

Rice Culture of Divine Right in a Celestially Ordered Zone: A Case Study of South Asian and South-East Asian Ideologies and Hegemonies from c.2000 B.C. to c. 1800 A.D. with Specific Reference to Bengal

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I

Gunder Frank pointed out in *ReOrient* that a narrative of the pre-colonial south Asian economy is incomplete without referring to contacts between the four empires of the Ottomans, the Safavids, the Mughals and the Chinese (with various points in between such as the northern Mediterranean, northern and eastern Africa and the Indonesian archipelago). He also said in *ReOrient* that a history of trade, finance and price movements, as well as population, money and commodity flows, necessitates a new world history from a 'globological' perspective. Eurocentric history and social theory are inadequate to explain the 'rise of the west' between 1400-1800.¹

Unfortunately this is not how pre-modern South Asian maritime trade is constructed by economic and maritime historians. This article seeks to place Bengal-traditionally regarded as a zone of rice-culture of 'divine right' by virtue of Brahmanical settlement in a commercial zone that was also determined by Bengal's place in successive religious-cultural networks stretching from Central Asia to China. Conventional studies of the Bay of Bengal economies have tended to focus on the Coromandel area; nonetheless Bengal occupied a vital position in the religious life of Buddhism — and then Islam — in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal. This article will therefore attempt to define Bengal's role vis-à-vis 'ideologies' and 'hegemonies' radiating across both the cultural worlds of the middle Gangetic plain and the Bay of Bengal.

A reconstruction of South Asian (and Bengal's) maritime history has to take in long-term cycles of expansion and decline in world economies in the period 1200 to 1800. While these expansions and contractions impacted on the Indian ocean at large; in Bengal's case the specific cycles of hegemony are: 1) the Buddhist network in the Bay of Bengal that continued until at least the 12th century, 2) the economy of the first Islamic world — mediated by the Mongol political system — that stretched from Africa to China. This lasted from the 13th to the 16th centuries, 3) the Chinese dominance in the Bay of Bengal, 4) a sub-economy in northern Bay of Bengal dominated by eastern Bengal, Arakan and Pegu, 5) the Mughal economy that lasted from the 16th to the 18th centuries. This changed the course of the commercial history of Bengal, and 6) the European economy that impacted into the Indian Ocean with the coming of the Portuguese. Such a reading will show that regional 'hegemons' such as the Iberian-North African, Ottoman, Persian, Central Asian, South

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Asian, the Javan-Sumatran and the Chinese were far more influential in determining trends in South Asian commerce than a relatively insignificant region such as the European².

When I first decided to focus on pre-Plassey Bengal for my PhD thesis³ I was faced with a formidable dilemma. How was I to reconcile my findings on the silk trade at Kasimbazar with the idea of 'Asian Trade' that focussed on Indian Ocean ports? Kasimbazar was a singular riverine port in 18th century Bengal in that it experienced a truly amazing volume of traffic. But it was neither 'coastal' nor 'oceanic'. I faced difficulties in dealing with this ubiquitous topic called Asian Trade and this quandary was already reflected in scholarly works. Asian Trade (why not 'European' or 'Islamic' trade for that matter? Was there something specific about the trade of the Indian Ocean that singled it out as being Asian and therefore different? Could riverine/coastal trade be an offshoot of 'Asian Trade'? I still think so, but how do we situate Bengal in this schema?) is deemed today an a-historical concept, a concept that denies momentum to non-European societies; moreover it is singularly atemporal in nature. Asian Trade signifies, by its very nomenclature, a pre-capitalist and a 'pre-modern' preoccupation. After all, all of Bengal's ports are riverine ports; does this then mean that Bengal conducted no long-distance ('Asian') trade in history? For those beset by these dilemmas studies of coastal and long distance trade remained uni-dimensional as long as developments — comprising linkages, growth, ruptures, transitions and transformations — on *both* land and sea (including rivers) were not taken into account. It was felt necessary to integrate studies of the trading society under enquiry into the trading rhythms of larger regions of which it is a part. This essay hopes to accomplish this, even if somewhat partially, for Bengal.

II

In traditional literature Bengal is portrayed as a frontier country, a place unknown, but one where fortunes were made and unmade. At the same time, the idea that rivers made and unmade Bengal, took shape. The idea of Bengal, as a hell full of good things, took root from the 14th century and is attributed to Ibn Batuta the famous Maghrebian traveller who visited Bengal in the first half of the 14th century; this was subsequently attributed to other travellers who left behind accounts of Bengal; most notably François Bernier and Robert Challes (both of whom visited Bengal in the 17th century). The notion of Bengal as a hell with abundance was echoed as late as in the 18th century when the *Riyas-us-Salatin* stated this same sentiment unambiguously.

The flag of dissidence was frequently raised from Bengal. In 1579 Abu'l-Fazl called Bengal *bulghak-khana* or a 'house of turbulence'⁴. In Mughal times a posting to Bengal was deemed a demotion away from the corridors of power at Delhi, Agra or Lahore; yet it was emphasised that fortunes awaited those *subahdars* who braved this unsavoury posting.

This diffidence, these reservations persisted because Bengal's frontier culture was unfamiliar to north India. A fish-eating land, its culture was perceived as alien by the Mughal *ashrafi* culture of the north. Bengalis were dismissed as 'bands of fishermen'—a livelihood

and culture that the Mughals despised⁵. Given this unsavoury reputation of Bengal what could be called the distinguishing feature of Bengal that set it apart from the rest of the South Asian sub-continent? Was it its distant location, its specific agrarian-commercial economy (a mix of paddy cultivation and coastal navigation) or its distinct religious culture? What were its chief characteristics? Its trans-border affiliations, its riverine topography, or its distinct material culture? In other words what forms the identity of Bengal? Is there one Bengal, or have there been many Bengals in its turbulent history?

In earlier times Bengal was an amorphous zone which contained within it various Bengals. In time the various Bengal coalesced into two Bengals: the one centring around Lakhnawati—Gaur (west) and the other around Dhaka-Vikrampur (east). These divisions continued into the 18th century and their different politics and economic policies—ruled by external agencies such as frontier affiliations and internal factors such as the massive riverine changes from west to east from the 16th to the 18th centuries—determined life to a great extent.

If we look back in time we see that of the many Bengals in history there was colonial Bengal in the recent past, there was Islamic (Nawabi, Afghan, Mughal and Sultani) Bengal in the more remote past, a Puranic Bengal further back, a Buddhist-Tantric Bengal yet further back and there was finally the multi-faceted *Vanga* or non — aryanised Bengal in the very distant past. In its most recent avatar Bengal was the arena of British imperialism; further back Bengal was in the vortex of Muslim expansion and European settlement; and yet further back Bengal—the eastern heartland of the Gangetic plain—was part of the Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms of Sasanka, the Palas, the Varmans, the Chandras and the Senas. Bengal therefore has made the journey from ancient Vanga, via medieval Bangalah and subah Bangla, to modern Bengal in history.

Bengal's geographical boundaries have fluctuated over time; the large *subah* Bangla incorporating Bihar and a part of Orissa of the 18th century is not the Bengal we know today. Its eastern frontier was substantially reduced after 1947 when eastern Bengal became East Pakistan (and then Bangladesh in 1971).

III

Bengal is a frontier zone of India even today: both locationally and culturally. Historically Bengal formed a zone with fluid boundaries to the north, east and south. Its northern frontier was dictated by its relationship with Tirhut (Mithila), and beyond; its eastern frontier depended on interactions with the Tripura, Koch, Kamta, Kamrup and Arakan kingdoms; its southern frontier at Jajnagar demarcated Bengal from the mainly southernised Orissa. The incorporation of Bengal into mainstream middle Gangetic culture was achieved by constantly pushing forward the various frontiers within a given period—the agrarian frontier, the political frontier, the cultural frontier, the religious frontier and the demographic frontier. In the process Bengal's story has not been simply one of integration (or incorporation) with dominant political powers emanating from the gangetic heartland but also one whereby the ascendant state power and political ideologies of any given moment have been, time and again, forced to come to terms with Bengal's unique frontier culture.

The earliest annals do not refer directly to Bengal—it was only when the frontiers of *aryabharta* were consistently pushed outwards in the aftermath of the Gupta epoch that Bengal assumed its own identity. Kulke remarks⁶:

After the decline of the Gupta Empire and of the 'transient' successor state under King Harsa in the early seventh century, the overwhelming majority of the early medieval states of India emerged from a process of continuous agrarian expansion and political integration...this development took place mainly in those areas of the South Asian subcontinent which had lain at *the periphery or even outside the core areas of ancient state formations. This process started from local nuclei of early socio-economic and political development and increasingly came to include their hinterlands.* (My emphasis).

This passage implies the following schema for Bengal: 1) that although both the earliest centralised states in India were located in the east (viz. the Mauryas and the Guptas), Bengal lay outside their core areas, 2) the expansion of these two early centralised states was directed towards the west and not east and therefore Bengal did not form even the periphery of these states, 3) it was between the 5th and the 7th centuries that the first states appeared in Bengal⁷, 4) the dynamic of state formation started from numerous 'local nuclei' of growth, 5) these local nuclei in their turn evolved into states by incorporating their hinterlands. It is therefore clear that not one, but various states emerged from the post-Gupta phase in Bengal.

