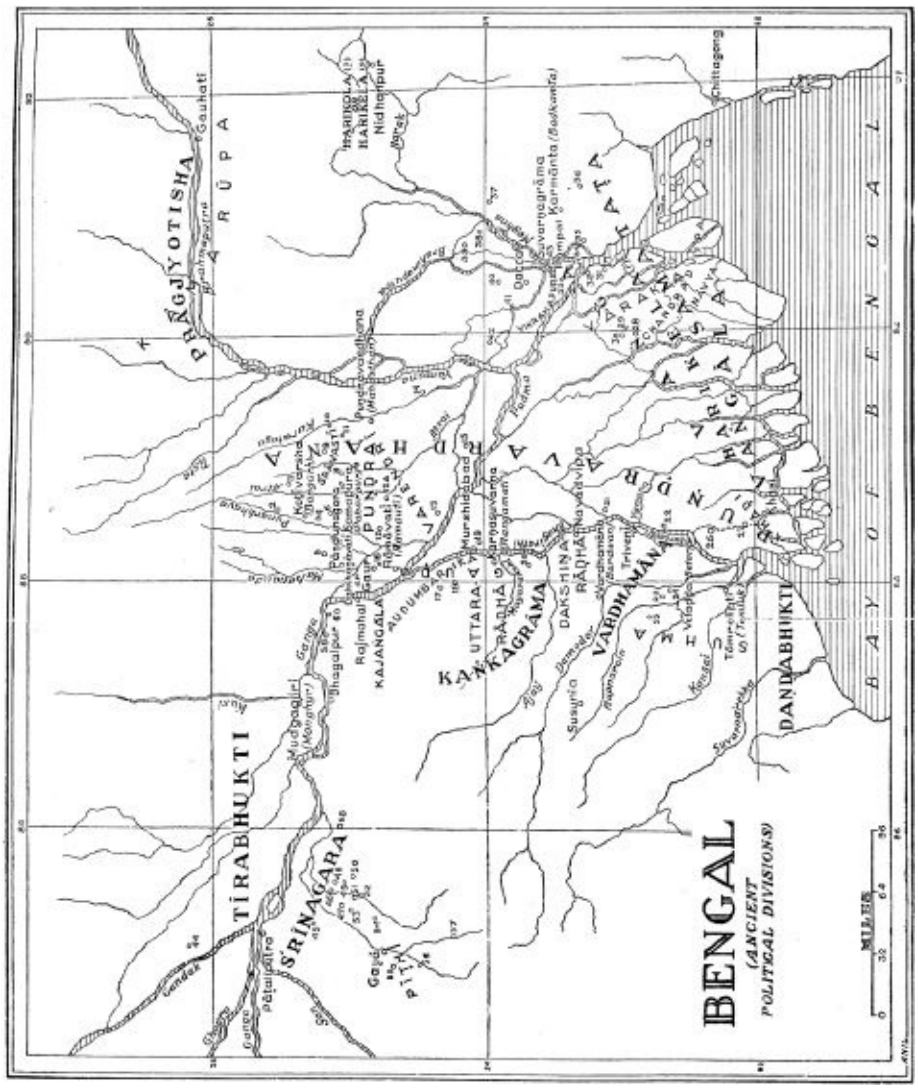
Following Partition, the study traces the history of East Bengal through various phases, in the course of which the East Bengalees felt humiliated and economically exploited under Pakistani rule. They eventually revolted against Pakistan's dictatorship, struggled for a rightful place for their mother tongue and for a fair deal, under the charismatic leadership of 'Bangabandhu' Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and formed an independent nation, Bangladesh. Bangladesh now occupies the driver's seat in the matters of promotion and propagation of Bengali language and culture. This was climaxed recently by Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina formally seeking UN status for Bengali language in a statement before the UN General Assembly. She said, 'Bangla [Bengali language] is spoken by over 250 million people worldwide, primarily in Bangladesh and West Bengal … Given the rich heritage of Bangla and its singular place as a symbol of people's faith in the power of languages to sustain cultures and indeed the identity of nations, I seek support of the membership of UN General Assembly for its acceptance as an official language of the United Nations.'

Long ago, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee expressed his sadness at the fact that the Bengalees were a nation who had forgotten their past. The credit goes to the

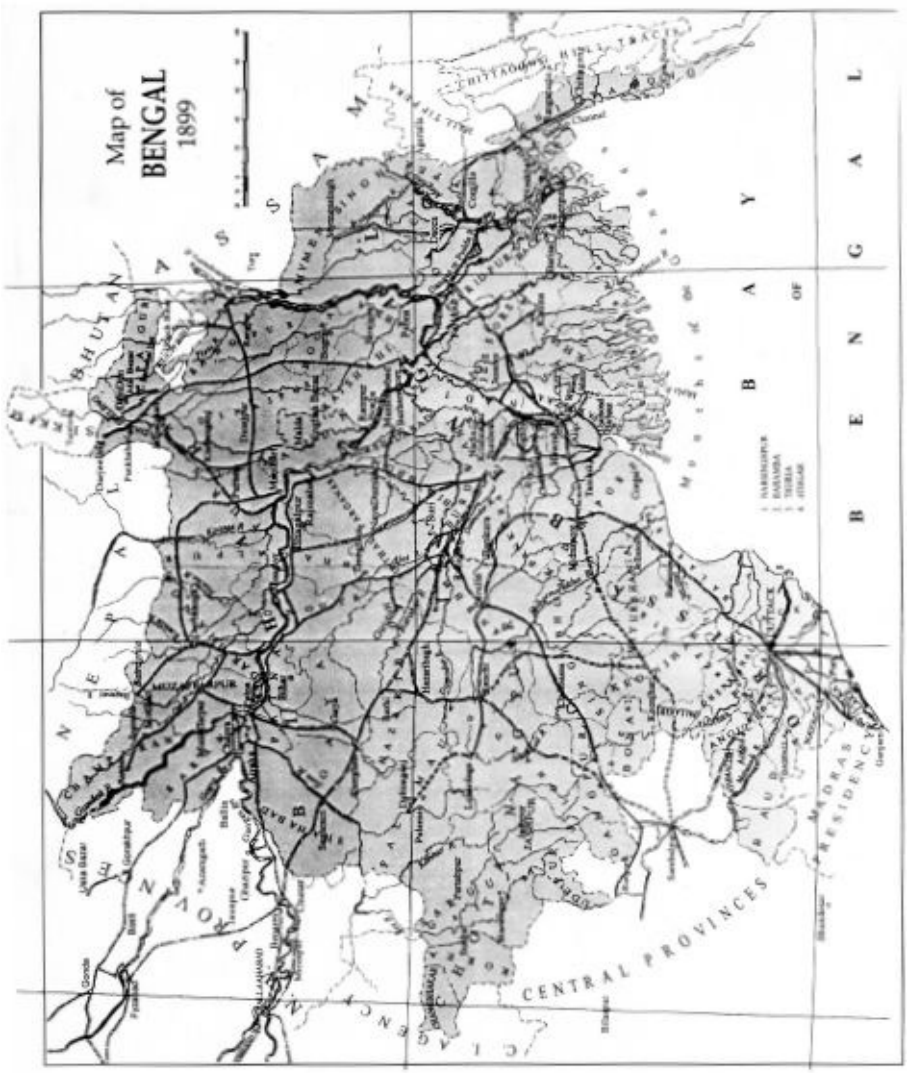
University of Dhaka for bringing out the two-volume *History of Bengal*, with the first volume on the region's ancient history edited by R.C. Majumdar and the second volume on the medieval period edited by J.N. Sarkar. Unfortunately, the Partition of 1947 intervened and the third volume on modern Bengal never came out. Dr Nihar Ranjan Ray's seminal work *Bangalir Itihas* in Bengali deals with the evolution of Bengal's culture, bringing the story up to AD 1000 when neither the name 'Banga' or 'Bengal', nor the name 'Bengali' had appeared in popular parlance. The only work that covers the entire story of Bengal is R.C. Majumdar's masterly three-volume work, *History of Bengal*, but it suffers from being too subjective and shaped by prejudices brought on through personal experiences of the author.

The present study essentially centres on the political history and does not dwell upon the cultural, linguistic, literary or social aspects of Bengal's development, except where these had a direct impact on political developments. It is based on both secondary and primary sources. The epilogue attempts to sum up the main events since 1971 in both the Bengals and give a perspective on the present and the future.

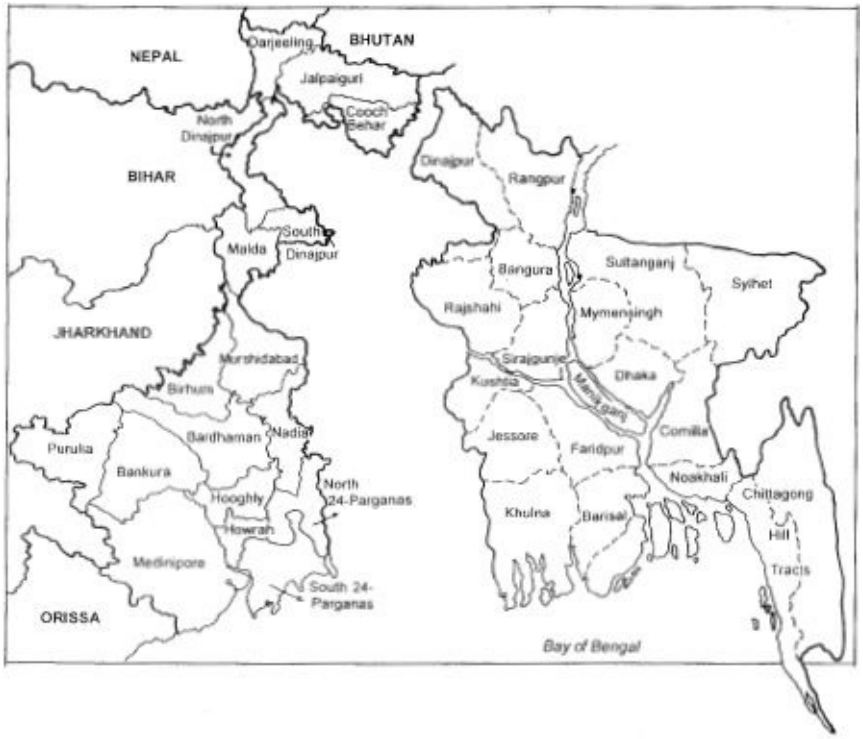
I thank all my friends in India and Bangladesh who helped me in conceptualizing my thoughts and completing this book. Thanks are also due to Penguin India, particularly Ravi Singh, who suggested that I write this book. I also deem it my pleasant duty to pay tributes to the memory of Prof. Sushobhan Chandra Sarkar, Dr Narendra Krishna Sinha, Dr Sashi Bhusan Choudhary and Prof. A.W. Mahmood, who taught me history as it should be learnt.



The unique formation of the Gangetic delta with the two rivers, Ganga and Brahmaputra, created a land that became as enviable for its richness of learning and culture as for its prosperity.



The large—according to some administrators, 'unmanageable'—province of Bengal included Bihar and Orissa as well before its first partition in 1905.



The split of the two Bengals became formalized with the Partition in 1947, when West Bengal (on the left) became a state within the Indian Union and East Bengal, a province of Pakistan. Eventually, Bangladesh (on the right) declared its independence from Pakistan's exploitative administration in 1971.

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First Gaur Kingdom under Sasanka

During the political confusion that followed the end of the Gupta Empire, we can notice the emergence of two independent kingdoms in the east, viz., Gaur and Banga. Both of them arose around the sixth and the seventh centuries AD. Three rulers of Banga can be traced, viz., Gopachandra, Dharmaditya and Samachardev. Each of them assumed the title Maharajadhiraja. There are three inscriptions discovered around Kotalipara in the district of Faridpur in Bangladesh and one in Burdwan district of West Bengal, which refer to these three kings. The gold coins of Samachardev have been discovered in the ruins of Nalanda in Bihar. His gold coins have also been discovered at a number of places in East Bengal, notably at Savar in Dhaka and Kotalipara in Faridpur district. When precisely did this kingdom of Banga cease to exist is not known. On the basis of Chalukya records (*Prasasti*s) Dr R.C. Majumdar came to the conclusion that it was the Chalukaya king, Kirti Varman, who destroyed this kingdom in the latter half of the sixth century. But what is more certain is that it was the rise of the kingdom centring on Gaur under King Sasanka which eventually destroyed the Banga kingdom. During this confusing period there are references to the Gaur kingdom attacking Kamrup and also an invasion of Gaur by a Tibetan ruler. It was during this period that one King Adisur, famous in the folklore of Bengal, ruled. But the legends of Adisur do not have any historical authenticity. Adisur is no doubt a legendary figure like King Arthur of England whose historical authenticity is very doubtful.

In the evolution of Bengal as a distinct political and ethnic entity, the rule of Sasanka (c. 606–37) is a major landmark. Sasanka was the first historically known ruler of what came to be called Bengal later, although he was described in his time only as the king of Gaur. Also he was the first known king of Bengal who extended his political sovereignty over territories well beyond the normal geographical boundary of Bengal. Sasanka might have started as a vassal of the Maukhary king Avantivarman, as claimed by some historians. Also, he might have been a subordinate ruler under the later Guptas. What we definitely know is that around AD 606, Sasanka became the king of Gaur with his capital at Karnasuvarna which is identified as the village Kansona near Baharampur town of Murshidabad district. From two copper plate grants of Sasanka, around *samvat* 230 or 330, it is quite clear that his rule extended to Danda, and Utkala, or Orissa. He must also have been in possession of the whole of south Bengal. In an inscription of the year AD 619, Sri Madhavarajan, a king ruling over Kongada on the Chilka Lake of Orissa, invokes the name of Sasanka as his protector. This shows that Sasanka was definitely exercising sovereignty up to Chilka Lake, after he launched his campaign in these areas. But his campaign in north India in the course of which he came in conflict with the great emperor Harshavardhana of Kanauj was not successful. There is ample evidence to this effect from the account of both Banabhatta, Harsha's court poet, and Hiuen-Tsang, the great Chinese pilgrim who visited the empire of Harshavardhana.

