

BENGAL

INDIA'S REBELLIOUS SPIRIT



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Chapter 1

Resistance Before Remittance – Bengal Joins the Mughal Empire

Bengal Before the Mughals

Bengal came under Muslim rule in the early 13th century when Bhaktiyar Khilji orchestrated a sudden attack on the province in 1204 AD, and captured Nadia, an eastern district in present-day West Bengal. At that time, Nadia, which lay at the confluence of the Bhagirathi and Jalangi rivers, was the temporary capital of Laksmansena, the third king of the Sena Dynasty that ruled Bengal for 28 years until 1225. The octogenarian king (Laksmansena) withdrew to the south-eastern regions of Bengal, without pursuing any aims to recapture parts of his empire, which had been conquered.

Bhaktiyar Khilji was a common man. He established his kingdom at a time when most of Northern India was being transferred into the hands of Muslim rulers, mainly Afghans. He was also of Afghani descent, and belonged to the Turkish Khilji tribe. He gradually expanded his kingdom in Bengal and made Gaur his capital city. Today, this city lies on the border of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Gaur, which is also known as Gauda, Gaud and Lakhnauti, is remembered as a flourishing town by early European traders who visited Bengal. Presently, it lies in a state of decay, kept alive only by the tourists who visit the region to relive its historic magnificence through its ruins.

Bhaktiyar Khilji died in 1206 without a successor. In the two years of his rule, he had established several administrative policies which worked as early foundations of Muslim rule in Bengal. His successor,

Ghiyasuddin Iwaz Khilji, ruled from 1208 to 1227 with a two-year break in his rule between 1210 and 1212 when Ali Mardan Khan, the general who is popularly considered to be Bhaktiyar Khilji's murderer, captured the throne.

Ghiyazuddin Iwaz Khilji took the title of Ghiyas-ud-din Iwaz Shah, and carried out several military conquests to expand his kingdom. He successfully brought Vanga, Kamarupa (present-day Assam), Tirhut (northern Bihar) and Utkala (northern Orissa) under his rule.

Delhi, at this time, was under the Mamluk Sultanate with Iltutmish as its king. In 1224, Iwaz Shah was forced to accept the supremacy of the Mamluk Sultanate, after being defeated in a battle between the two armies, which took place in Teliagarh, Bengal. The Mamluk Sultanate, however, wanted absolute control of Bengal, which led to a second invasion in 1226, in which Iltutmish's army once again defeated Iwaz Shah and annexed Bengal into the Mamluk Sultanate that ruled from Delhi with Iwaz Shah as the governor of the province.

Power changed hands when Iwaz Shah died in 1227. Prince Nasiruddin Mahmud, who was the son of Iltutmish, became the Governor of Bengal and was bestowed the title, 'Malik-us-Sharq' which translates into 'King of the East'. His consolidation of Bengal with the provinces of Oudh and Bihar are known to be one of the reasons why he earned this title. He died after a year and a half in 1229, and the governorship of Bengal passed into the hands of Malik Ikhtiyaruddin Balka Khilji, who styled himself as the ruler of Bengal.

Iltutmish put an end to Balka Khilji's rule by defeating and killing him in battle. Malik Alauddin Masud Jani was named the new Governor of Bengal, and he governed the province from its capital, Lakhnauti. Previous efforts of consolidation started by Prince Nasiruddin Mahmud were stopped and Bihar was put under separate governance.

In this way, Bengal continued to remain a province of the Delhi Sultanate during the reign of the Mamluk dynasty until the ninth Sultan of the dynasty, Ghiyas-ud-din Balban, sent his son Mahmud Shah, also known as Naseeruddin Bughra Khan, as the new Governor in 1281. Bughra Khan governed Bengal adeptly for the next 6 years. When his

father, Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban, died in 1287, he declared Bengal to be independent of the central Delhi sultanate, which came under Bughra Khan's son, Qaiqabad's rule. Not very long after his accession to the throne, Qaiqabad marched towards Bengal to reconquer the province. The armies confronted each other on the banks of the Saryu river but father and son reached an agreement to avoid the battle. Qaiqabad acknowledged his father's independence from the Delhi crown, and allowed Bughra Khan to rule Bengal.