Therefore there was never *one* Bengal even in the ancient period. Just as there have been many 'Bengals' in recorded history there have been, within each of them, 'diverse' Bengals. The area we refer to as Bengal today comprised various small states (in the order north to south) in ancient times known as Pundra, Varendra, Rarh and Vardhamana in the west and Harikela and Samatata in the east. The dividing line between the two regions was Pundravardhana which comprised within it the area called Vanga (Banga). With time the different political and ethnic nomenclatures of Bengal⁸ finally coalesced into *three* Bengals—Varendra or the political heartland, Vanga, its economic and cultural unit which became synonymous with the province and the often neglected Samatata (or the political 'other' of Varendra) with its autonomous economic heartland in Harikela.⁹ These divisions were clear to the observer by the 7th century.

In very early times Vanga was the political and social frontier of Bengal and beyond it lay unknown lands peopled by strange peoples with fanciful names. These distinct geographical and political units, inhabited by particular peoples with specific tribal attributes and social attitudes, were therefore designated within a particular place/time context that varied over time¹⁰.

The peoples of Bengal—the Pundras, the Radhs, the Suhmas, the Vangas and the Gaudiyas along with the cities and ports of Kotivarsam, Tamralipta and Ganga—are first attested to variously in the *Aitareya Brahman*, the *Aitareya Aranyaka*; later in the

Arthashastra and in the texts of Strabo, Diodorus, Plutarch and Pliny ; they are also referred to in contemporary Jain and Buddhist texts.

States within Bengal were equally diverse. That the entire area was undergoing an almost continuous process of state formation(s)—was evidenced in ever new names for kingdoms, cities and peoples—from later Vedic literature which mention the peoples of Anga, Vanga Pundra, Tamraliptaka, Suhma and Radh ; from the writings of Diodorus, Curtius, Pliny and Plutarch who mention the mighty kingdoms of the Gangarides and the Prasoi, their military might and the splendid emporia of Ganga in the Gangarides kingdom (both Plutarch and the anonymous *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* mention this) we glean an idea of the wealth of this frontier land; and from the *Sabhaparvan* of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ayodhya Kanda* of the *Ramayana* which mention the Suhma, Prasuhma, Vanga, Tamralipta, and Pracya as independent kingdoms we get an idea of the diverse peoples in the region. The Jain and Buddhist inscriptions similarly attest to the existence of numerous states in ancient Bengal.

Bengal has been, through history, a cosmopolitan melting-pot. It is possible, by going through a detailed chronological study of the inscriptions and manuscripts, to discern the main lines of Bengal's early civilization from circa 2000 B.C. to the 4th century A.D.¹¹ The excavations of Pandu Rajar Dhibi prove that at least 2000 years before the beginning of the Gregorian calendar Bengal possessed a definite non-Aryan culture, based on the use of iron implements, specific black and red ware and some wet rice cultivation along with contact with overseas cultures. The find of a seal at Pandu Rajar Dhibi similar to the Minoan seals of Knossos has led many to speculate that the coastal regions of eastern India may have established contact with the Minoan civilization of Crete.

Reading between the lines from the sources we have mentioned it seems likely that the tribal peoples of the various parts of eastern India were slowly coming into contact with the Vedic civilization emanating from the upper Gangetic plain. The eastern limits of *madhyadesa* were constantly pushed outwards as Vedic culture changed its perception of the tribals from *rakshasas* to *mlechhas*, that is from *monsters* to *unclean* peoples, who might, at a later stage, be co-opted into the Vedic hierarchy. Reading from left to right *madhyadesha's* frontiers shifted from Uttar Pradesh to Bihar and then to Bengal. By the time of the writing of the *Manava Dharmasastra* (2nd B.C.?) the eastern limit of *madhyadesa* had moved to Prayag in present day Uttar Pradesh. It was now only a matter of time before Magadh (in present day Bihar state) too became a part of *aryabharta* or *madhyadesa*.

The early Jain and Buddhist texts and inscriptions offer us a glimpse of the expanding frontiers of a hegemonic culture. Early Buddhist texts such as *Anguttara*, *Mahavastu*, *Vinaya* and *Niddesa* do not include any of the Bengal kingdoms mentioned among the sixteen great republics but the Jain *Bhagavati-Sutra* includes Anga, Vanga and Magadha in its list of the sixteen great countries of India. Bengal was now therefore only a step away from this radical 'colonization'; this happened under Gupta aegis around 4th century A.D. in Vanga but this colonization was achieved only partially. The eastern section of the gangetic delta remained outside the orbit of direct Gupta control. Harikela or the easternmost area

became an addendum to Samatata and its history is obscure to this day for the most part. Even today, this area's turbulent history remains outside the ambit of historical research.

With time Vanga assumed dominant status—at least iconographically—over other states in Bengal. We do not know the reasons for the hegemony of Vanga but it seems likely that its fame as the most productive region within Bengal as well as its proximity to Varendra (Gaur) or the political nerve centre was responsible for its new status. From Maurya times the region of Vanga or the western part of the lower gangetic delta, co-terminous with the ancient kingdom of Gangarides and wealthy in terms of natural and material resources, claimed dominance over the regions of Pundra, Radh and Varendra in the western half. By the time of Samudragupta the entire area was conquered and reunified as Vanga.

We can say that by the time the Guptas consolidated their empire in eastern India the great 'eastward migration' of the *aryas* had reached the last frontier. Rabid brahmanism under Gupta aegis combined with existing social and cultural norms to produce an *unique form of aryanisation* in Bengal. Aryan ideals slowly permeated political and military norms. As 'aryanisation' proceeded hand in hand with expanding wet rice cultivation it became ever more imperative to find rulers of either lowly origin, or outside the aryan fold a place within the new social pyramid that was becoming generic throughout the upper and middle gangetic plain. Those who declined, or were considered unfit of being co-opted into the new order, were banished to forests and mountains as waves of 'civilization' swelled in magnitude. Where such rulers continued in power in defiance of aryan norms they were marginalised and referred to either as 'kings of the mountains' or 'of the forests'. The term 'Vanga' now became a general noun describing the entire state of Bengal except its eastern parts—Samatata and Harikela. Now only parts of Harikela (north of Samatata and contiguous with Cooch Bihar and Tripura), Samatata and Kamrup remained to be aryanised. This was achieved only partially due to Buddhist-Tantric influences and the Muslim presence there.

This civilizing wave gained momentum when, around the 5th century A.D., new administrative and agrarian patterns came into being. These necessitated a new social framework. More *jatis* were born. In other parts of South Asia it was from this time that the temple and the ideological position of the Brahman became the loci from which hegemony was articulated. It was also from this time that obscure rulers came to the political forefront and turned to Brahmans to legitimise their lineages. Many claimed *kshatriya* status and sought fictitious genealogies linking them to the cardinal *suryavamsi* and *candravamsi* lineages of the Puranas. In some cases dynasties traced their descent from powerful Brahmans. In either case these were tools exercised for assimilating non *aryas* within the dominant ideological fold. Hinduism, as Kulke points out¹², was the most adaptive religious and social system that was open to aspects of 'localisation' or 'indigenisation'. The new model of *varna-jati* whose two criteria of *difference* were language and the observance of codes regarding the organisation of society (*varnasramadharma*) and *not* either race or economic superiority, thus offered a superb exemplar of social advancement and political authority not just within India but in neighbouring regions as well.

IV

But Brahmanism's progress in Bengal was impeded because of an unique geographical factor. Bengal lay at the southern tip of an arc that extended from the Eastern Himalayas to Tibet. Events here took a different course. After the Guptas' promotion of Brahmanism Buddhism was the dominant vehicle through which kingship and state formation was articulated in Bengal, except in the case of the somewhat enigmatic Sasanka who was terribly anti-Buddhist. The early 'aryanised' states in Bengal — which were also Buddhist — offered its neighbours a novel and flexible model of political rule based on social division, equilibrium and an amalgam of Hindu practices and Buddhist ideals.

Legitimation was not the only attraction for tribal leaders here. It has been pointed out by Wolters that the magico-religious component of *tapasya* inherent in Hinduism was particularly attractive for tribal leaders who sought to move from a pre state to a 'state stage'.¹³ Soon this model sought to replicate itself across its natural frontiers—in the case of Bengal this was naturally in the countries of northern-South East Asia. The small, scattered 'countries' and empires of south east Asia—tribal in polity and social organisation—offered an ideal terrain for this penultimate wave of 'aryanisation'. This was particularly visible in the case of the early Pyu states (Burma/Myanmar) and especially Arakan with whom Bengal shared a common cultural and economic zone¹⁴.

There was a substantial Buddhist network that already passed overland through North India. Maurice Lombard tells us of the Buddhist network of trade through Turkestan which joined India and China through mountain passes of the Hindu Kush and Central Asia. This was also a massive conduit for trade. It is not clear to what extent Bengal participated in this network but we know that cotton went from India to China in the 6th century through this route¹⁵; Chaudhuri opines however that cotton cultivation really expanded in China in the post Sung period in the 11th century¹⁶.