In the course of his campaign, Sasanka defeated the Maukhary king Grahavarman, the son of Avantivarman who had married Rajyasri, the daughter of Prabhakaravardhana, the ruler of Thaneswar. It seems that a triangular pattern of interaction had developed at that time among the Pushyabhuti dynasty of Thaneswar, the Maukhary dynasty of Kanauj and the later Guptas from Malava. By a dynastic alliance through the marriage of Rajyasri, daughter of Prabhakaravardhana of Thaneswar, with Grahavarman, the Maukhary king had brought these two powers together against the king of Malava. Sasanka, who had gradually extended his authority over Magadha and up to Benares, now intervened in this triangle on the side of the king of Malava, making it a quadrangular affair. The Malava king defeated and killed Grahavarman, imprisoning his queen Rajyasri, sister of Rajyavardhana. Rajyavardhana, who had ascended the throne of Thaneswar on his father's death, marched against

Devagupta of Malava with a hastily organized cavalry of 10,000, leaving the kingdom in charge of his younger brother, Harshavardhana. He defeated the Malava king and captured a large part of his army. But before he could conquer Kanauj or establish contact with his sister, Rajyasri, he was killed by Sasanka. Both Banabhatta and Hiuen-Tsang had described this as a treacherous murder under orders of Sasanka, although their versions somewhat differ. From Harshavardhana's own inscriptions, it is learnt that Rajyavardhana met with his death in the house of his enemy trying to fulfil a promise (*satyanirodhana*). Many scholars do not accept this charge of treacherous murder by Sasanka, since both Banabhatta and Hiuen-Tsang had personal prejudice against Sasanka. But whether or not Rajyavardhana was treacherously murdered, there is no denying the fact that Rajyavardhana was eliminated from the political scene in AD 606 and left Sasanka as the dominant power in that region. Sasanka did not pursue his victory by proceeding to Kanauj or Thaneswar but presumably decided to consolidate his existing gains. On hearing of Rajyavardhana's death, Harshavardhana with his vast army marched on for taking vengeance on the king of Gaur. And then a fifth power stepped in.

Bhaskaravarman, king of Kamrup, must have found in this situation an opportunity to settle scores with his neighbour Sasanka. He entered into a military alliance with Harshavardhana. The combined army then proceeded against their common enemy after Harsha had rescued his sister Rajyasri from the Vindhya forest. We have no further information on the results of the joint military campaign of Thaneswar and Kamrup against Bengal. The later Buddhist work, *Arya Manjusri Mula-kalpa*, speaks of a conflict between Sasanka and Harsha, but this cannot be taken as historically accurate. It does seem probable that Sasanka had to fall back on his capital when he was attacked on both sides. But soon the enemy withdrew, leaving him the master of his kingdom. There is a reference by Hiuen-Tsang to an ineffectual military campaign by Harsha. It is certain that Harshavardhana's campaign was a short-lived episode without any major effect on Bengal, and Sasanka remained in possession of Gaur, Magadha and Utkala long after AD 606. He held his own empire against the powerful combine of the north Indian ruler and his eastern friend until his death, which took place sometime after AD 616 and probably before AD 637. The significance of the latter date was that around the time Hiuen-Tsang visited

Magadha, he found that Sasanka had cut down a bodhi tree at Gaya and ordered the removal of the statue of Buddha from the temple. After his orders were executed, the king was seized with remorse and was affected by some incurable disease that caused his death. Hiuen-Tsang had also recorded many other acts of oppression by Sasanka against the Buddhists. According to him, one of the reasons why Harsha was induced to ascend the throne was to avenge the wrongs done by the king of Karnasuvarna. Both Banabhatta and Hiuen-Tsang accused Sasanka of having an anti-Buddhist bias; but, in fairness to Sasanka, it needs to be emphasized that his so-called anti-Buddhist stance was clearly more political than religious. He had to fight against two powerful Buddhist kings and, therefore, some Buddhists in his own dominion had to bear the brunt of his hostility. But he should not be made to suffer in the eyes of posterity for not having had emotionally motivated chroniclers like Banabhatta and Hiuen-Tsang to write in his favour.

HIUEN-TSANG'S ACCOUNT OF BENGAL

This intrepid Chinese pilgrim, a friend of Harshavardhana, visited Bengal during the first half of seventh century AD. He crossed the Ganga from north Bihar and studied in Nalanda University for several years. He reached Pundravardhana in north Bengal. He found the country thickly populated where both Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism were flourishing along with Brahmanism and Jainism. From Pundravardhana Hiuen-Tsang journeyed to Kamrup where the people were dark yellow in colour and of small stature. They were honest and simple in manners, but somewhat impetuous. Their language differed 'a little' from the language of mid-India. They were serious in study and their memories were retentive. Their king Bhaskaravarman was a Brahman, and the people also followed Brahamanical rituals. From Kamrup Hiuen-Tsang went to Samatata or eastern Bengal which bordered the sea. This was a country of rich lowlands. The people were black-complexioned, hardy and small-statured. They were serious in learning. As in Pundravardhana, Brahmanism and Jainism existed side by side. From Samatata he moved to Karnasuvarna (Kanasona) in Murshidabad district. Here, the men were both believers and heretics. They were brave and hardy, but of hasty temperament. The next place on his itinerary was Tamralipta where the people were honest, amiable and keen seekers of knowledge. They

were both Buddhist and Brahmanical. Thereafter he proceeded to Odra, which was presumably in south-western Midnapore and moved on to Kalinga and Orissa. One thing which is clear from Hiuen-Tsang's travelogue is that by the seventh century AD upper-class people all over Bengal had accepted the Aryan language and the Aryan way of life, but these had not yet spread among the masses.[1]

DARK AGE

The period from Sasanka's death (637) to the rise of the Pala imperial dynasty in the middle of the eighth century is another Dark Age in Bengal's history when there is no political continuity. There are only stray references to Bengal in the few historical documents available with us, and thereafter we are left to guesswork. It seems reasonably certain that after Sasanka, Bengal was split between Bhaskaravarman, the Kamrup king, and his ally, Harshavardhana of Kanauj. The former occupied most of Sasanka's kingdom including the capital Karnasuvarna, where he made a land grant that survives. Hiuen-Tsang who visited Bengal around AD 638 refers to four principalities, which were presumably under Harsha's sovereignty, viz., Pundravardhana, Karnasuvarna, Samatata and Tamralipta. According to Hiuen-Tsang, around AD 642, Bhaskaravarman marched to Kanjangala near Rajmahal with 30,000 boats which sailed along the Ganga and had a meeting with Harshavardhana. The political situation got further confounded after the death of Harsha (AD 646 or 647) and there was the bizarre episode of the clash between Harsha's successor and the Chinese envoy Wang-hiuen-tse, which led to a Chinese invasion of Harsha's empire. There are three references to military invasion of Bengal, one by the powerful Tibetan king Starong-Tsan Gampo (AD 700),[2] another by the powerful king of Kanauj, Yasovarman (AD 725–35), who conquered both Gaur and Banga killing the Gaur king,[3] and the third by Lalitaditya, king of Kashmir who defeated Yasovarman around AD 736 and undertook a *digvijaya* or a campaign of conquest to assert his supremacy over all those territories that owed allegiance to Yasovarman. In Kalhan's *Rajatarangini*, there are at least two references to Gaur, which indirectly suggest Gaur's acceptance of the Kashmir king's sovereignty. First, a troupe of elephants from Gaudamandala joined Lalitaditya's

expeditions. Second, there was the visit of the Gaur king to the Kashmir court where he was assassinated in a temple at Lalitaditya's behest. This was followed by a heroic but suicidal mission of some followers of the Gaur king who journeyed to Kashmir to seek revenge. 'Even the Creator,' says Kalhan, 'cannot achieve what the Gauras did on that occasion and to this day the world is filled with the fame of the Gaur heroes.' There are also some copper plates of this period alluding to a certain Kharga dynasty in Dhaka–Tippera area of East Bengal. The Tibetan monk, Taranath, vaguely refers to a Chandra dynasty ruling in East Bengal. But all these do not add up to any history as such. What is most certain is that Bengal was in a state of political disintegration and passed through one invasion after another until the rise of the Pala dynasty around the middle of the eighth century.

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The Imperial Palas

As we come to the age of the imperial Pala dynasty (c. eighth to tenth century) we move from the grey area in Bengal's history to the age of historical certainty. To quote R.C. Majumdar:

> For the first time the historian has the advantage of being able to follow, in the main, the fortunes of a single ruling dynasty, the order of succession of whose long line of kings is precisely known and whose chronology may be fixed with a tolerable degree of certainty. The advantage does not forsake him in spite of occasional political disintegration and the rise of local dynasties in various parts of the province.

The Pala dynasty, firmly based in Bengal, but with imperial ambitions over north India, had an origin unique in world history. The people of the land, tired of chronic anarchy and lawlessness that had inflicted endless suffering on them, chose one amongst themselves, Gopal, as their king, because they felt that the end of the prevailing anarchy could be brought about only by the establishment of a strong central authority to whom all petty chieftains subordinated themselves. The political situation of Bengal immediately before the Palas is picturesquely described by the Khalimpur copper plate used during the thirty-second year of the reign of the second Pala king Dharmapal. The expression *matsya nyaya*, sometimes used in Sanskrit treatises on politics to express a state of anarchy caused by the absence of a central authority, is also a typical Bengali way of describing the state of affairs with the imagery of a tank where big fishes are forever preying on smaller ones. This copper plate alludes to the unique event of Gopal's election in the following stanza:

Matsyanyayam apakitum prakritibhir Lakshmiya karam grahitah Sri Gopal iti kshitisa-sirsam chudamani-tatsubha

To put and end to the state of affairs similar to what happens among fishes, people made the glorious Gopal, the crest jewel of the heads of kings, take the hand of Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune.

Whether this means a democratic process of election by the people or whether it was a case of powerful feudal landlords selecting one amongst themselves as king, this was a unique event where the society, as it was at that time, chose a king—almost providing a copybook illustration of Locke's theory of social contract creating the state. The Sanskrit word '*prakritis*' meaning 'subjects' is more suggestive of people in general. In reality, the selection must have been made by a group of chieftains, which was subsequently endorsed by the general people. We have very little information about Gopal's ancestors. There are stray references in official records to his father, Vapyata and his grandfather, Dayitavishnu, who were clearly ordinary officials under some nondescript local chief.

There are casual statements in subsequent literature of the Pala period such as *Ramcharita* that they were Kshatriyas or they descended from the solar dynasty, but these lack credibility and were clearly attempts to cover up the relatively humble origins of this dynasty by an imagined ancient lineage. Abu'l-Fazl described them as Kayasthas. The Palas were devout Buddhists, and perhaps this explains why in their own records they never allude to Brahmanical institutions like caste. Gopal's accession must have taken place around AD 750, and according to R.C. Majumdar, his reign ended around AD 770. Much of his reign must have been devoted to consolidating his authority over the whole of Bengal including Gaur, Varendra and Banga. It must also have included parts of Magadha. According to his grandson Devapal's Monghyr copper plate, he conquered the whole country as far as the sea. This implies his conquest of lower Bengal. Another expression in his plate, of his releasing the war elephants, hints at his ending the military campaign. Thus, the only conclusion one can draw is that Gopal's main achievement was the establishment of durable peace in Bengal by bringing under his control the turbulent chiefs from outlying areas and unifying Gaur, Varendra, Banga and Magadha in one kingdom.

DHARMAPAL (770–810)

It was Gopal's son and successor, Dharmapal, who built on the foundations laid by Gopal and took Pala rule to imperial glory.

Dharmapal's imperial ambitions took him outside the limits of Gaur and Magadha on to the political horizons of north India where a triangular struggle developed between the Palas, the Rashtrakutas from the south and the Gurjara-Pratiharas of Malava in the west. All the three powers tried to take advantage of the power vacuum in north India to extend their own hold. As both Dharmapal from the east and King Vatsaraja of the Gurjara-Pratihara dynasty from the west marched to the north to capture the declining Kanauj empire, there was an inevitable clash that took place in the Doab. Dharmapal suffered defeat, but there was providential intervention. Even before the Pratihara victor could press home his political advantages over the Bengal king's defeat, he was himself defeated by the Rashtrakuta king Dhruva who had chosen to make a quick military sortie to north India. Dhruva proceeded to occupy the Doab, and in that process he met and defeated Dharmapal's army; but once again providence favoured Dharmapal as the Rashtrakuta victor, already far away from his southern kingdom, chose to return to the Deccan. With Vatsaraja driven out as a fugitive in the trackless desert and Dhruva having withdrawn to the south, Dharmapal quickly proceeded to occupy north India. Although the details of his campaign are not known and there are only stray references in copper plates (e.g. Khalimpur, Bhagalpur, Monghyr) it seems certain that he defeated Indraraja, the ruler of Kanauj, and gave the throne to his own protégé, Chakrayudh. Thereafter, he held an imperial durbar at Kanauj where the vassal chiefs from all over north India were present to acknowledge his supremacy. From the place names found in the Khalimpur copper plate which came under Dharmapal's military occupation, it seems certain that his empire extended from Bengal and Bihar to the north-west, including Punjab and Rajasthan.

