



## THE PERIOD OF THE NAWABS IN BENGAL (1717 – 1757): A POLITICAL SKETCH

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

The Nawabi period in Bengal represents a crucial transitional era between the Mughal rule and the British colonial dominance. From 1717 to 1757, it was characterized by increasing autonomy, administrative reforms, and growing European meddling, particularly from the English East India Co. Murshid Quli Khan established a practical independence, which the later Nawabs maintained, but in 1757 the English decisively defeated the last independent Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah in the battle of Plassey. In this paper I examine the important events from 1717 to 1757 and ultimately the end of the independent Nawabi rule in Bengal. This paper is a try to give a Political sketch of Bengal during the period of the Nawabs from 1717 to 1757, by the extensive use of Primary Persian sources.

**Keywords:** Bengal, Nawab, English, Murshid Quli Khan, Siraj-ud-Daulah, Plassey

The Nawabi period in Bengal represents a crucial transitional era between the Mughal rule and the British colonial dominance. From 1717 to 1757, it was characterized by increasing autonomy, administrative reforms, and growing European meddling, particularly from the English East India Co. Murshid Quli Khan established practical independence, setting up a centralized administration and shifting the capital from Dhaka to *Makhsusabad* (later Murshidabad)<sup>1</sup>. Murshid Quli Khan was succeeded by Shuja-ud-Din Muhammad Khan and later by Alivardi Khan, who both maintained the traditions of strong governance. Alivardi Khan's reign, however, was challenged by continuous Maratha invasions (*Bargi* raids), which weakened the Political stability and also drained Bengal's resources. Despite these threats, the Nawabs maintained a relatively prosperous and stable regime, with Bengal being one of the richest provinces in the subcontinent at the time.

The last independent Nawab of Bengal was Siraj-ud-Daulah, who took power in April 1756. His short reign was marked by tension with the British East India Co., particularly over the fortification of Calcutta and trade privileges. These disputes and disagreements resulted in the historic Battle of Plassey in 1757, where the British decisively defeated Siraj after he was betrayed by the key commanders. The Battle of Plassey was a turning point, as it marked the end of effective Nawabi sovereignty and the beginning of British political control in India.

### Murshid Quli Khan (1717 – 1727)

In 1716, Murshid Quli Khan was appointed as the Subahdar of Bengal. He regularly sent the yearly revenue and taxes to the centre, defined for Bengal, as because of, the Emperor and the Imperial *Diwan* were happy and pleased to Murshid Quli Khan.<sup>2</sup> That's why they did not bother about whatever administrative changes Murshid Quli Khan taken by his own. During this time, the Political nature of the Mughal Empire (After the death of Aurangzeb) was like this; a countless successive *war of succession*, in which the Mughal nobles were grouped and fractured into different parties. In this uncertain and dubious situation the general rule followed by Murshid Quli Khan was that whosoever the group will succeed and read *Khutba* (to whom), he will follow their suzerainty and will send the revenues and tributes regularly.<sup>3</sup>

### Sitaram's Rebellion

Murshid Quli Khan was known for his centralization of revenue collection and for curbing the powers of Zamindars in Bengal. His strict revenue policies led to discontent among Zamindars, some of whom resisted his authority. One such was Sitaram, who was a Zamindar of the south-eastern part of Jessore district and also a petty revenue collector under the faujdar of Bhusna. He revolted by withholding payment of revenue and plundering the neighboring tracts with a band of armed men.<sup>4</sup> Murshid Quli Khan sent an army (commanding by Hasan Ali Khan) and directed the nearby Zamindars to cooperate with him.<sup>5</sup> At the end Sitaram was defeated and killed. In reality, it was a lesser-known local uprising not like the rebellion in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century Bengal.

The utmost nature of his administration was the consolidation of power in his own hands. He appointed his own relatives and his loyal servants in different pivotal position of administration<sup>6</sup>, his son-in-law Shujauddin Muhammad Khan was appointed

the deputy *subahdar* of Orissa, another relative Itisam Khan was appointed deputy at Dacca, all the faujdars of all important places were also from his relatives or chosen men, Sayed Radi Khan, *diwan* of Bengal was the husband of Murshid Quli's granddaughter. He also transferred many Muslim *Jaigirs* into crown lands (from east and central Bengal) and granted the same in Orissa. He also granted many administrative and revenue departmental post to the Hindus<sup>7</sup>, the secretary of the treasury and the secretary of his financial affairs were Bhupat Rai and Krishna Rai respectively, two auditor-generals (*sadr qanungo*) Darpa Narayan and Jai Narayan, Superintendent (*darogha*) of Mint was Raghunandan.

### **Murshid Quli Khan and European Companies**

The companies like English, Dutch, French were continuing their trading activities in Bengal and the main concern of Murshid Quli Khan was to collect regular customs and taxes from them. Among them the English were enjoyed a superior position regarding the privileges. During his regency in Bengal these traders got fresh letter for carrying trade in Bengal but, the English were emerging as the powerful traders in Bengal, comparatively<sup>8</sup>.