The Buddhist network was a bond that greatly expanded maritime trade from Bengal. The bond emanating from Bengal dominated the northern Bay of Bengal while the Coromandel ports concentrated on the southern Bay of Bengal world. Leaving aside the issues of 'colonisation', 'brahmanisation', 'indigenisation' or 'acculturation' that have been raised by R.C.Majumdar, Nilkantha Sastri, George Coedes, Kulke and Quatrich-Wales¹⁷, it was clear that a new maritime space had come into being in the Bay of Bengal.

The Buddhist network seems to have survived the growing Islamic presence in the Bay (in the shape of Arab traders) that exploded into the Bay of Bengal from the 7th century. From the 7th century onwards the decline in Roman trade had been apparent. Arab trade now provided the impetus behind external trade to link East Asia with the west. Unlike the case with Roman trade, Bengal played an increasingly important role in both the Buddhist¹⁸ and Arab networks. Mohar Ali points to three Abbasid coins that were found at the Buddhist settlements of Paharpur and Mainamati as indicative of growing Islamic trade in eastern Samatata in the 8th/9th centuries¹⁹. Growing Islamic presence in the Chattagram(Chittagong/Xatigam/Chatighan)-Arakan area during this time indicates that this part of Bengal,

predominantly Buddhist in inclination, was becoming integrated into a growing Islamic trading network in the Bay ²⁰. We have seen that the culture of cotton cultivation spread from India to Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean world (Syria, Aleppo, the shores of the Dead Sea, Damascus and Cilisia) by the 7th century²¹. It is likely that some of the cotton that found its way both east (China) and west (Mesopotamia/Mediterranean) originated from the Bengal trade. Some cotton went to South East Asia from Bengal by way of the Bay. Therefore from the 7th century Bengal participated actively in the northern Bay of Bengal commerce. Of necessity this was a coastal commerce because of the fierce cyclones that could suddenly hit this part of the Bay.

Studies in early coastal archaeology tell us that the Bengal-Orissa coast (Sisupalgarh/Tamralipta) traded with Burma, Thailand and Malaysia; what is pertinent to Bengal's maritime links with the world of the northern Bay is that of these the site of Beikthano on the Irrawady in Central Burma, which experienced considerable trade with Bengal (on the basis of Rouletted Ware findings), was occupied until the 8th century AD²². The evidence from Beikthano is particularly important in light of the thesis we are developing about Bengal's commercial contacts with Arakan. Beikthano was populated by the Pyus. The state of Arakan that rose in the eleventh century was Pyu in origin. While it now seems evident that the growing Arab presence in the Bay was responsible for the decay of the ancient maritime sites in the Bay of Bengal a Buddhist network continued to exist in the northern Bay until at least the 12th century. This linkage between the Bengal and Burma coasts continued beyond the 11th century when the greater Buddhist network collapsed in the Bay. Interaction was facilitated with the emergence of the state of Arakan in the 11th century. Bengal and Burma, with their fluid borders, extensive riverine and coastal networks and a shared material culture of supplementing agriculture with fishing and coastal trade continued to experience commercial ties until the conclusive Mughal orientation of Bengal's trade westward broke up this 'little' trade that encompassed the Padma, Meghna, Brahmaputra and Irrawady valleys and the numerous creeks that acted as outlets to the Bay.

Conventional wisdom has it that Hinduism and Buddhism co-existed peacefully in Bengal but history tells us otherwise. It seems that Brahmanical and Buddhist 'colonisation' in Bengal, far from unifying the region, had actually sculpted it into two distinct political entities, especially after the rule of Sasanka. By the 9th century one was Gaur from where the dominant political discourse was articulated. The other was the Dacca-Vikrampur region which enunciated a different rhetoric that frequently challenged the hegemonic pretensions of Gaur.

The post-Sasanka pre-Pala period in Bengal (8th-9th centuries) is traditionally described as the period of *matsya-nyaya* or interregnum. But a closer investigation of the period under review shows that this was essentially a Gaur (or west) centred view of politics in Bengal. While political authority may have declined from Gaur in the post-Sasanka period the region of samatata or the south eastern portion of the delta, which we call the Dacca-Vikrampur region, seems to have emerged as a distinct economic region with mainly Buddhist affiliations. This region manifested considerable political and economic vigour as evinced

from the verve of so called 'minor' dynasties there: the Bhadras, the Khadgas, the Chandras, the Varmans and the Devas who continued to rule as independent kings up until the time of the Sena conquest of Bengal in the 12th century.

Sasanka's legacy therefore lay in the creation of two centers of political authority in Bengal: Gaur under the Palas and Vikrampur under the Chandras. The Vikrampur state continued to promote commercial activity. The Chandras coined silver currency at a time when trade under Pala leadership from Gaur was in decline; moreover the Chandras claimed lineage from the 7th century Chandras of Arakan, meddled frequently in the politics of Arakan, carried on a brisk commerce with that kingdom and also conducted a profitable coastal trade among the countries across the northern Bay.

Therefore it seems certain that Brahmanical (Puranic) expansion and Buddhist hegemony had clashed in Bengal, and far from unifying the region, had actually sculpted it into two distinct political entities with different cultural and economic affiliations. Morrison's analysis of inscriptions from land grants suggests that far from being an alternative capital Vikrampur may have been the only capital in the delta that was the administrative centre for the whole of Bengal.

Note that Vikrampur lay in a strategic position at the joining of the Meghna and the Padma. It was placed in a supreme position for putting the goods of the north-east coming through the Brahmaputra in touch with the goods of the west through the Ganga-Padma. Plates of property transfers from Vikrampur from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries suggest that it was the only capital that had the power to issue proclamations for the whole of Bengal²³. Moreover land grants from Samatata exhibit a different character from those elsewhere in the delta. This area recorded the highest number of land grants and property transfers to collectives rather than individuals such as monasteries and shrines. The plates from Samatata are markedly pro-Buddhist (six out of seventeen inscriptions) unlike those of Varendra which are pro-brahman in character. It is clear that Samatata, bound by the three large river systems of the Ganga/Padma, the Meghna and the Brahmaputra, was the political and economic nerve centre of the region from where the Chandras, the Varmans and, later the Senas, ruled Bengal. The large grants to institutions, the concentration of major building sites (Lalmai/Paharpur) and the existence of a silver currency in Samatata suggest its rulers were wealthier and more able to offer a stable administrative system than their contemporaries in the west²⁴. Inscriptional evidence from Samatata therefore modifies considerably the received history about Gaur as the only durable capital of a unified Bengal.

We noted that Vikrampur manifested considerable economic vitality. At a time when the Palas used cowrie shells as currency in Gaur their rivals, the Chandras, used a silver currency in the east. The Chandras were Buddhists from Rohtasgarh in Bihar. More significant, they were an offshoot of the royal house of Arakan which is further proof of the very fluid borders that existed between Bengal and upper south east Asia. After the Palas reconverted back to Hinduism Buddhists from Bengal went north and east; and some went to Arakan. Arakan became an important Buddhist state in the 11th century and its revived trade with Bengal may be seen as an offshoot of the 11th century trade revolution in the Indian Ocean²⁵.

Moreover since the Chandras were supposed to be of Arakanese lineage this helped cement Bengal's traditional commercial links further with Arakan from the 11th century²⁶. The usage of a medium of international trade points to the area's enduring ties with northern south east Asia at a time when trade possibilities radiating from Gaur towards the middle gangetic plain were shrinking. The rise of Chattagram as the premier port of the region dates from this period.

The Pagan kings of Burma maintained considerable contact with the Mainamati Buddhist area in Bengal and both Pagan and Bengal interfered in Arakanese politics. The King of Pattikera gave his daughter to King Alaungsithu of Pagan in marriage. The most important and longest-lived centres in Bengal (in proximity to Arakan) were the towns of Comilla and Mainamati, both in the vicinity of the Lalmai range. Mainamati was very likely Patikkera, the neighbouring state to which Burmese chronicles attributed so much significance. It was at that place where as late as in AD1219-20 one of the rulers (named Ranavankamalla Harikelade-va) made a donation to the monastery of the Buddhist goddess Durgottara²⁷.

The Chandras were the overlords of these lesser kings. The dynasty, by reason of its proximity to the sea and by virtue of its considerable international trade, maintained a large fleet. It is said that the Varmans defeated the Chandras in a sea battle where the last Chandra king went down in his ship. This ended Buddhist rule in the east. Similarly the Palas of Gaur were defeated by another band of military adventurers from outside (Senas) which professed strong Brahmanical loyalties.