According to the Khalimpur copper plate, the durbar at Kanauj was attended by the rulers of Bhoja, Matsya, Madra, Kuru, Yadu, Yavana, Awanti, Gandhara and Kira. These names more or less represent the whole of present-day north India and Pakistan even if we were to discount substantially from them. According to the Monghyr copper plate, Dharmapal offered prayers at Kedar, possibly Kedarnath in the middle Himalayas and Gokarna in the south, and these descriptions clearly indicate that, by and large, his position as sovereign in the

whole of north India was accepted by most of the rulers, although this was a loose arrangement unlike the empire of the Mauryas or the Guptas. It was more like the standard pattern characteristic of the Asian feudalistic system where all these rulers, while maintaining their positions, acknowledged the overall military and political supremacy of the imperial Palas. But history has a tendency to sometimes repeat itself. Thus the Pratihara king, Vatsaraja's son and successor Nagabhatta II, renewed his northern imperial pretensions. He organized a combination of all those rulers who were against Dharmapal, marched to Kanauj and defeated Dharmapal's protégé, Chakrayudha. Inevitably, there was a great battle between Nagabhatta and Dharmapal, possibly fought somewhere near Monghyr. According to Pratihara records, Nagabhatta too defeated Dharmapal, thereby repeating his father's feat. But once again their traditional enemies from the south, the Rashtrakutas, attacked the Pratiharas. The Rashtrakuta king Govinda III decisively defeated the Pratihara army and proceeded up to the Ganga–Jamuna Doab. According to Rashtrakuta sources, Govinda also defeated Dharmapal of Bengal and carried away images of the goddess Tara, but once again Govinda returned to the Deccan and Dharmapal was left free to regain his strength and re-establish his authority.

According to R.C. Majumdar, Dharmapal's empire did not suffer much diminution during the rest of his life and he spent his final days in peace. This is supported by the Monghyr copper plate of Devapal stating that there was no disturbance in the domains when he succeeded his father, Dharmapal. Thus ended Dharmapal's remarkable and long rule during which time he had transformed his small inherited kingdom into a powerful imperial regime. His reign was also a great age of Buddhism. However, though he was a Buddhist king he was not hostile to other religions. In fact, his minister was a Brahman named Garga.

DEVAPAL

Dharmapal was succeeded by his son, Devapal (c. 810–50), under whom the Pala dynasty reached the zenith of its glory. According to the highly exaggerated information given by the Badal inscription left by a family of hereditary ministers who served the Palas, Devapal, assisted by Minister Darbhapani, received tributes from the entire north India, from the Himalayas to the Vindhyas

and from the eastern to the western seas. The same inscription says that Devapal exterminated the Utkalas and the king of Pragjyotisha (Assam) and curbed the rise of the Hunas, Dravidas and Gurjaras. Devapal's own land grant shows that his career of victory took him to Kamboja in the west and Vindhya Mountains in the south. According to the Bhagalpur copper plate, the rulers of both Assam and Utkala accepted Devapal's sovereignty. The reference to the Hunas probably refers to a Huna principality in north-western India. Similarly, the Kamboja principality was also in the north-west of the present-day Punjab. The Gurjaras were undoubtedly the Pratiharas, the traditional enemies of the Palas. Similarly, the reference to the Dravidas presumably implied the Rashtrakutas, another traditional rival of the Palas, though according to R.C. Majumdar, the Dravida king whose pride was curbed by Devapal was presumably the Pandya ruler, Srimara-Sriballabha. Clearly, Devapal became the sovereign ruler of the whole of north India and extensive parts of southern India. That his hold crossed beyond the seas is proved by the famous inscription in Nalanda University according to which King Balaputradeva of the Silendra dynasty ruling in modern Indonesia and Malaysia sent an ambassador to his court seeking the grant of five villages to maintain a monastery built by him at Nalanda. It also shows Devapal as assuming the role of the patron and the guardian of the Nalanda University. The role of Devapal is also supported by the Ghosrava inscription, which records that Veeradeva, a learned Buddhist and a Brahman, was appointed as the head of the Nalanda University by Emperor Devapal.

The formal position of patronship of the Nalanda University, a premier seat of learning in the Buddhist world, must have given considerable international status to the Pala emperors. All Pala copper plates start with an invocation to Lord Buddha. As summed up by R.C. Majumdar: 'For nearly four hundred years their court persevered to be the last stronghold of that dying faith in India. For this reason the Pala kings enjoyed an important position in the international Buddhist world, and they maintained intact the fountainhead of later Buddhism from which streams flowed to Tibet in the north, and the Indian archipelago in the south-east.'

Among the adversaries whom Devapal humbled were Bhoja I, the king of the Gurjaras, the traditional rival of the Palas and of the Pandya ruler Srimara-Sriballabha, who has been referred to in the inscription as the king of Dravidas.

There is enough indirect evidence to suggest a victorious campaign by Devapal in the extremely southern part of south India and other nations. They were staunch Buddhists, but extended patronage to other religions. They also patronized Sanskrit literature, which was the general language of the educated people those days. However, inscriptions of the Palas are not in Devanagari script but a script that is the forerunner of the Bengali script. Sulaiman, an Arabic traveller who visited the Pala kingdom towards the end of Devapal's reign refers several times to the conflict with the Rashtrakutas and the Pratiharas and to the 50,000 elephants that always accompanied the Pala army. The two universities which the Palas patronized, viz., Nalanda and Vikramasila, acquired international recognition. In the contemporary records, there is reference to one Yuvaraj Haravarsha who ruled Bihar and parts of Bengal on behalf of the imperial Palas. Tibetan records of this period referred to the invasion of north India during this period by two successive Tibetan kings. They speak of the Tibetans conquering India as far as Gangasagar, but there is no corroborative evidence, nor any reference to this in the contemporary literature of Bengal. It is, however, possible that Tibetans did come to north India and caused some anxiety to the Palas. The empire steadily declined after the rule of Devapal disintegrated and virtually vanished in about half a century. There are references to shadowy kings like Vigrahapal, Surapal II, Narayanapal, Rajyapal, Gopal II and Vigrahapal II; but none of them had the competence or the pretensions of Dharmapal and Devapal. Taking advantage of their weakness, both their traditional enemies, the Pratiharas from the west and the Rashtrakutas from the south, again made incursions into Bengal. Both Assam and Orissa threw off Pala sovereignty and became independent. After them, the great Chandela king Yasovarman and his son Dhanga invaded Bengal. So also did the newly established Kalachuri dynasty. For some time, in the tenth century, a usurper claiming to belong to one Kamboj family took possession of the truncated Pala kingdom, including the capital, and issued land grants in his own name. Perhaps the empire was also split up into a number of principalities controlled by former feudatories.

MAHIPAL I

This phase of decline was temporarily halted by Mahipal I (988–1038). Mahipal recovered much of his ancestral kingdom, which had disappeared through non-occupation (*anadhikrita-vilupta*). On the basis of a study of the contemporary inscriptions, R.C. Majumdar came to the conclusion that Mahipal reoccupied East Bengal and that he could have done this only after gaining control over either Varendra (north Bengal) or Rar (western Bengal). But Bengal continued to attract invaders from outside. The most important of the invasions was the one by the southern emperor, Rajendra Chola from 1021 to 1023. This invasion is well documented in Chola inscriptions. According to these inscriptions Rajendra Chola's ostensible pretext for invading Bengal was to bring the sacred Ganga water, but in that process he clearly humbled the then rulers of West Bengal and returned home not only with the Ganga water, but with considerable booty. It is not sure whether the ruler in West Bengal whom he humbled was a Pala feudatory, but even if he was defeated he must have recovered his kingdom in a short while. According to K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, the Chola invasion was nothing more than 'a hurried raid across the vast stretch of the country and did not leave any imprint'.[1] The rulers in Rar region who were humbled by the Chola conqueror, viz., Dharmapal, Ranasur and Govindachandra, might have been feudatories under Mahipal. During Mahipal's reign a new invader appeared on the western horizon of the subcontinent, viz., Sultan Mahmood of Ghazni, who carried out many raids over north India. Mahipal did not join the confederacy of north Indian princes on the side of the Shahi dynasty of Udbhandapur against Mahmood, presumably because he did not perceive any direct threat. Mahipal restored the Bodhi temple at Bodhgaya and constructed and renovated some temples at Sarnath. This definitely indicates that his influence extended in the west up to Varanasi. He also repaired and restored the Nalanda University. Local traditions have preserved the name of Mahipal with the construction of a large number of tanks and towns in north Bengal, among them the magnificent buildings at Paharpur in Rajshahi district. Also, his name still figures in popular ballads current in Bengal, even as the names of great emperors like Dharmapal and Devpal have been forgotten in popular memory.

THE KAIBARTA REBELLION

After Mahipal I the process of disintegration of the Pala Empire resumed. His successor Nayapal ruled over a vastly reduced kingdom. Old rivals like Kalachuris took advantage of the weakness to attack the Palas repeatedly. But one highlight of this period was that the famous Buddhist monk Dipankar Srijnana Atisha lived during this troubled time. He hailed from Dhaka and spent many years in Magadha. Interestingly, he intervened in a conflict between Nayapal and the Kalachuri king Karna and tried to bring about peace, and a treaty was concluded between the two hostile kings. Shortly after this, around AD 1040, Dipankar left for Tibet at the age of forty-nine. He spent the last thirteen years of his life in Tibet reforming and reviving Buddhism in that kingdom. It appears that during the shadowy rulers after Nayapal, Banga or eastern Bengal slipped out of the Pala Empire and possibly became an independent kingdom—first under the Chandras and then under the Varmans. Apart from the intermittent military forays by the Kalachuris, there was also an invasion by the king of Orissa named Mahasivagupta Yayati around the middle of the eleventh century and one by Vikramaditya, the Chalukya king from Karnataka (c. 1068). A new power, Varmans, occupied parts of eastern Bengal. According to the copper plate of Ratnapal, Kamrup had also defied Pala sovereignty.

There were several shadowy figures until Mahipala II ascended the throne (c. 1072) and brought about yet another short-lived phase of military glory. Fortunately, we have a fairly detailed contemporary account of Bengal's history during the next half-century (1070–1120) in the form of *Ramcharita*, a Sanskrit poetic work written by Sandhyakar Nandi, the court poet of the next Pala ruler Rampal. It is a unique work, which both describes the life of Rampal and pretends to tell the story of Rama, the hero of the epic *Ramayana*. Although it is a eulogy of Rampal it is of considerable historical value. Mahipal II was an oppressive ruler and threw his brothers Rampal and Surpal into prison, accusing them of plotting to seize the kingdom. The common people were also oppressed under his tyrannical rule.

There was very soon a well-organized rebellion by a confederation of lower castes led by Divya, an official of the Kaibarta (fisherman) caste. Divya defeated and killed Mahipal, and occupied Varendra or north Bengal. There followed about half a century of rule of Varendra region by the Kaibarta chiefs, Divya,

Rudak and Bhim, in succession. Divya's rule over Varendra was stable and in some ways distinguished despite Sandhyakar Nandi's uncomplimentary adjectives about him such as a brigand (*dasyu*), evildoer and a hypocrite. In many respects the Kaibarta rebellion is comparable to the well-known struggle of orders between patricians and plebeians in early Roman history. From *Ramcharita* and other scattered documentary references, what can be concluded with reasonable accuracy is that around the time Mahipal II was defeated by the confederation of lower castes, his two brothers Surpal and Rampal fled from prison with the help of their friends and proceeded to the eastern part of Bengal where they ruled one after another.

All this time the major part of the Pala kingdom, including Varendra's capital city, was under the occupation of Divya and his two successors. A running battle must have gone on during the time between the Kaibartas and the two Pala princes. Eventually Rampal, who succeeded Surpal, could organize a confederacy of powerful chiefs by lavish offer of land and wealth and led the confederate army against the usurpers. The most important of Rampal's allies was his maternal uncle, the Rashtrakuta chief, Mahana. Initially a reconnaissance force, led by Mahana's son Shivaraja, crossed the Padma and established a foothold in Varendra. Thereafter the main force crossed the river by means of a flotilla of boats to the northern bank. The great battle that took place is described in nine verses of the *Ramcharita*. Both Bhim and Rampal personally fought in this battle. The *Ramcharita* showers praise on Bhim's bravery. But by a cruel turn of destiny, Bhim was captured. This settled the fate of the battle, as Bhim's soldiers, when they did not see their leader, fled despite a determined rearguard action by Bhim's general, Hari. Eventually, Hari was also won over, and this led to Rampal's overwhelming victory. Bhim was killed in public by means of a shower of arrows as if to make an example of the retribution that can befall lower-caste people if they defy the upper castes.

Rampal must have been quite advanced in age when he reoccupied his dearly beloved land of Varendra. He devoted himself to the task of restoration of peace and order. His great achievements were reducing taxes, promoting agriculture, constructing great works of public utility and reintroducing regular administration. He established his capital at Ramavati, which could either have been a new city or a new name given to the old capital city. According to

Ramcharita, this was a beautiful and splendid capital of the Palas till their end. Rampal gave the day-to-day charge of the government to his son. He also expanded his possessions by conquering Kamrup, Rar and Kalinga. *Ramcharita* states that Rampal ruled up to Kalinga by destroying the *nishachar*s, or noctural operators, which could have meant bandits. It also describes him as defending Varendra from attacks made by soldiers of what is now known as Karnataka. This perhaps refers to an early unsuccessful attempt made by the Chalukyas of Karnataka to conquer Bengal. This could have also been the beginning of the process which eventually led to the replacement of the Pala dynasty by the Sen dynasty of Karnataka origin. There is also some documentary evidence that Rampal came into conflict with Gahadwal dynasty of Kanauj.

According to *Ramcharita,* Rampal was struck with overwhelming sorrow when he heard of the death of his maternal uncle Mahana and ended his own life by throwing himself in the Ganga at Monghyr. Thus ended the great career of the hero of Sandhyakar Nandi's modern 'Ramayana'. It was a life of great achievement and also great reverses. The reverses in fortunes in the earlier part of his life were followed by remarkable recovery in the later part, leading to the reunification of nearly all the parts of Bengal—though for a brief period—and also several conquests outside.

