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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Gunter 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 were: 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 'hegemonies' 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 European.

When I first decided to focus on pre-Plassy Bengal for my PhD thesis I was faced with a formidable dilemma. How was I to reconcile my findings on the silk trade at Kasimbarz with the idea of 'Asian Trade' that focused on Indian Ocean ports? Kasimbaraz was a singular riverine port in 18th century Bengal in that it experienced a truly amazing volume of traffic. But it was neither 'costal' nor 'oceanic'. I faced difficulties in dealing with this ubiquitous topic called Asian Trade and this quantity 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 it deemed today an a-historical concept, a concept that denies modernism 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 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 (excluding 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.

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 Battuta 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 Challies (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 Ryor-uz-Sultang stated this same sentiment unambiguously.

The flag of dissidence was frequently raised from Bengal. In 1579 Ata‘i-Fazl called Bengal balghak-ghana or a 'house of turbulence'. 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 who braved this unsavoury posting. This dissidence, 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 aristocratic culture of the north. Bengalis were dismissed as 'bands of fishermen' — a livelihood
and culture that the Moghuls despised? Given this unsmiling 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 Bengalis in its turbulent history?

In earlier times Bengal was an amorphous zone which contained within it various Bengalis. In time the various Bengal coalesced into two Bengals: the one centering around Lalbagh (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 Bengalis in history there was colonial Bengal in the recent past, there was Islamic (Nawabi, Afghan, Mughal and Subani) 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 Bengali or non—araynised 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 Sinhas. Bengal therefore has made the journey from ancient Vanga, via medieval Bengal and modern Bengal, to modern Bengal in history.

Bengal's geographical boundaries have fluctuated over time; the large subah Bengal incorporating Dihar 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).

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Bengal is a frontier zone of India even today; both geographically 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 Tirthut (Mithila), and beyond; its eastern frontier depended on interactions with the Tripuras, Koch, Kama, Kanpur 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 cessionantly 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 the 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 aryabhata were consistently pushed outwards in the aftermath of the Gupta epoch that Bengal assumed its own identity. Kulke remarks:

After the decline of the Gupta Empire and of the ‘transient’ successor states under King Harsha in the early seventh century, the overwhelming majority of the early medieval states of Indraprastha process continuous agrarian expansion and political integration...this development took place mainly in those areas of the South Asian subcontinent which had been 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 Bengal, 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’ Bengalas. 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, Rath and Vardhamana in the west and Harikela and Samatara in the east. The dividing line between the two regions was Pundaradvama which comprised within it the area called Vanga (Banga). With time the different political and ethnic homelands of Bengal finally coalesced into three Bengals—Varendra or the political heartland, Vanga, its economic and cultural unit which became autonomous with the province and the often neglected Samatara (or the political ‘other’ of Varendra) with its autonomous economic heartland in Harikela. These divisions were clear to the observer by the 9th 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 time.

The peoples of Bengal—the Pundras, the Radies, the Suhasas, the Vangas and the Gondiyas along with the cities and ports of Kotiyarman, Tatralipa and Ganga—are first attested to variously in the Aitareya Brahman, the Aitareya Aranyaka; later in the
Arthaśāstra and in the texts of Ṛgveda, 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—was evidenced in ever new names for kingdoms, cities and peoples—from later Vedic literature which mention the peoples of Anga, Vanga Pandua, Tamraliptika, Subha and Raddh; from the writings of Diodorus, Curtius, Pliny and Plutarch who mention the mighty kingdoms of the Gangarides and the Prawati, their military might and the splendid emporia of Ganga in the Gangarides kingdom (both Plutarch and the anonymous The Periploos 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 Subha, Prasukha, Vanga, Tamralipta, and Pārya 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.1 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 the Madhyadeva were constantly pushed outwards as Vedic culture changed its perception of the tribals from rakshasas to melchitas, that is from monsters to unclean peoples, who might, at a later stage, be co-opted into the Vedic hierarchy, leading 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 Dharmasstra (2nd B.C.) the eastern limit of Madhyadesha had moved to Prayag in present day Uttar Pradesh. It was not only a matter of time before Magadh (in present day Bihar state) too became a part of aryabharata or madhyadesha.