Until the Islamic conquest Bengal possessed two distinct centres of political authority: one drawing upon the resources of the Bhagirathi-Hugli basin and sustaining itself on paddy cultivation, the other relying upon the Padma-Meghna delta and participating in international trade. Inscriptions of the Chandras and the Varmans from their capital at Vikrampur illustrate the measures that these dynasties were taking to strengthen their empire in the Harikela-Samatata region. The Rampal and Kedarpur copper plates of Srichandra and the Belava copper plate of Bhojavarman clearly articulate an alternate discourse of kingship from Pala to Sena times in eastern Bengal.²⁸

V

However, from the 10th and 11th centuries, Hinduism was outpacing Buddhism in Bengal. The expanding nature of the society and economy of Vanga is evident from the names of offices and functionaries that are mentioned in inscriptions²⁹. They indicate a highly complex and sophisticated culture based on the effective appropriation of natural wealth through agriculture and regulated by a strong ideological/religious system. There are separate terms for centre and district (*Adhikarana* and *Adhithana*), mention of various taxes, names of functionaries in charge of specific manufactures, designations of supervisors of public and religious edifices (*Avasathika*) and special officers (*Devadroni-Sambaddha*) charged with the maintenance of temples and sacred water tanks. The inscriptions also mention various categories of administrative officials, numerous classes of citizens and their occupations.³⁰

The variegated functions quoted above may be taken as being indicative of segregated tribal kingdoms coming under an unified political umbrella in the final transition from isolationism to actual 'empire building' in ancient Bengal. The designations and offices prove that western Bengal, then, primarily an agricultural economy. Agrarian surplus, and not profits from trade, supported the emergent states in the west. A conservative Hinduism promoted agricultural matters, to the possible detriment of trade.

It was first George Coedes, and subsequently Quatrich-Wales, Denys Lombard and K.N.Chaudhuri (among others) who pointed out the topographical similarities between Bengal and South East Asia³¹. Such similarities contributed to the distinctive material culture of this predominantly riverine, rice-culture dominated zone and led to the formation of agrarian, rice based, empires and states in the littoral region surrounding the Bay of Bengal and the Java Sea.

Historically speaking the successful articulation of political power in this region has always based itself on two stark realities — control over surplus grain and control over the waterways³². This articulation of political power was effected through specific ideological structures peculiar to the eastern coast of India and south east Asia. However such a sophisticated articulation of power and its concomitant ideology was beyond the scope of warring tribes and could only come about when one tribe imposed its power over all others in the region. A degree of centralised rule, along with appropriate religio-political ideology, was therefore essential in the transformation of tribal zones into states capable of tapping the vast agrarian and natural resources at their command. With time therefore the flat riverine plains of Bengal (and South East Asia subsequently) saw the rise of a divine political economy and validating philosophy in this distinct topographic zone — what Denys Lombard calls a 'rice culture of divine right'³³ based on the successful appropriation of legitimising models for lineage construction and the economic control of the area. Such a model had to operate within societies that were organised *hierarchically* (and not *spatially* as had been tribal societies) on the basis of *varna*, with *jati* being used as a mechanism of incorporating newly conquered peoples³⁴.

From the time of the Guptas until the time of the Senas, that is between the 5th to the 13th centuries—a period for which we have somewhat comprehensive records—we have seen that major activities consisted of continually expanding the political and cultural frontiers of civilization, instituting rice culture as the dominant economy of the region and settling Brahmins in the forested lands of the eastern margin (Samatata) to popularise wet rice cultivation in the east. In the process the tribal culture of Bengal with its *jhum* cultivation was overshadowed by emerging Brahmanical expertise based on superior agricultural skills. Along with subordination to a vastly superior technique for expanding cultivation the tribal peoples of Bengal were subject to the hegemony of Vedic civilization as embodied in the four fold *varna* scheme. Within this vast span of time there were two distinct phases.

Between the 5th and 10th centuries this process continued inexorably. More and more of the eastern part was brought under cultivation. The frontier now extended beyond Samatata to Kamrup and the hostile territory outside it. After the 10th century there was a hiatus in the

agrarian expansion; the eastern delta (Samatata) engaged more in trade and less in agriculture³⁵. This development was dictated by events between the 7th to the 9th centuries (that is the period between Sasanka's rule and the advent of the Palas). During this time western Bengal or Vanga became synonymous with Gaur as the seat of the mighty non-Buddhist empire of Sasanka. Agricultural activities became more important; trade declined because of Sanka's hostility to Buddhism. The eastern deltaic region or Samatata remained geographically and culturally a distinct zone and often challenged Gaur's political hegemony. Moreover this area was staunchly Buddhist — witness the large Buddhist settlements of Mainamati-Lalmai, Paharpur and Mahastan. The questionable political allegiances of the eastern parts became evident after the downfall of Sasanka's state. Successive rulers of Bengal from the time of Sasanka tried to subdue Samatata and Kamrup and enrol them as feudatories but were not successful. In spite of hosting the dynamic Bhadra, Khadga and Chandra dynasties Samatata/Harikela remained a frontier region with politically suspect affiliations.

This area was finally brought into the folds of Brahmanism by the Varmans who succeeded the Chandras but they too, it seems from extant inscriptions, reigned as political rivals of the Senas who succeeded the Palas in the western delta. Samatata continued to be, until the nineteenth century, outside the pale of Vanga's dominion. By then of course Vanga had metamorphosed into colonial Bengal.

VI

From the 13th to the 16th centuries Bengal experienced four crucial shifts: 1) under the first Islamic Sultanate which established itself in Bengal at a time when 2) the Mongols chose to rewrite the political map of Asia and then again in the 16th century 3) first under the Husain Shahis and then 4) under the Mughals. These shifts occurred under the aegis of Islam. The fourth and last shift occurred at a time when the Portuguese attempted to carve out an independent place for themselves in the commerce of the Bay.

When the Bengal Sultanate established itself at Lakhnawati and started the process of moulding Bengal into an Islamic conquest-state this multifaceted region experienced yet another ontological shift. The establishment of Islamic rule in Bengal saw the region incorporated into a complex political/religious/diplomatic/mercantile network that stretched from China to southern Spain, Maghreb and Ifriquiya. The first Islamic rule in Bengal that lasted from the 13th to the 16th centuries produced repercussions within: by the beginning of the 14th century the many miens of Bengal, the different names/places/cultures that we mentioned, had coalesced into the three principal areas of Gaur-Pandua-Firuzabad-Lakhnawati (the older Varendra or the political heartland), Satgaon-Hugli-Tribeni (the old Vanga or the cultural and economic pulse) and the Dacca-Suvarnagram region or the old Samatata. A new name for the eastern region had also emerged — Bangalah³⁶.

Eastern and western Bengal were frequently at war. In the 14th century Ibn Batuta referred to the fact that the ruler of Bangalah (or Samatata/Harikela in whose dominions lay

Chattagram/Chittagong/Chatighan and which Ibn Batuta visited) was frequently at war with the ruler of Lakhnawati. Ibn Batutah thus followed the accepted practice of distinguishing between Bangalah and Lakhnawati. It seems, in contemporary perception, that the ancient vanga or the west had become synonymous with Bangalah of the east in the 14th century; Lakhnawati further north was the focus of political might (and power tussles with the rest of the gangetic plain) and was regarded as a country apart, in fact as the *new-fashioned state*.³⁷ That Bengal was still, in effect, two states under two sets of rulers for much of the period under study here is therefore unquestionable.

Only the last frontier remained to be subdued, that of Harikela with its difficult terrain, suspect loyalties and the magnificent port of Chattagram/Chatighan/Chittagong at its southern tip; this was only partially achieved by the quasi-independent Mughal subahdar Shaista Khan at the end of the 17th century. We know that between the 15th and 18th centuries the Chattagram-Jugdia area was fought over by the kings of Arakan, Tiperah and Bengal³⁸. A new dimension was added to this conflict when the Mughal made Bengal a Mughal province. Ananta Manik of Bhalwa frequently enlisted Arakanese help to retain his zamindari in the face of the Mughal threat emanating from Bengal. This fight was complicated by the Portuguese presence in the area. The latter frequently acted as mercenaries in the countries of the Bay and were utilized as such by local rulers in their wars against each other.

This is not the place to detail the successful (and unsuccessful) attempts at expansion beyond Bengal by the Bengal sultans. However under the Ilyas Shahis, throughout the 14th century, attempts were made to extend hegemony over Kamrup, Kamta, Tirhut and Nepal to the north and the powerful Ganga state (medieval north Orissa) to the south. Inscriptions found in Kamrup indicate that a portion of Assam at least was brought under Muslim control by the time Sikandar Ilyas Shah and Ghiyath-al-Din Ilyas Shah were on the throne of Lakhnawati. Eaton opines that the activities of the militant Sufis who expanded rice cultivation in the east-aided by the riverine shifts of the 16th to the 18th centuries that rendered the western delta 'moribund' and the southeast delta 'active'-was an activity that extended the eastern frontiers of Bengal³⁹.

