



Bengal ports during the Seventeenth Century

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Abstract: *The Bay of Bengal on the Indian side has two coastal areas significant for trade: one is the Coromandel and the other is Bengal, the area where the Portuguese first sent missions in the beginning of the sixteenth century. This paper is an attempt to write the significance and the commercial activities that took place in the ports of Bengal. Bengal's richness in medieval period was legendary and the cheapness of wares there is attested to by most of the foreign travellers. The natural products of Bengal were profusely abundant. It was the advantageous position of Satgaon on the river Saraswati in the loop formed by it before it falls into the Ganges that made it the great port of Bengal. Chittagong was the chief port of Portuguese at the same time when Satgaon was also a major port. We come to know that Chittagong and Satgaon were established as ports almost at the same time both in the different direction but later they lost their importance and Hooghly replaced them as the chief port. We see that Portuguese, Dutch, English and many other traders came to India with Bengal due to its abundance of natural products. Therefore we will study about trade and commercial activities of Bengal and how ports played an important role.*

Keywords: Bengal, Port, trade, economy

The author of *Riyaz-us salatin* described Bengal as *Jannat-ul bilad* (Paradise of Provinces).¹ No official farman, parwana or other official papers of the Mughal empire ever mentioned Bengal without adding 'the paradise of India'.² Bengal's richness in medieval period was legendary and the cheapness of wares there is attested to by most of the foreign travellers.³ The natural products of Bengal were profusely abundant. In the beginning of the seventeenth century Pyrard de Laval found that Bengal exported rice not only to several parts

of India, including far off places like Goa and Malabar, but even to Sumatra, the Moluccas and all the islands of Sunda. Bengal was said to be a 'very nursing mother who supplies them with their entire subsistence and food'.⁴ Bengal sugar was not only sent to Golconda and the Carnatic, but to Arabia and Mesopotamia through the towns of Moka and Basra, and to Persia by way of Bandar Abbasi.⁵ The region produced such a quantity of cotton and silks, that it could be called the common store house for these two kinds of merchandise not of Hindoustan or of the Great Moguls only, but of all the neighbouring Kingdoms and even Europe.⁶ Therefore, it was quite natural that trade and commercial activities were brisk in medieval Bengal and, hence, its ports played an important role in the flourishing of its economy.

Topography of ports:-

To study about the importance of ports we first need to know about the topography of the ports. Chittagong was the main gateway to the royal capital Gaur. Its geographical position lent it importance, situated as it is at the mouth of the Meghna and, hence, the port was most convenient for navigation. The Meghna was the principal route to Gaur. The other being up the Satgaon situated on the river Saraswati, which used to take off from Hooghly river at Tribeni, 50 km north of Calcutta. Running parallel to the Hooghly river, Satgaon was more accessible to larger ships. The topography of Hooghly was not very different from what it is today. Kalikata was an insignificant village on the left bank. The towns of Hooghly, Chandernagore, Chinsura, Serampore and Barrackpore flourished only as European settlements later on. The river

¹ Ghulam Hussain Salim, *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, transl. Abdus Salam, Idarah-i-Adabiyat, Delhi, 1975, p. 4

² S.C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-* 57, vol. iii, Murray, London, 1905, p. 160

³ Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal 1669-79* ed., R.C. Temple, AES, New Delhi, 1905, pp. 193-194; Huyghen John Linschoten, *The Voyages of John Huyghen Van Linschoten to the East Indies (1583-1589)*, vol. I ed., A.C. Burnel & P.A. Tiele, vol. I, Hakluyt Society, London, 1885, p. 93.

