

Randomness. **Simulation, bootstrap statistical methods, and permutation tests:** Random numbers, The bootstrap methods, permutation tests, Generating discrete and continuous random variables.

Instructional Strategies:

- The medium of instruction is English
- Lecture materials: recommended books, ppt files, and documents
- Discuss experimental results to learn analyzing techniques (using lab results)

Prerequisite: STAT 1103

References:

1. Sheldon M. Ross, Introduction to Probability and Statistics for Engineers and Scientists, Elsevier/Academic Press, 4th Ed.
2. Douglas C. Montgomery and George C. Runger, Applied Statistics and Probability for Engineers, John Wiley and Son, 4th Ed.

Course No.	Course Title	No. of Credits	Credit Hours
GE 1212	Bangladesh Studies	Theory: 3	$15 \times (3 \times 1) = 45$

Introduction of the Course:

This course will explain the History and Society of Bangladesh. It will cover the Government and Politics, Geography and Resources of Bangladesh, Social Structure of Bangladesh, Culture of Bangladesh, Economy of Bangladesh, Achievements in different sectors of Bangladesh, and Socio-economic problems and prospects of Bangladesh. It is expected that, by the end of this course, students will be able to understand Bangladeshi history, society, culture, overall economics and others.

Specific Objectives:

- To understand the History and Society of Bangladesh
- To understand the Government and Politics, Geography and Resources of Bangladesh, Social Structure of Bangladesh, Culture of Bangladesh, Economy of Bangladesh
- To understand the Achievements in different sectors of Bangladesh, and Socio-economic problems and prospects of Bangladesh

Course Contents: History and Society of Bengal under the British rule and Pakistan rule: The impact of British and Pakistan rules on the economy and education of the people. Language Movement of 1952, Events Leading to the Mass Upsurge of 1969, War of Independence and the Emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, **Government and Politics:** Three branches of government-executive, legislative and judiciary, Formation and role of major political parties in Bangladesh and Constitutional development of Bangladesh, **Study of Geography and Resources of Bangladesh:** Location, Area, Boundary, Ecological Settings, River System, Climate, People and Resources of Bangladesh, **Social Structure of Bangladesh:** Rural society, Urban society, Family, household, and kinship, Women's role in society **Culture of Bangladesh:** Language, Literature, Art and Culture of Bangladesh, **Economy of Bangladesh:** Major Economic Sectors, potentials of various sectors and their prospective challenges; foreign aid and development, role of donor agencies, role of NGOs, **Achievements in different sectors of Bangladesh:** Economy, Culture, Sports, etc., **Socio-economic problems and prospects of Bangladesh:** poverty, health issues, natural disaster, social stratification and gender discrimination.

Instructional Strategies:

- The medium of instruction is English
- Lecture materials: recommended books, ppt files, and documents
- Discuss experimental results to learn analyzing techniques (using lab results)

Prerequisite: N/A

References:

1. Islam, S. (2003). Banglapedia. National Encyclopedia, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka
2. Kibria, S. A. (1999). *Bangladesh at the Crossroads*. University Press Ltd.
3. Riaz, A. (2016). Bangladesh: A Political History since Independence. London: IB Taurus.

Course No.	Course Title	No. of Credits	Credit Hours
SE 1206	Object Oriented Concepts	Theory: 3	$15 \times (3 \times 1) = 45$

Introduction of the Course:

This course will explain the basic topics of object oriented concepts. The course will guide the students to design a problem and code them using Object Oriented (OO) Concepts. It is expected that, by the end of this course, students will be able to model different practical scenarios using the object oriented paradigm. Students will learn and implement concepts, functionalities and interaction of objects and classes using different programming languages, which will strictly follow Object Orientation.

GEOGRAPHICAL DETERMINISM

A. N. Chumakov

Geographical Determinism * (from Greek *geographia*, or “description of the Earth” and Latin *determine*, “I define”): a world outlook and a scientific/philosophical school whose backers absolutize the influence of geographical conditions on human lives and actions claiming that geographical environment is the determinative factor of social development. Under geographical environment is meant, as a rule, the part of terrestrial nature (the upper lithosphere, the atmosphere, the hydrosphere, flora and fauna) involved in human activities and being a necessary precondition for social existence and development. A concept, opposite to geographical determinism—geographical indeterminism—rejects causality as far as interactions between nature and society are concerned.

Although the French philosophers of the eighteenth century Turgot and Montesquieu are commonly thought of as the founders of geographical determinism, this concept dates back to Antiquity. We can distinguish between real geographical determinism developed by the Greek historians Herodotus and Strobon aiming at revealing the dialectics of interrelations between nature and human development; physiological geographical determinism founded by the Greek physician Hippocrates and studying interconnections between human health and natural environment; geopolitical geographic determinism dating back to the Greek historian Thucydides and studying the influence of nature on social development. Putting a lot of emphasis on climate variations among different regions, the Greeks considered Greece and the Mediterranean the friendliest environment for human life and activities.

In the eighteenth century a mechanistic geographical determinism emerged insisting on nearly total dependence of human activity on natural environment. The founder and the most outstanding representative of this school was the French Enlightenment philosopher Charles Montesquieu (1689–1755). In his large treatise *On the Spirit of Laws* he extensively announced his concept, stating that their geographical and climatic environment directly causes human life, morals, laws, customs, and even political organization. Acknowledging that nature has created all people equal from their birth he, at the same time, stresses their differences from a geographical determinist viewpoint. He wrote that fruitless land makes people industrious, ascetic, hard working, fearless, and belligerent because they must get for themselves what their land is unable to provide; fertile land brings not only wealth but also femininity and an unwillingness to sacrifice human lives. Montesquieu gives the same explanations when describing life of insular nations. They are, according to him, more prone to freedom than continental inhabitants because the small sizes characteristic of islands make oppression of one part of the population rather hard for the other part. Islands are separated from the big empires by a sea and they cannot support a tyranny; besides, a sea intercepts a conqueror.

That is why, Montesquieu thought, insular nations are not in danger of being conquered and it is easier for them to preserve their laws.

A bit later an English economist Thomas Malthus (1766–1834) developed these ideas and put forward his prominent concept that there is some “natural law” regulating the level of population in accordance with the available food supply. According to this law, population growth always exceeds the growth of the means of subsistence because population increases in a geometrical ratio while the means of subsistence increase in an arithmetical ratio, which necessarily leads to “absolute overpopulation” that threatens many social disasters. Emphasizing strict determination of social development by the eternal laws of nature Malthus argued that the laws of nature are unchangeable from the beginning of the world.

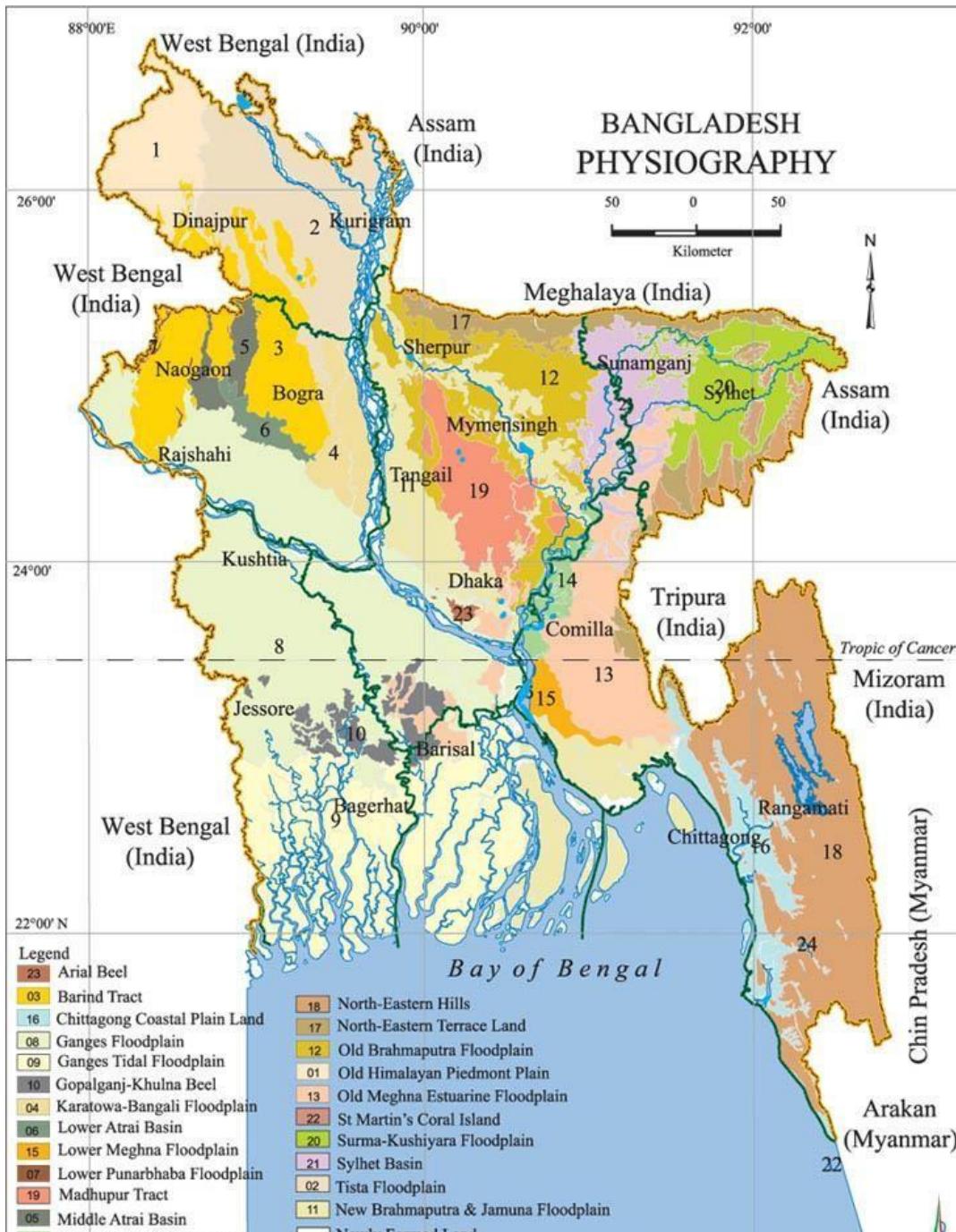
German ethnographer and geographer F. Ratzel was the foremost representative of geographical determinism at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Building upon ideas of Kant, von Humboldt, Ritter, and others, he was the first one to link politics to geography in his attempts to explain the behavior of this or that state by its geographical position and the space it occupies. The fullest description of these ideas can be found in his volume *Political Geography* (1887). Arguing that human beings are a part of the whole world and that landscape and natural environment have a central impact on the character of nations living in various regions of the planet, Ratzel came to the conclusion that human beings must, like plants and animals, adapt to their natural environment. Moreover, even a state’s wealth depends on to what extent it has adjusted itself to its natural environment, because a state, from Ratzel’s point of view, is a biological organism acting according to the laws of biology and is rooted in the land like a tree. He concluded that expansion of living space (*Lebensraum*), or territorial expansion, is the most important means for a state to acquire power. Ratzel applied his ideas to Germany arguing that its central economic and political problems were caused by unjustly drawn and too narrow borders limiting the country’s progressive development.

It is evident that territory, climate, resources, landscape, and the lay of the ground, have an impact on social development because while working and producing material goods people use various natural materials, and the broader the sphere of their economic activity becomes, the more actively they use these materials. As a result, the sphere of direct interactions between humans and nature undergoes changes and expansion, meaning the role of the geographical environment in social life grows. While primitive people mostly used natural living sources (plants and animals) and made their labor tools from naturally available materials (stone and wood), at later stages of historical development the significance of mineral and energy resources grew and the geography of human activity expanded dramatically. Simultaneously the complexity of labor was constantly growing due to geographical factors because human activity took place not only within friendly environments but also under severe, life-threatening natural conditions. So, moderate climate, fertile land, and optimal humidity provide an opportunity for bountiful harvest under relatively low labor costs, and

natural resources' availability and their easy extraction make mining simpler and the production costs lower.

Up to our century, human economic and social life depended on the geographic environment and the forces of nature less than when their economic and technical capabilities were higher. In the twentieth century this trend changed and even reversed. That means now, after humankind has become a planetary phenomenon, its economic growth encounters natural limits of the geographic environment that is too limited in its size and resources to correspond to the growing human productive activity. It has been calculated that over the last three years the amount of raw materials consumed equaled the amount consumed during the whole of previous history. In the next decades, if the speed of economic growth is the same, industrial production may grow two to three times more, causing a demand for an additional huge amount of natural resources.

The image of the Earth has been even more changed after the emergence of human-made environments, or so-called "second nature" (See also Anthroposphere; Technosphere). That means the presence of huge megalopolises and countless cities and towns covering nearly all the inhabitable territory of our planet's continents and islands. That also means a dense net of roads and railways, channels, pits, dumps, waste sites, and other objects made by humans that did not previously exist. Thus, nowadays human beings play the major role in changing the geographical environment but, at the same time, after having encountered the above-mentioned natural constrains they have lost their relative independence from them. This does not just explain the long-lasting attempts to find theoretical foundations for the role of geographical environment in social development, but also makes many discussions concerning the process of globalization and the re-emergence of global problems especially significant.



Bangladesh: A Nation State Born in 1971

- Total Area: 56,977 sq. miles
(1,47,570 sq. k.ms.)

*The limits of territorial water area of Bangladesh are 12 nautical miles and the area of the high seas extending to 200 nautical miles measured from the base lines constitutes the economic zone of the country.

(Statistical Year Book Bangladesh confirm in 2020 Statistical Year Book Bangladesh 2020, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Dhaka: Ministry of Planning, Government of Peoples Republic of Bangladesh, May 2021, 4th edition.)

Sixth Population and Housing Census

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, June, 2022.

- The population of the country was 169.83 million in 2022.
- The male population is 84.08 million and female is 85.65 million.
- The average annual growth rate of the population was 1.22 per annum.
- The density of population was 976 per sq.km. in 2011 which increased to 1119 per sq.km. in 2022.
- The total number of households is 41,010,051 which is distributed as 27,820,341 in rural areas and 13,189,710 in urban areas.

Culture

- Denotes a wide range of meaning
- It has been used in different disciplines
- It is a term that includes our beliefs, norms, way of life, language, system of communication
- It includes the materials objects used by a particular group or society.
- Performing arts like dance, drama, movie or storytelling, folk art, literatures are also included in Culture.

Culture

- UNESCO defines culture as the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

(UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2001)

- Whereas it is not always possible to measure such beliefs and values directly, it is possible to measure associated behaviours and practices

(The 2009 UNESCO Framework for Cultural Statistics, page 9)

Lecture 2

Geographical Features of Bangladesh

- Location
- Physiographic units (Land formation)
- Climate
- River system
- Bay of Bengal and the Sundarbans
- Influence of Geography in history, economy and culture

For introductory reading please follow the

Link ~~http://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bangladesh_Geography~~

Bengal (pre-1947 phase)

- ❖ Here it means the geographical identity in colonial times (1765-1947)
- ❖ comprising the area of present Bangladesh and the Indian province of *Paschim Banga* (West Bengal)
- ❖ It often expanded to neighboring areas- Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura,

Bihar, Orissa and sometimes up to
Delhi



Location: Bangladesh

- Bangladesh is located in South Asia
- At the south east corner of the Indian Subcontinent
- Bordered by the Indian States in three sides
 - West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura
 - It has border with Myanmar in the south-eastern side
- The Bay of Bengal in the south

For further reading please follow the link

https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bangladesh_Geography

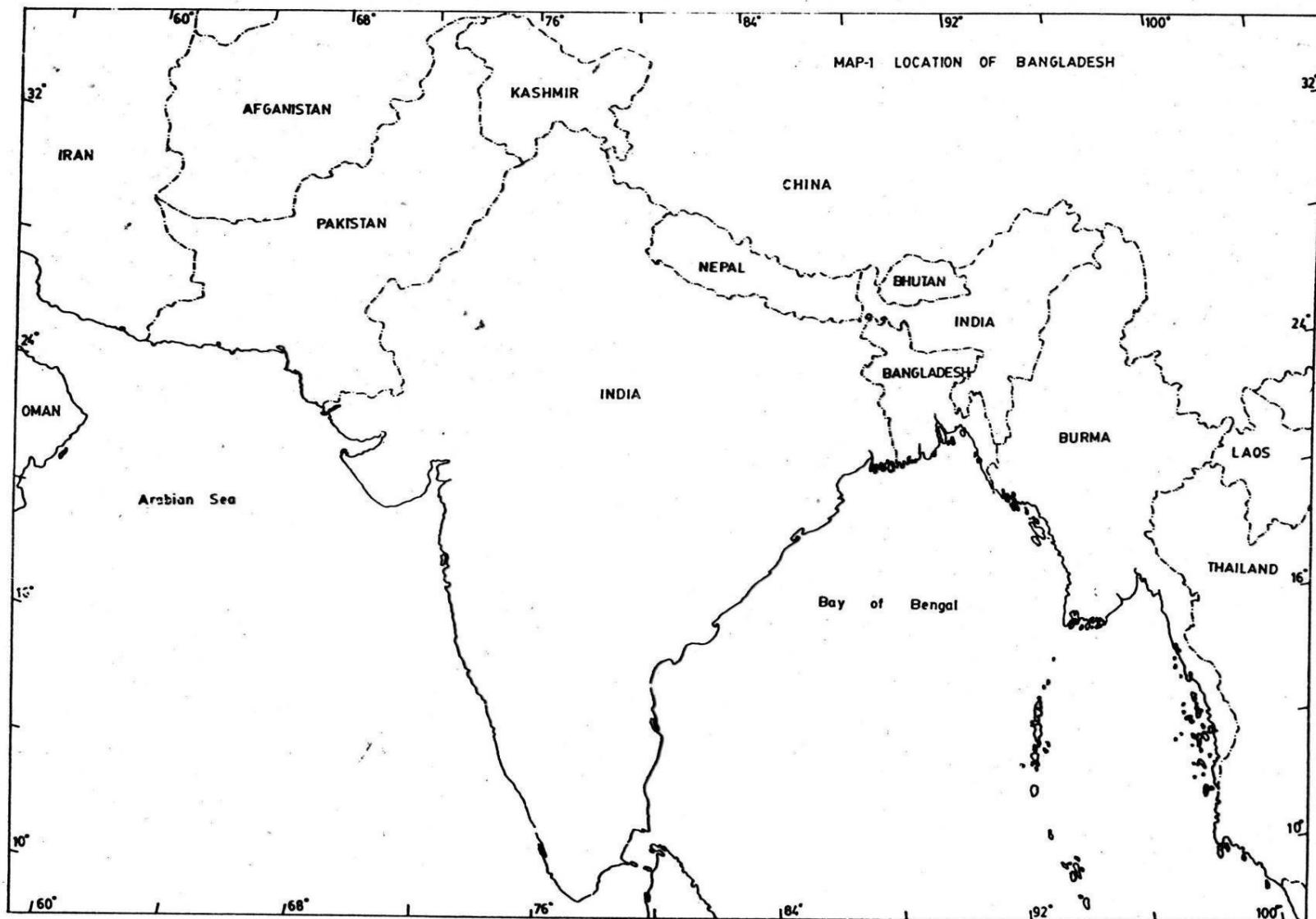


Bengal during Pre-1947

- It will be very difficult to quantify the extant of Bengal with modern measurement units.
- The first attempt to figure it was done by the British Government in 1872 CE, when the first census was done.
- Bengal was measured 94,539 sqm
- Situated between $27^{\circ}9''$ and $20^{\circ}50''$ north latitude and $86^{\circ}35''$ and $92^{\circ}30''$ east longitude.

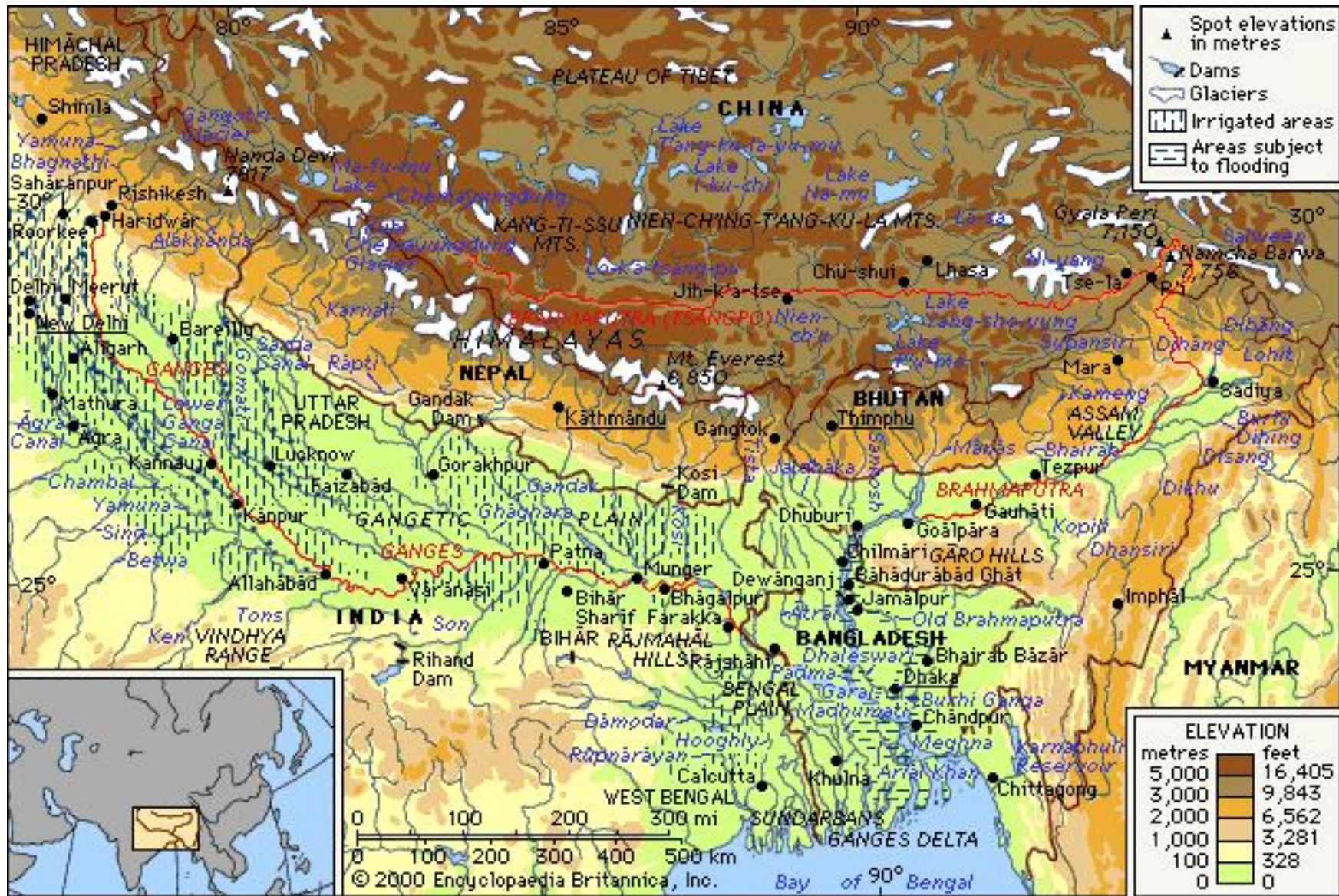
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The Himalayas and other hills



Location and Natural boundary

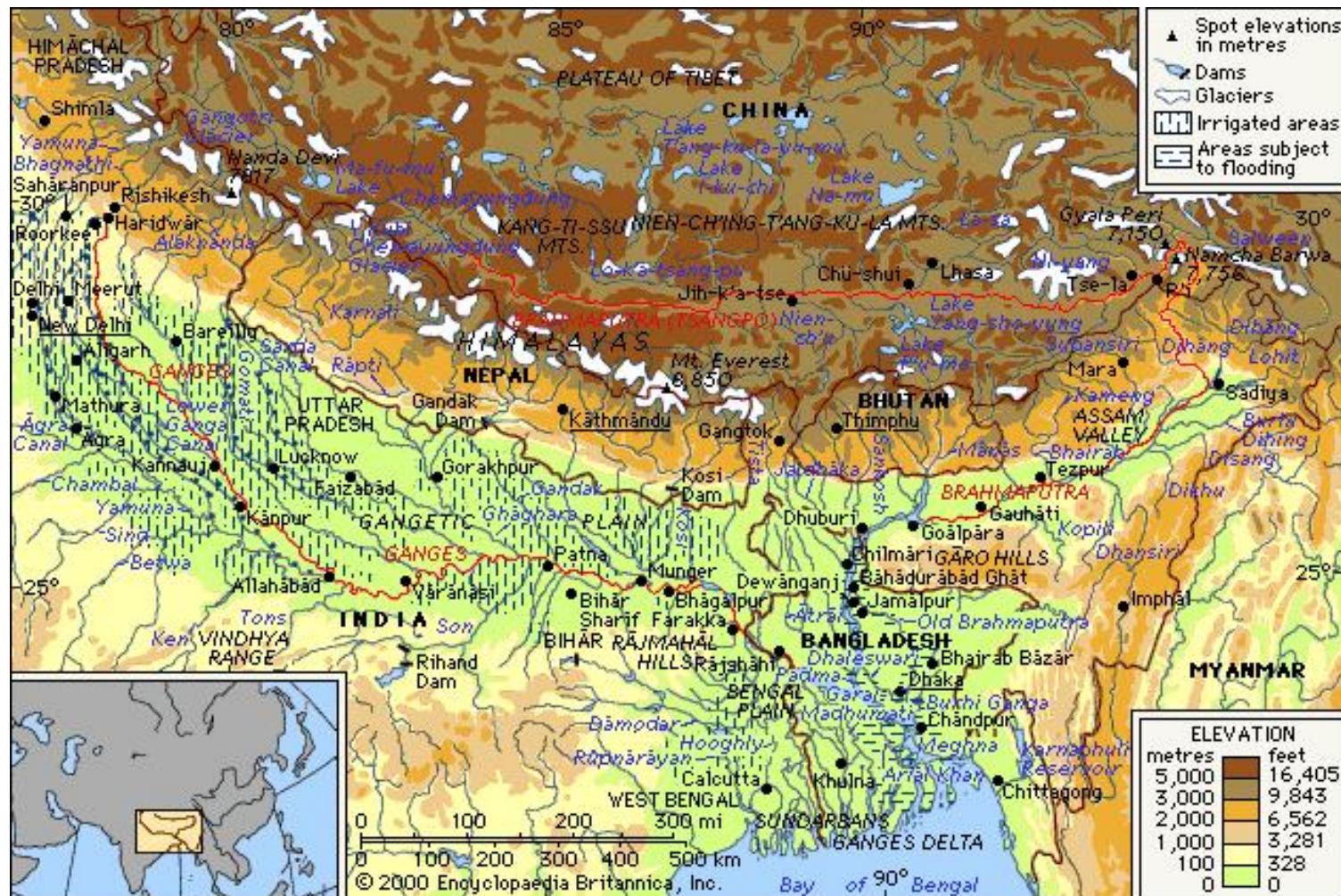
- Located at the southern corner of the Indian Subcontinent
- the Himalayan hills on the north
- The eastern border: the Garo-Khasi-Jaintia hills in the northern side and Chittagong-Arakan hills in the southern side.
- The mangrove forest of the Sundarbans stands as a transit zone between the sea and the land in the southwestern part.

Physiographic units

Land formation

- It is difficult to find out how and exactly when this region came into existence and acquired very distinct geo-physical features.
- There is a good deal of physiographic variety within the general pattern of geological setting of the ‘Bengal Delta’.

Physiographic units of Bangladesh



the Bengal Delta can be classified into three sections

- **Moribund Delta:** It stretched over the then districts of Nadia, Jessore and Murshidabad, ‘the northeastern quadrilateral’ was surrounded by Bhagirathi-Padma-Madhumati in the north and eastern side. Northern boundaries of Khulna and 24 Parganas have created a rough line along the southern border.
- **Mature Delta:** This is a land strip between the Moribund and the active part of the delta spreading over the northern half of 24 Parganas and Khulna districts. Here the rivers are quite dynamic and ‘some salinity occurs along with the larger one’.
- **Active Delta:** The active part of the delta consists of the largest mangrove forest, the Sundarbans, and the land mass between the river Madhumati and Meghna.

For further reading please follow the link

https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bengal_Delta



Old Alluvium Land Tracts:

(West Bengal)

- A large area of old alluvial land in the middle, eastern, northern and western parts of ‘Bengal’.
- In the west, the old alluvial tract extends from the south of Rajmahal almost to the sea.

- The deep forests and the mountainous regions of the Rajmahal, the Saontal Parganas, Manbhum-Singbhum-Dhalbhum comprise this old alluvial land.
- East of it are the higher red lands of the western parts of the districts of Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bardhaman, Bankura and Medinipur.
- This plateau is quite hilly, woody, dry and infertile and highland
- Some parts of Raniganj and Asansol, Medinipur, and the

- A particular tract of this old land crosses the Ganga, north of Rajmahal and extends up to North Bengal. This belt of red soil and older rock cuts through the Malda-Rajshahi-Dinajpur-Rangpur area across the Brahmaputra and extends up to the hilly areas of Assam.
- Barind Tract: The comparatively high lands of Bogra, northern portion of Rajshahi, eastern part of Dinajpur and western tracts of Rangpur
- Madhupurgarh, north of Dhaka, also belong to this old alluvium which is lacerated from the northern alluvial tract of Varendra by the

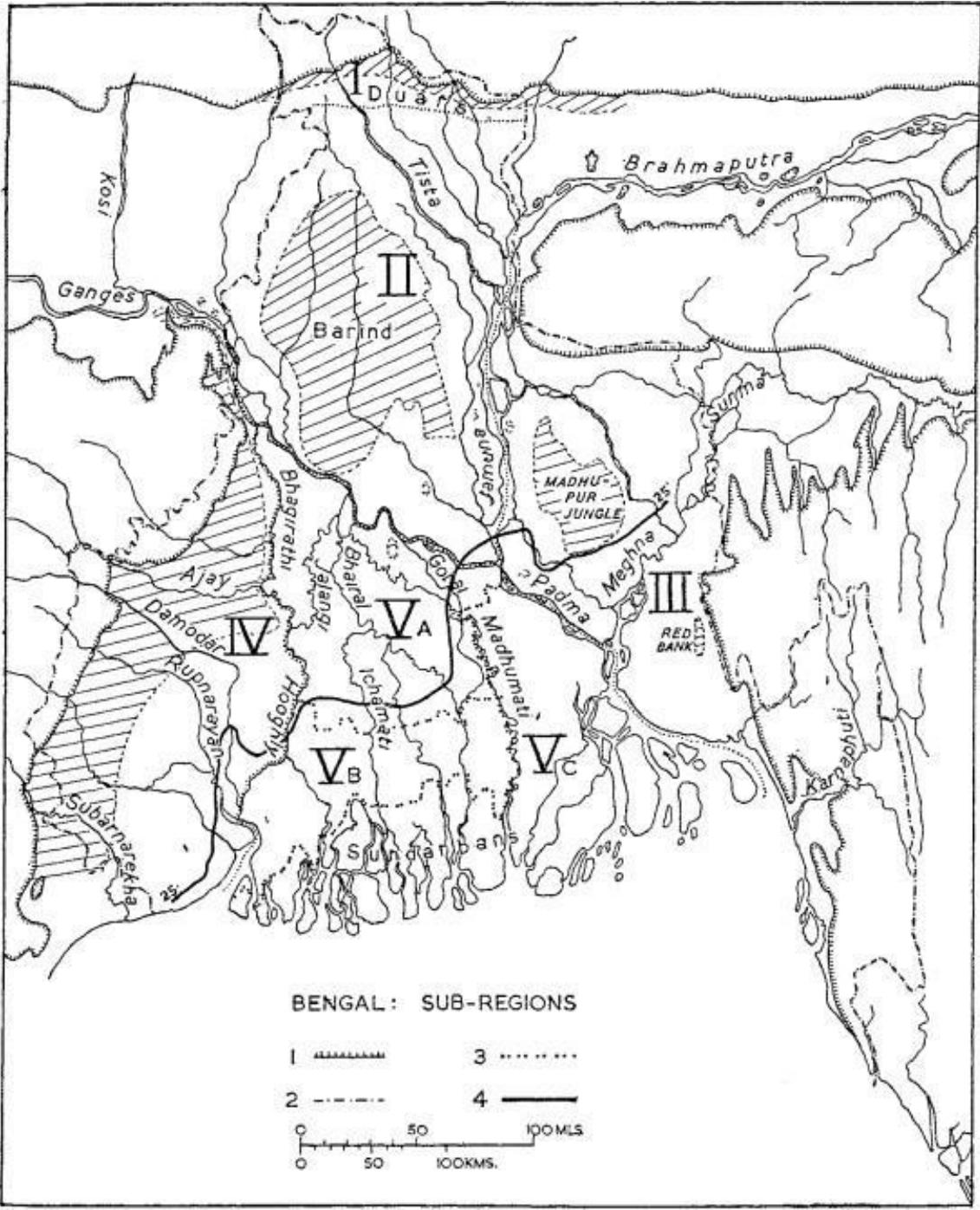
Brahmaputra

Comparatively New Alluvium:

- ‘Bengal’ is bounded, geologically, by the red and older land tract which beginning from the western side of Bengal encircles the northern areas and extends till the southern frontier of eastern Bengal.
- The rest of the areas (barring Chittagong and hilly areas of Tripura) constitute the geologically defined new alluvium land. This area, rich in their abundant

The Delta:

- The Delta: new mud, old mud, and
- marsh' and probably the largest delta in the world



The Bengal Delta

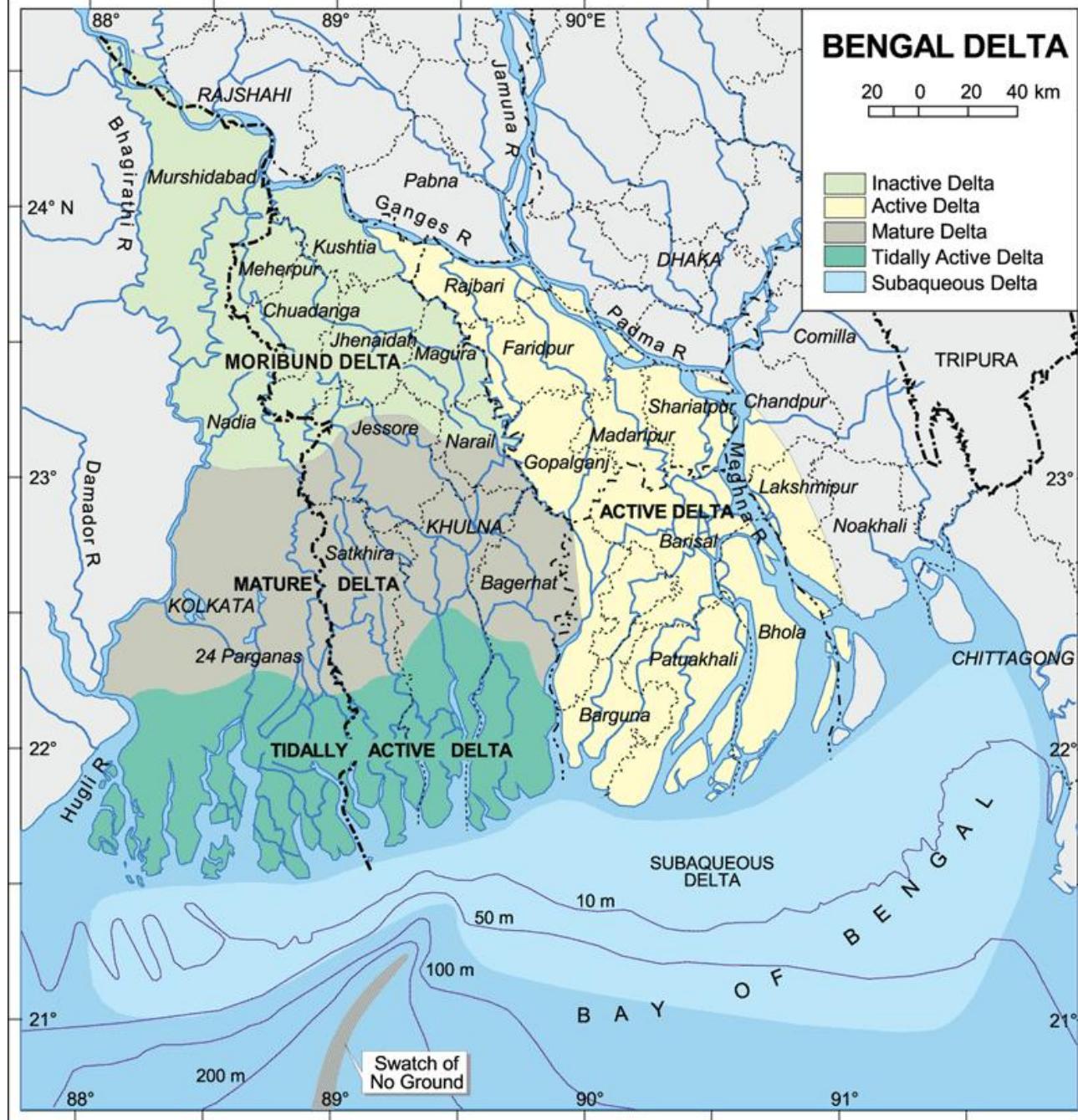
- The Bengal delta comprised of sediment carried by the great **Rivers-Brahmaputra, Jamuna, Ganga and Meghna-** is one of the largest deltas in the world.
- Among these rivers the first two originated from the Himalayas and the last one from the hills of Shillong and Meghalaya.

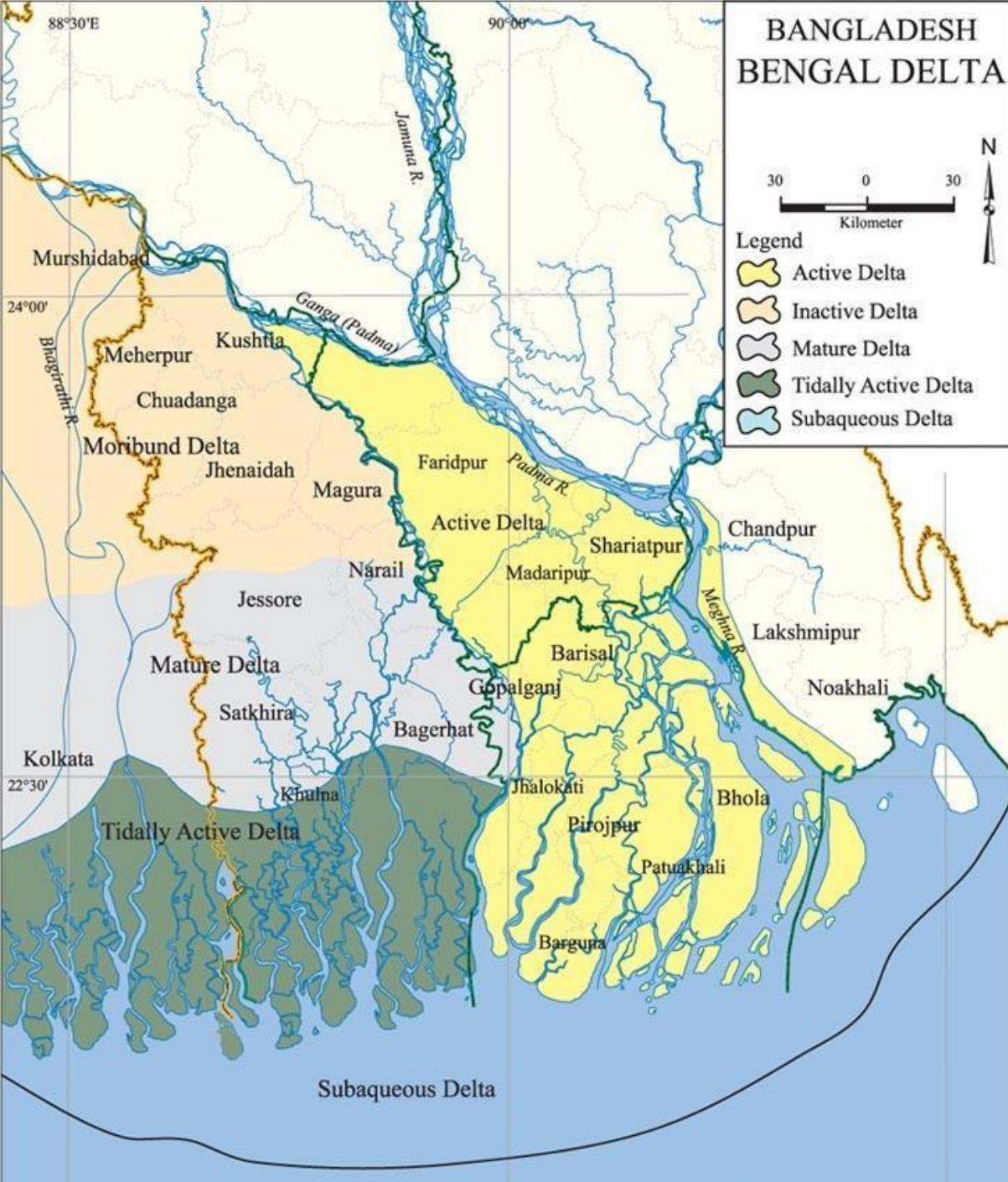
- They carry the maximum sediment load, amounting more than one billion tons every year.
- Nearly 80% of which is dispatched during the monsoon months - June, July, August and September.

BENGAL DELTA

20 0 20 40 km

- Inactive Delta
- Active Delta
- Mature Delta
- Tidally Active Delta
- Subaqueous Delta





Major Rivers of Bangladesh

- The **Brahmaputra** also known as the *Lauhitya*, popularly known as the Brahmaputra, originated from the Manasaravar located in the northern fringe of the Himalayas, entered present day Bangladesh through the northeastern part of the Kurigram district.
- The present course of the Brahmaputra and its lower stream known as the Jamuna River
- It runs from the mountain of Tibet to Bay of Bengal for about 2850 km.
- In Bangladesh, Brahmaputra-Jamuna runs for 276 km, whereas the first one alone 69 km only

For further reading please follow the link

https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Brahmaputra_River

The Padma

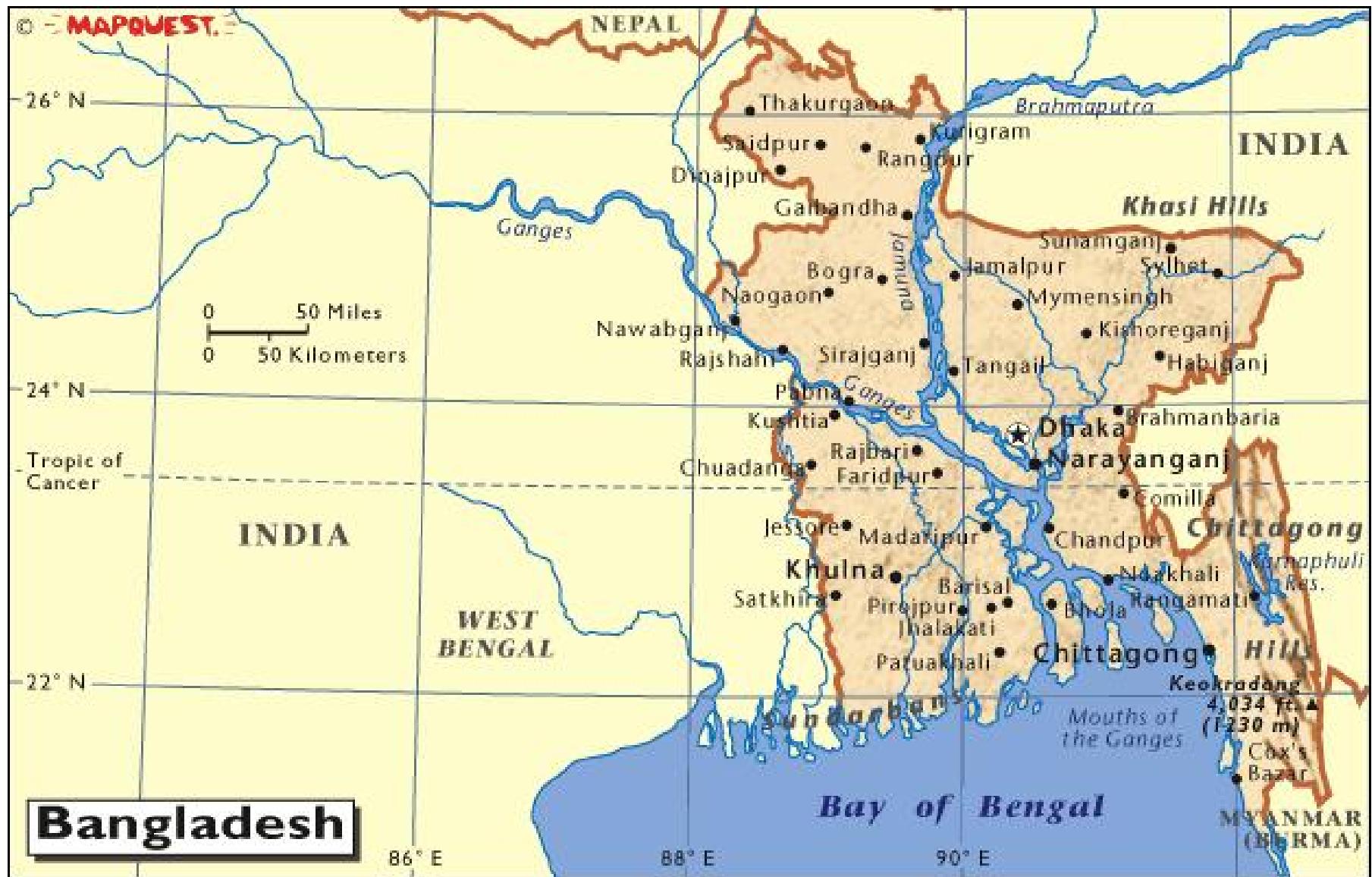
- The eastward flow of the River Ganga
- At present the river entered Bangladesh through the western part of the Rajshahi city and then flows southeastward.
- The river joins with the Jamuna at Goalanda, Rajbari.

- From here it retains the original name (Padma) and goes further southeast.
- At Chandpur the Padma-Jamuna combined stream meets the Meghna and lost its identity as the Padma.
- The new combined stream of the three rivers, known as the Meghna carries the large portion of water and silt to the Bay of Bengal

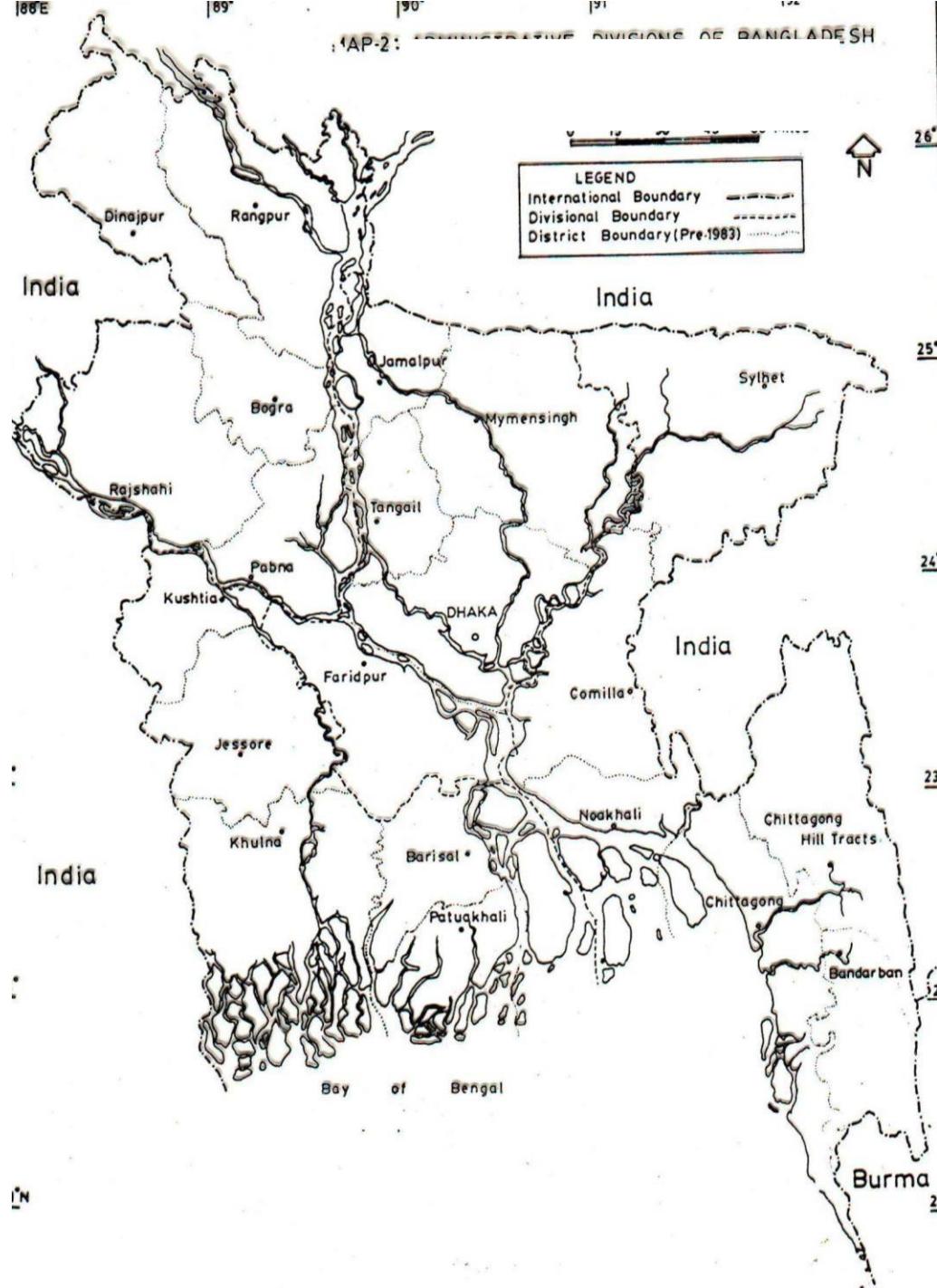
For further reading please follow the link

https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Padma_River

River System

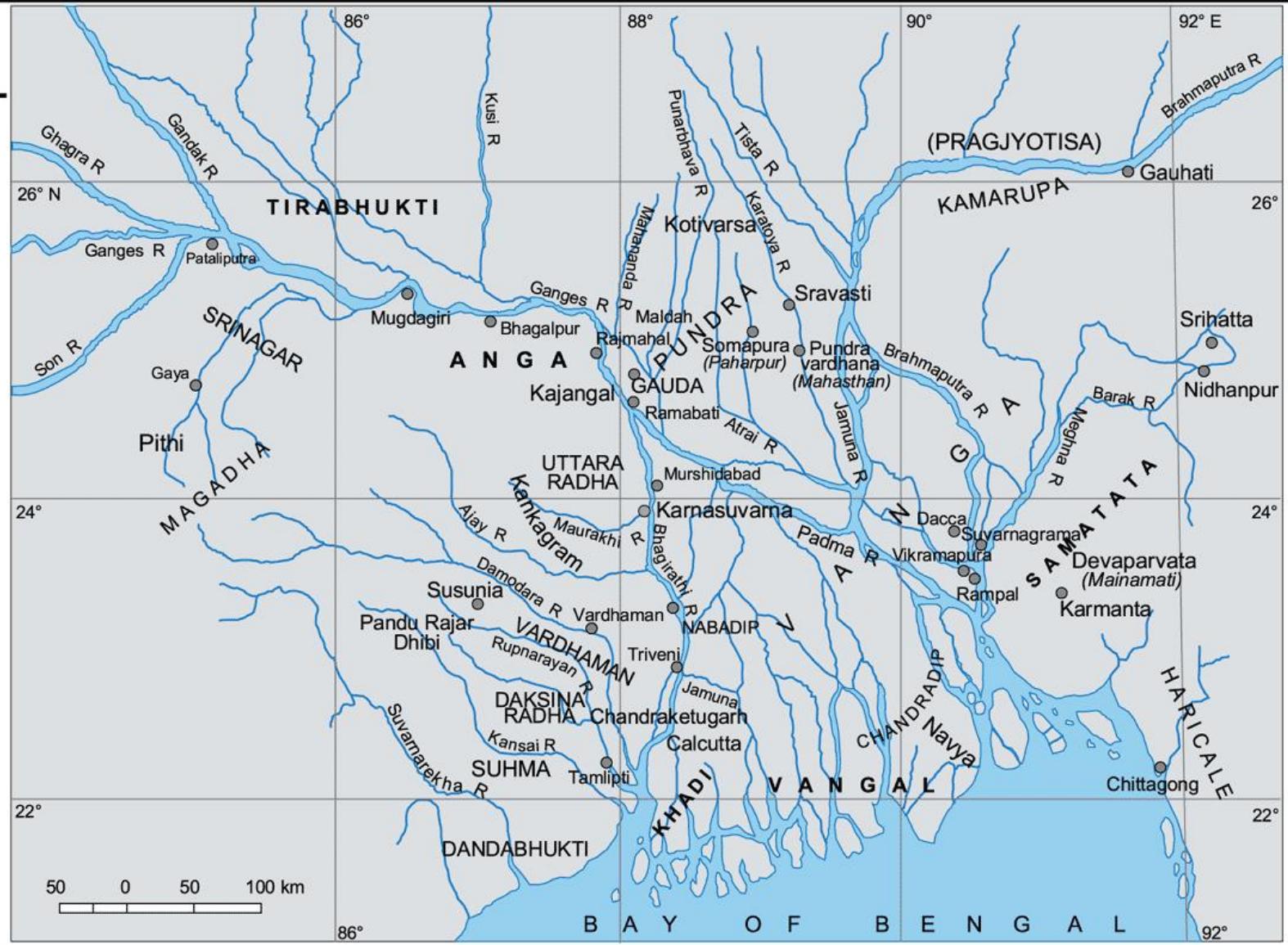


MAP-2: ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS OF BANGLADESH



BENGAL

(Ancient Period)



Sundarbans

(combination of two Bengali words denote the meaning of beautiful forest)

- Situated in the southern fringe acting as a buffer zone for mixing saline water of the sea and sweet water carried by the rivers.
- This mangrove forest was declared as the World Heritage Site by UNSCO in 1997.
- It covers an area of 16,700 sq km, 60% of which is in Bangladesh (Patuakhali, Bagerhat, Khulna, Satkhira) and the rest in West Bengal

Climate: Bangladesh

- Located in the monsoon zone
- *Sharariturdеша* or country of six seasons
- Rain: May/June to August/ September
- Heat and Humidity: Summer heat
- Flood: due to excessive rains:
 - flash flood in *haor* area
- Natural Disasters: Earthquake, Cyclone, Thunder Storm
- Moderate Cold in winter

