

## Chapter VIII

### Decline and Decay of Malda

#### 1 Decline

Due to paucity of sufficient data, it is difficult to determine the different causes which contributed to the decline of Malda in the last quarter of the 18th century. The most plausible cause which played an active role behind the decline of Malda was the transfer of the English factory from Malda to Engrezbazar, (Angrezabad as it was called) a town created by the English themselves for their own necessity. <sup>(1)</sup> With this shifting Malda began to lose its prosperity. It tended to decline throughout the 19th century and never recovered its former glory as a centre of trade and commerce.

Now the question is why did Malda, the natural trade centre of North Bengal, lose its prosperity only due to the shifting of the English factory. The answer is obvious. After Plassey the trade in the Bengal Subah was practically monopolized by the English East India Company. Naturally the whole trading activity of a particular zone or region was dominated by the East India Company. Other European Companies and the indigenous merchants played a secondary role during our period. Obviously the fate of a particular trade centre or inland mart, whether natural or planned, was indissolubly connected with the colonial interest. So it will be better here to discuss the nature of

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(1) A.Mitra, District Handbook, Malda, 1951, p.(App) 11A.

interest of the English behind the shifting of the factory from Malda to Engrezbazar.

During the last quarter of the 18th Century the Company was deeply interested in the silk trade particularly in raw silk. The places adjacent to Engrezbazar were suitable for mulberry cultivation.<sup>(2)</sup> Besides, there were other auxiliary factors. Since the very beginning the Company had been trying to shift their factory to Mukdampur (alias Engrezbazar). Because the factors wanted to avoid the tax on goods which they had to pay at Malda.<sup>(3)</sup> At Mukdampur the English factors did not pay any tax on goods which they exported or imported. So their desire to establish or shift the factory from Malda to Mukdampur was long standing. But the English could not materialise their desire. The local Zamindars as well as the Government strongly objected to their plan every time they tried.<sup>(4)</sup>

The victory at Plassey and the acquisition of the Diwani in 1765 gave the English the opportunity to fulfil their longstanding desire. And in 1770 Thomas Henschman, the Resident of the Malda factory transferred the headquarters of the factory to Engrezbazar.

In addition to this there were other factors which contributed to the decay of the town namely, (1) Natural-Geographical factors and (2) Socio-Economic factors. Under the first head we would put down such events as hydrology, fire, epidemic, famine, etc. and under the

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(2) Lambourne, op.cit.p.84.

(3) Supra Chapter II.

(4) Supra Chapter II.

second the determined policy of the East India Company to make Calcutta the centre of trade of the whole Bengal at the cost of other inland marts or trade centres.<sup>(5)</sup> There must have been other factors behind the decay of the town. But the limitation of the nature of our data and the other handicaps preclude us from considering them.

It is undeniable that transport is a chief ingredient of the normal economic life of a town. The town of Malda maintained its economic link with the outer-world through the Mahananda - Kalindri river route. Historically speaking, it can be said that all the premier towns of medieval Bengal were river-based, river being the chief means of contact, political and economic with the outer regions.

Since the last quarter of the 18th century and even earlier it was clear that the Mahananda and the Kalindri were not navigable throughout the year.<sup>(6)</sup> The normal functioning of trade was thus hampered. The cotton piece goods, filature silk and other goods collected from the different subordinate aurgungs could not be sent to Calcutta in proper time. An evidence would suffice to bear it out. Thomas Henschman, the Resident of Malda factory, wrote in 1779 that some delay will happen in the despatch of goods to the presidency, the river being entirely dried up in the month of February.<sup>(7)</sup>

Other references of a similar nature fill the pages of the volumes of the proceedings of the Board of Trade. The diversion of the

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(5) G.Bhadra, op.ci.Chapter V.

(6) Supra Chapter I.

(7) B.T.C.Vol.18,12th Feb. 1779.