THE FALL OF PALA EMPIRE

The reign of Rampal was the last great episode in the history of the Palas, almost the last flickering of the lamp before it finally got extinguished. *Ramcharita* describes the exploits of Rampal's son Gopal III and then of Madanpal. The period of these rulers, AD 1130–61, saw the extinction of the Pala kingdom through invasions from outside and revolts from within. Kamrup and south Bengal came to be ruled by new rulers and an independent dynasty, Barman, is seen ruling East Bengal from Bikrampur. Taking advantage of the kingdom's weakness, the Eastern Ganges from Orissa, the Chalukyas from the south and Gahadwals from the west pushed their conquests into Bengal, of which there are enough inscriptional evidences. There is also evidence to indicate that a new power, namely, the Sens, were in the process of establishing their possession in south Bengal by taking advantage of the chronic rivalry between the Palas and Eastern Ganges. In Deopara inscriptions, Vijayasen, founder of Sen dynasty,

claims that he drove away the lord of Gaur, possibly Madanpal, at about the same time. According to an inscription, Madanpal was still exercising his authority over north Bengal during the eighth year of his reign and over Monghyr district in Bihar in the fourteenth. But after him there is no trace of any other king of the imperial Pala dynasty. There are stray references to local chieftains, e.g. Govindapal in Gaya region in Bihar, a contemporary of Madanpal, but there is no evidence of any ruler claiming to belong to the imperial Palas. It may, therefore, be safe to assume that the Pala Empire evaporated around AD 1160 leaving the stage for the Sen dynasty.[2]

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The Sen Dynasty

The Sen dynasty, as clearly explained in the Deopara inscriptions and supported by other relevant archaeological evidence, came from the south. Two of its early chieftains, viz., Samanta Sen and his successor Hemanta Sen, described themselves as Kshatriyas from Karnataka. Either they came as mercenaries under the Palas and then established themselves as local chieftains in western Bengal, or they might have been part of the army of an invader from the south who stayed on. Vijayasen (c. 1095–1158) was a contemporary of Rampal and established his hold in Radha (Rar) area, i.e., West Bengal. His marriage with a princess of the Sura family must have enhanced his power to a large extent, as borne out by the combined evidence of the Deopara inscription 'Prasasti', composed by his court poet Umapatidhar, and the Barrackpore copper plate which describes him as Maharajadhiraja. It seems certain that he defeated a number of chieftains like Nanya, Veera, Raghav, Vardhan and, eventually, the sovereigns of Gaur, Kamrup and Kalinga. Nanya was the Karnataka chieftain who conquered Mithila around AD 1097 and thereafter submitted to Vijayasen.

The lord of Gaur, who according to the Deopara inscription fled before Vijaya, was probably Madanpal I, the last ruler of the Pala dynasty—by that time confined only to parts of north Bengal. Vijayasen could not complete the process of conquest of Gaur and left it to his son and successor Ballalsen to complete this task and assume the title Gaureshwara. But there is evidence that some pretenders to the Pala throne continued to linger on in south Bihar. That Vijayasen eventually established his rule in East Bengal is proved by the fact

that some of his land grants were issued from Bikrampur, the capital city of Banga, and it was here that the queen of Vijayasen performed a sacrifice called *tulapurusha mahadana*. The Deopara inscription also speaks of Vijayasen's military success against the king of Kamrup, although it does not necessarily show that he conquered Kamrup. Probably he repulsed an invasion of Bengal by the Kamrup king. The inscription also claims Vijayasen's conquest of Kalinga, although some historians have doubted this. The Deopara inscription also speaks of the advance of Vijayasen's fleet to the west along the Ganga, although this could not have been a campaign of much consequence. Vijayasen's long rule of nearly sixty years restored peace and prosperity to Bengal and made a deep impression among its people. The tributes paid to him in the beautiful poem of Umapatidhar in Deopara stone slab and the reference to him in poet Sriharsha's *Vijay Prasasti* (Eulogy of Vijay) no doubt reflected the common people's feelings in relation to him.

His son and successor, Ballalsen, the best known Sen ruler (AD 1158–79) consolidated his kingdom. He might have completed the conquest of north Bengal and also conquered Magadha and Mithila. According to a tradition of Bengal, Ballalsen's kingdom consisted of five provinces, viz. Banga, Varendra, Rar, Bagri (possibly a portion of lower Bengal) and Mithila. But neither the two inscriptions that survive from this region, nor the two great literary works, which were attributed to him, viz., *Dan Sagar* and *Adbhut Sagar*, allude to his military victories. On the other hand, these refer to his scholastic activities and social reforms. Ballalsen is associated with the revival of orthodox Hindu practices in Bengal, in particular with the establishment of the reactionary and pernicious tradition of Kulinism, but there is no historical authenticity regarding this. He married Ramadevi, a Chalukya princess. This also indicates that the Sens maintained close social contact with south India.

Ballalsen must have maintained the kingdom inherited from his father, which included present-day Bangladesh, the whole of West Bengal and Mithila, i.e., portions of north Bihar. According to a cryptic passage in *Adbhut Sagar*, Ballalsen, along with his queen, retired in his old age to the confluence of the Ganga and the Jamuna leaving his son, Lakshmansen, with the task of both maintaining his kingdom and completing his literary work. The book certainly remained incomplete, but there is no historical evidence that Ballalsen abdicated

in favour of his son Lakshmansen. It is reasonably certain, however, that his rule ended around AD 1170. Whether he died at that time or abdicated and spent his last days in retirement is not known.

There is considerable weight of historical evidence to suggest that during the rule of the Sen dynasty there was a relapse into Brahmanical orthodoxy. According to Nihar Ranjan Ray, north Indian Aryan Brahmanism, which for centuries had not found an easy entry into Bengal, now got an 'open door' during the Sen dynasty.[1] The Sen dynasty came from outside Bengal and in a short time was able to establish its power with assistance from the Brahmans. Under the social system created by Ballalsen, the Brahmans became all in all in the land—arbiters of both life and the life after death. The system openly discriminated against all non-Brahmans in general and the lower castes in particular, condemning them to live as second-class citizens. The 'Kulin' system was created as a highly privileged category even among upper-caste Hindus. Due to a marriage alliance with the Sen dynasty, the authority of the kings and the Brahmans was strengthened in Bengal. It was from the Sen period that greater Bengal became a narrower Bengal. Exchanges with the outside world stopped. Travelling across the seas was forbidden, and Bengal was turned into a frog in the well. Intensive quarrels, fear of going out of the frontiers of Bengal and the strong desire to enjoy the comforts of a stay-at-home life, forgetting the world outside, were the reasons for the national degeneration. 'Who could have foreseen that the gentle breeze of enjoyment at home for the sake of which we had become inert would eventually turn into a tornado making us in our own land beggars and dependent on others.'[2]

Lakshmansen (AD 1178–1207), son of Ballalsen and Ramadevi, must have been fairly old, about sixty years, when he succeeded his father. Seven copper-plate inscriptions have been found in different parts of Bengal, five of them issued early in his reign from Bikrampur. This shows that Bikrampur was the centre of his empire in his early days. These inscriptions show him as a great military leader as also a patron of learning. On his accession he assumed the title of 'Ariraja-Madana-Sankara'. Along with the traditional title of Gaureshwara, he also assumed the title Paramvaishnava in place of the earlier epithet of Parameshwara used by both Vijayasen and Ballalsen. This indicates that Lakshmansen was a devout Vaishnava, unlike his father and grandfather, who

were proclaimed Shaivas. This is also supported by the fact that all the official proclamations from then on started with an invocation to Narayana. Lakshmansen's court was adorned with Jaidev (the famous poet of Bengal), Dhoyi and Umapatidhar, among other distinguished poets. His prime minister, Halayudha, was himself a great poet. The king himself was a man of letters and completed the work *Adbhut Sagar* begun by his father according to tradition.

Thus the military glory of the Sen dynasty reached its climax under Lakshmansen, in a way the last flicker before its inglorious end. According to his own copper plates, he achieved victories over the neighbouring kings in all directions. In particular, his victories over the kings of Gaur, Kamrup, Kalinga and Kashi are mentioned. He is reported to have erected pillars commemorating his military activities at Puri, Benares and Allahabad. It is also quite certain that he liquidated the army of the Pala ruler in the west and carried on his campaign successfully against the Gahadwals who had established themselves in Magadha. He was the first Bengal ruler to extend his suzerainty beyond Benares. Some inscriptions found in Gaya shortly after his reign attest to his rule in Gaya region. But his rule also marked the beginning of the end of the Sen era.

Contemporary sources provide enough evidence to indicate that the disintegration of the Sen kingdom began in the latter part of Lakshmansen's reign, both through centrifugal forces within and through the invasion by Central Asian invaders of Turkish origin and of Islamic faith. There is inscriptional evidence of an independent kingdom being established in the western Sunderbans in south Bengal by one Damanpal around AD 1196. Both Orissa and Kamrup perhaps also threw away the Sen suzerainty. Another challenge came from the rise of the kingdom of Pattikera in Tippera region under Ranabankamalla Harikaladeva who ascended the throne around 1201–03 and ruled till at least 1217. This is known from an inscription discovered at Mainamati Hills near Comilla. It also appears that another powerful kingdom under the Deva family rose in the territory beyond the Meghna River.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE PALA–SEN ERA

The archaeology of the Pala–Sen period in Bengal has been of great interest to archaeologists and historians since the 1830s. The process of deciphering the inscriptions began with Wilkins who first read inscriptions from Bengal and

Bihar belonging to the Pala period. The study of inscriptions went hand in hand with the study of coins and the study of Buddhist literary sources for the dynastic history of the Buddhist period within its chronology. The archaeologists studying the early medieval period of Bengal's history have also highlighted the transition from the Buddhist motifs in the Pala period to orthodox Hindu motifs during the rule of the Sens. Simultaneously, there has been a return of classical Sanskrit in contrast to Pali–Prakrit during the Pala dynasty. The most important aspects of material culture were sculptural pieces, which were found in large number in the region. Sculptures were analysed in modern times by Broadley, Beglar, Kittoe and Cunningham in the course of their surveys but the first real discussion of Pala–Sen sculptures was found in the catalogues by John Anderson and by T. Bloch.[3]

Certain works attempt to deal with these sculptures as a continuous development and relate them to the reigns of the Pala–Sen kings. Sculptures form the most major evidence of Pala–Sen or 'early medieval' material culture today. Other aspects of material culture were also looked into as part of region-wise surveys carried out by British officers. Buddhism's major value for British scholars of the nineteenth century was an an antithesis to the 'degenerate' Brahmanical religion they had come across in both India's past and present. Cunningham brought home the 'greater' benefits involved in his project of searching out the Buddhist ruins of India.

The first person to deal in-depth with material remains was Francis Buchanan. He described the Paharpur remains as that of a temple and 'its great steepness and height induce me to suppose that it had been solid, like many of the temples of Buddha in Ava and Nepal'. He also visited Mahasthangarh and surmised that these were Buddhist remains.[4] Westmacott explored parts of south-eastern Dinajpur and the neighbouring parts of Bogra and found remains of Buddhism and the Buddhist Pala kings. He described Paharpur as a tall brick mound, which was once a Buddhist stupa. Beveridge travelling in Bogra found nothing Buddhist in Mahasthan. Cunningham, tracing the routes of Hiuen-Tsang, undertook tours of north Bengal in order to look for the site of the ancient capital called Pundravardhana. He identified it as Mahasthan on the basis of the distance and bearing from the neighbourhood of Rajmahal and partly on the basis of the immediate vicinity of Bhasu Bihara which corresponds exactly with Hiuen-

Tsang's account of the Buddhist monastery of Po-shi-po, west of the capital. He was fortunate enough to discover the ancient site of Mahasthan on the Karatoya River.

Considerable work was carried out by the Varendra Research Society in order to bring to light the rich heritage of Varendra. Paharpur was excavated by the society along with the University of Calcutta. The monuments, writes A.K. Maitra, belong to two principal classes—*architectural* and *iconographic*—both of which fall under the general head: devotional. 'In an age in which freedom of faith and observance used to be kept under cruel control, religious toleration appears to have been a noteworthy characteristic of this land.'[5] Maitra's efforts in reconstructing to some extent the material culture of the people of Varendra was followed by Nihar Ranjan Ray's monumental work, *Bangalir Itihas* (History of the Bengalee People), where there was an effort to 'excite a degree of hope in their lives. It can offer some direction for the future, if it can arouse love and reverence for the land and its people'.[6]

S.K. Saraswati and H.E. Stapleton toured the areas in Malda and Dinajpur districts and discovered many 'sites' and sculptured pieces of the 'early medieval' period. Stapleton writes that the main objects of the tour were to make inquiries about Ekadala and the battle between Sikandar Shah and his son amongst other aspects. The emphasis was on remains of the sultanate and subsequent dynasties. Saraswati on the other hand was more interested to show the Hindu antecedents of Muslim monuments. He remarked how an examination of the stones used in the construction of the Adina mosque shows that most of them came from temples. 'A study of every Muslim settlement of some antiquity reveals the story how they all sprang up on earlier sites. The ancient town of Devikot was levelled to the ground in the early days of the Muslim rule. Such was also the story of Gaur, of Mahasthan and practically of every Muhammadan establishment, which we so frequently find perched on ancient mounds.'[7]

Of special significance is B. Morrison's work on settlements in Mainamati near Comilla in Bangladesh. It concentrates on a holistic approach to a site in general. The excavations of Jagjivanpur and several other cities in Habibpur in Malda district in West Bengal are also of significance. The site of Jagjivanpur is a single-culture site dating from the ninth century AD belonging to the early

medieval period where excavations have been undertaken. All this archaeological evidence points to a rich ancient archaeological heritage from the Stone Age to recorded history.