In 1291, Bughra Khan's son, Rukunuddin Kaikos, became the next king of Bengal. By now, the kingdom could be divided into four regions—Bihar, Lakhnauti-Devkot region in north Bihar, Satgaon-Hughli region in southwest Bengal, and Sonargaon region in east Bengal. His successor, Shamsuddin Firoz, continued the expansion of the kingdom after coming to power in 1300. He annexed Mymensingh in the Sylhet region of east Bengal and Sonargaon in south-east Bengal, in addition to resisting attacks from the Delhi Sultanate. Firoz's relationship with Bughra Khan and Kaikos is unknown.

His son, Ghiyasuddin Bahadur Shah I, began his rule in 1322. When the Tughlaq Sultanate of Delhi decided to bring Bengal under its rule, Bahadur Shah was attacked and killed by Bahram Khan, a general of the Delhi Sultanate.

Bahram Khan became the new Governor of Bengal in 1328, and remained so until his death in 1338, when his armour bearer, Fakruddin Mubarak Shah, emerged as an independent king of Sonargaon. At the same time, another senior official by the name of Allauddin Ali Shah named himself the Sultan of Lakhnauti, and a third king by the name of Haji Iliyas rose in the region of Satgaon.

In their struggle for absolute power, the three kings fought each other, and Haji Iliyas became the new king of Bengal, thus laying down the foundation of the Iliyas Shahi dynasty in 1342. The dynasty suffered a brief period of suspension when, in 1414, a powerful *zamindar* named Raja Ganesh killed Shihabuddin Bayazid Shah—a usurper of the Iliyas Shahi dynasty, whose act of usurpation had allowed chaos to weaken the kingdom.

Raja Ganesh’s dynasty lasted for a short period, from 1414 to 1436, when the Ilyas Shahi dynasty was restored by a descendant of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty—a man named Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah. The dynasty continued to rule till 1487, when the Habshi dynasty came into power in Bengal for a short period of 7 years. In 1494, Alauddin Husain Shahi established the Husain Shahi dynasty ruling until 1533, when the Afghan adventurer Sher Shah Suri, annexed Bengal into his kingdom (which already included parts of Bihar). It was his policies that led to the emergence of the Baro Bhuiyans, who were tribal chieftains, who came into a lot of power.

Sher Shah Suri expanded his kingdom significantly. In 1540, he ousted Humayun and took over the throne in Delhi. Humayun eventually recaptured the throne but Bengal remained under the rule of the Suri dynasty till 1564, when an Afghan by the name of Taj Shah Karrani, who was formerly an employee of Sher Shah Suri, conquered Bengal and brought it under the reign of the Karrani Dynasty. During his reign, Bengal’s capital moved to Tanda from Gaur (Lakhnauti). Taj Shah’s brother, Suleiman Khan Karrani, succeeded the throne in 1566 and it was during this time that Akbar decided to bring Bengal under Mughal suzerainty.

The Karrani Rulers

Aware of both Akbar’s intentions and of the Mughal army’s strength, Sulaiman Karrani adopted a submissive approach and agreed to include Akbar’s name in the coins as well as in the *khutbah* read at the mosques. This artificial creation of diplomatic peace was only meant to buy time. The underlying objective was to gather Afghans and rebel against the Mughals. However, Sulaiman’s early death in October 1572 did not give him the chance to strike back.

His son, Bayazid Khan Karrani, succeeded the throne for a short period of time—before he was betrayed and killed by his brother-in-law, Hansu, who claimed the throne for himself. The deceased king’s nobles lost no time in dethroning Hansu. In this way, Bengal’s sultanate passed to Sulaiman’s youngest son, Daud Khan Karrani—an ambitious ruler

who dreamed of extending Bengal's sultanate over the entire Indian sub-continent.

Daud Khan chose to openly and aggressively display his distaste for Mughal authority by breaking allegiance with the Mughals, and having the coins minted with his name. This was clearly an act of rebellion, which displeased the Mughal emperor. In 1574, Akbar led a large army towards Bengal and, after successfully uprooting the Afghans up to Patna, entrusted the operation to be completed by a 20,000-strong army, left in the capable hands of veteran commander Munim Khan. The army penetrated as far as the Afghan capital of Tanda, and victoriously occupied Tanda on September 25, 1574. Bengal's sultanate was delivered into the hands of the Mughals, who forced Daud Khan Karrani to flee to Orissa, which had been annexed into the Karrani Empire by his father.

