

Pathan Invasion in Burdwan: Domination and Conflict (14th to 16th Century)

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Abstract

Towards the end of Laxman Sen's reign (1201 AD), Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, the commander of Sultan Qutubuddin Aibek of Delhi, directly invaded the Nadia region of Bengal, destroying the Vikramshila Mahavihara and winning the victory. This victory marked the beginning of Pathan rule in Bengal. At the time of Bakhtiarkhalji's invasion, the ruler of the region was a Hindu feudal lord named Biswarup. However, this feudal ruler did not cooperate with King Laxman Sen of Bengal during his war against Bakhtiarkhalji. From the 13th century onwards, Afghan invaders started dominating the regions like Burdwan, Saptagram, Devkot etc., after conquering Nadia, Bakhtiarkhalji became eager to occupy the Rarh region (South and South-west part of West Bengal). Burdwan, Bankura, Hooghly districts were included in Rarh region. Bakhtiar Khalji sent his general Mohammad Siran (1206-10) to attack the Rarh region. However, he was not completely successful but captured some areas of this region. At that time, most of the territories of Rarh were under the control of Utkalaraja Anangabhimadeva III, a Ganga dynasty of Orissa. Bakhtiarkhalji's next commander was Alimardan or Sultan Alauddin (1210-12), who occupied the northern part of the Rarh region. Later, during the reign of Tughril Khan, Burdwan and Birbhum gradually came under the control of the Pathans. Mughisuddin Uzbek (1252-57) became the ruler of Bangal after Tughril Khan's death (1246). During his time Pathan supremacy was consolidated in the districts of Burdwan, Hooghly, Medinipur and Bankura. After the death of Emperor Ghiyasuddin Balban of Delhi, Nasiruddin held the post of ruler of Gaur as the Sultan's representative. He divided Bangal into three parts namely Lakshanavarti (Northern Region), Suvarnagram (East and South Eastern Region) and Saptagram (South Western Region) for the convenience of governance. An Iqta or administrative center

was established in each division. The region south of Ajay river and west of Bhagirathi river belonged to Saptagram division. The south western region was under Nasiruddin. Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Hooghly, Howrah and Midnipur districts were located within this region.

Keywords : Land Lord, Mosque, Muslim Invasion, Bhagiriti River, Mughal-Pathan.

Burdwan regions have been known in history for various reasons since ancient times. Various literary texts such as 'Jainkalpasutra', 'Kathasaritsagar' by Somadeva, 'Brithasamhita' by Varahamihir etc. mention the ancient Bardhaman and also the term Bardhaman is found in the sixth century Mallasarul script and Laxman Sen's Naihati script and Gobindpur script.¹ This knowledge is further strongly supported by the age of the pottery and other artefacts found during the excavations of " Pandu Raja Dhibi" on the banks of the Ajay River and " Vikramaditya Dhibi" near to the Mangalkot in west Bengal.² There is also a mention of Bardhaman in 'Acharanga Sutra', a Jain religious text of the 6th century BC. It is mentioned here that the local people forbade the 24th Jain Tirthankara Bardhaman Mahavira from preaching in this area. It is clear from all of these facts that Bardhaman became well-known in prehistoric Indian history. Following the Mughals' victory at the First Battle of Panipat and the formation of the Mughal Empire in India in 1526, increasing possession was one of the many factors contributing to the Mughal-Afghan conflict from the 16th century onwards.³ There were many reasons for the Mughal-Afghan conflict in eastern India, and one of the reasons was to take control of Bardhaman. Geographically, economically, and politically, the Mughal-Pathans and Marathas found Burdwan to be very attractive from several aspects. In terms of producing organic agricultural products, Bardhaman was getting the place at the first row in India. The Mughal-Pathans' ultimate objective was to gain control of this agriculturally productive region; so that, the ruler highly hoped that they would have great power and be able to have enormous influence over the local inhabitants. Burdwan also became a hidden shelter for all the rulers due to its proximity to Delhi from a geographical standpoint.

The first Muslim invasion of Bengal took place during the reign of Laxman Sen in the 13th century.⁴ Ikhtiyar Uddin Mohammad Bin Bakhtiar Khalji first invaded the Nadia region of Bengal by destroying the Vikramshila Mahavihara. However, his victory was made possible with the help of the feudal lords of Bengal, after conquering Nadia, Bakhtiar Khalji became eager to occupy the Rarh region (South and South-west part of