Teesta after 1787 was another cause which also hampered the transport system of the Malda region. Because before the diversion the Teesta used to discharge her water through the Punarbhave (now a tributary of the Mahananda) the Atreyi and the Karotoya which used to fall into the Ganga. (8)

Together with this inundation and flood appeared as a constant threat to the town. Innumerable documents may be cited to support this point. (9) One noticeable feature is that the inundation affected both Malda and Engrezbazar. In August 1787, the Resident had written to the Board that an unusual flood caused by rain had damaged the cloth investment of the Company in its different branches. (10) Thus the vagaries of hydrology certainly hastened the decay of the town.

a/ Famine had an ominous role to play in the life of the town. It caused depopulation and migration of the artisans. The famine of 1770 had a devastating impact upon the trade and industries of Malda region and in Malda town particularly.

It swept away many of the inhabitants of the Malda town. The number of weavers decreased during the calamity to nearly one half. (11)

Another devastating effect of the famine was that a section of the uprooted weavers joined hands with the Fakir raiders. (12) The

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(8) S.C.Majumdar, op.cit.p.54-55.

(9) Supra Chapter III,

(10) B.T.C.Vol.59, 29th August 1787.

(11) P.C.R.M., Vol.VI, Ducarel's letter 20th Dec, 1771.

(12) Suprakash Roy, op.cit.Vol.I, p.71.

whole of Malda region became very much exposed to the Sannyasi and Fakir raiders throughout the last quarter of 18th century. So it is reasonable to conclude that the progressive decline of Malda dates from the famine. Prof. N.K.Sinha has pointed out that the decline of North Bengal had begun after the famine of 1770. (13)

But these natural and physical factors were not the sole reason for the decline of Malda. Because the problem of hydrology was nothing new. It was always there and even in its heyday<sup>a</sup>. Famine and fire were also two near regular features in the life of the towns in Mughal India. The ultimate causes lay elsewhere.

The cause was the rise of Calcutta as the centre for colonial activities. The East India Company gave an undue importance to Calcutta. The result was that the other urban centres which had their root in the pre-British days were bound to suffer. Their economy was at variance with that of a colonial town. Because as a ruler and trader the East India Company dominated the political and economic life of Bengal. Some towns survived because it was necessary for the administrative or economic needs of colonialism. But other towns were denuded through deliberate policy of colonialism. Malda and Murshidabad are the examples of the second category and Dacca belongs to the first. But there is also a difference between the decline of Malda and Murshidabad. In the Malda region the English created a town (Engreza-bazar) whereas in the Murshidabad region we find no other creation of

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(13) N.K.Sinha, op.cit Vol.II, p.64.

town like Engrezbazar after the decline of Murshidabad.

The decline of Malda was connected with the decline of Murshidabad. Because their economy was closely interrelated. Even before the establishment of the capital at Murshidabad Malda had a regular trade connection with Murshidabad.<sup>(14)</sup> Secondly, after the establishment of the capital at Murshidabad, the political importance of Murshidabad also indirectly increased the trading activities in the Malda region. Because Malda was the only leading trading centre adjacent to Murshidabad. Other trade centres were situated at ~~XXXX~~ a distant <sup>ce</sup> place from Murshidabad. Murshidabad had another advantage. It was on the lower route from Malda to Calcutta. Naturally, it is supposed that the merchants of Murshidabad definitely purchased a portion of the Malda goods and this became almost regular during the later period of our study. So we can easily conclude that so long as the wealth of the country was concentrated in Murshidabad more money was circulated in the Upper parts of Bengal.<sup>(15)</sup> Because of this fact the trading condition in this region was flourishing. But this flourishing condition was seriously affected due to the transfer of Diwani office from Murshidabad to Calcutta in 1772. Because no more money was concentrated in Murshidabad.

Thus Calcutta as an agent of London had practically dwarfed all the leading urban centres of Medieval Bengal. Malda, Dacca Murshidabad, Hugli, etc. had lost their importance as inland trading centres which

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(14) Supra Chapter I.

(15) N.K.Sinha, op.cit. Vol.II.p.64.

they had enjoyed for a century.<sup>(16)</sup> Philip B. Calkins truly remarked, "it was the British traders and the rivers which destroyed the commercial city and not the British administrators".<sup>(17)</sup> It is to be noted here that the river was not so important a factor in the decline of Malda town. It was the transfer of trading activities of the East India Company from Malda town to English Bazar which destroyed the importance of Malda.