At the end of the 15th century Vipradas had described the mercantile dynamism of Saptagram in the western delta. It was peopled by Hindus, Mughals and Pathans; it contained a dazzling array of houses and conducted trade with Ceylon (Sarandib) and Orissa. Since the Arakan trade was not mentioned it seems likely that Arakanese disturbances in eastern Bengal had interrupted this trade. Possibly Chattagram/Xatigam conducted what little trade continued to exist with Arakan⁴⁰. Now, in the 16th century, the Husain Shahis sought to enhance trade within their western domains by connecting Triveni (in the older Vanga which had evolved into the cultural and economic heartland of Varendra) with Vanga's chief port Saptagram by way of a bridge in 1506. This bridge connected Saptagram and Triveni with the main channel of the Bhagirathi because the Saraswati had dried up. This endeavour reflects the westward shift under Husain Shahi leadership that resulted in a reorientation of trade routes to the west of Bengal.

Under Husain Shahi aegis a new urban complex emerged in Bengal. Gaur was the capital, Saptagram its port, Triveni its religious hinterland and Nabadwip its cultural centre. Vanga thus saw a new phase of urbanization. Nabadwip attracted immigrants from Sylhet (a well known intellectual centre of Harikela) and Chattagram and soon evolved into the scholars' centre of Vanga. By 1560 Nabadwip had grown into a well-known market town as well; merchants were settling there and selling goods from locations as far off as Kashmir in the north to Kanchipuram in the extreme south.

From this time on textiles (mainly cottons and some silk piece goods) began to be manufactured in the towns along the lower Bhagirathi. These supplied the market towns along the Bhagirathi and provisioned the trade conducted from Saptagram. Saptagram ceased to function as a port with the establishment of Hugli as the chief port on the Bhagirathi in 1580. The impetus of urbanization in this region continued unabated and Hugli took over the functions of Saptagram by connecting long distance trade to the hinterland. The Portuguese came west and settled at Hugli.

Soon after Bengal came to be integrated more closely with northern India through yet another endeavour — Sher Shah Sur's efforts — to reorient the trade of Bengal from the East to the West. This meant that Bengal had another outlet for its manufactures apart from its riverine/oceanic trade. The construction of the Grand Trunk Road — which exists to this day — ensured that Bengal would no longer remain a marginal sultanate. The Mughals enhanced further the east-west shift. The Grand Trunk Road which was built by Sher Shah (1538-45) and finished by Akbar connected Bengal permanently with Delhi via Allahabad, Benares and Awadh. After this time, Bengal's commerce was firmly reoriented towards the west.

In conclusion we can assert that just prior to the 18th century the various Bengals through history that we noted had combined into the two Bengals that still exist today : the one situated around the heartland of Gaur, functioning through its port of Hugli; the other situated around Dacca, functioning through Chattagram. While the Gaur-Pandua-Lakhnawati-Murshidabad bloc housed Bengal's better known western capitals the Dacca-Vikrampur-Suvarnagram axis had functioned as a separate capital so much in history that we can even assert that there still were two *states* in Bengal. (It is of course significant that the borders of the present nation of Bangladesh corresponds to the old division of Samatata and Harikela).

The Dacca-Vikrampur area was the last frontier of Bengal; witness the Chandra and Varman kings who ruled quasi-independently from the region as we have already seen. In the wake of the ferment produced by the takeover of Lakhnawati the last Sena king, Lakshman, ran away to this area; later in the post-Mughal ferment of the ephemeral takeover of Gaur dispossessed Afghan/Turk adventurers also fled there. In the 16th century the Portuguese concentrated their commercial activities there. The Bengal Nawabs in the 18th century transferred their less fortunate officers there. In time the Dacca-Vikrampur region ceased to be a separate political unit and became instead an extension of Nawabi Bengal but the region still retained its separate identity.

Eastern Bengal was always the last frontier aka Eaton ⁴¹ but this frontier was repeated endlessly throughout the early history of Bengal as well. Militant Sufis, radical rulers, Portuguese adventurers and Arakanese raiders did not create this Turnerian frontier; this frontier was a more gradual creation under the twin impulses of statecraft and religion from the time of the spread of Buddhism in the early centuries of the first millenium and fashioned further by Brahmins who brought to the area superior agrarian management skills. But it was pushed forward relentlessly nevertheless throughout the centuries until Mughal regulation of this frontier put a stop to this from the 17th century. Separate faiths, different religious affiliations and the prevalence of many tongues and races still mark the east from the rest in Bengal. By the 18th century, when our story ends, Assam (Kamrup) and Koch (Cooch Bihar) delineated the final frontier of Bengal.

VII

Bengal's history in the Islamic period is littered with references to Arabs, Pathans, Afghans, Turks, Tajiks and Mughals. These groups — with their specific extra — South Asian affiliations — introduced new ideologies and hegemons into Bengal. Their ethnic designations emanated from four political blocs as we know them today : the Middle East (which exported a vast amount of Arabic speaking merchants to India's shores), Afghanistan which provided South Asia with the Ghaznavid and Ghurid kings (the Pathans came from the same area), Turkestan or that vast area between China and Russia which comprised the Mongol khanate and included Turks as both Tatars and Mongols (Mughals) and Tajiks from the eastern reaches of Persia contiguous with Turkestan. In other words both the Mughals and the Turko-Afghan sultans of India are Turks but the former are Mongol while the latter are Tatars and traditional enemies of the Mongols. And the Tajiks are also Turks but from a different area. In other words while all these ethnic groups were 'Muslim' by the 16th century their political affiliations, arising out of their area of origin, dictated the commercial inclination (routes, commodities, ports) of each of these groups⁴².

Of these various groups it was the Afghans and Mughals who impacted most on Bengal in the 16th century. Husain Shahi stability was destroyed with the Afghan victory in Bengal in the 1530s. This shortlived Afghan triumph was shattered once again with the Mughal victory (albeit nominal at that time) in 1576. The Mughal decree of 1580 to the Portuguese Pedro Tavares to establish a port at Hugli signaled the passing away of the Husain Shahi urban dream; from now on lower Bengal and not the Saptagram-Triveni-Nabadwip complex would dictate Bengal's mercantile history. Moreover the grant of decree also signalled the coming into being of a new order in western Bengal: the beginning of Portuguese political involvement in the western part of Bengal.

In the last analysis the only 'Islamic' trading combine that showed staying power in the Bay were the Persians. The Gromalles and the Khwajas of early Portuguese documents exhibited remarkable staying power in the 16th century; in the 17th century we have Muhammad Sayyid (the infamous Mir Jumla of Persian origin) as subahdar and monopolist

in Bengal and the extensive Shi'a migration from Persia into Bengal during Prince Shuja's subahdarship from 1639-60; and in the 18th century we get a group of wealthy Persian merchants/officials dominating trade from Dacca.

The second Murshid Quli, Mirza Lutfullah of Tabriz, became governor of Orissa during Nawab Shuja's reign in Bengal. Subrahmanyam (1992) says that the second Murshud Quli weathered the storm of the 1739-40 succession dispute and was appointed Naib-Nazim (what the English refer to as the 'Chota Nawab') of Dacca during Alivardi's reign⁴³; this however is incorrect⁴⁴. He had been appointed Naib Nazim of Dacca by Shuja around 1727 and he remained in that position until 1734 when he was transferred to Orissa as Naib Nazim⁴⁵. The second Murshid Quli and his associates Mir Habibullah of Shiraz and Mir Razi of Shustar appear to have practised a minor variant of state mercantilism from Dacca and in the process built up a clique of Iranian and Central Asian traders in Bengal. This group also maintained close links with Surat and Basra and there is every likelihood that a major portion of Bengal's westward trade was monopolized by this Iranian group.

What made Persians move to Bengal? They seem to have come initially mostly from the Deccan where they migrated as merchants, religious leaders and men of letters from as early as the 14th century⁴⁶, and in the 16th century, from Delhi as well. In the 16th century the major Deccani sultanates — Bijapur, Golconda and Ahmadnagar — boasted Iranian antecedents or links⁴⁷.

The Persians soon metamorphosed into a court elite in the numerous Islamic courts of South Asia and in so doing moved onto the east as well. They seem to have acted as traders in Bengal; lured there by the rich pickings that trade offered.

What were the reasons behind this Persian exodus to South Asia in such huge numbers? While this has been discussed in greater detail in my *Merchants and Companies* etc. we may present a brief account here. The conventional reasons are the disturbances in the Central Asian world which made Muslims view South Asia as the custodian of Islam, and the diplomatic ties established by Akbar with the Safavid Empire. These were furthered by Jahangir's identification with Persian kingship and his alliance with Shah Abbas in the 17th century. However a recent book⁴⁸ suggests that more fundamental causes were at work behind the migration of the Persians from Persia.

The Safavids converted to Islam in 1500. Persia therefore became a nodal point in the vast Islamic network of trade and politics that spanned continents. The mercantilist and statist policies of Shah Abbas I at the start of the 17th century were aimed to put Persia on the world map of Islam. Shah Abbas' policies resulted in the resettlement of the Armenians in New Julfa as part of Shah Abbas' strategy to counter the economic might of the Tajiks in Persia (who now migrated to South Asia in large numbers), an exploitation of the Armenian overseas trade network and consequently increased trade with South Asia (since the Armenians were long settled there) and the attempt to control all trade within Persia, especially that of silk, to the profit of the Safavid state. The Persia of Shah Abbas was essentially a mercantilist state and his silk policy was one whereby he attempted to counter the Ottoman domination of the European market for silk.