For further reading please follow the link

<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Climate>

Influence of Geography

- Early civilization grew in the comparative old land with high elevation
- Human settlements and cities were located beside the major rivers and their tributaries
- Bengal attracted outsiders throughout its history resulting in an ethnic ‘melting pot’

- Most of the time during Ancient and medieval period Bengal remained outside the Indian Empire
- Due to location Aryan civilization came almost a thousand years later
- As a result, Pre-Aryan Culture became strong and ultimately there was a blending of these distinct cultures
- Rural Bengal: The scenic beauty with rivers and green fields

- Brick Structures (religious and secular)
- Development of Terracotta Art
- Agricultural Economy
- Bay of Bengal: Doorway to maritime world
- Trade based on Agricultural Products: Rice and fine clothes are two age old export items
- Rice and Fish Culture
- Development of Boat Industry
- Participation in Indian trade as well as global trade
- Songs, ballads, festivals centered on rivers & harvesting (*Nauka baich, Bhatiyali, Nabanna, Chaitrasankrati* etc)

Bangladesh Studies

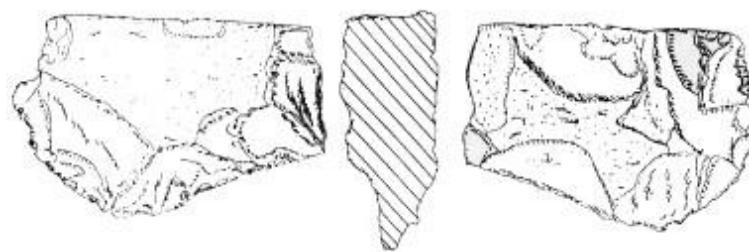
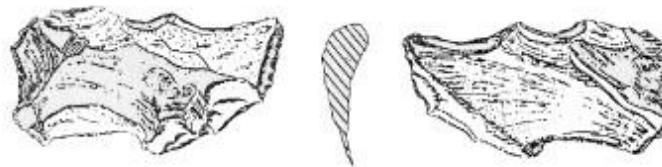
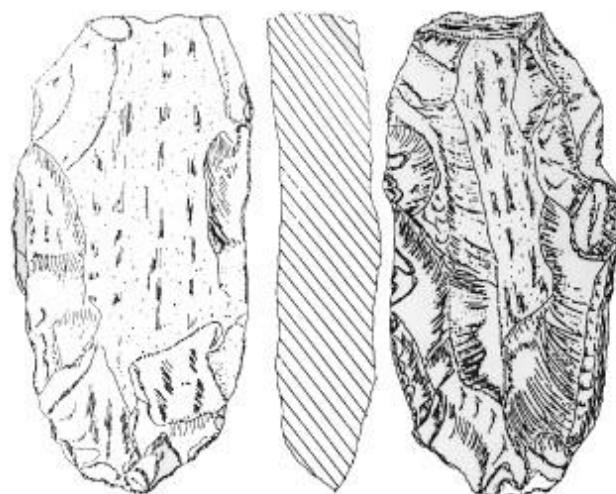
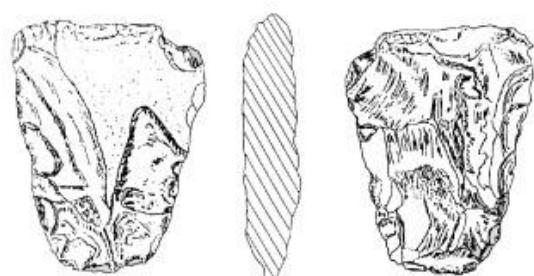
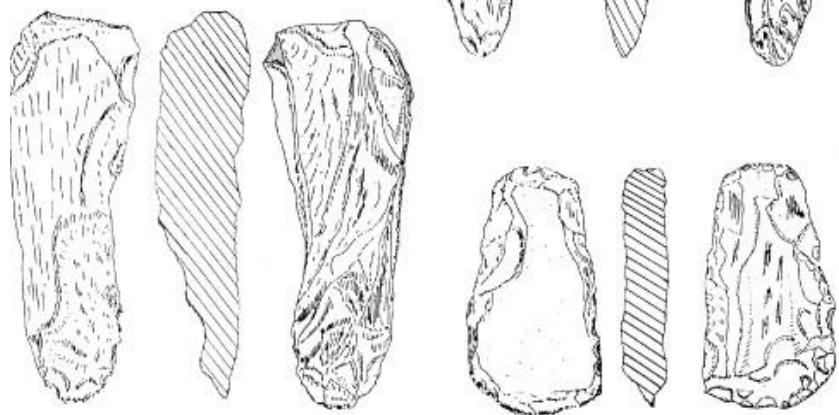
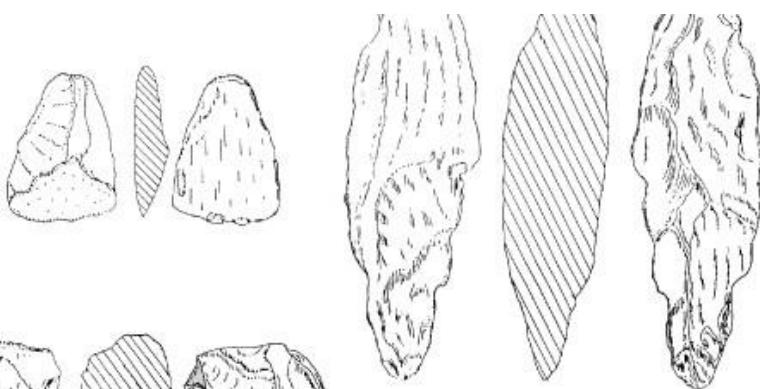
Lecture 2: Notes and Outline

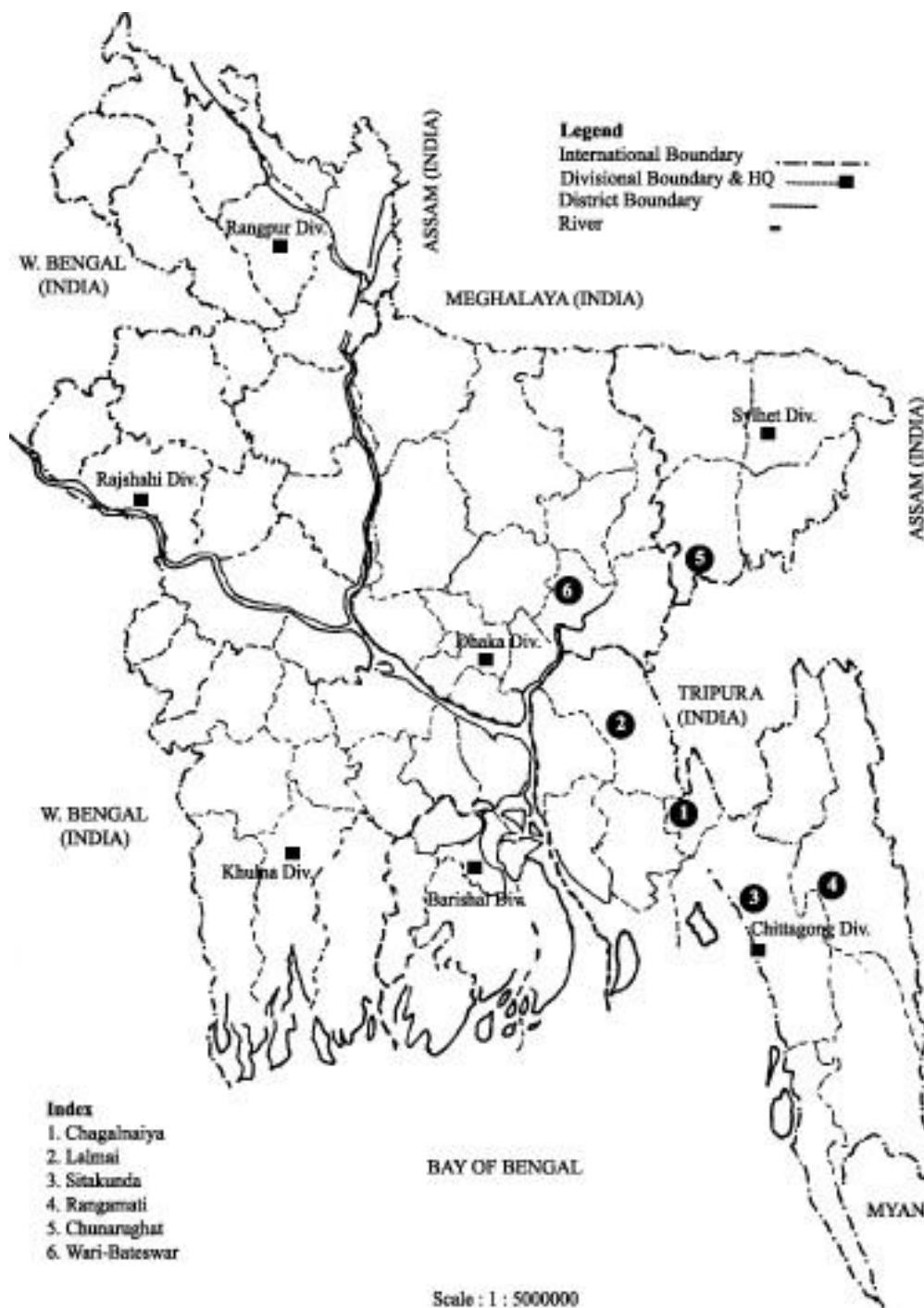
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Ancient *Janapadas* of Bengal
Vanga to Bangladesh

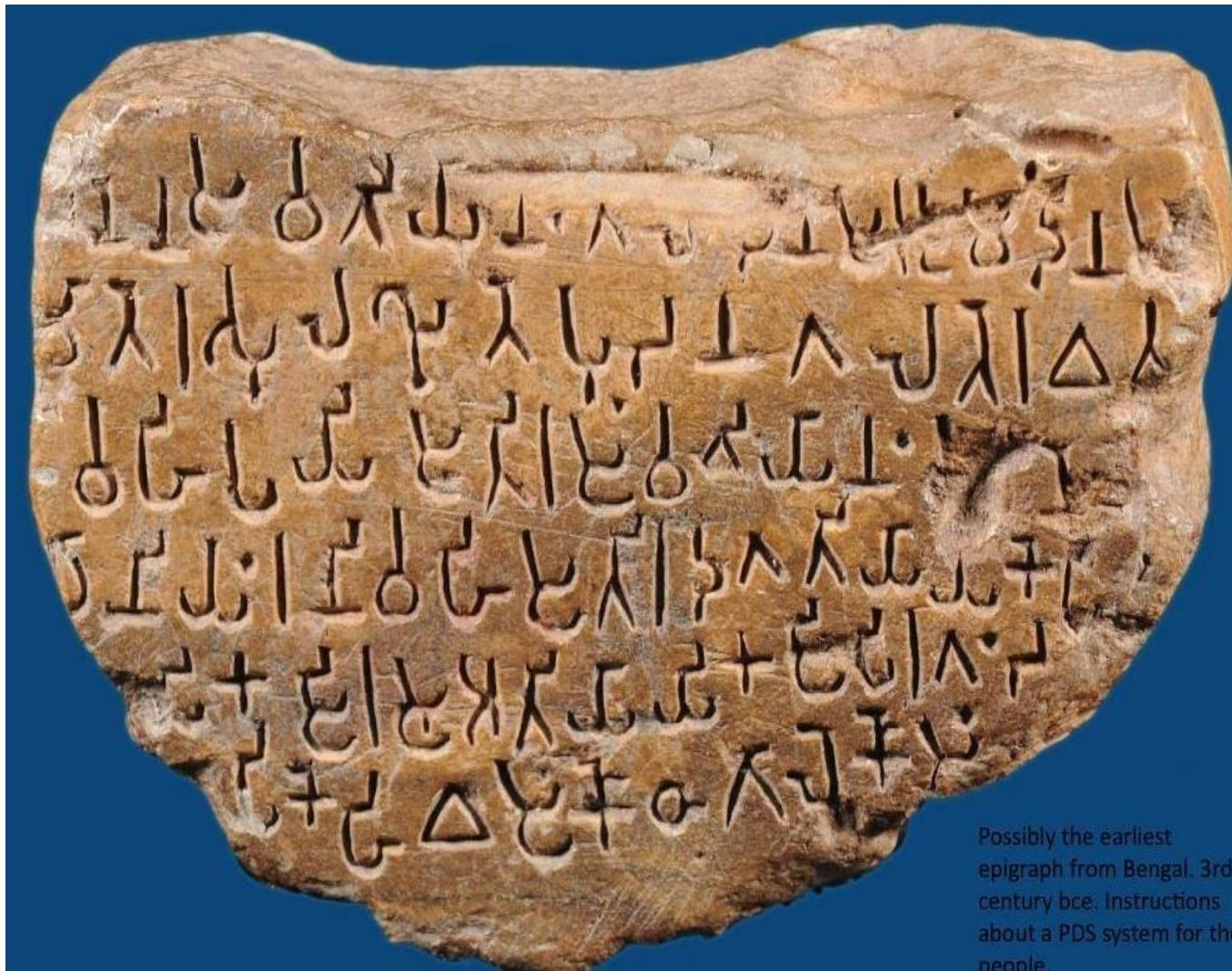
Pre Literate Phase of Bengal

- Pre Literate Phase is dateable to the 2nd Millennium BCE
- In between 1500-1000 BCE
 - People of Bengal became food producer i.e. started agricultural activities, cattle farming, trading.
 - Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Mahasthan and Wari Bateshwar
- Literate Phase or Historic Age dates back to the 3rd century BCE
- Pre Literate Past are evident through the tools used by human being





Earliest Written Record: Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription

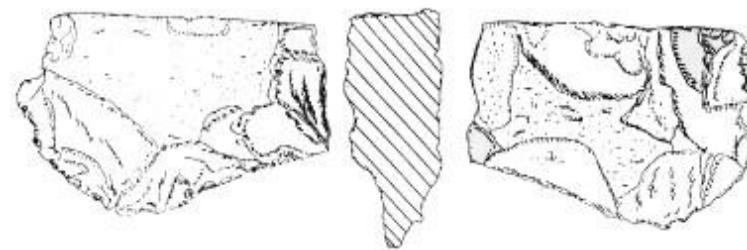
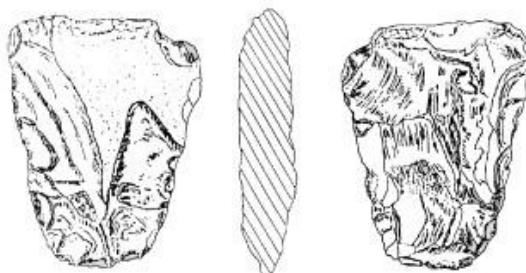
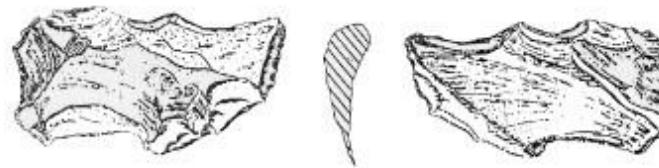
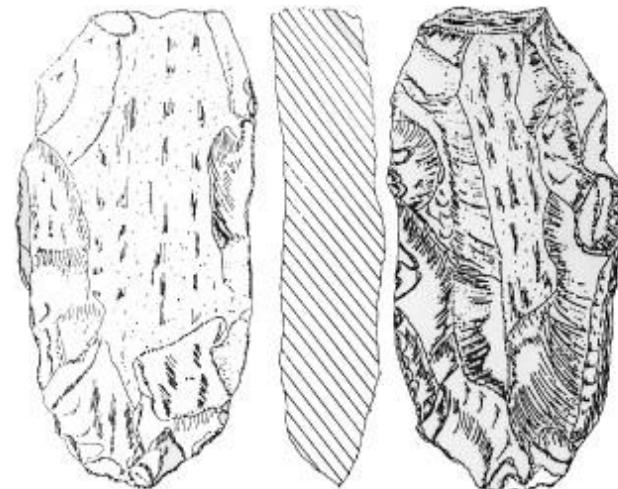
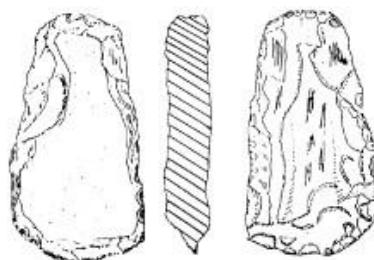
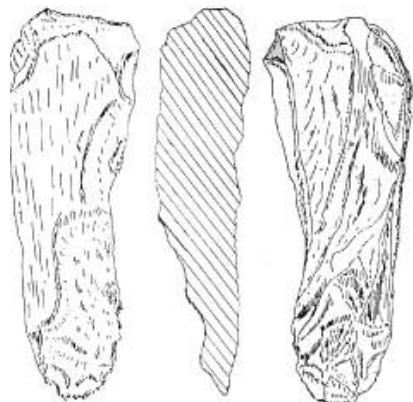
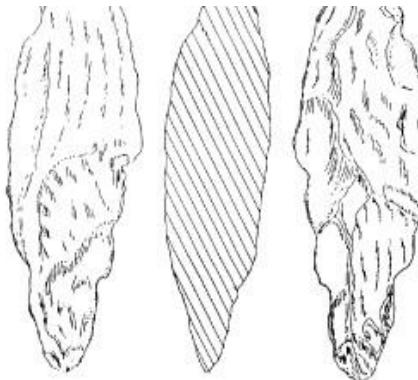
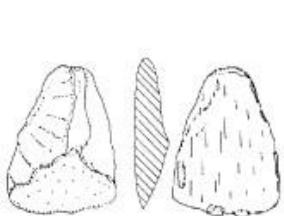


Possibly the earliest epigraph from Bengal. 3rd century BCE. Instructions about a PDS system for the people.

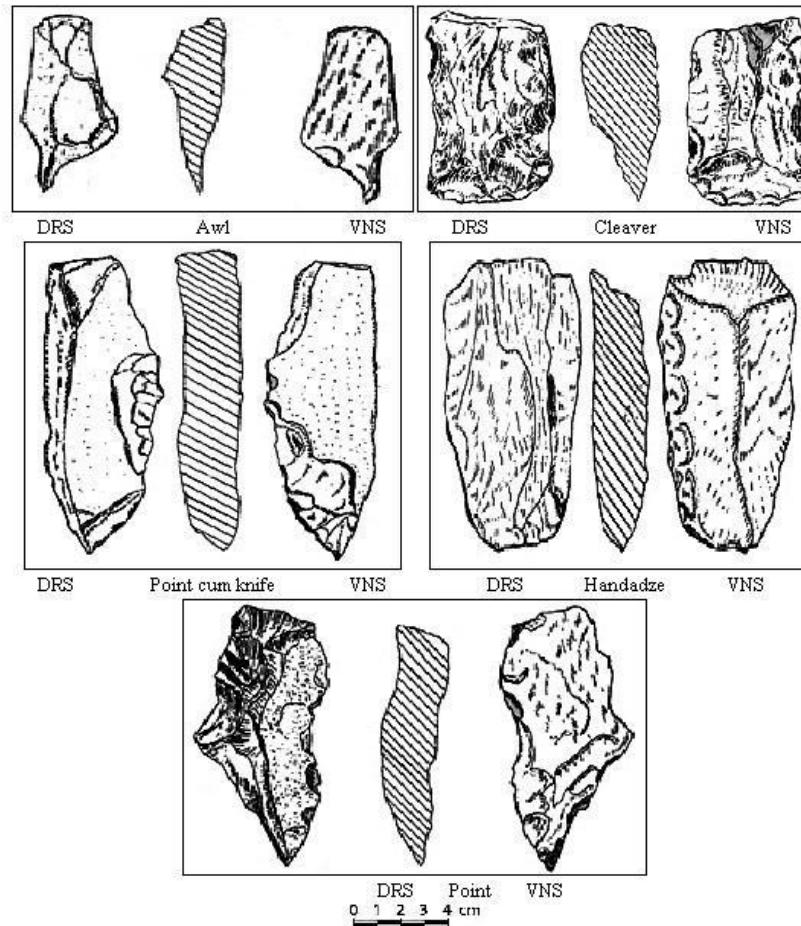
Lalmai-Mainamati Hills



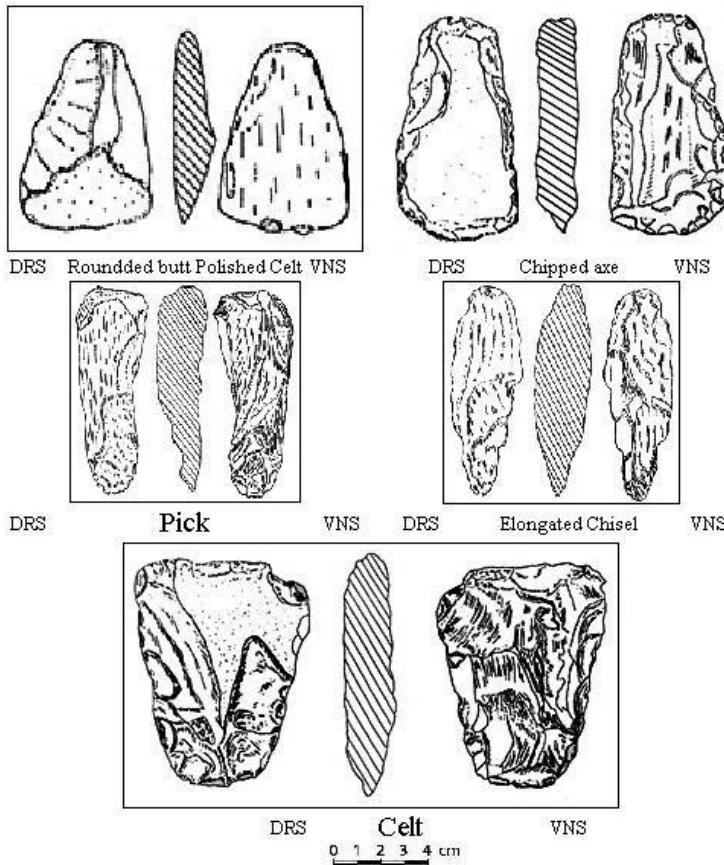
Pre-neolithic Tool Types from Lalmai Hills



Pre-neolithic Tool Types from Lalmai Hills



Neolithic Tool Types from Lalmai Hills



Hand axe found from Lalmai



Neolithic tools found from Wari-Bateshwar



Photo: Sufi Mostafizur Rahman

Neolithic tools found from Wari-Bateshwar



Photo: Sufi Mostafizur Rahman

Neolithic tools found from Wari-Bateshwar



Photo: Sufi Mostafizur Rahman

Ancient *Janapada* of Bengal

- What is Janapada?
 - *Jana* mean People
 - *Pada* means leg
 - **Foothold of a people**
- A place where people kept their legs i.e. settled themselves from the nomadic way of living.

Ancient *Janapadas* of Bengal

- Pundra
- Gaur
- Varendra
- Rarh
- Vanga
- Samatata
- Harikela
- *Absence of Cartographic records to understand the territorial demarcation is the greatest challenge for historians*

- These *Janapadas* are also known as sub-regions or geo-political units.
- They were possibly never unified under a single paramount political power in the pre-1200 CE phase.
- The division of *Janapadas* to a great extent was created by the course of the great rivers of Bengal.
- Their boundaries often varied with the variation of the river courses as also with the extension or reduction of political influence of the units or sub-regions (*Janapadas*)

Ancient Janapadas: Pundra

- This Janapada originally denoted northern part of Bengal, i.e. Rajshahi-Bogra-Dinajpur areas of Bangladesh and part of northern sector of West Bengal, India
- In Ancient land records it was mentioned as *Pundravardhana Bhukti*
- The name is based on the name of the tribe Pundra people (*jana*), gradually developed into a territorial unit
- *Pundranagara* identified with Mahasthan, Bogra probably was the center of this unit

For further reading please follow the link

<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Pundranagara>

Ancient *Janapada*: Varendra/Varendri

- Another geographical unit
- Which was co-extensive with large tracts of North Bengal,
- In the *Ramacarita* of Sandhyakaranandi (written in the 12th century CE), it is stated that *Varendramandala* forms the best part of the world, and *Pundravardhana* is its crest-jewel (*varendri-mandala-churamani*)

For further reading please follow the link

<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Varendra>

Ancient *Janapadas*: Gaur

- This was an important geo-political entity in Bengal
- the Gaur *janapada* comprised areas of Malda-Murshidabad, Birbhum and Bardhaman of West Bengal, India.
- During the reign of King Shashanka its sway extended both northward and southward.
- Karnasubarna was the capital of Shashanka; identified in the Rajbaridhanga, Murshidabad District, West Bengal
- Kings of Gaur took the title *Gauresvara*

https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Gauda,_Janapada

Ancient *Janapadas*: Rarh

- This *Janapada* roughly denoted areas to the west of the Bhagirathi, i.e. the present districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Bardhaman, Hughly, Howrah and Medinipur in West Bengal.
- It means that Rarh probably included a large part of the Indian state of West Bengal.

- Geographically, it is constituted by lateritic old alluvium flanked by the coalesced fans of rivers Ajay, Damodar, Rupnarayan and Kasai, and the moribund and mature deltas along Bhagirathi-Hughly River.
- It is bordered by the Rajmahal and Chotanagpur hill tracts on the west.
- Padma and Bhagirathi rivers demarcate it from the other sub-units

Ancient Janapadas: Vanga

- This unit is bounded by the two wings of the Ganges
- It included the area covering modern districts of 24-Parganas (both north and south), Hughly, Howrah and Medinipur and parts of Bardhaman (and also parts of Birbhum, Bankura and Nadia) and the coastal region of present Bangladesh up to the mouth of the Padma (or the joint streams of the rivers Padma, Brahmaputra, Meghna and Yamuna).
- It constitutes the main part of the Bengal delta
- The boundaries of Vanga have changed from time to time

For further reading please follow the link

<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Vanga>

Ancient *Janapadas*: Samatata

- It was a flat coastal land
- A well demarcated ancient *Janapada* located in the southeastern part of Bengal.
- This territorial unit roughly corresponded to the region east of the River Meghna, i.e. Noakhali, Comilla, Chittagong and adjacent areas in present Bangladesh and some parts of present Tripura in India

For further reading please follow the link

<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Samatata>

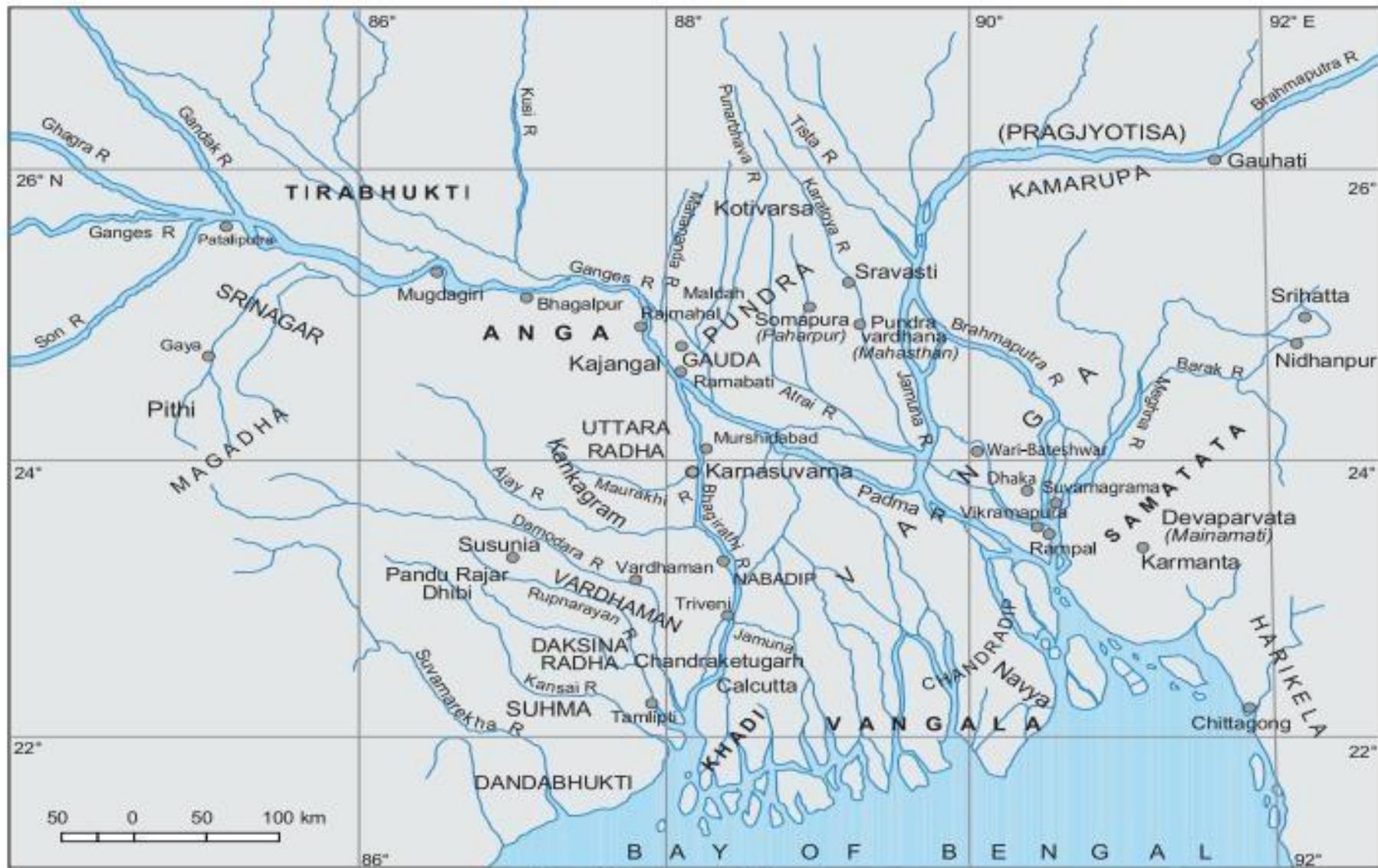
Ancient Janapadas: *Harikela*

- It was another distinct unit in the Trans-Meghna region,
- A separate political entity in the coastal tract of Chittagong and its neighboring areas.
- the capital of *Harikela* has been identified with present *Vara-uthan* or *Borodhan* village of Patiya Upazila in Chittagong district

- With the growth of political power, the limits of Harikela kingdom extended to incorporate areas of Noakhali, Comilla, Tripura and Sylhet.
- The inclusion of these territories within Harikela gave it a fairly well-defined natural boundary:
- the Bay of Bengal to its south, hill tracts of Chittagong, Tripura, Cachar and the Lushai hills to its east and north-east and Jaintia hills to the north, the Meghna and the Surma formed its western boundary.

For further reading please follow the link

<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Harikela>



- But it must be said that it is not possible to make any water tight limits between *Samatata* and *Harikela*.
- It is generally held that Comilla-Noakhali area formed the core territory of *Samatata*, while the coastal tract of Chittagong formed *Harikela*'s core

Vanga to Bangladesh

Vanga to Bangladesh

An Etymological Journey

- Ancient *Janapadas* of Bengal were: Pundra, Gaur, Varendra, Rarh, Vanga, Samatata, Harikela
- Among these Vanga-Harikela-Samatata was located within the border of present Bangladesh
- Pundra-Varendra was spread over the Northern part of Bangladesh and it includes few parts of West Bengal, India.

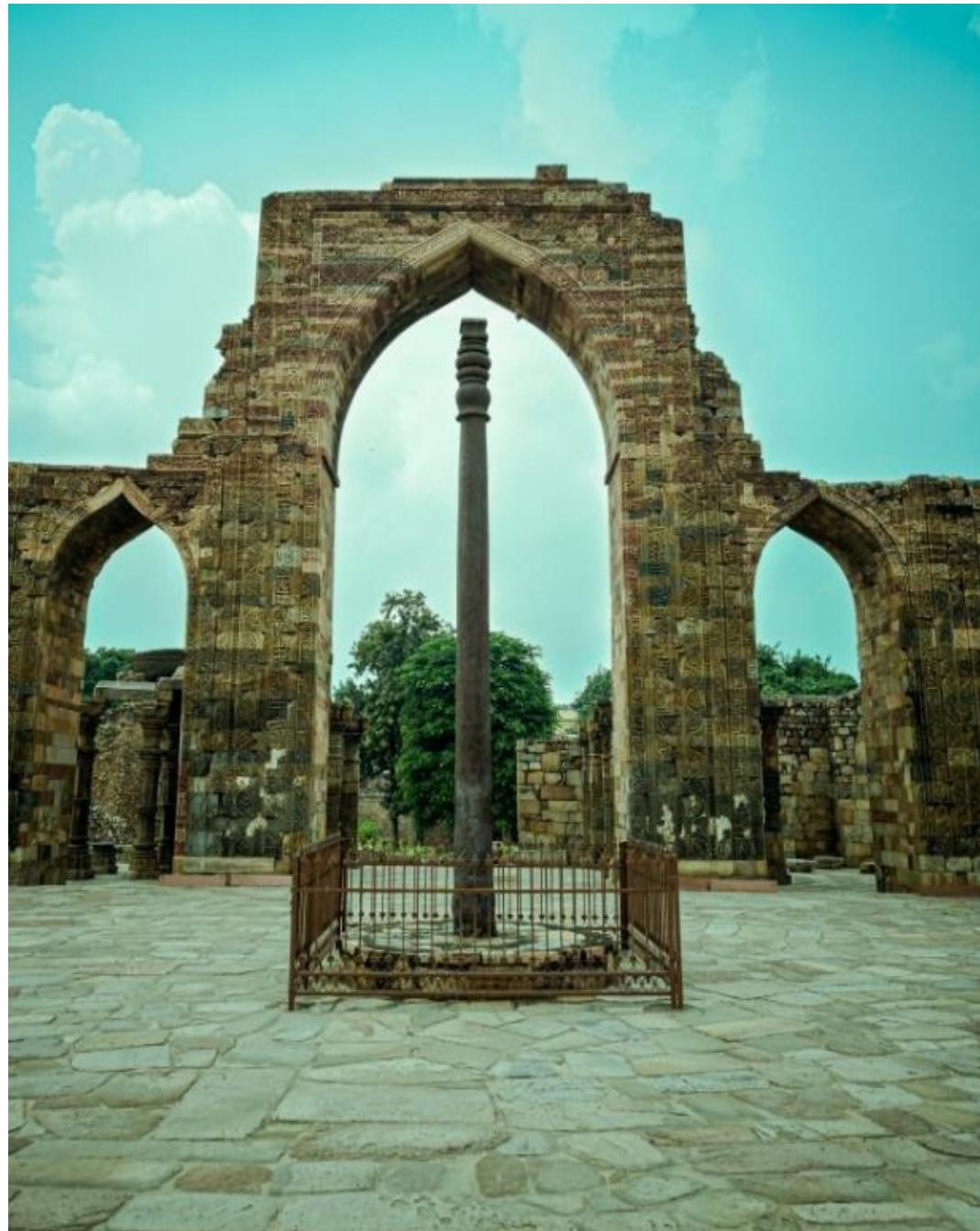
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स्वदपयकेऽः प्रासमुद्गामुमुडाकिर्णः शाह गव्यैः । राजयदंत्सरावके नैकलारथ्येषु धीः नैकलाकुर
 आसमुडकिर्णांगना माँनांकनपवल्लम्लाँ॥ यथाविद्विद्वाग्निनी नाँ यथाकामाद्विना
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 त्वाधिली॥ यश्विजिशी वृलाँ पजायेग्नमधिनी॥ जोर्ज्जवेत्यक्षविद्यानी॥
 शोवनविषयेषिली॥ वार्द्धकमनिवलीनी युग्मनाकेनव्यजी॥ नव्युलामन्वयीवक्ष
 नव्यविरुद्धापिमना नक्तुलीः कर्णमाश्य चायनीयताविगः॥ वृन्दिकृष्णकी॥ गैर
 इति खड्डु नैकलारथ्येषु धीः । विवाह अनिष्टव्येवर्गमहामहिभास्यै

Kalidasha's *Raghubamsha* (4th-5th century)

- The mighty Raghu had fight with the people living in Vanga region.
- He exterminated the *Vangas*
- Vanga was located between the extreme mouths of the Ganges
- They were very skilled in Naval Fighting
- Raghu then set up pillars of victory in the islands situated in between the channels of the Ganges (the Bhagirathi and the Padma)

- The Meherauli Iron Pillar Inscription of king Candra mentioned the conquest of Vanga-Samatata area (land watered by the lower streams of the Ganges).



Vangaladesha:

A name found in Chola Inscription

- The name is found in a south Indian Chola Inscriptions called the Tirumulai inscription of Rajendra Chola's (1012-1044 CE)
- It records an expedition sometime before 1024 CE, and roughly between 1021 CE and 1024 CE.

- Its apparent object, as expressed in the Chola records, was to bring the holy water of the Ganges in order to sanctify his own kingdom.
- The Cola general destroyed Dharmapala in a fierce battle.
- The Chola army forcibly attacked *Vangaladesha*,
- It is a land where the rain water never stopped,
- The King of *Vangaladesha* was Govindacandra, who fled from his kingdom instead of resisting the Chola attack

Bangalah

- Sultan Shamsuddin Iliyas Shah united Satgaon, Lakhnauti and Sonargaon by the middle of the 14th century and came to be known as *Shah-i-Bangalah*
- From that time onwards the whole of Bengal was under a unified rule and came to be known as *Bangalah*.

For further reading please follow the link
<https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Bangalah>



Subah Bangala

- The Mughal Provinces were known as *Subah*
- It was one of the Province of Emperor Akbar
- Abul Fazl, the court historian of Akbar wrote that Bengal was one of the fifteen *subahs* of the Mughal Empire



- Abul Fazl mentioned a very important factor regarding the naming of the ‘*Subah Bangala*’ that:
 - The original name of Bengal was *Banga*.
 - Its former rulers raised mounds throughout the province which were called *Al* (embankment)
 - From this suffix, the name *Bangala* took it rise and currency

Bengal Province of the British India

- British Province of Bengal included Bihar and Orissa since 1765 CE
- It was admittedly much too large for a single province of British India.
- It was divided in 1905, which known as The Partition of Bengal, 1905
- Before the Partition Bengal Province covered an area of 189,000 sq miles
- In 1903 the population of the province was 78.50 million

Eastern Bengal and Assam Province

- The capital was set up at Dhaka and subsidiary headquarters at Chittagong.
- It covered an area of 106,540 sq. miles with a population of 31 million comprising 18 million Muslims and 12 million Hindus
- A clear division between these two communities was created by the British administrators of India.

East Bengal

- On 15 July 1947, the Indian Independence Act of the British Parliament ended the British rule in India on 15 August 1947.
- It also stipulated that the partition of India into two sovereign dominions : India and Pakistan.
- East Bengal and West Pakistan formed the state of Pakistan
- The power was finally officially transferred to Pakistan and India on 14 and 15 August respectively

East Pakistan

- East Pakistan was renamed from East Bengal in 1955
- Pakistani Prime Minister Mohammad Ali actively operated this reform
- One Unit programme: It merged the four provinces of West Pakistan (West Punjab, Sind, NWFP and Baluchistan) into one single province
- The act was passed 30 September 1955 in the



March 2, 1971 Faculty of Arts University of Dhaka

The independence of Bangladesh was declared in 26 March, 1971 and after a fierce battle the victory came on 16 December 1971.

For further reading please follow the link

https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php?title=Political_Geography

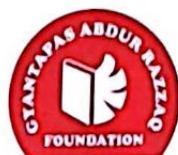
জ্ঞানতাপস আব্দুর রাজ্জাক পুণিজন বক্তৃতামালা
পর্ব ২ বক্তৃতা ১

ধর্মীয় বঙ্গবাদ

প্রাক-ঔপনিবেশিক বাংলায়

বক্তা

ড. আবদুল মমিন চৌধুরী
ফেলো, বাংলাদেশ এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটি



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২২ এপ্রিল ২০১৯, সোমবার বিকেল ৪.৩০টা
মুজাফফর আহমেদ চৌধুরী অডিটোরিয়াম
ঢাকা বিশ্ববিদ্যালয়



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ড. আবদুল মিন চৌধুরী

আজকের বঙ্গতার মূল বিষয়ে যাওয়ার আগে আমি বোধ করছি যে, সাম্প্রতিক বিষয়ে জ্ঞানচর্চায় ঐতিহাসিকের ভূমিকার কার্যকারিতা সম্পর্কে কিছুটা আলোকপাত করা প্রয়োজন। পেশাগতভাবে ঐতিহাসিক অতীত নিয়েই ব্যস্ত থাকেন, কিন্তু ভবিষ্যৎ 'সমাজ' নির্মাণেও তার ভূমিকা অত্যন্ত তাৎপর্যপূর্ণ। আপাতদৃষ্টিতে উক্তিটি আত্মবিরোধী বলে মনে হলেও সত্যবিরোধী নয়। ঐতিহাসিকের দৃষ্টি সব সময়ই নিবন্ধিত থাকে ঐতিহাসিক প্রেক্ষাপটে তার সমাজের অভূদ্যয় ও বিবর্তনকে বোঝার দিকে। ফলে ঐতিহাসিকগণ সমাজের একটি চিত্র উপস্থাপন করায় নিজেকে ব্যাপ্ত রাখেন। এখানে 'সমাজ' শব্দটিকে পরিব্যঙ্গ অর্থে ব্যবহার করা হয়েছে: মানব জীবনের প্রত্যেকটি কর্মকাণ্ডই 'সমাজ'-এর অন্তর্ভুক্ত। অতীতের সাক্ষ্য-প্রমাণ নিয়ে ঘাঁটাঘাঁটি করতে গিয়ে ঐতিহাসিক তার সমসাময়িক ধ্যান-ধারণা দ্বারা প্রভাবিত হতে বাধ্য। তাই ইতিহাসের ব্যাখ্যান অনেক সময়ই দ্বিমুখী প্রক্রিয়া বলে মনে হতে পারে-বর্তমানের প্রয়োজন অতীতে খুঁজে বেড়ানোর প্রক্রিয়া কিংবা অতীতের প্রতিচ্ছবি বর্তমানের ওপর চাপিয়ে দেওয়ার প্রবণতা থাকা মোটেও অস্বাভাবিক নয়। এই প্রতিচ্ছবি সমসাময়িক রাজনৈতিক কল্পনা-প্রসূত অতিকথা সৃষ্টিতেও সাহায্য করতে পারে। এ-ধরনের রাজনৈতিক প্রচারণার সহায়ক ভূমিকায় অনেক সময়ই ঐতিহাসিক বা সমাজবিজ্ঞানীর সৃষ্টি-জ্ঞানকে ব্যবহার করতে দেখা যায়।

দৃষ্টান্তস্বরূপ দুটি ঘটনাকে আনা যায় : (১) হিটলার বা অন্যান্য ফ্যাসিবাদীরা আর্যজাতির সবোর্চ স্থানের ধারণাকে সম্বৃদ্ধ করেছে; (২) হিন্দু ও মুসলমান দুটি ভিন্ন 'নেশন' ধারণাটিকে পাকিস্তান সৃষ্টির প্রক্রিয়ায় ব্যবহার করা হয়েছে, যদিও পরবর্তীকালে বাংলাদেশের অভূদ্যয় ধারণাটি যে ভান্ত তা স্পষ্ট করে দিয়েছে। এ-ধরনের বিকৃত যৌক্তিকতার মাধ্যমে একদিকে বর্তমানের ধ্যানধারণা অতীতের উপর চাপিয়ে দেওয়া হচ্ছে। অপরদিকে ঐতিহাসিকের ব্যাপারে নিশ্চয়ই এমন একটা ধারণা জন্মাচ্ছে যে, পূর্বনির্ধারিত ধারণাকে প্রতিষ্ঠিত করার উদ্দেশ্যেই অতীতকে পর্যালোচনা করে প্রচারার্থে ব্যবহার করা হচ্ছে। তাই স্পষ্ট করে বলে রাখা প্রয়োজন যে, বর্তমান বঙ্গার এ-ধরনের কোনো ধ্যান-ধারণার প্রতিই আকর্ষণ নেই। এ-প্রসঙ্গে আমাদের

স্মরণ রাখতে হবে যে, বিগত শতাব্দীকালে ইতিহাসশাস্ত্রের অনুসন্ধান বীতি ও উপসংহার টানার বীতিতে অনেক পরিবর্তন এসেছে। ঘটনার বর্ণনার চাইতে ঘটনার বিশ্লেষণ প্রাধান্য পাচ্ছে। বর্তমানের ইতিহাসবিদ অনেক অসচেতন হয়েছেন, একদিকে ইতিহাসের উপাস্তের প্রকৃতি সমক্ষে, অন্যদিকে তার নিজের লেখনির সামাজিক ও রাজনৈতিক প্রভাব সম্পর্কে। ঐতিহাসিক এখন যথেষ্ট সচেতন হয়েছেন যে, বিদ্বজ্জনোচিত চারিত্রিক সততা রক্ষা করে তাকে সমাজে এখন যথেষ্ট সচেতন হয়েছেন যে, *'The time has come for us to free ourselves from the necessary polemics of the history writing of the colonial period. We should acquire the confidence of critically assessing our own culture and history.'*

ঐতিহাসিকের পক্ষে উপর্যুক্ত কৈফিয়ৎ দেওয়ার প্রয়োজন বোধ করছি এই কারণে যে, বর্তমানে শুধু বাংলাদেশ নয় বরং সমগ্র দক্ষিণ এশিয়াতেই একটা প্রবণতা লক্ষ্য করা যাচ্ছে যে, অতীতকে সাক্ষ্য হিসেবে উপস্থাপনের প্রচেষ্টা চলছে বিভিন্ন ধ্যান-ধারনা প্রতিষ্ঠিত করার উদ্দেশ্যে। তাই সাক্ষ্য প্রথমেই আমি সবিনয়ে বলতে চাই যে, অতীতের উপাত্ত বিশ্লেষণ করে ঐতিহাসিকের বিচার-প্রথমেই আমি সবিনয়ে বলতে চাই যে, অতীতের উপাত্ত বিশ্লেষণ করে ঐতিহাসিকের বিচার-বিবেচনা প্রয়োগ করে একটা উপসংহার উপস্থাপন করতে আমার এই ক্ষুদ্র প্রয়াস। বিষয়বস্তুর ব্যপকতা এই সীমিত পরিসরে তুলে ধরা যে অত্যন্ত কষ্টসাধ্য বা প্রায় দুঃসাধ্য তা মেনে নিয়েই আমার এই প্রয়াস। আমি এ-বিষয়ে সজাগ যে, আমার বক্তব্য সর্বৈব সত্য এবং গ্রহণীয়-এমন দাবি করার দুঃসাহস আমার নেই। এই প্রবন্ধ রচনায় প্রেরণা যুগিয়েছে ঐতিহাসিকের সমাজ সচেতনতা ও ভবিষ্যত সমাজের প্রতি দিগ্নির্দেশনার অন্যতম দায়িত্ববোধ থেকে।

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আমাদের আজকের আলোচনায় একটি প্রত্যয়, সংস্কৃতি (culture) অত্যন্ত গুরুত্বপূর্ণ এবং তাৎপর্যবহু। কারণ সমাজ, ধর্ম, কিংবা সামাজিক ধারণা 'বহুত্বাদ' সবই সংস্কৃতি-প্রসূত এবং সংস্কৃতির অন্তর্ভুক্ত। সামাজিক বিজ্ঞানে 'culture' (সংস্কৃতি) এমন একটি প্রত্যয় যার কেন্দ্রে একক ব্যাখ্যা দেওয়া প্রায় অসম্ভব। তবুও ব্যাখ্যাদানের প্রচেষ্টায় 'culture'-এর তিনটি

আভিধানিক অর্থ অত্যন্ত তাৎপর্যপূর্ণ। আমরা কি লক্ষ্য করেছি যে, শব্দটির অধিক তাৎপর্যপূর্ণ ব্যবহার ক্রিয়াপদ (verb) হিসেবে; বিশেষ্য (noun) হিসেবে ব্যবহার শুরু হয় ক্রিয়াপদ হিসেবে ব্যবহারের কর্মকাণ্ড থেকে। ক্রিয়াপদ হিসেবে ব্যবহার-to culture- এর অর্থ দাঢ়ায় আবাদ করা, শস্য ফলানো, বিকাশ সাধন করা, সংস্কৃত করা বা পরিমার্জিত করা। তাই এমনও চিন্তা করা অসমিচীন হবে না যে, culture বা সংস্কৃতি হচ্ছে মানবজীবনকে পরিশীলিতকরণের প্রচেষ্টায় মানুষের হস্তক্ষেপ বা অবদান। ধীরে ধীরে এই হস্তক্ষেপ ব্যক্তি ও সমাজের মধ্যে একটি সাধারণ ক্ষেত্র তৈরি করে নেয়।

‘সংস্কৃতি’র মতো ‘সমাজ’ও এমন একটি শব্দ যার ব্যপক পরিধি বুঝে নেওয়া প্রয়োজন এবং আমাদের আজকের আলোচনায় এর ব্যবহারও সংজ্ঞায়িত করে নেওয়া প্রয়োজন। সমাজের উজ্জ্বল ঘটে এমন সব মানুষের মধ্যে পারস্পরিক ক্রিয়া-প্রক্রিয়া উজ্জ্বল জটিল সংশ্রয় থেকে, যারা স্বীকৃত পদ্ধতিতে জীবনযাত্রা পরিচালনা করে থাকেন। তাদের জীবনযাত্রায় বা চিন্তা-চেতনায় এক সাথে ও সমভাবে বসবাস করার প্রবল ইচ্ছা থাকে। এ-রকম সমাজ গড়ার জন্য প্রয়োজন চালিকাশক্তির, যা শাসক শ্রেণি হতে পারে বা শাসনের মৌলিক আদর্শও হতে পারে। সামাজিক মূল্যবোধ সৃষ্টি বা নৈতিক ধ্যান-ধারনা দ্বারা সমাজ পরিচালনার জন্য অদৃশ্য শক্তির প্রয়োজন থাকতে পারে।

সমাজতাত্ত্বিকরা ‘সংস্কৃতি’র যেসব সংজ্ঞা দিয়েছেন, তা মোটেও সরল বা সহজ নয়; সংক্ষিপ্তও নয় এবং অবশ্যই জটিল। উনিশ শতকের দ্বিতীয়ার্দে এডওয়ার্ড টেইলর সংজ্ঞা দিতে গিয়ে বলেছিলেন, মানুষের বিশ্বাস, আচার-আচরণ এবং জ্ঞানের একটি সমন্বিত প্যাটার্নকে বলা যায় সংস্কৃতি। ভাষা, সাহিত্য ধারণা, ধর্ম ও বিশ্বাস; রীতিনীতি, সামাজিক মূল্যবোধ ও নিয়মকানুন; উৎসব ও পার্বণ; শিল্পকর্ম এবং প্রতিদিনের কাজে লাগে এমন হাতিয়ার ইত্যাদি সব কিছু নিয়েই সংস্কৃতি। সমাজের সদস্য হিসেবে মানুষ যেসব শিক্ষা, সামর্থ্য ও অভ্যাস আয়ত্ত করে, তাও সংস্কৃতির অঙ্গ। নিশ্চাসের বায়ু যেমন আমাদের চারদিক থেকে ঘিরে রাখে, তার অভিত্ব অনুভব করি, অথচ তাকে দেখতে পাইনে, সংস্কৃতি তেমনি। সংস্কৃতি মানুষকে ‘মানুষ’ করে। সংস্কৃতির মাধ্যমেই একটা মূল্যবোধ, ধ্যান-ধারণা জন্মায়। সংস্কৃতি বিদ্যমান রুচির সুশীল মানুষ গড়ে তোলে। সংস্কৃতির কারণেই আমরা যা, তা হয়েছি।

একই সাথে আমাদের মনে রাখতে হবে যে, সংস্কৃতির অবয়ব আদৌ সাদামাটা অথবা একমাত্রিক নয়। পূর্ব আর পশ্চিম বঙ্গের রান্না অথবা হিন্দু আর মুসলমানের রান্না এক নয়। তার চাইতে আরো

গুরুত্বপূর্ণ হচ্ছে সংস্কৃতির ঘনপ অনড় নয়। কোনো এক জায়গায় তা দাঁড়িয়ে থাকে না; সংস্কৃতির ধারা কালপ্রবাহে বিবর্তিত হবেই। কিন্তু এই বিচিত্র প্রবহমান সংস্কৃতির ধারার মধ্যেও কিছু কিছু বৈশিষ্ট্য আছে, যা শাশুত, যা চিরস্তন। আর এই শাশুত বৈশিষ্ট্যসমূহ সংস্কৃতিকে বিশেষায়িত করে। তাই সাধারণভাবে বলা যায় ‘সংস্কৃতি’ ও ‘ইতিহাস’ গভীরভাবে পরস্পর-ঝুঁঠিত দুটি বিষয় এবং উভয়ই যুগপৎভাবে বিবর্তনশীল। আর এই বিবর্তন প্রক্রিয়ায় সদানিয়ত সংলাপ চলছে অতীতের সাথে বর্তমানের। আর এই মিথ্যাই সমাজকে মাঝে মাঝে আন্দোলিত করে, আবার কখনো কখনো সমাজের জন্য দিগন্দর্শন প্রদান করে।

সামাজিক বিজ্ঞানে ‘সংস্কৃতি’ ক্রমান্বয়ে এমন একটি ধারণায় পর্যবসিত হয়, যা মূলত সমাজের বহুবিধি কর্মকাণ্ডের ‘প্যাটার্ন’কে ইংগিত করে- সমাজ গড়া থেকে সমাজের বিবিধ কার্যবলী ও ধ্যান-ধারণা (ideas) সংস্কৃতির অবিচ্ছেদ্য অংশ হয়ে দাঁড়ায়। একটি উদহারণ হয়তো বিষয়টি আরো একটু স্পষ্টভাবে বুঝতে সাহায্য করবে। প্রাথমিক পর্যায়ে কোন কোন ক্ষেত্রে একটি বয়নশিল্পের উৎপাদিত দ্রব্য হিসেবেই ধরা হতো। কালক্রমে এই দ্রব্য একটি শিল্প (art) হিসেবেই সংস্কৃতির অন্তর্ভূক্ত হবে বা হয়েছে।

সামাজিক সংস্কৃতিতে ধর্মের ভূমিকা বা স্থান বিষয়টি আমাদের আজকের আলোচনায় খুবই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ। এখানে প্রথমেই একটি বিষয়ে স্পষ্ট করে নেওয়া প্রয়োজন যে, ধর্মের ভূমিকাটি মানব-সৃষ্ট এবং এর একটি পার্থিব উদ্দেশ্য রয়েছে, অবশ্য এ-বিষয়টিও অঙ্গীকার করার কোনো অবকাশ নেই যে, পরকালে বিশ্বাস ও পরকালে পুরুষ হওয়ার আশ্চাস ধর্মের প্রসারের সাথে অবকাশ নেই যে, পুত্ররাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত। সুতরাং ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকা ‘বিশ্বাস’ (belief/faith) থেকে অবশ্যভাবীভাবে জড়িত।

বিভিন্নরূপে ধর্মের সামাজিক ভূমিকার প্রকাশ ঘটে: একদিকে যেমন রয়েছে শামানদের বিশ্বাস যে, তারা অন্য জগতের সাথে যোগাযোগ রক্ষা করে; তেমনি অন্যদিকে রয়েছে বর্তমানের রাজনৈতিক ও অর্থনৈতিক নিয়ন্ত্রণ বিভিন্ন ধর্মীয় প্রতিষ্ঠানের (যেগুলিকে আবার সামাজিক প্রতিষ্ঠান বলেও ধরা হয়ে থাকে) মাধ্যমে। শেষোক্ত প্রক্রিয়াটি আধুনিক বিশ্বের বেশ জটিল একটি কর্মপন্থা। ধর্ম ও রাজনীতির মধ্যে পারস্পরিক ক্রিয়া-প্রক্রিয়ার ক্ষেত্রে এ-বিষয়টি বেশ তাৎপর্যপূর্ণ। যদিও এ-বিষয়ে বাংলার প্রেক্ষাপটে বিস্তৃত ও নিগৃঢ় গবেষণা এখন পর্যন্ত হয়নি বলেই

আমাদের ধারণা। তবে শাসকশ্রেণিকে (বিশেষ করে বংশানুক্রমিক শাসক) নিয়ে ইতিহাসে পর্যাণ না হলেও কিছু গবেষণা হয়েছে। শাসকদের নিজেদের ধর্ম; হোক তারা বৌদ্ধ, জৈন, বৈষ্ণব, শৈব, সিয়া বা সুন্নি, বা অন্য কিছু; তা সব সময়ই নির্দিষ্ট করে উল্লেখ করা হয়েছে। এ-পর্যন্তই, এর চাইতে বেশি কিছু উল্লেখের প্রবণতা লক্ষ্য করা যায় না। ঐতিহাসিকরা যখন অনুসন্ধান করতে চাইছেন যে, শাসকদের এই ধর্মীয় পরিচয় বা আত্মপ্রতিকরণ (identity) কীভাবে সমাজ বা সামাজিক প্রতিষ্ঠানের ক্রিয়াকলাপে ব্যবহার করা হয়েছে। অন্যভাবে বলা যায় বৌদ্ধ বা জৈন শাসকরা কি অন্যান্য ধর্মাবলম্বীদের প্রতি ভিন্ন রাষ্ট্রীয় নীতি গ্রহণ করেছিলেন? কিংবা ধর্ম বিষয়ে তাদের নীতিই বা কেমন ছিল?