To maintain the peace and to prevent the crimes in society, he taken in long-term effective measures, like established new *thanas* (Police station) especially where crimes were in regular<sup>9</sup>, his justice treated everyone fairly and strictly, regardless of status or position<sup>10</sup>.

### **Shujauddin Muhammad Khan (1727 – 39)**

He (son in law of Murshid Quli Khan) became the lawful Governor of Bengal and Orissa, through the imperial order.<sup>11</sup> He took some early measures, he formed a council consisting men from high position including Jagat Seth and Alam Chand (acted as the chief minister), who were in favour of Shujauddin Khan. He redistributed the prime posts in the administrative section among his own sons and loyalists.<sup>12</sup> The *Tawarikh-i-Bangalah* and *Sier-ul-Mutaqherin* both mentioned the good Excellency and attributes.<sup>13</sup> He respects the learned and pious men, acted justice without any impartiality.

### **Conquest of Tippera (1729<sup>14</sup>)**

One of the noteworthy achievement during his time was, perhaps the conquest of *Tippera* (Tripura). There was domestic strife within the state, where the prince having been repulsed by his uncle, fled to Dacca and prayed for assistance. Mir Habib<sup>15</sup> assured him and launched an expedition into *Tippera*. Mir Habib captured and handed over the Zamindari of this land to the prince, but interestingly included it to the Subah of Bengal and resettled the administrative arrangement there.<sup>16</sup> Later Tippera was renamed by *Raushan Abad* (the land of light).<sup>17</sup>

During the final phase of Shujauddin Khan, the tributary king of Kuch Bihar withheld the payment of tributes and revenues and attempted to be as independent. Later by an expedition that was subdued and captured the whole country.<sup>18</sup> In the western Bengal, Badi al-Zaman, the Afghan Zamindar of Birbhum withheld the revenues and declared his independency. Later on he was defeated and brought back to Murshidabad where Shujauddin Khan pardoned him and returned back his Zamindari.<sup>19</sup>

### **Shujauddin Khan and the English**

The agents of the English East India Co. were regularly abusing the *dastakhs* and a frequent complain came to the Nawab's court. The company got the permission of trade but it was not for the agent's private trade. Now, the Nawab claimed the arrears of rent of the Calcutta villages. The Nawab gave pressure to them by blockading their trade in different areas of Murshidabad. The English solved the situation by making a payment of 55000 rupees.<sup>20</sup> But later they again continued this in a large scale.

### **Alivardi Khan (1740 – 1756)**

After Shujauddin Khan, Sharfaraz Khan became the Nawab of Bengal, Shujauddin Khan nominated him as his successor. But just after one year Sarfaraz Khan faced a strong rivalry from Alivardi Khan and the later defeated the army of Sharfaraz Khan and sat on the *Masnad*. First of all he rearranged the big posts to his closed and relatives.

Alivardi Khan turned his attention towards Orissa, where Murshid Quli Khan II<sup>21</sup> was the de facto governor. Alivardi Khan marched towards Orissa with having an extensive army against the Later and completely defeated him.<sup>22</sup> After resettling the affairs in Orissa, Alivardi Khan returned back to Bengal. But, Bengal faced a continuous attack from the side of the Marathas, who attacked the hinterlands of Bengal.<sup>23</sup> Also the groups, who were in Orissa and opposed Alivardi Khan, now attacked Bengal, leading by Mir Habib and others. Mir Habib became successful to retain Orissa from Alivardi Khan. A peace was signed in May 1751 the one group was itself the Nawab and on the other side Mir Habib and the Marathas.<sup>24</sup> It was signed that Mir Habib would be the Governor of Orissa and River Subarnarekha near Jalasore, fixed as the boundary between Bengal and Orissa. After meeting all the expenses, surplus revenue have to pay for paying the Raghuji Bhonsle's army. The Marathas agreed that they will not attack again on Alivardi Khan's dominion. The Nawab also faced problems in Bihar (*Ajimabad*) but later regained from Afghan.<sup>25</sup>

### **Siraj-ud-daula (April 1756 – June 1757) and The English Political ambition in Bengal**

The peace settlements with the Marathas did not bring a fresh political peace in Bengal, rather it expose the weakening political strength of Bengal *Nizamat*, conceiving from earlier. There were problems among the family members for getting position and power, also powerful rival groups in the highest ministerial bodies, growing political aspire of the English in Bengal and all these three were closely connected. The English continued their fortification in the trading centre of Calcutta.<sup>26</sup> They also observed

that the power of the Nawab lies in the support comes from the *Seths-Banias* in one side as they played important factor in economy, and politics too. So the English now turned their alliance towards these groups and to the rival groups in the Politics. In between Alivardi Khan died in April 1756 and succeeded Siraj-ud-daula (April 1756-June 1757). The throne that the young Nawab Siraj-ud-daula inherited from Alivardi was in very dangerous situation. The English became a prosperous political power due to the provision of free trade to the East India Company by the Subadhar and the Emperor at various times. In the beginning, the volume of trade of the English was very small. But in course of time they started doing business all over Bengali-Bihar and the volume of their trade increased enormously. Other merchants were greatly inconvenienced by the granting of free privileges to the English. Moreover, the government continues to incur huge losses in the revenue sector.