TURKISH INVASION

The biggest challenge to the Sen rule came from an invasion by Muhammad Bakhtiar Khilji, a Turkish adventurer in AD 1202. His invasion is described in *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* written by Minhaj-i-Siraj. Before we come to this event, a little digression is necessary. After the rise of Islam in Arabia in the seventh century AD there was a prolonged occupation of Sind by the Arabs under the Abbasid Caliphate for several centuries from the eighth century onwards. But this was more an episode in this subcontinent's history than a development that had a continuity in the mainstream. It was not the Abbasid Caliphate, but the Turkish dynasties of trans-Oxian Central Asia, that were destined to bring the standard of Islam to the heartland of the Indian subcontinent. One of these dynasties was the Yemeni dynasty, which arose in Ghazni in the tenth century. Under its two rulers, Subuktgin and Mahmud, it carried on a relentless war against the Shahi kingdom of Udbhandpur (Und), which ruled over western Punjab and the north-western frontier up to the Hindu Kush mountains. The Ghaznavid campaign against the Shahi rulers Jaipal and Anandapal was inspired by both a fiery zeal to spread Islam and a strong temptation to plunder the untold wealth of Hindustan. Sultan Mahmud (AD 998–1030) led a large number of expeditions, at least seventeen, to north India, including places as far as Kashmir, Kangra, Mathura, Kanauj and Somnath, destroyed the power of the Hindu rulers of these regions over time and carried away immense riches to his native Ghazni. The Ghaznavid invasion and occupation of Punjab and Afghanistan was followed a century later by another invasion, once more by a Turkish power, the Ghurids from Ghur in Afghanistan. The Ghurid general Shihabuddin Mohammad invaded India several times. He had an unsuccessful encounter with Prithviraj, the Chauhan ruler of Delhi, around AD 1190–91. He was, in fact, defeated and captured by Prithviraj, but released and allowed to return to his homeland. In 1192 Mohammad returned to India and defeated and killed Prithviraj Chauhan at the well-known battle of Tarain. This led to the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate a few years later under Mohammad Ghauri's general, Qutbud-din Aibak (AD 1206). It was

Muhammad Bakhtiar Khilji, one of Aibak's associates and a reckless adventurer, who was responsible for bringing Islam and Turkish rule to Bengal.

Muhammad Bakhtiar Khilji, traditionally held as conqueror of Bengal but described by contemporary sources as conqueror of the kingdom of Lakhnaoti, belonged to a Turkman tribe called Khilji, which migrated from the Oxus region to Afghanistan in the twelfth century. He, like many other adventurers, moved eastward to the fabled Hindustan in quest of fortune. All of them aspired towards carving out kingdoms in Hindustan, taking advantage of the political disunity and vulnerability of the numerous Hindu princes in the face of better horsemanship, better training in swords and guns and better speed and military techniques of the Central Asian tribes. The invaders were strongly motivated by the Islamic fervour to spread the new religion. Indeed, Bengal, along with the whole of north India, had become, in the twelfth century, a playground for the Turkish–Afghan adventurers. Bakhtiar, who was physically deformed, first came to Ghazni around AD 1195, moved to Delhi shortly thereafter, seeking fortune unsuccessfully everywhere. He moved further east and landed on a soldier's job under Hassan Adib of Badayun in AD 1198 and thereafter took charge of a small *jagir* in Mirzapur district under the governor of Oudh (Ayodhya). Soon he gathered around himself a sizeable body of Khilji and Turkish adventurers, wandering around north India in search of wealth and fortune, and began regular forays into the open country to the east of Karamnasha River, not defended by the army of any large kingdom. The object was to seize as much booty as possible at a minimum of risk and bloodshed. After one or two years of plundering, he was involved in the melodramatic incident of capturing the so-called fortress of Bihar (which was in reality a Buddhist monastery, possibly the famous monastery of Odantapura). It was only after storming the massive structure of the vihara and killing the 'shaven soldiers' that the invaders discovered that they were not soldiers but monks living in a monastery. It is to this fortuitous event that the Indian state of Bihar (Vihara) owes its name, as the Turkish conquerors started referring to this whole country as Bihar. After occupation of Bihar and consolidation for a year through establishing thanas or military camps, Bakhtiar's attention inevitably turned to fabled Bengal. Meanwhile, he also visited Aibak, the sultan of Delhi, and paid homage.

It was in the year 1201 that Bakhtiar made his famous and well-described raid into the heart of Bengal, then ruled by the aged Lakshmansen. He led a cavalry not through the usual route of Rajmahal, but through the hills and jungles of Jharkhand and made a sudden appearance before Nadia or Nabadwip where Lakshmansen was camping at that time. Presumably, this was already a well-known place of pilgrimage where orthodox people used to go for bathing in the sacred Ganga. According to Minhaj's *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, many of the residents of Nadia panicked at the news of the sudden appearance of Bakhtiar's horsemen and left the city. The vanguard of eighteen horsemen entered into the town without any resistance. Perhaps some of the local people even mistook them as horse dealers from Central Asia. They suddenly attacked the rulers and residents, causing panic and all-round confusion. Lakshmansen was taking his midday lunch when 'a loud cry rose from the gate of the palace and from the interior of the town'. This shows that the main body of the Turkish troops had followed the reconnaissance party into the town almost immediately. The aged Lakshmansen, taken by surprise, fled the palace by boat together with his retinue, leaving the town in the possession of the daredevil invaders. He withdrew to riverine East Bengal which was beyond the reach of the Turks. Thus Bakhtiar's men had a walkover as far as Nabadwip was concerned. This is the famous event described traditionally as Bakhtiar's conquest of Bengal with only eighteen horsemen. The process of actual conquest of Bengal took many more years. For the present, Bakhtiar had only occupied a holy place on the river Bhagirathi where religious-minded people often stayed in order to have regular dips in the holy river. Nabadwip was not the capital of Bengal, nor close to the capital Gaur, also called Lakhnaoti; but Bakhtiar must have followed up the conquest of Nadia by occupying the central part of Bengal around Lakhnaoti.

Lakshmansen continued to rule in East Bengal for several years after AD 1201. Several land grants issued by him from East Bengal (e.g. Bhawal Pargana grant, AD 1205) clearly attest to this. There is also a laudatory reference to Lakshmansen's victory against the *mlechchha* king and also to the victory of his sons over Yavanas. Even the author of *Tabaqat* uses a very complimentary term in relation to him and describes him as the great Rai of Bengal comparable to Sultan Qutb-ud-din of Delhi. Lakshmansen died around AD 1206. His two sons, Bishwarup Sen and Keshav Sen, ruled in succession in East Bengal with the

usual imperial titles. Thereafter, there is no reference to them, although, in general, eastern Bengal stayed outside Delhi's rule for nearly half a century, even up to the time of Balban. According to Minhaj, Ghiyas-ud-din Iwaz, the sultan of Lakhnaoti, made an abortive attempt in 1226 to conquer Banga. Perhaps this invasion was foiled by Bishwarup Sen. Keshav Sen also claimed victory in his inscription, over invaders from the west, possibly Malik Saifuddin (AD 1231–33) of Gaur, who sent an expedition to Banga which brought some elephants, according to Minhaj. Minhaj also informs us that the Sens occupied the throne of Banga up to AD 1245.

It was the rise of the Pattikera kingdom and the Deva family, beyond the Meghna River, which perhaps brought about the final end of the Sen dynasty around AD 1250. The memories of the mysterious Pattikera kingdom are generally lost except in the ruins of its capital city at Mainamati Hills near Comilla. The Burmese chronicles from the time of King Anarotha of Burma (AD 1044–77) speak of the close and friendly relations between Burma and her western neighbour, Pattikera; there is a reference to the city of Pattikera in a Nepalese manuscript of AD 1015, and the name of a *pargana* called Pattikera near Mainamati Hills. We know the name of only one king of this dynasty from an inscription in Mainamati Hills. He must have ruled between AD 1202 and 1219.

The Deva dynasty that followed, and possibly gave the final coup de grâce to the Sen dynasty, consisted of Purushottam, who rose from the position of a village headman (*gramani*) and his son, Madhusudan, who took the title of king (*nripati*). They were followed by Vasudev and Damodar, who might have destroyed the Pattikera rule, and Danuja Madhav Dasaratha Deva, who claimed to have wrested Gaur through the grace of god Narayana and who issued an inscription from Bikrampur. Danuja Madhav entered into a treaty with Balban, the sultan of Delhi, in AD 1293, on equal terms. The meeting between Balban and Danuj Rai at Sonargaon is vividly described in *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi.*

EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL

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Turkish Invasion

The Kingdom of Gaur under Early Turkish Rulers

After his daring conquest of Nadia, Bakhtiar Khilji had a very short life. He occupied Gaur or Lakhnaoti, the western capital of the Sen dynasty. He spent the next two years consolidating his new kingdom and divided it into several administrative units, each in charge of a Turk or Khilji commander. He built many mosques and madrasas and converted many Hindus to Islam. But he suddenly developed a quixotic vision of conquering distant and mysterious Tibet. He marched along the Brahmaputra River guided by one Ali, a Mech tribal leader, who had presumably been converted to Islam. He marched up to the sub-Himalayan hills where there was a stone bridge with twelve arches across the river, perhaps the present Teesta River. He also got in touch with the king of Kamrup (Assam), requesting him to join in a combined invasion of Tibet. Kamrup king asked him to wait till the next year when he could also join this campaign. But Bakhtiar Khilji was impatient. He crossed the bridge and started a march along the Teesta Valley to Sikkim.

After marching for fifteen days Bakhtiar reached Tibet, possibly the Chumbi Valley. He started looting Tibetan villages. There was an uprising among the Tibetans who inflicted heavy casualties on Bakhtiar's forces. Bakhtiar then decided to withdraw to Bengal but all along the escape route, the hilly forces carried on a relentless guerrilla-style attack on the Turkish army. The raids turned into a rout and Bakhtiar's soldiers were forced to kill their own horses for food. After reaching the stone bridge at the foothills, he found that the Kamrup forces had destroyed a number of arches in the bridge. It was difficult to cross

the river and Bakhtiar took shelter in a nearby temple where they were surrounded by the Assamese. Bakhtiar then made a desperate bid to cross the bridge with his men and horses at a point where the river, from the looks of it was shallow but was actually very deep. The Turkish army lost many men and also their horses. With only about a hundred men left, Bakhtiar reached the other side of the river where his old friend Ali met him and guided him back to Devkot. By now Bakhtiar's authority was challenged by many of his followers and in a few days he was assassinated. Ali Mardan's 'merciful knife' ended a short but eventful life.

After Bakhtiar, there followed several successive shadowy chieftains, all of them his associates, in charge of the kingdom of Lakhnaoti: Malik Izad-ud-din Muhammad Shiran Khilji (AD 1207–08), Ali Mardan (AD 1210–13) and Ghiyas-ud-din Iwaz Khilji (AD 1213–27). There was at first a struggle for succession between the first two, the latter receiving sanction from the Delhi sultan, Qutb-ud-din Aibak, and eventually seizing the kingdom. Ali Mardan remained faithful to Aibak, but declared independence after Aibak's death. His oppressive rule antagonized a large section of the people and he was eventually murdered by the Khilji amirs who elected Iwaz as sultan. Iwaz assumed the name of Ghiyas-ud-din and shifted the capital back to Lakhnaoti from Devkot, which during the preceding years had become the main centre of authority. During his fifteen-year rule Ghiyas-ud-din beat back all invasions from Orissa, constructed many mosques all over the kingdom and built a road from Devkot to Rajnagar in Birbhum district whose traces survived till recently. He also secured a formal recognition from the caliph of Baghdad and unsuccessfully challenged the claim of sovereignty of Sultan Iltutmish of Delhi. There was a prolonged conflict (AD 1225–27) between Delhi and Bengal in the course of which naval battles took place on the Ganga. There was a temporary truce when Lakhnaoti accepted Delhi's suzerainty only to repudiate it in a short time. Eventually, Ghiyas-ud-din was captured and killed by Delhi forces in AD 1227.

Then followed half a century of direct rule from the Delhi Sultanate (AD 1227–83) by the Delhi governors. There were altogether fourteen governors, starting with Nasir-ud-din Mahmud whom Sultan Iltutmish appointed as governor of Lakhnaoti. The two most important were Tughral Tughan Khan (AD 1236–46) and Ikhtiyar-ud-din Yuzabak Tughral Khan (AD 1251–57).[1] During

Tughan Khan's rule, Narsimha Dev, the Ganga king of Orissa invaded Lakhnaoti twice, inflicting military reverses on Tughan. During the second invasion, the governor of Oudh, Taznar Khan, came to the assistance of Tughan at the behest of the Delhi sultan. The king of Orissa lifted the siege of Lakhnaoti, presumably because he felt outnumbered, and returned home. A curious episode of a quarrel took place between Tughan and Taznar after which the Delhi sultan interchanged the two governors—Taznar staying as governor of Lakhnaoti and Tughan moving as governor of Oudh. An interesting sidelight of Tughan's rule was that Minhaj-i-Siraj, the author of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* came to Bengal, stayed in Tughan's court for three to four years and played an important role as Tughan's emissary in many political and military events. His history book is a remarkable record of what he saw and heard about Bengal, including the immediate history of this land.

Yuzabak also faced three military encounters with Orissa, the first two successful from his point of view but the last one ending in a military disaster. He retrieved the situation somewhat by occupying the kingdom of Mandaran (Hooghly district), a feudatory of Orissa, and thereafter Nadia and large part of West Bengal that had apparently passed out of Lakhnaoti's rule. This emboldened him to attack Oudh and proclaim himself as a sovereign with the title Sultan Mughis-ud-din in defiance of Delhi. He issued coins in his name to mark this occasion (AD 1255), but very soon he was compelled to withdraw from Oudh. His end was disastrous. He led a successful campaign into Kamrup, occupying the capital Gauhati. But the Kamrup king followed a scorched-earth policy, removing food grains from the countryside and thereafter flooding the whole country by cutting the river dykes and blocking all sources of supply of food grains. The Bengal army decided to withdraw to Bengal through the mountainous route, either the Khasi and Jaintia Hills or the Dooars, but was overpowered by the Assamese. Yuzabak was captured and died in captivity. After him, Lakhnaoti reverted to Delhi sovereignty and coins once again bore the name of the Delhi sultan. There were several obscure figures in charge of Lakhnaoti until Sultan Balban of Delhi appointed Amir Khan and Tughral Khan as governor and deputy governor respectively (AD 1271).

