

Topography of Bengal's Prosperity: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract: This research paper attempts to explore the state of Bengal's prosperity which reached its zenith particularly under the Mughals. In adopting the doctrinal method, this paper aims to examine some factors including geological atmospheres and proper governance etc. which contributed to bring prosperity to the country. This paper strives to show that Bengal has wonderful features that can bring her glorious prosperity but the ruling class's lack of good intentions, lack of benevolence and lack of good governance are deeply rooted problems that need to be solved. This paper further argues that with the right approach and determination of the ruling elites we can revive the prosperity and bring about positive change in the country. Finally, this paper attempts to prove that the congenial ecology and environment within the state and good intension of the ruling elites may revive the historic economic prosperity whose example exists in the history of Bengal.

Key Words: Bengal's Prosperity, Geo-atmosphere, People's Labour, Ethical Governance.

Introduction

Bengal was remarkably wealthy, rich and mostly civilized because of its vast fertile land, the largest reservoir of natural raw materials including cotton industries, human resources and the good governance of the Mughals. The common people of the land loved to engage in industrial activities for their own need while the proper accountable administrative system played a great role to bring the historical prosperity. Friendly geo-atmosphere, people's labour and the ethical governance of revenue and trade policy of the Mughals brought proverbial economic prosperity in Bengal that attracted world-renowned commercial giants to trade with this prosperous land. But the land gradually lost its fame while the English colonizers impoverished the country by plundering wealth, deindustrializing inland produce, and monopolizing the trade. The enormous

prosperity of the land may revive by stopping money laundering, establishing administrative accountability and using the fertility of the land properly.

Literature Review

This research work has been developed on the basis of theoretical, conceptual and empirical analysis of the feasible primary and noticeable secondary literature which deals with the Bengal topography and its consequences. The author has considered such indexed scholarly published and unpublished historical literature along with research articles, dissertations as well as books which have been reviewed and used analytically for conceptual clarity.

K. B. Saha (*Economics of Rural Bengal*, Calcutta: Chakravarti Co. Ltd., 1930) examines rural economic life of Bengal significantly and shows that the majority of the people (93 per cent) live in villages. This author also describes the contributions of physical influences including monsoon rainfall and wonderful network of rivers and land system of Bengal to its economic activities like fishing, transportation, irrigation etc. Consequently, he discusses various crops (rice, wheat, sugarcane, cotton, jute, tobacco etc.) and their different productive zones over the country, its importance, productive methods, and standard of cultivation. Moreover, he analyses the advantages and disadvantages (danger of flood and others) of the country's agricultural investments and indebtedness, importance of industries for the economic life of the people, trade, transport, labour and the rural unemployment of Bengal.

Atul Chandra (*History of Bengal: Mughal Period, 1526-1765 A.D.*, Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1968) discusses the political history of Mughal ruled Bengal from 1526 to 1765. Similarly, Abdul Karim (*History of Bengal: Mughal Period*, vol. 1 & 2) describes Bengal history from Bara-Bhuyans of Bhati to the rebel prince Shah Jahan Khan and the restoration of imperial authority. In these long discussions, the author

analyses the political history of Bengal with emphasis mainly on the rule of several subahdars. Tapan Raychaudhury (*Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory study in Social History*) analyses the social life and its bases under the Mughals particularly until the death of Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627). Consequently, this book discusses the trends of the socio-religious and cultural life as well as the economic background, modes of life, social and trading activities of the foreigners of Bengal. Nafis Ahmad, (2nd edition), (*An Economic Geography of East Pakistan*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968) analyses the contributions of the geographical location of Bangladesh to its prosperous economy.