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 Angirasa, Mahavastu, Vina 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 Magadh 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 hegemony around 5th 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. Harikelu or the easternmost area of Bengal was, however, on the rampart of an empire that stretched from the Ganges to the Kaveri. It is thus easy to see why the place names in the eastern parts of Bengal resemble those found in the Ganges and Brahmaputra valleys, and why the eastern sections of Bengal also tend to be more conservative in their cultural practices than those found in the western parts of the state.


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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 Gangaidera and wealthy in terms of natural and material resources, claimed dominance over the regions of Pundra, Radha 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 aryans had reached the last frontier. Rabid brahmanism under Gupta aegis combined with existing social and cultural norms to produce a unique form of aryasmita 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 Bihor and Tripura), Samatata and Kamrup remained to be aryamised. This was achieved only partially due to Buddhist-Taoist influences and the Muslim presence there.

This civilising 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 Jats 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 Brahmanism to legitimise their lineages. Many claimed kshatriya status and sought fictitious genealogies linking them to the cardinal surya-vamsi and candra-vamsi lineages of the Puranás. In some cases dynasties traced their descent from powerful Brahmanas. In either case these were tools exercised for assimilating non aryan within the dominant ideological fold. Hinduism, as Kulke points out, 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 (varnamardamdharmam) 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.
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 Gupta’s 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 Sanakata who was terribly anti-Buddhists. The early ‘aryanised’ states in Bengal—were also Buddhist—offered to 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’. 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 zone.

There was a substantial Buddhist network that already passed overland through North India. Maurice Lombard tells us of the Buddhist network of trade through Turkesthan 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 Bengali participated in this network but we know that cotton went from India to China in the 6th century through this route; Chaudhuri opines however that cotton cultivation really expanded in China in the post Sung period in the 11th century.

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-Wales, 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 in 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 Buddhist 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 centuries. Growing Islamic presence in the Charagram/Chittagong/Hatigans/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. 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 Cilicia) by the 7th century. It is likely that some of the cotton that found its way to the 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 (Simrapur/ Tamluk) 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 Irrawaddy in Central Burma, which experienced considerable trade with Bengal (on the basis of Rouletted Ware Findings), was occupied until the 8th century AD. 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 Bay 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 Irrawaddy 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 Brahmical and Buddhist ‘colonisation’ in Bengal, far from uniting the region, had actually sculpted it into two distinct political entities, especially after the rule of Suvanta. 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-Suvanta pre-Pala period in Bengal (8th-9th centuries) is traditionally described as the period of manya-nayika or interregnum. But a closer investigation of the period under review shows that this was essentially an era of Gaur (or Karn) centred view of politics in Bengal. While political authority may have declined from Gaur in the post-Suvanta period the region of Suvanta 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 vanguard of so-called ‘minor’ dynasties there: the Bhadras, the Khadgas, the Chandra, 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.

Sassaka’s legacy therefore lay in the creation of two centers of political authority in Bengal: Gaur under the Palas and Vikrampur under the Chandra. The Vikrampur state continued to promote commercial activity. The Chandra coin silver currency at a time when trade under Pala leadership from Gaur was in decline; moreover the Chandra claimed lineage from the 7th century Chandras of Arakan, undated 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 uniting 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 Megna 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 sixteenth centuries suggest that it was the only capital that had the power to issue proclamations for the whole of Bengal 21. 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 Megna and the Brahmaputra, was a political and economic nerve centre of the region from where the Chandra, the Varmans and, later the Senas, ruled Bengal. The large grants to institutions, the concentration of major building sites (Lalmapur/Paharpur) and the existence of a silver currency in Samatata suggests its rulers were wealthier and more able to offer a stable administrative system that their contemporaries in the west 22. Inscripional evidence from Samatata therefore modifies considerably the received history about Gaur as the only durable capital of an 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 Chandra, used a silver currency in the east. The Chandra were Buddhists from Rohanagar in Bilhore. 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 reconquered 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 Ocean 23.
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 century. 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 Puttikera gave his daughter to King Aungthithu of Pagan in marriage. The most important and longest-lived centres in Bengal (in proximity to Arakan) were the towns of Cumilla and Mainamati, both in the vicinity of the Lalmai range. Mainamati was very likely Pathikera, the neighbouring state to which Burmese chronicles attributed so much significance. It was at that place where as late as in AD 1219-20 one of the rulers (named Ranavankamalla Harikeludeva) made a donation to the monastery of the Buddhist godess Dargottua.