The former was only a titular ruler and the real power revolved around Tughral. Tughral turned to what had by then become the tradition of Bengal

governors turning rebellious, taking advantage of Bengal's remoteness, its huge rivers, the forbidding monsoon months and the facility with which Bengal forces resorted to naval action with which the Turks from upper India were not familiar. The Delhi sultan's continued preoccupation with the Mongol invaders from the northwest also encouraged him. Tughral earned popularity in Bengal and secured resources by raiding neighbouring kingdoms. Presumably he was the 'Turkish King of Gaur' who, according to the *Rajmala*, the chronicle of the kingdom of Tripura, intervened in the fight between the two brothers Raja-Fa and Ratna-Fa, drove away the former and gave the latter the title of 'Manikya' or jewel, receiving in his turn a lot of jewels from the Tripura king. He also invaded Rar (West Bengal) and Orissa and got huge booty. By AD 1280 he felt bold enough, according to Barani (*Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*), to withhold the Delhi sovereign's share of the booty captured in his latest raid and to declare himself sovereign ruler with the title Sultan Mughis-ud-din. He easily defeated the forces sent by Balban under the leadership of Amir Khan. Hindu soldiers also fought on his side in large number. Two other expeditions from Delhi also suffered reverses in encounters with Tughral.

But these reverses, instead of demoralizing the octogenarian Balban, only strengthened his resolve to redouble his efforts and crush Tughral's rebellion. He himself led an invasion, occupied Lakhnaoti and pushed Tughral up to eastern Bengal. He entered into a formal treaty with King Danuja Madhav of Sonargaon who agreed to block Tughral's passage to Orissa through the waterways of his kingdom. Barani's description of the waterways would seem to indicate that Danuja not only ruled East Bengal, but also central Bengal through which alone there could be waterways leading from Sonargaon to Orissa. The interesting thing to note is that this treaty had all the formality of a treaty between two sovereign equals. Sultan Balban even agreed to King Danuja's request to stand up and receive him on his arrival for signing the treaty. After thus closing all Tughral's riverine escape routes, Balban sent a number of search parties in all directions. One such contingent traced Tughral, overpowered his forces and beheaded him. Balban returned to Lakhnaoti and ordered to kill all those who had supported Tughral by mass execution along the main bazaar. He appointed his second son Boghra Khan as governor of the province and returned to Delhi only to suffer a personal tragedy, viz., the killing of his eldest son Muhammad in

an encounter with the Mongols in AD 1286. He died broken-hearted in AD 1287. He summoned Boghra Khan to his deathbed and requested him to assume royal responsibility. But an unusual event took place, unique in all history. Boghra, enamoured of the life in Bengal, refused to be the king of Delhi and preferred to remain the governor of the province.

Balban named Kaikhusrav, son of Muhammad, as the next king. Very soon Kaikhusrav was removed by court intrigues and Boghra's own son Kaikobad became king. Kaikobad, like his father, surrendered himself to a life of luxury. These reports reached Boghra, who had by then proclaimed himself independent with the title Sultan Nasir-ud-din. 'The family shirker at last rose to a sense of paternal responsibility,' to quote Barani, and decided to march to Delhi with his forces to discipline his son. For a time it almost looked as if the two armies were on a collision course. Eventually, a meeting was arranged on the borders of Oudh at the bank of the Gogra River, vividly described by Amir Khusro, the poet. As the sultan of Bengal, after crossing the river, entered the court making submissions to the Delhi sultan who was seated on the throne, the young sultan was overcome with emotion, came down from his throne and rushed to his father. Father and son embraced each other with the whole crowd rejoicing at this reconciliation. They spent three days together and Boghra Khan left for Bengal, giving his son as much advice as he was capable of. But nothing much came out of this meeting.

Kaikobad's rule ended in 1289 and his three-year-old son Kaimurs became the new king, virtually a puppet in the hands of the Turkish nobles of the Delhi court. Then followed the occupation of the throne by the non-Turkish nobles led by Jalal-ud-din Khilji. Boghra still ruled for a while in Bengal with the title Sultan Nasir-ud-din, but with the end of the Balban dynasty in Delhi, he was a broken-hearted man and, in AD 1291, he abdicated in favour of his second son Rukhn-ud-din Kaikavas. Kaikavas, according to coins struck in his name, ruled Bengal from AD 1291 to 1301. During his reign, one Zafar Khan, calling himself in stone inscriptions an 'officer of Sultan Kaikavas', conquered Tribeni in Hooghly district of West Bengal.[2]

For several years the spotlight shifts from the royal court of Lakhnaoti to Zafar Khan, described in a stone inscription as 'raja and friend of the emperors'. He conquered not only Tribeni, but the famed Satgaon, the western capital of

Bengal. His tomb still exists in Tribeni. At some point of time there was a change on the throne of Lakhnaoti, Rukhn-ud-din Kaikavas being replaced by one Shams-ud-din Firuz Shah (1301–22), about whom little is known. He might have been a governor of Bihar who seized the throne of Lakhnaoti after Kaikavas's death and ruled over a vast kingdom that included Satgaon, Sonargaon and Mymensingh. Sylhet was also conquered during his reign by an army led by Sikandar Khan accompanied by the legendary faqir, Shah Jalal, who some have (perhaps wrongly) identified as the well-known dervish Sheikh Jalalud-din Tabrizi (1297–1347).[3] According to local legend, Shah Jalal attacked and defeated King Govindadev of Sylhet on account of his oppression of the Muslim subjects and his objection to cow slaughter. Shams-ud-din Firuz also appears to have occupied Kamrup. Although Sonargaon was his main capital, the coins of the Bengal sultans from mid-fourteenth century refer to Pandua (named Firuzabad) in Malda district as the capital.

On Firuz's death there were battles for succession between his two sons, Bughra Shah and Bahadur Shah, and afterwards between the latter, now named Ghiyas-ud-din, and another brother Nasir-ud-din. Inevitably, it was tempting for the sultan of Delhi, Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq, to intervene on the side of Nasir-ud-din. He defeated and captured his rebellious chieftains, occupied Lakhnaoti and appointed Nasir-ud-din governor of Bengal. Curiously, his own foster-son, Tatar Khan, was appointed governor of Satgaon and Sonargaon. After Ghiyas-ud-din's death in an accident in AD 1325, and his succession by Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, Bengal came to be formally split up into the three provinces of Satgaon, Sonargaon and Lakhnaoti, corresponding roughly to West Bengal, East Bengal and north Bengal. For ten years, three separate governors ruled the three provinces under Muhammad Tughlaq. In 1338 Bahram Khan, governor of Sonargaon, was killed and his armour-bearer Fakhr-ud-din seized Sonargaon and declared independence with the title Fakhr-ud-din Mubarak Shah. Bengal reverted to the tradition of an independent sultanate under the new Ilyas Shahi dynasty.

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Appearance of Europeans

A new element made its entry into Bengal's history during the sixteenth century. From the fifteenth century onwards, European mariners had been trying to discover a direct sea route to India to reduce their dependence on the Arabs and Turks in trading with the fabled East. In that process Columbus stumbled on to America in 1492 and Vasco da Gama eventually discovered the sea route to India via the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. The Portuguese seized Goa in 1510 and occupied several strategic centres in the east of the subcontinent, including Chittagong. They were followed by other Europeans like the Dutch, French, Danes and the English. The Portuguese, in their zeal to conquer and also to spread Christianity, occupied Chittagong during the reign of Nusrat Shah and started sailing up to Gaur through the Hooghly River and also the Meghna. It was during Ghiyas-ud-din Mahmud Shah's reign that the Portuguese first arrived in Bengal. In 1534 the governor of Goa, Nuno da Cunha, sent 200 men on five ships led by Martin Afonso de Mello Jusarte to Chittagong to commence trading with Bengal. A delegation proceeded to the sultan at Gaur with costly presents. But the sultan not only had the delegation members arrested, but even Jusarte with thirty other Portuguese were arrested at Chittagong and brought to Gaur. The Portuguese helped Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Mahmud Shah in his military engagements against the Afghans and thus secured their release and got the sultan's permission to construct a fort at Chittagong. Soon misunderstandings developed again and Jusarte and his men were taken prisoners a second time. The governor of Goa sent Antonio de Silva Meneses with nine ships and 350

men to Chittagong to relieve the situation. As their letter to the Gaur authorities remained unanswered, they sacked Chittagong and the nearby villages. The sultan was adamant initially, but later released the Portuguese prisoners after they had helped him against Sher Khan's invasion of Gaur. In 1537, when Sher Khan laid siege on Gaur, Ghiyas-ud-din Mahmud formally requested the Portuguese governor of Goa for military help. A force from Goa in nine ships led by Perez de Sampayo was sent to Bengal, but Sampayo, on his arrival, got the news that Gaur had already fallen to Sher Khan and Sultan Mahmud Shah had died. Every year Portuguese merchant ships would lay anchor at a place called Betore opposite the present Calcutta Port and do extensive trading. They opened a factory at Satgaon in 1517 and another at Hooghly in 1579–80. But they earned notoriety on account of capturing people from the riverine villages and selling them as slaves, their indiscriminate looting and converting people to Christianity by force. The popular Bengali expression *harmad* (which must have come from 'armada') to denote the Portuguese meant 'notorious freebooters'.

The lure of Eastern trade also brought other competitors. The Dutch, the British and the French (in that order) staked their claims for a share of maritime trade with the East which, among other things, meant control over the spice trade. Spices were of great importance to the aristocrats in Europe who desperately needed these, particularly pepper, to provide taste to their food and drinks during the long winter and also to act as preservatives. Portuguese naval supremacy was soon challenged by the Dutch. The Dutch successfully captured from the Portuguese East Indies (modern Indonesia) in 1617, Malacca in 1641 and Ceylon (present Sri Lanka) by 1654. They appeared in Bengal by the middle of the seventeenth century and set up settlements at Hooghly, Cossimbazar (near Murshidabad), Patna and Dhaka, as also at Surat, Agra and the Coromandel Coast. By the end of the century, of the great network of Portuguese fortresses, which at one time dominated Asia, nothing was left except for Goa, Daman, Diu and Macao. The main reason for the eclipse of Portuguese power was Portugal's annexation by Spain in 1580. Emperor Shah Jahan turned hostile to the Portuguese and ordered the subedar of Bengal to capture their factory at Hooghly in 1632. Those who were captured were given a choice between slavery and conversion. The fall of Hooghly, for all practical purposes, signalled the fall of Portuguese power in Bengal, although Portuguese marauders

continued to trouble the coastal areas for years. The king of Arakan had occupied Sandip and Dianga. After 1632, the Portuguese only operated as pirates in alliance with Thiri, the king of Arakan who believed he was a future Buddha who would unite the whole world under him. For many years the Portuguese harmads and the bandits of Arakan carried on in unison a reign of terror in the entire coastal region of Bengal which survived in Bengalee memory for generations.

It was now the turn of the Dutch merchants to enter Bengal. The Dutch company, Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie, established its factory at Chinsurah near Hooghly in 1653 and subsequently two other subsidiary factories at Patna and Cossimbazar. Soon, the French East India Company (Compagnie des Indes Orientales) set up a factory at Chandernagore (Chandannagar) near Hooghly. Emperor Farrukh Siyar granted important customs concessions to both the Dutch and the French.

The English East India Company came to Bengal after the Dutch and before the French, but it was they who were destined to create an empire in India. The Company came into existence on 24 September 1599 when eighty merchants of the city of London met to establish a formal association for carrying out trade with India. The Company received a royal charter. Interestingly, one major reason given was the raising of the price of pepper by the Dutch merchants of Amsterdam from three shillings to eight shillings a pound, thereby putting English traders, hitherto only dealing with India indirectly through Amsterdam, into serious difficulty. The Company had to fight the Portuguese in the Arabian Sea and the Dutch in the East Indies. The Portuguese were easily defeated, leading to the capture of Ormuz on the Persian Gulf, and the setting up of the first English factory at Surat with Jahangir’s permission, along with agencies at Ahmedabad, Agra and Ajmer (1612). This followed the successful embassy of Sir Thomas Roe (1615) to the imperial court at Agra in contrast to the complete failure of Hawkins’s mission to Agra in 1508. Roe came on behalf of both King James I and the East India Company. His mission was an important landmark. Roe’s advice to the Company was ‘let this be perceived as a rule that if you will profit, seek it at sea, and in quiet trade—it is an error to afford garrisons and lead wars in India’. That was a lesson learnt from the Portuguese and Dutch activities in Asia. This was good advice and the English did seem to adhere to it for about

a century, but thereafter ignored it, as their growing involvement in local affairs pushed them ahead.

The bitter fighting with the Dutch in the East Indies led to the famous massacre of the English by the Dutch at Amboyna (1623) and the end of English ambition in Indonesia. Under a tacit understanding, the English withdrew from Indonesia, and the Dutch gave up their pretensions in Bengal, although there had to be another short war in 1759 before they finally withdrew from India. The East India Company soon became a prosperous trading company. There was an average annual return of 25 per cent on the capital employed, which at times rose to 50 per cent in cash with 100 per cent in bonus shares for every share held. The English king was prompted to end its monopoly and grant a charter to a rival group of London merchants in 1635. The rivalry between the two companies caused many problems until they got merged in 1657. The first factory to be established in Bengal was at Balasore in 1633. In 1650 permission was obtained from the nawab of Bengal to trade in Bengal. A factory was established at Hooghly in 1651. This was followed by factories at Dhaka, Rajmahal and Malda. Soon, the English came to have a visible presence in Bengal through a network of trading, including private trading by its officials backed by a small but effective military contingent. Meanwhile, the Danes and the French had also come and the neighbouring river ports of Serampore, Chandernagore, Hooghly and Chinsurah became seats of Danish, French, English and Dutch factories, respectively, in Bengal. On the western coast the English received from the Portuguese as dowry of Catherine, the Portuguese king’s daughter, on her marriage to King Charles II (1660), the island of Bombay (Mumbai) which was to replace Surat as the Company’s western headquarters.

In the closing years of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth, as Mughal authority declined to the point where it could no longer provide stable conditions for merchants, the European merchant warriors moved to fill the political vacuum in and around their settlements. They offered, on a small scale, a forerunner of the nineteenth-century Pax Britannica or Pax Netherlandica (in Java) in lieu of the Mughal peace. Another significant development was that while wars and rivalries among nations in Europe did not have an impact on any of the European merchants in Asia in the past, these came

to have a direct impact now through armed conflicts between, say, Madras and Pondicherry, or between Calcutta and Chandernagore.