J. N. Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal, Muslim period 1200-1757*, vol. II, (Dacca: Dhaka University Press, 1948) analyses Bengal history from the conquest of the land by Bakhtiar Khilji (1204) to its fall (1757). In this discussion, the authors examine prudently the history of several Muslim dynasties of Bengal. This book focuses on the political history of the Muslims. Anjali Basu (*Bengal in the reign of Aurangzib, 1658-1707*, an unpublished Ph.D. thesis) assesses various aspects of Emperor Aurangzeb's rule in Bengal. Bengal's geographical boundaries, political conditions, provincial administration and its functions, commercial activities, relations with the European trading companies with special focus on the British East India Company (EIC) have been analysed critically. The researcher also explores the social structures based on religion and education. Bengal's fabulous wealth and prosperity has attracted foreign invaders time and again and this paper is an attempt to revisit that history.

Geological Significance of Bengal

Bengal was in the easternmost domain under the Mughals (1576-1757) consisting of modern Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. Geologically, this land is at a strategic point in South Asia which is bounded to the south by the Bay of Bengal, and the Subah of Bihar joins in the west, northwest and northeast by the uplands of the Himalayas and Assam Hills.¹ Melting ice

of said mountains ‘drains into the vast network of rivers following into the Bay of Bengal, supporting a vast ecosystem and human civilization, based on extremely fertile land.’² Moreover, this land annually overflowed with its riparian network ‘comprising vast alluvial plains of great fertility.’³ This land boasts of six unique seasons, namely Summer, Rainy, Autumn, Late Autumn, Winter, and Spring. All of these seasons come with moderate temperatures, making this place a true paradise. The abundance of seasonal rainfall, one or two floods and sedimentary clay, and tidal irrigation of sweet water twice a day make this alluvial land extremely fertile. Thereby, Bengal turned into the wealthiest province of Mughal India.⁴ A Chinese traveller Wang Ta-yuan (1349-1350) rightly mentioned that “the seasons of heaven have scattered the wealth of the earth over this kingdom.”⁵

Historical Prosperity of Bengal

In this text, we will be discussing the prosperity of Bengal that has been documented by historical travellers and regional rulers. We will explore various descriptions of the region's economic and cultural growth and how it has been portrayed throughout history. Many historical travellers from Asia, Africa, and Europe visited Bengal and were attracted to the land's enormous prosperity. The hardworking people of the land applied practical and theoretical knowledge in agriculture and industry over the virgin land that brought agricultural and industrial prosperity for which Bengal's wealth and resources became proverbial around the world. Chinese traveller Wang Ta-yuan described Bengal as “a country of luxuriant fields which yields three crops a year, the people being highly industrious... pure and virtuous.”⁶ Another Chinese traveller Ma-Huan (1415) visited Bengal and gave the following description:

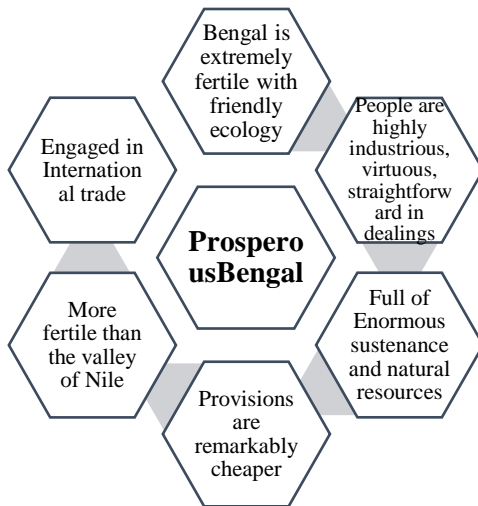
It is a kingdom with walled cities, and [in the capital] the king and officials of all ranks have their residences. It is an extensive country; its products are abundant, and its people are numerous; they are

Muhammadans, and their dealings are open and straightforward. The rich build ships, in which they carry on commerce with foreign nations; many are engaged in trade, and a goodly number occupy themselves with agricultural pursuits; while others exercise their crafts as mechanics. They are a dark-skinned race, although you occasionally see among there a light-complexioned person; ... The language of the people is Bengali; Persian is also spoken there.⁷

Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta (1340) visited Bengal and mentioned "Bengal is a vast country and abounds in rice. In the whole world, I did not see a country where commodities were cheaper than in Bengal. All the same, Bengal is foggy and called it '*dozakh-i-pur ni'mat*', (inferno full of gifts). Moreover, he compared this land's ecology with the Nile valley of Egypt.⁸ Venetian traveler Caesar Frederick visited eastern Bengal in 1565 and gave an astonishing description of Bengal's affluence and cheapness of provisions and opines "All ages have spoken of Egypt as the best and most fruitful part of the world, ... but as far as I can see by the two voyages I have made to the kingdom of Bengal, I am of opinion that that advantage belongs rather to it than to Egypt." Another European traveller Hamilton gave personal observation about Bengal's prosperity at end of the 17th century and writes the "plenty and cheapness of provisions are here incredible."⁹

Mughal Emperor Humayun considered Bengal as Jannatabad for its charming environment, beautiful weather and enormous sustenance.¹⁰ Bengal Mughal court historian Ghulam Hussain Salim (author of *Riaz-us-Salatin*) describes Bengal as Jinnatul Bilad (paradise of Provinces) for "the richness of it produces, and the vastness of its natural resources,"¹¹ Mughal emperors used to mention the word *Riaz-us-Salatin* in every official document related to Bengal for its enormous affluence. Paying two visits to Bengal inclines French traveler Francois Bernier to believe that "the pre-eminence ascribed to Egypt is rather due to Bengal."¹² European prominent historian F. B. Bradley Birt mentions, "It was a wonderful land, whose richness and abundance neither war, pestilence, nor oppression could

destroy.”¹³ British historian Robert Orme (1743-1753) brings similar descriptions such as “the province of Bengal is the most fertile of any in the universe, more of than Egypt, and with greater certainty.”¹⁴ According to French traveler and trader Ralph Fitch (1593-1591), Bengal was “very great and fruitful and hath store of rice ... wherewith they serve all India,”¹⁵ and exported to South and Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Such historical descriptions (14th-18th century) led the researcher to write about Bengal's characteristics that created prosperity for the land.



Bengal's Potential Agro-craft Economy

Bengal's vast resources have enabled the confident and swift development of agriculture and crafts, establishing it as a leading economy among developing nations. The energetic, industrious and dynamic people of all ages were engaged in work according to their ability while a favourable atmosphere existed (it will be discussed in the next section) who produced in abundance for themselves and the global economy.¹⁷ The moderate temperature of the bank of the Meghna river was the perfect place to produce the finest cotton. Women aged 18 to 30 years used to make the finest thread skilfully from very early

dawn to 9 am or 10 am and from 3 pm or 4 pm until half an hour before sunset.¹⁸ Thus, many of the native people became highly skilled and produced the best spin as well as the finest cotton called *muslin* using 126 types of indigenous instruments while the English industrial revolution was in the womb.¹⁹ Silk was another remarkable cash crop of Bengal which was also an integrated cultivating system and exported abundantly to European countries with an international reputation.²⁰

The aforementioned agricultural and industrial prosperity promoted to development of the agro-craft economy durably in Bengal. Moreover, the considerable growth of the cotton industries of the land encouraged European traders to invest in a large volume. The Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English established approximately 2,350 factories to export muslin to Europe.²¹ It is mentionable that East Bengal (currently modern Bangladesh) and West Bengal of India were familiar with cotton (muslin) and silk respectively. Foreign trade is crucial in introducing superior products, and it significantly contributes to the development of the agricultural sector.²² Traveler Ralph Fitch mentioned Bengal as a “great store of cloth” and ‘Dhaka was a principal seat of cotton manufacture and a great town to trade.’ Muslin was highly prized and in demand among European ladies at the time of luxury and refinement.²³ Therefore, Bernier stated, “the Kingdom of Bengal has a hundred gates open for entrance, but not one for departure.”²⁴ Bernier mentioned as follows:

There is in Bengale [sic] such a quantity of cotton and silks, that the kingdom may be called the common storehouse for those two kinds of merchandise, not of Hindustan or the empire of the great Mogol [Mughal] only, but of all the neighbouring kingdoms and even of Europe... [the native silks are] not certainly fine as those of Persia, Syria, Sayd and Barut, but they are of a lower price.²⁵