বাংলার ইতিহাসে তুর্কি, আফগান, মোঘল শাসন এখনও ইতিহাসে অতি সরলভাবে হিন্দু জনগোষ্ঠীর উপর মুসলিম শাসন বলে অভিহিত হয়ে থাকে। কিন্তু ধর্মীয় অভিধায় পরিচিতি এখন প্রায় বিলুপ্তির পথে। শুধু ধর্মই যে সংস্কৃতি সৃষ্টিতে একক ভূমিকা রাখে একথা বলার দিন পাল্টে গেছে। এখন অবশ্যই বলতে কোনো দ্বিধা নেই যে, সব সমাজেই বহুবিধ সংস্কৃতির সমাহার এবং যে-কোনো একটি সমগ্র সমাজের প্রতিনিধিত্ব করতে পারে না।

এতক্ষণ সমাজবিজ্ঞানের অতি প্রয়োজনীয় দু'একটি ধারণাকে (concept) বর্তমান প্রবন্ধের প্রেক্ষাপট সৃষ্টির উদ্দেশ্যে অতি সংক্ষেপে পর্যালোচনার চেষ্টা করেছি, এবং আমি একথা স্বীকার করতে একটুও কুঠা বোধ করবো না যে, আমার পর্যালোচনায় কেবল মুখ্য কয়েকটি ধারণাকে তুলে আনার চেষ্টা করা হয়েছে। উপসংহারে রোমিলা থাপারের উপর ভর করে বলবো, “Culture is the pattern of living of all segments of a society, and since there are many patterns there are many cultures with many activities that sustain a society. Cultures of the past are the ingredients of heritage.... I am not arguing for counterfactual history [or a manufactured heritage] but for an extension of what we know, and that too in the form of enquiry.”^১

বর্তমানে বিশ্বাস করা হয় এবং বলা হয়, বাঙালি তার দীর্ঘ ঐতিহাসিক অভিজ্ঞতায় বিভিন্ন ধর্মের সংস্পর্শে এমন এক সামাজিক আচার-আচরণের ঐতিহ্য গড়ে তুলেছিল, যা আধুনিক দৃষ্টিভঙ্গিতে ‘ধর্মীয় বহুবাদ’ (Religious Pluralism) ধারণাটির প্রায় কাছাকাছি বা সমার্থক। আমাদের চেষ্টা হবে এ-ঐতিহ্যকে আরও স্পষ্টভাবে তুলে ধরা। তাই শুরুতেই ‘ধর্মীয় বহুবাদ’ ধারণাটি স্পষ্ট করে নেওয়া প্রয়োজন।

সমাজবিজ্ঞানে ধর্মীয় চরম উত্তার বিপরীতেই ‘বহুবাদ’ ধারণাটি ব্যবহার করা হয়। সাদামাটাভাবে ‘ধর্মীয় বহুবাদ’কে সংজ্ঞায়িত করা হয় বিভিন্ন ধর্মাবলম্বীদের শান্তিপূর্ণ সম্পর্ক ও সহাবস্থান বোঝানোর জন্য। ‘বহুবাদ’ ধারণাটি প্রাচীন গ্রিকদের চিন্তা-চেতনায় প্রথম দেখা যায়। গ্রিক ঐতিহাসিক হেরোডোটাস ও জ্বেনোফোন গ্রিক, মিশরীয় ও পারস্যের সাংস্কৃতিক বিভিন্নতার প্রতি দৃষ্টি আকর্ষণ করে উপসংহার টেনেছিলেন যে, শতাব্দীকাল ধরে সভ্যতার অগ্রগতি ঘটেছিল বিভিন্ন জাতি, ধর্মবিশ্বাস, ভাষা ও সংস্কৃতি ধারণকারী মানবগোষ্ঠীর মিথ্যাক্ষেত্রে। ধারণাটি আরো স্পষ্ট করা প্রয়োজন:

- (ক) ‘ধর্মীয় বহুবাদ’ ধারণাটিতে স্বীকার করে নেওয়া হয় যে, কোনো একটি ধর্মই সত্যের একক ও বিশিষ্ট উৎস নয়; অন্য ধর্মগুলোতেও সত্য ও মূল্যবোধ রয়েছে।
- (খ) অনেক সময় একই ধর্মের বিভিন্ন সম্প্রদায় বা বিভিন্ন ধর্মাবলম্বীদের মধ্যে সহযোগিতা ও পারস্পরিক সমরোতা বৃদ্ধি করাকে বোঝায়, যা ইংরেজি ভাষায় ‘ecumenism’।
- (গ) প্রত্যয়টি ধর্মীয় সহিষ্ণুতা অর্থেও ব্যবহৃত হয়ে থাকে। সহিষ্ণুতা ধর্মীয় সহাবস্থানেরই পূর্ব শর্ত।
- (ঘ) ইউরোপীয় দার্শনিক হব্স তাঁর লেভিয়াথান-এ এই মর্মে মত প্রকাশ করেছিলেন যে, সমাজে শান্তি বিরাজ করবে কেবল ঐ সময়ে যখন একটি মাত্র ধর্ম বিদ্যমান থাকবে। ১৬৮৯ সনে জন লক্টার কনসার্নিং টলারেশন-এ হব্সের বিরোধিতা করে ধর্মীয় বহুবাদের ধারণা গ্রহণ করার প্রয়োজনীয়তা তুলে ধরেন। তিনি রাষ্ট্র ও চার্চের ক্ষমতার মধ্যে বিভিন্নতা তুলে ধরে বলেন, রাষ্ট্র নাগরিকদের বৈচিত্র্যকে রক্ষা করবে এবং নাগরিক স্বাধীনতা নিশ্চিত করবে। অন্যদিকে চার্চ অবশ্যই নাগরিক সমাজের অন্য ধর্মের প্রতি

সহনশীল হবে এবং ধর্মীয় স্বাধীনতাকে স্বীকৃতি দেবে।^৭ আঠারো শতকের ইউরোপের জ্ঞানদীপ্ত যুগের (Enlightenment) দার্শনিকবৃন্দ ধর্মীয় সংঘাতের বিরোধিতা করে বলেছিলেন, রাষ্ট্র ও চার্চ উভয়কেই সহনশীল হতে হবে।

সম্প্রতি John H. Evans ধর্মীয় ক্ষেত্রে 'বহুত্ববাদ' প্রত্যয়টিকে বর্তমান যুক্তরাষ্ট্রের প্রেক্ষাপটে *Gods in America* এন্ডের 'Religious Pluralism in Modern America: A Sociological Overview' অধ্যায়ে লিখেছেন-

"....the term 'pluralism' intends something more than 'diversity', which refers to the simple fact that differences exist. Pluralism, rather, involves understanding the diverse religious groups in society for what they are, appreciating them and respecting them; it is a strategy for managing diversity."^৮

এখানে ধরে নেওয়াই হয়েছে যে 'diversity' যুক্তরাষ্ট্র ম্যানেজমেন্ট সমস্যা সৃষ্টি করছে, ফলে 'বহুত্ববাদ' তার বহুব্যাপ্ত অর্থেই সমাজকে বোঝানোর প্রয়োজন দেখা দিয়েছে।

এতক্ষণ 'ধর্মীয় বহুত্ববাদ'কে সংজ্ঞায়িত করার চেষ্টায় যে ব্যাখ্যাসমূহ উপস্থাপন করা হলো সেগুলোকে একত্রিত করে প্রত্যয়টি সম্পর্কে একটা ধারণা নিশ্চয় করা সম্ভব। তা হলো-বর্জন নয় বরং গ্রহণ করার মনোভাব; সহযোগিতা ও বিবিধ ধর্মাবলম্বীদের মধ্যে সমরোতার উন্নয়ন ও বিভিন্ন ধর্মের অনুসারীদের সহাবস্থান। যেহেতু ধর্ম একটি সামাজিক-সাংস্কৃতিক বিষয়, ফলে দীর্ঘসময় ধরে 'বহুত্ববাদ'-এর অবস্থিতি নৈকট্য থেকে পারস্পরিক আদান-প্রদানের পরিবেশ সৃষ্টিতে সহায়তা করে। অবশ্য এ-কথা স্বীকার করতেই হবে যে, মানব সভ্যতার সুনীর্ধ ইতিহাসে এর ব্যতিক্রমও লক্ষ্য করা যায়। তবে এ-ধরণের ব্যতিক্রম 'বহুত্ববাদ'-এর ধারণার বিরুদ্ধে না গিয়ে বরং এর যথার্থতাই প্রমাণ করে। আদিকাল থেকে সাধারণ অব্দের অয়োদশ শতাব্দী পর্যন্ত সময়কালে বাঙালির ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক জীবনের দিকে দৃষ্টিপাত করলে আমাদের কাছে উপর্যুক্ত ধারণাই প্রতীয়মান হয়।

হিন্দু ও বৌদ্ধ ধর্ম উভয়ই ব্রাহ্মণধর্মের ক্রিয়া-প্রতিক্রিয়ার ফল। এই দুই ধর্মাবলম্বীদের সহাবস্থানই বাংলার প্রাচীন যুগের বৈশিষ্ট্য। বিশেষ করে বৌদ্ধ শাসকদের সহনশীল মনোভাব ‘ধর্মীয় বহুত্ববাদ’-এরই বহিপ্রকাশ। একথা এখন প্রায় সবাই স্বীকার করেন যে, বাংলার সভ্যতার ‘ধর্মীয় বহুত্ববাদ’-এরই বহিপ্রকাশ। একথা এখন প্রায় সবাই স্বীকার করেন যে, বাংলার সভ্যতার ভিত্তি অস্ত্রিক ভাষা ব্যবহারকারী ‘নিষদ’দের কৃষিনির্ভর গ্রামীণ জীবনধারা থেকেই গড়ে উঠেছিল। অনেকদিন থেকেই একথা প্রচলিত ছিল যে, ব্রাহ্মণ-সভ্যতার আগমনের পরই বাংলায় উচ্চতর সভ্যতার বিকাশ ঘটে। কিন্তু বিগত পঞ্চাশ বছরে বাংলার ভূ-ভাগে প্রত্বতাত্ত্বিক আবিষ্কার একথা প্রমাণ করেছে যে, সাধারণ অদ্বের পূর্বে প্রথম সহস্রাব্দ থেকেই, বা তার কিছু আগে থেকেই, বাংলার মানুষ বস্ত্রগত ও আধ্যাত্মিক বা আন্তর্জাতিক চিন্তা-চেতনায় বেশ অঙ্গসর ছিল।^১ সুতরাং ব্রাহ্মণ-সংস্কৃতির অনুপ্রবেশের বহু আগে থেকেই বাংলায় মানব সভ্যতার বিকাশ ঘটেছিল। ব্রাহ্মণ ধর্ম-সমাজ-সংস্কৃতি বাংলার ভূ-ভাগে প্রবেশ করার বহু পূর্বেই এখনকার জনগোষ্ঠী সংঘবন্ধ জীবনযাত্রা ও সভ্যতা সৃষ্টিতে অংশী ভূমিকা গ্রহণ করেছিল।

‘নরগোষ্ঠী’ (রেইস) শব্দটি প্রাণিবাচক (জুওলোজিক্যাল), সংস্কৃতিবাচক নয়। নরগোষ্ঠী বাস্তব, ‘নরগোষ্ঠী’ (রেইস) শব্দটি প্রাণিবাচক (জুওলোজিক্যাল), সংস্কৃতিবাচক নয়। নরগোষ্ঠী বাস্তব, ব্যবহারিক ও সাংস্কৃতিক প্রয়োজন ও পরিবেশের প্রভাবে বিবর্তিত ও পরিবর্তিত হয়ে নতুন রূপে রূপান্তরিত হয়ে সৃষ্টি হয় ‘জন’ (পিপল), যে শব্দটি সাংস্কৃতিক, প্রাণিবাচক নয়। ‘জন’-এর সূচনা থেকেই ইতিহাসের সূত্রপাত। বঙ্গা:, রাঢ়া:, পুঁঁড়া:- এদের নিয়েই বাঙালির ইতিহাসের শুরু। সংস্কৃতির অনুপ্রবেশ ঘটে, আর পরবর্তী দুই শতাব্দী কালব্যাপী গুপ্ত শাসনকালে তা দৃঢ় হয়েছে। সংস্কৃতির অনুপ্রবেশ ঘটে, আর পরবর্তী দুই শতাব্দী কালব্যাপী গুপ্ত শাসনকালে তা দৃঢ় হয়েছে। অপেক্ষাকৃত বিলম্বে বাংলায় ব্রাহ্মণ প্রভাবের আগমন বাংলা ও বাঙালির জন্য তাৎপর্যপূর্ণ ছিল। দীর্ঘ পূর্বমুখী বিজ্ঞারকালে (যা সময়ের দিক থেকে সহস্রাধিক বছর এবং দূরত্বের দিক থেকে নির্মুক্ত বিজ্ঞারকালে (যা সময়ের দিক থেকে সহস্রাধিক বছর এবং দূরত্বের দিক থেকে সহস্রাধিক মাইল) ব্রাহ্মণ সংস্কৃতি স্বাভাবিক কারণেই ক্ষীণ হয়ে পড়ে এবং ইত্যবসরে বাংলার আদি জনগোষ্ঠীর সমাজ-সংস্কৃতি ও ধর্মবিশ্বাস দৃঢ় হওয়ার ও বাংলার ‘ব্যক্তিত্ব’তে নিগৃঢ়ভাবে সম্পৃক্ত হওয়ার সুযোগ পায়।

প্রাচীন বাংলার সমাজ, সংস্কৃতি ও ধর্মীয় জীবনে ব্রাহ্মণ সংস্কৃতির প্রভাব স্পষ্টতই ধরা পড়ে। আবার আদি সাংস্কৃতিক উত্তরাধিকারের কারণেই ব্রাহ্মণ-সংস্কৃতির শিথিলতা ও পরিমিতি লক্ষ্য করা যায়। প্রাচীন বাংলার সমাজ-সংস্কৃতিতে যা কিছু বাংলার স্বকীয় বলে মনে হয়, তা নিঃসন্দেহে

জনি সাংস্কৃতিক উত্তরাধিকারের প্রভাব বা বহিরাগত সাংস্কৃতিক প্রভাবের সাথে জ্ঞানীয় আদি সংস্কৃতির সংমিশ্রণের ফল। 'প্রোটোবেঙ্গলি' লিপির উত্তব, দুর্গা দেবীর প্রতি বাংলার বিশেষ আকর্ষণ, তাত্ত্বিক মতবাদের উত্তব ও বিকাশ, বাংলার বিশেষ উত্তরাধিকার আইন (জীমৃতবাহন কর্তৃক নিবন্ধিত) প্রভৃতির কথা দৃষ্টান্তব্রহ্ম উল্লেখ করা যেতে পারে। উপমহাদেশের অন্যান্য অঞ্চলে এসব বৈশিষ্ট্যের অনুপস্থিতি বাংলার বৰ্কীয়তার কথাই ঘোষণা করে।

আর একটি বিষয়ের প্রতি দৃষ্টি দেয়া প্রয়োজন। বাংলায় ব্রাহ্মণ সংস্কৃতি পশ্চিম বাংলায় (রাঢ়, গৌড় ও পুত্রের পশ্চিমাঞ্চল) অনেকটা দৃঢ়ভাবে প্রতিষ্ঠিত হওয়ার সুযোগ পেয়েছিল, কিন্তু দক্ষিণ-পূর্ব বাংলায় (বঙ্গ-সমতট-হরিকেল) সেই সংস্কৃতির প্রভাব তুলনামূলকভাবে অনেক ক্ষীণ। তাই ভাষা-সংস্কৃতি-সমাজ জীবনের প্রায় সর্বক্ষেত্রেই কিছু বিভিন্নতা লক্ষ্য করা যায়। প্রাচীন বাংলায় ব্রাহ্মণ এবং বৌদ্ধ ধর্মে অনেক উদার চিন্তার বিকাশ লক্ষ্য করা যায়। উভয় ধর্মকেই প্রাচীন বাংলার জনগণ নিজের আদি মানসিকতা দিয়ে সিন্ত করে গ্রহণ করেছে। সে-কারণেই হয়তো প্রাচীন বাংলার 'ব্যক্তিত্ব' ধর্মীয় মনোভাবে গোড়ামির অভাব ও সাম্য ভাবনার উপস্থিতি লক্ষ্য করা যায়।

হয়তো এই কারণেই উদারভাবাপন্ন বৌদ্ধ ধর্মকে বাংলা মনেপ্রাণে গ্রহণ করেছিল। এই ধর্মের উদার সাম্যবোধ আর বাংলার ব্যক্তিত্বে মানবতার প্রতি গভীর অনুরাগ একই তরঙ্গে প্রবাহিত হয়েছিল বলেই হয়তো বৌদ্ধ ধর্ম উপমহাদেশের এই পূর্বাঞ্চলীয় ভূভাগেই অধিক অনুসারী পেয়েছিল। অবশ্য দীর্ঘকাল সনাতনী ধর্মের পাশাপাশি অবস্থানের ফলে এবং আত্মকরণ প্রক্রিয়ার ফলে বৌদ্ধধর্মের আদিরূপও বাংলায় বেশিদিন টিকে থাকেনি। ব্রাহ্মণ মতবাদের প্রতি যে বিরোধ ছিল, ধীরে ধীরে তা শিথিল হয়ে উঠেছে। বিরোধের উগ্রতা প্রশ্মিত হয়ে সংমিশ্রণ প্রক্রিয়ার মাধ্যমে উভয়ের মধ্যে সেতুবন্ধের সৃষ্টি হয়েছে। যেসব বিশ্বাস ও আচার-অনুষ্ঠানের বিরুদ্ধে এবং যা প্রত্যাখ্যান করে গৌতম বুদ্ধ তাঁর ধর্মমত প্রবর্তন করেছিলেন, মনে হয় বাংলায় শেষ পর্যন্ত সেই বৌদ্ধাদর্শ তারই কাছে আত্মসমর্পণ করেছিল। এ-পরিবর্তনই বাংলার বৌদ্ধ ধর্মের বজ্রায়ন, অন্ত্রায়ন বা সহজয়ন ও কালচক্রায়ন নামে ভিন্ন রূপ পরিগ্রহ করেছে। বাংলার বৌদ্ধধর্মের এই লোকজ সংস্কৃতি সম্ভবত আদি সাংস্কৃতিক উত্তরাধিকারের কারণেই ঘটেছিল। বাংলার 'সাঙ্গিকরণ'-এর প্রবণতা থেকেই ব্রাহ্মণ ও বৌদ্ধ ধর্মের এই রূপান্তর। নবাগত প্রবাহে গা না ভাসিয়ে দিয়ে দীর্ঘদিন ধরে একটা বোৰাপড়ার মাধ্যমে একটা সমৰ্পণ গড়ে তোলাই বাঙালির ধর্মীয় সংস্কৃতির একটি প্রধান বৈশিষ্ট্য। "দুঃসাহসী সমৰ্পণ, সাঙ্গীকরণ ও সমীকরণ যেন বাঙালির চারিত্রিক বৈশিষ্ট্য; সনাতনত্বের প্রতি একটা বিরাগ যে বাংলার ঐতিহ্য ধারায়। ...বাঙালির বৃত্তি

যথার্থ বৈতসী; যে আদর্শ যে ভাবস্থ্রাতের আলোড়ন, ঘটনার যে তরঙ্গ যখন আনিয়া লাগিয়াছে, বাঙালি তখন বেতসলতার মতো নুইয়া পড়িয়া অনিবার্যবোধে তাহাকে মানিয়া লইয়াছে এবং ক্রমে নিজের মতো করিয়া তাহাকে গড়িয়া লইয়া; নিজের ভাব ও কৃপদেহের মধ্যে তাহাকে সমর্পিত ও সমীকৃত করিয়া লইয়া আবার বেতস লতার মতই সোজা হইয়া ষ-কল্পে দাঁড়াইয়াছে। যে দুর্মর প্রাণশক্তি বেতস গাছের, সেই দুর্মর প্রাণশক্তি বাঙালিকে বারবার দাঁড়াইয়াছে।” নীহাররঞ্জন রায়ের এ-উদ্ভৃতি দিয়েই প্রাচীন বাংলার ব্যক্তিত্বে ধর্মীয়-সংস্কৃতির ষক্রপ তুলে ধরার সমাপ্তি টানছি। এতক্ষণ যে বিষয়াদি উপস্থাপন করেছি তার উদ্দেশ্য ছিল আমার আঙ্গনের আলোচনার প্রেক্ষাপট সৃষ্টি করা।

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আদি মধ্যযুগে বাংলার সামাজিক ও ধর্মীয় জীবনে ব্রাহ্মণ্য প্রভাব যেমন ধরা পড়ে তেমনি আদি সংস্কৃতির উত্তরাধিকারের কারণেই ব্রাহ্মণ্য-বৈশিষ্ট্যেও শিথিলতা ও পরিমিতি লক্ষ করা যায়। আগত সাংস্কৃতিক উপাদানের মধ্যে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ছিল ধর্ম। ব্রাহ্মণ্যধর্ম যে কয়েক শতাব্দীর মধ্যে স্থানীয় বিশ্বাসকে নিজের মধ্যে অনেকটাই সমন্বিত করে নিয়েছিলো, বঙ্গীয় বৈদিক ধর্ম থেকে তার প্রমাণ পাওয়া যায়। এভাবেই অনার্য দেবদেবীর অনুপ্রবেশ ঘটেছিলো হিন্দু ধর্মে। সেই সঙ্গে স্থানীয় ধর্মীয় আচার-অনুষ্ঠানও জায়গা করে নিয়েছিলো ব্রাহ্মণ্য ধর্মে। মোটকথা, আর্যদের আগমনের ফলে স্থানীয় এবং বহিরাগত সংস্কৃতির ক্রিয়া-প্রতিক্রিয়া শুরু হয়েছিল এবং তার ফলে সমন্বয়ের মধ্য দিয়ে আর্য এবং অনার্য উভয়ের ধর্মে পরিবর্তন আসতে শুরু করে। এখান থেকেই বাংলার ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতিতে ‘সমন্বয়’ প্রক্রিয়া বিশেষ স্থান অধিকার করে নেয়। এই ‘সমন্বয়’ই কালক্রমে পরিণত হয় বাংলার ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতির বিশেষ ঐতিহ্যে। ‘সমন্বয়ের মাধ্যমে বিবর্তন’ স্থান করে নেয় বাংলার মানুষের সাংস্কৃতিক মানসিকতায়।

সাধারণ অন্দের পূর্বে তৃতীয় শতকেই বাংলায় বৌদ্ধ ধর্মের আবির্ভাব। বৌদ্ধ পাল-দেব-চন্দ্র রাজাদের শাসনামলে বৌদ্ধ ধর্মের প্রসার ঘটে। বাংলার বৌদ্ধ সংস্কৃতি তদানীন্তন বিশেষ খ্যাতি অর্জন করে। তবে বৌদ্ধ শাসনামলে ব্রাহ্মণ্য ধর্মেরও প্রসার ঘটেছিল সে বিষয়ে কোনো সন্দেহের

অবকাশ নেই। বৌদ্ধ রাজাদের দরবারে ব্রাহ্মণ ধর্মাবলম্বীদের যে বেশ প্রাধান্য ছিল, তার প্রমাণ মেলে অসংখ্য পাল-দেব-চন্দ্র লিপিমালায়। ব্রাহ্মণ সম্প্রদায় যে বৌদ্ধ সন্ন্যাটদের পৃষ্ঠপোষকতা লাভ করেছিল তা ভূমিদান-সংক্রান্ত লিপি থেকেই বোধ যায়। এককথায় বলা যায়, বাংলার ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতিতে ধর্মীয় সহনশীলতা ও সহাবস্থানের ঐতিহ্য সৃষ্টি হয়েছিল। এই সময়ে অসংখ্য দৃষ্টান্ত রয়েছে যেখানে বৌদ্ধ সন্ন্যাট শাস্ত্রীয় জ্ঞান ও চতুর্বর্ণ প্রথার প্রতি নিজেদের একাত্মতা ঘোষণা করেছেন বা হিন্দু ধর্মীয় প্রতিষ্ঠান এবং ব্রাহ্মণদের ভূমিদান করেছেন। চন্দ্র বংশীয় রাজা শ্রীচন্দ্রের এক তমলিপিতে শ্রীহট্ট মন্ডলে ৬০০ ব্রাহ্মণকে (তাদের মধ্যে দেশীয় ও বহিরাগত উভয়ই ছিল) ভূমিদান করেছিলেন এতদম্বলে কৃষির ও ব্রাহ্মণ ধর্মের প্রসারকল্প। এতো ধর্মীয় সহিষ্ণুতার ও সহাবস্থানেরই দৃষ্টান্ত। রাষ্ট্রীয় পর্যায়ে ধর্মীয় সহিষ্ণুতা ও উদারতার মনোভাব প্রাচীন যুগে খুবই স্পষ্ট।

যুগে যুগে বৈষ্ণব, শৈব বা বৌদ্ধ ধর্মের জনপ্রিয়তার নিশ্চয়ই তারতম্য ছিল, তবে একথা বলা হয়েছে যে সামগ্রিকভাবে বৈষ্ণব মতবাদের জনপ্রিয়তাই অধিক ছিল। ব্যারি মরিসন পঞ্চম থেকে ত্রয়োদশ শতাব্দীর লিপিসমূহ বিশ্লেষণ করে এ-সিদ্ধান্তে উপনীত হয়েছেন যে, প্রাচীন বাংলায় সবচেয়ে জনপ্রিয় মতবাদ ছিল বৈষ্ণব মতবাদ; শৈব, এমনকি বৌদ্ধ মতবাদ নয়।^১ হিন্দু ধর্মের এই বিশেষ মতবাদের প্রতি বাংলার অগ্রাধিকার বাংলার ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতির একটি বিশেষ বৈশিষ্ট্যেরই ইঙ্গিত করে—যেই বৈশিষ্ট্যকে নীহারণজ্ঞন রায় “মানবতার প্রতি প্রাচীন বাঙালীর শুন্দা ও অনুরাগ”^২ বলে উল্লেখ করে বলেছেন। এই উদার সাম্য-ভাবনা ও মানবতার আদর্শই মধ্যপর্বের হাতে আদিপর্বের শ্রেষ্ঠতম, মহস্তম উত্তরাধিকার। সামগ্রিকভাবে একথা বলা যায় যে বৈদিক ব্রাহ্মণ ধর্মকে বাংলা নিজের মতো করে গড়ে তুলেছিল, আগত ব্রাহ্মণ ধর্মবিশ্বাসকে নিজের আর্য-পূর্ব মানসিকতা দিয়ে সিংক করেছিল; আর সেই মানসিকতায় প্রাধান্য লাভ করেছিল মানবতা, উদারতা ও সাম্যভাবনা।

প্রাচীন যুগে আর একটি ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক বৈশিষ্ট্যের প্রতি দৃষ্টি আকর্ষণ করছি। বৈদিক ধর্ম বিশ্বাস আর বৌদ্ধ ধর্মের মধ্যে যে বিবর্তন বাংলায় লক্ষ করা যায় তা বাংলার ‘সমন্বয়ের’ মানসিকতারই পরিচায়ক। দীর্ঘকাল হিন্দু ধর্মের পাশাপাশি অবস্থানের ফলে এবং বাংলার বিশেষ একাত্মকরণের ফলে বৌদ্ধধর্মের আদিরূপ বাংলায় বেশি দিন টিকে থাকেনি। ব্রাহ্মণ মতবাদের সাথে যে বিরোধ ছিল, তা ধীরে ধীরে শিথিল হয়ে উঠেছে; বিরোধের উত্তীর্ণ প্রশংসিত হয়ে সমন্বয় ঘটেছে উভয়ের মধ্যে। বাংলার বৌদ্ধধর্মের বিবর্তিত রূপ দেখে মনে হয় গৌতম বুদ্ধ নিজে যা প্রত্যাখান করে

তাঁর ধর্মমত প্রবর্তন করেছিলেন, পরে বৌদ্ধধর্ম তারই কাছে আত্মসমর্পন করেছে। দেব-দেবীর পূজা ও আচার-অনুষ্ঠান বৌদ্ধধর্মে অনুপ্রবেশ করে এমন এক রূপ পরিশহ করেছিল যা লোকিক হিন্দু ধর্ম থেকে খুব একটা ভিন্ন ছিল না। এই পরিবর্তনই বজ্রায়ন ও ত্ত্বায়ন বা সহজয়ন ও কালচক্রযানে রূপান্তর বলে আখ্যায়িত হয়েছে। নিজের মানসিক পরিমওলে নিজের করে এহণ করার প্রবণতা ব্রাক্ষণ্য ও বৌদ্ধ ধর্ম উভয়ের ক্ষেত্রেই লক্ষ করা যায়।

প্রাচীন বাংলার হিন্দু ধর্মের যে রূপ দৃষ্ট হয় তাতে দেব-দেবী উভয়ই প্রাধান্য পেয়েছে। শিবের সাথে সম্পর্ক স্থাপনের মাধ্যমে স্থানীয় অনার্য দেবীরা হিন্দুদের দেবী হয়েছেন-কেউ শিবের ত্রী (দূর্গা, কালী ও চষ্ণী) কেউ কন্যা (মনসা), কেউ পুত্রবধু (ষষ্ঠী)। এভাবে বহু অনার্য দেবী হিন্দু ধর্মের আওতায় সমন্বিত হয়েছেন। তাই একটা সাধারণ মন্তব্য করা অসমিচীন হবে না-দুই ধর্মেরই বিশুদ্ধ রূপ অনেকটা হারিয়েছে। স্থানীয় প্রভাব তাদের উপর অনেক নতুন নতুন বৈশিষ্ট্য আরোপ করেছে। এই রূপকে বাংলার সমন্বিত রূপ বলা যায়। পরবর্তী কালে ইসলামও এই স্থানীয় প্রমাণিত হয় যে, ‘সমন্বয়’ই যে বাংলার মানুষের ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতির একটি মূখ্য উপাদান।

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অধুনা আবিষ্কৃত এবং সম্প্রতি (২০১৬ সালে) জার্নাল অব দি রয়াল এশিয়াটিক সোসাইটিতে প্রকাশিত একটি তত্ত্বাসনের প্রতি দৃষ্টি আকর্ষণ করছি একটি বিশেষ কারণে।^{১০} তত্ত্বাসনটি প্রকাশ করেছিলেন গুপ্তসম্বৎ ১৮৪ (৫০৪ সা. অ.ব.)তে ‘পরভট্টারকপাদানুধ্যাতঃ পঞ্চাধিকরণোপরিক মহাপ্রতিহার-মহারাজ শ্রীবৈন্যগুপ্ত’। বৈন্যগুপ্ত ইতোমধ্যেই অন্যান্য সূত্র থেকে প্রাপ্ত তথ্যের মহাপ্রতিহার-মহারাজ শ্রীবৈন্যগুপ্ত। বৈন্যগুপ্ত ইতোমধ্যেই অন্যান্য সূত্র থেকে প্রাপ্ত তথ্যের মহাপ্রতিহার-মহারাজ শ্রীবৈন্যগুপ্ত। কিন্তু তাঁর ভিত্তিতে সমতট অঞ্চলে একজন প্রভাবশালী সামন্ত রাজা হিসাবে পরিচিত ব্যক্তিত্ব। কিন্তু তাঁর এই সদ্য প্রকাশিত তত্ত্বাসন থেকে আমরা বেশ বিস্ময়কর কিছু তথ্য পাচ্ছি। শৈব রাজা বৈন্যগুপ্ত ১৮৪ গুপ্তাদে তাঁর এ-তত্ত্বাসন দ্বারা ৯১ গুপ্তাদে মহারাজ মহেশুর নাথচন্দ্র কর্তৃক জারিকৃত তত্ত্বাসনের ভূমিদানকে পুনরানুমোদন দিচ্ছেন এবং নাথচন্দ্রের তত্ত্বাসনটি বৈন্যগুপ্ত তাঁর

বর্তমান তত্ত্বাসনে হৃষি তুলে দিয়েছেন। এই তত্ত্বাসন দ্বারা আজীবিক সংঘকে ভূমিদান করেছিলেন। আজীবিক সংঘের শ্রমণরা পরমপূজনীয় চতুর্মুখ মণিভদ্রের মুর্তি স্থাপিত আয়তনে (অর্থাৎ মন্দিরে) বসবাস করতো। এই মন্দিরের রক্ষণাবেক্ষণ ও আজীবিক সংঘের ব্যয় নির্বাহের জন্য শৈব রাজা নাথচন্দ্র ৯১ গুণাদে বিরাট আকারের ভূমিদান করেছিলেন। আর তাঁর ৯৩ বছর পর অন্য এক শৈব রাজা বৈন্যগুপ্ত পূর্বের ঐ দান অনুমোদন করে আর একটি তত্ত্বাসন জারি করছেন। এ-থেকে বোধ যায়, যে সমতট অঞ্চলে সুদীর্ঘকাল আজীবিক সম্প্রদায়ের বসবাস ছিল।

সমতট অঞ্চলে দীর্ঘকাল 'আজীবিক'দের বসবাস এ-অঞ্চলের ইতিহাসে এক নতুন মাত্রা সংযোজন করছে। শৈব রাজাদ্বয় দ্বারা 'আজীবিক'দের পৃষ্ঠপোষকতা দান ধর্মীয় সহিষ্ণুতা এবং বিবিধ ধর্মাবলম্বীর একত্রে বসবাস তো প্রমাণ করেই এবং শাসকশ্রেণীর মন-মানসিকতায় 'ধর্মীয় বহুত্ববাদ'-এর প্রতি শ্রদ্ধার এক অবিস্মরণীয় দৃষ্টান্তও প্রতিষ্ঠা করে।

এখানে 'আজীবিক' সম্প্রদায় সম্পর্কে দু'একটি কথা বলা প্রয়োজন বলে মনে করছি। প্রাচীন বাংলায় 'আজীবিক' শ্রমণ সম্প্রদায়-এর উপস্থিতি সম্পর্কে বৈন্যগুপ্তের এই তত্ত্বাসনটিই প্রথম এবং একমাত্র প্রমাণ। সা.অদ্বের পূর্বের ৬ষ্ঠ শতক থেকে সা. অদ্ব তৃতীয় শতকের মধ্যে মধ্য-গঙ্গা উপত্যকায় প্রায় ৬০টি সম্প্রদায়ের উভব দেখা যায়। তাদের মধ্যে 'আজীবিক' সম্প্রদায় একটি, এবং বৌদ্ধ ও জৈনদের লেখনীতে এদের উল্লেখ পাওয়া যায়। কিন্তু বৌদ্ধ ও জৈন মতবাদ দীর্ঘকাল বেঁচে থাকলেও 'আজীবিক' মতবাদ বেশি দিন টিকে থাকেনি। 'আজীবিক'রা অগেহ (গৃহহীন) যায়াবর সন্যাসী এবং তাদেরকে 'নাস্তিক' বলেই মনে করা হতো। কারণ তারা 'বেদ-অপ্রমাণ্য' এবং ব্রাহ্মণ্য সামাজিক রীতিনীতি ও ব্রাহ্মণদের প্রাধান্য অঙ্গীকার করত। তারা অদৃষ্টবাদী ছিল। সুতরাং দেখা যাচ্ছে ব্রাহ্মণ্য ধর্মবিরোধী আজীবিকদের পৃষ্ঠপোষকতা করতেও শৈব রাজাদ্বয় কুণ্ঠাবোধ করেননি।^{১০}

এবার প্রাচীন বাংলার ইতিহাস থেকে কয়েকটি দৃষ্টান্ত দিয়ে আমার বক্তব্যের ভিত্তি স্থাপনের চেষ্টা করব। পালবংশের দ্বিতীয় রাজা ধর্মপালকে তাঁর পুত্র দেবপালের তত্ত্বাশনে তাঁকে 'শাস্ত্রাদি সম্পর্কে জ্ঞান সম্পন্ন'^{১১} বলা হয়েছে এবং বিভিন্ন বর্ণ-যাতে নিজ নিজ ধর্মীয় অনুশাসনের মধ্যে থাকে সেদিকে তিনি তৎপর ছিলেন বলে উল্লেখ করা হয়েছে। পরবর্তী সময়ে পাল শাসক তৃতীয় বিহুপাল সম্পর্কে বলা হয়েছে 'চতুর্বর্ণ-সমাশ্রম'^{১২}। বৌদ্ধ রাজন্যবর্গ কর্তৃক হিন্দু মন্দির ও ব্রাহ্মণদের জন্য ভূমিদানের মাধ্যমে ধর্মীয় বহুত্ববাদের প্রসারের এবং অনুসরণের দৃষ্টান্ত এত অসংখ্য যে তা আর ব্যাখ্যার অপেক্ষা রাখে না। বেদ পড়ে শুনানোর জন্য ব্রাহ্মণকে ভূমিদান করছে; আর এ-ভূমিদানের ফলে মাতা-পিতার ও নিজের পুণ্য সাধন হবে—এরপ বিশ্বাসের অভিপ্রাকাশ ঘটেছে বৌদ্ধ রাজার অসংখ্য তত্ত্বাশনে। বৌদ্ধ ধর্মাবলম্বী শাসকদের অসংখ্য তত্ত্বাশনে উৎকীর্ণ বংশলতিকা এবং ভূমিদান অংশ লক্ষ্য করলে স্পষ্টভাবে প্রকাশ পায় যে, শাসকগোষ্ঠী ছিল বৌদ্ধ (যারা প্রায় চারশ' বছর একাধারে শাসন করেছিল) কিন্তু বেশিরভাগ রাজকবি, প্রশংসি রচয়িতা, মন্ত্রীবর্গ এবং বিভিন্ন স্তরের সরকারি কর্মকর্তা ও কর্মচারিগণ ছিল সনাতনী ধর্মাবলম্বী। বৌদ্ধ শাসকদের প্রশংসিতে পৌরাণিক কাহিনী ও কিংবদন্তির বহুল ব্যবহার^{১৩} এ-কথাই প্রমাণ করে যে, ধর্মীয় বিভেদের কোনো চিহ্নই ছিল না, বরং বলা চলে ধর্মীয় সহাবস্থানের এবং সমন্বয়ের এর চাইতে আর প্রত্যক্ষ দৃষ্টান্ত আর কি হতে পারে।

আর একটি বাস্তব দৃষ্টান্ত তুলে ধরা যায় পাহাড়পুরের সোমপুর বিহারের কেন্দ্রীয় ক্রসাকার মন্দিরের ধ্বংসাবশেষ থেকে। প্রত্ততাত্ত্বিক খননের ফলে উদ্ঘাটিত ধ্বংসাবশেষের নিচ থেকে দ্বিতীয় স্তরের বহিদেয়ালটি পোড়ামাটির ফলক দ্বারা অলংকৃত দেখা যায়। স্থাপত্যটি বৌদ্ধরাজা (ধর্মপাল) কর্তৃক নির্মিত বৌদ্ধ ভিক্ষুদের আবাসিক শিক্ষা প্রতিষ্ঠান সোমপুর মহাবিহার। কিন্তু পোড়ামাটির ফলকে বিধৃত রয়েছে ব্রাহ্মণ ধর্মীয় বিভিন্ন দেব-দেবীর মূর্তি।^{১৪} ধর্মীয় সহিষ্ণুতা ও যার কিছু প্রমাণ নিচের বা আদি স্তরে বিদ্যমান রয়েছে।^{১৫} উল্লেখ করা যেতে পারে যে, বাংলাতে যে এক সময় জৈন ও বৌদ্ধ ধর্মন্বয়ের পাশাপাশি অবস্থান ছিল তার উল্লেখ শুয়ান জাং (৬৩২ সা. অন্দ)-এর ভ্রমণ্ণতাত্ত্বেই উল্লেখ রয়েছে।

বৌদ্ধ ও সনাতনী ধর্মের দীর্ঘকাল ধরে শান্তিপূর্ণ সহাবস্থানের ফলে এই দুই ধর্মের সংমিশ্রিত রূপ তাত্ত্বিক দর্শনের উজ্জ্বলের মধ্যে লক্ষ্য করা যায়। প্রাচীন বাংলার ইতিহাসে অসহিষ্ণুতা যে একেবারেই ছিল না তা বলা যায় না। ব্রাহ্মণ শাস্ত্রে আছে, ‘পরধর্ম ভয়াবহ’। আবার এও প্রচারিত হতে দেখা যায় যে হিন্দুধর্ম সহিষ্ণু। এ-দুই অবস্থানের মধ্যে অবিরোধ অবশ্যই আছে। সমাজে ব্রাহ্মণদের প্রাধান্য বৌদ্ধ রাজশাস্ত্রির শাসনের সময়ও স্পষ্টভাবে দৃশ্যমান। কৌম সমাজ ব্রাহ্মণ প্রভাবেই রূপান্তরিত হয়েছিল, তাই ব্রাহ্মণ ধর্মীয় প্রভাব থাকাটাই স্বাভাবিক। তার বিরোধিতা করেই অংশত ও সাময়িকভাবে সফল হয়েছিল বৌদ্ধ ধর্ম। আবার এই দুই ধর্মের সমর্থোত্তা থেকেই জন্ম নিয়েছিল তাত্ত্বিক মতবাদের।

সেন যুগের ব্রাহ্মণ পুনরুজ্জীবন আর বৌদ্ধদের প্রতি অসহিষ্ণুতার প্রকাশ বাংলার ধর্ম-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতিতে কেমন যেন হঠাতে করে আসা তাড়ব। দীর্ঘকাল ধরে লালিত সহিষ্ণুতার মানসিকতায় এ-যেন এক অপঘাত। এই অপঘাতের প্রতি বিরোধী মতবাদ ফুটে উঠতে দেখছি সরোজবঞ্জের দোহাকোষে।^{১৬} দোহাকোষে প্রাণ কয়েকটি উদাহরণ বাংলায় উদার মনোভাব ও একই সাথে গোঢ়ামির প্রতি বিরোধিতার পরিচয় পাওয়া যায়: (ক) হোমাগ্নি মুক্তি প্রদান করে কিনা, কেউ জানে না, তবে তার ধুঁয়া চোখে নিশ্চিতভাবে পীড়াদায়ক; (খ) যদি নগ্নতা (বৌদ্ধ ও জৈন ক্ষপনক সন্যাসীদের মধ্যে প্রচলিত) মুক্তি প্রদান করতে পারে, তবে কুকুর শৃগাল মুক্তি পাবে সবার আগে; (গ) বলা হয়ে থাকে যে, ব্রহ্মার মুখ থেকে ব্রাহ্মণদের জন্ম। কিন্তু তাতে কি? আজকাল তাদের জন্ম অন্য সবার মতোই। তাহলে তাদের উচ্চতর অবস্থানের কারণ কি? (ঘ) যদি এ কথা স্বীকার করা হয় যে, ব্রাহ্মণরা বিভিন্ন ‘সংস্কারের’ ফলে উচ্চতর স্থান অর্জন করে, তাহলে আমি বলবো চঙ্গাদের ঐসব ‘সংস্কার’ পালন করতে দেয়া হোক যাতে তারা ব্রাহ্মণ হতে পারে। তোমরা বলো যে, বেদ-এর জ্ঞান তাদের ব্রাহ্মণ করে, তাহলে চঙ্গাকে বেদ পড়তে দাও। এসব প্রতিবাদী উচ্চারণ সেন পর্বে ব্রাহ্মণ পুনরুজ্জীবনের অপঘাতেরই প্রতিক্রিয়া।

বাংলার ইতিহাসে সেন শাসনোক্তর যুগে ইসলামের আগমন বাংলার সামাজিক ইতিহাসে এক যুগান্তকারী ঘটনা। প্রায় পাঁচ শতাব্দীকাল পরিক্রমায় হিন্দু-বৌদ্ধ জনগোষ্ঠী রূপান্তরিত হয়েছিল মুসলিম অধ্যুষিত জনগোষ্ঠীতে। ইসলামের ব্যাপক প্রসার বাংলার ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতির একটি বৈশিষ্ট্য দিয়ে আংশিক হলেও ব্যাখ্যা করা সম্ভব। বাংলার সংস্কৃতিতে যে-উদার সাম্য-ভাবনা আর মানবতার আদর্শ প্রাচীন যুগে সৃষ্টি হয়েছিল, তা ইসলামের প্রতি বাংলার মানুষের আকর্ষণের একটি বিশেষ কারণ বলে বিবেচনা করা যেতে পারে।

মধ্যযুগে মুসলিম শাসনামলে একদিকে যেমন ব্যাপক ধর্মান্তরের ফলে জনসংখ্যায় মুসলমানদের সংখ্যা বৃদ্ধি পেয়েছে, অন্যদিকে সমাজে সাম্য ভাবনা ও সহ-অবস্থানের মনোভাবও বিশেষভাবে লক্ষ্যণীয়। বিশেষ করে স্বাধীন সুলতানদের দুঃশো বছরের শাসনকালে শাসক ও শাসিত উভয়ের পারস্পরিক স্বার্থেই এ-প্রক্রিয়া গতি লাভ করেছে এবং সামাজিক রূপান্তর ঘটিয়েছে।

স্বাধীন সুলতানি আমলে বাংলার সামাজিক-সংস্কৃতিতে প্রবল সহিষ্ণুতা ও সহ-অবস্থানের মানসিকতার অসংখ্য দৃঢ়ান্ত পাওয়া যায়। স্বাধীন সুলতানি শাসনের দুঃশো বছরে বাংলার সুলতানরা দিল্লির আধিপত্যকে অস্বীকার করে সম্পূর্ণভাবে সম্পর্ক ছেদ করেছিলেন। দিল্লির সুলতানরা বাংলাকে পুনর্দখলের জন্য বেশ কয়েকবার চেষ্টা চালিয়েছেন। উত্তর-ভারতের পথ ধরে মুসলিম অভিবাসীদের বাংলায় আসাও বন্ধ হয়ে গিয়েছিল। ফলে বাংলার সুলতানদের সৈন্য বাহিনীর শক্তি বৃদ্ধি করার জন্য স্থানীয় জনগণের সহযোগিতা ছাড়া অন্য কোনো উপায় ছিল না। তাছাড়া বাংলার অভ্যন্তরে যেন কোনো প্রতিরোধ গড়ে না উঠতে পারে- এ কারণেও সুলতানরা স্থানীয় জনগণকে ধর্ম-বর্ণ নির্বিশেষে সরকারি কাজে নিয়োগ দিতে বাধ্য হয়েছিলেন। স্থানীয়দের সহযোগিতা ছাড়া মুঠিমেয় আগন্তুক মুসলিম শাসকগোষ্ঠীর পক্ষে নদী-বিধৌত বন্যা-স্থানীয়দের সহযোগিতা ছাড়া মুঠিমেয় আগন্তুক মুসলিম শাসকগোষ্ঠীর পক্ষে নদী-বিধৌত বন্যা-বর্ষায় পিড়ীত জলাভূমি-সম্বলিত বাংলা শাসন করা দুষ্কর হয়ে দাঁড়িয়েছিল। তাই স্বেচ্ছা-প্রগোদ্ধিত না হলেও কিছুটা বাধ্য হয়েই সুলতানরা উদার নীতি অবলম্বন করে এ-দেশের জনগণকে স্বপক্ষে আনতে পেরেছিলেন। ফলে একাধারে দুঃশো বছর শাসন চালাতে পেরেছিলেন।

সুলতানদের উদার মনোভাব সমাজে প্রতিটি ক্ষেত্রেই লক্ষ করা যায়। সুলতানদের পৃষ্ঠপোষকতায় রামায়ণ-মহাভারতও বাংলায় অনুদিত হয়েছে। সংস্কৃত ও বাংলা ভাষায় রচিত হয়েছে বৈষ্ণব ও

মঙ্গল কাব্যসম্ভার। মুসলিম শাসকদের ধর্মীয় বহুত্বাদের প্রতি শিক্ষার অত্যন্ত উজ্জ্বল দৃষ্টান্ত সৃষ্টি করেছিলেন সুলতান আলাউদ্দিন হোসেন শাহ (১৪৯৪-১৫১৯ সা. অ.ব)। সুলতান নিশ্চয়ই জানতেন যে, শ্রীচৈতন্য নব্য-বৈষ্ণববাদ প্রচার করা ওরু করেছিলেন হিন্দু ধর্মকে রক্ষা করা উদ্দেশ্যে। তা সত্ত্বেও সুলতান শ্রীচৈতন্যের প্রতি এমন উদার নীতি গ্রহণ করেছিলেন যে শ্রীচৈতন্যের প্রচারকার্যের সব রকম ব্যয় বহন করবে রাষ্ট্র।^{১৭} সমসাময়িক বৈষ্ণব সাহিত্য থেকে জানা যায় যে, ব্রাহ্মণ সম্প্রদায় শ্রীচৈতন্যের বৈপুরিক ধ্যান-ধারণা পছন্দ করেনি এবং সুলতান আলাউদ্দিন হোসেন শাহের কাছে তারা আবেদন জানিয়েছিলেন এই মর্মে যে, তাঁর প্রচারণা বন্ধ করার ব্যবস্থা নেওয়া হোক। সুলতান নিজে শ্রীচৈতন্যের প্রচারণার বিষয়বস্তু পর্যালোচনা করে এ-সিদ্ধান্তে পৌছান যে, শ্রীচৈতন্যের প্রচারণা হিন্দু সমাজ উন্নয়নের সাহায্য করবে এবং তিনি নির্দেশ দেন যে, রাষ্ট্রের তরফ থেকে চৈতন্যের প্রচারণায় যেন কোনো বাধা দেওয়া না হয়, বরং তাঁকে যেন রাষ্ট্রীয় পৃষ্ঠপোষকতা দান করা হয়।^{১৮}

ঞাধীন সুলতানি আমলে সুলতানদের সৈন্যবাহিনীতে স্থানীয়দের যে গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা ছিল সে-বিষয়ে প্রমাণের অভাব নেই। সৈন্যবাহিনী ছাড়াও প্রশাসনের অন্যান্য বিভাগেও স্থানীয় হিন্দু ধর্মালম্বীদের অংশগ্রহণও নিশ্চিত করা হয়েছিল। এ-থেকে বোঝা যায় যে স্থানীয় হিন্দু জনগোষ্ঠী সুলতানদের আস্থাভাজন হতে পেরেছিল। সৈয়দ এজায় হোসাইন^{১৯} এই প্রক্রিয়াকে বলেছেন: “the Sultanate was under the process of the formation of a common citizenship and a common statehood.” সৈয়দ এজায় হোসাইন ৪৩ জন হিন্দু কর্মকর্তার তালিকা দিয়েছেন যারা প্রশাসনের বিভিন্ন ক্ষেত্রে সুলতানদের দ্বারা নিয়োগপ্রাপ্ত হয়েছিলেন। সুলতান ইলিয়াস শাহ বেশ কয়েকজন হিন্দু জমিদারকে পুরস্কৃত করেছিলেন দিল্লির বাহিনীর সাথে যুদ্ধে তাদের সামরিক সাহায্যের জন্য। রাজা গণেশ রাজস্ব বিভাগের একজন সাধারণ কর্মচারি থেকে ‘উজির’ পদে পদোন্নতি পান এবং ফলে স্বল্পকালের জন্য হলেও রাজক্ষমতা দখল করতে সক্ষম হয়েছিলেন। সুলতান জালালউদ্দিন মাহমুদ শাহ সংস্কৃত পণ্ডিত ও কবি বৃহস্পতি মিশ্রকে ‘রায় মুকুট’ উপাধিতে ভূষিত করেন ও সেনাবাহিনীর উচ্চপদে নিয়োগ করেন। দুই হিন্দু ব্রাহ্মণ রূপ ও সনাতনকে আলাউদ্দিন হোসেন শাহ যথাক্রমে ‘দবীর-ই-খাস’ (ব্যক্তিগত সচিব) ও ‘সরকার-ই-মুলক’ (প্রতিমন্ত্রী) পদে নিয়োগ দান করেন। হোসেন শাহ কেশব খান ছাত্রীকে (কেশব বসু) নিয়োগ করেছিলেন তাঁর দেহরক্ষীদের প্রধান; গোপীনাথ বসুকে ‘উজির’ ও রামচন্দ্র খানকে ‘লক্ষ্মণ উজির’ পদ প্রদান করেছিলেন। এসব উদাহরণ থেকে মুসলমান শাসকদের উদারনৈতিক প্রশাসনের স্পষ্ট প্রমাণ পাওয়া যায়।