Munim Khan, in consultation with Raja Todar Mal, took up residence in the capital city of Tanda with the objective of consolidating political and financial matters in Bengal as per Mughal policies.

This however, was a task more colossal than the annexation of the province. Bengal had a reputation of being extremely difficult for outsiders. The Afghans who ruled the place had integrated into the local atmosphere but had failed to successfully import their culture into the region. The Mughals were unaware of these impending difficulties as they began the assimilation of Bengal—a hotbed for rebellion and chaos—into the Mughal Empire. The biggest concerns for the Imperial administrators during these early years were the Afghans and Baro Bhuiyans (tribal chieftains) who seemed to have formidable control over the region and its people.

Afghan rebels were quick to join forces in the hinterlands of Bengal, which were mainly forest areas. They continued to foster an anarchical atmosphere along with the *zamindars* of Bengal. Portuguese defectors and tribal chieftains, who did not want to submit to Mughal dominion, also joined hands to fight for independent rule.

Daud Khan Karrani used this chaos in Bengal as an opportunity to regain his lost territories in the Battle of Tukaroi. Victory, however,

was a mistress difficult to lure. She decided, once again, to side with the Mughals, and Daud was forced into signing a treaty that ceded Bengal and Bihar to the Mughals, thus leaving Orissa as the only region under the control of the Karrani Dynasty.

With Mughal authority established more firmly in Bengal, Munim Khan, acting in the capacity of the Governor of Bengal, decided to move the provincial capital back to the ancient, populous city of Gaur. The decision came at a time when Bengal was going through natural geographical renovations caused by the shifting of River Ganga's main course. Additionally, Bengal had been experiencing a lot of political turmoil as power shifted from the Afghans to the Mughals. Administrative and political instability led to neglect of the canals that were linked to the lagoons in Gaur, thus triggering the stagnation of water. Before this could be remedied, a deadly plague swept through the city, killing as many as 300 people each day. Munim Khan also lost his life to the plague in October 1575.

Chaos nourished itself through the plague and the transfer of power from one dynasty to another. Having lost a capable Governor, Akbar realised that he could not allow Bengal to fall into anarchy once again. He appointed another decorated commander, Hussain Quli Beg, who bore the title of 'Khan-i-Jahan', as the new Governor. Hussain Quli's primary assignment was to control the situation in Bengal.

The city of Gaur had been devoured by the plague, its population reduced unimaginably in a short period of time. The new Governor reached Tanda, accompanied by Raja Todar Mal, in November. Recognizing the mistake made by his predecessor, Khan-i-Jahan decided that Tanda should be restored as the capital of Bengal.

Daud Khan Karrani, who had been waiting all this time for an opportunity to salvage lost territories, saw Munim Khan's death as the perfect catalyst. He sought the support of scattered Afghans and met the Mughal army in a decisive battle on the banks of the Padma River in central Bengal. The Afghans tasted a crushing defeat and, Daud Khan Karrani, the last independent ruler of Bengal, was captured and beheaded by the Mughals.

Mughal Turncoats

The death of the Karrani Dynasty's last successor increased the Mughals' foothold in their eastern-most province. Changing geographies, stubborn insurgents and dying subjects had kept the Mughals busy until now. Unfortunately, Bengal's penchant for rebellion turned out to be more deeply entrenched than the Mughals had expected. At a time when external factors had been restrained to a certain extent, internal mutiny caused mayhem in the empire's administration efforts.

Akbar had established a robust administrative system throughout his empire, where several posts and titles were created to run the empire efficiently. His reign saw a powerful central governance system, which branched into 12 *subahs* that later expanded into 15. Bengal, one of the richest *subahs*, was divided into 19 *sarkars* that further bifurcated into *parganas*. A system called *mansabdari* was used for military organisation, where every officer in the army held a rank known as *mansabdar* and was assigned a specific cavalry that he must provide to the government. *Mansabdars* enjoyed extravagant payments for maintaining their forces. Akbar also had strict measures in place to ensure that the quality of the forces held by the *mansabdars* was not endangered by degradation. The revenue system, which was formerly a decentralised system, underwent a transformation and was placed under the control of the central government with the application of the *dahsala* system—the brainchild of Raja Todar Mal, who had earlier served as a revenue officer under Sheh Shah Suri.