In a state of prosperity, Bengal turned into a prodigious world-class emporium and an international trade centre in the 17th century. Bradley-Birt (1896-1963) noted: “Dacca sent her

goods to almost every country in the world, while Surat on the west coast quickly established itself as the top emporium for Indian and European goods following the discovery of the Cape route to India.²⁶ Bernier recalled his astonishment at witnessing the volume of the scale of trade:

I have been sometimes amazed at the vast quantity of cotton cloths, fine and coarse, white and coloured, which the Hollanders alone export to different places, especially to Japan and Europe. The English, the Portuguese, and the native merchants deal also in these articles to a considerable extent. The same may be said of all sorts of silks and silk stuff.²⁷

Ways to Revive and Sustain Prosperity

Mughal Revenue and Trade Policy

It is an indisputable fact that agriculture, craftsmanship, and commerce serve as the primary means of earning a livelihood. Agriculture is the first among all other remarkable sectors for getting enough sustenance for 'its very nature'.²⁸ Bengal being extremely fertile, most of its people were dependent mainly on agriculture for their livelihood. Therefore, the rulers of the land considered land revenue as the main source of state income so they classified crop lands into four categories (Polaj,²⁹ Parauti,³⁰ Chachar³¹ and Banjar³²) and imposed revenue based on its production.³³ In return, the farmers got security against the attack of bandits and enjoyed cooperation from the state when fewer crops were produced due to drought. Hence, the central rulers always ordered the provincial administrators to keep a watchful eye on the people's interest and suggested not to impose revenue beyond the capacity of the farmers. So, the land revenue collectors must be friendly towards the cultivators and 'zeal and truthfulness, should be his rule of conduct'.³⁴ Moreover, they provided several facilities to the cultivators including repayable loans to assist the cultivation called Takawi loans, free education to their children etc.

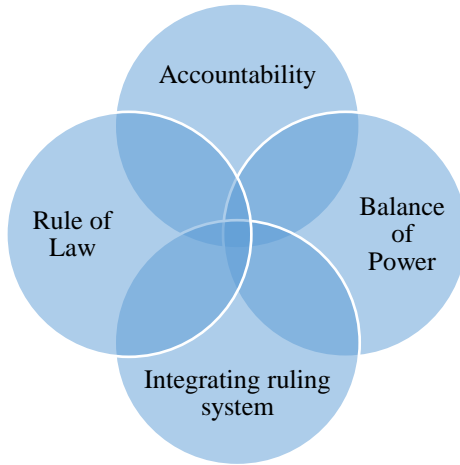
It is imperative to conduct commerce in a lawful and ethical manner in order to reap profits.³⁵ Undoubtedly, statecraft and

commerce are deeply intertwined. The ethical governance of trade is a crucial element in ensuring and bolstering the prosperity of the state. The Mughal rulers' ethical governance played a crucial role in promoting successful commerce, minimizing risks, and significantly reducing transaction costs.³⁶ The rulers, particularly Emperor Aurangzeb used to consult with the theologians regarding public matters including civil and criminal laws, imposing taxes, regulation of trade and commerce, even the fixation of commodity prices. Thereby, he broke the monopoly and opened trade for all that brought what was called the Golden Age of Muslim rule in India.³⁷ Consequently, government policy coupled with flourishing agriculture in Bengal led to establish a historical craft whose reputation spread over the world. To effectively promote both national and international trade, the following facilities had been provided:

- Freeing the market system of corruption.
- Foreign merchants were granted favourable charters.
- Providing commercial incentives such as loans.

Bengal's Prosperity as linked to Mughal Provincial Administrative System

Bengal stood out among other countries in the contemporary world due to its unique ecological, geographical, and environmental features that shaped the way of life of its inhabitants. That prosperity was intrinsically linked to the efficiency of its management system, in addition to the fertility of its land. The Mughal Empire's dynamic provincial administrative system was the pinnacle of efficient management, and as such, four distinct characteristics can be considered as the four pillars of the administration. It is this unparalleled combination of natural resources and effective governance that has propelled Bengal to become a leading region in the world.