⁴ Francois Pyrard de Laval, *The Voyage of Pyrard de Laval*, tr. Grey & Ball, Hakluyt Society, London, 1888, p. 327

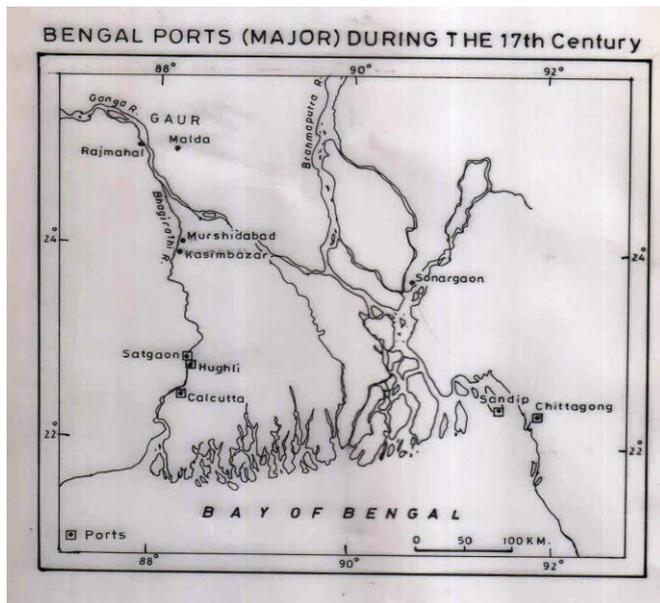
⁵ Francois Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire 1656-68 A.D.*, ed. & rev. Archibald Constable, Gulshan Books, Kashmir, 2012, p. 437.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 439

Hooghly was not navigable for larger vessels up than the Adhi Ganga.

Ports of Bengal:-

A Port is a knot where ocean and inland transport lines meet and intervene.⁷Therefore Bengal ports as we see are important to study because during the seventeenth century trading activities were brisk in Bengal and ports played an important role in it. There were major as well as minor port but here we take up major ports which played an important role in the economy of Bengal.



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In western Bengal, since 1537, Satgaon was the chief mart where all the merchants of Northern India flocked with their merchandise. It was the advantageous position of Satgaon on the river Saraswati in the loop formed by it before it falls into the Ganges that made it 'the great port of Bengal' for ocean going ships in the Middle Ages. It was the chief emporium of Portuguese trade since 1537 and was popularly known to them as 'porto-piqueno'.⁹ Even in 1567 Caesar Fredrici

found Satgaon 'a reasonable *faire citie*, where every year thirty or thirty five ships were laden.'¹⁰ But the historic port of Satgaon began to decline from the middle of the sixteenth century mainly due to ravages of nature. The river Saraswati on which it was situated and through which flowed the main current of Hooghly began silting up. Even the smallest craft, let alone the large vessels, could not ply except for a few weeks during the monsoon. This sounded the death knell to Satgaon as an important port.¹¹ Its importance as a port was visibly declining.¹² Apart from the natural causes, the activities of traders especially the Portuguese also accelerated the decline of Satgaon and the rise of Hooghly as the principal port of Bengal. The Portuguese were the dominant sea-power in the Indian Ocean during the sixteenth century and the greater portion of the seaborne trade of Bengal was concentrated in their hands. They had begun to frequent Bengal from the fifteen thirties and had important settlements at Satgaon. In 1560 they felt necessary to build temporary quarters at a place downstream during the trading seasons as their big ships could not reach Satgaon and burnt those villages when they left Bengal every year after brisk trade activities.¹³ But they realised that the making and unmaking of villages did not lead to either comfort or economy and so were naturally anxious to shift their 'porto piqueno' to a convenient place on a navigable river with sufficient anchorage. Thus, their choice fell on Hooghly, which soon supplanted Satgaon as the principal port of Bengal. The great majority of merchant princes of Satgaon moved only a short distance and settled down at Hooghly, which rose to the position of the chief port of Bengal and remained so throughout the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth century.¹⁴ Besides the trading activities of Malaya, Arab, and Indian traders, even

1912, p. 47; Porto Piqueno is a Portuguese term meaning by Small Port.