This alteration in the revenue system reduced the authority of the *mansabdars*, who earlier had the revenues exacted from their region under their disposal. Akbar also ordered his *mansabdars* to brand and present the forces that they were paid to maintain. These changes in the law created widespread bitterness among Mughal officials, leading to an atmosphere of unrest.

Furthering these factors of chaos was Akbar's lack of foresight. The emperor had an inclination for reprimanding disgruntled officials by sending them off to Bengal, where agitation among the locals and a frenzied administration awaited them. This led to the concentration

of recalcitrant rebels in a region that was far from the Mughal capital and had a history of insurgence. In 1579, when Bengal was under the governance of Muzaffar Khan Turbati, Masum Khan Kabuli, a resentful *mansabdar* from the Bihar region, rebelled in Bihar and later travelled to Bengal, and made an alliance with the Qaqshals of North Bengal. In April 1580, the combined armies stormed into the fortress of Tanda and killed the presiding Governor. They claimed Bengal as an independent territory and proclaimed Mirza Muhammad Hakim as the new king of Bengal and Bihar. The mutiny leaders took up high offices following their declaration of a new empire. *Zamindars* of the area, who had long resented Mughal authority, were quick to throw off their allegiance to Akbar and impose independent authority in their regions too. For two years, Bengal and parts of Bihar remained beyond the reach of the Mughal Empire.

Akbar sent Raja Todar Mal along with other officials of considerable reputation to end the insurgence and reinforce Mughal authority in the delta. The campaign successfully ended the revolt but Masum Khan Kabuli escaped from the clutches of the Mughal army. Baba Khan Qaqshal, leader of the Qaqshals, died of natural causes before the revolt concluded.

Subdued by the powerful imperial army, Masum Khan Kabuli fled to the Bhati region of eastern Bengal, where he found refuge under another emerging Mughal adversary named Isa Khan.

The Baro Bhuiyans

The source of resistance against the Mughals in Bengal now was 12 chieftains known as the Baro Bhuiyans, who had come into power during Sher Shah Suri’s reign. The leader of these chieftains, Isa Khan, controlled a region that lay deep in the near-impregnable eastern riverine tracts—in the town of Katrabo, located not very far away from the city of Sonargaon.

Shahbaz Khan, who was appointed Governor of Bengal in 1583, decided to end Mughal resistance in the province and bring political stability by leading a campaign in 1584 against the leader of the

Baro Bhuiyans. Early success helped the Mughals seize Sonargaon and destroy Isa Khan's seat in the town of Katrabo but defeat followed in the battles of Egarasindur and Bhawal. The Mughals retreated to Tanda and Isa Khan regained his authority over the Bhati region. In 1586, he signed a peace treaty with Shahbaz Khan, which required Masum Khan Kabuli—the Mughal turncoat who had taken asylum with Isa Khan—to send his son to the Delhi Court as a sign of his subjugation to the Mughal Empire. The treaty also implied that Masum should consider a pilgrimage to Mecca before presenting himself before the court.

The compromise, however, did not deter Masum Khan Kabuli from standing up against the Mughals in future encounters. Instead of going on the pilgrimage, he took up residence in the town of Katrabo, which was also the seat of Isa Khan, and continued to resist Mughal rule along with other Baro Bhuiyans. This put the province of Mughal-ruled Bengal in a precarious spot.

A change of governance renewed Mughal focus on the chieftains who had been successful so far in creating friction throughout Bengal. In 1594, Raja Man Singh reached Bengal as the new Governor. After establishing Rajmahal as his new provincial capital, he started a fresh campaign in 1595 against the Baro Bhuiyans of the Bhati region. Powerful chieftains who did not want to submit to the Mughals took refuge with Isa Khan, who put together a large army along with the disaffected Mughal general, Masum Khan Kabuli. In August 1597, the Mughals were defeated and the unremitting Isa Khan continued ruling the area with the least Mughal interference, precociously according conjectural allegiance to Akbar whenever it was right to do so. Two years later, he died of natural causes.