West Bengal). Burdwan, Bankura, Hooghly districts were included in Rarh region. Bakhtiar Khalji sent his general Mohammad Siran (1206-10) to attack the Rarh region. However, he was not completely successful but captured some areas of this region. At that time, most of the territories of Rarh were under the control of Utkalaraja Anangabhimadeva III, a Ganga dynasty of Orissa. Bakhtiar Khalji's next commander was Alimardan or Sultan Alauddin (1210-12), who occupied the northern part of the Rarh region. Later, during the reign of Tughril Khan, Burdwan and Birbhum gradually came under the control of the Pathans. Mughisuddin Uzbek (1252-57) became the ruler of Bangal after Tughril Khan's death (1246). During his time Pathan supremacy was consolidated in the districts of Burdwan, Hooghly, Medinipur and Bankura. After the death of Emperor Ghiyasuddin Balban of Delhi, Nasiruddin held the post of ruler of Gaur as the Sultan's representative. He divided Bangladesh into three parts namely Lakshanavarti (Northern Region), Suvarnagram (East and South Eastern Region) and Saptagram (South Western Region) for the convenience of governance. An Iqta or administrative center was established in each division. The region south of Ajay river and west of Bhagirathi river belonged to Saptagram division. The south western region was under Nasiruddin. Burdwan, Birbhum, Bankura, Hooghly Howrah and Midnipur districts were located within this region. From the time of Nasiruddin, the Muslim dominance in the Burdwan region continued to strengthen. After Nasiruddin's death in 1291 AD, his son Rukunuddin Kaikayum began to gain political power during his reign and established dominance by destroying many temples in the region. From the 13th century, the people of Muslim Pirs and Fakirs (saint) began to come to Burdwan, their main objective was to propagate Islam. In the first phase, Bardwan preached in the areas of Mangalkot, Patuli, Kalna, Churulia, Disergarh, Ausgram, Rajnagar. They established mosques in Mangalkot and Jaugram. While doing this work, they had several clashes with the local Hindu

landlords. Poet Krishnaram Das' Shathmangal Kavya describes this as, In Bengali...

Bardhamānēra kabi sadā kutuhali,
gaṅgāya karitē snāna ā'ilēna cali.

“The poet of Burdwan is always curious, I went to bathe in the Ganges.” After 1526 AD, political instability in Bangladesh arose. In 1538 AD Shershah occupied Bangladesh. As soon as he knows that, Sher Khan's campaign the Gour region, Ghiyasuddin Mohammad Shah as a commander, he assembled a large army at Teliagari hill. Sher Khan felt that the battle was unwinnable and took refuge in Burdwan to secure himself. At that time he was informed about the economic and political opportunities of Manbhum, Burdwan, Birbhum regions. He captured the Churulia fort in the western part of Burdwan. Later this region came to be known as Shergarh. Pathan supremacy in Burdwan district became stronger during Shershah's time.

After Humayun became the Mughal emperor in 1530 AD, the Mughal-Afghan conflict in eastern India became increasingly intense. Mughal emperor Humayun fought several battles with Sher Khan, the ruler of Sasaram in Bihar, over the capture of this small region of eastern India. Both the rulers took refuge in Burdwan during these wars and sometimes chose this region as their hiding place. From then on both rulers noticed that the Burdwan region produced large agricultural crops and that if the area could be captured, it would lead to future increases in wealth. Hence, the Mughal-Afghan conflict over the possession of this region increased. This is evidenced by the fact that both rulers built thousands of mosques in Burdwan's Ausgram, Mangalkot, Kalna, Burdwan city, Selimabad, Pandua, Garmandaran etc. to establish their power. Geographically the region was important to both the rulers as it provided safe haven and was also more important for communication with eastern India. Hence, the Mughal-Afghan conflict reached its peak in the sixteenth century over the occupation of this small region of eastern India.

Even before the Mughal-Afghan war, the local Orissan rulers frequently attacked and plundered Burdwan. Anangabhimadeva III ruled over Utkalaraja, a region in Southern Rarh (south Bengal) area. Hooghly, Burdwan, Bankura, and Medinipur all these areas were included in Orissa. The Utkal soldiers took shelter in Katsin fort of Bankura district. In 1243 AD, the Gangavamshya emperor of Orissa, the king first Narasimhadeva took control over the southern part of Rarh area. It is true that from the 10th to 13th century A.D., the Bardhaman region repeatedly passed into the possession of external powers. Several stages can be recognised while examining the evolution of the movement of Muslim invasions in Bengal. Between 1204 and 1342 AD, Delhi's elected

officials ruled over this region. However, the local landowners used to collect the revenue. After that, from 1342 to 1574 AD, the Sultanate rulers of Delhi lost their dominance. During this time, Muslim leaders independently ruled Bangla. Naturally, enormous resources of Bangla remained there. The third stage was the Mughal era. Beginning in 1574 AD, on the representative system of Delhi government began in Bengal. Both subadars and soldiers came from Delhi. They were ungrateful and self-centred. The Pathans and Turki Muslims used to be targeted by soldiers of the Mughal Empire in order to be forced to hand over money and valuables. This kind of analysis demonstrates that the Bengal had a colony for them.⁵ Burdwan was under Sharifabad's rule during the reign of Subadar Alivardi Khan. About 13 lakh rupees in revenue were generated from this.