এ-উদারনীতি সমাজে প্রতিক্রিয়া সৃষ্টি করতে বাধ্য। এর সাথে যোগ হয়েছে মুসলিম সুফিদের সমব্যুক্তি প্রচারণা। ফলে বাংলার স্বাধীন সুলতানি আমলে ইসলাম ও হিন্দু ধর্মের মধ্যে যে সমব্যুক্তি সমবোতার সৃষ্টি হয়েছিল তার প্রমাণ পাওয়া যায় স্থানীয় সাহিত্য ভাষারে, বিশেষ করে, সুলতানি যুগে রচিত বাংলা ও সংস্কৃত সাহিত্যে। বৃন্দাবন দাস রচিত চৈতন্য-ভাগবৎ-এ বলা হয়েছে: আমার বৎসরগণ শোন: সব মানুষের ভগবান এক ও অভিন্ন। হিন্দু ও মুসলমানরা কেবল তাঁর নামের পার্থক্য করে থাকে। কোরান ও পূরাণ পরম অস্তিত্বের সন্ধান করে। সবার হৃদয়কে পরিপূর্ণ করে এক ত্রুটিহীন, অবিভাজ্য, অস্তিত্ব ও চিরস্তন সন্তা।^{১০}

বাংলার প্রাচীন মানব সমাজে মানবতার প্রতি গভীর আকর্ষণই হয়তো তাদের করেছিল বিষ্ণুপ্রিয় ও পরবর্তী সময়ে নব্য বৈষ্ণববাদের ভক্ত। এ মানবতার প্রতি ভক্তিই সম্ভবত ধর্মীয় সংস্কৃতিতে সৃষ্টি করেছে ধর্মীয় বহুত্ববাদের প্রতি শ্রদ্ধা। তাই পনের শতকের কবি চণ্ডীদাসের কল্পে উচ্চারিত হতে শুনিঃ

শোন হে মানুষ ভাই
সবার উপরে মানুষ সত্য
তাহার উপর নাই।

এই মানবতাপ্রেমী সংস্কৃতি থেকে সৃষ্টি বহুত্ববাদ ফুটে উঠছে সতের শতকের মুসলমান কবি লাল মাহমুদের কবিতায়:

হিন্দু কিঞ্চা হোক মুসলমান।
তোমার পক্ষে সবাই সমান
আপন সন্তান জাতির কি বিচার।
ভক্ত সকল জাতির শ্রেষ্ঠ চণ্ডাল কি চামার।
কেহ তোমায় বলে কালী, কেহ বলে বনমালী
কেহ খোদা আল্লা বলি তোমায় ডাকে সারাঃসারা।^{১১}

ষেষ শতকের শেষ এবং সতের শতকের প্রথম দিকে বাংলার মুসলমান কবি/লেখক মহানবি (স.) ও খলিফাদের সিরাত বা জীবনচরিত রচনা শুরু করেন। এদের মধ্যে অগ্রদৃত ছিলেন সৈয়দ সুলতান-নবীবংশ ও রসূল বিজয় রচয়িতা। এ ছাড়াও তিনি জ্ঞান-প্রদীপ নামে তাত্ত্বিক যোগ সাধনার একটি গ্রন্থ রচনা করেন। তিনি হরিবংশ ছাড়াও হিন্দু শাস্ত্রের বই থেকে তাঁর উপাস্ত সংগ্রহ করেন। তাঁর রচনায় ব্রহ্মা, বিষ্ণু, শিব এবং কৃষ্ণকে ‘নবি’ বলে উল্লেখ করা হয়েছে।^{১২}

বাংলায় হিন্দু-মুসলিম জনগোষ্ঠীর মধ্যে সমষ্টয়ী ভাবধারা বেশ স্পষ্টভাবে ধরা পড়েছে পূর্ববঙ্গ গীতিকা ও ময়মনসিংহ গীতিকায়। এক মুসলিম কবি নৃলঞ্জনের কবরের কথা গীতিকায় লিখেছেন-

হেন্দু আর মোছলমান একই পিত্রের দড়ি
কেহ বলে আল্লা রসূল কেহ বলে হরি।
বিছমিল্লা আর ছিরিবিষ্ট একই গোয়ান
দোফাক করি পরভ রাম রাহিমান।^{১৩}

উপর্যুক্ত কাব্য উদ্ভৃতিসমূহ এ-বিষয়টি প্রতীয়মান করে যে মুসলিম শাসনের, বিশেষ করে স্বাধীন সুলতানি আমল থেকে হিন্দু-মুসলমান সমষ্টয় প্রায় অব্যাহতভাবে ধরা পড়ে মোঘল আমল পর্যন্ত। সুতরাং একথা বলা হয়তো অযৌক্তিক হবে না যে, প্রাচীন যুগের মানবতাবাদ-আধুনিক সমষ্টয় প্রবণতা মধ্যযুগে ভিন্ন ধর্মালম্বী বহিরাগত শাসকদের রাজত্বকালে বাধাতো পড়েইনি, বরং চ আরো শক্তি সংযোগ করে ধর্মীয় সংস্কৃতিকে বহুত্বাদের প্রতি গভীর অনুরাগ প্রদর্শন করছে।

আর দুটি উদহারণ স্থাপন করে আমার বক্তব্যের উপসংহার টানবো। মোঘল যুগে বাংলার মুসলমান সুবাদারগণ হিন্দু প্রজাদের প্রতি অত্যন্ত উদারনীতি অবলম্বন করেছিলেন। হিন্দুদের ধর্মীয় উৎসবাদিতে তারা কেবল আর্থিক সহযোগিতার হাতই প্রসারিত করতেন না, সব রকম নিরাপত্তা বিধানেরও ব্যবস্থা করতেন। জনসমাজে হিন্দু-মুসলমান সম্পর্ক যে সম্পূর্ণতর সম্পর্ক ছিল তার অনেক দৃষ্টান্ত আছে।^{১৪} এ-সম্পূর্ণতি উভয় ধর্মালম্বীদের প্রভাবিত করেছে। মুসলিম সমাজ যে প্রভাবিত হয়েছিল তা বোঝা যায় মুসলমানদের অনেক সামাজিক কর্মকাণ্ড, যা রক্ষণশীল দৃষ্টিভঙ্গি থেকে ইসলামি নয় বলেই মনে হয়, যেমন, অনেক সুফি-সাধকের মাকবারায়, এমনকি অমুসলিমদের তীর্থেও, মুসলমানদের তীর্থযাত্রা বা মুসলমান সমাজের অনেক আচার-অনুষ্ঠানে হিন্দু সমাজের ন্যায় জাকজমক ও আমোদ-প্রমোদ অনুপ্রবেশ করে।^{১৫} মুসলিম সমাজের ধর্মীয় অনুষ্ঠানদিতে হিন্দু প্রভাব লক্ষ করা যায় মহরুরম পালনে। কারবালার প্রান্তরের মর্মাণ্ডিক শোকপূর্ণ ঘটনার প্রতীকী অনুষ্ঠান উদ্যাপনে জারিগান, তাজিয়া মিছিল ও তাজিয়া বিসর্জন প্রভৃতির সাথে হিন্দু সম্প্রদায়ের দুর্গা দেবীর বিসর্জন বা রথযাত্রা প্রভৃতির মিল খুঁজে পাওয়া যায়। জেমস ওয়াইজ^{১৬} উল্লেখ করেছেন যে, পাটনা ও বিহার শরিফে ১৪০০ তাজিয়া মিছিলের মধ্যে ৬০০

মিহিলের আয়োজক ছিলেন হিন্দু সম্প্রদায়। একইভাবে বাংলার হিন্দুদের মহোসুব দূর্গাপূজা হয়ে দাঢ়িয়েছে সার্বজনীন বাঙালীর উৎসব। দীর্ঘকাল সম্প্রীতি ও সহ-অবস্থানের সুফল বাংলার সমাজে অসাম্প্রদায়িক চেতনার উন্নয়ন; মনের বহুবাদের বহিপ্রকাশতো বটেই।

আঠার শতকের মাঝামাঝি সময়ে হিন্দু-মুসলিম সম্প্রীতি ও সহ-অবস্থান প্রসূত সংমিশ্রিত আনন্দোৎসবের উদাহরণস্বরূপ উল্লেখ করা যেতে পারে শাহমাং জঙ্গ ও সলোং জঙ্গ কর্তৃক মুর্শিদাবাদের মতিঝিল উদ্যানে সাতদিন ব্যাপী হোলি অনুষ্ঠান পালন।¹³ এই অনুষ্ঠান উপলক্ষে প্রায় ২০০ জলাশয় রংবেরং-এর পানিতে ভর্তি করে রাখা হয়েছিল; আবির ও জাফরান ডুপাকারে রাখা হয়েছিল এবং প্রায় ৫০০ নৃত্যশিল্পী প্রতিদিন সকাল ও সন্ধ্যায় উদ্যানের বিভিন্ন দিকে নৃত্যরত থাকতো। নবাব সিরাজ-উদ-দৌলাহ (৯ ফেব্রুয়ারি, ১৭৫৭) আলীনগরের সন্ধি সম্পাদন করে মুর্শিদাবাদে নবনির্মিত মনসুরগঞ্জ প্রাসাদে হোলি উদযাপন করেন।¹⁴ পাটনায় অবস্থানকালে নওয়াব মীর জাফর বহু সভাসদসহ গঙ্গা নদী বক্ষে হোলির আমোদ-উৎসব উপভোগ করেন।¹⁵

উপর্যুক্ত দৃষ্টান্ত থেকে এই উপসংহার খুবই যুক্তিসংত যে, চৌদ শতক থেকে আঠার শতক পর্যন্ত প্রায় চার শতাব্দীকাল বাংলায় মুসলিম শাসন ছিল, কিন্তু ধর্মীয় সহ-অবস্থান সম্প্রীতিময় সামাজিক অবস্থান দুই ধর্মের মধ্যে সমন্বয় ঘটিয়ে সাম্প্রদায়িক বিভেদমুক্ত সমাজ সৃষ্টি করেছিল। এই প্রক্রিয়ায় সুফিরা অবশ্যই গুরুত্বপূর্ণ অবদান রেখেছিল। একই সাথে আমাদের স্মরণ রাখতে হবে যে, তাঁদের প্রচেষ্টায় বাংলায় ইসলামের প্রসারের সাথে সাথে ইসলাম ধর্মেরও বিবর্তন ঘটেছিল। যেসব সুফি-দরবেশ বাংলায় এসেছিলেন তাঁদের অধিকাংশই এসেছিলেন পারস্য ও মধ্য এশিয়া থেকে।

পারস্য প্রভাব যে বাংলার মুসলমানদের মধ্যে অত্যন্ত প্রবল তা পরোক্ষভাবে বোঝা যায় আল্লাহর চাইতে ‘খোদাঁ’র বহুল উচ্চারণ; সালাতকে বলা হয় নামাজ, রমাদানকে বলা হয় রোজা, জান্নাত ও জাহানাম জনমুখে বহুল ব্যবহৃত হচ্ছে বেহেত্ত ও দোজখ হিসেবে। এথেকেই বোঝা যায় যে বাংলায় ইসলাম প্রচারিত হয়েছে ফার্সি দিয়ে, আরবি দিয়ে নয়। সুফিদের প্রচারিত ইসলাম কালের প্রবাহে স্থানীয় আচার-বিশ্বাসের সাথে সমন্বয় করে বেশ কিছুটা নতুন অবয়ব পরিগ্রহ করেছিল।

মূল ইসলামে আল্লাহ প্রভু, মানুষ তাঁর বান্দা বা দাস। কিন্তু সুফিবাদের প্রভাবে বাংলায় ইসলাম ভিন্নরূপ পরিগ্রহ করে-যেখানে সৃষ্টি ও স্রষ্টা অভিন্ন। সৃষ্টিকর্তা ও সৃষ্টির সম্পর্ক প্রেমের,

প্রভু-ভূত্যের নয়। মৌলিক ইসলামে সৃষ্টি আর শৃষ্টার সম্পর্ক কোন মধ্যস্থতার অপেক্ষা রাখে না। অন্যদিকে সুফিবাদীরা পীর-মুরশিদের মাধ্যমেই সৃষ্টিকর্তার সান্নিধ্য লাভের আশা করেন। সুফিদের রাবিতা হলো একজন মধ্যস্থ বা গুরুর মাধ্যমে পরমাত্মার সঙ্গে মিলিত হওয়ার পদ্ধতি। এর সাথে মিল রয়েছে বাংলার গুরুবাদের।

বাংলার ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতি চিরকালই ভক্তিবাদী এবং গুরুমুখী। ইসলামও তাই এই অবয়বেই অধিকতর জনপ্রিয়তা লাভ করে। তাই গ্রাম বাংলায় অসংখ্য পীরের মাজার, আর এইসব মাজারে শতাব্দীর পর শতাব্দী ধরে পীর পূজা চলেছে তারও প্রেরণা এই ভক্তিবাদ। পীরের প্রতি প্রবল ভক্তি বাংলার মুসলমানদের ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতির বিশেষ অঙ্গ হয়ে গিয়েছে। বাংলার বিগত ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতির সাথে ইসলামের সমন্বয়ের ফলে ইসলামের এ-রূপান্তর। ইসলাম-পূর্ব মানসিকতা দিয়েই বাংলার মানুষ ইসলামকে গ্রহণ করেছে।

ভক্তিবাদী মতবাদ কেবল গ্রাম বাংলাতেই প্রসার লাভ করেনি, সমাজের উপর তলার মানুষকেও প্রভাবিত করেছিল তারও অসংখ্য দৃষ্টান্ত আছে। বাংলায় ‘কদম রসুলের’ বিস্তার স্থানীয় বিক্ষুপদের সদৃশ্য বলে মনে করার যথেষ্ট কারণ আছে। পীরের মাজারে মানত বা পীরের কাছে ধর্মীয় দেওয়া প্রভৃতি আচার-আচরণ বাংলার মুসলমানদের মধ্যে এখনও বিদ্যমান। স্থানীয় ধর্মীয় আচার-অনুষ্ঠানের সাথে সমন্বয় করে ইসলাম ধর্মের পরিবর্তন এবং সমন্বয় সাধিত হয়েছিল। মুসলিমদের মধ্যে প্রচলিত অনেক সামাজিক আচার-অনুষ্ঠানই স্থানীয় এবং ইসলাম-পূর্ব এবং তা সমন্বিত হয়ে ধর্মীয়-সামাজিক সংস্কৃতির অংশ হয়ে দাঁড়িয়েছে।

বাংলার মুসলমান সুলতানদের উদারনৈতিক শাসন সম্বন্ধত: তাঁদের নিজের কারণেই ছিল। স্বাধীন সুলতানি রক্ষা করতে গিয়ে স্থানীয় জনগণের সাথে তাঁদেরকে একাত্মতা ঘোষণা করতে হয়েছে, পৃষ্ঠপোষকতা দান করতে হয়েছে স্থানীয় ভাষা ও সাহিত্যকে, রাষ্ট্রীয় নিয়োগের ক্ষেত্রে ‘উন্নাজুম্বার’ নীতি অনুসরণ করতে হয়েছে, ধর্মীয় কারণে সমাজে বিভেদ সৃষ্টি না করার মতো উদার নীতি অনুসরণ করতে হয়েছে সর্বক্ষেত্রে। যে উদার সাম্য-ভাবনার ঐতিহ্য বাংলায় সৃষ্টি হয়েছিল প্রাচীন ও আদি মধ্যযুগে, তারই ধারাবাহিকতায় ইসলামি শাসনের এই রূপ ইসলামের প্রসারে যেমন সাহায্য করেছিল, তেমনি সমাজে সৃষ্টি করেছিল মানবতাবোধ, সাম্য ভাবনা আর সমন্বয়ের ধারা।

হ্যানীয় হিন্দু ধর্মেও মুসলিম আমলে সংকারের প্রচেষ্টা লক্ষ করা যায়। ইসলামের চ্যালেঙ্গের মুখে প্রথমে হিন্দুত্বকে রক্ষা করার জন্য সৃতিশাস্ত্রকারণ চেষ্টা করেন। রঘুনন্দন এরকমের একজন শাস্ত্রকার। কিন্তু এদিয়ে বৃহত্তর সমাজে ধর্মান্তর বা ক্লপান্তর ঠেকিয়ে রাখা সম্ভব হয়নি। আর্য-দেবতাদের সঙ্গে হ্যানীয় অনার্য দেবদেবীর যোগাযোগ ঘটিয়ে নিচের তলার সংস্কৃত-না-জানা হিন্দুদের বৃহত্তর হিন্দু সমাজে ধরে রাখার উদ্দ্যোগ নেওয়া হয়েছে। ঔবেদিক দেবদেবী জনপ্রিয় হয় মঙ্গলকাব্য আর পাঞ্চালির মাধ্যমে। মুসলিম শাসনের এক-দেড়শো বছরের মধ্যেই দৃঢ়গুপ্তজা জনপ্রিয়তা লাভ করে। দৃঢ়া পূজা ও কালীপূজা বিশেষভাবে বাংলার পূজা।

শোড়শ শতাব্দীতে হিন্দু ধর্ম রক্ষার্থে চৈতন্যও ‘মানবতা’ এবং ‘প্রেম’-এর ঐতিহ্যকে ভর করে বৈষ্ণব ধর্মের ব্যাপক প্রসার ঘটিয়েছিলেন। ইসলামের সাম্যবাদের চ্যালেঙ্গকে চৈতন্য মোকাবেলা করেছিলেন রক্ষণশীল হিন্দু সমাজের বর্ণবাদী মনোভাবে সজোর আঘাত হেনে।

চৈতন্য-পরবর্তী সময়ে বাংলায় আনুষ্ঠানিকতা-বর্জিত এক ধরনের ধর্মীয় সমন্বয়ের ঐতিহ্য গড়ে উঠে। বৌদ্ধদের সহজ্যান, মুসলমানদের সুফিবাদ ও বৈষ্ণবদের প্রেমধর্ম একাকার হয়ে সহজ প্রেমের ধর্মই মুখ্য হয়ে উঠে। এরই প্রকাশ বাংলার বাউলদের মাধ্যমে। ধর্মীয় উদারনীতিবাদের প্রতিফলনী শোনা যায় বাংলার বাউলদের গানে (মধ্যযুগীয় ও আধুনিক নির্বিশেষ), চৈতন্য ও নাথ সন্ত্যাসীদের চেতনায়, কিংবা ধর্মঠাকুরের জনপ্রিয়তায়। উদারতার উত্তরাধিকার বাংলার সমাজের ধর্মীয় সংস্কৃতির ক্ষেত্রে অনন্বীকার্য এবং এই মনোভাবের কালাতিক্রম প্রবাহ বাস্তব সত্য। লালনের গানে যেন সেই কথাটিরই প্রতিফলন:

ভজের দ্বারে বাধা আছেন সাঁই
হিন্দু কি যবন বলে তারকাছে জাতির বিচার নাই
এক চাঁদে হয় জগৎ আলো
এক বীজে সব জন্ম হলো।^{১০}

সহিষ্ণুতা ও সাম্যভাবনা-প্রসূত ‘ধর্মীয় বহুত্ববাদ’-এর ধারণা যে প্রাক আধুনিক বাংলার অতি প্রশংসনীয় ঐতিহ্য, সে-বিষয়ে নিশ্চয়ই আজকের এ-আলোচনা আমাদেরকে সচেতন করবে। অতীতের উত্তরাধিকার ভবিষ্যতে পথচলার দিক নির্দেশনা দেবে। অতীতকে অবলম্বন করেই আগামীর প্রস্তাবনা সৃষ্টি করতে হবে, আর এই প্রস্তাবনাকে ধারণ করেই ভবিষ্যতের পথ নির্ধারণ

করতে হবে। বর্তমান প্রজন্মকে স্মরণ করিয়ে দেয়া প্রয়োজন যে, সমাজদেহে যতদিন জীবনী শক্তি থাকে ততদিন ভিতর থেকে বা বাহির থেকে যত আঘাতই আসুক না কেন, সমাজ আপন শক্তিতেই তা প্রতিরোধ করবে। সমাজ এ-শক্তি পাবে তার অতীতের ঐতিহ্য থেকে। অতীতের উত্তরাধিকার সম্পর্কে গভীর সচেতনতাই সৃষ্টি করবে এ-প্রাণশক্তি।

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2

ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURE

Iftekhar Iqbal

How he who has not known the mystery of the rivers of Bangladesh would really know Bangladesh?...at the tender shore of the Bay of Bengal meet the sea and the river. The river is women, the sea is man. They mate on the tip of the storm-caught waves; the soft, alluvial *Banga* is their child.¹

Nature's place in contemporary discourse of culture can be examined from two broad perspectives: one is wider civilizational complexes of mankind and the other is everyday cultural life in a given society. Attempts to connect a nation's cultural attainment to a particular environment have been made for a long time. An Arab scholar in the middle ages, for instance, noted that the people of northern Europe had been so affected by the extreme distance from the sun (i.e., cold climate) that they possessed no sense of humour, developed pale skin colour and 'mental blindness'.² During the period of European dominance world wide, environment³ became an important part of the emerging discourse of knowledge and power. In the eighteenth-century Europe, an urge for connecting racial category with environmental factors led to the emergence of the theory of 'climatic determinism'. This theory was popularized by the writings of a French intellectual, Montesquieu, who asserted that people in hot climate would feel both physical and mental matters more passionately than the inhabitants in the cold regions. He argued that the people in the former regions were restless and uncontrollable hence a strong despotic rule was more appropriate for them, whereas the people in the cold regions were temperamentally suited to a more democratic order.⁴ Climatic determinism was soon superseded by 'biological determinism' whose proponents, generally known as Social Darwinists, argued that Europeans of the nineteenth century had a dominant role over the non-European world because they were biologically superior, indicating a resonance of the belief in 'survival of the fittest' in the natural world. In the twentieth century, particularly in the post-WWII period, the intellectual practice of associating race with environment lost ground and a more dynamic interpretation of nature surfaced as exemplified in the theory of *longue duree* which traced the development of civilization and culture in long-term environmental trajectories.⁵

1 Pramathanath Bishi, *Chalan Bil* (3rd edn, Kolkata, 1957, 1364 BS), pp.17-8.

2 Said al-Andalusi, *Kitab Tabaqat al-Uman*, ed. L. Cheikho (Beirut: al-Matbaah al-Kathulikiyah, 1912), pp.8-9 quoted in P.K. Hitti, *Islam and the West*, p.166.

3 'Environment', 'ecology' and 'nature'—these words are used interchangeably throughout the essay, if not otherwise specified.

4 Denis Richards, *Modern Europe 1789-1945* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1950), p.6.

5 Fernand Braudel, *Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philippe II*.

In the case of intimate interaction between people's everyday cultural life and their natural environment, Ibn Khaldun was one of the earliest scholars who, through examining the cultural life of the Arab Bedouins, sought to find linkages between a particular lifestyle and the physical environment in which it flourished. In modern period, a subsidiary of Social Darwinism promoted the idea that human beings were members of the animal world and that human behaviour must be governed by biological drives and instincts. Thus warfare and violence were equated to 'aggressive instinct', mass behaviour to the 'herding instinct' or homemaking to the 'nesting instinct' and so on. In the early twentieth century, however, the biological discourse of culture was gradually replaced by psychological explanations. Behaviouralists denounced heredity or 'instinct' as sources of socio-cultural practices of human being, and argued that what people became was dictated by the events in their physical environment.

While nature's influence on both the broader civilizational and archaic cultural patterns has been appreciated, the vulnerability of nature itself has not been adequately examined in the discourse of relationship between nature and culture; nature merely symbolized permanence that was supposed to be permeable through time and space. It is only very recently that the cultural-environmental discourse has been informed more by a sense of vulnerability of nature than by its perceived omnipotence. Current issues have emanated from a concern for a fast-degrading natural world whose existence is equated with that of human race itself. Thus, an overwhelming sense of vulnerability of mankind in the wake of environmental degradation has contributed to the emergence of varied, pluralist and microscopic study of relationship between nature and culture.⁶

In spite of the fact that the study of environment and culture has developed to a great extent over the past few decades, no significant research has been done in or about Bangladesh in this context. In the bulk of literature on the culture of Bangladesh major focus is on debates around the way Aryan and non-Aryan cultures, or Hindu, Muslim, and European cultures clashed or co-existed, ignoring or not adequately appreciating the physical atmosphere in which different cultures of the region emerged and were nourished. On the other hand, environmental studies have focused on the contemporary context of degradation with no substantial focus on broader historical or cultural context of environmental patterns and changes and on wider cultural connotation of the environment. A study of mutual relationship between the environment and culture of Bangladesh is important not because this theme has not been adequately explored in serious academic forums, but also because Bangladesh itself offers an intriguing context for examination of the subject. This chapter is an attempt to explore the varied patterns of relationship between the environment and culture in Bangladesh in particular and the Bengal Delta in general. The first section focuses on the environmental context of wider civilizational development that took place in the region from proto-historic time; the second section examines the intricate cultural ways in which the people of the region respond to their surrounding

⁶ For a theoretical discussion of relationship between environment and culture, see Kay Milton, *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse* (London, New York: Routledge, 1996); Ramesh C Misra, Pierre R Dasen, Shanta Niraula, 'Ecology, language, and performance on spatial cognitive tasks', *International Journal of Psychology*, 2003, 38, 6, Dec, 366-383.

environment; the third and final section explores into the patterns of man's creative engagement with nature as reflected in artistic and literary modes of expressions.

Ecological settings and the scope of its influence on Bangladesh's culture and identity

Geological evidence suggests that most of the regions of the Bengal Basin remained under water during the Paleolithic period and perhaps because of that human settlement was made in the hilly regions and adjacent valleys. Evidence of antiquity of man in this region has been sought, therefore, not on the deltaic plain land, but in the older geological formations. It is possibly because of the lack of land formation in the plain land, substantial Pleistocene deposits containing Paleolithic tools, likely to be 10,000 to 15,000 years old, were found in the hilly regions in and around Bangladesh eg. Hills of Rangamati and Chittagong, Rajmahal Hills, Garo Hill tracts, Naga Hill tracts, Lalmai in Comilla and Feni Districts.⁷ Neolithic age in the region seems to have lasted from 3,000 BC to 1,500 BC and similarly Neolithic tools were found at Hilly regions of Sitakunda in Chittagong and Mainamati near Comilla. It is believed that the 'thinly forested laterite hills in eastern Bengal dotted with fertile valleys provided a congenial environment for Neolithic settlements.'⁸ As the Delta extended by sedimentation process, human settlement also gradually extended to plain land.⁹ It may be assumed that by the late Neolithic Age, a substantial landmass must have been formed which made it possible for settled life between 1000 BC and 300 BC when the ancient *janapadas* flourished with mature cultural and political organizations in place. In this context of ecologically induced process of land formation between the hills and the sea, it is not surprising that ethnically the majority of the people of Bangladesh have more affinity with the aboriginal peoples of the surrounding hills than with the people of other regions.¹⁰ Malony has found that though majority of Bangladesh population show signs of genetic affinity with that of the West Bengal, such affinity are more remarkable if compared with tribal people living along the eastern border of Bangladesh including north Indian hilly states and north Burma. Malony suggests that these similarities 'accounted for either by gene flow within that region, or by shared common selective factors'¹¹

7 D K Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh. A Study of the Archaeological Sources* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1992), pp. 177-8.

8 <http://asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/countries/bangla/bangladeshm.html>

9 The Bengal Delta owes its emergence and territorial expansion to the age-old process of deposition of sediment in the Bay of Bengal. Several South Asian natural phenomena have sustained this process. Between 1 and 6 million years ago, as the forces of mountain building waned, erosion levelled the topography down to the deep-level metamorphic rocks, generating a huge amount of sediment in the Himalayan ranges, which thus became a giant repository of sediment. A portion of this sediment regime has been brought down to the Bay of Bengal by two major rivers: the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. These rivers, jointly falling into the Bay of Bengal through the eastern Bengal territories along with their numerous branches, are reported to carry the highest proportion of sediment, amounting to about 25% of what is carried away by the rest of the world's rivers. It is estimated that some 40,000 million cubic feet of silt are deposited in the deltaic plain or thrown out to the sea every year in this process. At the same time, the ocean currents are also impeded by the heavy outflow from the rivers, and in turn 'drop down the burden of sand'. Thus a double process of land-making continues amidst the mutual confrontation of silt-laden rivers and the sand-carrying sea. See, W.W. Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (vol. VI, 1885), pp. 24-8.

10 Maloney, 'Tribes of Bangladesh and synthesis of Bengali culture', in *Tribal cultures in Bangladesh*, ed., Mahmud Shah Qureshi (Rajshahi University: Institute of Bangladesh Studies, 1984), pp.33-35.

11 Malony, *ibid.*, p. 50.

This fact is important for it reminds us of the possibility of Bangladesh's Southeast Asian cultural contacts through a host of migrants who had settled in the hilly strips as they followed the direction of land formations. This also denotes that pre-Aryan cultural development in Bangladesh was integral to the Southeast Asian monsoon cultural continuum. This possibility has been amply bolstered by recent researches. It is generally believed that the ancient stock of mankind which emerged in Africa dispersed first in the Middle East and then in Southeast Asia and Australia about 50,000 years ago. Those who traversed in Southeast Asia developed Austric languages and some of these Southeast Asian ethnic and linguistic groups assumed to have traversed in the Bengal Delta region.¹² In this context we find that 'the practice of growing rather than just hunting and picking' came to Bengal from Southeast Asia, which probably hosted the earliest cultivation practice in the world. Thailand is considered the place where cultivation was first invented and then spread to Bangladesh particularly via Burma. Malony observes, "Naturally, the people who cultivated their own food would be ecologically more efficient, culturally strong, more numerous, and more politically organized. This gave rise to Austroasiatic cultural and linguistic continuum, which stretched from the Pacific Ocean through Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, Bengal and into the Ganga plains and central India, and brought Munda language in India."

Thus from the point of view of pre-historic intra-Asian cultural exchanges, Bangladesh not only came under the sway of agrarian culture of Southeast Asia, it was also a 'shattered zone' which became a contact point between Southeast Asia and middle-Ganga region of India. The process of transmission of Southeast Asian Neolithic agro-cultural elements, such as wet-rice cultivation and Munda languages, to the middle-Ganga region via the Bengal Delta, seem to have taken place well before the West Asiatic Neolithic cultural elements reached there via northwestern India. In discussing the culture of Bangladesh, a reference to the early cultural development in the middle-Ganga region is important because by being a 'shattered zone' Bangladesh remained integral to Indian as well as Southeast Asian cultural diaspora in both proto-historical and early historical periods. Malony found the middle-Ganga region as a proto-historic site for resistance by Munda-speaking people against the invading Aryans. He even thought that the Munda-speaking people were, in fact, the Kauravas who, in the Mahabharata War, were said to have fought the Pandavas who represented western Indian culture. Malony also assumed that Brahmanical Hinduism was largely a product of the composite Indo-Aryan and Dravidian culture of the Indus region and western India, whereas original Buddhism, in reaction to it, represented more of the values of the middle and lower Ganga region.¹³

Bangladesh, therefore, appears to have played an important role in proto-historic period by absorbing Southeast Asian cultural influences, such as language, botanic and ritualistic traditions including birth practices, and then by transmitting them to middle-Ganga region. At the same time, we must also acknowledge that Bangladesh, because of its particular geographical location, again acted as a transit point when

12 Harun Er Rashid, 'Land and People', in A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed and B.M. Chowdhury ed., *Bangladesh: National Culture and Heritage* (Dhaka: Independent University of Bangladesh, 2004), p. 12.

13 For elaborate discussions of related issues see, Clarence Maloney, 'Tribes of Bangladesh', pp.5-51.

Buddhism from middle Ganga region spread in Southeast Asia at a later date.¹⁴ If we are to accept Malony's suggestion that 'proto-historic cultural contact was from Southeast Asia...in historic times the contact was mainly to Southeast Asia with the diffusion of Indian civilization', then we must also accept Bangladesh's central place in both phases of these historic interactions. As Buddhism grew and expanded, its followers not only sought to propagate the religion but also, when occasion arose, to protest against Brahmanical restrictions on sea voyages for trade and commerce; but for Buddhists to flourish across the ocean needed a coastal outlet which Bangladesh was able to provide. Bangladesh came under the influence of Buddhism both as a region adjacent to the birth place of Buddha himself as well as a 'transit point' for the spread of Buddhism in Southeast Asia. Thus the Southeast Asian proto-historic contributions of Austro-Mongoloid monsoon rice civilization to lower and middle Ganga region were amply rewarded back by the Buddhist cultural contributions to Southeast Asia in the early historical period.¹⁵ Being a 'cultural transit point', Bangladesh not only transmitted but also assimilated the cultural cross-currents between the Southeast Asian monsoon rice civilization and the middle-Gangetic Buddhist cultural traditions.

Recent discoveries in Wari-Bateshwar, two villages near Narsingdi District in the Meghna Valley, suggest that the region around Dhaka played a prominent role in the dissemination of Mauryan trade and Buddhism. The proximity of the region to the Meghna river that flowed to the nearby Bay of Bengal speaks of international maritime connection of the area, presumably with Southeast Asia and the Roman Empire. Professor Dilip K Chakrabarti suggests that Wari-Bateshwar could have been Ptolemy's *Sounagoura* which stood in rank and glory with other contemporary cities of Arikamedu (India), Mantai (Sri Lanka), Kion Thom (Tailand) and Oc-Eo (Vietnam) - each of these sites being the first urban centre in their respective regions. They were each major ports, all have been identified as emporia listed in Ptolemy's *Geographia*.¹⁶ In the post-Mauryan period, the existence of about four hundred years of Buddhist rule in Bangladesh, including that of the Palas and the Devas, testify to the assumption that the Buddhist cultural tradition was firmly rooted in all sectors of the society and all these were due to the longing of the Buddhists to expand and disseminate the *dhamma* via the geographic routes that Bangladesh provided.¹⁷ At the same time, during periods of insecurity and persecution in different phases of Indian history, Chittagong, protected as it is by rivers and hills on all sides, became one of the secure places for the retreating Buddhists.¹⁸

14 To support the hypothesis that Southeast Asian rice cultural practices went up to the middle Ganga via Bangla, it may be mentioned that the last diet of Buddha himself was fine rice rather than bread.

15 For a general discussion of commerce and culture of South Asia and Southeast Asia, see Kathleen D Morrison, 'Commerce and Culture in South Asia: Perspectives from Archaeology and History', in *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol. 26 (1997), 87-108; For reference to 'cultural transit' point, see Chakrabarti, pp.179-80.

16 MM Hoque and SS Mostafizur Rahman, 'Wari-Bateshwar', in *Banglapedia*.

17 For a detailed study of the society during the Pala rule, see Shahanara Hussain, *Everyday life in the Pala Empire* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1968); For a narrative of the Hindu-Buddhist rulers of southeastern Bangla, see A.M. Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1964).

18 According to the Buddhist tradition prevailing in Chittagong the name Chittagong was derived from the word *caityagram* or *cetiagram* meaning thereby a land of cetiyas or caityas i.e. Buddhist

An emphasis on Buddhist cultural tradition in ancient Bangladesh should not let one ignore the robust Hindu indigenous cultural development in the region. As is well-known, Buddhism was probably never able to fully disengage itself from the traditional core of Hinduism. The subtle difference that remains in this regard is that while Buddhism offered a wider platform for Bengal's socio-cultural development encompassing cultural continuum of two monsoon agrarian frontiers, Hinduism offered stimulus to a more localized interaction between culture and nature. We will deal with these issues in the following sections, but to be more in tune with the theme of this section, we need to examine as to why Buddhism, rather than Hinduism, lost ground to the Muslims? If persecution by the Muslim rulers were to be held responsible, the mantle would have fallen equally on the Hindu community; but it did not. Some historians have argued that in the context of Sena Brahmanical persecution in the twelfth century, the Buddhists were waiting for an emancipator and they found it in the Islamic polity. Another group of scholars have focused on the internal decay of Buddhism as exemplified in Trantic deviation. From an ecological point of view, however, it may be noted that the maritime trade and commerce of the Buddhist era in Bangladesh met a relative decline during the time of the Sena rulers who were not, as Brahmanical scriptural traditions entailed, keen on sea-faring. In this context, it may not be too far-fledged to contend that Islamization in Bangladesh perhaps meant a rehabilitation of the seafaring Buddhists in the Muslim seafaring tradition. This assumption, however, is yet to be substantiated. In any case, with the arrival of the Muslims in Bangal frontier, the three major cultural streams—Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, provided a solid and pluralistic cultural impetus to the region.

The culture that developed in the Bengal Delta thus represented assimilation as well as remarkable divergence of various streams, particularly between that of non-Aryan and Aryan. The aspects of divergence, however, appear to have been largely fashioned by the respective cultural group's perception of the ecological circumstances in the region. In other words, ecological variations within the greater Bengal Delta provided corresponding cultural variations. Since the Southeast Asian rice-based civilizational elements remained strongly embedded in Bengal, the Aryans failed to make any remarkable inroad in the cultural landscape of the region. It is in this context, cultural expressions, motifs and practices in Bangladesh are found to be still dominated by wet-land ecology. On the other hand, the failure of the Aryan dry agro-ecological and cultural elements kept sharply informing the mind of those who wanted to engage with this region out of political ambitions but with certain degree of difference. This is reflected in several Aryan texts which referred to the people of this region as inferior and untouchables who lived in 'jungles'. In the middle ages, Navadwipa (Nadia) played central role as the excellent seat of learning. Poet Brindabana Dasa (Born 1537) writes:

Navadwiper sampatti ke borniber pare.

Ek Ganga Ghate Lakha lok snan kore.

(Who can describe the [intellectual] wealth of Nadia (Navadwipa)

Millions of people alone take bath at a bathing ghat of Ganga)

temples where the image of Buddha is generally housed for worship by the laity. See, P.R. Barua, 'Buddhist Shrines and Monasteries in Chittagong', *Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad Commemoration Volume*, ed Muhammad Enamul Haq (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1972), p. 172.

Those who were close to or part of the intellectual or linguistic development that took place in medieval Navadwipa, however, sometimes considered themselves as superior in comparison to people of other regions within Bengal. A number of luminaries based in Navadwipa accordingly considered Eastern Bengal dialects and cultural traits as inferior to that practised in Navadwipa. In the later 16th century Kavikankan ridiculed the dialects of Eastern Bengal. Even Caitanya, who was born in Nadia in 1485, could not avoid the ‘temptation of jeering at the people of the Eastern Bengal on account of their peculiar dialect’.¹⁹ But it is interesting to note that the linguistic sophistication and perceived intellectual excellence of Nadia in the middle ages was probably a result of its geographically suitable situation where three politico-cultural as well as dialectically important areas of Bengal, Varendra (Northern), Rarh (Western) and Vanga (Eastern), met and thus Nadia appeared to be ‘eminently fit to be the common literary vehicle of the Bengali thought’.²⁰ And in this process, River Ganga played central role in its capacity as the major provider of transport and communication. Such sense of ‘otherness’ on the part of the medieval intellectuals in Western Bengal was not only expressed in linguistic terms, but also on ethno-geographical consideration. In *Manik Chandra Rajar Gaan*, we find such lines as: *Bhati Hoite Ailo Bangal Lamba Lamba dari* [There comes the Bangal from tidal country and they have long beard!].²¹ At a much later date, Ghulam Hussain Salim commented that the deltaic Bangalis had ‘shabby food taste, shabby cultural taste, shabby clothing taste.’ It is not surprising that the British who came from a completely different environment would also find themselves alien to the environment of the region. British colonial perception of the environment in Bangladesh is nowhere so nicely depicted as in the following poem written with reference to a small town near Dhaka:²²

O Moonsheegunge, thou spot beloved
 Of paddy-bird and duck;
 Where all the land is water,
 And all the water's muck;

 Where never, by remotest chance,
 A Sahib shows his nose;
 And where there's no society
 But that of Ram Nath Bose!

 What have I done, relentless Fate,
 That thou shouldst stick me here,
 Remote from horses, dogs, and men,
 From all I hold so dear?

 As I sit in the verandah
 A-smoking my cheroot,
 I come to the conclusion
 I'm a miserable brute.

¹⁹ Md Shahidullah, ‘A Brief History of the Bengali Language’, *Dhaka University Journal*, (vol. VIII, April 1932), pp.97-100.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Nihar Ranjan Roy, *Bangalir Itihasa, Adiparva*.

²² C.S., and the title of the book is *Leaves from a diary in lower Bengal* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1896), p. 65.

There's Jones has gone to Shikarpore,
 There's Smith at Spinst'rabad,
 While I am left to linger here
 And probably go mad.

To post a European here
 Is cruelty refined;—
 'Tis rigorous imprisonment
 with solitude combined.

O may some future ruler
 In charity expunge
 Thy name from each gazettee and map,
 O slimy Moonsheegunge!

The relative sense of otherness with respect to Bangladesh region that has been shown by the British, by Jawaharlal Nehru in the 1940s, Ayub Khan in the 1960s and by Salman Rushdie more recently has to be viewed not in simple racial or linguistic term, but in the fact that the unique geographical setting of Bangladesh, with its highly fluid deltaic and forest regime, offered a formidable and significantly different political as well as cultural identity. The cultural 'other' that the Aryan mindset, in ancient as well as in medieval and modern periods, had constructed with respect to Bangladesh has, therefore, been largely an ecological otherness.

But how do we identify the key environmental links to the formation of a separate socio-cultural identity in this region? Answering this question would require us to take a look at the role of extensive *chars*, (alluvial formation), of the rivers and the forest in more recent history, especially in the British colonial period. The process of land reclamation in the deltaic regions did not denote a mechanical mode of cutting forest or developing *char* lands for cultivation. In most cases, reclamation was taken up in areas far beyond the vicinity of a settled tract or village. But even in the cases where distant migration took place societal relations seemed to have been reproduced. For instance, in Barisal Sundarbans, the gradual extension of the population southward was brought about by establishing *daula bari* or a second home. A settled cultivator of a village put up a *daula bari* at a reclaimable or partly reclaimed tract, which he occupied during the cultivating season only. As the new tenancy grew in value, the *daula bari* tended to become a real homestead to which the family, or more generally a part of it, migrated.²³

Among those who reclaimed wastelands, nine out of ten cultivated these lands with their own hands, though they might have employed others to assist them.²⁴ This collective process of reclamation and settlement bonded the reclaiming tenants together in a spirit of equity, if not equality. They developed mutual dependency as well as collective way of doing things. It was the custom of the cultivators to assist each other mutually with labour and recourse to hired labour was unusual.²⁵ As the

23 H. Sasson, Offg Collector, Barisal to W. Hunter, 7 Sept 1885, *Movements of the people*, p.24,

24 CSAS, Mukherjee papers: 'Thirty nine articles on the Report of the Bengal Rent Law Commission', p. 8.

25 India Office Records, Temple Collection, MSS Eur F86/165, misc. colln. 14, no. 26/27J.G: Offg Joint Magistrate of Munshiganj to Collector of Dacca, 19 Sept 1873; Seton-Karr, 'Agriculture', p. 425.

old aristocratic Muslim families and upper caste Hindus were not involved in the actual reclamation process, differentiation did not become the dominant feature in the society. Henry Beveridge was surprised by the dearth of aristocratic Muslim families in Bakarganj, which was full of Muslims.²⁶ As new lands were being created or reclaimed from forests, the tenants were at considerable liberty to settle in lands on terms best suited to their demand. If they were not offered favourable terms, they would leave to seek better deals elsewhere. A Magistrate of coastal district of Noakhali, for instance, reported that there were very few wealthy individuals, but on the other hand there were no paupers and the possession of wealth was ‘widely diffused among all classes of the community’. He attributed this ‘fortunate condition’ to the system of land tenures which ensured the possession of a small plot of land or interest by ‘almost every individual’.²⁷

Among specific social groups, the Badyas made a gypsy social group, who lived on boats, and rarely set foot on land ‘save for the purpose of theft or to sell their rude manufacturers.’ In the course of the nineteenth century they formed colonies of the ordinary agricultural type, gradually merging into the vast mass of the population. A remarkable instance of their cultural survival was their villages which appeared as ‘a congeries of mat huts, of a shape identical with that of the cabins on their floating homes’.²⁸ When the indigo industry was closed in the district of Sirajganj, the Bunas, another gypsy group, who served as coolies at the indigo factories, were induced by the local landlords to settle on the wastelands for the purpose of reclamation. Following this, the Bunas induced more of their fellow community members from their homes in the districts of Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura and Purulia, to settle in this region, which included both zamindari estates and *khās mahals* or government lands.²⁹

The Namasudras, numbering about 1,860,000 in 1901, made the second largest Hindu caste in Bengal and the largest group among Hindu cultivators in eastern Bengal. They also exemplify linkages between the process of the reclamation of wasteland and upward social mobility in the nineteenth-century eastern Bengal. The Namasudras did not exist as a distinct caste group before the nineteenth century when all inferior castes were loosely described as ‘Chandals’. In the course of the nineteenth century most Chandals proved extraordinarily responsive to the opportunity of engaging in agriculture within the general ecological regime of the Delta which offered fertile land, higher wages for agricultural labour and profits from the commercialization of agriculture. The highly fluid environment of the marshy tracts where they lived and which they reclaimed for cultivation often ‘diluted the intensity of oppression by the dominant classes’.³⁰ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, it was observed that the Chandals tended to identify themselves as Namasudra with a view to mobilizing themselves along a distinct caste category. This transformation from Chandal, a rather nebulous and inferior identity, to

26 H. Beveridge, *District of Bakarganj*, 191.

27 *Condition of the lower classes*, p.11.

28 F.H. B. Skrine, Offg Collector, Tipperah to W.W. Hunter, 25 July 1885, See *Movements of the people* , p.7.

29 *Movements of the people*, p.12

30 Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, protest and identity in colonial India. The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947* (London, 1997), p.22.

Namasudra, denoting association to higher castes of Sudras, was reasonably mediated by the status they gained through agriculture which offered them a settled and relatively prosperous life. Whereas by the beginning of the nineteenth century they maintained an ‘amphibious existence’, earning their livelihood primarily through boating and fishing, in 1911 about 78 per cent of the Namasudras were more or less connected with agriculture.³¹

The fruits of reclamation of forests and *chars* and the extension of cultivation were comprehensively appropriated by the Muslim cultivators who formed the majority of the population, between 56 to 67 per cent in 1872. As Richard Eaton has shown, reclamation proved to be the most important factor for the growth of the Muslims in eastern Bengal deltaic frontiers throughout the middle ages.³² This linkage evidently persisted throughout the British period. The long continuity of this linkage is subtly expressed in a popular ballad of eastern Bengal. The ballad narrates the movement of two brothers, Ghazi and Kalu, who started a journey saying ‘bismillah’ (in the name of Allah) and after traveling through many countries arrived in Bengal and at last settled in the Sundarbans forests where ‘all tigers became their disciples’. They stayed there for ‘seven years’.³³ In sponsoring the publication of a *puthi* in the 1830s, the publisher said that his grandfather, who was from Mymensingh district, migrated to Char Palash village where he built home after cutting jungle (*jungle katia teni bari banailo*). The *puthi* writer himself had a different story to tell. The writer, Siddik Ali, wrote:

Allah knew whether I would become a Muslim or not

My mind always told me to leave the country.

But the Devil forbade me on the excuse that I did not have money

I then started some religious studies at the place of Mir Munshi Abdul Fazel

I don’t know what happens to a Hindu when he dies

So I left my own people to offer myself at *Khoda’s* will.

Let my relatives remain faithless

I will bring faith in Muhammadi religion.

In the tenth month of the year 1243 (1837 AD)

I came to the town of Dhaka on a postal boat.

In a Jumma day (Friday prayer day) at the hand of Sufi Shaheb

I satisfied my heart’s desire by the order of Allah (by becoming Muslim).

The Hindus say I have gone mad

I am not Sheikh, nor Syed nor Pathan,

Whom shall I say (who am I)

I am speechless, I don’t understand anything

And I keep silent.

So many have become Muslim after uttering the *kalema*

³¹ For a comprehensive account of the emergence and rise of the Namasudras in Eastern Bengal, see *ibid.*, pp. 15-29; see also R. Carstairs, *The little world of an Indian District Officer* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1912), p. 58; For a background of the rise of the non-elite cultivating groups in India in the nineteenth century, see Susan Bayly, *Caste, society and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age* (Cambridge, 1999), pp.108-10, 200-2.

³² Richard M Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier*.

³³ *Ghazi kalu and champaboti kanyar puthi* (Mymensingh, 1870).

But they live the lives of Hindus
 When they will die, only then they will know
 The true essence of happiness in life (*zindegir shukh*)
 ...Afterwards I was taken to Hujurah (seat of a spiritual leader)
 and he (*hujur*) taught me some lesson of spirituality (*marfoter bedjat*).³⁴

It is apparent from the *puthi* that Siddik Ali was an ordinary man and was too poor to make a journey. Then he began to understand Islam and came to eastern Bengal after availing of the earliest opportunity and became a Muslim. It is not clear whether his migration to eastern Bengal was for material reasons or due to a genuine desire to lead a sacred life; but practically he not only attached himself to the emerging Muslim society, but also took responsibility to spread the teaching of Islam.

The Muslims, like other social groups, appeared to be quick to avail themselves of the new agricultural opportunities. This was accompanied by an urge for self-esteem and honour. A Collector of Noakhali reported that the Muslim cultivators were a thrifty class who seldom spent money on passing enjoyment and that it was the 'chief ambition of a Muhammadan rayat [cultivator] to save enough to buy a small estate, which will give him independence and position among his neighbours'.³⁵ Muzaffar Ahmad, one of the founders of the Communist Party of India, was born in the 1880s on the island of Sandwip. He noted that among the Muslims the title *thakur* was a symbol of some rank and the family of his grandfather had some claim to it, however small. He recorded that in a small island like Sandwip, a family with even a few acres of land was considered aristocratic. His father was a pleader who was born in 1827 and he narrated that nearly all his father's professional colleagues had become owners of a good amount of landed property. He also mentioned how many of his own friends were aspiring to a middle class position in Sandwip and other neighbouring islands (such as Hatia).³⁶ This indicates that in those peripheral islands of the Bay of Bengal three consecutive generations went through a process of upward mobility, financially or socially. Such process of upward mobility inevitably paved the way for differentiations within the society. For instance, a *puthi* reads:

When a man becomes rich he does not care anybody
 He considers himself above everyone else
 He has wealth but does not donate
 But when a *Hakim* visits his house, welcomes him heartily
 When (ordinary) visitors come he says there is no food at the house
 When a *salar sammondhi* (distant but materially important guest) arrives
 He kills pigeons (to entertain).³⁷

Such differences in attitude turned into class differentiation in the context of deteriorating agrarian relations which became most apparent by the early twentieth century. But in the course of the nineteenth century, as long as ecological and social conditions remained favourable to ordinary peasantry, society remained largely undifferentiated in both economic and cultural sense, broadly defined. Within these

³⁴ *Siddik Alir Puthi*, 1244 BS (1837 AD).

³⁵ J.E. Webster, *EBDG: Noakhali*, p. 279.

³⁶ Ahmad, *Myself and the Communist Party of India* (Kolkata, 1970), pp. 1-5.

³⁷ Abdur Rahim, *Akaler puthi* (Kishorganj, Mymensingh, 1875).

trends we do not find it surprising that a *puthi* written in the 1870s talked about *jatek-gathan* or ‘nation formation’. The author of the *puthi* observed that the whole universe (*jagat*) was created because of the Prophet of Islam while the nation (*jati*) was also created because of the Prophet. It is not clear whether the author was speaking simply of the *ummah* or community of Islam, or whether he was making a point in the context of the emergence of a new society in eastern Bengal. But the term *jatek-gathan* appeared particularly reflective of a mobile and vibrant society in which the writer apparently nurtured his sensibilities.³⁸

Thus in the nineteenth century the sublime quest for ‘nation’ was indirectly influenced by the ecological regime, in particular the forest and the water system, of eastern Bengal in the sense that it provided economic buoyancy and social mobility which provided elementary impetus for social formation. During the Pakistan period, environmental signs and symbols remained central to the collective struggle for a free Bangladesh. Nature was remarkably invoked in the musical or literary expression of patriotism and ideas of political emancipation from Pakistan. In today’s Bangladesh, natural phenomena occupy a prominent place in the production and reproduction of cultural heritage.

Cultural response to nature in everyday life

Having discussed the broader environmental background and significance of culture(s) in Bangladesh, we will now focus on the specific contexts of relationship between culture and nature. It has been a well-known assumption that the whims of monsoon climate and the dependence of crops and livelihood on such climate have made the people of the region believers of an absolute power. In this context the concept of goddess Kali and Durga can be considered emanating from a sense of omnipotence of nature. In everyday economic activities gods and goddesses are invoked for safety and well-being. It has also been observed that though the Veda, Purana and other ancient scriptures have spread the message of moral theology, Bangali Hindu society have paved ways to the emergence of various gods and goddesses which are intrinsically related to various natural phenomena.³⁹ This relationship between man and the supernatural has manifested itself in the way ordinary people interact with their environmental surroundings.

Water seems to have been the single most important ecological element that has formed the cultural life in the region. This is primarily because of the presence of extensive network of rivers and different other water bodies along with the water that descend on the land in rich volume during the monsoon. In the Hindu pantheon, both goddess Durga and river Ganga are equated with Ma (mother), as long as they are considered the pristine provider. But there are occasions when *Ma Ganga* (Mother Ganga) is often more intimately engaged than Ma Durga. Thus the Hindu fishermen propitiate *Ma Ganga* ‘not only for helping them make a good catch but also for keeping them safe while they are fishing.’⁴⁰ The river is also viewed as a site for washing off of not only the body but also of the sins. The tradition of annual dip in

38 *Aftab-i-hidayat* (Mymensingh, 1877).

39 M.A. Rahim, vol.2, p. 8.

40 Md. Anwar Hossain, ‘Fishing Community’, in *Banglapedia*.

Langalband, a place near Dhaka where the Ganga and the Brahmaputra rivers meet, signify this popular spiritual attachment to water.

The emergence of Islam, especially its Sufi variant, in the cultural frontier of Bangladesh gave rise to a different metaphysical framework for the appropriation of nature, but the centrality of water in popular mind remained unchanged. The concept of local gods and goddesses was mixed with the examples of the life of the Sufis. This inter-cultural development led several eminent cultural historians of Bangla to assert that these shifts gave rise to a kind of hybridity or syncretism, which symbolized a secular, non-orthodox and flexible cultural world-view.⁴¹ While this has been the case to a certain extent, it must be acknowledged that a more fundamental change was occurring in the cultural landscape of Bengal. For instance, the remembrance of the names of local *pirs*, eg Badar, in place of gods and goddess, during sailing across a river meant that Bangla popular mind was shifting its focus from animism to a sort of anthropocentrism. While in pre-Islamic period, man's engagement with nature was often mediated by omnipotent supernatural elements, now human being began to be regarded as an agent of God. Therefore, while the Muslim fishermen say their prayers, arrange *milad* (prayer to Allah praising the holy prophet's birth), they also take blessings from spiritual personalities by offering *shirni* (sweetmeats) as well as donations to *darga* (mausoleum of a holy saint) before setting out on the first fishing voyage of the season.⁴² It is no wonder that *dargahs* are often situated on the river banks or various kinds of water bodies. It may be noted that one of the most prominent personalities in Bangali Muslim mythology is Khaja Khizr. Khizr represents the domain of water and is regarded as the 'water-saint'. He is considered to be still alive and is believed to be so old that he had contact with Noah during the Great Flood. A fish-rider and protector of the mariners from shipwreck, Khaja Khizr is believed to have discovered the source of the water of life. He is also venerated during flood and drought. Still today, there exists the practice of burning lamps in his honour in the Buriganga river.⁴³

Popular perception of health and disease in Bangla draws from situation of hot climate of the region. It is no longer fashionable to believe in an inherent connection between heat and certain diseases, for most theories which attribute disease to climate now sound medically unacceptable. However, it is worth exploring some aspects of indigenous knowledge about and popular attitudes towards the way the people cope with the unhealthy circumstances which are partly due to the 'tropical' climate and landscape. Writing in the 1830s, William Twining, an English medical practitioner, found that people generally exposed to extreme heat in Bangla were liable to apoplexy, paralysis, inflammatory fever, and sudden attacks of cholera.⁴⁴ The general attitude of the Bangali people to *Bhadra*, a very hot as well as extremely humid month corresponding roughly to mid-August to mid-September, provides an

41 Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: a quest for identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981); Richard M. Eaton, *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier 1204-1760* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Asim Roy, *Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal*.