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 (Senaas) who 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 Vikramapura 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 Bhojavarma can clearly articulate an alternate discourse of kingship from Pala to Sena times in eastern Bengal.

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 inscriptions. 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 (Adhikaranas and Adhishthanas), mention of various taxes, names of functionaries in charge of specific manufactures, designations of supervisors of public and religious edifices (Avanathika) and special officers (Devadroni-Sambuddha) 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.
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 Quaritch-Wales, Denys Lombard and K.N.Chaudhuri (among others) who pointed out the topographical similarities between Bengal and South East Asia. 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 been based on control over surplus grain and control over the waterways. 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’ 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 peoples.

From the time of the Guptaas 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 Brahmanas in the forested lands of the eastern margin (Samastata) 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 Samastata to Kamrup and the hostile territory outside it. After the 10th century there was a hiatus in the
agarian expansion; the eastern delta (Samatata) engaged more in trade and less in agriculture. This development was dictated by events between the 7th to the 9th centuries (that is the period between Sansanka’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 Sansanka. Agricultural activities became more important; trade declined because of Sansanka’s hostility to Buddhism. The eastern delta region or Samatata remained geographically and culturally a distinct zone and often challenged Gaur’s political hegemony. Moreover, this area was staunchly Buddhist—in vino the large Buddhist settlements of Mainamati-Lalmat, Paharpur and Mahasthan. The questionable political allegiances of the eastern parts became evident after the downfall of Sansanka’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, Khadji 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 Chavdas 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 course Vanga had metamorphosed into colonial Bengal.

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 the Mongols chose to rewrite the political map of Asia and then again in the 16th century) 3) first under the Hussain 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 Bakhtiarabad 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 Iberia. 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 and regions had also emerged — Bengali.

Eastern and western Bengal were frequently at war. In the 14th century the Banaras referred to the fact that the ruler of Banagal (or Samatata/Harikela in whose dominions lay
Chattagram/Chittagong/Chatighat and which Ibn Batuta visited) was frequently at war with the ruler of Lakhnawati. Ibn Batuta thus followed the accepted practice of distinguishing between Bangalath and Lakhnawati. It seems, in contemporary perception, that the ancient vanga or the west had become synonymous with Bangalath 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.27 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 barakela with its difficult terrain, suspect loyalties and the magnificent port of Chattagram/Chatighat/Chittagong at its southern tip; this was only partially achieved by the quasi-independent Mughal subedar Shaitana Khan in the end of the 17th century. We know that between the 15th and 18th centuries the Chattagram-Jagdia area was fought over by the kings of Arakan, Tipurah and Bengal28. 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 Shahin, throughout the 14th century, attempts were made to extend hegemony over Kamrup, Kamata, Tibet and Nepal to the north and the powerful (Bangal 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 southwestern delta ‘active’ was an activity that extended the eastern frontiers of Bengal29.

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 Arakan30. Now, in the 16th century, the Husain Shahin 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 1556. This bridge connected Saptagram and Triveni with the main channel of the Bhagirathi because the Saraswati had dried up. This venture reflects the westward shift under Husain Shahi leadership that resulted in a reorientation of trade routes to the west of Bengal.
Under Husain Shahi reign 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 Sylvet (a well known intellectual centre of Haritaka) 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 Kanpur in the north to Kochi 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 is this region continued unabated and Hugli took over the functions of Saptagram by connecting long distance trade so 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 Suri'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 satellite. The Moghuls 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 Bengalis through history that we noted had combined into the two Bengalis that still exist today: the one situated around Chittagong, functioning through its port of Hugli; the other situated around Dhaka, functioning through Chittagram. While the Gaur-Pandua-Lakhnowati-Mashhadabad bloc housed Bengal's better known western capitals the Dacca-Vikrampur-Sylhet region also 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 Sylhet and Haritaka.)