¹⁰ Caesar de Fredrici, *Extracts of Master Caesar Fredrichis: His Eighteen year Indian observation, 1563-81*, Purchas his pilgrims, MacLehouse Glasgow, 1905, p. 114.; *Faire Citie-Fair City*

¹¹ Salimullah, *Tarikh-i Bangla*, tr. Gladwin, Calcutta, 1788, p. 87; J.J.A Campos, op.cit., pp. 22, 57; S. Dey, *Hooghly Past and Present*, Calcutta, 1906, pp.9, 150; W.W. Hunter, *Statistical account of Bengal*, Turbner, London, 1875, p. 299.

¹² Fredrici, op.cit., p. 115; C.R. Wilson, *Early Annals of the English in Bengal being the Bengal Public Constitutions for the first half of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. I, Thacker, Spink & Co., London, 1900, pp.134-136; Crawford, *A Brief History of Hughli District*, Hughli Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1902, p. 2.

¹³ Fredrici, op.cit, pp.113-114.

¹⁴ C.R. Wilson, op.cit., p. 135.

⁷ G.G Weigned, 'Some elements in Port Geography', *Geographical review*, XL, viii (April 1958), p.185 cited by Atiya Habeeb Kidwai, 'Conceptual and Methodological Issues: Ports, port cities and port-Hinterlands', *Ports and Their Hinterlands in India (1700-1950)* ed. Indu Banga, Manohar, Delhi, 1992, p.10

⁸ Irfan Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire*, OUP, Delhi, 1982, p.11B. This is drafted by me with the help of mentioned Atlas.

⁹ Huyghen Van Linschoten, op.cit., vol.I, p. 93; J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal with Map and Illustrations*, Janaki Prakashan, Patna, 1979, p. 113; L.S.S. O'Malley, Manmohan Chakraborty, *District Gazetteer: Hooghly* Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta,

the inland trade was mostly diverted to Hooghly, although Satgaon remained the royal port and the seat of the governor and the imperial customs house till 1632 when Hooghly took its place officially as the royal port.¹⁵

Chittagong was the chief port of Portuguese at the same time when Satgaon was also a major port¹⁶. They termed Chittagong as *porto Grande* and Satgaon *porto piqueno*. Chittagong¹⁷. This was an important port used by the traders from the Middle East, China, Turkey, Europe to trade with this part of the world. Back during the 9th century the activities of the port had increased tremendously as the Arab traders started using the port. They used to call the port 'Samunda'. The port was under their control at the time. The sixteenth century saw the arrival of the Portuguese with Joao da Selveira as the first Portuguese captain to reach there. The Arakan Kingdom provided Peninsula to the Portuguese and used them as a buffer against Mughal Empire.¹⁸ In 1552, De Barros described Chittagong as the most famous and wealthy city in Bengal. In 1598, Van Linschoten assigned to Chittagong a position fifty miles eastward from the mouth of the Karnaphuli.¹⁹ The first Portuguese settlement founded by Affonso de Mello in 1537 was obviously in the real Chatigam. In the literature of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries and, especially in the Portuguese travelogues, there are frequent references to a 'city of Bengala', which is generally supposed to have been Chittagong. This is also substantiated by Duarte de Barbosa who was one of the earliest Portuguese to write a geographical account of the African and Indian coasts. He mentions that the Bay of Bengal is a gulf which enters towards the north and at its inner extremity there is a very great city inhabited by Moors which is called Bengala, with a very good harbour. All evidence points to the conclusion that Chittagong was real city of Bengala, spoken of by the early writers. As Chittagong was the great port of Bengal, it was more likely the great city too, that is

¹⁵ Crawford, op.cit., pp.188-89; J.N. Sarkar, vol. 2, op.cit., p. 318; W.W. Hunter, vol. 3, op.cit., pp.299-300; G. Toynbee, George, *A Sketch of the Administration of the Hooghly District (1795-1845)*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1888., p. 2, Sumbhoo Chunder Dey, op.cit., p. 18.

¹⁶ K.N Chaudhuri, 'Foreign trade', *The Cambridge economic history of India*, Vol. I, ed. Tapan Ray Chaudhuri and Irfan Habib, Orient Longman, 1984

¹⁷ Porto Grande is a Dutch Term used for Grand Harbour

¹⁸ Kaushik Roy, *Warfare in pre-British India, 1500 B.C to 1740*, Routledge, New York 2014, p. 185.