His death served as an impetus for the Governor, who spearheaded vigorous campaigns against the rest of the Baro Bhuiyans and Musa Khan (Isa Khan's son and successor). With his capital in Rajmahal, Raja Man Singh incorporated Dhaka, which was located at the heart of the hinterlands of Bengal, as the centre of his military campaigns in 1602. He wiped out all enemies before he returned to Agra in 1605 to attend to the ailing emperor, who died soon after.

Akbar’s son, Jahangir, who succeeded the throne in November 1605, lacked his father’s political and military acumen. His rule saw early seeds of the East India Company’s rule being sowed on India’s prosperous lands. However, this should not overrule the fact that it was during his regime that Bengal was finally able to come under regular Mughal administration.

Jahangir dispatched his childhood friend, Islam Khan Chisti to Bengal as the new Governor. Thirty-seven-year-old Islam Khan was a man of great self-discipline, and proved his extraordinary bravado by clearing Bengal of remnant Mughal rebels. He established Dhaka, officially known as Jahangirnagar, as the new provincial capital in order to entrench Mughal authority in the regions of Bengal that would otherwise be impenetrable. The new Governor successfully integrated the powerful Bengal chieftains into imperial service, who soon started to fight alongside the Mughals.

The Baro Bhuiyans and other Mughal enemies gradually started to accept the strength and determination of the Mughals in terms of their authority over Bengal. Musa Khan, son of Isa Khan, the once powerful overlord of the Bhati region, made several attempts of rebellion but was also subdued by the Mughals. The subjugation of the Baro Bhuiyans took a considerable amount of time and cost the imperial Court a lot of money. What eventually worked was the policy of ‘divide and rule’—a concept that was later used by the East India Company to establish British Raj in the country.

Raja Man Singh first took notice of the lack of unity among the Baro Bhuiyans during his governorship in Bengal, which started in 1594. This lack of unity among the chieftains was quickly exploited by Man Singh, who provided them with imperial favours and rewards—thus playing them off against each other, and avoiding absolute unity of the Bhuiyans, which could prove treacherous for the empire. The absence of a unified Bhati region, along with the significant resources available for the governors to dispense, made it possible for the Mughals to victoriously extend their authority through eastern Bengal.

In 1613, when Qasim Khan became the Governor of Bengal, he allowed Musa Khan to take part in Mughal expeditions against other enemies. Musa Khan, along with several other Baro Bhuiyans who had acute knowledge of eastern Bengal, helped the Mughals secure the lands and actively participated in several expeditions.

With east Bengal under Mughal control, Islam Khan, who was the Governor of Bengal in early 1613, sent an army into Koch Behar in northern Bengal to crush a new kingdom that had emerged when the Kamata Kingdom ruled by the Koch dynasty had split after the death of their king, Nara Narayan, in 1586. When the kingdom was divided, the region that became Koch Behar was ruled by Nara Narayan's son, Lakshmi Narayan, while the other half, called Koch Hajo, was ruled by the Nara Narayan's nephew, Raghudeva.

It is said that Lakshmi Narayan was a weak king who eventually agreed to become a vassal of the Mughal Empire. Raghudeva, on the other hand, is said to have collaborated with the rulers of the Ahom kingdom, merging the region into present-day Assam. Koch Behar remained a vassal of the Mughal Empire until the Koch King, Pran Narayan, rebelled against the Mughals in 1661 during Aurangzeb's rule. However, Mir Jumla, who was Bengal's Governor at that time, suppressed the resistance, conquered Koch Behar once again and renamed it Alamgirnagar. In 1711, the Mughals signed a peace treaty with Koch Behar, restoring the independence of the kingdom that had already lost several territories to the Mughals, the Ahoms and later to Bhutan.

Bengal's Integration with the Mughal Empire

Jahangirnagar (Dhaka), the capital of the province, metamorphosed from being a military outpost for the Mughals to becoming the epicentre of trade and activity. Hindu merchants and moneylenders collaborated with the Mughals to support their conquests of Bengal and, in return, the Mughals provided them with political security. Most of these merchant bankers hailed from the Marwar region of Rajasthan,

and were known as Marwaris. They were spread far and wide and were available even in the remotest areas.