The Dacca-Vikrampur area was the last frontier of Bengal; witness the Chandra and Varmans kings who ruled quasi-independently from the region as we have already seen. In the wake of the ferment produced by the takeover of Lakhnowati the last Sena king, Lakshman, ran away to this area; later in the post-Moghul ferment of the ephemeral takeover of Gaur dispossessed Afghan/Turk adventurers also fled here. 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 Exxon 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 Turnier 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 millennium 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 hegemonies 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 Ghaznavids and Ghurid kings (the Pathans came from the same area), Turkestan or that vast area between China and Russia which comprised the Mongol khans 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 Turkic-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 groups.

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 short-lived 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-Nabudhipur complex would dictate Bengal’s mercantile history. Moreover the grant of decree also signaled 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 Cronologies 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

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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. Subrahmanyan (1992) says that the second Murshid 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 reign; this however is incorrect. He had been appointed Naib Nazim of Dacca by Shuja around 1727 and he remained in this position until 1734 when he was transferred to Orissa as Naib Nazim. The second Murshid Quli and his associates Mir Hasibullah 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 Bara 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 century 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 links.

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 Conquists 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 book 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 Abbas\(^4\). During Jahangir’s reign a Persian embassy toured all provinces of the Mughal empire to see the famous 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 Dinajpur\(^5\).

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 Arabians became a favorite, in time Persian immigrants settled at the Arakanese court of M-rak U persuaded the Arakanese court in terms of rituals and commerce. By the 17th century they were present in ‘Thailand as well — notably is Mergui and Ayyuthia where they exercised considerable power. It is claimed that even the Thai royal dishes were persianised\(^\) .

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 7th 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 longevity. 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 reported\(^\) that in the middle of the 15th century there arrived in Hormuz merchants from foreign territories such as Egypt, Syria, Anatolia, Turkistan, 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, Uzbekistan, housed textile merchants from Bengal in December 1557\(^\).

Mohar Ali claims however that a section of Persians, known as Tajiks, had visited eastern Samatata even earlier and takes an inscription of Ratanpala (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 Murshidbad) where a coin from the Abbasid Caliph Harun-al-Rashid has been found\(^\). 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-ul-Siraj who accompanied Bahadur Khali on his north-eastern campaign in Bengal was Persian. His Tabaqat-i-Naziri 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 research 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 hegemons 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 Islamic 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 feédom) with states he conquered. From the end of the 13th century Venetian, Persian 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. Under Kubla Khan China became a great trading nation. Similarly Temür wrote to all kings and princes not subject to him, urging them to send merchants since ‘trade makes for prosperity’.

This Central Asian world order incorporating Kus, Iran, China, South East Asia, Tibet and a part of Central Asia 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 Tahiriz in the 14th century as the empire’s city in the west-east trade. Tahiriz 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 follow 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 1343) that we find once again the beginnings of a commercial policy in Bengal. Ibn Battuta 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 Islam 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 continuously vibrant Islamic world order. Most Mongol chieftains converted to Islam. By the 16th century the descendents 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 Turans. 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 Jahan Ali’s India formed the most integrated bloc. Persian merchantist policies after 1600 mixed with the more powerful lassiez-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 Hajj 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 Dakhira in the 16th century, selling cotton textiles at local markets1. The Ottoman bloc, with which the Mughals had political and commercial ties, was tutored 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 Xan.

In this state 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 economies can exist as sub-systems within a single world economy and the world economy creates a web system with a hierarchical ordering of spatial units articulated to the structure of the state that is central to it. By contrast a world order is an ethno-legal system which envisages ultimately the command of a world economy constructed by subject-entities. The Indian Ocean was a world system mastered by a world economy that was constituted by the entities that participated in its economic life.

What denotes a world economy? It denotes, firstly, a spatial physical territory centered 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 area. This aided its subsequent expansion east into India and China, south into Africa 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/Sasanian, was now united 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 on.

Within this world system, the world economies of the Turko-Afghans and the Mongols of the 13th century; these in turn were absorbed into the greater world economies 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 Fregelici 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 goods and the best rates from Pegu. In this trade Arakan and Bengal occupied pivotal positions. Maimerique'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

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Chattagram, then the execution of de Brío, the ‘independent’ Portuguese ruler of Syriam by the Mons-Burnese in 1613, followed by the defeat of the Portuguese by the Kandy forces in Ceylon in August 1630, and finally the fall of Aceh 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 1630s:

...the great Bay of Bengal, and Pegu, where ... we once had great settlements of Portuguese... all of them came to an end with great destruction and devastation, and hence today one only navigates to the port of Oriza in the kingdom of Bengal (Pipil), 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, but 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 region. 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.