The town of Burdwan, where the city of today is located, played significant role in the Mughal-Afghan conflict. The affluent Burdwan was for a very long time immensely attractive to the Mughal- Pathans. On the western boundaries of Burdwan city, the Sinha dynasty of the Sultanate ruled the Goda region. Many people think that after defeating the Singha dynasty, Muslim authority began rule over in Burdwan. The Afghans had control over the present-day regions of Kanchannagar and Lakurdi. The Lakurdi Humayun Mosque is historical evidence of this. The rivalry between the Mughals and the Pathans, or the Afghans, became extreme after the first battle of Panipat in 1526 AD, when Babar established the Mughal dynasty in India.⁶ The Bengal ruler Ghiyasuddin Shah was defeated and Gaur was captured by Sher Khan (Shershah), the king

of Sasaram in Bihar, eastern India. Mughals emperor Humayun were not able to stop Shershah. Delhi was taken by Sher Shah in 1540. Khizir Khan was at that moment appointed as the Bengali ruler. After getting married to daughter of Mamudshah, Khizir Khan proclaimed himself the independent king of Bengal. Khizr Khan was put in prison by Sher Khan after becoming angry. At that time Khizr was engaged in combat with Shershah. The base was built by Sher Shah in Burdwan's Old Chak area. Later, in the Mayurmahal or Old Chak region, he constructed the Black Mosque. Previously, Sher Khan had found a peaceful shelter in the Old Chak region following his defeat by the Mughal Emperor Humayun in 1537 AD. Later, after becoming emperor of India, he established his power and built mosques in the old Chak area. Burdwan was a secret shelter for the Mughal and Afghans, but its history has many other

incidents. In this situation, Burdwan was witness for another incident. Khuram escaped and concealed for a few days in the city of Burdwan out of fear of being captured by Jahangir. Later on, he travelled to Burdwan as Shah Jahan. The Juma Mosque was established later by Emperor Azim-us-San during his extended stay in this former Chak region. Additionally, Farukshiar, another Mughal Prince, escaped secretly to Burdwan from Delhi. When he approached a poor Fakir (saint) in the Kalna Gate area on the eastern edge of present-day Burdwan, he offered shelter and prophesied that he would later become the emperor of India. Later, Farukshir, the ruler of India built a mosque in the Kalnagate, which is present in the eastern part of Bardhaman presently. Today the mosque is known as Bonmasjid.⁷

During the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, the western part of Bhagirathi came under the Mughals and in 1594 AD, Mansingh was appointed as Subadar of Bengal. At that time Burdwan Sharifabad was literally the abode of noble people. Although the administration of the region was in the hands of the subadars, but the role of jagirdars and revenue collectors was particularly significant as local governance in this area.⁸ The Mughal Emperor Akbar appointed Alikuli Itshajohi (Sherafghan) as Jagirdar of Burdwan in 1603 AD.⁹ He lived in Burdwandurg or Mughal Fort with his wife Meherunnisa. Later this Mughal fort was built as Burdwan Rajbari. The Nurjahan Gate in the Shambazar area of Bardhaman indicates that Sher Afghan and his wife lived together here. After Jahangir became the Mughal Emperor in 1614 AD, Qutubuddin Khoka was sent to Burdwan to capture Sher Afghan. Allegations were that SherAfghan had secretly

befriended the Afghans and conspired against the Mughal emperor. But Jahangir's real intention was to marry Meherunisha. Eventually a battle broke out between Sherafghan and Qutbuiddin Koka in which both died and were buried at Burdwan. Meherunnissa was sent to Agra on the orders of Emperor Jahangir and was later married by Jahangir.

As the Mughal-Afghan conflict reached its peak, the Karrani Afghans were in control of Bengal. In 1564 AD Taj Kha of Afghan clan killed the local ruler Ghiyasuddin III and seized the throne of Bengal.¹⁰ Later Mughal rule was established in Burdwan by defeating Daud Karrani (1572-76). Mughal Emperor Akbar was assisted in this work by Munim Kha and Todarmal. In 1614 AD, Iftiyar Khan was the bailiff of Burdwan. From this time, the Mughal-Afghan conflict gradually increased. Therefore, it can be seen that the Mughal Emperor had to change Burdwan's

fauzdar and other people of the administration again and again in a very short period of time. Fauzdar Iftiyar Khan was succeeded by his son Mirza Mukki as Fauzdar. Then the ruler and faujdar of Burdwan, Mirza Shalih, declared rebellion against the Mughals. In view of this, the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan sent a large number of troops to Burdwan and suppressed Shalih's rebellion and defeated him. The Afghan insurgent soldiers caused extensive damage to houses, paddy fields and food items while fleeing from Burdwan. The Mughals were indeed victorious in this war, but suddenly they were in dire straits as they did not have enough food and other essentials. So it was announced by the Mughal rulers that if any kind hearted person cooperated with them with food and clothing then he would be rewarded. At this time, a paddy merchant named Abu Rai helped the Mughal army by providing enough food-logistics, blankets and other necessary items. Abu Roy received the post of Chowdhury and Kotwal post of Rekabibazar in Burdwan and Mughaltuli as reward.¹¹ From then on, with the help of the Mughals, Abu Rai's family became the largest zamindars of Burdwan.