Persian-Mughal relations became more genial when Jahangir became emperor. In his bid to assume the title of ruler of the world Jahangir entered into a friendly competition with Shah Abbas⁴⁹. During Jahangir's reign a Persian embassy toured all provinces of the Mughal empire to see the fresh conquests. In keeping with the diplomatic/commercial network favoured by Shah Abbas this mission visited Bengal in the 1620s as well. This happened during Islam Khan's tenure and the mission was royally entertained at the Mughal provincial court at Dacca⁵⁰.

The Persians who settled in the numerous states around the Bay in Eastern South Asia were soon made aware of the trading possibilities of the region. Trade with Arakan became a favourite; in time Persian migrants settled at the Arakanese court of M-rauk U persianised the Arakanese court in terms of rituals and commerce. By the 17th century they were present in Thailand as well — notably in Mergui and Auythia where they exercised considerable power. It is claimed that even the Thai royal dishes were persianised⁵¹.

Religious dissidents from Persia also found their way to South Asia which, by virtue of its numerous and flourishing Islamic states, was seen as the guardian of Islam. By the 17th century many more such Persian elite were founding states in South Asia; the founder of the Bengal nizamat of the 18th century, Murshid Quli Khan for example, had a Persian background. Many more such nobles such as the second Murshid Quli followed and set up secure mercantile bases in eastern Bengal.

There may be yet another reason for this intensive commercial contact between Bengal and Persia. It seems that as in Bengal Persian overland and maritime trade was more complementary than competitive and the caravan trade between South Asia and Persia enjoyed a long lineage. The overland route flourished throughout the 18th century and carried as much merchandise as the sea route from Bengal. Moreover not just cargo but merchants kept in close touch with Persia. It was reported⁵² that in the middle of the 15th century there arrived in Hormuz merchants from foreign territories such as Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, Turkestan, Russia, China, Java and Bengal, Siam, Tenasserim, Bijapur, Malabar, Cambay, Arabia and Yemen — in short the entire trading world of medieval times was present in Hormuz long before Portuguese arrival. Persia's neighbouring state, Uzbek Turan, housed textile merchants from Bengal in December 1557⁵³.

Mohar Ali claims however that a section of Persians, known as Tajiks, had visited eastern Samatata even earlier and takes an inscription of Ratnapala (9th/10th century) to suggest that some may actually have settled in the region of Chattagram/Arakan from those times. Similar evidence comes from the Buddhist site of Paharpur (in Rajshahi district just across the river from Murshidabad) where a coin from the Abbasid Caliph Harun-al-Rashid has been found⁵⁴. That Persia had a long lineage of contact with Bengal is now corroborated by other scholars.

So Bengal was known to the Persians from very early times. Minhaj-I-Siraj who accompanied Bakhtiar Khalji on his north-eastern campaign in Bengal was Persian. His *Tabaqat-I-Nasiri* may have served as a practical guide for eastern India just as it does for historians today. This long history of interaction between Bengal and Persia has attracted

little attention in historical research⁵⁵ and the ship-owning/mercantile activities of Persian merchants and officials offer substantial scope for historical research on early medieval Bengal.

VIII

We had noted that the period from the 13th to the 18th centuries had seen various hegemony in operation in the Indian Ocean : the Mongol order of the 13th century, the early Islamic network of the 14th century, the Asian states system of the 16th century and the Iberian economic order.

As in most parts of Asia Islam in Bengal too had been tempered by its encounter with the Mongols. It had weathered the Mongol rupture of the 13th century, because the Mongols chose to bypass Bengal. What did the Mongol world order dream of? Certainly it dreamt of political conquest, of making their civilization the centre of the world to rival Rome or Constantinople. But it also dreamt of economic hegemony, of controlling a trans-Asian/European trade that spanned continents, and of being a second Baghdad or Damascus.

Chingiz Khan did not only dream of plunder on a mega-scale, he also advocated trade as ambassador between empires, and he established diplomatic relations (based on tribute and fiefdom) with states he conquered⁵⁶. From the end of the 13th century Venetian, Pisan and Genoese merchants acted as the Khan's diplomatic messengers in an attempt to open trade with the west through South Asia, Central Asia, southern Russia and Iran ⁵⁷. Under Kubla'i Khan China became a great trading nation . Similarly Taimur wrote to all kings and princes not subject to him, urging them to send merchants since 'trade makes for prosperity'⁵⁸.

This Central Asian world order incorporating Rus, Iran, China, South East Asia, Tibet and a part of Central Asia⁵⁹ came very close to Bengal's eastern frontier (in the shape of the T'ai Ahoms). The Mongols subverted the caravan routes on which the known world depended : Baghdad was replaced by Tabriz in the 14th century as the emporia city in the west-east trade. Tabriz was replaced in its turn by Samarkhand through Taimur's conquests, for he blocked the caravan routes running from the Black Sea to China and opened instead a new route passing through his dominions: Transoxania.

The Mongol mercantile world now confronted the Mediterranean Islamic world order. In 1258 it sacked Baghdad and in 1260 the Mongols occupied Aleppo and Damascus: meeting-ground of Christian-Islamic trade. Ibn Khaldun has left behind a description of the havoc caused in the early Islamic network by the Mongols. It is precisely because of the uncertainty caused in the old commercial cities of Asia that the nascent Bengal Sultanate could not form a successful commercial policy in the 13th century. Things settled down in the 14th century. It is only from the early Ilyas Shahi period (circa 1342) that we find once again the beginnings of a commercial policy in Bengal. Ibn Batuta left the Maghreb and came to Bengal, traversing the known commercial world of his time in this decade.

But the Mongol dream of economic domination was abortive. Despite the Khanate's desire to ally itself with the Papacy and combat Islam⁶⁰ in the Holy Land this was not

achieved. In both east and west robust Islamic empires carried on their political/diplomatic/economic functions much as they had done before the Mongol interregnum. After wreaking untold havoc in Asia and Europe the Central Asian order in South Asia soon became integrated into the much older and commercially vibrant Islamic world order. Most Mongol chiefs converted to Islam. By the 16th century the descendants of the Mongols, the Mughals, were established at Delhi.

By the 16th century the older Islamic system — stretching from North Africa to China that the Mongols had attacked — was no more. In its place were the mighty empires of the Ottomans, the Safavids, the Mughals and the Turanis. Indeed it may not be an exaggeration to say that four empires formed an integrated regional market with an emergent ‘international’ credit system facilitating trade. Of these Shah Abbas’ Iran and Jahangir’s India formed the most integrated bloc. Persian mercantilist policies after 1600 mixed with the more powerful *laissez-faire* Mughal economy and its free trade economic policy. The increasingly closer links with north, east, west and south-east Mughal India that Iran initiated were efforts at instituting an uniform credit/banking system to facilitate trade between the two empires. By contrast trade with the Uzbek states and Rus seems less integrated from the point of view of India. Likewise with the Ottoman Empire; but here strong religious ties, reinforced by the regular Haj sailings to Mecca from Akbar’s time constituted a powerful argument for commerce. But we find no similar financial and economic policies with the Ottomans as was the case with the Safavids; perhaps because here the Armenians, and not local merchants, controlled the external trade.

Indeed Safavid Persia played a key role in determining Mughal relations with the external world of Islam. It certainly played an important part in determining Mughal-Ottoman relations for it controlled the land (caravan) routes between the two empires. We have already noted the presence of South Asian merchants from as far away as Bengal present at both Hormuz and Bukhara in the 16th century, selling cotton textiles at local markets⁶¹. The Ottoman bloc, with which the Mughals had political and commercial ties, was nurtured through trade and diplomatic missions that passed mainly through Iran. In short Iran guarded the key to the trade with Ottoman Turkey and Rus while Uzbek Turan controlled the routes to Rus.

In this states system of the 16th century China — which had played a major role in the earlier Islamic world economy — hardly figured. This withdrawal impacted adversely on Bengal; Bengal’s eastern trade suffered a setback. A new entrant into the Bay was the European world economy in the shape of the Portuguese which now created a new maritime space for Bengal in the north Bay.

IX

We have spoken of ‘world empires’ of the Mings (1368), Ottomans (1453), the Mughals (1526) and the Safavids (1500). We have spoken of the earlier Mongol and Islamic ‘world orders’. What distinguishes a world order from a world system? What would be the role of world economies? Where do world empires fit in?

World empires can exist as sub-sets within a single world economy and the world economy creates a world system with a hierarchical ordering of spatial units articulated to the structure of the state that is central to it⁶². By contrast a world order is an ethical-legal system which envisions ultimately the command of a world economy constituted by subject-empires. The Indian Ocean was a world system motored by a world economy that was constituted by the empires that participated in its economic life.

What denotes a world economy? It denotes, firstly, a spatial physical territory centred around an initial process of state formation and its outward projections over space and time. The two main markers of a world economy are its durability over time and its capacity to govern economic activities from its peripheries to the advantage of its core area. Secondly, a world economy, when it has retained its hegemony over surrounding regions for a long enough time, transforms itself into a world system where the dominant positions of power may not always be expressed through economic relationships. These can be political, cultural, religious, and linguistic.

