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A Study of Urban Communities in Medieval Bengal (13th To 17th Century)

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Abstract:*The article essays at bringing together the knowledge of urban communities in medieval Bengal as derived from various sources such as local, Persian and travellers account. An attempt has been made to identify the urban communities and their contributions of urban economic growth and development as well as their impact on economic life of Bengal.*

Keywords:*Medieval Bengal, Urban communities, growth and development, economic life.*

Introduction: Indian historians viewed that urban centres in India declined before the middle of the 11th century and again growth of urban centres after the coming of the Turkish in India on the beginning of the 13th century. R.S. Sharma[1] remarked that urban centres declined on the middle of the 11th century, because during this period there was none existence of gold and silver coins as well as the decline of overseas trade and commerce proves the decline of urban centres. NiharRanjan Ray, M.R. Trafdar and V.K. Thakur showed evidences of urban decline in Bengal almost up to the end of the 13th century.[2]This is also supported by Irfan Habib[3] as urbanisation started in Bengal with the arrival of the Turks with their new technology which was one of the important factors of regrowth of urban centres in India. Furthermore, historians like K. A. Nizami,[4] and M.A. Ashraf [5] also remarked that urbanization started in India in the beginning of the 13th century after the Turkish conquest in India. Therefore, the most important impact of the arrival of the Muslims in India in general, and Bengal in particular, in the beginning of the 13th century, was the emergence of new

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urban centres. The important urban centres during the period of my review are Lakhnauti (Gaur), Pandua (Firuzabad), Devikot (Kotivarsa), Satgaon (Saptagrama), Chittagong, etc. had their origin in the Hindu period.[6]

According to Aniruddra Ray,the revolutionary work of H.K. Naqvi merely lists the urban centres in a survey which did not undertake to analyse the process of urbanisation for a fuller understanding of the contemporary social and economic forces as well as blew ideologies behind the decline and growth of urban centres in the medieval period.[7]Here an attempt has been made the urban Communities in medieval Bengal based on light of the contemporary Persian sources, local sources, travellers' account, archaeological remains, inscriptions as well as numismatic evidences.There were two types of communities lived in urban areas in medieval Bengal such as elite class and artisans class of people.

(a) Elite Class

Duarte Barbosa mentioned that the elite class comprised from Arabs, Iranians, Abyssinians, and Indians. Mentioning about the lifestyle of elite class people of medieval Bengal he remarked that, "walk about clad in white cotton smocks, very thin, which come down to their ankles, and beneath these they have girdles of cloth, and over them silk scarves; they carry in their girdles daggers garnished with silver and gold, according to the rank of the person who carries them.…They are luxurious, eat well and spend freely, and have many other extravagancies as well. They bathe often in great tanks which they have in their houses. Everyone has three or four wives or as many as he can maintain."[8] The Chinese envoy had come to Bengal in the beginning of the 15th century and praised the wealthy merchants and elite urban people's life style. The luxurious life styles of urban elite class mention that "wear a white cotton turban and a long white cotton shirt. On their feet they wear low sheep-skin

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shoes with gold thread. Every one of them is engaged in business, the value of which may be ten thousand pieces of gold."[9] On the beginning of the 16th century Varthema found in Gaur "the richest merchants I have ever met with."[10]

Besides nobles and merchants the Sufis, *Ulema*, *Qazis*, Syeds, Mughals and Pathans, Arabs, Central Asians or Afghan origin and foreign born soldiers and administrators were also the integral part of elite class urban communities.[11]The16th century contemporary Bengali poet Mukandaram mentioned that the migration of people from the west was considered as elite class or *Ashraf*.[12]

Hindu Elite Class

Before the establishment of the Turkish rule, the Hindu elite class especially the Brahmans and the chieftains served the Sena government as ritual priests, astrologers, ministers, advisors and officers related to the finance.[13] But after overthrow the Sena power from Bengal by Turkish adventure Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji most of the Brahmans, chieftains and land lords moved from initial position of distain for the new political order. However, on the beginning of the 15th century right from the times of Ilyas Shah, the Brahmans, land lords, chieftains and other joined in the administration of Ilyas Shah.[14]*Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* of Afif also mentioned that the local Hindu Raos and Ranas, Zamindars and generals had provided valuable service to Ilyas Shah.[15]*Tarikh-i- Mubarak Shahi* also mentioned that the Ekdals battles of Ilyas Shah against Sultan Firoz Shah Tughluq of Delhi the Sahadeva, who was one of the generals of the Bengali forces, and was killed on the fighting.[16] So it shows that the Hindu chieftains were integral part of the administrative system of the Bengal Sultanate right from the time of Ilyas Shah. [17]Gradually the Hindu Chieftains become the dominating figure of the Sultans Court. Mention may be made Raja Ganesh become the most influential and powerful from the time of Sultan Ghiyas Uddin