In the 17th century, a major battle between the Burdwan zamindars and the Pathan armies took place around Burdwan. In 1695 AD, Shobha Singh, the zamindar of Chitua-Baroda, became a rebel against Burdwan Jagidar and thereby increased his influence, his conflict with Bardhaman jagirdar Krishnaram. In this conflict, Krishnaram was killed by Shobha Singh in 1696 AD. Shobha Singh proclaimed himself as the king of Burdwan. In this war Shobha Singh was

directly assisted by Afghan Sardar Rahim Khan of Orissa. Rahim Khan's original objective was to capture the region west of the Ganges. As a result, vast areas of Hooghly, Burdwan and Midnipur districts passed to the Afghans.¹² At that time the Mughal Fauzdar Nurullah Khan of Hooghly fled the area in fear. Shobha Singh entered Hooghly and plundered extensively. There Shobha Singh was injured in a battle with the Dutch. One night in 1698 AD, Shobha Singh forced his way into the bedroom of Princess Satyavati of Burdwan, and the princess killed him with a knife. After the death of Shobha Singh, the Afghan Sardar Rahim Khan took over the administrative power of Burdwan and declared himself king with the title of Rahim Shah. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb appointed Azim Ussan as Subadar of Bengal to suppress Rahim Shah. Rahim Shah was killed in a battle with Azim Usshan in 1698 AD.¹³ In view of this

incident, it is understood that this Mughal-Afghan conflict centered on Burdwan had been going on for a long time.

Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan wanted to eliminate Afghans from Bengal forever. Therefore, in 1624 AD, he reached the city of Burdwan with a large army and took refuge in the Burdwan fort for some time. Salebeg was the ruler of Burdwan Fort at that time. Salebeg always acted according to his own decisions. Emperor Shah Jahan was not at all satisfied with Salebeg's actions. So the Mughal emperor removed Salebeg from his post and made Bairam Beg the general and Jagidar of Burdwan. But this task was not easy. The Mughal emperor was assisted in this task by Shyamballav, the zamindar of Narayangar in Midnipur. The Afghans were still strong in Bengal. The Mughal-Afghan conflict continued. Renowned poet Bharatchandra in his poem "Vidyasundar" commented that the Afghan soldiers who worked in Burdwangarh considered the Mughals as sheep. Mughal-Afghans were always trying to establish their dominance in Bengal. As a result, it can be seen that they have established mosques in several districts of Bengal including Burdwan district,¹⁴ three mosques under Ausgram police station in North Burdwan were established in 1496 AD. And in 1510 AD also a mosque was established there. Two mosques were established in 1510 AD in a village called Nanuhath near Mangalkot. Four mosques were established between 1489 and 1560 AD in Kalna subdivision of Burdwan district. Also in the city of Burdwan, the Sufi saint Bahram Shakkah came to preach in the 16th

century and he died and was buried in Burdwan in 1563 AD. Similarly Sufi Khanqah used to preach in Shiyan village of Mangalkot. Afghans also tried to establish dominance through proselytizing.

The aims and objectives of the Mughal-Pathan conflict centered on Burdwan from the sixteenth century onwards were not alien to either power. As the Afghan power had long ruled eastern India, Burdwan was aware of its overall importance. On the other hand, the Mughal power also always tried to establish Mughal rule and law in all India. From 1530 AD onward, Mughal-Afghan conflicts were consistently seen in which Mughal power was not completely victorious. On the other hand, Shershah resorted to several strategies to make himself the ruler of Delhi from the Jagirdar of Sasharam. Afghan forces tried to consolidate their power around the lime fort. When the Mughal Emperor Humayun attacked Chunar fort several times, Sher Shah misled

Humayun by trickery and Sher Shah kept himself safe by hiding in Burdwan and Midnipur districts and attacked the Mughal forces at every opportunity. Burdwan area was considered as a suitable place for hiding. Also economically, Burdwan was famous in India for producing agricultural resources. This news was not unknown to the Mughal-Pathans. The Burdwan region was a safe haven for both powers, a potential area of economic prosperity and geographically an important point of contact with eastern India. During the Mughal period, the highest revenue was collected from Burdwan Jagir. Therefore, historians also deny that Burdwan region was very important in the long-lasting Mughal-Afghan conflict.

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