It is therefore evident that the Islamic world empire had managed to coalesce into an Islamic world economy and ultimately an early Islamic world system. This came about when the core of the Muslim world—bound on the east by the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, on the north by the Caspian and Black Seas and on the west by the Mediterranean—placed itself at the intersection of two great economic units : the Indian Ocean area and the Mediterranean area⁶³. This aided its subsequent expansion east into India and China, south into Ifriquiya and west into Iberia. This core area that had been one in Hellenistic times but had split into two hostile units, the Roman/Byzantine and the Parthian/Sassanian, was now united together once again through the Islamic conquests. This area experienced capitalistic activity from very early times : the signs of incipient capitalism were intense urbanisation, the rise of regional empires, the growth of international trade, emergence of a labour market, the birth of a cash economy, the invention of a paper money and so on⁶⁴. Within this world functioned the world empires of the Turko-Afghans and the Mongols of the 13th century; these in turn were absorbed into the greater world empires of the 16th century—the Ottomans, the Safavids, the Mughals and the Mings.

The Mings withdrew from this world; with this withdrawal Bengal's trade went into decline. From 1506 the Husain Shahis worked at encouraging Bengal's trade to the west and not the east. In the 1560s the Venetian Cesare Frederici praised the great port of Saptagram, emblematic of the 16th century shift from east to west within Bengal.

Finally, it was only the Portuguese who attempted to revive the Bay trade for another century. Their objective was however not the older China-Bengal-Delhi-Red Sea network but the Malacca-Pegu-Coromandel network which brought in very cheap gold and the best rubies from Pegu. In this trade Arakan and Bengal occupied primate positions. Manrique's voyage to Bengal, and his negotiations with the Arakanese king in the 1630s are testimony to a last attempt by the Portuguese to revive this once flourishing trade. But it was too late by then. In 1612 Pegu was closed off to all trade. Also the massacre of the Portuguese by the Arakanese at Dianga in 1607 soon after the latter had thrown out the Portuguese from

Chattagram, then the execution of de Brito, the 'independent' Portuguese ruler of Syriam by the Mons-Burmese in 1613, followed by the defeat of the Portuguese by the Kandy forces in Ceylon in August 1630, and finally the fall of Acheh in 1636 in the wake of Dutch conquests in the Indonesian archipelago signified the collapse of the informal Portuguese network of trade in the Bay of Bengal. Bocarro laments the passing of the Bay trade in the *Livro das Plantas*, in the 1630s⁶⁵:

...the great Bay of Bengala, and Pegu, where ... we once had great settlements of Portuguese...all of them came to an end with great destruction and devastation, and hence toaday one only navigates to the port of Orixá in the kingdom of Bengala (Pipli), where there is a Portuguese captain appointed by the viceroy only in order to treat with the Moorish vassals of the Mogor, to whom the port belongs...but he has nothing else there, not even a house, save some made of straw....

The association between political power, long-distance trade and a high level of economic activity in cities of substantial status was taken for granted in the Islamic and Iberian worlds. The historical connection between long-distance trade and the process of urbanisation was a simultaneous phenomenon; one that could make or break the port cities of the Indian Ocean world. Wholesale merchants and bankers engaged in transcontinental trade found all the supporting services at these ports. These advantages were held together by primate port-cities in the Indian Ocean. There were, unfortunately, no such primate cities in Bengal. Hugli and Dacca were riverine cities; hardly in a position to influence the greater rhythms of trade in either the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean.

The advantages enumerated here collapsed when there was political instability in the states that supported this network. The urban centres were the first to pay a heavy price for political instability or invasions. This is borne out in the case of Bengal's ports. Their instability, once the eastern Bay trade collapsed, has already been documented.

Earlier we had suggested the advantages of discussing regional histories in the world systemic perspective. If we situate Bengal within the early and later Islamic world economies then the enigma of its marginal position both in terms of the territorial history of South Asia and the maritime world of the Indian Ocean can be transcended: in the 18th century, not just Bengal but the whole region from Iran to South East Asia was undergoing internal decline. Political vigour was flagging, once flourishing towns and their urban economies were lagging behind. Indeed this whole area, and not just Bengal, was reeling from European attacks on their economy, sovereignty and way of life. Seen in this context the 18th century debate, while immediately crucial for Bengal and consequentially for South Asia as a whole, is marginal to the rhythms of history that made up the greater history of the region⁶⁶. Rice culture was no longer divinely ordained, commerce was no longer celestially ordered. The withdrawal of the Chinese, the collapse of Arakan and the demands of the second Islamic world economy had put paid to both in Bengal. Between 1600 and 1800 Bengal became first,

a commercial zone for the second wave of Europeans to explode into the Indian Ocean, and then a British colony until 1947.

Notas

- ¹ A.G. Frank, *ReOrient, Global Economy in the Asian Age*, California Press and Sage/Vistaar Publications, 1998.
- ² See C.A. Bayly and P.F. Bang, "Introduction: Comparing Pre-Modern Empires" pp. 169-187, P.F. Bang, "Rome and the Comparative Study of Tributary Empires" pp. 189-216 and L. De Ligt, "Taxes, Trade, and the Circulation of Coin: The Roman Empire, Mughal India and T'ang China Compared", pp. 231-48 in *The Medieval History Journal* 6, 2, Special Issue on Tributary Empires in History, Comparative Perspectives from Antiquity to the Late Medieval, July-December 2003.
- ³ See Rila Mukherjee, "The Story of Kasimbazar: Silk Merchants and Commerce in Eighteenth Century Bengal", REVIEW, Binghampton, New York, XVII, 4, Fall 1994 pp. 499-554, and *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century* (forthcoming). See also Rila Mukherjee, "A Mercantile and War Economy in Eighteenth Century Bengal". Paper presented at the India and Claude Martin in the Age of Lumieres conference at Lyon, 2000 (forthcoming).
- ⁴ H. Beveridge, (Tr), *The Akbar Nama of Abul-Fazl*, 3 vols., Delhi, Ess Ess Publications (2nd reprint, 1977) vol. III, p. 290.
- ⁵ Nathan Mirza, *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi*, 2 Vols. (Tr. M.I. Borah), Gauhati, Govt. of Assam, II, pp. 650-51.
- ⁶ "The Early and the Imperial Kingdom: A Processual Model of Integrative State Formation in Early Medieval India in Herman Kulke (Ed), *The State in India 1000-1700*, New Delhi, OUP, 1995, pp. 233-262. See p. 233.
- ⁷ This supposition is borne out by the archaeological evidence I discuss later.
- ⁸ Bengal was variously referred to as Rarh, Varendra, Vanga, Samatata, Pundravardhana, Harikela — names that changed over time according to the changing political frontiers and the relative weight of the ethnic composition of people dominating a particular area.
- ⁹ Two authors who also work with this divide in mind are P. J. Marshall, "Bengal: The British Bridgehead, Eastern India 1740-1828", *The New Cambridge History of India*, II, Cambridge, University Press, 1987, and Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*, Berkeley, University Press, 1993.
- ¹⁰ For more divisions within Bengal see Pramode Lal, Paul, *The Early History of Bengal, Calcutta, Indian Research Institute*, 1939, and Morrison, Barrie M., *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, The Association for Asian Studies, University of Arizona Press, 1970.
- ¹¹ Bani Roy Choudhuri, *The Political History of Bengal to the Rise of the Pala Dynasty*, Calcutta, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1990, provides much information on a neglected period in Bengal's early history; see also R.C. Majumdar, *History of Bengal*, Calcutta, G. Bharadwaj, 1971, vol. I, *The Ancient Period* for a reconstruction of the history of the same epoch.
- ¹² H. Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in South East Asia*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1993, pp. 273-274.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- ¹⁴ Rila Mukherjee, *Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kasimbazar and Jugdia in the Eighteenth Century* (forthcoming).
- ¹⁵ Maurice Lombard, *L'Islam dans sa Première Grandeur, VIIIe-XIe siècles*, Paris, Flammarion, 1971, p. 201.
- ¹⁶ K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy And Civilisation of the Indian Ocean From the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 107.
- ¹⁷ H. Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in South East Asia*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1993, pp. 273-274. H.G. Quaritch-Wales, *The Making of Greater India*, London, 1961, B. Quaritch-Wales, second edition and also B. Quaritch-Wales, *Pre-History and Religion in South East Asia*, London, 1957.
- ¹⁸ Himanshu Prabha Ray, *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime Links of Early South Asia*, Delhi, OUP, 1994.