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Azam Shah. Raja was directly involved in the killing of Azam Shah. Later on, Raja Ganesh enjoyed a dominant influence in politics and become king maker of the descendants of Azam Shah.[18]

During the times of Mughals the Hindus show their loyalty. Mention may be made when Mirza Nathan protest against Governor Islam Khan, several Hindu officers supported to Mirza Nathan and even suffered imprisonment for showing their loyalty to him. When brought the Hindu rebellion before the governor Islam Khan to explain their conduct, one of the Hindus, Baikuntha Das, was questioned with the arguments, "you are a Hindu; why did you join this rebellion?' He answered, 'God forbid! No rebellion will ever be raised either by Ihtimam Khan or his son Mirza Nathan. But as from my childhood, my father, at the request of his father, had given me to serve him and as I had been equally sharing his prosperity and adversity from my early life, so I cannot leave his company."[19] Unlike the early sultans of Bengal, Mughals did not notice Islam as the state religion. Despite pressure from local *mulla*s and Sufis to support Islam against other religions, the Mughals maintained a strictly non-interventionist position in religious matters.[20]

Attitudes of the Ruling and Elite Class towards Local People under the Mughals

The Mughals ruling and elite class in Bengal were distinct from the Sultanate of Bengal. The local literature and the architecture of the period show that the ruling classes consider foreigner, non-Bengali character they never considered Bengal as their homeland. Even migrant Sufi saints attitudes was negative about Bengal. Mention may be made in 1626 AD Mahmud Balkhi from Afghanistan come to Rajmahal and wrote of encountering people whose family origins lay in Balkh, Bukhara, Khurasan, Iraq, Baghdad, Anatolia, Syria, and North India.[21] Likewise Shah Ni'matullahFiruzpuri in 1669 AD come from Punjab and

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settled in Malatipur near Malda early in the 17th centuries, express negative attitude for the region as below-

"Bengal is a ruined and doleful land;
Go offer the prayers to the dead, do not delay.
Neither on land nor water is there rest;
It is either the tiger's jaws or the crocodile's gullet"[22]

Such attitudes towards the Bengal the Shaikh however gained favour from the Mughal Governor of Bengal large land grant i.e. *madad-i- mash* for him and his generations.[23]

The feeling of the Mughal ruling and elite class was superior to the local people clearly reflected in the matters of language, dress, and diet. They always considered northern India as their home land. Therefore, they brought wheat and meat from the northern India. The Mughal ruling and elite class people's perspective regarding Bengali culture almost was the same as the British colonial attitude towards India.

Mughal officers openly insulted to the local people around in first half of the 17th century two Mughal commanders, aiming to belittle the martial accomplishments of one of their colleagues, taunted the latter with the words: "Where shall I find a Dawud son of SulaymanKarrani to fight with, in order to please you?" he asked rhetorically, and with some annoyance, adding that it was his duty as a Mughal officer to subdue all imperial enemies in Bengal, "whether they are *Machwas*(fishermen) or Mughals or Afghans."[24] The Mughal ruling and elite class always maintained distance from the local people. On another situation Islam Khan's chief naval officer, Ihtimam Khan, stated resentment that the governor had once treated him and his son like natives.[25] But Ihtimam Khan was himself an India-born Muslim from northern India.[26] The Mughal ruling and elite class socially distinct from the "natives" was also viewed Sebastian Manrique, who in 1629 AD mentions Bengal's

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population as composed of three groups—"the Portuguese, the Moors, and the natives of the country."[27]

(b) Artisans

The urban artisan class was socially distinct from the ruling and elite class who formed part of Bengal's growing industrial production. The artisans were engaged in the manufacture of various goods.The 16th century Chinese traveller viewed that, "There are in the country…. all kinds of artisans who are skilled in hundreds of crafts."[28]The productive artisan classes such asi) Blacksmith (*Lohar*), ii) Goldsmith (*Sunar*), iii) Carpenters (*Badhai*), iv) Calico-Printers (*Chhinpas*), v) Dyers (*Rangrez*), vi) Weavers (*Julahas*), vii) Perfumers (*Gandhis*), viii) Masons, ix) Oilman (*Telis*), x) Potters (*Kumbhars*), xi) Tailors (*Darzis*), (xii) Labourers (Menial and Untouchables). Contemporary of 16th century Bengali poets particularly Mukundaram mentions of these artisans and said the maximum artisans are belonged from the Muslim community.[29] The new artisan class prior to their conversion to Islam were untouchables**.** The main regions the artisans and manual labours converting to Islam was that they gained freedom to live in urban regions during the Sultanate of Bengal.