Bengal experienced a cultural integration as it grew and prospered in business, trade and agriculture. The region experienced an influx of immigrants who came in the form of government officials, Marwari traders who accompanied their patrons, and skilled artisans required by the armies to create artillery. This change in the environment of the delta region was in stark contrast to its pre-Mughal days when invaders and conquerors would have to adjust to the atmosphere of Bengal, thus alienating themselves from the rest of India.

The architecture of Bengal witnessed noticeable Mughal influence. Mughal governors and nobilities confidently imported their architectural ideologies to Bengal and started building structures that were similar to those built in the northern regions of the Empire.

While east Bengal had been relatively more difficult to tame, it had a higher population of Muslims than other regions of Bengal. It was also one of the most fertile regions of the imperial kingdom. The shift of the River Ganga collided with the Mughal conquest of Bengal, making the region more arable and fertile for agriculture. While locals of the delta region had been transforming forest lands into cultivation areas even before the advent of the Mughals, it was the consolidation of Bengal with the Mughal Empire and the role of spiritual leaders called *pirs* that truly supported the transformation of the delta region into an agrarian frontier.

Several oral narratives of the folks and written accounts of travellers show that the *pirs* assisted the people of the delta in clearing the forests, which were considered wild and dangerous by the locals. Once cleared, the holy men assisted the people in making the lands fit for the cultivation of wet rice. *Pirs* were given tax-free grants of jungle lands which they could transform into arable lands. This helped the Empire increase the production of rice and cash crops from Bengal, which could be exported for high returns.

The changing course of River Ganga improved transportation by linking north India with east Bengal, which meant that local produce

could easily be shipped to the central government and men could easily travel to and from east Bengal and the imperial heartland. Eventually, the production of rice was so high that east and south Bengal were able to export rice from the two primary ports of Chittagong and Satgaon to other regions and countries in the Indian Ocean.

As for west Bengal, cash crops like cotton and silk emerged as the most profitable source of income for the locals. The Mughals had an inclination for luxury products like silk, produced in the Cossimbazaar region (in present-day Murshidabad). Bengal's unification with the Mughal Empire provided it with access to a larger market and improved the income of cultivators, artisans and traders of the region.

The indigenous people of the delta region had now been transformed into cultivators of the land. Religious piety was seen as a driving force in the alteration of the forests, which is the reason why the area saw a notable increase in mosques and shrines dedicated to holy men. This was also a reason for the significant increase in the number of Muslims in east Bengal.

So, the atmosphere of Bengal before the arrival of the British was that of a newly transformed, fertile cultivation area where rice was the major crop, followed by high quality cotton and silk. The region was experiencing an economic boom through its agriculture and manufacturing sectors. Everything seemed to have worked with clockwork precision—the shift of the river, the entrenchment of Mughal rule and the transformation of the forests into cultivable lands. The Mughals were no longer perceived as a threat to the locals. Now that Bengal didn't seem as hostile any longer, it had readied itself for an entirely new change.

Chapter 2

The Beginning of European Trade

Early Portuguese Ships Reach Bengal

The Portuguese had already built deep and resilient inroads into India long before any of the other European countries could find sturdy footing on the subcontinent. The first two decades of Portuguese trade in India was dedicated to the establishment of trading posts mainly on the western coastline. However, Vasco Da Gama as well as Afonso de Alburqueque had mentioned about the lucrative trade prospects in Bengal in several letters to the government of Portugal.

This made way for the first official Portuguese mission to Bengal, which was led by Joao de Silveira in 1517. On his arrival, the reigning Sultan perceived him as a pirate and refused all requests for opening the ports of Bengal to trade with the Portuguese. Their first attempt to encourage commerce in this eastern province had failed.

However, the Portuguese were determined merchants who knew the rewarding trade prospects awaiting them on Bengal's shorelines. They started sending at least one fleet of ships, laden with tradable goods, every year to Bengal with the objective of making their presence felt and eventually initiating business in the region.

None of these annual visits had the impact that a storm, which started on the coasts of Ceylon, had on the expansion of Portuguese trade to eastern India.

In 1527, a Portuguese ship under the command of Alfonso de Mello accidentally arrived in Bengal when his ship was caught in a violent storm off the coast of Ceylon. The locals took him to their chieftain, who immediately imprisoned De Mello and his men. A Persian merchant by

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