42 *Banglapedia*.

43 Sirajul Islam ed., *History of Bangladesh* (vol. 3, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997), pp.90-92; Ahmad Hasan Dani, 'Significance of the establishment of the independent sultanate in Bengal', *Justice Muhammad Ibrahim Trust Fund Lecture*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka 1997, p.8.

44 William Twining, *Clinical illustrations of the more important diseases of Bengal* (vol.1, 2nd edn., Kolkata, 1835), p. 6.

example of the popular response to such climate of heat and humidity. Twining observed that the month of *Bhadra* produced ‘extreme languor, depression of spirit, and exhaustion of bodily strength as well as mental energy.’ During this month, animals languished and became sickly, and consequently meat and all market supplies were of ‘indifferent quality’. It was estimated that at least one-fourth of the total number of annual deaths occurred in this month. In response, people have shown remarkable conservatism about this time. Twining noted people saying that those undertaking a journey in this month were liable to ‘lose their lives, or to have their health permanently impaired.’ Marriages were not contracted by the Hindus and women did not visit their relatives. Twining, however, remarked that many of the popular conclusions with respect to this month were the result of long observations.⁴⁵ Till date, many communities in rural Bangladesh prefer to arrange marriage during cooler and drier months as there is abundance of food and communication is easier for the bridal parties to travel during this time.

In response to the hot climate, among those who could afford it avoided ‘any exertion’, reduced the quantity of their food, and ate fruits which were considered cooling. In the afternoons, they drank the fluid contained in the unripe coconut, or a very simple *sherbat*, or some sugar and water, which was thought to be especially cooling. They also occasionally drank an infusion of the leaves of *Nalta Pat* or jute (*Corchorus Olitorius*) in the mornings as it was considered to have a ‘cooling and mild tonic effect’ as well digestive powers. Twining observed that though tuned to the hot climate, the Bangalis took ‘more care to moderate the effects of the hot-season than Europeans—especially in their light clothing, abstemious food, and tranquil habits’.⁴⁶

Despite all these precautions among Banglalis of all regions, however, western Bengal and to some extent northern Bengal, stood exposed to more diseases and fatalities than eastern Bengal. The factors that differentiated the health conditions in eastern Bengal from other parts of Bengal, therefore, appear to have been caused by other factors besides heat and humidity. One of the factors appears to be the styles of housing, particularly in regard to ventilation. Twining observed that conditions of ill-ventilation in the living places caused several diseases, including cholera.⁴⁷ A Bangali sociologist, Kanny Loll Dey, observed in the 1860s that in order to keep the air ‘in its necessary state of purity’, it must be ‘continually changing.’ Following the estimate of a European doctor, Dey thought that the change must amount to at least 2,000 cubit feet per hour per head for persons in good health, and not less than 3000 or 4000 cubic feet or more for sick persons. But he observed that a room in Bengal, meaning mostly western Bengal, was like a ‘hermetically closed box’. In the case of *dalans* or masonry buildings, where better-off people lived, most spacious and somewhat airy areas were reserved for social functions such as *pujas*. In these areas male members of the family predominated. On the other hand, the *zenana*, where women of the family lived all day and night, received hardly any air or light. Day noted that when the male members entered the *zenana* for rest or a night’s sleep, they also joined their female members in the same ‘hermetically sealed’ room. Therefore,

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

46 W. Twining, *Clinical illustrations*, p. 6.

47 *Ibid.*, pp.31-2.

sleep, ‘nature’s sweet restorer’, brought rather ‘lassitude and enervation’.⁴⁸ In the cases of accommodation of ordinary people who could not afford masonry buildings, and this was mostly the case, the walls of houses were made of mud and there was very little ventilation, except through the door.⁴⁹ In eastern Bengal, the situation was perhaps better in this context, since in most deltaic districts masonry buildings were not as prevalent as they were in Burdwan or Hugli. The accommodation of ordinary peasantry was mostly built of slit bamboos which contained ‘a superabundance’ of air.⁵⁰ In today’s rural Bangladesh, the tradition of erecting houses made of mud and straw with ample facilities for cross-ventilation persists.

Another interesting feature of housing in eastern Bengal is that people tended to surround their dwellings with different kind of trees and also with thick thatch of leaves or rice straw. Such arrangement apparently speaks of Bangali people’s intimacy with nature, but this at the same time serves two other purposes. One is the need for supply of fruits and fuels for the family and the other one is the need for privacy which, as a nineteenth-century English visitor commented, was ‘looked upon as of great importance, as it often shields a family from obnoxious intrusion’.⁵¹ It must be noted, however, that the traditional housing patterns with a clear bias in favour of environment and health is fast diminishing with the recent pace of urbanization which have resulted in a kind of accommodation culture that shows an entirely different pattern of living and well-being. People live, or are compelled to live, in a condition characterized by less ventilation, lower rooftop, and dense population.

As far as the relationship between Bengal soil and health was concerned, John M’Clelland, another English medical scientist, observed that most of the soil of eastern Bengal consisted of grey sand, which, becoming saturated with moisture retained by the clay on which it rested, was rendered rich and fertile during cultivation. When neglected, it degenerated into a poor sandy or heavy clayey soil, which was soon overrun with coarse grasses and other indigenous vegetations, which, once established, was difficult to eradicate. It was observed that in the eastern Bengal alluvial lands where reclamation and cultivation took place most extensively, diseases were proportionately less prevalent than in other areas of Bengal where reclamation and cultivation were less intensive. M’Clelland also observed that in the areas composed of lighter sedimentary soil, such as the Sundarbans, fever did not set in ‘until after the first fall of the rain’, when the malaria had immediate effect. It lost its effect for a time when the rains had set in, reappeared when the fall of rain became interrupted towards the close of the rainy season. Like the eastern Sundarbans, districts composed of sedimentary deposits became safe after November. The districts composed of laterite or heavy clay, mostly prevalent in western Bengal, on the other hand, took a longer time to dry after the rains had subsided and were not ‘safe to enter until the middle of January.’ There are reasons to believe that Bangali peasants who reclaimed and cultivated lands and dwelled in this region had been

48 Kanny Loll Dey, *Hindu Social laws and habits viewed in relation to health* (Kolkata, 1866), pp.3-5.

49 Baboo Isser Chunder Mitter Roy, ‘A few facts concerning village life’, The Bengal Social Science Association Meeting, 1877 (Kolkata: Wyman and Co., 1877), p.3.

50 Mitter Roy, ‘A few facts concerning village life’, p.3.

51 *A sketch of Eastern Bengal with reference to its railways and government control* (Kolkata: Thacker, Spink and co., 1861), p. 3.

aware of the subtleties of good living in their ecological system. M'Clelland noted that in response to the threat of diseases, the Bengalis showed 'instinctive objection to live on ground floors. Their houses were consequently raised on posts. This practice, which was also prevalent in parts of Assam and Pegu, seemed to have originated in a perception of the capillary attraction of the soil, in consequence of which, the surface was always wet. Thus the inhabitants of these regions displayed a 'just appreciation of the influence of soil', which became 'engrafted even in their national character and customs'.⁵²

Food habit and housing patterns of the people of the region, thus, appear not only environmentally-inspired but also reflective of an awareness of healthy living. This sounds true also in the case of dressing. Though Bangladesh has been well known for its excellent muslins for centuries, it has been the clothes made of coarse cotton fabrics, eg. shari, of recent origin dhuti, punjabi-pajama, which are used universally. No doubt, this has been particularly so because cotton fabric is best suited to the hot and humid weather of the land. Popular appreciation of this connection between the region's climate and clothing pattern has given rise to indigenous textile industries which have accommodated workers from all traditions, Hindu, Muslim or indigenous people.

With regard to local ecological wisdom about nutrition intake, health and medicine as well as agricultural practices, there is strong evidence that the people have intimate knowledge of the biodiversity that surrounded them and they make the best use of it. This knowledge of biodiversity and their uses have recently been appropriated within the framework of sustainable development. For instance, the government has started to advocate the use of some selected indigenous agro-ecological knowledge by farmers to mitigate environmental degradation. Some of these practices include: the use of bamboo sticks or tree branches for insect control; the sprinkling of cattle urine or spreading of tobacco dust to control pest (as nicotine is an effective insect repellent); the use of *neem* leaves with its active insecticide 'azadirachtin' and Biskatali leaves when storing seeds to deter insect attack; the laddering of standing wheat crops and pulling of ropes across rice/wheat fields early in the morning to moisten the soil with falling dew drops; the use of ash; and application of poultry excreta to vegetable gardens to provide nitrates.⁵³

Forest, a major repository of biodiversity, has been given a special place in popular mind. This is true not only in the case of the *adivasi* or indigenous people such as *santals* but also for the Bangalis themselves. Here forests are not considered culturally alien as much as they are in western worldview. Forest has been a special site for the meditating sadhus and sufis; this has been a place for *banprasth* or place of retirement of ordinary husbandmen. It is true that there are numerous stories of *bonobash*, or banishment in the forest, but this does not signify the alien entity of the forests. In most of the stories of *bonobash*, the *bonobashi*, or the banished one, is found to have made intimacy either with forest-dwelling creatures or with human being connected with forest in some capacity. The demarcation between the domestic and the wild has, therefore, been blurred to a certain extent in the folk ideas and

52 J.M 'Clelland, *Sketch of the medical topography*, pp. 38, 126.

53 Abdul Momen Miah, Indigenous Technical Knowledge: Unexplored Potential for Sustainable Development', Paul Sillitoe ed., Indigenous Knowledge Development in Bangladesh. Present and Future, Dhaka: UPL, 1990, p. 25.

stories. No wonder, so many stories have been told about the Sundarbans ('beautiful forest') that it has been justly termed as an 'anthropological and sociological dreamscape'.

At a more practical world of struggle for livelihood, however, people undergo the predicaments of wilderness with the perceived support of spiritual or metaphysical authorities. Whenever villagers, Hindus and Muslims alike, enter a dangerous forest zone, a holy man or a *gunin*, with spells and amulets, accompany them to keep tigers away. Bonobibi, the forest goddess, provides an interesting example of how people view the Sundarbans as an ambivalent site which is simultaneously very close and alien to their worldview. Bonobibi was abandoned in the Sundarbans after birth but was reared by deer 'by the will of Allah' and was filled with magic to turn a goddess who would vow to help the vulnerable visitors to the Sundarbans. The Sundarbans were perceived as a place of wild animals, particularly tigers which would stand between themselves and their search for livelihood such as timber or honey. In this context, they seek support of Bonobibi who is considered all powerful over the wilderness of the Sundarbans. The presence of Bonobibi in the Sundarbans make it 'safe' as much as in the womb of mother. The *gunin*, who accompany the forest-goers, therefore prays:

O Mother
 Thou who lives in the forest,
 Thou, the very incarnation of the forest,
 I am the meanest son of yours.
 I am totally ignorant.
 Mother, do not leave.
 Mother, you kept me safe inside your womb
 For ten months and ten days.
 Mother, replace me there again,
 O Mother, pay heed to my words.⁵⁴

An interesting aspect of the whole programme of visiting the forest is not only the prevention of the team from wild attacks with the support of Bonobibi, but it also relates to the test of purity of one's soul—for if such a team is nevertheless attacked--even the *gunin* may be a victim--a reason is invariably found: an act of impiety, some offense which the gods would not let pass.⁵⁵ In recent days the *gunin* finds that they are not getting the desired support of Bonobibi as frequently that it used to because, according him, people are becoming impure and that goodness is giving good-bye to the world.⁵⁶ Thus, in Bangali cultural worldview, forest provides a special site where ethics and supra-rationality exist together.

The bazaar is a special feature of the public life in Bangladesh. Until recently bazaars were perceived as a place for material exchanges in a purely economic context. C.A. Bayly's seminal work on Indian bazaars has, however, shown that these are also places for reproduction of cultural, social as well as political traditions and

⁵⁴ Sy Montgomery, *Spell of the Tiger*, quoted in AK Townsend, 'women of water, men of mud: gender translucence & opacity in the Sundarbans', in <http://www.smartoffice.com/tiger/id26.htm>

⁵⁵ <http://www.phy6.org/outreach/books/Tiger.htm>

⁵⁶ AK Townsend, 'women of water, men of mud: gender translucence & opacity in the Sundarbans', in <http://www.smartoffice.com/tiger/id26.htm>

activism.⁵⁷ In Bangladesh, these bazaars have invariably been set up near rivers or any kind of water bodies. The way how bazaars have been influenced by water bodies of the region has been amply illustrated by Richard Temple, the nineteenth-century Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, who visited eastern Bengal in the 1870s, “Boats of all sizes in thousands are moored and lashed together, thus constituting stages, almost roadways along which people can move to and fro. Tens of thousands of boatmen, workmen, and traders are congregated; this concourse induces villagers and tradesmen to bring supplies on board the boats; the merchants find it convenient to arrange their transactions on board also. Thus a floating city is actually formed on the river for several months in the year; on board of this vast flotilla, markets are held, goods disposed of, even rates of exchange settled, and transactions proceed as if on land...the river-banks and temporary islands mid-stream change every year, therefore the floating city, while it keeps its name, has not a local habitation...it has been not inaptly termed a town without houses.”⁵⁸

If environment has been influential on religious beliefs, health and well-being as well as social and economic interactions, this is also true that it has bearing on the finer sides of the community and its values. For instance the folk song: ‘Ai bristi jhepe dhan dibo mepe’ (Oh rain, come in profusion, and we will donate paddy produced thereafter with equal proportion) signify the intimate relations between community feeling and the virtue of charity as they rely on an endowment of nature: rain. At the same time the people have felt affinity with nature with such passion that even the etymologies of different natural phenomena suggest that nature possess some kind of temperament or character. Thus, the Sundarban means ‘the beautiful forest’, Haringhatta denotes ‘deer-shore’ river, Madhumati represents ‘honey-flowing’ river, Bhairab represents ‘dreadful’ river and so on.

The indigenous people represent a small proportion of Bangladesh population percentage wise, but they are rich in their cultural worldview and diversity. Generally the indigenous people attach great importance to earth which they consider as ‘mother’ who possesses all possibilities of bearing children, that is crops. No doubt a reconstruction of the idea of the earth in the symbol of a mother relates to the agrarian order in which they live. It is observed that they worship the ‘mother’ earth before sowing crops. Specially the Oraons revere the cropland and believe that it is the earth-mother’s menstruation that produces crops. This explains why they observe a number of ceremonies where the ‘earth is treated as a menstruating or pregnant woman.’⁵⁹ But agricultural practices of the indigenous people have not merely revolved around some supernatural ideas and deities; cultural practices of a more secular, temporal and diverse nature have evolved as well. For instance, there are records of fifty-two techniques and associated tools employed by tribal people in watershed management in the country’s hill tracts region.⁶⁰ If technology is a form of cultural expression then these agrarian techniques provide example of the indigenous people’s diverse patterns of cultural attachment to nature.

⁵⁷ C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaar: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770-1870*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983.

⁵⁸ Richard Temple, *Men and events of my time in India* (London, 1882), pp. 417-8.

⁵⁹ Ali Nawaz, ‘Tribal culture’, *Banglapedia*.

⁶⁰ Paul Sillitoe ed., *Indigenous knowledge development in Bangladesh. Present and future* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2000), p. 6.

Representing nature in cultural modes of expressions

Representation of nature in various cultural modes of expression forms an integral part of cultural life in a society. In Western literature, for example in Homer's *Iliad*, sea is represented as repositories of misfortunes or hurdles as well as sites for expressing human heroism which responded to such misfortunes. Generally, in Western literature, nature provides space for creative imagination of temporal orientation. There are rivers, forests and picturesque landscape in Europe and in America, but literary traditions fall just short of spirituality. In South Asian literature, references to natural phenomena have been imbued with spiritual contents and, at the same time, natural elements have often been personified. In Kalidasa's classic *Meghduta* clouds are skilfully depicted not only as purely natural phenomena, but also as an ambassador for Shokuntala, who wanted to send emotional messages to her beloved husband then living in a distant place. To the French poet Charles Baudelaire, for instance, cloud is loveable but it is at the same time a stranger; to Kalidasa it is so intimate, hence impersonated.⁶¹

Perhaps such remarkable subjective attachment to natural phenomena in this region has led to the absence of a tradition of intellectual or critical appreciation of nature and its manifestations. The famous Abul Fazl of Emperor Akbar's court sought an ecological understanding of the region of Bangladesh. He argued that the kings of the land used to construct grand *al* (embankment) by the size of 10 gauge height and 20 gauge width in the ancient period. For this reason this region had been called Bangalah. Abul Fazl also made other related observations on the land and landscape of the region. He, however, was not an environmentalist and his analysis of the landscape of Bangla was necessitated more by an imperial and administrative need for revenue collection than by a particular need for examination of the landscape. The absence of pioneering environmental thinkers in the pre-industrial and pre-modern era may be explained by the fact that during this time environmental degradation did not become so pervasive. But even in modern period, when the United States and France, for instance, have seen great environmental thinkers like Aldo Leopold or Fernand Braudel respectively, India in general and Bangladesh in particular have not produced any remarkable environmental thinker. Specific scientific or intellectual work on raising awareness in the deterioration of environmental system appears only secondary to the accommodating of nature in more aesthetic narratives in poems or novels. So, creative literature rather than intellectual exercises have become the major repository of human expressions about nature in this region. But this deficiency has to be seen not as an instance of poverty in the Bangali intellectual thoughts on nature. It has to be sought in the fact that popular mind-set in this region has been so spiritually and romantically loaded that in most spheres of cultural expression on nature, scientific attempts to understand environmental problems and priorities have not been made.

The earliest evidence of aesthetic appreciation of nature in Bangla language could be traced in the specimen of Bangla language itself, known as *Caryapada* or *Caryagiti*. In the *Caryagiti*, composed by Buddhist monks during the ninth to thirteenth centuries, natural phenomena appear as symbols of poetic and spiritual representation. Since different water bodies dominate the landscape of the region,

⁶¹ Baudelaire in his famous poem, 'The stranger', thus writes: I love the clouds the clouds that pass up there up there the wonderful clouds!

Caryapadas extensively use imagery of water and related themes. For instance, in one *Carya*, the world is compared to a river which is a deep source of endless sin. Since middle of the river is unfathomable and thus difficult to cross (to overcome these sins) for the ignorant commoners, Catilla and Siddhacarya, two Buddhists saints, built a bridge (of spiritual wisdom) for those who wished to cross the world river of materialism. ‘The wood needed for the bridge has to be gathered from the tree of illusion which is rooted in our mind. Body, speech and mind are sources of illusion and should be separated in order to destroy evil. They will have to be joined by knowledge. The bridge will be constructed by wisdom. This is the way of salvation. While water is mystified, various other elements relating to water are inserted in creative expressions. For instance, boat, boatmen, tortoise, fish, boat-making instruments—all aid in the process of using nature as metaphor for spirituality. In one *Carya*, the boat represents the Buddha, Dharma and Samgha. Its eight chambers represent eight Buddhist treasures. Inside is supreme Bliss. Kanha says: ‘avoid illusion and sail your body boat. Take the five senses as your oar and cross the sea of the world’. Thus the *Carya* says,

The deep and profound world river flows fast
The two banks are muddy
The middle is unfathomable

Or

The body is the boat. The mind is the oar
Hold the sail high to the words of the Guru (guiding saint).
Concentrate your mind...⁶²

Bangla literature underwent major wave of development in the Middle Ages, particularly in the fourteenth century onward. During this time, *Caryapada* tradition of creative and spiritual engagement with nature persisted in the Vaishnava and Sufi literature. Literary works of these genres continued to consider natural phenomena as means of understanding the ways of attaining spiritual excellence and knowledge. The songs of Lalon, a nineteenth-century saintly poet who represented a synthesis of Vaishnavism and Sufi trends of medieval literature, provide representative examples of linkages between water and creative quest for spirituality. Thus Lalon says,

O, that untouchable (*adhar*) Man has taken his dwelling (*ghāt*) by the bank of the River.
It is built with stones by implementing pearls and jewels.
The Padmā and Jamunā are mixing in the ever-flow of the Bhāgirathī,
Descending in three moods the waters of the three rivers are making ebb and flow.
The first Man in the Untouchable Moon has the one form taken three shapes.
From three sides mixing with three tastes (*rasa*) they are giving public audience.
Turning three *ratis* and riding on three rasas, Man has taken three
—*sādhārāni*, *samañ jasā* and *samarthā*—names.
In the taste of poison it is *sādhārāni*, in *samañ jasā* I hear it to be *sāmbhu*.
(And) the *samarthā* is residing in the form of nectar.
One who has become a taster (*rasika*), only knows that implementation of tastes.
By mercy of spiritual guide, descending on the *ghāt*, he has surpassed three *ratis*.
When the passionate love (*rasa-rati*) is surpassed, it is called *Gopī-kṛpā*.
Turning his eye to the easy (course of enchanting) beauty, he is dead while alive.
Sitting on the *ghāt*, he has captured easily the Man.
O Friend, says Hīrūchānd, without knowing the inner meaning (*bhāva*) Panj, you wander in vain.

62 This discussion and the English translations of the *Carya* are drawn extensively from Hasna Jasimuddin Moudud, *A thousand year old Bengali Mystic poetry*, UPL, Dhaka 1092, pp.38-40

Here apparently the Faqir Panj Shah is aggrieved as he could not taste well the inner meaning of the thoughts of the *Bauls*. As the three minds—beastly, human and divine—are only a diversification of one Mind, so the disinterested love that never dies are originated from the One Source, so are the three currents of Water (*benī* or *srota-dhārā*) coming from the One Origin and are again mixing with the same River (or Ocean). ‘These three currents meeting together are called the *Trivenī-sangama* like the three currents of attraction for love towards the Soul unified together in its developed mental stage from where all the three stages of attraction for love can be easily grasped. In the same way, when the passionate love disowns itself, it is called the favour of the *Gopī*-who alike gave up all their selfish desires for the sake of their Lord Krishna. Here the Baul poet is apparentlyavouring the *Sahajīyā* cult of love where the passionate love is gradually turned into divine love.’⁶³

One of the most remarkable genre of medieval Bangla literature is Mongal Kavya, composed during the 13th to 18th century. Mongal Kavya focuses on the story of a conflict between a very rich merchant and the goddess of snake, Manasha. Manasha desired that the merchant, Chand Sawdagar, would worship her. But the merchant was never ready to do so. In revenge, Manasha intervened to destroy all accumulated fortunes of Chand acquired by sea and river trade. Six of his seven sons died for the same reason. Finally when his youngest son died because of the curse of Manasha, the former’s wife appealed to Chand to start worshipping the Manasha in order to get back her husband. Chand reluctantly did so and thus regained his fortunes and family. This story, as retold generation by generation in different forms, is often interpreted as the victory of local deities over the Aryan elite. Interestingly it appears that though Chand reluctantly gave in to Manasha, when he extended his offering in one hand, he kept a stick on the other hand. This is significant because that stick was made of Hetal tree, an indigenous variety, which the snakes detested.⁶⁴ It seems that the story refers to a conflict between two different cultural ways by which the ecology of the region was perceived: water trade that denote economic mobility and snake that represents cultural preponderance of an indigenous group called Bedyas, who revered the snakes and whose livelihood depended on snake charming etc. In this conflict, none actually won since though Manasha received loyalty of Chand, Chand did it with a symbol that Manasha detested. In the final analysis it was an example of incomplete syncretism. And most significantly, water remained central to this story. For Chand, water was civilizational category, offering him opportunity for trade and commerce; for Manasha and hence the Bedyas, water denoted a sort of cultural shelter in which their lives and sensibilities were nurtured.

In the modern period, poetic and musical tradition of ancient and medieval Bangla continued to thrive with much more creative dimensions attached to it. Nature is the most celebrated theme in Rabindranath Tagore’s writings. His famous song, ‘amar sonar Bangla’, written in 1905 in the context of the partition of Bengal represents the naturalistic essence of his patriotic feeling for a united greater Bengal, even though the nature he depicts mostly describes the natural environ of eastern Bengal, which

63 Harendra Chandra Paul, ‘Origin of the Bauls and their Philosophy’, *Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad Commemoration Volume*, ed Muhammad Enamul Haq, (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1972), pp.25-6.

64 S.M. Lutfur Rahman, *Bangladeshi Lockochikitsha* [Folk Medicine of Bangladesh], Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2003, p.91.

later became Bangladesh. This particular song became the national anthem of Bangladesh after its independence in 1971. On the other hand, Tagore's 'Sonar Tori' or 'golden boat' represents the pick of his spiritual longing uniquely represented in the form of a boat: an integral element of archaic Bangla. Yet in his other poems Rabindranth has a more temporal, passionate and romantic affiliation with the waters and rivers of the region of eastern Bengal:

...in that village
the Dhaleswari flows
at her banks the shadow of Tamal tree
and the woman who waits at the yard
wears Dhakai shari, vermillion on her forehead
or

When I will live no longer, and when this song will not be sung
Even then the sound of your joy of enlivening the heart of the earth in Bangladesh
Will be heard year and year on, O Isamati (river).⁶⁵

Nazrul Islam, another great name in Bangla literature and the national poet of Bangladesh, was somewhat different to Tagore in that he did not seek sublime solitude amidst the serenity of the nature of Bangladesh. He instead was famous for his rebellious romanticism. He was imprisoned during the British rule for his fiery poems. The most famous anti-colonial piece of poetry by him, *Vidrohi* (The Rebel), extensively uses metaphor from nature. While Rabindranath is eager to seek unity with nature, Nazrul wants to use nature's elements in his quest for political emancipation in contemporary India.

I am the soothing breeze of the south,
I am the pensive gale of the east.

...
I am the harsh unquenched mid-day thirst,
I am the fierce blazing sun,
I am the softly trilling desert spring,
I am the cool shadowy greenery!
Maddened with an intense joy I rush onward,
I am insane! I am insane!

...
Clapping my hands in exultation I rush like the hurricane,
Traversing the earth and the sky.
The mighty Borrak is the horse I ride.
It neighs impatiently, drunk with delight!
I am the burning volcano in the bosom of the earth,
I am the wild fire of the woods,
I am Hell's mad terrific sea of wrath!
I ride on the wings of the lightning with joy and profound,
I scatter misery and fear all around,
I bring earth-quakes on this world! (8th stanza)⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Quoted in Khaleda Edib Chowdhury, 'Bangadesher Nadi O Shahitya', *Mizanur Rahmaner Troimashik Patrika*, vol. XVII, no.3, issue 58, Oct-Dec, 1999., p.227-228.

⁶⁶ Translated by Kabir Choudhary.

It should, however, be noted that on other occasions when it took Nazrul to write about the nature of the region itself, he found immense vitality particularly in the nature of Eastern Bengal. Nazrul has seen in the riverine Bengal a power that influences other parts of India and indeed beyond it. In his ‘Purob Banga’ (Eastern Bengal) Nazrul says:

The eastern horizon washed away by Padma, Meghna
 The flute of the youth and the sunny sings as the dark night ends
 That satisfying message of the moments of creation
 Awakens the sleeping life, offers new consciousness
 That elixiaring message spreads its power
 In the West and in the distant horizon.
 Always made sacred by the rhythmic waves of hundreds of rivers
 The East Bengal is bathed pure and is beautifully placed in its deep forest
 Amidst nature the simple, calm yet so powerful East Bengal exists
 At this auspicious moment the birds of this message fly high in the sky
 With jinglings and humings
 Let the wintry India enlivens in this new spring.⁶⁷

Another famous contemporary of Tagore and Nazrul was Jivanananda. Jivananada’s engagement with nature opened up a new vista in Bangla literature. At times he seems to be Wordsworthean in depicting nature, but while Wordsworth’s poems represent romanticism in cold mental fusion, Jivanananda induced surrealism as he depicted nature. So he becomes more unpredictably diverse not only in expressing nature’s diversity, but also in opening up his surrealist soul. His poems ‘Rupasahi Bangla’ or ‘Nadi’, amply illustrate this. Another Bangali poet whose poetry represents the true temporal beauty and reality of rural Bangladesh is Jasimuddin. He has rather folkways of appreciating the nature graphically set in a idyllic Bengali rural life and landscape. Different natural phenomena, from rivers to typical trees and birds of Bangladesh, have been elegantly represented in the writings of Jasimuddin.

These four poets represented four distinct genres in Bangla literature as long as the question of using nature in their works was concerned: Tagore used nature to engage ephemeral conditions of life or a philosophical unity with nature, Nazrul exalted nature to highlight existential temporality, and Jivananda used natural phenomenon to express surrealist feeling. Jasimuddin not only drew his poetic inspiration from nature, but in fact he soaked his poetic imagination and words in the essence of nature of the region. In Pakistan period, movement for national autonomy and then for independence contributed to the writing of a lot of patriotic songs. Al-Mahmud extensively used examples from rural life and landscapes to show affection to his motherland. Some of the poems of Syed Ali Ahsan and later Shamsur Rahman brought nature to describe their feeling of felicitation to Bangladesh. It must be noted here that along with poems a lot of songs were composed and sung in the modern period which drew extensively from nature to express patriotic feelings. In the wake of the War of Liberation, rivers, sky, forest, flora and fauna of Bangladesh were extensively referred to inspire and encourage the freedom fighters and to raise awareness of the mass. For instance, the song *mora ekti phulke banchabo bole*

⁶⁷ Quoted in Rafiqul Islam, in ‘Purobbango O Purobdeser purnari’, *Prothom Alo*, 1 September 2006 [translation is by the author].

juddho kori (we fight to save a single flower) became a very popular and inspiring song.

The age-old tradition of engaging nature's phenomena in poetic and musical tradition seem to have been greatly present in modern novels and short stories, which evolved in early colonial period. Bankim Chandara Chatterjee, most prominent of the first generation novelists in Bangla, set his popular novel, *Kopal Kundola*, in a deep forest. *Nadi o Nari* (1919) by Humayun Kabir, *Padma Nadir Mazhi* (1938) by Manik Banerjee, *Titas ekti Nadir Nam* (1956) by Adaityo Mallo Varman, *Ganga* (1957) by Samaresh Basu are classic creative expressions of the intimate relations between river and the life of the ordinary people, especially the fisher community. While these novels mostly depict a picture of the economic vulnerability of the fishers, they also represent the world view of the peasants which is centered on rivers. Samaresh Basu even employs libido theory in his novel through a central character who feels intimate attraction to river Ganga.⁶⁸ *Timi* (1981) by Hasnat Abdul Hai describes the struggles of the costal people not only with nature but also with the politics and bureaucracy that surrounds their life. Abu Bakr Siddiq's *Jala Rakhas* (1985) and *Kharadaha* (1987) describe human struggle for survival amidst storm, storm surge, famine, drought and epidemic as well as the crude insensitivity of the state. Selina Hossain's novel *Pokamakorer gharbasati* is not only the story of people's struggle against nature, but also of the story of their collective win over nature. In *Nadi Vakke* of Kazi Abdul Wadud, riverine environment seems to have played important roles. It describes how draught-induced poverty in one region caused migration leading to displacement in the family life, as well as in the community. But the writer also depicts how the migration in an ecologically endowed, rain-fed, region revives the hopes of a comfortable livelihood. In the whole story river appears to be an inseparable symbol of social mobility.⁶⁹ Amarendra Ghose's Char Kashem trenchantly depicts how nature plays both destructive and formative role in the agrarian society of Bangladesh. Rather than accusing nature for human suffering, this novel narrates how human follies denies man's entitlements to nature's endowment. In this novel most important endowment of nature appears to be *char* or alluvial land topped up by soft, fertile silt. It is no wonder that the author passionately terms the char as 'milk cream' (*char noi to dudher shar*).

The environment lies centrally in the realm of folk literature, which largely comes in the form of rhythmic songs or poems. In term of thematic concentration the bulk of folk literature include planetary system, climate and weather, flora-fauna, landscape and animal. A survey on Bangla folk literature reveals the degree of reference to natural environment. (Tables 1-5).⁷⁰

Table 1: Environment-related words used in Bangla folklore

The universe	Climate	Geographical features	Trees and plants	Fauna and animals
2341	535	3274	1829	928
58%	13.37%	81.85%	45.72%	13.10%

68 Md Ashraful Islam, Samaresh Basur 'Ganga': Visaya and Shilporup, in Bangladesh Asiatic Society Patrika, vol. 18, no. 1, June 2000, Poush 1407, pp.57-64.

69 Kazi Abdul Wadud Rachanavali, vol.3, "Works of Kazi Abdul Wadud, Ed. Nurul Amin, Bangla Academy, Dhaka 1992, p.204.

70 Habibur Rahman, Bangladesher Lokosangeet O Bhougalik Paribesh (Folk Songs of Bangladesh and the Geographical Environment), Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1982).

Table 2: Words relating to the universe

Cloud	Sky	Stars	Moon	Sun	Lightening	Total words used
325	213	249	611	507	436	2341
13.88%	9.10%	10.63%	26.10%	21.66%	18.62%	100%

Table 3: Words relating to physical features and landscape

Waterbodies	Alluvial lands	High lands	Hills	Creeks	Ebb and tide	Total words used
1352	385	131	326	374	706	3274
14.19%	11.75%	4.00%	9.96%	11.43%	11.57%	100%

Table 4: Words relating to trees and plants

Trees	Gulmo	Oushodhi	lata	Total words used
461	317	595	456	1829
25.20%	17.33%	32.53%	24.94	100%

Table 5: Words relating to fauna, fishes and animals

Birds	Fish	Animals	Insects	Total words used
209	374	83	258	928
22.6%	40.47%	8.98%	27.92%	100

Bangla proverbs offer interesting examples of how intimately they are related to nature and its different phenomena. Some of the examples are: *Rঁ কুঁ বাঁ এন্জেলে কুমির দাঙায় বাঘ* (crocodile in the water and tiger on the land or between the devil and the deep sea); *ঠিলুব এন্ট ফোঁ ঠিলুব মুঁব নোঁ যেখানে বাঘের ভয়, সেখানে সন্ধ্যা হয়* (danger comes where danger is feared); *গিন্বাঁজি বাঁজি লক্ষ মারা হাতির দাম লাখ তকা* (a dead elephant can still yield a hundred thousand coins in value, meaning the ruins of the great are still great), *মাঁজ লুক কোঁ এঁকোঁ জ বাঁগাঁ / হাতি খাডে পদলে বাঁংগো লাথি মারে* (even frogs may kick an elephant fallen in a ditch, or even little birds may peck at a dead lion), *মাঁজ নোঁজি জি / গুৱেঁজি কেঁজি রঁজি / হাতি-ঘোড়া গেলো তাল, মাশা বালে কাতা জাল* (fools rush in where angels fear to tread), *মাঁজ লুকু ফ লুকু ঘুঁঘু দেক্হেছ্বা, ফান্দ দেখনি* (you have seen the dove and not its trap).⁷¹ It is interesting to note that folk literature in Bengal region are not entirely same everywhere, as is generally perceived. Folklore have been similar in essence, but have often changed textually in the context of variations in regional environment. For instance, the following verse was collected from Bankura in West Bengal in 1302 BS by Vasanta Ranjan Ray Viddadvallabh:

Chele ghumalo pada judalo vargi elo dese/ Bulbulite dhan kheyche khajna dive kise (the child sleeps, the place quietens, the Vargis loot the country, Nightingales devour paddy, how to pay rent?)

Munshi Abdul Karim Sahitya Visarad collected the same sleep-inducing song from Chittagong in the Bengali year 1309 in the following slightly different form:

Mani ghumailo pada judail gorki ail dese/Tiyapakhie dhan khail khajna dive kise (Darling (Mani) sleeps, the place quietens, typhoon comes to country/Parrots devour paddy, how to pay rent?)

⁷¹ These examples are drawn from Banglapedia. Entry: Proverb.

The commentator who compared these two sleep songs comments that ‘it is remarkable that a nursery rhyme based on the historical fact of Vargis (Mahrattah looters of West Bengal during the eighteenth century) plundering the country should migrate as far as coastal Chittagong where only naturally the word ‘gorki’ meaning typhoon or cyclone [makes more sense]’⁷²

In other forms of art such as *Alpana* and *Nakshi kantha* nature is represented in numerous intricate ways. *Alpana* denotes a kind of art of drawing on the floor or wall with lots of colour and designs. Of the eight forms of *Alpona*, first set relates to lotus; second set to plants; third to trees, flowers and branches; fourth to rivers, and scenes of rural life; fifth to animals, fauna, fish etc; sixth to solar system. The rest of the forms of *Alpana* relate to non-natural themes.⁷³ Like *Alpana*, *Nakshi Kantha*, or embroidered quilt, also represents artistic excellence of rural women that universally engage natural phenomena. Only difference is that of the background and means of artistic production. Whereas *Alapana* is generally drawn on the floors or walls with indigenous colouring elements, in the case of *Nakshi Kantha*, drawings are made on used cotton *sharees* by both colourful and black and white cotton thread. *Nakshi Kantha* represents unique combination of necessity and creativity. In terms of design, usually there is a centre in the drawing and the centre has wider periphery. The centre is often occupied by a tree or a big kadama flower or a lotus. Generally, lotus represents the sun, the tree represents knowledge. In particular, Padmo (lotus) is the symbol of both womanhood as well as the depth of water. When water dries the padma dries as well, but after a little drop of rainfall it revives. The natural elements that surround the centre include flora and fauna; paddy sheaves, star and moon etc. In particular, trees, which are also often represented as *jivan brikha* (life tree), occupies an important role in these forms of artwork. The tree represents direct relationship between nature and the artists in the countryside who would often do the artwork sitting beneath a shadowy tree. These threes are full of birds, fruits and leaves and these together represent a sense of live nature in the embroidery. The Hindus consider the tree as god, the Buddha himself sat under a tree to mediate. In Muslim worldview too trees have deeper metaphysical connotation: a new leave on a tree represents a new baby in the world. It may be added that the designs and motifs are equally applied to sharee, Punjabi, Salwar-kamij, bed sheet, table cloth, prayer mat, pillow cover, mats of sofas, handkerchief, included in the art of embroidery. It must also be noted that in both the cases of *nakshi kantha* and *alpana* women play the sole role in identifying and engaging artistic motifs and designs.

An example of harmony between human cultural expressions and nature can be found in the traditional architecture of the Bengali mosque, which is seen as ‘fitting within a natural setting rather than forcing itself on its surroundings’. Bengali village mosques have thatched roofs and mud walls, somewhat similar to the original Masjid al-Nabawi (the Prophet’s mosque). Often natural ponds are attached to these mosques. These serve as a place of wudu. The vernacular architecture of the Muslim villages reminds us that the focus of Islamic architecture ‘should not be solely on building: rather, it should be about people and their environment and ecology.’

72 Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visarad Commemoration Volume, ed Muhammad Enamul Haq, Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1972, pp 270-1.

73 Khogeskiron Talukdar, Bangladesher Lokayato Shilpakala (Folk Art of Bangladesh), Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1987, p 17.

Another example of artistic engagement with nature is Bengali *tughra* decorative writing which dominated architectural calligraphy between fourteenth and early part of the sixteenth century. It has been rightly observed that ‘the calligraphers...ranged freely, using their creative imaginations in producing different forms and patterns of *tughra*. However, it is not difficult to find in Bengali *tughra* a rhythmic pattern in the movement of the letters (emulating mostly Arabic letters in style) and in the flow of lines, which often contained metaphorical expressions of life, nature, and the environment of Bengal in abstract forms ranging from the bow and arrow of Bengali hunting life to the swan and reeds of riverine rural Bengal.’ This exemplifies, according to the writer, the symbiotic relationship of the Bengalis to nature.⁷⁴

Conclusion

It seems that general environmental conditions of the Bengal Delta region have played significant formative role in the origin and development of the culture, broadly defined, that the people of the region cherish and practice. Of foremost significance in this regard has been the particular geographical location of the region. It is prominently located at the meeting points of the Indian subcontinent, southwestern China and northwestern edge of Southeast Asia and has, therefore, been subject to pre-historic cultural migrations from all of these regions. Instead of being overtly subjugated by any of the three cultural regimes, this region became a melting pot of all of these cultural traits, though the monsoon climate made it closer to Southeast Asian rice civilization. What was unique about Bengal in terms of its cultural evolution is both its language and physical features. Perhaps by the 10th century AD, the emergence of Bangla language enhanced the pace of cultural development and at the same time with the development of Bangla, popular perceptions of nature began to be recorded. The monsoon climate and huge water network provided a lifestyle, food habit, economic mobility and social imagination that contributed to the development of a distinct Bangali culture. In late ancient and medieval period, it was the tradition of intermixing among different groups that proved most formative in the emergence of the Bangali nation. The idea of ‘tribal’ culture perhaps developed later when it was found that pre-historic and ancient intermixing had not influenced those who did not enter the plain land in the more deltaic interior. In the medieval period, the idea of Bangaliness was beginning to be shaped through further development of Bangla language and literature which culminated in colonial modern period. But the possibility of an enduring language-centric ‘national’ development within greater Bengal Delta region ultimately failed as religion began to predominate over linguistic bond. Communal politics that ultimately loosened the linguistic bond of the entire Bangali nation, culminating in the formation of Bangladesh and West Bengal state of India, have been deeply researched and documented. It is largely believed that Hindu and Muslim middle class leadership have fomented Hindu-Muslim antagonism to secure political support on communal basis. But, there are reasons to believe that the failure of national integration between the two wings of Bengal may have an ecological connotation too. This region was colonized and culturally engaged by a majority of ‘lower caste’ Hindus as well as Muslims, while the upper caste Hindus, as well as upper class

⁷⁴ The content of paragraph is extensively drawn from Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, ‘Islam and ecology: with special attainment to the environmental issues in Bengal’, Lecture presented at the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2005.

Muslims, failed to do so. This alienation of an important segment of people to the riparian, fluid deltaic environment of Bangladesh sown the seed of divisiveness that eventually culminated in the partition of Bengal. Though Bangla remains the language of the majority in both Bangladesh and West Bengal, the ways cultural response to nature, aesthetic imagination, cultural symbols and vocabulary as well as economic activities have been expressed remain relatively different, if not conflicting.

While the environment has played important formative roles, it must be noted that it is fast losing its power to creatively inform social and cultural development. Environment is changing to the worse and this has remarkable bearing on social modes of interaction and the process of cultural reproduction. Among natural disasters occurring annually in Bangladesh are flooding, cyclones and storm surge, erosion, landslide and earthquakes. But the teleology of environmental insecurity induced by climate change and relatively disadvantageous location of the country has been overshadowed by the impact of modernising interventions into the ecological regime of the region. Since the late nineteenth century, the process of ecological decline started through unsustainable expansion of the railway in the highly fluid deltaic landscape, construction of bridges and embankments by frustrating the natural flow of the river systems. In the post-colonial period, large-scale dams, barrages, highways, multi-purpose bridges, appropriation of riverbeds by locally influential people and industrialization have added new dimensions to ecological dislocations. Excessive and mechanical exploitation of underground water has left about seventy per cent of drinking and irrigation water contaminated by toxic arsenic, leaving about 40 million people at risk. Rapid globalization has brought about a more drastic change in the environment. The growing export markets for fish, shrimp and leather, for instance, mean depleted stocks, less biodiversity and fewer forests. A particular case in Bangladesh has been the damage of the eco-system due to accidents relating to exploitation of natural gas, which has left a large tract in northeastern Bangladesh infertile and dead of biodiversity. Thus both natural factors and man-made development interventions have contributed to large-scale ecological dislocations. Among the visible social indicators are the growth of unemployment (at the current rate of 30 to 35 per cent), landlessness, impoverishment, rural out-migration, malnutrition and shortage of food supply. A large proportion of day-labouring, land-poor and landless people regularly march towards expanding urban areas for alternative livelihood. The growth of cities has been specially linked to substandard living and complicated livelihood alternatives for many. Mass movement of refugees and internal displacement of people thus create congenial conditions for social unrest and conflict, resulting in serious problem of governance. A good example of the dual impact of climate change and modernist development interventions is *monga* or near-famine condition in northern Bangladesh. Every year, due to drought and riverbank erosion and consequent non-availability of work, between late July and early November, a substantial proportion of rural population suffers from lack of employment and food. Among the affected people who make unholy pilgrimage to cities and towns, some live by pulling rickshaws and some by associating themselves with socially disruptive activities. It is, therefore, no wonder that a majority of the human agents involved in socially unacceptable activities hail from those areas which are mostly affected by environmental deterioration.⁷⁵

75 Iftekhar Iqbal, 'Radicalism in Bangladesh: an ecological perspective,' *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 23 June 2006.

Deterioration in the environment and ecology is fast affecting not only social and political life but also aesthetic diversity in creative expressions. So is the case for cultural connotation of nature. Creative modes of expressions are often enriched by the existing biodiversity from which the writers take their materials. For instance, in the past there had been more than six thousand varieties of local rice, but due to HYV monoculture the local varieties have disappeared at an alarming rate and only 100 varieties are at present estimated to remain. Same applies to fisheries and forest resources since local knowledge base is eroding faster than that of natural resources.⁷⁶ Therefore, when poet Jasimuddin wrote long time ago about '*binni dhaner khoi*', he meant that special variety of *binni* rice that were specially suited to the preparation of *khai* (parched rice). Since these varieties are probably non-existent by now, so it is probably not possible for a creative writer to skilfully deploy such word as a special signifier of an aspect of biodiversity in Bangladesh. From a larger perspective, it will be seen that the broader monsoon environmental complex in which cultural development of Bangladesh took place are losing its formative forces.

Between the important records of formative roles of the environment in the cultural development of the region and socio-cultural predicaments arising out of the deterioration of the same, a valid question that ensues is: how can we restore the linkages between the environment and culture in Bangladesh? There is no easy answer to such questions, but a critique of environmental debates should inform us about the nature of the problem and possible remedies. Environmental debates, since its emergence, have been mainly concerned with the looming ecological crisis on the earth, water regime and biosphere and with the ways to meet such crises. Though the idea of human well being has been attached by default to this environmental discourse, human response to and his/her temporal reading of the various forms of ecological problems have not been adequately documented. Man's place and voice, which are integral to his cultural understanding of the world, have been minimised in this discourse particularly because it has been largely informed by an approach that equates man's well being with scientific categorization of nature and its crisis in view of achieving 'sustainable development'. This has led to the emergence of global scientific committees and policy bodies and international NGOs, which in their turn have often failed to appreciate the micro-mechanism of environmental problems that demands deeper understanding of local cultural and social dynamics. As a result, many of the global goals of sustainable and equitable development have not been successfully met at the ground level. It is, therefore, necessary that we repose ecological issues in a broader social and cultural framework.

76 Sillotoe, ed. p 42.

HARMONY AMIDST DIVERSITY: EXPLORING RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN BENGAL THROUGH THE LENS OF SUFI HERITAGE AND ITS ENVOYS

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Abstract

This study explores the significant influence of Sufism on Bengal's cultural, religious, and social landscape from the eleventh century to the present. It highlights the contributions of pivotal Sufi figures like Shah Jalal, Shah Paran, and other Sufi orders who played crucial roles in propagating Islam and fostering regional socio-economic development following the 1204 CE conquest by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji. By establishing khanqahs, these Sufis provided religious instruction and spiritual guidance and promoted tolerance and moderation within Bengal's diverse society. Utilising a qualitative methodology, the research draws on primary and secondary data from local and international archives to underscore Sufism's enduring impact on interfaith harmony and societal cohesion in Bengal. While much literature exists on Sufism in Bengali, academic research is scarce. This study aims to fill that gap by offering a nuanced analysis that emphasises both the positive contributions of genuine Sufi scholars (e.g. coexistence of multiple religions) and the problematic actions of pseudo-Sufi groups engaged in non-Islamic practices (e.g. *shirk*, *bi'dah* and altered false beliefs). This dual focus enhances the academic understanding of Sufism's complex legacy in the region.

Keywords: *Sufism, Bengal, Sufi Orders, Propagation of Islam, Religious Tolerance, Peaceful Coexistence, Mutual Respect and Understanding.*

Introduction

Sufism, a mystical dimension of Islam, has played a transformative role in shaping the cultural and religious identity of

Bengal, which includes present-day Bangladesh, West Bengal and Assam in India. Rooted in profound spiritual teachings and practices, Sufism facilitated intercultural dialogue and social cohesion in a region historically characterised by religious and ethnic diversity. This study explores the historical dissemination, cultural integration, and contemporary challenges of Sufism in Bengal, offering insights into its enduring impact on the region's socio-religious landscape.

In Bengal, Sufi traditions succeeded from the mid-eleventh to the seventeenth century with the arrival of mystics from Arabiya, Anatolia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Central Asia, and Northern and Western India. Local peoples were attracted to Islamic Mysticism, emphasising personal spirituality, love, equality, and community, transcending caste, race, and religious barriers. The conquest of Bengal by Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1204-5 CE further intensified the propagation of *Shari'ah* and *Ma'rifah* traditions, as ruling elites and Sufis jointly contributed to establishing Islam in the region. Sufi leaders utilised their spiritual paths (*tariqahs*) and humanistic ideals to create an inclusive religious and cultural environment, significantly shaping Bengal's socio-religious fabric.

However, in the eighteenth century, pseudo-Sufi groups emerged, deviating from the core principles of genuine Sufism. These groups commercialised Sufi practices, encouraging rituals such as prostrating before graves and *pīrs* and mixed-gender *dhikr* sessions. The spiritual essence of Sufism was diluted by such deviations, leading to misconceptions and negative perceptions about the actual teachings of Sufism. This phenomenon reflects the complex interplay between authentic Sufi traditions and the socio-religious transformations in Bengal.

The article explores the role of Sufi scholars and institutions in promoting Islam and the socio-educational upliftment of the indigenous people of Bengal. It deals with how the Sufi doctrines of experiential spirituality and flexibility found easy acceptance among the local customs and left permanent cultural marks. The paper also brings into focus the pseudo-Sufi groups that have eroded the genuine Sufi practices and underlines the need to preserve the spiritual essence of Sufism.

This paper contributes to the literature on the history and politics of Sufism in Bengal by investigating these themes and suggesting how its original traditions may be revived to offset the pervasive misunderstandings. The explanation of the Sufism legacy stresses how Sufism can be used as an instrument for common inter-faith understanding, cross-cultural survival, and spiritual nourishment in the world system.

2. Literature Review

This review covers the Bengali literature on Sufism, including books, articles, and archival materials. Though there are a lot of narrative-based works, academic analyses related to Sufism in Bengal are relatively few, which creates difficulties in gathering authentic and comprehensive data. However, the review critically discusses the significant contributions within the field.

Muhammad Enamul Haq's (d. 1982) "*Bonge Sufi Provap*" investigates the profound cultural impact of Sufi teachings, emphasising their role in fostering peaceful coexistence, cultural integration, and religious tolerance. However, the work overlooks contemporary issues, such as the rise of fraudulent Sufi practices, limiting its applicability to modern contexts.¹

Muhammad Mojum Khan's "*The Muslim Heritage of Bengal: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of Great Muslim Scholars, Writers and Reformers of Bangladesh and West Bengal*" provides a collection of biographies of notable Islamic scholars, including some prominent Sufis. While insightful, the work fails to explore the origins, influence, spiritual orders (*tariqahs*), and ongoing activities of Sufism in Bengal, leaving significant aspects of its historical and cultural evolution unexamined.²

In *Banglar "Musulmander Samajik Itihas* (Social history of the Muslims of Bengal)", Abdul Karim addresses the spread of Islam across various regions of Bangladesh. However, he provides limited discussion on the specific roles and activities of the Sufi orders, which were instrumental in this process.³

"*History of the Muslim Bengal*" by Muhammad Mohar Ali (d. 2007) underlines the impact of Sufism as early as the 12th century and rightly recognises that it played a central role in the gradual dissemination of Islam. Despite this, the detailed biographies of the influential Sufis, an analysis of the *tariqahs*, and any discussion on pseudo-Sufism concerning the contemporary era are not found, which reduces the scope of the work.⁴

The famous traveller Ibn Battuta (d. 1369), in his travelogue *Rihlah*, narrates his encounter with the great Sufi Shah Jalal in Bengal. From Battuta's account, one gets a glimpse into Shah Jalal's deep religiosity and adherence to Islam but very little on the more extraordinary Sufi landscape in Bengal and other saints and their contributions.⁵

The literature reviewed here clearly shows these vast gaps in academic studies. It ranges from acknowledging the presence of Sufism to actual, on-site, and comprehensive analyses of the *tariqahs* themselves, contemporary dynamics, and the shifting relationship within the *tariqahs*. All these issues are also part of what needs to be considered regarding Sufism's impact on the history and culture of Bengal.

3. Methodology

Sufism's impact on Bengal's cultural, religious, and social development over many centuries requires an in-depth qualitative exploration. This paper applies a qualitative research design to understand in detail the contributions of Sufi traditions and the challenges posed by deviant practices. A dual focus will guide this research: assessing the positive contributions of genuine Sufi scholars and the distortions introduced by pseudo-Sufi groups.

The research draws on primary data, especially Ibn Batuta's *Rehla*, and secondary data, including local and international archival records, historical manuscripts, and scholarly publications. Critical materials include translations of Sufi texts, historical accounts of Islamic propagation in Bengal, and analyses of the Sufi order's interactions with local populations. Archival materials were sourced from institutions dedicated to preserving the history of Sufism in Bengal, ensuring the reliability and comprehensiveness of the data.

The paper presents the data analysis through thematic content analysis, ranging from religious tolerance to peaceful mutual coexistence and the institutional role of Sufism. Supplementing this analysis, the historical interpretation places the findings within the historical socio-cultural development of Bengal. This integrated approach allows for a complete comprehension of Sufism's multifaceted influence.

The qualitative approach would thus be most apt for studying the complex cultural and historical dimensions of Sufism. As a non-numerical methodology that focuses on descriptive data rather than numerical metrics, this approach provides depth rather than breadth. It explains how Sufi traditions evolved and continue to feature in Bengal's religious and social lives.