- ¹⁹ Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*. Vol. 1A, *Muslim Rule in Bengal 1203-1757*, Riyadh, Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985, pp. 35-36.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-40.
- ²¹ Maurice Lombard, *op. cit.*, p. 201.
- ²² Ian C. Glover, "Recent Archaeological Evidence for Early Maritime Contacts Between India and South-East Asia", in Himanshu Prabha Ray and Jean François Salles (eds), *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in The Indian Ocean*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1996, pp. 129-158. See p.136.
- ²³ Barrie M. Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, The Association for Asian Studies, University of Arizona Press, 1970, pp. 57, 153.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.101, 107,115, 119, 124-5, 152-3.
- ²⁵ Hermann Kulke, "Rivalry and Competition in the Bay of Bengal in the Eleventh Century and its Bearing on Indian Ocean Studies" in Om Prakash and Denys Lombard (Eds). *Commerce and Culture in the Bay of Bengal 1500-1800*, ICHR/Manohar, 1999, pp.17-35. See pp. 26-27.
- ²⁶ For more on this see Pramode Lal Paul, *The Early History of Bengal*, Calcutta, Indian Research Institute, 1939,
- ²⁶ For more divisions within Bengal see Pramode Lal, Paul, *The Early History of Bengal*, Calcutta, Indian Research Institute, 1939, p. 78.
- ²⁷ Tilman Frasch comments on the politics of this borderland in "Coastal Peripheries during the Pagan Period" in Jos Gommans/Jacques Leider (eds.) *The Maritime Frontier of Burma*, Amsterdam, 2002.
- ²⁸ See N.G Majumdar (ed. with tr. and notes), *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Rajshahi, Varendra Research Society, Volume III, containing the Inscriptions of the Chandras, the Varmans and the Senas and of Isvaraghosa and Damodara, 1929, *op.cit.*, pp. 3-13; see also R.C Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, p. 199-212.
- ²⁹ Barrie M., Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, The Association for Asian Studies, University of Arizona Press, 1970.
- ³⁰ In Bani Roy Chowdhuri, *op.cit.* See also the categories of functionaries and citizens in the contemporaneous Varman kingdom in samatata-harikela in N.G. Majumdar, (ed. with tr. and notes) , *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Rajshahi, Varendra Research Society, 1929, Volume III, pp. 4-24, containing the Inscriptions of the Chandras, the Varmans and the Senas and of Isvaraghosa and Damodara.
- ³¹ H. Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in South East Asia*, New Delhi, Manohar, 1993, pp.273-274, 260-261, 264-269. H.G.Quaritch-Wales, *The Making of Greater India*, London, B. Quaritch-Wales, 1961, second edition and Quatrach-Wales, 1957, *Pre-History and Religion in South East Asia*, London, B.Quaritch-Wales. For the other references cited see Lombard, Denys (1990) cited later and Chaudhuri, K.N., (1990) cited before . The concepts of 'indianisation' and of 'agrarian empires' has been questioned by Wink, A., 1984 in "Asian Studies: Agrarian History and Orientalism" in *Itinerario*, vol.VIII, no.2.
- ³² Rivers in Bengal in Rila Mukherjee, *Strange Riches: Mercantile Bengal's Place in Eighteenth Century South Asian History* (provisional title). Forthcoming.
- ³³ Denys Lombard, *Le Carrefour Javanais: Essai d'histoire Globale*, III, L'Heritage des Royaumes Concentriques, Paris, Editions E.H.E.S.S, 1990 pp. 15-54
- ³⁴ Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor for History*, Calcutta, K.P.Bagchi, 1975, pp. 31-33; Denys Lombard, *Le Carrefour Javanais: Essai d'histoire Globale*, III, L'Heritage des Royaumes Concentriques, Paris, Editions E.H.E.S.S, 1990, III, pp. 55-56; George Coedes, *Les Etats Hindouises d'Indochine et d'Indonesie*, Paris, Boccard, 1964, pp. 51-53.
- ³⁵ We link this with the 11th century trade revolution in the Bay and the rise of Arakan at the same time.
- ³⁶ See Ibn Batutah, *op.cit.* Bangalah has been taken to be Dacca. This confusion was compounded by Portuguese references to a 'City of Bengalla' (Cf. J.J.A.Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1919) in the sixteenth century.
- ³⁷ See Ibn Batutah, *Voyages*, and a more recent evaluation of Ibn Batutah's passages on Bengal in Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*. Vol. 1A, *Muslim Rule in Bengal 1203-1757*, Riyadh, Imam Muhammad, Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985, pp. 124-132.
- ³⁸ Chattagram was regained from Tiperah in 1516.
- ³⁹ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 1993, and *Essays on Islam and Indian History*, Oxford, 2000. Marshall , P.J., *Bengal The British Bridgehead, Eastern India 1740-1828*, New Cambridge History of India, II.2, Cambridge, Orient Longman, 1987, also refers to the riverine

- shifts that rendered the south-east delta an active area. In the 18th century Jugdia became an important mart town for cotton textiles (chiefly baftas) that were produced in the surrounding areas, including the Tripura Hills. See Rila Mukherjee, "The French East India Company's Trade in Eastern Bengal from 1750-53: A Look at the Chandernagore Letters to Jugdia" in *Indian Historical Review*, 17 (1990-91) nn. 1-2, pp.122-35.
- ⁴⁰ Anirudha Ray, "Middle Bengali Literature: A Source for the Study of Bengal in the Age of Akbar" in Habib, Irfan, *Akbar and His India*, New Delhi, OUP, 1997, pp. 229-233 traces urbanization and trade for this neglected period of Bengal's history.
- ⁴¹ Richard Eaton, *op.cit.* This is his general view, also underlined in his title.
- ⁴² See Fuzli Rubbee Khondkar, *The Origin of the Musalmans of Bengal being a Translation of Haqiqate Musalman-I-Bengalah*, Calcutta, Thacker and Spink and Co., 1895, for the diverse Islamic groups in Bengal.
- ⁴³ S. Subrahmanyam, "Iranians Abroad: Intra-Asian Elite Migration and Early Modern State Formation" in *The Journal of Asian Studies* [henceforth *JAS*], 51, 2, May 1992, pp.340-63.
- ⁴⁴ Abdul Karim, *Dacca The Mughal Capital*, Dacca, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1964, p. 26 puts his tenure at Dacca as Naib Nazim from 1728-34.
- ⁴⁵ M.M. Ali, 1985, *IA*, *op.cit.* p. 583, 586-7.
- ⁴⁶ S. Subrahmanyam, *JAS*, 1992, pp. 340-63.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 343-44.
- ⁴⁸ Ina B. McCabe, *The Shah's Silk for Europe's Silver: The Eurasian Trade of the Julfa Armenians in Safavid Iran and India 1530-1750* (Armenian Texts and Studies, 150), Georgia, Scholars Press, 1998.
- ⁴⁹ See Mughal miniatures depicting both Jahangir and Shah Abbas standing, facing one another, on a globe; indicating clearly their equal status as world-rulers, at least of the Islamic realm.
- ⁵⁰ Nathan Mirza, *Baharistan-I-Ghaybi*, V.I, p. 212.
- ⁵¹ S. Subrahmanyam, *JAS*, 1992, pp. 348-350.
- ⁵² A.G.Frank, *Re Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*, University of California/Sage-Vistaar, 1998, p. 82.
- ⁵³ Anthony Jenkinson, *Early Voyages and Travels to Russia and Persia*, Delmar Morgan and C.H. Coote (Eds), 1886, Volume II, London, Hakluyt Society, p.87.
- ⁵⁴ M.M. Ali, 1985, *IA*, *op.cit.* pp.36-38.
- ⁵⁵ Alam Muzaffar, Francoise 'Nalini' Delvoye and Marc Gaborieu (Eds), *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture*, New Delhi, Manohar, 2000, has not even one article on Bengal.
- ⁵⁶ *Tabaqat-I-Nasiri*, p.961, p.1041.
- ⁵⁷ Rila Mukherjee, *The Lost Worlds of Europe*, Kolkata, Progressive, 2003, chs. VI and IX.
- ⁵⁸ Michael Prawdin, *The Mongol Empire: Its Rise and Legacy*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1940, p. 475.
- ⁵⁹ For more on this see Luciano Petech, *Central Tibet and the Mongols-The Yuan-sa-Skya Period of Tibetan History*, Rome, Serie Orientale Roma, Istituto Italiano Per Il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1990.
- ⁶⁰ See Rila Mukherjee, *The Lost Worlds of Europe*, 2003, chapter VI, pp. 156-157.
- ⁶¹ Anthony Jenkinson, *op.cit.* p.87 and A.G. Frank, *op.cit.*, pp. 62, 82.
- ⁶² Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* I (1974), II (1980) and III (1989), New York, Academic Books/Academic Press. See also "World System versus World Systems. A Critique" in *Critique of Anthropology*, 1991, II, 2.
- ⁶³ Maurice Lombard, *l'Islam dans sa Premiere Grandeur, VIIIe-XIe siècle*, Paris, Flammarion, 1971, p.19. In English as *The Golden Age Of Islam*, (Tr). J. Spencer, Amsterdam, 1975, pp. 9-10.
- ⁶⁴ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, III: The Perspective of the World (Tr). S.Reynolds, London, 1984, pp. 21-22.
- ⁶⁵ S. Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal 1500-1700*, New Delhi, OUP,1990, p. 261.
- ⁶⁶ Rila Mukherjee, "The Eighteenth Century and Bengal's Place in the Commercial World of the Indian Ocean". Paper presented at the conference Narratives of the Sea at the NMML, New Delhi, December 2003.