¹⁹ Linschoten Van Huyghen, op.cit., vol.1, p. 94.

frequently referred to by the travellers. Thus, we come to know that Chittagong and Satgaon were established as ports almost at the same time both in the different direction but later they lost their importance and Hooghly replaced them as the chief port. Abdul Hamid Lahori, the official historian of Shahjahan, states that 'During the rule of the Bengalees a party of Feringi merchants, inhabitants of Sandip, used to frequent Satgaon and populated a place on the estuary one *kos* beyond Satgaon.'²⁰ In due course, a large town grew up here and it came to be known as Hooghly Bandar²¹. It became a practice for ships from *farang* to call at this port and carry on their trade. Caesar Fredrici spoke only about Satgaon in 1567 and did not mention Hooghly. Lahori's statement is a definite hint that Hooghly port did not emerge suddenly and that it took considerable time for its growth and development. In 1576, it was only after Akbar's conquest that they established themselves on a firm footing in Hooghly. Neither any Persian chronicle nor any foreign traveller ever corroborated the contention that Hooghly was founded before Akbar's conquest of Bengal. On the contrary, we find sufficient evidence both among the indigenous and foreign writers (who were earlier authorities than Lahori) that the foundation of Hooghly can be fixed somewhere after 1576, i.e., after Akbar's conquest of Bengal. The Hooghly port flourished with amazing rapidity under the Portuguese. Ralph Fitch, the English Traveller who visited Hooghly in 1588, says that Hooghly was the 'chief keep' of the Portuguese²². After 1632 Hooghly became the chief seat of a considerable maritime trade carried on by local traders. Fr. John Cabral writes on November 12, 1633, that the vessels of India, China, Malacca and Manila were repaired there in great numbers. The Portuguese missionary further says, 'not only the natives of the country, but also Hindusthanis, the Mongols, the Persians and the Armenians came there to fetch goods.'²³ After the rise of Hooghly, Chittagong which so far enjoyed a preeminent position began to lose its commercial importance.²⁴ Thus, it appears that at the end of the sixteenth century Hooghly became the first port in Bengal and fully deserved to be called not *porto piqueno*, but *porto Grande*—the name by which Chittagong was known to the Portuguese. The Portuguese

²⁰ Abdul Hamid Lahori, *Badshahnama*, Vol. I, Calcutta Asiatic Society, 1867, p.434; Elliot & Dowson, *History of India as told by its own Historians*, vol. vii, London, 1877, p. 31.

²¹ Bandar is a Persian term used for port

²² J.J.A, Campos, op.cit., p.113

²³ Sushil Chaudhuri, op.cit., p.40

²⁴ J.J.A Campos, op.cit. 113

traveller Barbosa found many merchants in the 'ports of Bengala' who also owned large ships and traded with Malabar, Cambay, Pegu, Tenassarim, Sumatra, Ceylon and Malacca. After 1632 Hooghly became the chief seat of a considerable maritime trade carried on by local traders. But the port began to decline from about the middle of the eighteenth century which is evident from the fact that the gross collection of ports dues and custom dues (*saiyar*) realised in Hooghly amounted only to Rs. 91,196 in 1768 while in Calcutta it rose as high up as 890,604.²⁵ The process of the decline of Hooghly port was indeed very rapid as we find only five years later that the '*saiyar*' realised at Hooghly was only Rs. 62,644.²⁶ The seed of the decay and decline of the Hooghly port can be traced back to the withdrawal of the English East India Company from Hooghly and the establishment of their settlement at Calcutta. As a centre of trade Hooghly had several limitations. Firstly, it was separated from the sea; secondly, as it stood on the west bank, it was open to attack from the land. The position of Calcutta, on the other hand, at the lower reaches of the river made deep water channels and anchorages available which were lacking at the former port.