From the beginning the English Company's men showed their determination to protect their commercial interests by their armed might, fortified by a belief acquired in the course of their encounters in western and southern India with the forces of Indian rulers that a small European contingent, by dint of its discipline, firepower and superior morale, could at any time get the better of larger hordes of native forces who were undisciplined, ill-equipped and without any motivation or strong will to fight. In 1686, following a commercial dispute, the English at Hooghly declared war on the mighty Mughal Empire with only ten armed ships and 600 men. Clearly, they were not interested in peaceful trade any more. When the Mughal governor Qasim Khan attacked their Hooghly factory, the chief of the factory, Job Charnock, decided against frontal resistance on land and in favour of boarding their ships and sailing downstream. After a temporary halt at Sutanuti village (future Calcutta), the English sailed down to Hijli island and burnt down the town of Balasore in retaliation. The Mughals besieged them at Hijli.

When a truce was signed, the English did not return to Hooghly, but to the temporary halt at Sutanuti (Calcutta), which Job Charnock favoured on account of the security of its location. It was protected on the west by the Hooghly River and on the south and the east by impassable marshes. The ships could easily defend the settlement from Mughal or other invaders from the western bank of the river. Only the northern approach around Cossipore and Baranagar needed to be defended. Ships from the river could supplement such defence and rush troops easily, even cutting off the invading enemy from its base. Also, there was an excellent anchoring place for large ships, which eventually became the Calcutta harbour. On all these counts Charnock favoured Calcutta as the future headquarters of his Company in Bengal. But the board of directors, despite Charnock's opposition, decided to abandon this idea and move to Chittagong. The English attacked Chittagong, but the raid was a failure, forcing the English to return to Madras (1686) and sign a humiliating treaty. The nawab of Bengal, on payment of Rs 3,000, permitted the British to trade in Bengal without payment of duty and to return to Calcutta. In August 1690 the Company's ships were again moored off Calcutta and a factory was built. Thus was founded what

was to become the capital of British India and the centre of British power in Asia for over one and a half centuries. Although the three adjoining villages Kalikata, Sutanuti and Gobindapur existed before the visit of Job Charnock, traditionally viewed as the founder of Calcutta, it was the English presence and the location of the seat of that power that created modern Calcutta. To quote from Rudyard Kipling's famous ode:

> Thus from the mid-day halt of Charnock
> Grew up a city
> As the fungus sprouts chaotic from its bed
> So it spread
> Chance directed, chance erected,
> Laid and built
> Upon the silt
> Palace, mire, hovel, poverty and pride
> Side by side.

A year after the quixotic war with the Mughals, Sir Josiah Child, the Company's chief in London, in a dispatch to Madras made a significant remark that it was the duty of the Company 'to lay the foundations of a large, well-guarded, sure English dominion in India for all time to come for events were forcing us into sovereign state in India'. This attitude is supported by other documents such as the following unsigned statement in a document in the India Office Library:

> We must lay down one fundamental maxim with regard to Indostan, which is that as we acquired our influence and our possessions by force, it is by force that we must maintain and preserve them and that no neighbouring subah, nawab or rajah will suffer to remain in tranquillity except from fear, and a conviction that they cannot disturb us without danger to themselves, come what may.[1]

This repudiates the other view among some Western historians as illustrated by Vincent Smith's oft-quoted statement that the British Empire in India was not a matter of design.[2]

During the subedarship of Prince Azim-ush-Shan (1697–1712), the English took the zamindari of the three villages of Sutanuti, Kalikata, and Gobindapur for an annual rental of Rs 12,000. The rebellion of Sobha Singh, a zamindar of Chandrakona in Midnapore district who had ganged up with a Pathan sardar of Orissa, Rahim Khan, gave the English the pretext to fortify Calcutta, and the fort was named Fort William after William of Orange, at that time the king of both

England and Holland. Calcutta soon grew into a prosperous town, which, apart from being an entrepôt port, attracted merchants, skilled artisans and both adventurers and law-abiding citizens anxious to flee from the lawless conditions in the neighbouring territories. Its wealth and fortifications also attracted the attention of the nawab of Murshidabad. In 1700 Calcutta was separated from Madras and became a new Presidency. From then onwards, East India Company's operation in India centred on three Presidencies independent of one another and in direct relationship with the Company's head office in London. Each was under a governor and the council. All decisions were collective decisions of the council, but inevitably the governor called the shots.

An important landmark in the consolidation of British hold over Calcutta was a firman granted by Emperor Farrukh Siyar to the Company's plenipotentiary, John Surman, in 1717. Following the embassy that Surman took to Delhi from Calcutta, accompanied by Khwaja Israel Sarhadi, a leading Armenian merchant, the English were allowed, in return for an annual payment of Rs 3,000 in lieu of customs duty, to take their merchandise to Bengal, to acquire land in Calcutta and to settle down anywhere in the subah. This privilege of duty-free movement of merchandise was to lead to a great corruption perpetrated by the British in Bengal, viz., the forcible extension of this privilege through a *dastak* or permit from the president allowing private trading by the East India Company's servants—a practice that was widespread all over the East. Dutiful Mughal officials insisted on inspecting all goods that passed as Company's goods to distinguish between the Company's own merchandise and the goods that belonged to the Company's employees and to levy customs duties on the latter category. This was to become a bone of contention between the nawabs of Bengal and the English, a festering wound that lasted from Murshid Quli Khan to Mir Qasim. The nawab's government continued to object to the privilege of duty-free movement of goods claimed for private trading by the Company's servants. Murshid Quli kept the practice under check by instructing his officers to make sure that the dastak only covered goods that had been either imported by sea or clearly intended to be exported by sea. But this evil practice grew in volume, contributing to the increase of Calcutta's shipping, thereby coming to the notice of Shuja-ud-din. Alivardi (nawab of Bengal) did not disturb the European merchants so long as the abuse of the dastak did not go beyond

reasonable proportions and so long as they traded in peace and did not extend their European wars to Bengal.

When the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48) broke out in Europe, Alivardi specially exhorted the English, the French and the Dutch to refrain from military activities within his dominion. He was appreciative of the prosperity that European trading brought to Bengal and in 1755 permitted a new entrant, the Danish company, to set up a factory at Serampore. Thus, European trading steadily grew and with it the prosperity of their centres, viz., Calcutta, Chandernagore, Hooghly, Chinsurah and Serampore. During the Maratha raids many people abandoned the countryside and settled in the protective haven of Calcutta, which steadily grew in prosperity. The British dug a canal, i.e., the Maratha ditch across the narrow strip of land in the north between the Hooghly River and the salt lakes to prevent Maratha invaders from making use of this lone easy access by land to the city. With official trade, private trade also grew. By 1753, the two became inextricably blended.[3]

Thus by the middle of the eighteenth century, British mercantile capitalism was poised to jump into its destined role of an imperialist power in Bengal or, for that matter, the entire subcontinent and to become the catalyst for transition from medieval to modern times. This process was rendered easy by the political and military degeneration of the Mughal Empire accompanied by a certain moral degeneration and total disunity among Indian rulers and a lack of patriotism and overall political vision. Alexis de Tocqueville,[4] who attempted to historically study the grand phenomenon of the rise of the British Empire in India, noted that foreign conquerors had never encountered a united and patriotic nation, but only a multiplicity of disunited groups, that the British did not have to fight a nation but only a foreign aristocracy to whom the natives had subordinated themselves, and the English victories were not due to great generals or great military skill, but simply the fact that well-disciplined, better-equipped and motivated forces easily got the better of vastly larger, but ill-equipped and poorly disciplined hordes. Also, the latter were poorly motivated, not inspired by a real love for their country, or a real attachment to their prize, but simply with a strong desire to plunder the conquered countryside to augment the meagre salaries drawn from their masters. The effective combat strength was invariably a fraction of the official numerical strength of an indigenous army, not counting camp followers,

service staff and the harem. The lifestyle, eating habits and poor state of artillery also favoured the Europeans. All these became clear during the mid-century clashes in south India between the British and the French, each siding with rival pretenders to the throne of the Carnatic and Hyderabad (the so-called Carnatic wars), where the British and the French became conscious of the military inferiority of the Indian princes when faced with Western armies. What was to follow in Bengal was only a replay of the wars of the south. Clive's seizure of Arcot in 1751 and his defence of the fort during the siege by an overwhelmingly large force backed by the French was the precursor of Plassey and the English conquest of Bengal—where the English took sides in a local conflict in which the French also joined.

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Era of Independent Nawabs of Bengal

The rule of Bengal by Murshid Quli Khan, nominally as a subedar under the Mughal emperor of Delhi, but practically as an independent nawab, marked the beginning of several decades of near-independent nawabs in Bengal. Mughal rule through viceroys had, in general, the character of an army in occupation of the territory that had been annexed. The surplus funds from the revenue were usually diverted to other parts of the empire. It was Murshid Quli Khan who, in the beginning of the eighteenth century, gave this province (along with Bihar and Orissa) the look of a settled country with a settled administration and general peace at a time when, paradoxically, conditions in the Mughal Empire as a whole were fast becoming unsettled. He also tried to conserve Bengal's revenue and prevent its diversion. Bengal's economy grew at a fast pace backed by vigorous maritime trade and also thriving trade with the interior provinces, in both of which the European traders took the leading role supported by Bengalee *banian*s (agents) and Armenian intermediaries. The British settlement of Calcutta became a world centre of entrepôt trade.

Born in a Brahman family, but sold to a Persian nobleman, Murshid Quli Khan spent his early years in Persia and thereafter landed in the Mughal court where he found employment in the revenue department. Here he developed expertise in revenue that sustained him throughout his life. He was appointed dewan of Bengal (1700) in the declining years of Aurangzeb's reign and became *naib subedar* in 1707. With a rare honesty and competence, he improved the revenue administration of Bengal, so much so that even the illegal sources of the

income of the subedar, in this case the emperor's own grandson, Azim-ush-Shan, were cut off. This antagonized the subedar, who hatched a conspiracy for Murshid Quli's assassination; but the latter came to know of this and complained to the emperor who took Azim-ush-Shan to task. Murshid Quli transferred the dewani department of Bengal, with the emperor's permission, from Dhaka to Maksudabad, which was renamed Murshidabad. Murshidabad virtually became Bengal's capital.

But Azim-ush-Shan had his way when his father Bahadur Shah succeeded Aurangzeb in 1707. He poisoned his father's ears and got Murshid Quli Khan transferred to the Deccan as dewan. But things deteriorated fast in Bengal, and the new dewan was murdered by insubordinate soldiers. Murshid Quli Khan was brought back in 1710. The administration now had stability and he was able to keep Bengal out of the general disorder that followed Aurangzeb's death. He became, for all practical purposes, the ruler of Bengal although he was formally appointed subedar only in 1717. During his long period of governance (1710–27) there was an efficient civil administration where functionaries like the faujdars, the *amin*s, and the *kanungo*s functioned effectively under the benign eyes of the nawab who was both subedar and dewan, de facto ruler, subject only to a vague suzerainty of the shadowy Mughal emperor in Delhi and an annual payment of nazrana. The administration interfaced with a multitude of zamindars, who by and large maintained peace in the countryside. He also appointed many Bengalee Hindus to high offices under the government. Many family names among Bengalee Hindus and Muslims, such as Sarkar, Bakshi, Kanungo, Chakladar, Tarafdar, Talukdar, Dastidar, Lashkar, Haldar, Khan, Mirbahar and Chaudhuri, have descended from those who served in Murshid Quli Khan's administration. Hindus were the majority among zamindars and other intermediate landowners. It was Murshid Quli Khan, not Lord Cornwallis, contrary to a common belief, who was the founder of the zamindari system. In fact, the British inherited Murshid Quli's system of revenue administration and built on it. There were sixteen mega zamindars in charge of 615 parganas or revenue units. Smaller zamindars and *talukdar*s controlled another 1,600 parganas. The zamindar, as the subordinate instrument of a larger system, was answerable for the peace and good order in the country. The kanungo preserved regular, uninterrupted records, and every encouragement was given to weavers

and spinners as the textile business was regarded as one of the main sources of revenue. There was a new structure of foreign trade and full competition existed among the European nations, who imported bullion and metals and exported cloth. Thus, Bengal prospered under Murshid Quli both in terms of internal as well as maritime trade, in which European traders took the dominant role. The political changes that took place some years afterwards were not due to any economic malaise or administrative collapse in Bengal.[1]

Murshid Quli largely replaced the old zamindars and jagirdars, most of whom were upcountry Muslim nobles who had no vested interest in their estates and frequently defaulted in their revenue payments after misappropriating the funds. He appointed in their place a set of new farmers, majority of them Hindus, who would strengthen their hold by prompt payments. The nawab, while inflicting heavy punishment on the defaulters, including confining them in a room without food or water or toilet facilities, was kind to the zamindars who regularly paid revenue. He gave them the titles of Raja and Maharaja. Thus, a new aristocracy that included famous zamindar houses such as Natore, Dighapatiya, Muktagachha, Santosh, Panchakot and Searsole came into being. All of them declared their personal allegiance to the nawab. The only exception was Raja Sitaram Roy of Bhushana (Jessore), who is the central figure in Bankim Chandra's famous novel *Sitaram*. Sitaram stopped payment of revenue, collected a small but compact force and killed the faujdar of Hooghly. Murshid Quli had to invade Sitaram's domain in full strength. Sitaram was defeated and captured and his capital Mohammedpur, so named after the name of a Muslim fakir he revered, was destroyed. There was no other major political event during Murshid Quli's rule. Thanks to his encouragement of merit, a Hindu aristocracy consisting of zamindrs, high government officials and wealthy merchants came to be established in Bengal by the first half of the eighteenth century. This class was destined to dominate Bengal society after the establishment of British rule up to the early years of the twentieth century.

SHUJA-UD-DIN

An important political change coincided with Murshid Quli's rule. No longer would faujdars or nawabs be appointed and sent to Bengal by the Delhi durbar. The Mughal emperor had become too weak to do so. Unavoidably, the throne of

Murshidabad was from now on bound to pass by heredity or through usurpation by local nobles with the power of the sword. Imperial recognition was more of a formality to be obtained by whosoever came to rule in Murshidabad by money or muscle power. Also, as noted earlier, Murshidabad replaced Dhaka as the capital of Bengal.