This research finally synthesises the findings from historical and contemporary sources to present a holistic perspective on the legacy of Sufism in Bengal: how the Sufi scholars succeeded in establishing Islam in a region historically dominated by Hinduism and Buddhism, and how their teachings have been integrated into the

local context. It further points out that a deviation like pseudo-Sufi groups in Sufism needs to be handled carefully for its true essence to prevail and serve the overall study of the tradition.

4. Result and Discussion

The influence of Sufism on the socio-religious framework of Bengal was so profound that, throughout history, religious and cultural development in the region had taken place. This paper identifies Sufi mystics as the chief agents for the spread of Islam throughout Bengal through their spiritual teachings, exemplary conduct, and incorporation of local customs. Sufis' plea for coexistence and tolerance struck a deep chord in the people of Bengal, creating for themselves a unique syncretic tradition which connected Islamic precepts with indigenous beliefs such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

Some of the significant findings that emerge relate to the fact that the Sufi presence in Bengal dates to the 11th century with the arrival of pioneers such as Sultan Rumi (d. 1075), Fariduddin Ganjshakar (d.1266), Shah Jalal (d. 1346), and Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459). These Sufis established religious and educational institutions that helped spread Islamic teachings, thus facilitating the translation of the Holy Qur'ān into Bengali and the composition of commentaries to make Islamic knowledge accessible to the masses. This educational outreach reinforced Islam as a cultural and intellectual force in Bengal while preserving the region's linguistic and artistic heritage.

The discussion elaborates further that the inculcation of Sufi practices into the socio-religious life of Bengal contributed to the gradual and voluntary conversion of the local population. The Sufis' emphasis on spiritual devotions, personal experiences, and moral conduct attracted rural and agrarian people because they wanted to listen to this message of equality and universal love. The contact with the local tradition meant an effortless blending of Islamic ways into the Bengali way of life, which only reinforced peaceful coexistence and strengthened social bonding.

The study concurrently depicts several challenges to authentic Sufi traditions that emerged in subsequent centuries. The fundamental spiritual and moral principles of the tradition were weakened by the rise of pseudo-Sufi organisations in the 18th century that exploited Sufism for financial gain. Shrine worship, materialistic vows, and ritualised devotion all contributed to the development of misconceptions about Sufism by overshadowing its humanistic and intellectual aspects.

4.1. Sufism in Bengal: Tracing Its Roots and Transformations

Sufism significantly influenced the socio-cultural and religious aspects of Bengal. It was crucial in bringing people of different religions to Islam in Bengal, especially in Kolkata and Asam in India and Bangladesh. The Sufi movement in Bengal began in the 13th century, shortly after the conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji. Only after the conquest of Bengal by Khalji did the Sufis receive support from the state to spread Islam. In addition, the morals, ethical behaviour, and spiritual practices of the Sufis greatly influenced the local population. The “humanistic ethos” of Sufism played an important role in introducing the Bengalis to Islamic spiritual and cultural values during the Middle Ages. The Sufis emphasised universal moral principles that were in perfect harmony with the spiritual aspirations of the local community, among them compassion, tolerance, and purity of heart. As a result of their efforts, Islam was more readily accepted by everyone, and Islamic culture was established in Bengal.

Islam spread in Bengal through three general channels: the Sufis, Muslim rulers, and Arab traders. The Sufis had the most lasting impact on the moral and spiritual life of the people, although Muslim rulers and traders from Arabia, Central Asia, and Anatolia were the first to introduce Islamic cultural and economic traditions to Bengal. The Muslim rulers introduced the political aspects of Islam to the people, the traders introduced the morals and integrity of Islam to the people, and the Sufis introduced the moral aspects of Islam, the issues of *Tazkiyatun Nafs*, to the ordinary people and non-Muslims, due to which a large group of non-Muslims in Bengal readily embraced Islam as their religion. Many Hindus and Buddhists began to convert to Islam.

The study on Muhammad Enamul-Haq's seminal work, “*Sufi Influence in Bengal (the 1960s)*”, traces Sufi's presence in Bengal back to the eleventh century.⁶ Key figures such as Sultan Rumi, who arrived in Bengal in 1053, and Baba Adam Shahid, who travelled extensively with Sufi scholars to spread Islamic teachings, established the foundation for Islamic dominance in the region.⁷ Equally noted in the annals of Sufi history in Bengal is the contribution of Jalaluddin Tabrizi (d. 1244), who came in 1303.⁸ Enamul-Haq relates, among other things, the massive cultural impact of Sufistic teachings on Bengal, focusing on their role in promoting mutual coexistence, cultural interblending, and religious tolerance.

Muhammad Mohar Ali argues that the impacts of Sufism in Bengal were visible as early as the 12th century. The observation, as stated above, was before he left. The author also observed that in the

later part of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, many ordinary people in Bangladesh converted to Islam, majorly because of the influence of Sufi networks. During the next six centuries, so many Sufis from various parts of Anatolia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Khorasan, Central Asia, Pakistan, and North India came that the land of Bengal became the destination for migration.⁹ The spread of Sufism in Bengal thus generated the movement. In this manner, the Sufis were responsible for the sluggish yet unending spread of Islam over the region.¹⁰ Their interactions involved people from all walks of life, and their pedagogical modes and teachings commanded the highest regard from many quarters.¹¹

The renowned explorer Ibn Battuta (d. 1377) encountered Shah Jalal in 1345. The event described earlier took place at the Dargah of Shah Jalal, located close to Sylhet in Bangladesh. Battuta was at the dargah for three days, during which time he meticulously chronicled his experiences and thoughts regarding Shah Jalal and the local population in the area. Subsequently, the observations were consolidated and documented in a travelogue authored by the individual in question, titled "*The Rihlah.*" Battuta was profoundly moved by Shah Jalal's display of profound religiosity and his steadfast dedication to the Islamic faith. This exhibition left Battuta with a profound impression.¹²

According to Abdul Karim, the author of the book "*Knowledge Sea, during the spread of Islam throughout Bangladesh,*" The forefathers of Bengal were a cluster of various groups of individuals who professed either the Hindu or Buddhist religions. The preaching of the Sufis attracted them most as it was full of love, pity, and patience. The Sufis proved exceptionally able to reach out with friendships to every class since it was to people with a background of Muslim and non-Muslim preoccupation that the Sufi teachings appealed most strongly. Besides, they demonstrated the ability to accommodate changes in their preachings regarding changing practices and beliefs of the natives to increase the number of people who would accept the message; it is because of the Sufis that Islam spread over Bangladesh within a very short period.¹³ By the advent of the 15th century, Islam had acquired the status of the most dominant religion in the region.¹⁴

Carl W. Ernst, 1993 maintains that though they are placed in low caste rank in society and the poorest sections, the practitioners of Islam in Bengal attained remarkable achievements. The author asserts that Islam conveyed the message of equality and social justice, which appealed to people who had been marginalised due to caste. Ernst further observes that Muslim preachers in Bengal received hospitality from the natives, especially those who held low ranks within the caste

system.¹⁵ He quotes the words of Shah Jalal, a Sufi mystic from Bengal who once said that Islam was essentially egalitarian and fraternal. No distinction was made between people according to caste or class. The social and theological environment of the Indian subcontinent, especially Bengal, changed dramatically due to the attraction of Sufism among the lower castes.¹⁶

The above phenomenon led to the mass conversion of people to Islam as well as paved the way for a more egalitarian social order. The Sufis emphasised equality and social justice, thereby questioning the existing caste system and helping construct a more equalitarian social order. This significantly contributed to Bengal, and its effects are still felt across the region. The Sufi tradition in Bengal today has roots firmly attached to the Islamic Mysticism of North India. This proximity meant a great deal of interchange, which almost tied the North Indians and the Bengali Sufis together in beliefs, philosophy, and learning.¹⁷

While Muhammed Enamul-Haq dates this migration of Sufis from North India to Bengal from the late twelfth century up to the end of the fourteenth century, there was a gradual immigration which contributed immensely to the moulding and development of Sufism in Bengal. The migrated Sufis came with their prevailing traditions that resulted in an evolution which can be neatly divided into three historical periods in Sufism within Bengal.¹⁸

4.1.1. The first phase, which lasted from the 12th to the 14th century

It was the early period, roughly from the 12th to the 14th century, characterised by the migration of Sufis from Northern India into Bengal. The outcome was the establishment of madrasas and khanqahs in the region. Spread and penetration of Islam throughout Northern India were typical features of the first phase of Sufism in Bengal. An important feature of this period was the arrival of Sufis from North India, particularly representatives of the Suhrawardiyya and Chishtiyya Sufi orders. The Sufis during this period, therefore, made it a point to amalgamate the essentials of the local culture into their religious discourse. They opted for contemplation, harmony, and confrontation of the soul as the invitation method¹⁹ to Islam. This method of approach helped the people of Bengal positively approach Islamic Mysticism. From the eleventh to the end of the fifteenth century, scores of famous Sufi figures arrived in Bengal.²⁰

These Sufis played a crucial role in spreading Islam in the region, and their teachings and practices continue to be intrinsic to Bengali culture today. Some of the most well-known Sufis visited

Bengal, such as Sheikh Sultan Rumi (d.1126), Sheikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawama (d. 1210), Sheikh Jalal Tabrizi (d. 1244)²¹, Shaikh Fariduddin Shakkarganj (d.1266), Makhdum Shah (d. 1291), Jafar Khan (d.1295), Shah Makhdum Ruposh (d. 1313), Sheikh Sultan Balkhi (d. 1343), Shah Jalal (d. 1347), Sheikh Alaul Haq (d. 1382), Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459) and Ismail Khan Gazi (d. 1474).²²

4.1.2. The Middle Period of Sufi History in Bengal, which encompasses the period from the 15th to the 17th century

The rise and growth of Sufism in Bengal from the 15th to the 17th century mark a significant historical period. During this period, the Sufi ideology spread on a large scale, leading to several new Sufi orders. In the intermediate history of Sufism in Bengal, political power at the local level also showed some remarkable development by the Muslims and the Sufis. The Sultans of Bengal played a significant role in promoting the growth of Sufi groups across the vast expanse of their empire, whereby these communities could provide counsel and teachings to the populace. Indeed, several Sultans who governed the independent Bengal state were said to have immense respect for Sufi emissaries to the degree that they integrated themselves as disciples of these spiritual leaders. Some Sultans had a few persons in their family who were bestowed with the title of Pir and Sheikh.²³ The existence of such persons signifies that the Sufis achieved much political power in that period.²⁴

4.1.3 The concluding period of Sufi history in Bengal, encompassing the 18th and 19th centuries

The last period of Sufi history in Bengal, covering the 18th to the 19th century, was a period of the actual decline of Sufism. The reasons for such decline are many: increased detachment of the Sufis from their traditional doctrines and low educational standards eroded the quality of teachings and practice; erosion in the murshid-disciple relationship, the strong link in Sufism, snapped the already weakened ties between the Sufis and the people. Another debilitating factor was the growing dependence on khanqahs and shrines for revenue, which turned people away from spiritual ends and made such institutions less appealingly spiritual. Notably hostile to Sufism, the British colonial government was another rising influence that contributed to the decline in the influence of Sufism, as did other religious movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. Despite the hardship, certain Sufi groups prospered by adapting to and addressing this altered religious environment to maintain their popularity among the younger Muslim population. These profoundly impacted the culture and spiritual life of Bengali People.

5. Sufi Sects in Bengal: A Scholarly Exploration of Their Influence and Legacy

Most of the Sufi orders in Bengal have profoundly influenced Bengal's religious and cultural heritage. Historically, Sufi orders such as the Chishtiah, Qadiriyah, and Naqshbandiyah have greatly influenced Buddhist and Hindu thought by emphasising love, compassion, spiritual discipline, and meditation.²⁵

Bengal's most prominent Sufi orders are the Qadiriyah, Naqshbandiyah, Chishtiah, Suhrawardyya and Shadili. Despite differences in their prayer, zikir and meditation techniques, these orders have brought the beauty of Islam to the ordinary people and non-Muslims. As a result, the influence of these Sufi orders has contributed significantly to religious practice, social stability, tolerance and cultural heritage.

Sect-e Muhammadiyah reflects the unifying thread between various Sufi groups, accommodating different practices while underscoring their shared heritage. The Sufi order plays a significant role in Bengal's socio-cultural and economic development by fostering a sense of community and promoting values of peace and understanding.²⁶

5.1. The Chishti Order: Its Origins and Influence

The Chishti order originated from Central Asia and Persia.²⁷ Abu Ishaq Shami (d. 940) founded the Chishti order in Afghanistan. However, Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 633/1235) brought this order to India and made it one of the most extraordinary orders in India today. Scholars also note that he was a disciple of Abu al-Najib Suhrawardi (d. 1168).²⁸ Mu'in al-Din Chishti was originally from Sistan (eastern Iran, southwest Afghanistan) and was known as a sheikh who was well known in South Asia. He reached Delhi in 1193 during the end of the Ghurid rule and later settled in Ajmer-Rajasthan during the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate.²⁹

Mu'in al-Din Chishti's Sufism and social welfare activities called Ajmer "the nucleus for the Islamization of Central and Southern India". Mu'in al-Din established *khanqahs* to reach local communities and spread Islam through charity. Islam is famous not for bloodshed or forced conversions but for establishing Chishti *khanqahs* and for its simple teachings on humanity, peace and generosity. The Chishti group established unprecedented contacts with Hindus and tried to counteract the caste system's adverse effects somewhat. As a result, Muslims and non-Muslims visit Mu'in al-Din Chishti's tomb, and it has become a popular tourist destination and

pilgrimage site in India. Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (d. 1605) The 3rd Mughal ruler is the man who initiated Ajmer to become a traditional place of pilgrimage for the people.³⁰

The leading Sufis of the Chishti order in India and Bengal are Nudruddin Chishti (d. 1233), Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki (d. 1236), Nizamuddin Awliya (d. 1335), Nasiruddin Chiragh Dehlavi Bande Nawaz (d. 1422), Sayyid Baqaullah Sheikh Kareemi Safipur (d. 1362/1269); Alaul Haq Pandavi and Ashraf Jehangir Semnani (d. 1386). Akhi Siraj Aainae Hind (d. 1357) established different dargahs and religious institutions in Bengal and India.³¹

5.2. The Naqshbandiyyah Order: Origins and Influence

The origin of this order is based on Khwaja Yusuf al-Hamadani (d. 1390), who lived in Central Asia. Later, it was systematised by Baha' al-Din Naqshband (1318-1389) as a Tajik and Turkish origin. Therefore, Baha' al-Din Naqshband is known as the founder of the Naqshbandi order.³² Kaja Muhammad al-Baqi Billah (d. 1603) introduced the Naqshbandi order to Bengal.³³ This order, especially with the support of Kaja al-Hamadani, who became the leader of the Mughal empire in 1526 and was loyal to his ancestors, started the Naqshbandi order before the Mughal conquered Bengal.³⁴ The empire's support gave significant momentum to the order.³⁵ This order is considered the most important Quran and Sunnah priorities of all the Sufi orders. It strictly prohibits music, *sama'* dance and other liberal contents of Sufism.³⁶ Now, many followers in Bengal are introducing this order in their region.

5.3. The Qadiriyya Order: Origins and Influence

This order, founded by Abdul Qadir Gilani (d. 1166), known as the "Qutb of the Sufis and al-Insān al-Kāmil", is an important mystical path widely followed in Bangladesh and other southern parts of India. Qadiriyyah, built on intense devotion to the foundations of Islam, journey to Allah and love for the Prophets and the Righteous, unlike the previously mentioned orders, was formed and nourished from Arab (Baghdadi) roots.

The Qadiriyyah order started in a province of Bengal through Sufis who came from Yemen, such as Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdoom and Sheikh Fariduddin. The Zainuddin Makhdoom, from the Yemeni nobility and a family of scholars, came to Bangladesh in the 12th century and settled in the Barishal region of central Bangladesh. Bangladesh became an Islamic centre by establishing madrasahs, mosques and high Islamic complexes by Zainuddin Makhdoom, and Barishal became known as the "religious centre in Bangladesh". He

wrote important works on Sufism, such as *Hidayat-ul-Edkiya* and *Tarik-il-Awliya*, and played a significant role in advancing Sufi literature and the Qadiriyyah order.³⁷

It is stated that during the first period of the formation of Qadiriyya, Fariduddin bin Abdul Qadir Khurasani came from Yemen to Bengal and contributed to the spread of Qadiriyyah. The work “Muhiddin Mala”, written by Ghazi Muhammad and narrating the Karamat of Abdul Qadir Gilani, has become a book that all Muslims read with respect and benefit from.³⁸

The Al Maberi order, followed in Bangladesh and southern India, is a branch of the Qadiriyyah. The Qadiriyyah, which is being kept alive with great effort by a few remaining sheikhs, is still the first order of Bangladesh.

5.4. Furfura

Muhammad Abu Bakr Siddiqui Al Quraishi (d. 1939) was a famous *Pīr* of West Bengal, India.³⁹ He was the founding *Pīr* of Furfura Darbar Sharif, considered a religious pilgrimage site for Muslims of both Bengal and India.⁴⁰ He contributed significantly to the propagation of Islamic *Shari‘ah* and *Tariqah*, preaching, establishing mosques and madrasas, publishing newspapers and magazines, and spreading education in remote areas of Bengal and India. He was a follower of Jahanian Jahangasht (d. 1384).⁴¹

5.5. The Madariyyah Sufi Order: Origins and Popularity

Madariyyah is a Sufi order popular in North India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, the Mewat region, Bihar and Bengal, Nepal and Bangladesh. Known for its syncretic aspects, lack of emphasis on external religious practice, and focus on internal *dhikr*, it was started by the Sufi saint “Sayed Badiuddin Zinda Shah Madar” (d. 1434), known as “Qutub-ul-Madar” and has its headquarters in Makanpur, Kanpur district of Uttar Pradesh.

5.6. The Suhrawardiyyah Sufi Order: Origins and Contributions

The founder of this order was Abu al-Najib Suhrawardi (d. 1168). He was also Ahmad Ghazali’s student, Abu Hamid Ghazali’s younger brother (d. 1111). In this context, Ahmad Ghazali’s teachings significantly contributed to the formation of this order. This order existed in Iran before the people migrated to India and Bangladesh due to the Mongol invasion. As a result, Abu Najib, Suhrawardi’s nephew, brought the Suhrawardiyyah to the mainstream

consciousness. Abu Hafs Shihab al-Din (d.1243) wrote extensively on the theories of Sufism.

The most important classical book is ‘*Awā’rif al-Ma‘ārif*’ by Shihab al-Din’ Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1891). It was widely read and became an indispensable book in the madrassas of Bangladesh and India. It helps to understand the Sufi teachings of Suhrawardiyyah. Abu Hafs was a global ambassador of his time. From travelling from Baghdad to India to teach diplomacy between the Ayyubid rulers of Egypt and Syria, Abu Hafs was a Sufi leader who showed initiative in every field. Abu Hafs maintained cordial relations with the Islamic states and continued to approve their leadership and political participation in the Sufi orders.

5.7. The Presence of Sufi Orders in Bengal: Contributions and Challenges

The Sufi community has played a pioneering role in the propagation of Islam through their tireless efforts and dedication in various parts of Kolkata and Assam in India and Bangladesh. Sufis are also making significant contributions to advancing religious and Islamic education in the region.

The famous Sufi Abu Bakr Siddique (d. 1939) established a dargah in Furfura, Hooghly district of Kolkata, India, in 1900 and propagated Islam and Sufism. This dargah is still active today. The successors of Abu Bakr Siddique and his disciples are still working to propagate Islam here. In different parts of Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka, the sons and grandsons of Abu Bakr Siddique are spreading Islam by establishing various khanqahs, dargahs, mosques and madrasas. Among Abu Bakr’s family members, Muhammad Abdul Hai Siddique, Abul Ansar Muhammad Abdul Kahhar Siddique and Abu Bakr Abdul Hai Mishkat Siddique are notable.⁴² Nesaruddin Ahmad, a disciple and disciple of Abu Bakr Siddique, established a Kamil Masters Madrasa called Sarsina Darussunnat Kamil Madrasah in the Pirojpur district of Barisal in 1890 and a khanqah with him. He also significantly spread Islamic education throughout Bengal by establishing thousands of mosques, madrasas and khanqahs across Bangladesh.⁴³ His grandson, Shah Mohammad Mohebullah, continues this legacy as the chief Pir of Sarsina Darbar Sharif and plays an important role in the propagation of Islam.⁴⁴

Charmonai Pir, especially Syed Muhammad Ishaq (d. 1977), played an immense role in the propagation of Islam in Bengal. Their influence spread further when they established Charmonai Darbar Sharif in Barisal and Jamia Rashidiya Ahsanabad Kamil Masters Madrasa in 1924. His children, Syed Rezaul Karim and Syed Faizul

Karim, established the political party Islami Andolan Bangladesh. Today, the party is one of the country's most well-known Islamic political parties.⁴⁵ The uniqueness of the party lies in the fact that while, on the one hand, it urges all people to become good through Sufism, on the other hand, the party tries to develop this country toward Islamic governance through political activity. However, the establishment of the Maizbandari Darbar Sharif in Patiya, Chittagong, by Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbandari (d. 1906) significantly contributed to the country's Islamic atmosphere.⁴⁶

Other important Sufis like Abdullah Hil Kafi, Maulana Shamsul Haque Faridpuri, Muhammad Ullah Hafezzi Huzur, Maulana Atahar Ali of Kishoreganj, Siddiq Ahmad of Chittagong, Tajul Islam of Brahmanbaria, and Syed Abdul Karim Shaikh-e-Kawriya of Sylhet too played a critical role in spreading Islam by establishing their respective tariqas. It should be noted that the activities and influence of the Sufi leaders did not pertain only to religious teachings but also contributed to Bengal's social and educational development. The mosques, madrasas, and khanqahs they built served as centres of learning and spiritual guidance and helped develop a strong Islamic tradition in the region. The role of the Sufis needs to be viewed in assessing the influence of Sufism on the cultural and religious life of Bengal. This historical narration gives enough evidence regarding how the Sufi traditions have shaped the spiritual topography of Bengal and provided the ground on which its Islamic identity came to rest.

Sufism, along with many spiritual leaders and *Pīrs*, has contributed a great deal to the dissemination of Islam and the socio-economic development of Bengal. However, some groups have adulterated true Sufism, leading to the spreading of misleading practices.⁴⁷ A group of unscrupulous false *Pīrs* take advantage of the simplicity and innate religiosity of the Muslim masses to establish their khanqahs and dargahs with the express purpose of destroying the beliefs and practices of Bengali Muslims for their economic benefit.⁴⁸

Among the most prominent false Sufi groups in Bengal are the followers of Dewanbaghi, Sureshwari, Enayetpuri, Atroshi, Chandrapuri, Rajarbaghi, Beshra and various Baul groups.⁴⁹

Analysing their websites and the books published by their *khanqahs* reveals that they encourage people to believe that following the Pirs alone, without adhering to the Quran and Sunnah, is sufficient for attaining paradise.⁵⁰ These groups are also known to organise mixed-gender *dhikr* sessions, engage in practices such as lighting candles and performing prostrations at graveyards, deny the

obligation of Hajj, and propagate the idea that worship is unnecessary for *Pirs*, who they claim will secure the salvation of their followers in the afterlife. These beliefs and practices are clearly outside the bounds of Islam.⁵¹

Dewanbagi *Pir* has been widely criticised for spreading discord related to Islam. According to Dewanbagi Pir, Allah appointed him to spread Islam worldwide. His real name is Mahbub Khuda, commonly known as Dewanbagi.⁵² Dewanbagi has become a controversial figure who claims to be the husband of Hazrat Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, and proclaims himself a Sufi emperor. He also asserts that Prophet *Haḍrat Muhammad Rasūlullah Khātam un Nabiyyīn Ṣallallahu ‘alaihi wa ‘alā Ālihi wa Aṣḥābihi wa Sallam* bestowed upon him the “*Reviver of Islam*” title in a dream.⁵³

The *Pir* of Sureshwar continues to engage in activities that oppose Islam under the guise of promoting the religion. According to the tradition of the Sureshwar Dargah, followers and devotees are expected to prostrate before the *Pirs*. Furthermore, adherents of the Sureshwar Dargah tradition are required to prostrate before shrines. Such practices lead people into acts of disbelief and shirk.⁵⁴ The followers of the Sureshwar Dargah also misinterpret the Holy Qur’ān and Hadith by determining the dates of Ramadan and Eid based on the lunar calendar as observed in Saudi Arabia rather than according to the local lunar observations in Bangladesh, thus opposing the practices of Muslims in the country. Following this, *Pirs* leads their disciples towards shirk. According to the *Pir* of Sureshwar, worshipping anyone who does not pledge allegiance (*bai’at*) to the *Pir* is not accepted. Furthermore, he believes that neither the *Pir* nor the Murshid requires worship.

According to the Enayetpuri tradition, it is obligatory to follow the *Pir*. The power of good and evil is believed to be in the hands of the *Pir*, enabling the *Pir* to determine the well-being or misfortune of individuals. According to the Atroshi tradition, it is believed that the *Pir* will save his followers from Hell in the afterlife and that the *Pir* can protect his disciples from all worldly dangers. According to *Pir* Abul Fazal of Chandrapuri, worshipping the *Pir* is unnecessary. On page 29 of the book “*Haqqa ’l-Yaqīn*”, written by Abul Fazal, it is stated that once a person has attained the state of fana maqam, there is no further need for worship.⁵⁵

Rajarbagi *Pir* has added approximately fifty-two prestigious titles before or after his name. He claims that many of these titles were granted to him by Allah, some by last Prophet (*Sal Allāhu-u-‘alaihe wa sallam*), and the rest by the leaders of various Sufi orders.⁵⁶ According to the Beshra community, men and women are encouraged

to sing together and reject the concept of modesty between genders. They consider the consumption of alcohol and drugs to be permissible and practice prostration at the *Pir*'s grave.⁵⁷ The goal of the Baul community is to harmonise the essence of all religions. The fundamental purpose of all religions is the salvation of the soul. Bauls have emphasised the harmony between Islam and Hinduism.⁵⁸

The Sufi orders have contributed substantially to Islam's spread and Bengal's socio-economic development. Their impact is evident in the numerous institutions they established and the spiritual guidance they provided. However, the rise of deviant groups that distort Sufi teachings presents significant challenges. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maintaining the integrity of Sufism and ensuring the accurate practice of Islam in Bengal.

Understanding the dual nature of Sufi influence—both positive and problematic—provides valuable insights into the spiritual landscape of Bengal. It underscores the importance of preserving genuine Sufi traditions while addressing and correcting deviations.

6. The Impact of Sufism on the Religious and Cultural Landscape of Bengal

The influence of Islamic Mysticism on Bangladesh's religious and cultural landscape became evident as early as the thirteenth century when Sufis hailing from northern India and adjacent areas focused their efforts on Bengal. There was a Sufi presence everywhere, and no single town in Bengal was untouched by their influence. Their actions were significant in the propagation of Islam because of the specific populations and social groups they targeted as potential adherents.⁵⁹

Two primary causes may be attributed to the extensive influence and popularity of the Sufi movement in Bengal, which can be categorised as factors.

The initial point of discussion pertains to the diligent endeavours undertaken by Sufis to establish their religious beliefs inside the societal framework. This, in conjunction with their unpretentious and uncomplicated ways of living, resulted in the acquisition of substantial support and safeguarding from the governing sultans, augmenting their overall influence.⁶⁰

Second, Islam was more palatable in the nation due partly to its religious and social milieu. Because of the caste system, class disparities, and moral aberrations in society, people were more receptive to a faith that went beyond material standards of wealth,

race, and colour.⁶¹ People were more receptive to a transcendent religion as a result. Society has responded favourably to the Islamic faith's emphasis on values like equality, coexistence in a multicultural setting, and the framework of tolerating other religious beliefs and practices.⁶²

6.1. The Sufi Perspective on Equality and Brotherhood

Sufis played a significant role in establishing social justice in various parts of Bengal. They beautifully presented the beauty of Islam to the public, and people from the caste system of Hinduism and Buddhism came under the shadow of Islam and became Muslims and started contributing to society in various fields. At this time, the enlightened path of Sufism appeared to society as a seductive force with the idea of egalitarianism and brotherhood.⁶³

Through their various initiatives, moral intentions, and selfless actions in the propagation of Islam, the Sufis gifted Bengal with an idealistic society that people of all religions could deeply understand. Through their tireless efforts, crores of the people of Bengal sought the Islamic faith as a beacon of light and tried to lead their lives illuminated by the ideals of Islam.⁶⁴

Across the lush expanse of Bengal, Sufi luminaries, like celestial artists, craft *khānqahs* in every corner. These sanctuaries transcend physical spaces, becoming sanctuaries for intellectual enlightenment and humanitarian acts of grace. Their influence extends far and wide, sculpting the contours of the Muslim community's evolution in this sacred land, endowing its people with an elevated social status.⁶⁵

In Bengali Islam, preachers labour earnestly to embrace the most vulnerable and marginalised souls. In Bengal's embrace, Muslim preachers and Sufis find a warm welcome from locals and those trapped by the oppressive caste system's chains.⁶⁶ Here, the illustrious Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta crossed paths with the venerable Shah Jalal in 1345. He bore witness to the Sheikh's saintly aura, affirming his unique stature. Karamat, known to the realm, added lustre to the Sheikh's renown. The craggy denizens of these mystical mountains stood steadfast in their commitment to Islam, forging an unbreakable bond with their beloved Sheikh.⁶⁷

Moreover, Sufi leaders who stood out as kind, modest, and honourable were Sheikh Sultan Rumi (d. 1075)⁶⁸, Shah Makhdum Rupos (d. 1313), Mohammad Abu Bakr Siddique (d. 1939),⁶⁹ and Abdul Hai Siddiqi (d. 1977). Their noble and modest legacy was

ingrained in the collective consciousness and gave everyone a sense of warmth.⁷⁰

6.2. The Legacy of Sufis in Promoting Welfare Society

The Sufis tried establishing a welfare state in Bengal, where justice, equality, and human status were promoted.⁷¹ The Sufis influenced the region's kings and soon converted them to Islam. Shah Jalal (d.1347) and his followers collaborated with the Muslim forces of Zimmer Ghazi in the war against the tyrant King Gaur Govinda to establish Muslim rule in this part of the country in 1303.⁷² It is believed that Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459) added the districts of Cessore, Khulna and Barisal to the Muslim sultanate and established a welfare state independent of religion, caste and class.⁷³ The Sufis advised the kings on religious matters and made many efforts to prevent policy shifting and direct them towards the religious path. They contributed to the consolidation and economy of the state in times of crisis and added moral strength.⁷⁴

Hazrat Nur Qutb Alam (d. 1415) Raja Kans established the Muslim rule in Bengal when a policy of oppression against Muslims was attempted after the death of Sultan Ghiyathuddin Azam Sheikh (1390-1411).⁷⁵ Some Sufis also advocated Islamic policy in the administration of Muslim states.⁷⁶ Sheikh Abdul Haqq (d. 1384) advised Sultan Ghiyathuddin Azam Sheikh to implement Islamic policies in the affairs of the state.⁷⁷ Lakshmana Sena (1178-1206),⁷⁸ impressed by the humanitarian activities and karamah of Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi, gave him some lands to construct a mosque.⁷⁹ The Sheikh later established a Khanka, which became a centre of learning. This played a pioneering role in transferring knowledge to Bangladesh.

However, there were good relations between the kings and the Sufis. The Sufis and the Sultans of Bengal were fatally linked by mutual bonds of attraction and attraction in the political formation of the state and especially in the initiation of new dynasties.⁸⁰

6.3. The Role of Sufi Institutions in the Intellectual and Spiritual Development of Bengal

Various institutions contributed to the intellectual development of Bengal, but the Sufi institutions made a significant contribution. The Sufis of Bengal established madrasas, khanqahs and dargahs throughout the region to teach the people the basic tenets of Islam.⁸¹ These institutions, madrasas and khanqahs, served as the centres of learning and spiritual development of Bengal, where

Muslims were exposed to the depths of Islamic knowledge and were taught how to have a good relationship with Allah.⁸²

Sufis encouraged people to engage in religious studies, emphasising ethical conduct, spiritual introspection, and the search for universal truth. During the reign of Nasir-ud-Din Mahmud Shah (1394-1413) of the Delhi Sultanate, the Sufi figure Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459), who preached Islam at the Sixty Dome Mosque in what is now Khulna Division, Bangladesh, which is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He established various religious institutions in the Khulna region, including various dargahs, which played a considerable role in advancing Islamic education. All these religious institutions of Khan Jahan Ali ensured unity and coexistence among Muslims.⁸³ Shah Jalal and Shah Paran established numerous *dargāhs* and *khānqāhs* in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, taught people the principles of Sufism, and made an important contribution to the spread of Islam among non-Muslims.

Sufi institutions in Bengal were able to integrate diverse intellectual and cultural traditions. Sufis facilitated the spread of Islam through the establishment of dargahs, khanqahs and religious institutions. They established an environment where cultural exchange flourished, contributing to the region's unique identity as a place of interfaith dialogue and understanding and ensuring Islam's unique place among the people of the region.⁸⁴

6.4. The Humanitarian Legacy of Bengal's Sufis: Compassion in Practice

There are a lot of Sufis of Bengal who have attracted attention through their involvement in humanitarian activities.⁸⁵ Figures such as Shah Makhduim Rupos, Jalaluddin Tabrizi, and Akhi Sirajuddin Usman (d. 1357) were charismatic and influential figures who persuaded people through their compelling personalities. They established centres for humanitarian work, known as “*Langar Khānas*,” where they provided aid to people experiencing poverty, beggars, and travellers. Muslims and non-Muslims respected the khanqahs as centres of “worldly and spiritual inspiration.”⁸⁶

The Sufi biography *Siyar'l 'Ārifīn* reveals that Jalaluddin Tabrizi left Baghdad around 1228 and travelled to India, where he did not receive a warm reception at the court of Delhi. Afterwards, he moved to Lakhnauti, the former capital of Bengal. Records show that when he arrived in Bengal, the entire population gathered around him and became his disciples.⁸⁷ There, he established a public hospice and a free kitchen and purchased several gardens and lands to donate for charitable purposes. He also owned a riverport called *Deva Mahal*.

Today, the sacred tomb of Tabrizi is in a shrine within the river port of *Deva Mahal*, and half of the port's income is dedicated to maintaining the hospice.⁸⁸

Jalaluddin Tabrizi's discourses on forgiveness, sacrifice, justice towards humanity, unity, and love became a source of inspiration for the oppressed. Famous Sufi Shaikh Alaul Haq (d. 1398) spent considerable money to feed beggars and travellers and shelter them.

Abu Bakr Siddiqui (d.1939) of Furfura Sharif founded numerous charitable institutions, orphanages, and free healthcare centres in Bengal. He was also a great educator who believed that only education could eliminate all evil, and thus, he established many madrassas, schools, and educational centres. According to Al Mannan, his work was not limited to intellectual endeavours; he also contributed materially to the well-being of people and countries.⁸⁹ He tirelessly carried out humanitarian aid for others. His son, Abdul Qahhar Siddiqui (d. 2006), was involved in many social activities and charitable works and patronised many educational institutions. He was also very generous and never ignored the suffering of others. In this context, he did much for the oppressed and the poor. He provided for servants and took care of them when they were ill. He showed great kindness towards animals and even tried to save an ant drowning in water. He demonstrated kindness to orphans and lived a very humble life.⁹⁰

6.5. Sufism in Bengal: Fostering Interfaith Harmony and Social Inclusivity

At the time of the emergence of Islam, Bengal was predominantly a Hindu-Buddhist region, where Brahmins had established a notable political and social dominance over others. Their influence, through caste governance and other discriminatory social rules, affected Buddhists, lower-caste Hindus, and even the Sudras, who were ranked below the Brahmins in the caste system.⁹¹ Sudras and other lower-class people were denied access to religious texts and places of worship. When hostility between Hindus and Buddhists was rampant in society, the emergence of Islam, mainly through Sufis, had a profound impact on the political and social life of the region. The distinction between Brahmin, Sudra, Hindu, and Buddhist was no longer recognised. Muslims interacted with the local population for various reasons.⁹²

Centuries of contact between Hindus and Muslims profoundly influenced both groups, with Muslim social and religious life being significantly impacted by Hinduism. During the time of Shah Jalal, Ibn Battuta mentioned the relationship between Hindus and Muslims,

noting the agricultural society of the Surma valleys beneath the Sumerian hills, which were distinctly defined by Hindu identity. Hindus were deeply influenced by the attitude of Muslims during Hindu festivals. Muslims shared their food, knowledge, and clothes with them.⁹³

Sarsina Pir Nisaruddin Ahmed (d. 1952), Furfura Pir Abdul Qahhar Siddiqui (d. 2006), and Charmonai Pir Syed Fazlul Karim (d. 2006) were a prominent figure in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the southern part of Bengal, whom they spread Islam. Hindus mostly populated the region they served, yet there is no evidence of any conflict between Muslims and Hindus there. They dedicated their spare time to assisting new Muslims. Their character's open-hearted, humanitarian, sympathetic, and compassionate nature were distinctive. They treated all people equally.⁹⁴

Furthermore, the principles of human equality and fraternity expressed by Islam represented a revolutionary force within the caste system and the Brahmin-dominated Hindu society. Since Muslims did not have a caste system like the Hindus, they were not required to strive for positions between high and low status; instead, all Muslims equally benefited from employment and education.⁹⁵ Non-Brahmin Hindus, supported by Muslim rulers, gained social respect through the education and employment they received. Put, freedom existed for Hindus, and Muslims had liberated them from Brahmin oppression.⁹⁶ Islam profoundly influenced local religious and social systems. The most significant impact of Islam in Bengal was the dismantling of Brahminical supremacy.⁹⁷

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the profound and nuanced contributions of Sufism to the religious, cultural, and socio-economic landscape of Bengal. Sufis played a pivotal role in fostering coexistence, interfaith harmony, and religious pluralism among Muslims and non-Muslims in Bengal.

This study examines the influence of Sufism in shaping the spiritual fabric of the region. It shows how Sufis have, over the centuries, fostered an environment of tolerance and pluralism in Bengali society through their tariqas, khanqahs, and charitable works. These issues have been brought to the fore through the activities of Sufis across Bangladesh and West Bengal, India.

This study has shown how some pseudo-Sufism emerged in Bengal in the 18th century, excluding authentic Sufism. They used Sufism as a business interest. These groups built dargahs and shrines

in different places, made vows for worldly desires, offered money, flowers, candles, and incense sticks, prostrated themselves to graves and saints, considered it permissible for men and women to *dhikr* together, and encouraged ordinary people. Due to this, authentic Sufism is currently being damaged, and people are having a negative perception of Sufism. Among these groups, Vaishnavism, secular Mysticism, Baulism, Dewanbagi, Rajarbagi, Atrishi and other groups are involved in such activities.

Although this article has attempted to provide a comprehensive account of the impact of Sufism in Bengal, the reliance on secondary sources rather than primary sources has limited the depth of analysis. We believe that by making greater use of primary sources, future researchers will be able to further elucidate the nuanced role of Sufi traditions in Bengal, especially in their socio-political and contemporary contexts. Nevertheless, this study has laid the foundation for a rich and diverse history of Sufism in Bengal.

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Historical Overview of Religious Pluralism in Bengal

Kazi Nurul Islam*

Abstract. In the contemporary world, Bangladesh is possibly the only country which has had its name changed three times in less than twenty-five years. Before 1947, the present Bangladesh was known as East Bengal; from 1947 to 1971 it was East Pakistan; and in 1971 it emerged as Bangladesh. The purpose of the present paper is to give a brief historical overview of religious pluralism in the wider Bengal region of which Bangladesh comprises the larger part and to relate this historical background to the present condition of religion-based politics in Bangladesh. Despite major changes of ruling elites and occasional eruptions of violence and repression of competing religio-cultural traditions in the past, the underlying tendency of the people and their rulers in the Bengal region has been to tolerate and even support religio-cultural and social pluralism. The present survey is not intended as an in-depth analysis of the complex factors that might explain how through two millennia the people and rulers in the Bengal region have coped with marked diversity among elite 'Great Traditions' and countless 'Little Traditions' and ethnic minorities. It aims rather to present in broad terms the prevailing current of tolerant pluralism against which certain ideologically driven religio-political interests are attempting, futilely it would seem, to establish a repressive monolithic conception of an Islamic state in Bangladesh.

To understand religious pluralism in Bangladesh we need to know the historical background of the country. Before the 8th century C.E., Bengal was a land of many kings and their small kingdoms. In the beginning of that century, Buddhist rulers established the Pala dynasty and gave a proper shape to Bengal, and ruled the country for about four hundred years. The rulers were people of the land and they were quite respectful towards people of other faiths. Hindus, Buddhists and the indigenous peoples lived in such a harmonious way for many centuries that the period is known in the history of Bengal as a golden age of inter-religious harmony. Then a South Indian king conquered Bengal and established the Sena Dynasty. The Sena kings suppressed and oppressed the Buddhists. When Iqtiaq Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiar Kjilji, a Muslim warrior of Turkish origin, conquered Bengal in the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Buddhists in this country felt a sign of relief. Some historians are of the opinion that when the Muslim rulers came to Bengal, the Buddhists not only welcomed them, but felt as if the Muslims were sent by the gods and goddesses to save them.

From 1203 C.E. to 1757 C.E. the Muslims ruled Bengal. During this period the rulers in Bengal generally were quite respectful towards the people of other faiths. But after the British had conquered Bengal, they adopted the 'divide and rule' policy and Hindu-Muslim conflict appeared in this land. This Hindu-Muslim conflict ultimately prompted Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, to come forward with the 'Two-Nation Theory', which holds that though Hindus and ¹Muslims live in the same land, they are different nations – their religion is different and their

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cultural heritage is different. On the basis of this ‘Two-Nation Theory’ Jinnah claimed that the Muslims in India deserved a separate homeland. It may be mentioned here that this same Jinnah was a great advocate of the unity of these two communities and he was called the “Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity” by some very prominent Hindu leaders of that time. But the British rulers did not sincerely want the unity of the Hindus and the Muslims and their policy created certain situations in which Jinnah, a believer in secular philosophy of life, was virtually compelled to demand a separate state for the Muslims of India.

Jinnah’s ‘Two-Nation Theory’ became popular among the Muslims living in the western part of India and in some of the eastern part of the country. In 1947, when India won independence, the land was divided into two: India and Pakistan. Pakistan had two wings: East Pakistan and West Pakistan. At the partition of India, East Bengal became East Pakistan. It may be mentioned here that Pakistan is the only country in the world which was established in the name of religion: Islam. However, except religion, there was nothing common between the Muslims of East Pakistan and West Pakistan. From the very beginning, trouble started between the two wings. Within one decade, East Pakistan virtually turned into a colony of West Pakistan. This continued for one more decade and a half.

A great leader of East Pakistan named Sheik Mujibur Rahman led the country to independence in 1971. After a liberation war of nine months with the sacrifice of possibly three million lives, Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign state. While Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, Bangladesh became not only a People’s Republic but also a secular state. Within ten months of liberation the new government presented the nation a new constitution unanimously approved by the Parliament. Secularism was one of the four basic principles of the Constitution. The Constitution also prohibited any kind of politics in the name of religion. It may be mentioned here that the term ‘secularism’ was not understood and interpreted in the sense it is understood in the West. By ‘secularism’ the leaders of Bangladesh meant ‘equal opportunity for the people of all faith.’

Bangladesh is a country of 160 million people. Of them about 88% are Muslims, 10% Hindus and the rest are Buddhists, Christians, Bahais and animists. To give equal rights to different faiths the government made it compulsory that all the national programs conducted within the country and outside the country should start with recitations from the Quran, the Gita, the Tripitaka and the Bible. Possibly, nowhere in the world has such a tradition existed. The government declared one of the songs of a poet-philosopher of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, to be the national anthem of Bangladesh. It may be noted here that another song of this great poet is the national anthem of

India. Though Tagore was not a Muslim, the government of a Muslim-dominated country showed great respect to this great man by making his song their national anthem and by declaring him one of their national poets.

Now let me review the four major religious traditions of Bangladesh and their attitudes towards the people of other faiths in the country. I hope this will help you to understand religious pluralism in Bangladesh better. Hindu religious practices were followed by the people of this land from time immemorial. Vedic Hinduism developed slowly in Bengal and merged with folk religions and local customs. The Hindu religious rites and practices of Bangladesh are similar to those of the Hindus of West Bengal, but in many respects are different from the Hindus of the rest of the subcontinent. For centuries, the Hindus of this land have been influenced by the Vaishnava philosophy of Sri Chaitanya. The basic teaching of his philosophy is selfless love for God and His creation. Later on the Hindus of Bangladesh were tremendously influenced by the teachings of some great saints and philosophers of Bengal. Among them the names of Raja Rammohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and Swami Vivekananda are worth mentioning. The Hindus and the Muslims of Bangladesh have been much influenced by some contemporary Hindu saints and philosophers like Sri Anukul Chandra, Swami Swarupananda, Dr. Govinda Chandra Dev and Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari.

Raja Ramamohan Roy, who is called the father of modern India, was immensely influenced by the teachings of Islam. As a result, he became an ardent believer of monotheism and a great advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity. He vehemently opposed traditional Hinduism and established the Brahmo Samaj, which means a society of the followers of the Supreme Being. Members of this society do not believe in any kind of discrimination among castes and creeds. Some of the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj are quite similar to the teachings of Islam.

A great advocate of the unity of mankind, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, was born in a Hindu Brahmin family. At certain stages of his endeavour to know God, he tried to practice Islam and Christianity like genuine members of these traditions. After this spiritual journey, he was convinced that all religions have the same goal, but only their paths are different. The essence of Ramakrishna's philosophy is: do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each (person), which is spirituality. Learn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Saint-philosopher of Bengal, Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, propagated a philosophy that service to any living being means service to God. He did not believe in any kind of discrimination based on caste and creed. He believed in inter-religious harmony, particularly harmony among the people of the two major faiths

of the sub-continent. In a letter to one of his friends, he stated that the future of a harmonious India depends on the Upanisadic brain and the Quranic heart.

Among recent Hindu thinkers of Bangladesh Dr. Govinda Chandra Dev devoted his entire life for unity among people of different faiths. Though a confirmed bachelor, Dr. Dev adopted a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy and brought them up under the same roof, but provided each of them with their respective modes of religious education. When they were highly qualified adults, they were married, each according to their own religious traditions. I am fortunate that Dr. Dev was my professor at Dhaka University. In his classes, when he was asked about his religion, he used to say that he was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but a man and his religion was to serve humanity.

Dr. Mahanambrata Brahmachari, a saint-philosopher of Bangladesh who received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1933, was Secretary General of the Fellowship of Faiths for more than a decade and spent the rest of his life in Bangladesh for the promotion of human values and interfaith understanding. He used to tell everybody that a dog is a dog and dies also as a dog, but a dog can neither acquire dogness nor cease to be a dog. So is the case with any other animal. But a human is unique. A human baby is born with all the potentiality of a human being, but has to turn that potentiality into actuality. That is, she or he has to acquire the qualities of a true human being and maintain them or risk becoming inhuman. Through this and many similar examples and stories, he used to urge millions of his followers belonging to different religious traditions to realize that their primary goal of life should be to acquire the qualities of a true human being, no matter whether they are Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists or Christians. It may be mentioned here that when Dr. Brahmachari was a small boy he was miraculously saved from a sure death by a Muslim neighbour. He never forgot that and till his death in 1998 at the age of ninety-seven he used to tell everybody that a Hindu father was responsible for his birth and a Muslim father for saving his life and that, therefore he must work for the unity of both communities.

Now about Buddhism in Bangladesh. The Bengal region was the last stronghold of Indian Buddhism, where it prevailed through the eleventh century. In modern India, renewal of Buddhism usually is attributed to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who led the mass conversion of millions of low caste Hindus to Buddhism beginning in 1956. However, back in 1887, the Chittagong Buddhist Association had been founded. This was the first Buddhism society in the subcontinent in modern times. I have reason to feel proud of this since Chittagong is in Bangladesh. I have already mentioned that on the basis of Jinnah's 'Two-Nation Theory', Pakistan came into being in 1947. The areas of Muslim majority in western India and in part of eastern India formed Pakistan. It is quite interesting to note that the King of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an area then with more

than 90% Buddhist population, opted for Pakistan and so this area became a part of East Pakistan and subsequently of Bangladesh. It is also interesting to note that until 1956 the total number of the Buddhists living in Bangladesh was more than the Buddhists living in the rest of the subcontinent.

Bangladesh can feel proud of many great Buddhists this region has nurtured. One especially notable is Atisha Dipankara. He played a vital role in making Buddhism popular in Tibet and in promoting harmony among people of different faiths. To show respect to this great son of the soil a university was established in his name in Dhaka city in the year 2002. This is possibly the only university throughout the subcontinent which has been named after a Buddhist scholar. Among recent Buddhist scholars Venerable Vishuddhananda Mahathero deserves to be mentioned. A Buddhist philosopher of Bangladesh, Venerable Mahathero dedicated seventy years of his life to promoting understanding among people of different faiths in Bangladesh. He is no more in this world, but I am sure he is still alive in the hearts of those who knew him as a model of inter-religious harmony.

Now about Islam, which came to Bangladesh comparatively late. Though Arab Muslim traders came to coastal Bengal within a hundred years of the advent of Islam, proselytizing Muslim Sufi-saints came only from the eleventh century. Influenced by the teachings and ideals of the Sufi-saints, huge numbers of Hindus and Buddhists and other indigenous people embraced Islam. Islam entered here in full force, however, with the Turkish conquest towards the beginning of the thirteenth century. Islam, with its social justice and principles of equality and fraternity, came to downtrodden people as a saviour at a time when the society was steeped in inequality and caste oppression. It may be mentioned here that many of the Muslim converts retained their inherited customs and social behaviour, as is evident even today. Thus, while the social and religious life of the Muslims profoundly influenced Hinduism, conversely some practices of the Hindus entered into the life of the Muslims.

I have already mentioned that until British rule in Bengal, Hindus and Muslims were living harmoniously. Even when the British Government, through its 'divide and rule' policy, created misunderstanding among these two communities, there were many Muslim scholars and others who worked for the unity of the people of different faiths. The names of Lalan Shah, Hassan Raja, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Abul Hussain, Abul Fazal, Muhammad Shahidullah and Kazi Motahar Hussain are prominent among them. Several were professors in Dhaka University. Through their writings over many decades, they were successful in promoting free thinking and making people accommodating and respectful towards persons of other faiths. In their personal lives they practiced inter-religious harmony.

Lalan Shah was a folk-singer. Throughout a life of more than ninety years he was active composing and singing songs to remove misunderstanding among people of different faiths. To fulfill his mission he became so intimate with both Hindus and Muslims that he did not even care for his own identity as a Muslim. He is equally loved by the Muslims and the Hindus throughout the country. Kazi Nazrul Islam's contribution in this respect is unique. He wrote quite a good number of poems and composed hundreds of songs against social discrimination and in favour of inter-religious harmony. These have inspired millions of people of Bangladesh and West Bengal to stop discriminating against others in the name of caste, class and creed. As these are ever inspiring, one can confidently assert that Nazrul's writings will inspire generation after generation, as is equally true of the songs of Lalan Shah. It may be mentioned here that Nazrul's wife was a Hindu and that he was so much devoted to Hindu-Muslim amity that he named his first son Krishna Muhammad, Krishna being a Hindu god and Muhammad a prophet of Islam. Nazrul's uniqueness is evident from the fact that he composed hundreds of songs in appreciation of Prophet Muhammad and the teachings of Islam and likewise composed an equal number of songs praising the gods and goddesses of Hinduism. This great soul is a national poet of Bangladesh.

Now let me say a few words about Christianity, which came to Bengal first in the sixteenth century, as Portuguese Christian men married Bengali women. In Bangladesh converted Christians are mostly from low caste Hindus and backward tribal peoples. Colonial missionaries' attitude towards Hinduism and Islam was highly critical and confrontational for most of the nineteenth century. This naturally caused a considerable amount of resentment from the Bengal intelligentsia. However, this negative attitude did not continue for long. The missionaries changed their policy and started devoting their time and money for social service, which helped them change the situation. It may be mentioned here that educational work represents their main contribution to the development of modern West Bengal and present-day Bangladesh. People belonging to this faith are highly respected for their social work. They are so much respected that people in present-day Bangladesh feel proud of being able to send their children to the Christian missionary schools and colleges. In Bangladesh there are many organizations for the promotion of interfaith understanding. The first organizations of this kind were established by the members of the Catholic Church and these have their branches throughout the country. The main purpose of these organizations is not to convert people into being Christians but to convert them to being better human beings. That is one of the reasons why the Christians are highly respected in Bangladesh.

Now let me address certain changes in the government and some amendments to the

Constitution and their impact on the different religions of Bangladesh. The first President of Bangladesh presented the nation a Constitution where special emphasis was given to 'secularism'. He was assassinated in 1975 and soon after General Zia Rahman came to power with the help of the military. To consolidate his power General Zia took a number of political steps that helped return reactionary Muslims to the political arena. Through a martial law order he first dropped 'secularism' from the Constitution in 1976. In 1977 another article of the Constitution was amended to legitimize religion-based politics in the country. In the same year, a new clause, namely, 'Islamic solidarity' was added to the Constitution. This allowed cultivating fraternal relations among Muslim countries. In principle there was nothing wrong with this, but eventually it opened the flood-gates for using religion for political purposes. Many Islamic NGOs sprang up in the wake of politicizing religion. These Islamic NGOs have served as instruments for political Islam. Millions of dollars have been pumped into the country to cater to the politically motivated mullahs whose political aspiration is to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic Republic.

In 1982, General Ershad took over power as a military ruler. He went one step further than General Zia and used Islam to counter the political opposition to his dictatorial rule. He drove the last nail into the coffin of secular ideals at the state level. By his dictatorial power he got the Constitution amended in 1988 to declare Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. This virtually degraded the members of the minority religious communities to second class-citizenship. In 2001 a nationalistic political party with the support of some Islamist political parties came to power. After that the religio-political scenario changed beyond imagination.

From October 2001 to October 2006, fanatic Muslims became a threat not only to the non-Muslim minority but also to the smaller sects among the Muslims. For example, some fanatic Muslims, evidently with support and guidance of a revolutionary Islamist party named Jamaat-e-Islami, a partner in the coalition government, killed one imam of a mosque and made several attempts to demolish all the mosques belonging to the relatively small Ahmadiyya sect in Bangladesh. They tried to force the government to declare the Ahmadiyya Muslim community as non-Muslim. This was absolutely unfortunate. These fanatics wanted to replace all the existing laws of the country by Islamic Sharia laws. In August 2005 fanatic terrorists exploded about five hundred bombs throughout the country simultaneously to demonstrate their strength. This was a great challenge to the government, which was forced by pressure from civil society and the international community to take action against them. It is also worth mentioning that the most powerful of the Islamist political parties, namely, the Jamaat-e-Islami, disowned these terrorists. Many of the terrorists implicated in the five hundred bomb blasts were arrested and death sentences of their six top leaders were carried out.