The English Co. misused these commercial opportunities as the commercial facilities were given only to the Company, but not to the employees. But the employees continued to run private businesses as well. They evade the duty due to the government by misusing *dastak*. The English company became rich as well as powerful by enjoying the special benefits of free trade. They have blocked any government efforts to withdraw special trade privileges and stop *dastak* corruption. Nawab Siraj-ud-daula wanted to stop this corruption. Nawab's policy was hostile to the illegal interests of the British. That is why they became the enemies of the Nawab. The English company, some Hindu chieftains, some high ranked nobles and kinsmen conspired to dethrone Nawab Sirajuddaula and used Mir Jafar, the Nawab's general, as an instrument to achieve this objective.<sup>27</sup> As a result, the independence of Bengal came to an end in the battle of Plassey (23<sup>rd</sup> June 1757), as the English East-India Company dominated Bengal. They installed Mir Jafar as puppet Nawab in the Masnad of Murshidabad.

Bengal saw a dramatic political shift at the beginning of the 18th century, going from being a Mughal subah ruled by the Mughal Emperor to becoming a more independent state ruled by the Nawabs, although they never publicly condemned the Mughals' suzerainty. Dhaka was to be replaced as the capital by Murshidabad. Bengal's destiny was irrevocably altered by the Battle of Plassey (1757), which cleared the path for British rule over Bengal and ultimately India as a whole. The British gained strength and became a serious candidate for the Indian empire as a result, a new era began with the overthrow of Siraj ud Daula and the end of Muslim sovereignty in Bengal. This Political shift brought with a new Socio-Cultural, Economical changes.

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#### Endnotes and References

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- <sup>3</sup> *Riyaz-us-Salatin*. op-cit., P. 173.
- <sup>4</sup> *Riyaz-us-Salatin*. op-cit., P. 171, see also *Tarikh-i- Bangalah*. op-cit., pp. 89-92.
- <sup>5</sup> *Riyaz-us-salatin*. op-cit. pp. 171-172.
- <sup>6</sup> *Tarikh-i-Bangalah*. op-cit., pp. 42, 43, 99-100.121.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 61.
- <sup>8</sup> Muhammad Mohar Ali. History of the Muslims of Bengal, vol-IA, Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2003 (1985), Dhaka, p. 568, CF. *Home Miscellaneous Series*, Nos. 1,12,14,28-29.
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- <sup>11</sup> Seid Gholam Hossein Khan Tabatbayi. *Sier-ul-Mutaqherin*, transl. by Abdul Kalam Muhammod Zakariah, Dibya Prakash, Dhaka, 2nd ed. 2014(2006), p. 5.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 6.
- <sup>13</sup> *Tarikh-i-Bangalah*. op-cit., pp. 128-129, *Sier-ul-Mutaqherin*. Op-cit., pp. 59-61.
- <sup>14</sup> Azad-al-Husaini. *Naubahar-i-Murshid Quli Khan*, Jadunath Sarkar, trans. in the *Bengal Nawab*, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, reprint 1985 (1952), p. 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Mir Habib or Mir Habibullah was the assistant of the deputy Subahdar of Jahangirnagar, Murshid Quli Khan II (son-in-law of Shujauddin Khan).
- <sup>16</sup> *Bengal Nawab*, op-cit., pp. 4-8.
- <sup>17</sup> *Tarikh-i-Bangalah*. op-cit., p. 143.
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- <sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 193.
- <sup>20</sup> K K Datta. *The History of Bengal, Muslim Period (1200-1757)*, vol- II, (ed. Jadunath Sarkar), The University of Dacca, Dacca, 1948, pp. 432-433.

<sup>21</sup> Murshid Quli Khan II was the Brother in Law of Sharfaraz Khan. During the war against Sharfaraz Khan, Alivardi Khan sought help but the later did not respond.

<sup>22</sup> Usuf Ali Khan. *Tarikh-e-Bangala-e-Mahabat Jangi*, Abul Kalam Muhammad Zakariah, transl., Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1997, pp. 33-35.

<sup>23</sup> *Sier-ul-Mutaqherin*. Op-cit., pp. 119-122, 143-145.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 347-349, *Tarikh-e-Bangala-e-Mahabat Jangi*, op-cit., pp. 149-151.

<sup>25</sup> *Tarikh-e-Bangala-e-Mahabat Jangi*, op-cit., pp. 95-112.

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