Title

Bengal being the richest province of the Mughal empire, the governorship of the land was considered a prestigious and valuable gift so over 30 governors were appointed for Bengal who had blood connections with the ruling elites. Mughal provincial system was the exact miniature of the central administration. The system divided Bengal into several administrative units including Sarkars, Parganas, Thanas and Grams. Moreover, every unit was administered by a set of administrators like Subahdar, Diwan, Faujdar, Amal Gujar, Shiqdar, Amil, and Thanadar. Each administrative unit was divided into two main divisions called Subahdary and Diwani who were appointed directly by the Mughal emperors. A military commander popularly known as Subahdar or Nazim was appointed to govern a province including Bengal.³⁸ The main responsibilities were to establish peace, justice, religious tolerance, general supervision.³⁹ A Diwan was the second most important officer of the province, supervising revenue affairs both land and commerce was his sole duty. Both of them were free in their jurisdiction but kept strict watch over each other's activities which prevented corruption and local rebellion. But both of them were collectively accountable for keeping the peace and security and preventing local rebellions and

corruption in a province through good governance.⁴⁰ Thereby, the Mughals balanced the power in provincial administration.

Mir Bakhshi (provincial military officer in charge), Shiqdar (military officer), Sadr (enlightening officer), Amil (peacekeeper on revenue affairs), Bitikchi (revenue accountant), Potdar (provincial treasurer), Kotwal (police in charge of a city), Waqa-i-Nawis (authentic report collector and provider to the emperors) Qanungo (a revenue officer, accountant of a district or a village), Patwari (a deputy of Kanungo) etc. were mainly responsible for keeping peace and prosperity over the province. The village was considered the smallest fiscal unit under the Mughal administration which was administered by a council consisting of Chaudhury, Muqaddam, Qanungo, Gumasta, and Barkandaz who solved every dispute very wisely that ensured peace and prosperity in the rural part of the land. Justice is considered a fountain of prosperity. There were four layered (village, Pargana, Sarkar and Subah) judiciaries in Bengal.

Mughal provincial judiciary was also divided into two segments called Criminal and Civil like the central judiciary. Highly qualified Qadis solved the cases distinctively, and people could apply to higher courts to get justice if they were unsatisfied with lower courts. In the Mughal judiciary, the Gram Panchayet was distinctively important, solving issues in the initial stage. The Panchayet knew the root of chaos and solved it wisely and boldly in open darbar without any fees thereby the justice seekers felt comfortable to solve the disputes. Thus, the Mughals established the rule of law at the rural level which brought tranquility to the people. Peace and tranquility are undoubtedly essential for economic development.

With proper management, Bengal's prosperity reached its zenith under the Mughals, particularly during the governorship of Subahdar Shaista Khan (1664-1688) under Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707). On arriving in Bengal, Shaista Khan did three remarkable things which are, (a) stopping plundering the wealth by conquering Chittagong from gangster Arakanese and driving away the Mags (a band of highwaymen), (b) utilizing

the landed property by cultivating non-cultivated land (c) establishing the tradition of justice through good governance. Thereby, the socioeconomic and agricultural conditions were improved.⁴¹

Conclusion: Every state of the world has an individual way of making livelihood according to its ecological atmosphere. Bengal has universal fertile land due to its geological advancement on the earth but it did not reach its zenith until getting political stability though people had potential in the agro-craft economy. Ethical governance of land revenue and trade of the Muslim rulers opened hundred gates of prosperity for the land. Ensuring real accountability, the balance of power, and integrating the ruling system and rule of law established a logical ground to bring prosperity. Moreover, Bengal subahdar Shaista Khan followed three-dimensional methods including stopping looting or plundering wealth, utilizing non cultivate land and rule of law. These methods brought political sustainability and founded enormous prosperity.

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