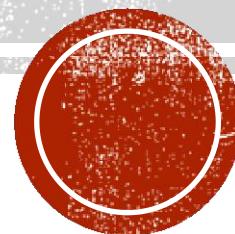
In Bangladesh there is a unique provision in the Constitution. After the five-year term of an elected government is over, the Prime Minister resigns and the President appoints a ten-member Advisory Board for a brief period to oversee a national election. The Chief Advisor of the Board becomes the executive head of a neutral caretaker government. After the election is held, the caretaker government hands over power to the newly elected Prime Minister. At the time of this writing Bangladesh is being run by a caretaker government. Fortunately all the members of the Advisory Board are against any kind of fanaticism.²

I am quite hopeful that the people of Bangladesh will be able to permanently resist the emergence of religious fanaticism and religion-based politics. This is not merely wishful thinking. I have reasons for my confidence in the people of Bangladesh. As mentioned at the beginning of this account, Bangladesh may be the only country in the world where people have given their lives for the prestige of their mother tongue. Bangladesh may be the only country in the world where three million people sacrificed their lives for the independence of their motherland and that, too, within a span of nine months. Bangladesh is the only country in the world where the birthdays of Sri Krishna, Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad are celebrated with equal importance and with equal respect by the government and also at the private level. These days are also celebrated as national holidays. Again, Bangladesh is the only country in the world where during the major religious festivals of all faiths adhered to by large sectors of the population public schools and colleges remain closed as a symbol of respect to the people belonging to the religious traditions concerned. Bangladesh may also be distinguished for special and substantial annual budget provisions for the development of minority religious traditions. For example, the Hindus, Buddhists and Christians are provided with special financial support for the development of temples and churches – and for celebrating religious festivals in a befitting manner.

Because of all these factors, I am quite convinced that religious fanaticism, intolerance and religion-based politics cannot last long in a country where people have been accustomed to inter-religious harmony for centuries. Bangladesh cannot be a permanent safe haven for any form of religious fanaticism. Rather, because of her unique cultural heritage, Bangladesh is poised to be a lasting abode of religious pluralism and inter-religious harmony.

² Editor's note: In December 2008 a general election returned to power with more than a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly the Awami League, of which Sheikh Hasina Wazed, daughter of former Prime Minister and President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is the leader and has became Prime Minister.

From Prosperity to Poverty:British Imperialism in India



ABOUT THE BOOK

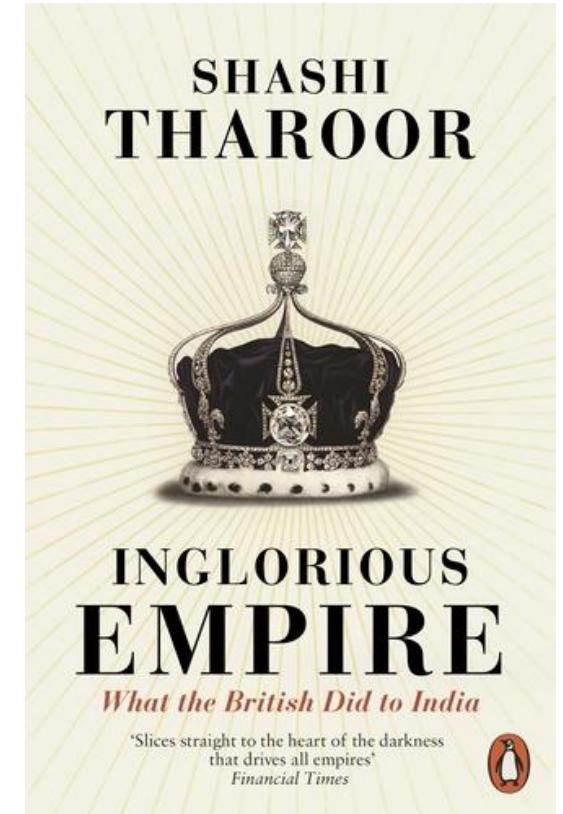
- Title: Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India (2017)
- Author: Shashi Tharoor
Publishers: Aleph Book Company (India) titled An Era of Darkness,
Hurst Publishers (UK)
- Genre: Non-fiction, History
ISBN: 978-1-84904-808-8

Overview

In Inglorious Empire, Shashi Tharoor presents a compelling critique of British colonial rule in India. He challenges the narrative that British imperialism was a civilizing force, arguing instead that it led to the systematic exploitation and impoverishment of India. Tharoor supports his arguments with historical data, highlighting the economic drain, cultural destruction, and social injustices inflicted during the colonial period. The book originated from Tharoor's 2015 Oxford Union debate speech, which gained widespread attention and prompted a deeper exploration into the subject.

Key Themes:

- Economic exploitation and deindustrialization of India



FROM PROSPERITY TO PLUNDER – THE LOOTING OF INDIA

Will Durant's Powerful Critique (1930):

British rule was “the greatest crime in all history.”

- Called the East India Company “a trading company without scruple or principle,” driven by greed.
- Described 173 years of “illegal and ‘legal’ plunder.”

India's Wealth Before British Rule:

- A global manufacturing and trading powerhouse.
- Excelled in textiles, shipbuilding, jewelry, metallurgy, ceramics, and finance.
- J.T. Sunderland: “India was a far greater industrial nation than any in Europe.”

Economic Superpower:

- - Held 27% of world GDP in 1700, larger than Europe’s share.
- - Dropped to just 3% by 1947 due to colonial exploitation.



FROM PROSPERITY TO PLUNDER – THE LOOTING OF INDIA (CONT.)

▪ Nadir Shah's Devastating Invasion (1739):

- Sacked Delhi, looted **500 million rupees** in gold, silver, and jewels.
- Carried off the **Peacock Throne** and imperial treasures.
- Killed **50,000 people** in Delhi; destabilized the Mughal Empire.
- Afterward, no taxes were needed in Persia for 3 years due to the loot.

The Turning Point – Battle of Plassey (1757):

- British defeated Bengal's Nawab with military force and betrayal (Mir Jafar).
- Looted **£2.5 million** (worth over £250 million today) from Bengal's treasury.
- In 1765, the Company got rights to collect taxes in **Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa**.

British Corporate Colonialism:

- The East India Company became a multinational empire with a private army.



BRITISH POLICIES – LOOTING INDIA TO ENRICH BRITAIN

Strategic Support for the East India Company:

- British Parliament (influenced by Company shareholders) passed laws favoring the Company.
- Military & naval support, plus loans from the Bank of England, helped defeat local rulers and rivals (like the French and Dutch).
- Foreign policy was weaponized to suppress Indian resistance and open trade routes for British profit.

Export-Import Disparity (Economic Reversal):

- Under British rule:
- India exported raw materials, imported finished British goods.
- British exports to India skyrocketed — from 60 million yards of cloth in 1830 to over 1 billion yards by 1870.
- India's share of global manufacturing fell from 27% to 2%.

Myth of “Natural Decline” Debunked:

- Apologists say handlooms lost to modern machines.
- Truth: Indian textiles were deliberately destroyed, not outcompeted.



BENGAL – THE HEART OF INDIA'S WEALTH & BRITISH EXPLOITATION

Bengal: A Global Trade Powerhouse

- Famous for its luxurious muslin, fine silk, and Kalamkari textiles.
- - Exported to Europe, Egypt, Turkey, China, Java, and Japan.

In 1750s:

- Textile exports alone = ₹16 million/year
- Silk exports = ₹6.5 million/year
- Dhaka known for “woven air” muslins — a global fashion symbol.

British Takeover & Economic Loot

- Post-1757 (Battle of Plassey): Company shifted from traders to rulers.
- Stopped paying with gold or silver — used Bengal's tax revenue to buy Bengal's goods.
- Established a Company monopoly; squeezed out other buyers.
- Traditional trade networks destroyed, local artisans trapped.
- Deliberate Destruction of Bengal's Industries
- Looms smashed, weavers' thumbs crippled (allegedly), to enforce dependency.



BENGAL – THE HEART OF INDIA'S WEALTH & BRITISH EXPLOITATION (CONT.)

Collapse of Dhaka & Weaving Culture

- Dhaka's population fell from hundreds of thousands in 1760 to 50,000 by 1820s.
- Once-prosperous weavers became beggars or landless farmers.
- Rural economy crashed as women lost home weaving income.

Legacy of Exploitation

- Bengal's economy hollowed out to support British industry.
- Its artisans, trade routes, and skills were destroyed not by progress, but by colonial greed.



EXTRACTION, TAXATION AND DIAMONDS

- British extracted ~£18 million annually from India (1765–1815)
- Harsh taxation (up to 50%) led to famine, land loss, even child sales
- First time in Indian history: emergence of landless peasants
- Massive corruption and looting by British officials (e.g., Robert Clive)
- Term "**loot**" entered English from colonial India
- Company men ("nabobs") returned to Britain with stolen wealth
- Thomas Pitt smuggled a giant diamond—symbol of imperial plunder
- East India Company ruled India with little parliamentary oversight
- William Pitt's India Act (1784) failed to stop exploitation
- Warren Hastings looted Indian princes, tortured widows (Begums of Oudh)
- Edmund Burke condemned atrocities during Hastings' impeachment
- Even Macaulay admitted British rule caused mass poverty in India



REVENUE COLLECTION & DRAIN OF WEALTH

- **Heavy taxation:** Peasants taxed beyond limits; worse off than under native rulers
- **British priority:** Revenue maximization > welfare; Indian wealth used for Britain
- **Bishop Heber (1826):** British-ruled peasants poorer than those under native princes
- **F.J. Shore (1857):** British rule aimed at making India entirely subservient
- **'Subsidiary alliances':** Indian princes paid heavily for British 'protection'
- **Hyderabad/Nizam case:** Forced debt, high interest, economic subjugation
- **Revenue collection:** Ruthless, rigid rules; no relief for crop failure or calamity

Major systems:

- Zamindari (fixed rent; Bengal)
- Ryotwari (direct tax; South & West)
- Mahalwari (community-based; North-West)



REVENUE COLLECTION & DRAIN OF WEALTH (CON.)

1. India Funded British Wars

- Indian troops fought in British wars worldwide (e.g., China, Egypt, Africa).
- Wars funded by Indian taxes, mainly from poor farmers.

2. British Army Paid by India

- 2/3 of British army in India funded by Indian revenues.
- British soldiers got better pay, food, and pensions than Indians.

3. Indian Labour Built the Empire

- Indian workers built railways, farms, and trade in other colonies.
- Many sent abroad as indentured laborers or convicts.



REVENUE COLLECTION & DRAIN OF WEALTH (CON.)

4. No Reward for Sacrifices

- India got no benefit despite massive contributions in both World Wars.
- Indian sacrifices were ignored and unpaid.

5. Economic Drain & Exploitation

- Huge wealth drained: £723 million in 30 years.
- Taxes taken from India were spent in Britain—not reinvested.

6. False Justifications

- British claimed moral duty—but acted for profit.
- Real motive: control and commercial gain, not Indian welfare.



IMPERIALISM OVER BENGAL

Bengal's Maritime Glory and British Takeover

- - Bengal had 4,000–5,000 ships in the 1600s, a global hub for shipbuilding
- Ships were durable, elegant, and built with superior materials like teak
- After 1757, British imposed trade monopolies, duties, and bans on Indian ships
- Indian shipping reduced to low-value coastal trade

Suppression by Law and Policy

- 1813 & 1814 laws blocked Bengal-built ships from UK and global markets
- British firms couldn't compete — so Indian ships were legally excluded
- Indian sailors were restricted; British crews were forced, raising costs
- By 1850, Bengal's shipbuilding industry collapsed

Broader Exploitation in Bengal

- Jute & tea industries in Bengal: fully British-owned until the 20th century
- Indian investors blocked from “sterling” companies
- British manipulated currency: kept rupee high to protect their assets
- 1929–38: Money supply cut, Indians starved — British profits protected



BRITISH SUPPRESSION OF INDIAN STEEL INDUSTRY

- **Ancient Excellence:** India pioneered high-quality steel (e.g., 'wootz'), famous globally
- **Colonial Sabotage:** British shut down Indian metallurgical industries by late 1700s
- **Tata Steel Struggles:** Jamsetji Tata faced hostility, delays, and racist mockery
- **BSSS Policy Trap:** Indian producers forced to meet British Standard Steel (BSSS) specs
 - Meant higher costs, no access to NBSSS global market
 - Restricted from British imports too — total market exclusion

Deindustrialization by Design

- **Blocked Growth:** Indian steelmakers couldn't compete or expand under colonial rules
- **False Narrative: Britain** claims India "missed the bus" of industrialization
 - Reality: Britain threw India under the bus with:
 - Tariffs, restrictions, market manipulation
 - No scientific institutions — only Indian-funded initiatives like IISc
 - Irony: Scottish prosperity came from exploiting India — 25% of colonial officials in India were Scots



POLITICAL IMPERIALISM

Destruction of Indian political unity:

- Tharoor argues that the British exploited India's diversity by dividing and ruling — fostering communal divisions (especially between Hindus and Muslims) which led to long-term political instability.

Undermining indigenous governance:

- Traditional rulers and administrative systems were systematically weakened or co-opted. - The British replaced decentralized and culturally rooted systems with a centralized colonial bureaucracy that served British interests.

No democracy for Indians:

- The British claimed to bring parliamentary democracy, but in practice denied Indians political participation for most of their rule. - Institutions were controlled by the British, and Indians had minimal say until the very end.



CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

Undermining Indian identity:

- Tharoor talks about how the British tried to portray Indian civilization as backward and inferior. They imposed Western education and values, undermining indigenous knowledge systems.

Language and education:

- English education was introduced not to enlighten Indians, but to create a class of Indians who were “Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste,” as Lord Macaulay put it.

Distortion of history:

- The British often misrepresented Indian history, especially the Mughal period, to justify their own rule and divide communities.



LEGAL AND ADMINISTRATIVE IMPERIALISM

Introduction of the British legal system:

- While it brought some structure, it disregarded traditional Indian legal systems, and was used more as a tool of control than of justice.

Bureaucracy and police:

- The colonial administration was oppressive, designed to extract revenue and maintain order, not serve the people.



MILITARY EXPLOITATION & SOCIAL DIVISION AND

Military Exploitation:

- Use of Indian soldiers for British wars: Indians were heavily recruited into the British army but used to fight wars that had nothing to do with India — such as in World Wars I and II.

Brutal suppression of Indian dissent:

- Tharoor cites events like the Jallianwala -Bagh massacre as evidence of the violent lengths to which the British went to suppress Indian political expression.

Social Division and Communalism:

- Tharoor emphasizes how the British intentionally emphasized caste, religious, and regional differences to weaken Indian unity. The legacy of this divide-and-rule policy can still be felt in modern-day communal tensions.



Thank
you!





POLITICAL HISTORY OF BENGAL UP TO THE ADVENT OF THE BRITISH IN INDIA

IIT-1212 Bangladesh Studies

Naming of Bengal

- The exact origin of the word *Bangla* is unknown, though it is believed to be derived from the Dravidian-speaking tribe **Bang/Banga** that settled in the area around the year 1000 BCE.
- Other accounts speculate that the name is derived from *Venga* (*Bongo*), which came from the Austro-Indian word "Bonga" meaning the Sun-god.
- According to the Mahabharata, the Puranas and the Harivamsha, Vanga was one of the adopted sons of King Vali who founded the Vanga Kingdom.
- The earliest reference to "Vangala" (*Bôngal*) has been traced in the Nesari plates (805 CE) of Rashtrakuta Govinda III which speak of Dharmapala as the king of Vangala.

- The records of Rajendra Chola I of the Chola dynasty, who invaded Bengal in the 11th century, use the term *Vangaladesa*.
- The term *Bangalah* is one of the precursors to the modern terms *Bengal* and *Bangla*. *Bangalah* was the most widely used term for Bengal during the medieval and early modern periods. The Sultan of Bengal was styled as the *Shah of Bangalah*. The Mughal province of Bengal was termed *Subah-i-Bangalah*.
- An interesting theory of the origin of the name is provided by Abu'l-Fazl in his *Ain-i-Akbari*. According to him, "The original name of Bengal was Bung, and the suffix "al" came to be added to it from the fact that the ancient rajahs of this land raised mounds of earth 10 feet high and 20 in breadth in lowlands at the foot of the hills which were called "al". From this suffix added to the Bung, the name Bengal arose and gained currency".



Early Settlement

- Stone Age tools found in the region indicate human habitation for over 20,000 years.
- Archaeological evidence confirms that by the second millennium BCE, the Bengal delta was inhabited by rice-cultivating communities.
- Explorations and excavations in the region brought into light 479 sites pertaining to the Palaeolithic (100), Mesolithic (208), Neolithic (99) and Proto-historic/Chalcolithic (72) periods. Of these, three Mesolithic, one Neolithic and 11 Chalcolithic sites so far have been excavated.
- Bengal was settled by Austroasiatics, Tibeto-Burmans, Dravidians and Indo-Aryans in consecutive waves of migration.
- Rivers such as the Ganges and Brahmaputra were used for transport while maritime trade flourished in the Bay of Bengal.
- Alexander Cunningham, the founder of the Archaeological Survey of India, identified the archaeological site of Mahasthangarh as the capital of the Pundra Kingdom mentioned in the *Rigveda*.

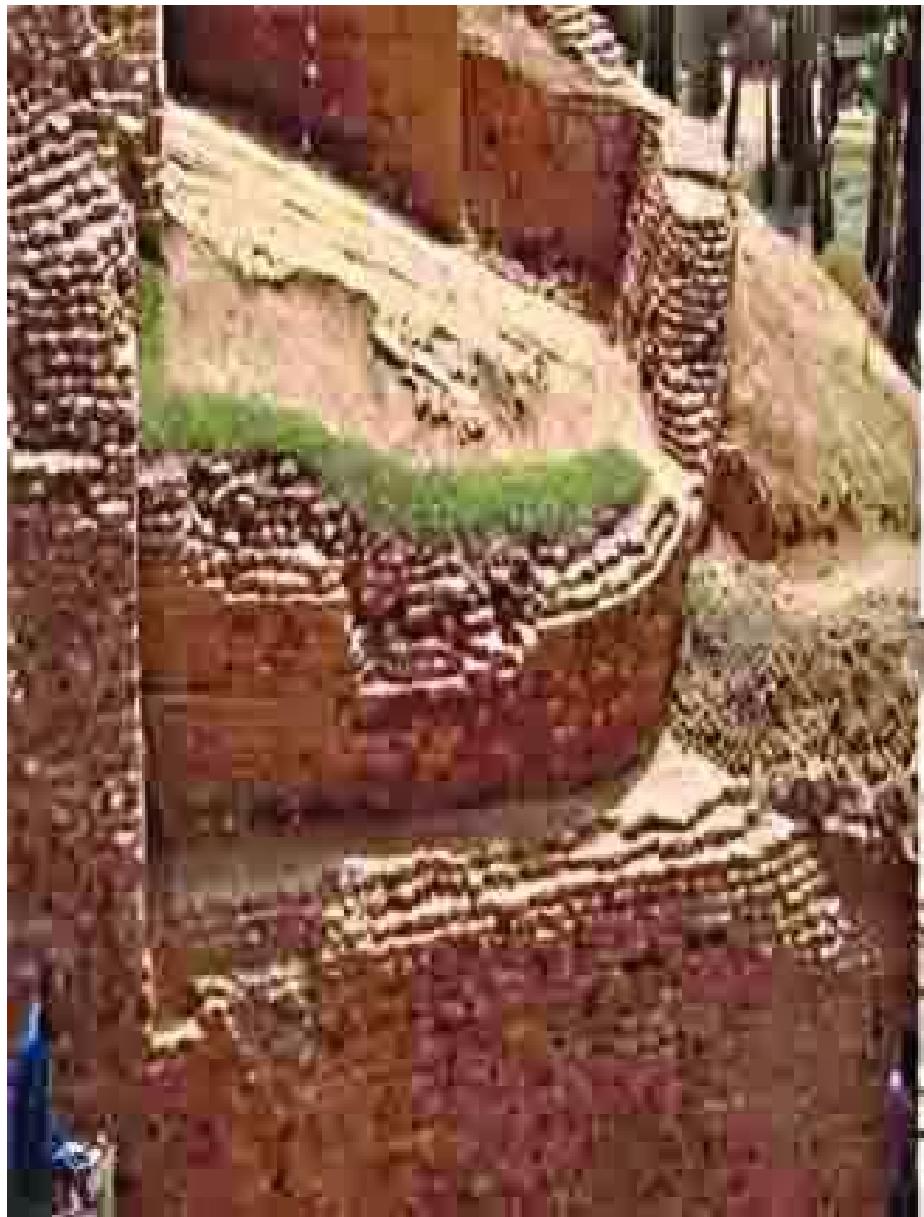
Early literary, Epigraphic and Geographic accounts

- The ancient Bengal region features prominently in legendary history of India, Sri Lanka, Siam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Burma, Nepal, Tibet, China.
- According to the Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the Vanga Kingdom was located in Eastern India.
- According to Sri Lankan history, the first king of Sri Lanka was Prince Vijaya who led a fleet from India to conquer the island of Lanka. Prince Vijaya's ancestral home was Bengal.

- In the Greco-Roman world, accounts of the Gangaridai Kingdom are considered by historians to have referred to Bengal. At the time of Alexander the Great's invasion of India, the collective might of the Gangaridai and the Nanda Empire (Bihar) deterred the Greek army. The Gangaridai army was stated to have a war elephant cavalry of 6000 elephants.
- The archaeological sites of Wari-Bateshwar and Chandraketugarh are linked to the Gangaridai kingdom.
- In Ptolemy's world map, the emporium of Sounagoura was located in Bengal.
- Roman geographers also noted the existence of a large natural harbour in southeastern Bengal, corresponding to the present-day Chittagong region.













Mauryan empire

(322 BCE – 184 BCE)

- The Mauryan Empire unified most of the Indian subcontinent into one state for the first time and was one of the largest empires in subcontinental history.
- The empire was established by Chandragupta Maurya. The reign of Ashoka ushered an era of social harmony, religious transformation, and expansion of the sciences and of knowledge.
- Chandragupta Maurya's embrace of Jainism increased social and religious renewal and reform across his society, while Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism has been said to have been the foundation of the reign of social and political peace and non-violence across the subcontinent.
- Ashoka sponsored the spreading of Buddhist missionaries to various parts of Asia.
- Bengal's oldest inscription - the Mahasthan Brahmi Inscription - dates from the Mauryan period. The inscription was written in the Brahmi script in the provincial capital of Pundranagara. The inscription was produced during the 3rd century BCE.

MAHSTHANGARH BRAHMI INSCRIPTION



- It records an order, issued by some ruler to the Mahamatra stationed at 'Pudanagala' (pundranagara> Mahasthana in Bangladesh) with a view to relieve the distress caused by some agency to the people called Samgvangiyas, who were settled in and about the town.
- The inscription speaks of four requisites viz tela (oil), duma (tree), dhanya (paddy) and two varieties of small coins called gandaka (ganda- a unit of calculation consisting of four kapardakas or cowries = one ganda) and Kakanyika (Kakamika-kapardaka or cowry).
- The storehouse or golaghar (Kothagala> Kosthagara) had to be filled up with these requisites as provisions against any emergency caused by water, fire and also the devastation of crops by parrots.
- The historical importance of the record lies in the fact that it is the earliest evidence that suggests the authority of the Mauryas in the pundravardhana area.

Maurya Dynasty in 265 BCE



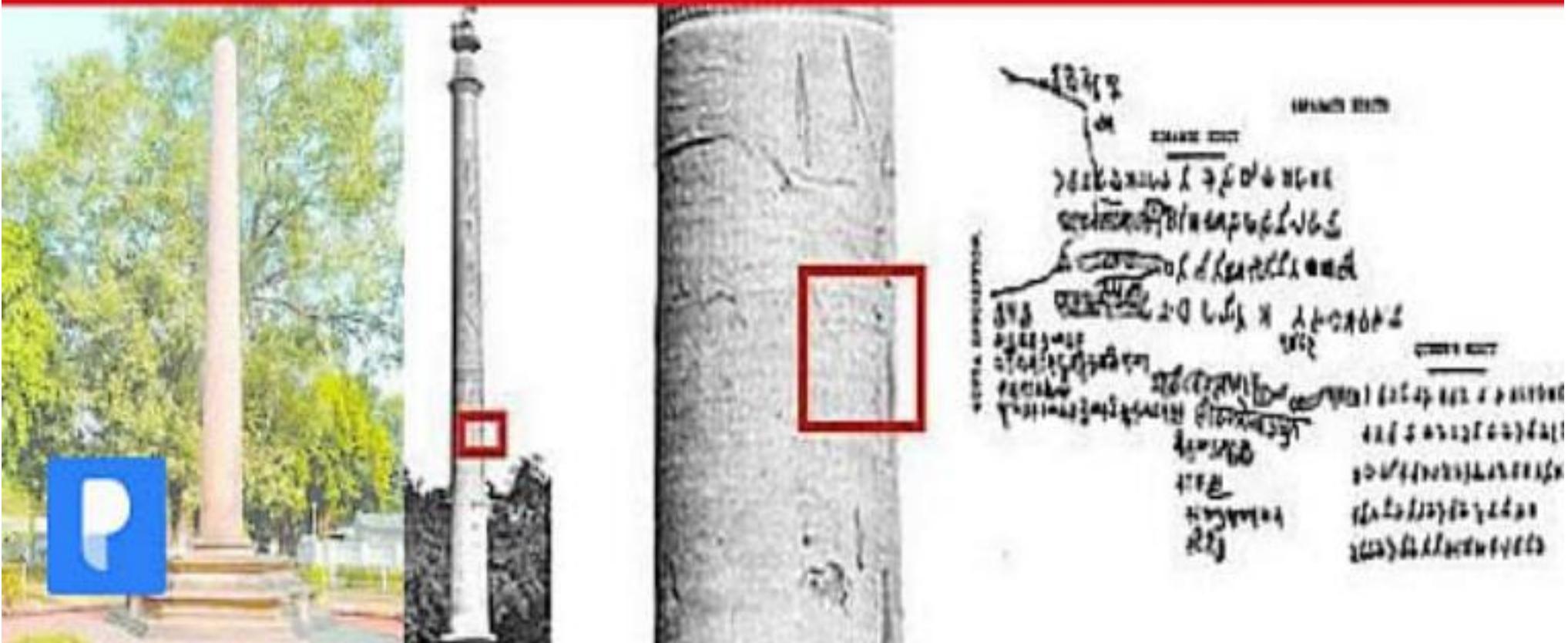
- Maurya Dynasty
- Tributaries
- ◆ Capital City
- Other Cities
- Edicts of Ashoka
- ▲ Buddhist Sites

Gupta Empire

(319 to 467 CE)

- The Gupta Empire is regarded as a golden age in subcontinental history. It was marked by extensive scientific and cultural advancements that crystallized the elements of what is generally known as Hindu culture.
- The peace and prosperity created under leadership of Guptas enabled the pursuit of scientific and artistic endeavors in the empire.
- Bengal was an important province of the Gupta Empire. The discovery of Gupta era coins across Bengal point to a monetized economy.
- Samataṭa, as a territorial term, has been widely used, beginning with the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta in the 4th century CE, as a frontier state of the Gupta Empire.

ALLAHABAD PILLAR INSCRIPTION (PRAYAG PRASASTI) - ART AND CULTURE NOTES





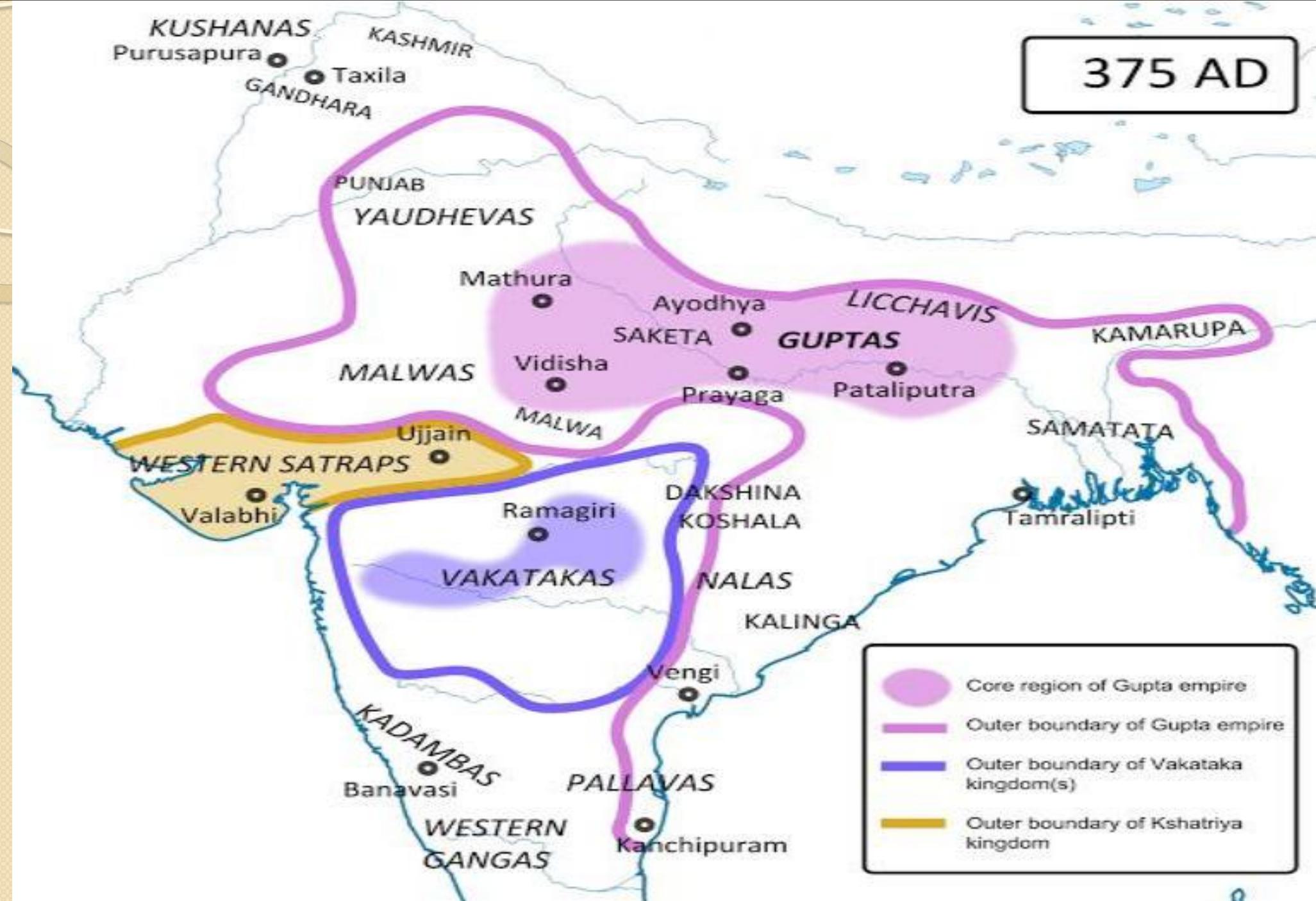
GUPTA COINS

A CULTURAL STUDY

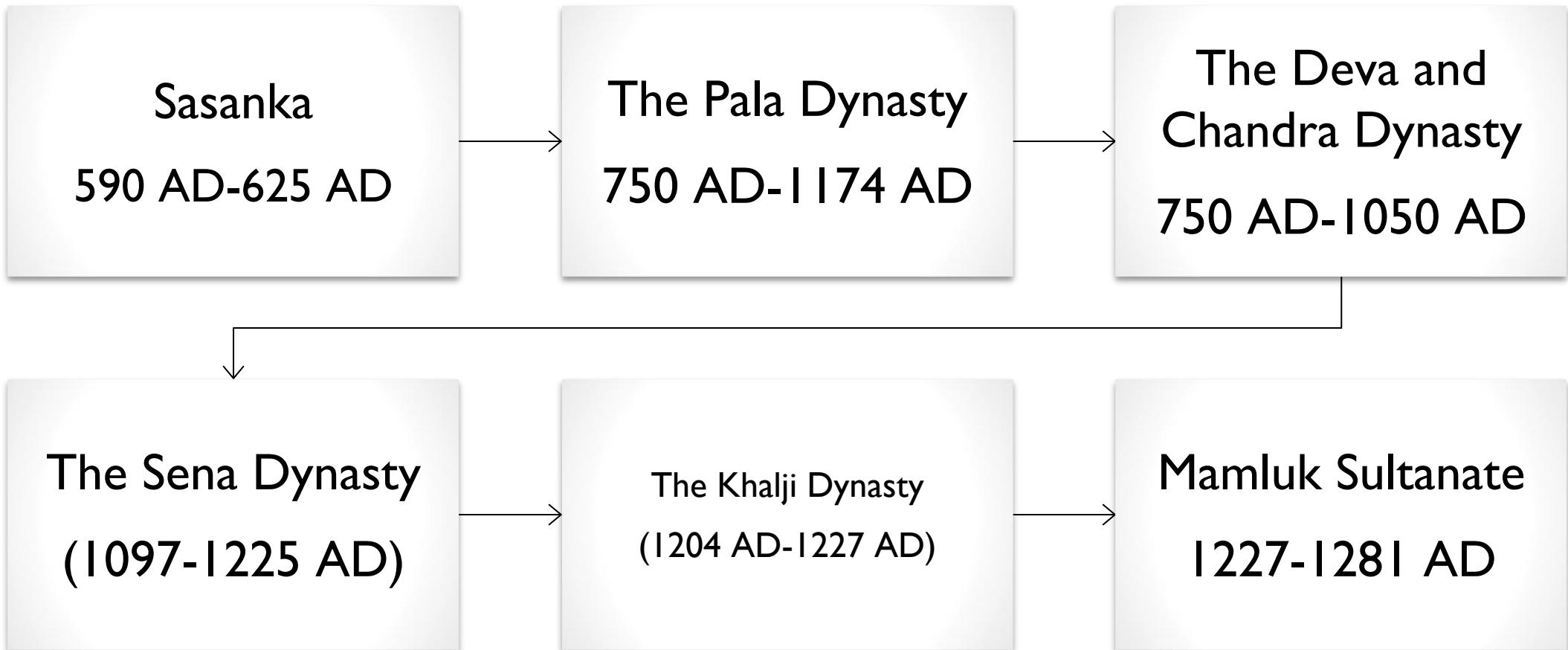
Ranjana Bhardwaj



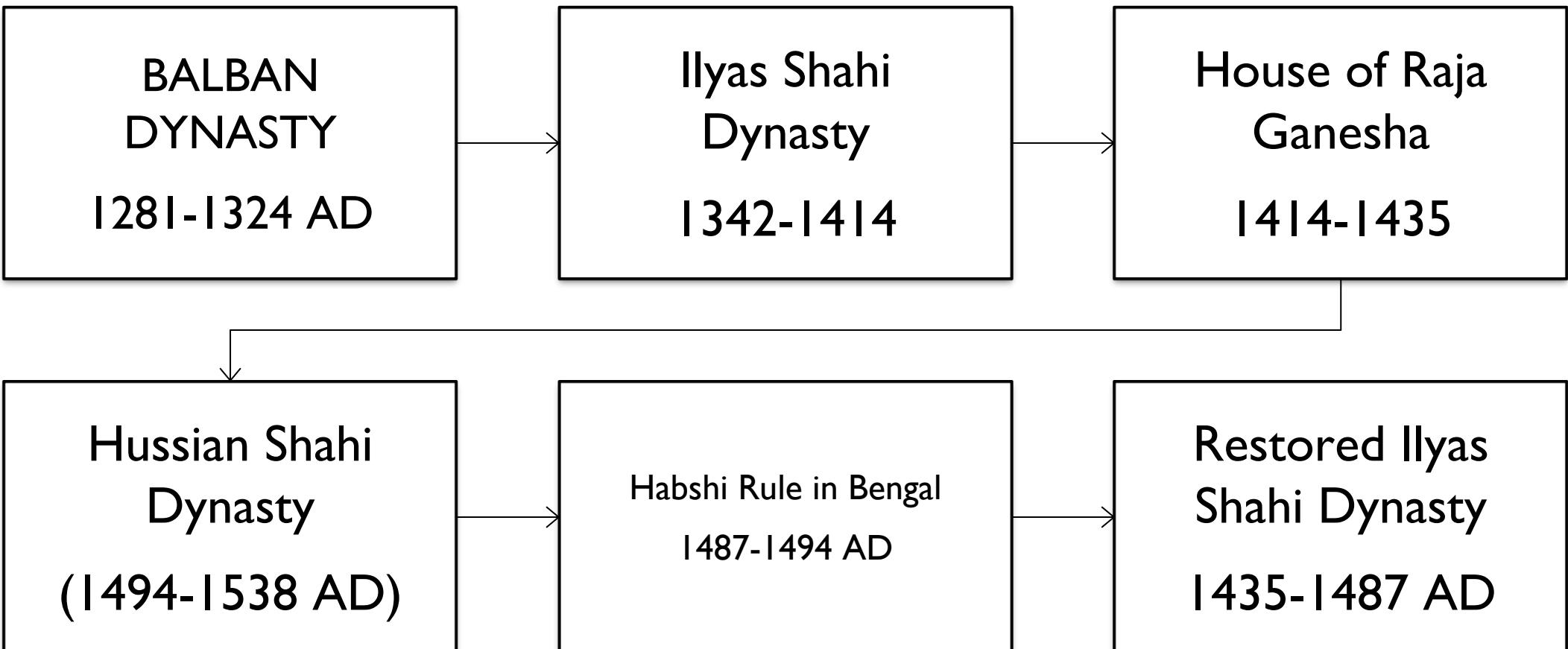
375 AD



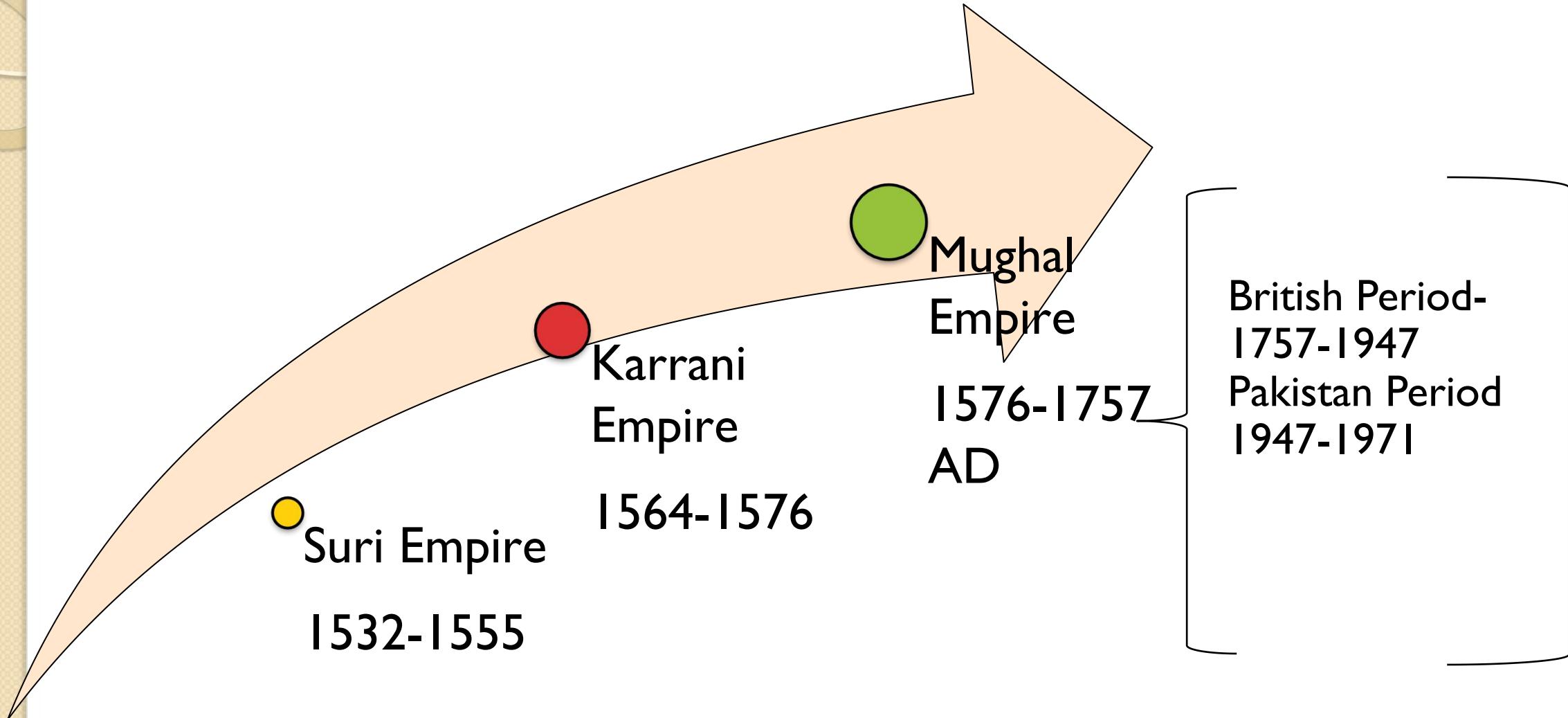
Timeline of Bengal history



Timeline of Bengal History

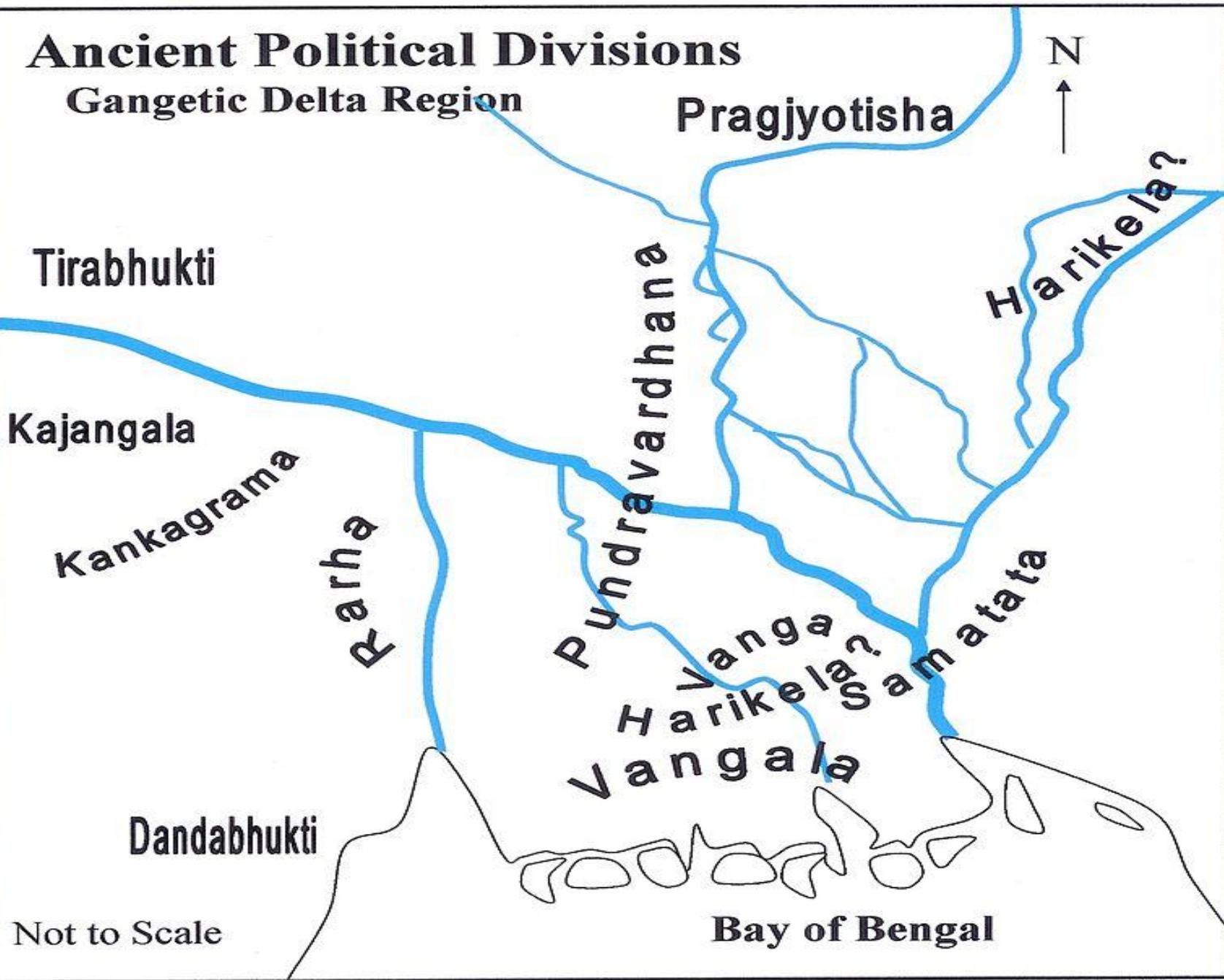


Birth of Modern Bangladesh



Ancient Political Divisions

Gangetic Delta Region





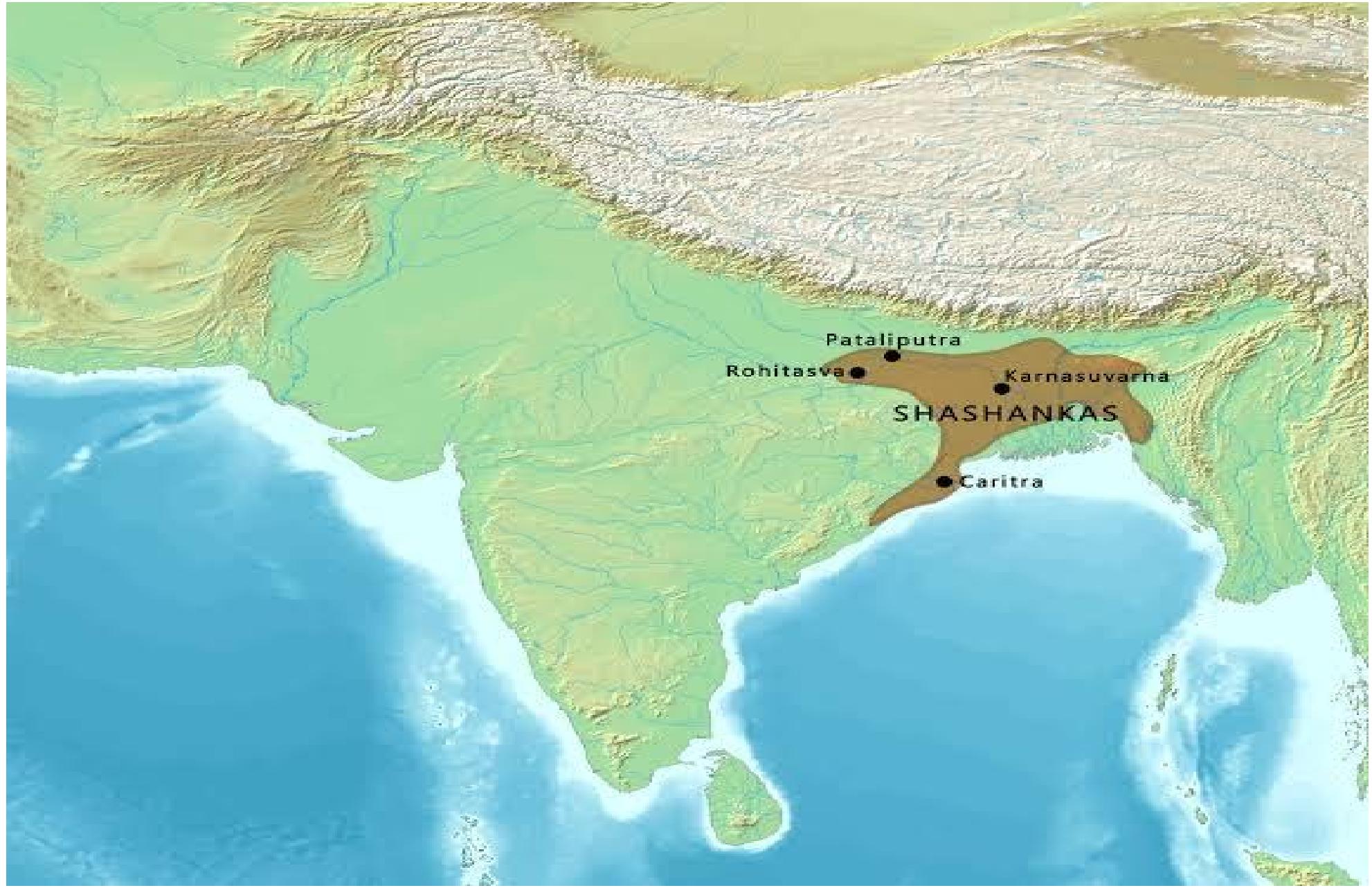
Shasanka, the First Independent Ruler

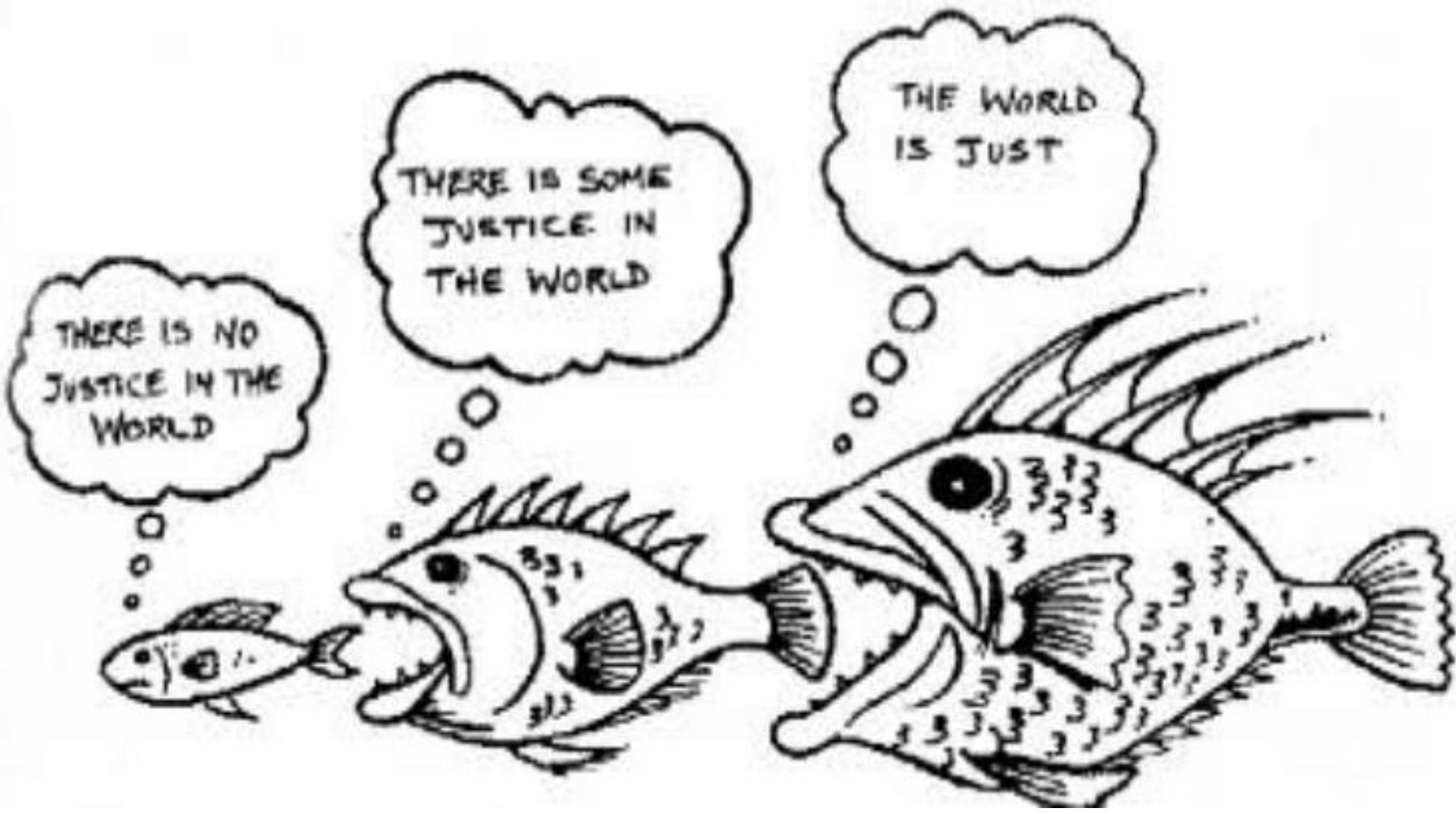
590 CE - 625 CE

- By the beginning of the seventh century SHASHANKA captured power in Gauda. Magadha formed a part of his dominions.
- There can hardly be a dispute in regarding him the first important king of Bengal, who could launch Bengal for the first time in her history on aggressive endeavors to establish supremacy over northern India.
- In this sense he was the forerunner of the aggressive northern Indian policy of the later day Pala rulers like DHARMAPALA and DEVAPALA. His capital was at KARNASUVARNA.