Notes
7 This supposition is borne out by the archeological evidence I discuss later.
8 Bengal was variously referred to as Ruh, Varendra, Vanga, Samudrika, Purandaradhana, Harihara — 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.
10 For more divisions within Bengal see Pramode Lai, Paul The Early History of Bengal, Calcutta, Indian Research Institute, 1959, and Morrison, Bruce M., Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal, The Association for Asian Studies, University of Arizona Press, 1970.
11 Bani Roy Choudhury, The Political History of Bengal to the Rise of the Pala Dynasty, Calcutta, Sanskriti Pratisthan, 1990, provides such information on a neglected period in Bengal’s early history; see also R.C. Majumdar, History of Bengal, Calcutta, G. Bhadrakar, 1971, vol. 1, The Ancient Period for a reconstructions of the history of the same epoch.
13 Ibid., p. 274.
14 Rita Mukherjee, Merchants and Companies in Bengal: Kusumbari and Jugaadi in the Eighteenth Century (forthcoming).
Rice Culture of Dwayne Right in a Calendrally-Ordered Zone


Ibid., pp. 37-40.

Maude Lombard, op. cit., p. 20.


For more on this see Pramoda Lai Paul, *The Early History of Bengal*, Calcutta, Indian Research Institute, 1939.

For more on this see Pramoda, Lai Paul, *The Early History of Bengal*, Calcutta, Indian Research Institute, 1939, p. 78.


See N.C. Majumdar (ed. with tr. and notes), *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Rajadh, Vista Research Society, Volume III, containing the Inscriptions of the Chandras, the Varnams and the Senas and of Ibraraghans and Damodars, 1939, op. cit., pp. 7-13; see also R.C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, p. 189-212.


Ihr Bay, Chowdhuris, op. cit. See also the functions of starangal and in the contemporary Indian kingdom in *Sanatana-Balkota* in N.G. Majumdar, *Vandara Research Society*, 1979, Volume III, pp. 4-24, containing the inscriptions of the Chandras, the Varnams and the Senas and of Ibraraghas and Damodars.


We link this with the 11th century trade revolution in the 21st century and the rise of the Arabians at the same time.

See Ibn Batutah, *Op. Cit.* *Bangladesh* has been taken to be Ibraragha. This conclusion was compounded by Portuguese references to a "City of Bengal" (Cf. J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, Calcutta, 9/99) in the sixteenth century.

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Chattogram was reganmed from Tipper in 1516.

shifts that rendered the south-east delta an active area. In the 18th century Jagodil became an important mint town for cotton textiles (chiefly batiks) that were traded throughout the surrounding areas, including the Tripras Hills. See Altaf Mukherjee, "The French East India Company’s Trade in Eastern Bengal from 1700-55: A Look at the Chandernagore Letters to Jagodil" in *Indian Historical Review*, 17 (1990-91) nos. 1-2, pp. 122-35.

40 Astridin Ray, "Middle Bengali Literature: A Source for the Study of Bengal in the Age of Akbar" in *India, Islam and 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 Indu Rubee Khondker, *The Origin of the Muslims of Bengal being a Translation of Hassaqqe Mustawwim-I-Bengalai*, Calcutta, Thacker and Spink and Co., 1855, for the diverse Islamic groups in Bengal.


47 Ibid, pp. 343-44


49 See Moghal miniatures depicting both Jahangir and Shah Abbas standing, facing one another, on a globe, indicating their equal status as world-rulers, at least of the Islamic realm.


55 Allan Muzaffer, Francesco’s ‘Nalini’ Delphine and Maria Rafaela (Eds), *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture, New Delhi, Manohar, 2000, but not even one muscle on Bengal.

56 Shabest-Khator, p.961, p.1041.

57 Altaf Mukherjee, *The Lost Worlds of Europe, Kolkata*, Progressive, 2003, chs. VI and IX.