Murshid Quli Khan died in 1727 without a son. His favourite grandson, Sarfaraz Khan, who was in Murshidabad, quickly proclaimed himself as nawab. But Sarfaraz's father, Shuja-ud-din (1727–37), who was governor of Cuttack, staked his own claim to the throne and marched towards Murshidabad, accompanied by his close adviser Alivardi Khan. As his army reached the outskirts of Murshidabad, Sarfaraz, instead of fighting, came forward to welcome his father and offer him the throne of Bengal. Shuja-ud-din was a good man and a humane ruler. He released most of the zamindars from the inhuman captivity to which they had been condemned during Murshid Quli's rule. He was fond of wine and women and gradually withdrew from active administrative duties. 'As he considered his ascendancy [being] due to the excellent wisdom of that unequalled counsellor, Alivardi, he never transacted any state business, complete or partial, without consulting him.'[2] He conferred on Alivardi the faujdari of Akbarnagar. Haji Ahmed, Alivardi's brother, was given the charge of land customs of Murshidabad. Two other persons who wielded great influence on Shuja-ud-din were Jagat Seth, the merchant, and Alamchand of the revenue department. According to Yusuf Ali Khan,[3] Alivardi used to visit Murshidabad from Akbarnagar once a year and advised the ruler on all state and financial matters, and the latter invariably followed his advice. Because of his profound intellect and unusual sagacity, Alivardi had come to know Shuja-ud-din's mind so well that he could anticipate his thoughts. Alivardi received yet another honour when Shuja-ud-din sent him in 1733 as *naib nazim* (deputy governor) of Bihar where he soon made a mark. On a visit to Murshidabad, Shuja-ud-din had the lofty title of Mahabatjang conferred on Alivardi by Emperor Muhammad Shah. This further added to Alivardi's stature. Trade and commerce flourished in Bengal and rice was again sold in Dhaka at eight maunds for a rupee.

On Shuja-ud-din's death (March 1737) Sarfaraz automatically succeeded to the throne (1737–40). He was a strange combination of a devout Muslim who prayed five times a day and observed all rituals and a pleasure-loving man who spent most of the time in the harem. Although he never allowed any outward change to occur in his behaviour towards the friends of his father 'and retained all of them in their original positions', the court soon became a hothouse of intrigues between broad groups of noblemen—those who were followers of Haji Ahmed and Alivardi and all those who were against those two brothers. The latter managed to gain the ears of the nawab who humiliated Haji Ahmed and his relatives. This gave Alivardi Khan the pretext to advance towards Murshidabad from Patna in March 1740, ostensibly to rescue his brother, his family and associates and with outward profession of loyalty. Alivardi's advance continued on some other pretext even after the nawab permitted Haji Ahmed to leave Murshidabad with his family and friends. Sarfaraz had no other choice except to ready himself to defend his capital from the invader. On 10 April 1740, the two armies clashed at the battle of Giria near Suti, north of Murshidabad. Alivardi rode a black elephant and led his men to victory. Sarfaraz was killed. So were most of his faithful commanders who showed great courage.

Two or three days later, Alivardi triumphantly entered the city of Murshidabad, but, unlike most usurpers in medieval times, he showed great kindness towards the family members of the fallen nawab. Before seating himself on the throne, he went to the door of the chamber of Nafiza, Sarfaraz's mother, saying, 'All that was written on the tablet of fate has already occurred. This disgrace had been permanently inscribed on the pages of time along with the name of the helpless man. But henceforth, for the rest of my life, I shall never do anything even to the meanest of the slaves of Your Excellency, except be obedient and loyal. I hope the petition of this aged slave will receive Your Excellency's acceptance.'[4] Then he turned to the capital city and ascended the throne of Bengal at the age of sixty. He allowed Nafiza Begum to retain all her personal possessions and also settled a land grant that fetched her a good annual income. He gave similar grants to each of the late nawab's sons and daughters. Alivardi's compassionate behaviour on this occasion contrasts sharply with the standard medieval pattern of cruelty by victors in similar circumstances.

ALIVARDI KHAN AND THE MARATHA INVASION

Alivardi's reign as nawab (1740–56) was marked by serious fightings with disgruntled and ambitious Mughal chieftains and the Maratha invasions taking place almost regularly. Within a few months of his accession by the power of sword, as mentioned earlier, his rule was challenged by Rustam Jung, Nawab Shuja-ud-din's son-in-law, who was naib nazim of Orissa. Alivardi defeated him in a battle at Falwari near Balasore (March 1741) and left for Murshidabad, leaving his own nephew as naib nazim of Orissa. Rustam Jung sought the help of Bhonsle, the Maratha ruler of Nagpur, and reconquered Orissa with the help of Maratha soldiers. Alivardi returned to Orissa and again defeated Rustam Jung (December 1741). But, having once discovered how easy it was to plunder Bengal's rich countryside through lightning raids, the Marathas were tempted to invade Bengal over and over. Thus, even before Alivardi could reach Murshidabad, a Maratha cavalry under Bhaskar Pandit was sent to Bengal by Bhonsle. It entered Burdwan through Panchet and started looting the countryside. Alivardi was initially stranded at Burdwan, with the supplies cut off, but managed to break through the Maratha forces to reach Katwa. The Marathas had been joined by Mir Habib, Rustam Jung's cunning naib, who provided them with valuable information about the countryside and with logistic support.

For about ten years the spectre of 'Bargi'[5] invasion and large-scale plundering of the countryside dominated western Bengal. Maratha horsemen would appear every year, plundering the whole territory west of the Hooghly River from Rajmahal in the north to Midnapore and Jaleswar in the south. On at least two occasions (1742 and 1745), they came up to Murshidabad and looted the capital city, including the mansions of the legendary merchant prince, Jagat Seth. How dreaded the Bargi were in popular view is evident from nursery rhymes, which are still current in Bengal. Contemporary chroniclers also left vivid descriptions of the Bargi terror, their hit-and-run tactics and the helplessness of the nawab's army in effectively checking them in the face of their unwillingness to be engaged in pitched battles.

Alivardi showed exemplary courage and military skill in every frontal battle that took place between his forces and the Marathas, in each of which, almost without exception, he had the upper hand. But his soldiers were unable to move

fast and keep pace with the speed and easy manoeuvrability of the Maratha horsemen who moved like the wind in any direction they chose, outflanking the nawab's army and merrily plundering West Bengal's prosperous towns and villages. In any case, their object was not occupation but plundering. They would often do the vanishing trick before the nawab's forces came in hot pursuit. Only the Ganga–Bhagirathi River line proved an effective barrier to their movements. They crossed over to the eastern side only on a few occasions. It was the fear of Maratha attack that made the English in Calcutta dig the Maratha ditch, cutting across the only pathway in the north of Calcutta through which invasions by land were possible.

The official pretext of the forces of Bhonsle of Nagpur led by Bhaskar Pandit was that the emperor of Delhi had promised the Maratha sovereign, King Shahu, the right to realize *chauth*, i.e. one-fourth, of the revenues from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, and Shahu had assigned that right to King Raghuji Bhonsle. The emperor later sought the help of Peshwa Balaji Rao to check the depredations of Maratha horsemen in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. Balaji and Raghuji were sworn enemies, and Balaji himself came to Bengal at least once to chase out Raghuji's son, who also led expeditions to Bengal on several occasions.

We have vivid description of the Bargi invasion from contemporary sources. One of the sources is the *Maharashtra Purana* composed by one Gangaram, of which only one canto entitled *Bhaskara Parabhaba* has survived. It gives a somewhat ingenious explanation about the original raison d'être of Maratha invasion. Goddess Bhavani (Durga) appeared in a dream before the Maratha Emperor Shahu in Poona and asked him to rescue Bengalee Hindus from the oppression of Alivardi. It was following this that Shahu asked Raghuji Bhonsle to invade Bengal. This contrasts sharply with Gangaram's own description of the devastation caused to Bengal's countryside by repeated Maratha invasions, affecting Muslims and Hindus equally. Initially, when the Maratha menace appeared, Alivardi did not take it very seriously. To quote a contemporary source, viz., Yusuf Ali Khan:

> As, since the earliest days of Bengal, the name 'Mahratta' had never reached the ears of the people and as the route through which to enter this province was the only well-known path through the pass of Sikri-gali, and as the Marathas first chose to cut through Panchet, the nawab did not pay heed to the invasion when he heard of the invasion of Manzil-i-Mubarak (Midnapore).[6]

Also, after the victory in Orissa, he had disbanded his troops temporarily. When Alivardi realized the full magnitude of the invasion, he showed remarkable courage and determination, but, as the Maratha way of fighting consisted of fleeing in the face of attack and then catching the enemy unawares, Alivardi's advisers counselled him to make up with the enemy, who appeared to be invincible. But Alivardi stuck to his firm resolve to fight the enemy at any cost, come what may. Bhaskar Pandit, on the advice of Mir Habib who accompanied him, went as far as Murshidabad. As Alivardi came in hot pursuit, the Maratha army withdrew after having plundered the city and taking away three lakh rupees in cash from the house of Jagat Seth. The entire territory from Malda in the north, on to Balasore, Midnapore and Orissa in the south, came under Maratha occupation. Only Murshidabad and the territory on the eastern side of river Hooghly remained in the possession of the nawab. In between, help came to the nawab from two different quarters. First, the Mughal general, Safdar Jung, in pursuance of an instruction of the emperor, Mohammed Shah of Delhi, proceeded to Azimabad (Patna), but his high-handedness, misbehaviour and ill-treatment of the people of Patna antagonized Nawab Alivardi who persuaded the emperor to order Safdar Jung to return. Secondly, the Peshwa of Poona sent one of his commanders, Bala Rao Pandit, to chastise Raghuji Bhonsle and Bhaskar Pandit. Bala Rao met the nawab near Murshidabad. The nawab gave him the usual gifts of elephants, pearls, etc., and a formal alliance was entered into against Raghuji Bhonsle. The unified forces marched against Raghuji and defeated and expelled him as well as Bhaskar Pandit from Bengal. Bala Rao returned to the Deccan and the nawab also went back to Murshidabad. But Bhaskar Pandit returned to Bengal shortly thereafter and went back to his usual game of looting, plundering and extortion.

Alivardi was piqued. His entire objective in giving a huge sum of money to the Peshwa as a price for preventing the Marathas from disturbing Bengal had been frustrated. He had no money in his treasury and the Marathas were back to their old game. In this situation, he decided to meet deceit with deceit. He invited Bhaskar Pandit and his commanders to meet him at a place called Mankaura near Murshidabad to discuss peace. When Bhaskar came unarmed with nineteen of his chiefs, they were suddenly attacked and murdered in cold blood by the nawab's men. While Nawab Alivardi undoubtedly had good reason,

this was contrary to diplomatic practice. This treacherous assassination of Bhaskar Pandit and his men remains a blot on Alivardi's character. However, after the massacre of Mankaura, the Maratha army left Bengal in peace for several years. Raghuji Bhonsle returned again in 1745, accompanied as usual by Mir Habib, and also received good support from a number of disgruntled Afghan chiefs. Nawab Alivardi initially sent Mir Jafar to reconquer Orissa, but Mir Jafar's mission was a failure. Alivardi, now seventy-one years old, led his army and defeated the Marathas and Mir Habib's men near Burdwan. He once again proceeded to Orissa in 1749 and defeated the Marathas, but as soon as he turned his back, Mir Habib reoccupied it with the help of Maratha soldiers. In that year the nawab set up a fortified military base at Midnapore to keep constant vigil against Maratha incursion in Orissa. The nearly ten-year period of Maratha invasion came to an end only in May 1751 when the Marathas and the nawab entered into a peace treaty on the following terms:

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

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

In between, Alivardi also had serious family problems. Alivardi had no son. He had three daughters whom he married to the three sons of his elder brother, Haji Ahmed. These three sons-in-law were appointed governors of Dhaka, Purnea and Patna. All the three died during Alivardi's lifetime. His most competent and favourite son-in-law, Zain-ud-din, who was naib nazim of Bihar, was killed along with his father, Haji Ahmed, by the rebellious Afghans (1748). Siraj-ud-Daula (real name Mirza Muhammad), Zain-ud-din's son, was Alivardi's favourite grandson and had stayed with him at Patna since his childhood, rebelled against his grandfather from Patna in 1750. It needed all Alivardi's patience and cajoling to win him back. Repeated insubordination by near relatives, the untimely death of favoured relatives, constant conflict with Rustam

Jung of Orissa and the Marathas and, above all, the family quarrels broke him down. He died on 1 April 1756 at the ripe age of eighty-two.

What is surprising is that in spite of these chronic political problems, Bengal's economy remained prosperous during Alivardi's reign, largely on account of the huge volume of maritime trade carried on by the European traders and the network of economic activities that it had generated. Alivardi realized their importance and protected them against unfairness despite his suspicion arising out of the stories of the Carnatic and Hyderabad wars that he had been hearing about. He extorted funds from the English, French and the powerful Dutch merchants when he needed them. But he did not let them become powerful as in south India by disallowing them to take part in local conflicts. He also would not permit the English and the French to fight with each other or build any fort when they fought each other in Europe in the Austrian succession war. He declared that merchants should not be warriors and should look to him for protection. He therefore asked the British after the end of the European conflict in 1751 to stop any further fortification. 'You are merchants. What need have you of a fortress? Being under my protection you have no enemies to fear.' But shrewd and wise as he was he did nothing more than occasionally threatening the British and the French with the show of force and, unlike his ill-fated successor, never took up any political position from which he could not easily withdraw with pride. He was fully aware that Bengal's prosperity very largely depended on the external commerce that the British, the French and the Dutch carried on through Calcutta, Chandernagore and Chinsurah, respectively. He compared them once with the 'bees of whose honey you might reap the benefit but which, if attacked in their hives, would sting you to death'—a prophecy that was to become true during his successor's reign. This issue of fortification of Calcutta by the British was to reappear as a festering wound with the commencement of the Seven Years' War (1756–63) in Europe and North America between the French and the British, with its inevitable fallout in Bengal.