Therefore, these low and degrade *antyaja* and downgraded Hindus were converted to Islam and become the important functioning groups of artisans within the newly formed Muslim society under the Turkish rule.[30]*BrahmavaiartaPurna* also supports that downgraded people converted to Islam and had taken the profession of artisans and manual labour, such as *jola, rangrez, sanakar, dhuunari*(cotton-carder) and similar occupational groups were Muslims.[31]

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Besides, these artisans many, other artisans and manual labour such as house builders, canal-diggers, stone–cutters, brick-makers, masons, timer-sawers, wood-carvers, manufactures of bamboo articles, varnishers, glaziers, zoofers, lime-makers, well diggers and cleaners etc. They were engaged in the building of fortifications, palaces, temples, houses, bridges, roads, ships, etc. in Bengal during that period.

The artisan occupation was based on the caste system therefore, the people of a particular caste followed their hereditary occupation. After the death of an artisan his son had right to adopt the occupation of his father from whom he had received training. The hereditary nature of professions considerably helped the artisans to acquire efficient and skilful in their works. Foreign travellers were prised the skill of the Bengali artisans. In the beginning of the first half of the 16th century, a Chinese traveller mentioned that "one could find Bengal's physicians, astrologers, diviners and all kinds of artisans who are skilful in hundreds of crafts."[32]

The artisan class of people in Bengal was divided into two categories i. Master and skilled artisans and ii. Unskilled labour or beginners. The master and skilled artisans were very well known for their excellence and perfection in their craft training. They worked inthe imperial *karkhanas* known as the master artisans. This function is mentioned ahead as (i) they manufactured the finer articleof higher artistic excellence. (ii) They guided and supervised the work of skilled workers and beginners. Their earnings were three times higher than the ordinary artisans.[33]

Abul Fazl and Bernier also mentioned about the skilled artisans in *Karkhanas* under the imperial patronage.[34] Bernier further mentioned that skilled artisans were also engaged in the *karkhanas* of the rich merchants on payment of high wages.[35] Their economic condition was much better than the ordinary artisans. They had permanent job in their hands and

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received regular salary. Secondly, the state had given protection and the financial help was also given to them in the times of need. The contemporary writing and travellers accounts mentioned that the artisans manufactured in the royal karkhanas luxury goods and arms, etc.[36]Severalimperial *karkhanas* were established in Dacca, Sonargaon, Junglebaree and Bajetpur. The controllers were appointed by the Mughal authority for maintaining rule and regulations of the *karkhanas*.[37] The selective expert artisans in Benga1 were invited to work here, and their names were registered.[38]As far as the economic condition of ordinary artisans was concerned, the wages which they received for their hard work were very low. The wages of the unskilled labourers were much less than those of the artisans. The condition of the village artisans was worse than that of the artisans living in towns. They were generally paid in kind. The blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, potters and shoe-makers made articles to meet the needs of the agricultural class and other communities were given a fixed amount of grain at the time of harvesting for subsistence. Besides low wages, the artisans were victims of forced labour. The village artisans had to offer their services to the government and jagirdars, for which nothing was paid to them. If they neglected in their duty, a fine was imposed on them.

The artisans were subjected to exploitation by the middle men and money landers. Since the general economic condition of the artisans was not good and an ordinary craftsman did not have sufficient money to purchase the raw material for making finished goods, they had to depend upon the money lender. A very high rate of interest was charged by the money lender. Sometimes, in pursuance of an agreement, the artisans had to sell their products at a very low price to the money-lender towards repaying the loan. The middle-men also exploited the artisans. Taking advantage of their poverty, they purchased goods at an inadequately low price. The goods were sold to big merchants or exporters at higher prices.

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The deplorable economic condition of the skilled and unskilled artisans was further worsened due to the various taxes levied by the government from time to time.

Conclusion: The urban regions of medieval Bengal several types of communities were lived such as elite, artisans and labours. The urban communities were working as 'nerve of all sort of economic functioning', which resulted in the growth of urban economy. In such an economy, the rural people have been benefited by raising their cash-crops in the competitive markets. In this system of market economy, the people could earn silver *tanka* introduced by the new rulers. Ibn Battuta's report of different items, viz: rice, milch-cow, hens, lamb, sugar, oil, etc. found in the streets of Bengal (namely in bazars) to be sold in silver coins[39], may indicate that money-economy took the place of rural economy of the past, when *cowrie* (conch shells) was the medium of exchange.[40] Even the immigrants settled in the remote areas that developed into Small Township which have influenced the economic life of the people of remote areas by providing them with *bazar* facilities. The people, being encouraged, by raising their commodities to be consumed by urban dwellers, especially by foreigners, would have been benefited from economic point of view. In short the new urban centres became the gravity of all sorts of economic activities based on industries, trade and commerce.

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