Import & Export:-

Manrique states that over 100 ships were yearly laden in the ports of Bengal.²⁷ Thus, articles imported to Bengal via Southern India (i.e., from Borneo, Moluccas, Sumatra, etc.) consisted of a large amount of 'worked silks, such as brocades, brocaletes, cloth, velvets, damasks, satins, tafettas, taffissirias and muslins—all from China; Cloves, nutmegs and mace from Mulaccas and Banda; and highly precious camphor from the Isles of Borneo; seashells were imported from Maldive islands. Pepper was being imported from Malabar and cinnamon from Ceylon. Red and white varieties of sandalwood, which was a rich commodity in Bengal, was obtained from Salor and Timor.²⁸ Cotton goods, Ghinghams of grass and silks of various shades as well as sugar, ghee, rice, indigo, long pepper, saltpetre and other articles, which were abundant in the Gangetic provinces, were exported from Bengal. Rice, in particular, was

exceptionally cheap in Bengal and hence it formed one of the chief articles of export to other parts of India and the East Indies. Besides rice, cotton linen was another commodity which was carried, as Linschoten observes, not only into India and all the Eastern parts but also into Portugal and other places.²⁹ The Dutch imported to Bengal 'gold from Japan, tuttenag, tin from Malaya. They also imported brimstone, quicksilver, vermilion and some cloth which, however, did not sell well in Bengal. Their export consisted rice, oil, butter, hemp, silk, cloth, raw silk, silk wrought, saltpetre, opium, turmeric, neelas (*nila*), ginghams, tapits (hanging carpet), brawles (blue and white striped cloth). Saltpetre and Amphora were the most profitable articles of their trade. The Dutch carried Indonesian pepper and spices to Bengal as also cinnamon, arecanuts and chanks from Ceylon, tin from Moluccas and Siam, Persia, and tobacco and sandalwood from Coromandel coast. They exported various grains especially wheat, rice, Bengal butter and cheese sugar and wax. They also sent opium and jute to other Asiatic places. Around the turn of the century, the exports of the Dutch from Bengal were carried to the following regions and countries in Asia: Moluccas, Batavia, Siam, Japan, Ceylon, Coromandel, Malabar, and Persia.³⁰ The English East India Company imported different types of woollen cloth such as broad cloth and woollen fabrics called perpetuanoes besides lead, copper, iron, iron wares, tute nague, vermilion, firearms and a variety of their articles generally called 'rarities'. The most important branch of Inter-Asian trade of the company from Hooghly was the sugar trade with Persia and other articles such as fine rumalls, mulmulls, cases, etc.³¹

Conclusion:-

Thus we see that Portuguese, Dutch, English and many other traders came to India to trade with Bengal due to its abundance of natural products. In this exchange ports played a significant role. However, the importance of one port was not constant and there was a shift of ports from one time period to another depending, firstly, on the drainage pattern of the rivers and their navigability; secondly, ports should be accessible

²⁵ S. Dey, *op.cit.*, p. 154.

²⁶ O'Malley and Chakrabarti, *op.cit.*, p. 190

²⁷ Manrique Fray Sebastian, *Travels of Frey Sebastian Manrique*, transl. Luard & Hosten, Hakluyt society, 1927 p. 113.

²⁸ O'Malley and Chakrabarti, *op.cit.*, p. 51; Hunter, *op.cit.*, vol. 3, p. 299.

²⁹ Pyrard de Laval, *The Voyages of Pyrard de Laval*, tr. Grey and Ball, vol. I, London, 1888, p. 327.

³⁰ William Foster, *Letters Received by the East India Company from its servant in the east*, vol. v, 1617 (Jan-June), Sampson Low Marston & comp., London, 1901, pp. 119-20.

³¹ William Foster, *The English factories in India (1668-1669)*, Vol. XIV, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1927, p. 79.

to the trading country; and, thirdly, particular ports flourished according to the dominant sea traders. Therefore, Calcutta emerged as the premier port during the third quarter of seventeenth century as it was much nearer to estuary and its position at the river made it important.³²