ROHTĀS
SEAL of ŞAŞANGKA



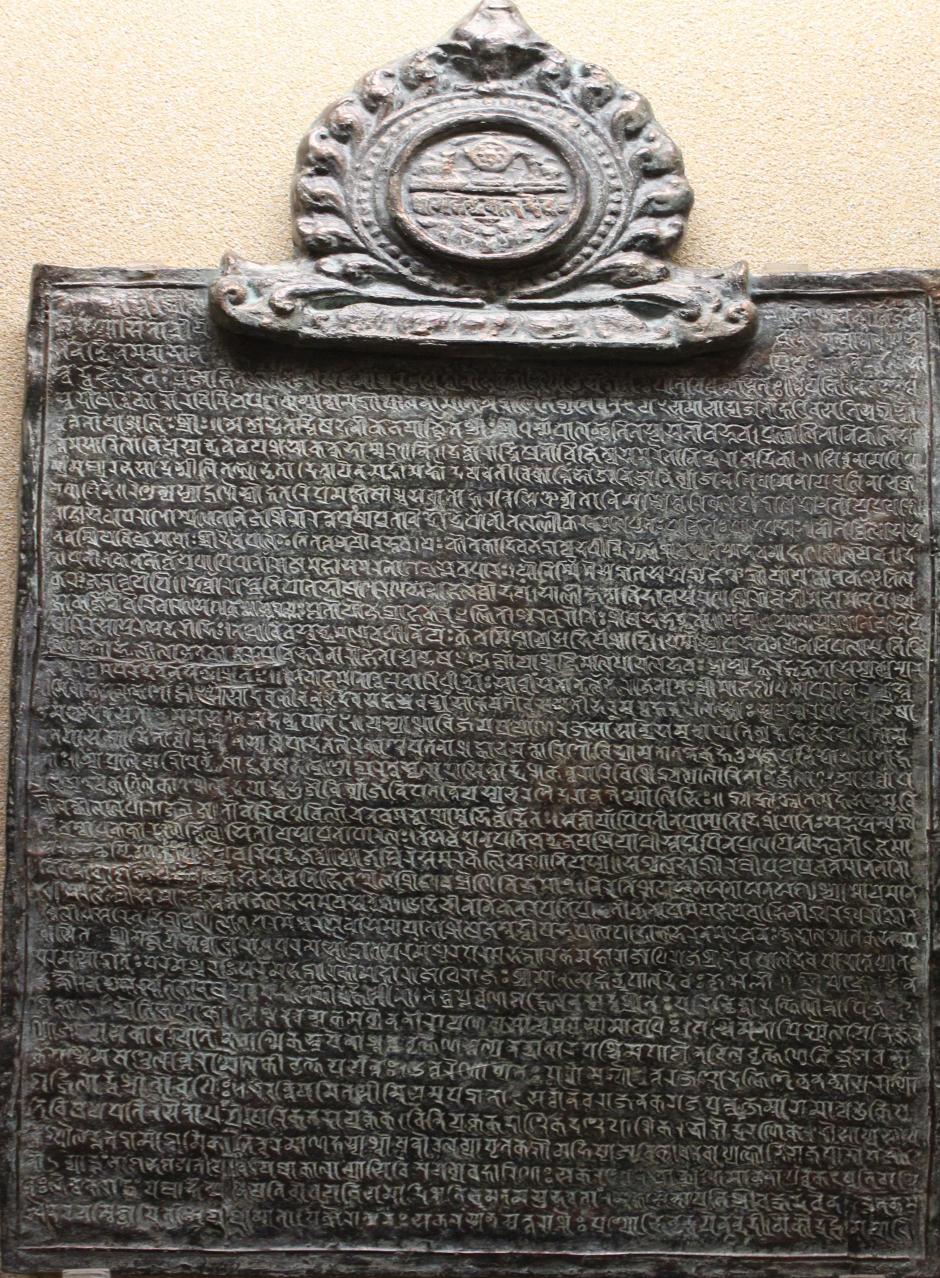




Matsyanyayam the condition of Bengal in the century following the death of Shasanka and before the rise of the Palas (c 750-850 AD) has been described as matsyanyayam (matsyanyayam).

In a near contemporary inscription, the Khalimpur copperplate of the 32nd year of the second Pala ruler dharmapala, and the 12th century ramacharitam kavya of Sandhyakaranandi the anarchical condition of Bengal preceding the rise of the Pala dynasty is found mentioned as matsyanyayam.

The Sanskrit term matsyanyayam, used in ancient texts, bears special significance. The Kautilya Arthashastra (1.4.13-14) defines the term as follows: '**When the law of punishment is kept in abeyance, it gives rise to such disorder as is implied in the proverb of fishes, ie, the larger fish swallows a smaller one, for in the absence of a magistrate, the strong will swallow the weak.**'



१९८७ सालमें उठी मार्ट्टिङलीनपुर का माहेन्द्रपलादेव की प्राचीन चारों तिर्यकों की ओर संस्कृत अवधि के लिए बहुत अचूक विश्वासी विवरणों का एक अद्वितीय उत्तराधिकारी विवरण इस चारों तिर्यकों की ओर संस्कृत अवधि के लिए बहुत अचूक विश्वासी विवरणों का एक अद्वितीय उत्तराधिकारी विवरण है।

THIS COPPER-PLATE CHARTER OF MAHENDRAPALADEVA OF THE PALA DYNASTY WAS DISCOVERED ON 13TH

- Lama Taranatha, the 17th century Tibetan historian of Buddhism in India, also mentions that all of Bengal was pervaded by an unprecedented anarchy in the century before the rise of the Palas. Government was fragmented, with no king having real control over gauda, vanga or samatata. Ksatriyas, Brahmanas, merchants and townsmen all were kings in their own homes.
- The sufferings and strife of the common people were intolerable. The writer of the Manjusrimulakalpa declared that after Shashanka the state of Gauda was paralysed, and whoever was king thereafter would not be able to rule for even a year. According to the same source there was a disastrous famine in the period in the eastern region of India.

- From the above it appears clear that in the century following the reign of Shashanka **Bengal saw very little of stable government**. The country was torn into many small kingdoms and internecine warfare among them caused the instability. In the absence of a strong force capable of enforcing law and order, a situation prevailed that has been termed as matsyanyayam. **Physical strength was the only strength, and throughout the land ran the frenzy of unbridled, unruly might.**
- In order to put an end to this state of affair, Gopala emerged as the king of Bengal and founded the rule of the pala dynasty. We have no direct evidence from which to discern the social ramifications of this anarchy. But indirect deductions from the available evidence makes it clear that in the absence of peace and order there was a decline in trade and commerce.
- In the absence of a strong king, the feudal vassals, each one independent and autonomous, must have been instrumental in creating anarchy. And the sagacity of a few of them must have brought an end to the state of lawlessness; some of them coming together brought Gopala to power.

- দেশে বহুদিন যাবৎ অরাজকতার ফলে দুঃখকষ্টের সীমা ছিল না। নেতৃস্থানীয় ব্যক্তিরা মিলিত হয়ে সুশৃঙ্খল শাসন প্রতিষ্ঠার জন্য একজন রাজা নির্বাচন করেন। রাত্রে রাজাকে এক কৃৎসিত নাগরাক্ষসী হত্যা করে। এভাবে প্রত্যেক রাতেই নতুন নতুন নির্বাচিত রাজাগণ নিহত হতে থাকেন। এভাবে কিছু বছর অতিবাহিত হয়। অবশেষে একদিন সকালে এক বাড়িতে সবাই বিষম্ব বসে ছিল। কারণ ঐ বাড়িরই এক ছেলে সকালে রাজা নির্বাচিত হয়েছে। আজ রাতে নাগরাক্ষসী তাকে হত্যা করবে ভেবে সবাই বিষম্ব ছিল। কিন্তু সেখানে এক আগন্তক আসে। সে ঐ ছেলের পরিবর্তে রাজা হতে সম্মত হয়। সেই রাতে লাঠির আঘাতে নাগরাক্ষসীকে সে হত্যা করে। সকালবেলা আগন্তককে জীবিত দেখে সবাই অবাক হয়ে যায়। তারপর সাতবার এভাবে তিনি রাজা নির্বাচিত হন। তাঁকে স্থায়ী রাজা রূপে অভিষিক্ত করা হয় এবং নাম দেওয়া হয় গোপাল।



The Pala Dynasty

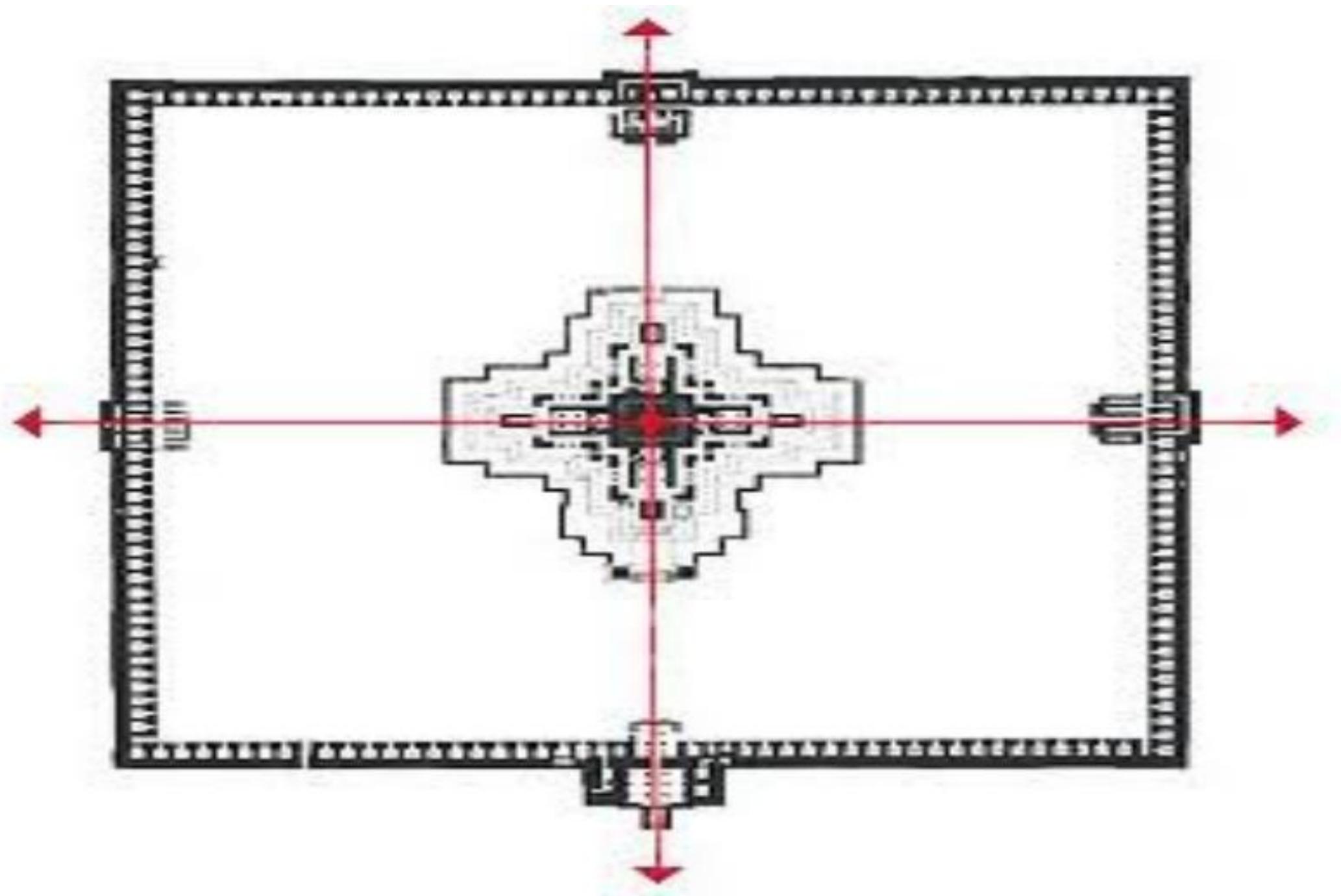
750 AD-1174 AD

- Gopala I (750–770) was its first ruler. He came to power in 750 through an election by local leaders in Gauḍa. Gopala ruled from about 750–770 and consolidated his position by extending his control over all of Bengal.
- The Pala dynasty lasted for four centuries and ushered in a period of stability and prosperity in Bengal. They created many temples and works of art as well as supported the important ancient higher-learning institutions of Nalanda and Vikramashila. The Somapura Mahavihara built by Emperor Dharmapala is the greatest Buddhist monastery in the Indian subcontinent.

- The empire reached its peak under Emperor Dharmapala (770–810) and Devapala (810–850). Dharmapala extended the empire into the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent.
- The death of Devapala in 850 ended the period of supremacy of the Pala dynasty and several independent dynasties and kingdoms emerged during this time. However, Mahipala I the reign of the Palas. He recovered control over all of Bengal and expanded the empire.
- After Mahipala I the Pala dynasty again saw its decline until Ramapala (1077–1130), the last great ruler of the dynasty, managed to retrieve the position of the dynasty to some extent. He crushed the Varendra Rebellion and tried to extend his empire farther to Kamarupa, Odisha and northern India.



- The Pala period is regarded as one of Bengal's golden ages. It was the largest Bengali empire that was known to ancient and classical India. The Palas were responsible for the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet, Bhutan and Burma.
- It was during the Pala period Bengal became the main center of Buddhist as well as secular learning. Nalanda, Vikramashila and Somapura Mahavihara flourished and prospered under the patronage of the Pala rulers. Dharmapala and Devapala were two great patrons of Buddhism, secular education and culture.
- The Palas also had extensive trade as well as influence in Southeast Asia. This can be seen in the sculptures and architectural style of the Sailendra (present-day Malay Peninsula, Java and Sumatra).
- While the monarchs were Buddhists, land grants to Brahmin agriculturalists was common.







The Chandra and Deva Dynasty

750 AD-1050 AD

- The Chandra dynasty ruled southeastern Bengal and Arakan between the 10th and 11th centuries CE. The dynasty was powerful enough to withstand the Pala Empire to the northwest.
- The Chandra kingdom covered the Harikela region. The dynasty's kingdom was a bridge between India and Southeast Asia. During this period, the port of Chittagong developed banking and shipping industries.
- The last ruler of the Chandra Dynasty, Govindachandra, was defeated by the south Indian Emperor Rajendra Chola I of the maritime Chola dynasty in the 11th century.

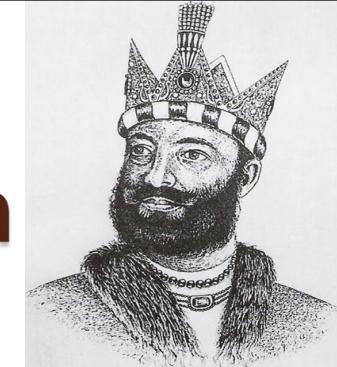
- The Deva dynasty was a Hindu dynasty of medieval Bengal that ruled over eastern Bengal after the collapse Sena Empire.
- The capital of this dynasty was Bikrampur in present-day Munshiganj District of Bangladesh.
- The inscriptional evidences show that his kingdom was extended up to the present-day Comilla–Noakhali–Chittagong region.
- The Deva dynasty endured after Muslim conquests but eventually died out.

The Sena Dynasty (1097-1225 AD)

- The Pala dynasty was replaced by the resurgent Hindu Sena dynasty which hailed from south India. In contrast to the Pala dynasty who championed Buddhism, the Sena dynasty were staunchly Hindu. They brought about a revival of Hinduism and cultivated Sanskrit literature in eastern India.
- They succeeded in bringing Bengal under one ruler during the 12th century.
- Vijaya Sena, second ruler of the dynasty, defeated the last Pala emperor, Madanapala, and established his reign formally.
- Ballala Sena, third ruler of the dynasty, was a scholar and philosopher king. He is said to have invited Brahmins from both south India and north India to settle in Bengal, and aid the resurgence of Hinduism in his kingdom.
- The fourth Sena king, Lakshmana Sena, son of Ballala Sena, was the greatest king of his line. He expanded the empire beyond Bengal into Bihar, Assam, Odisha and likely Varanasi. Lakshmana was later defeated by the nomadic Turkic Muslims and fled to eastern Bengal, where he ruled few more years

MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN BENGAL

The Advent of Islam



Muhammad Bin Qasim

During the reign of Hajjaj Bin Yousuf, the Governor of Eastern provinces of the Ummayad Caliph Walid bin Abdul Malik, His son-in-law Muhammed Bin Qasim was successful to defeat Dahir in 712, the King of Sindh was killed.



Sultan Mahmud

After the victory over sindh, It was Sultan Mahmud (Sultan of Gaznid) who marched towards subcontinent for 17 times from 1000-1027 AD, 300 years later after the previous one from Qasim.



Muhammad Ghuri

150 Years passed after the death of Sultan Mahmud, Muhammad Ghuri had the title of the Sultan of Ghaznid and finally he brought the Political Islam in India

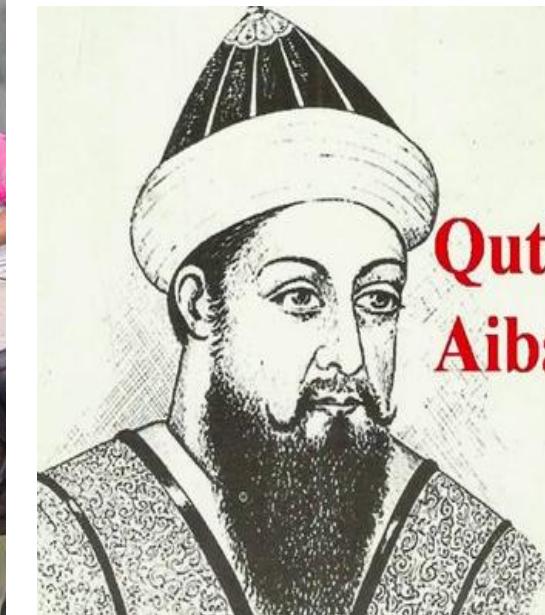
1st War at Tarain
(Ghuri was defeated by Prithwi Raj in 1191)

2nd War at Tarain
(Prithwi Raj was defeated by Ghuri in 1192)



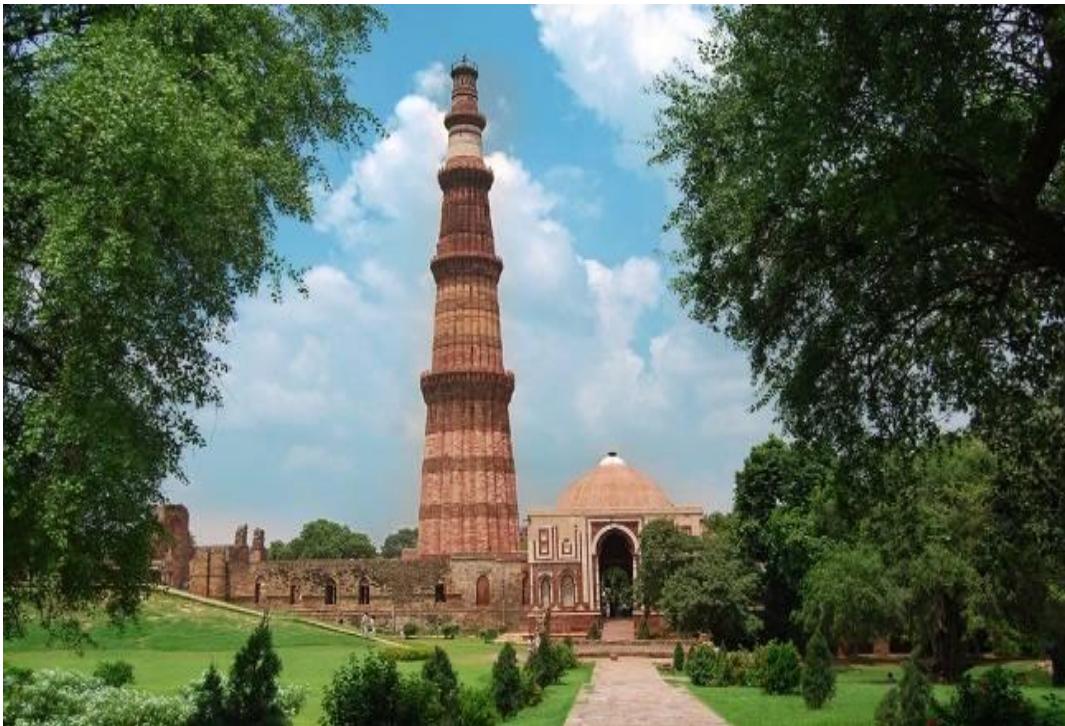
Delhi Sultanate

- Slave Dynasty (1206-1210)
- 1. Qutub Uddin Aibek (1206-1210)- He made Delhi as the center of his rule by getting authority from Ghuri, Qutb Minar was established by him.



The Real Founder Of Delhi Sultanate

- 2. Sultan Samsuddin Iltutmish (1211-1236) He was the son-in-law of Aibek, the real founder of Delhi Sultanate, He introduced first Muslim coin and finished the work of Qutb Minar.



Delhi Sultanate (first women Sultan)

- 3. Sultana Razia- The daughter of Iltutmish ascended on throne on 1235, he was the first women in subcontinent up to then to hold the executive position.



Delhi Sultanate



4. Sultan Nasiruddin
Mahmud (1246-1266)



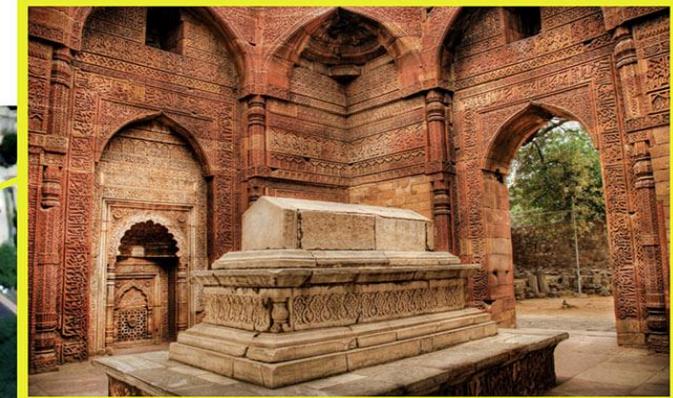
5. Sultan Ghiyas Uddin
Balban (1266-1287)



Qutb Minar
begun c. 1192–3 C.E.



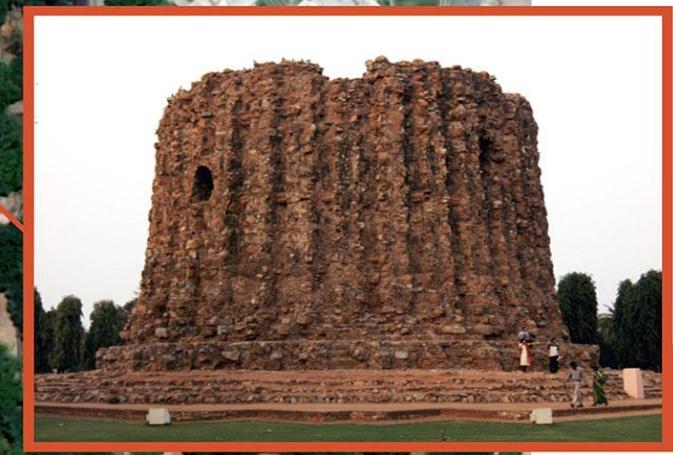
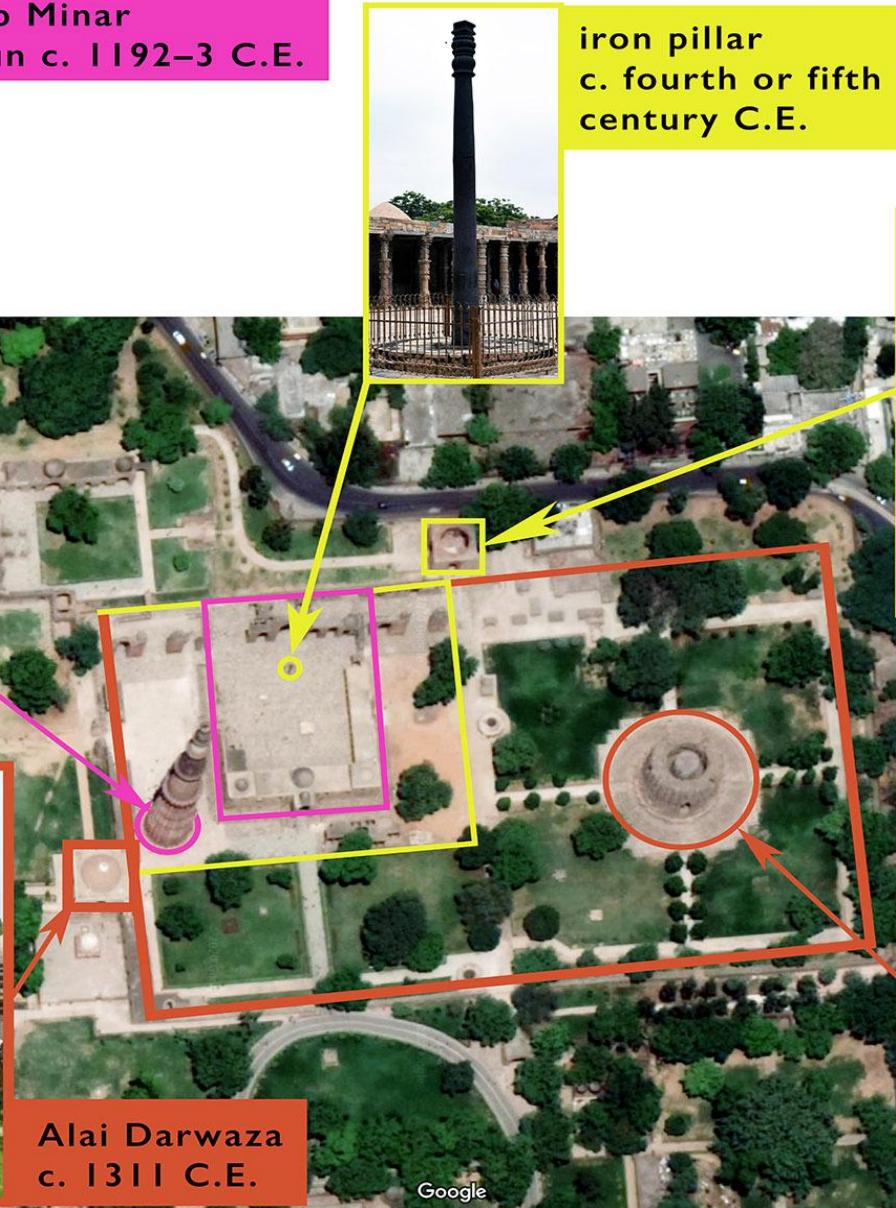
iron pillar
c. fourth or fifth
century C.E.



**tomb of
Iltutmish**
c. 1235 C.E.



Alai Darwaza
c. 1311 C.E.

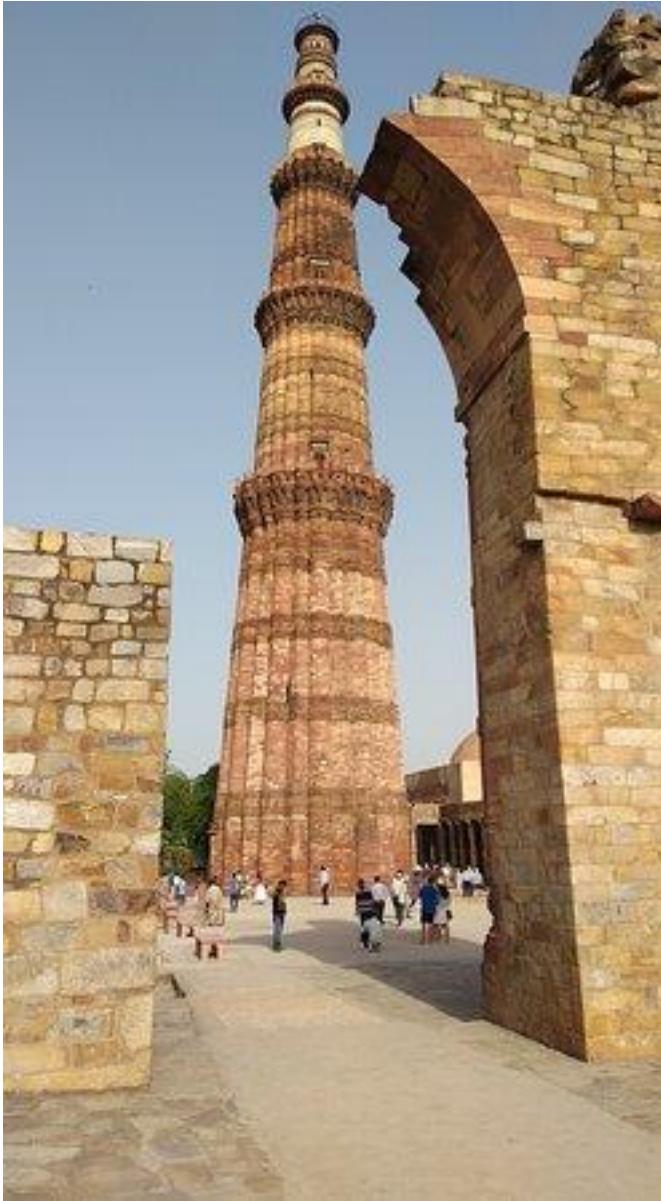


Alai Minar
c. 1311 C.E.

Qutb al-Din Aibak
1192 – 1206 C.E.

Iltutmish
1211 – 1236 C.E.

Ala al-Din Khalji
1296 – 1316 C.E.

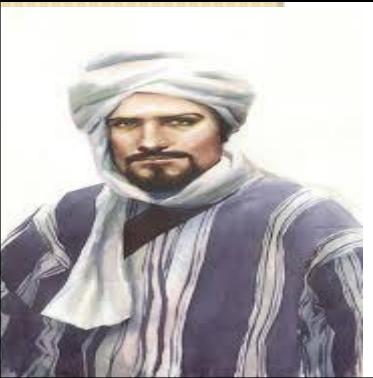
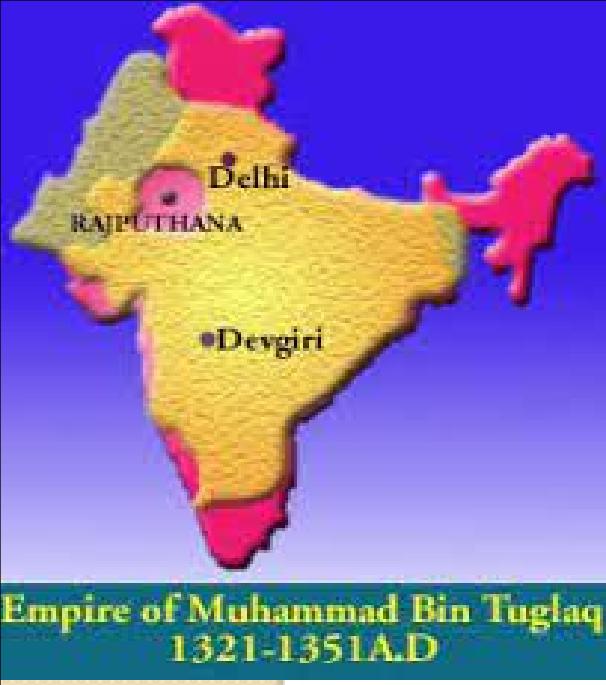




Khilji Dynasty (1290-1320)

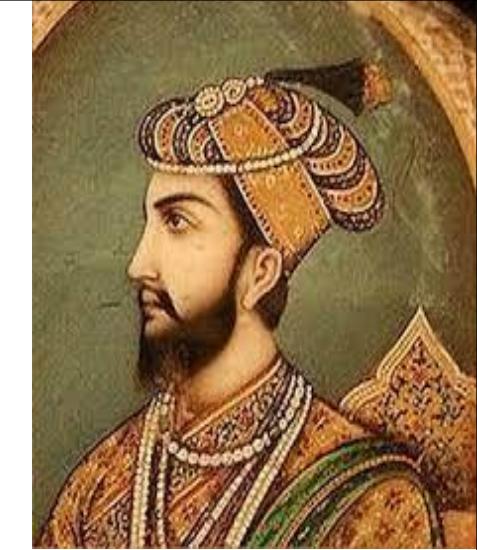
- I. Alauddin Khilji- He built 'Alai-Darwaza'





Tughlaq Dynasty (1320-1351)

- 1. Muhamamad Bin Tughlaq-
- Sifted his capital to Debgiri, but soon he had to transfer the capital to Delhi as the royal staff didn't want to reside there and the attack of Mongal there.
- Currency- He introduced new copper currency instead of gold and silver but due to the currency forgery.....
- **Ibn Batuta** was in a royal post in his court for 8 years, at last he imprisoned him and lastly forgiven and released him on the condition to go back.



Sayyid Dynasty (c. 1414–51)

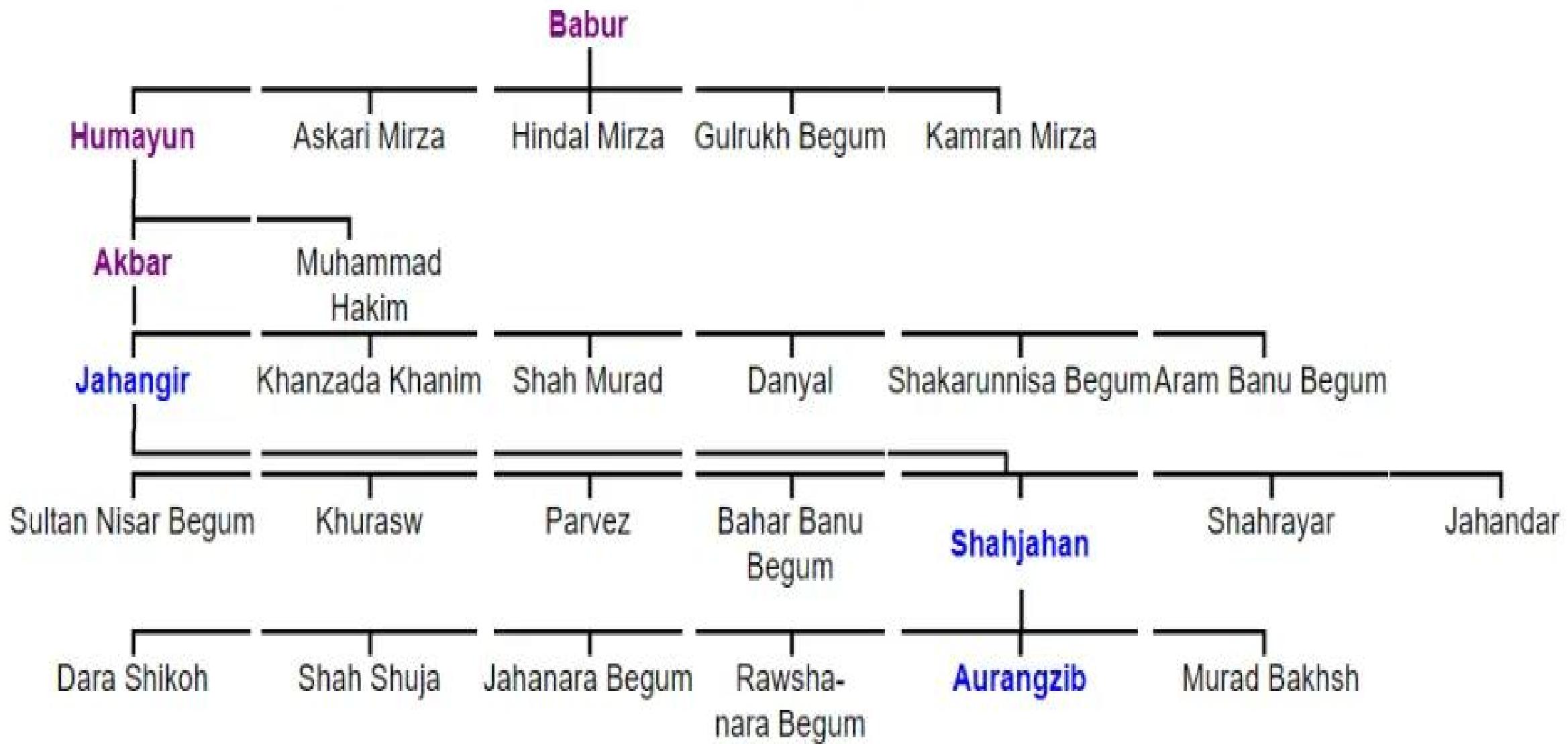
- Sayyid dynasty, rulers of India's Delhi sultanate (c. 1414–51) as successors of the Tughluq dynasty until displaced by the Afghan Lodīs. This family claimed to be sayyids, or descendants of the Prophet Muhammad.

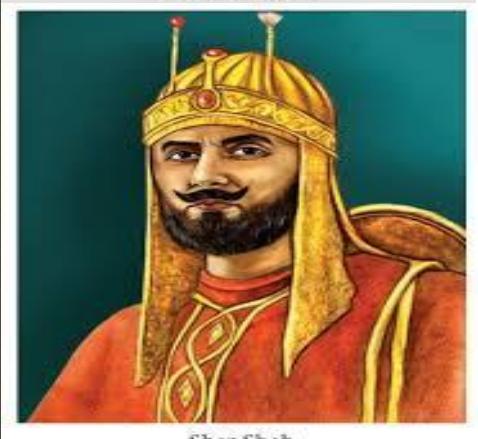
Lodi Dynasty (1451-1526), Last Dynasty of DS

- I. In the Battle of Panipath I, Babur defeated the last ruler of Lodi dynasty named ‘Ibrahim Lodi’ and founded the Mughal empire in india in 1526.



Mughal Empire Family Tree





Mughal Dynasty (First Phase) (1526-1539)

- 1. Jahiruddin Muhammad Babur (1526-1530)- the founder of Mughal dynasty and the writer of 'Tuzk-i-Babr'.
- 2. Nasiruddin Muhammad Humayun (1530-1540)- He was the eldest son of Babur, in 1538 he paid a visit to Bengal and named Bengal as 'Jannatabad'. He was defeated by Sher Shah in the Battle of Chausar in 1539 and fled to persia.



Shur Dynasty (1539-1555)

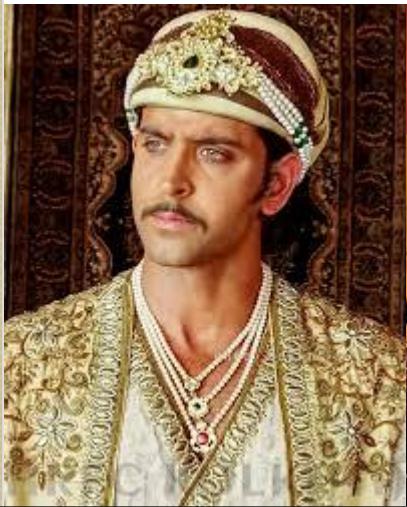
- I. Sher Shah- Grand Trunk Road (4830 KM)- extended from Sonargaon to Lahore, Postal System, Kabuliyat (deed to govt) and Patta (from Govt)



Restored Mughal Dynasty (2nd Phase)

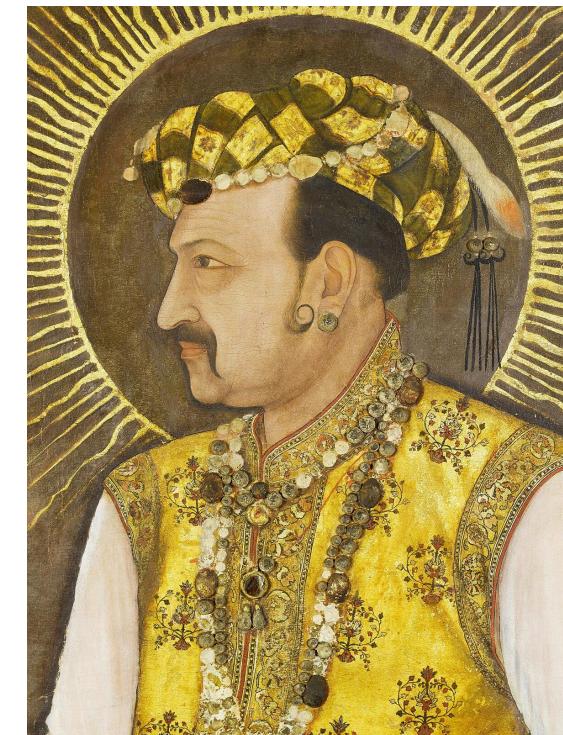
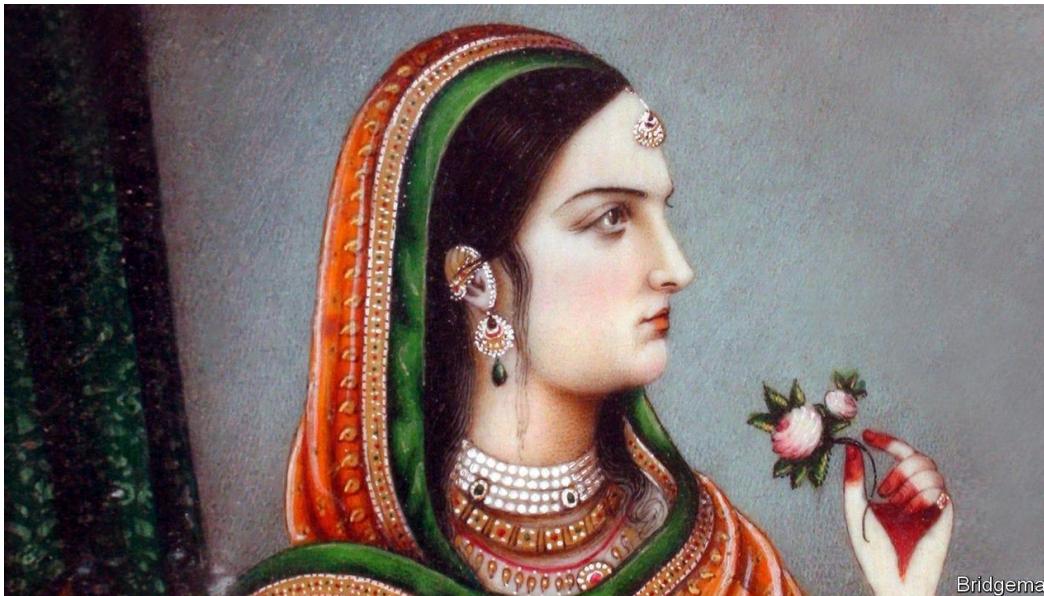
(1 5 5 5 - 1 7 0 7)

- Humayun- Humayun restored his title from the Shurs in 1555 by the help of Persian ruler and died in 1556.
- 3. Jalal ud din Muhammad Akbar (1556-1605)- At the age of only 13, he ascended on the throne, the great Akbar for his liberal policy. He repealed Zizya tax, married Jodhabai, the daughter of the rajputna and appointed a number of rajputna in the higher administration. Finally he introduced Din-e-Ilahi. Baro Bhuiyans were evolved in Benbal during his reign and Bengal was known as 'Subah-i-Bengala'.



Restored Mughal Dynasty (2nd Phase) (1555-1707)

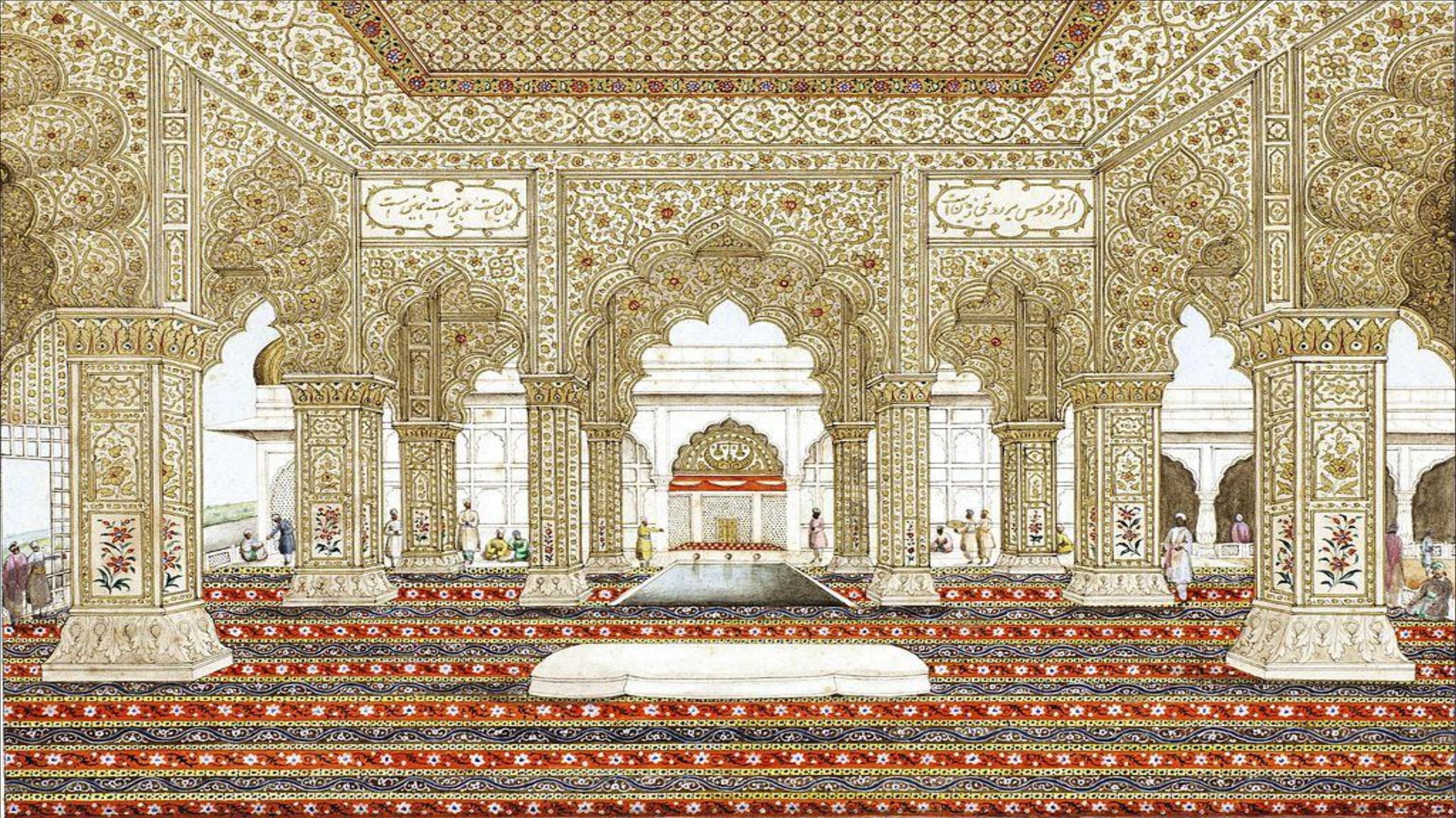
- 4. Nur Uddin Muhammad Jahangir [BP] (1605-1627)- He introduced persian as official language and consolidated the political and military authority over Bengal for the very first time.



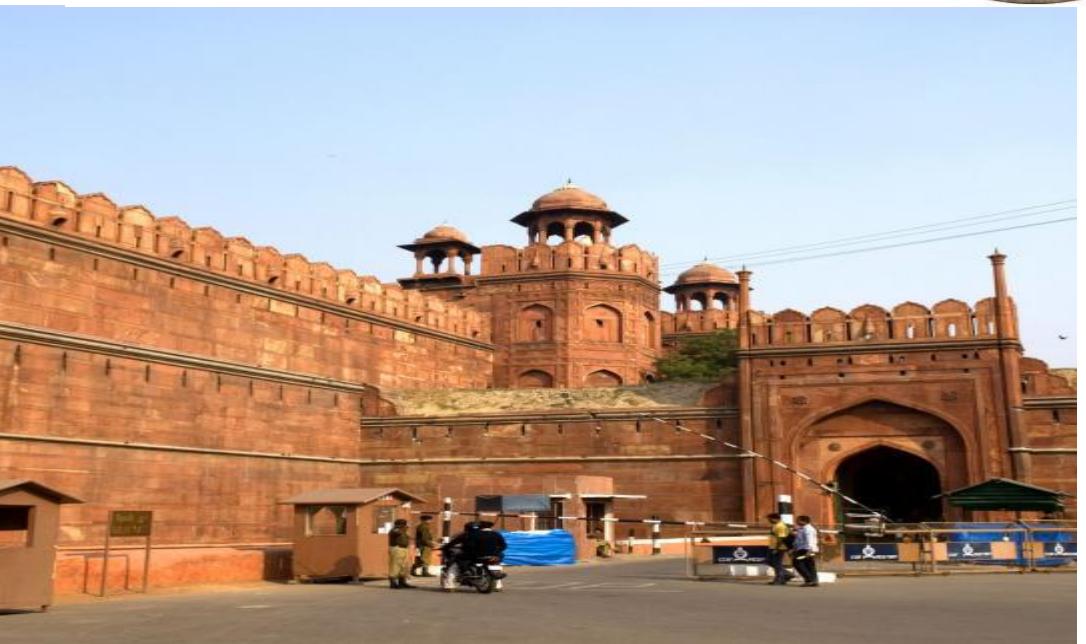
Restored Mughal Dynasty (2nd Phase) (1555-1707)

- 5. Shah Jahan (1628-1658)- Prince of builders- Diwan-i-Aam, Diwan-i-Khass, Shalimar Uddyan, Taj Mahal, Kohinoor, Lal Qila, and Jam-e-Masjid.









Last Strong Mughal Ruler

- Aurangzeb (1658-1707)- He followed Shariah in operating the empire, is considered by liberal scholars as an extremist ruler because he reintroduced the Jizya tax .



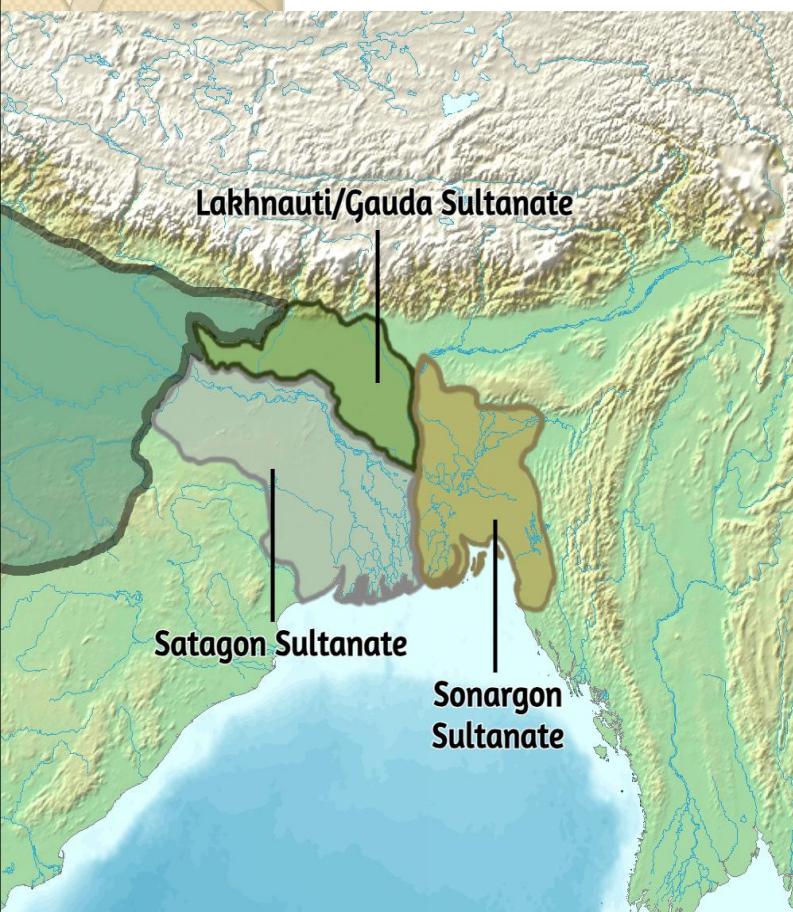
The Establishment of Muslim Rule In Bengal

1204-1338 (Balbani Era)

- In 1204, Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khilji (Commonly known as Bakhtiyar Khilji) defeated Laxman Sena, the last Sena ruler and made 'Devcote' of Dinajpur as his capital
- Turkey Rule in Bengali- From 1204-1338 (Balbani Era), a number of governors nominated by Delhi (**Mamluk, Khilji, Tughlaq**) ruled Bengal. Soon after their take over, they (most of them) tried to be an Independent ruler but the central government was successful to suppress them. Hence Bengal was named as 'Bulgakhpur'.



Iliyas Shahi Dynasty (1342-1412)



- 1. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah sultan of Bengal (1338-1349). He was the founder of the earliest independent Muslim sultanate in Bengal with his headquarters at the historic city of Sonargaon.
- 2. Sultan Shamsuddin Iliyas Shah (1342-1357)- He had taken the control of all Bengal and taken the title of 'Shah-i-Bangalah'. He transferred his capital from Gauda to Pandua. He was the real founder of Independent Bengal,
- 3. Ghiyas Uddin Azamshah- Yousuf Zulekha, he had a good tie with Hafeez.

House of Raja Ganesha (1414-1435)



- **Raja Ganesha** a Hindu landlord of Bhaturia and Dinajpur. Ganesha became the king of Bengal by taking power from the weak Iliyas Shahi sultans in the early 15th century (1414).
- Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah Alias Jadunarayan (1415-1416) - (1418-1433)



Restored Ilyas Shahi Dynasty 1435-1487 AD

Habshi Rule in Bengal

1487-1494 AD

- The "Habshi Rule" in Bengal refers to a brief period between 1487 and 1494 AD when a series of African rulers, known as Habshis (Ethiopians), held power in the Bengal Sultanate, following the assassination of the last Ilyas Shahi ruler and seizing control through a palace eunuch named Shahzada Barbak Shah; this period was marked by instability and frequent changes in leadership.





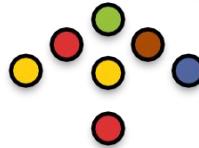


Hussain Shahi Dynasty (1493-1538)



- 1. Alauddin Hussain Shah- He was the greatest ruler of Bengali Independent Sultans, During this period Gauda was the capital of Bengal. Shree Chaitanya preached his 'Bhaisnavism' by this time. 'Mahabharata' was translated in Bengali by this time by Kabindra Parameshwar and Srikrishna Nandi. Chota Sona Masjid of Gauda was built by him and Biprodas, Bijoy Gupta, Jasoraj Khan were sponsored by him.
- 2. Ghiyas Uddin Mahmud Shah- He was the last Independent Sultan of Bengal. Sher Shah defeated him in 1538 and captured the capital 'Gauda'.

Birth of Modern Bangladesh



Mughal

Mughal Empire
1576-1757 AD



Karrani Empire
1564-1576



Suri Empire
1532-1555

British Period-
1757-1947
Pakistan Period
1947-1971

The Baro-Bhuiyans

- Akbar failed to subjugate whole of Bengal as many Zaminders having strong army were ruling different regions independently and they were united to suppress Mughal expedition. They are known as 'Baro-Bhuiyans'
- Isha Khan of Sonargaon was the leader of the Baro Bhuiyans, after his natural death, Musa Khan became the leader and Jahangir was in the Mughal throne. It was Islam khan who was appointed by Jahangir as the Subedar was successful to defeat the Baro bhuiyans.
- Pratapaditya was an influential Zaminders among the Baro Bhuiyans



Bengal Under the Mughal

Mughal Emperor	Subedar of Bengal	Notable activities
Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627)	Islam Khan (1608-1613)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Suppressed the Baro Bhuiyans➤ Made Dhaka as the capital in 1610 and Named it as 'Jahangirnagar'➤ He excavated the 'Dholai Khal'
Emperor Shah Jahan	Qasim Khan (1628-1632) Shah Suja	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ The portuguese were uprooted from Hoogli➤ The right to trade in Bengal without duty➤ Builded 'Borokara'➤ In 1633, EIC got the right to involve in the Bengal trade and commerce and to establish a fort
Emperor Auranzeb (1658-1707)	Mir Jumla (1660-1663) Shayesta Khan (1664-1678) and (1679-16880)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ SK captured Chittagong and Sandeep from the Mogh and Potuguese pirates➤ SK-Chota Katra, Lalbagh Killa, Chak Masjid, Shat Gambuj

The Rule of Nawabs in Bengal

Nawab Murshid Quli Khan (1717-1727)-
During this time,
Bengal was again
became independent
as the control of
central authority
became weakened.
He transferred
capital to Rajmahal
from Dhaka.

Nawab Alibardi Khan (1740-1756)

Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula (1756-1757)
&
The Battle of Palassey

Nawab Mir Jafar Ali (1757-1760)

Nawab Mir Qasim (1760-1764)
&
The Battle of Buxer