## II Results

The one hundred fifty three years' (1680 - 1833) history of the East India Company's trade in the Malda region was an important episode in the history of North Bengal. It was from Malda that the Company gradually expanded its trading activities throughout the North Bengal within a span of a century. Malda itself was a natural inland trading centre of North Bengal before the coming of the Europeans in the region. The volume of trade in the Malda region in the 1660's was fantastic. The trade in this region was chiefly conducted by the merchants of Agra, Gujrat and Benares. Every year they purchased and shipped cotton and silk fabrics to the value of Rs. 15,00,000 - 25,00,000 and in addition the freight valued at about 50 per cent of the above sum was transported overland.<sup>(18)</sup>

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(16) Milburn, op.cit.Vol.I.p.XLII.

(17) R.L.Park, op.cit.p.27.

(18) Temple, op.cit.Vol.I.p.399.

With the establishment of the English East India Company's monopoly, these Indian merchants gradually disappeared from the market. The East India Company's trade was gradually increased in the Malda region. But the vacuum created by the absence of the Indian merchants was not filled up by the East India Company in spite of their increasing investment. Naturally the total production of the Malda region was reduced. The Company in its heyday at Malda invested only 5 to 6 lakhs rupees, though the Company's investment in raw silk was tremendously increased during the second and third decade of the 19th century. <sup>(19)</sup> This was due to several reasons. <sup>(20)</sup>

Malda and its surrounding area was a manufacturing centre of textile goods. The mixed piecegoods, silk and cotton and the muslins of Malda were famous for their superior artistic skill. These industries gradually lost their foot hold in their birth place due to the commercial polity of the East India Company. The Company deliberately induced the silk weavers to produce raw silk instead of piecegoods. <sup>(21)</sup> The result was that the traditional silk industry of Malda which had enjoyed a glorious position generation after generation was turned into a raw silk producing area.

Similar was the fate of the Cotton industry of Malda. The muslins of Malda once had been used for the imperial household of

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(19) Supra Chapter. IV.

(20) Supra Chapter. IV.

(21) Supra Chapter. IV.

Delhi and of Bengal respectively. Here the reason of decline was something different from that of the silk industry.

One general result of the decline of these two industries was that a large number of weavers and other people related to the industries were thrown out of employment. This was the general feature of all the manufacturing centres of Bengal on the eve of the end of the Company's trade. In short Malda lost her position as an industrial and manufacturing centre during the Company's time and was turned into a village of agricultural produce.

One important point should be noticed here. In comparison with the other manufacturing centres, Malda was least affected. Because the primary producers (both of silk and cotton) of the Malda region had no prejudice against sericulture or mechanical or agricultural occupations.<sup>(22)</sup> We have noticed earlier that the weavers in this area were also cultivators.<sup>(23)</sup> Secondly, a considerable quantity of silk and cotton was still produced in the Malda region for export to Western and upper India respectively.<sup>(24)</sup> Lastly, the use of British cotton goods was very limited in this zone.<sup>(25)</sup> Thus Malda largely escaped to a large extent from the misery which prevailed in the other areas such as Dacca and Patna.

There was another beneficent side of the Company's trade in the Malda region. It was absolutely humanitarian. Though it was

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(22) N.K.Sinha, op.cit.Vol.III, p.9.

(23) Supra Chapter, VII.

(24) Supra Chapter, IV.

(25) Sinha, op.cit.Vol.III, p.9.

not the offshoot of the Company's trade, it began in connection of the Company's trade. It was from Malda that came forth the Evangelical zeal to eradicate the evils of decadent Hinduism and Islam. Willam Carey, a Baptistish linguist, was the pioneer of this zeal and Charles Grant was the chief architect of the plan. Though before Carey, John Thomas had carried on his missionary activities there, the actual work began under the supervision of Carey. (26)

Carey was originally appointed as an overseer of plantation at Dinajpur. But the climate and the nature of work there did not suit him. So he turned his attention to the propagation of Christianity among the natives through the dissemination of learning. Accordingly in 1794 he opened a free boarding school at Malda for poor children providing for them tuition in Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali and the doctrine of Christianity. (27) Thus Malda under Grant and Udney was the seminal centre for the British Evangelicals in Bengal. (28)

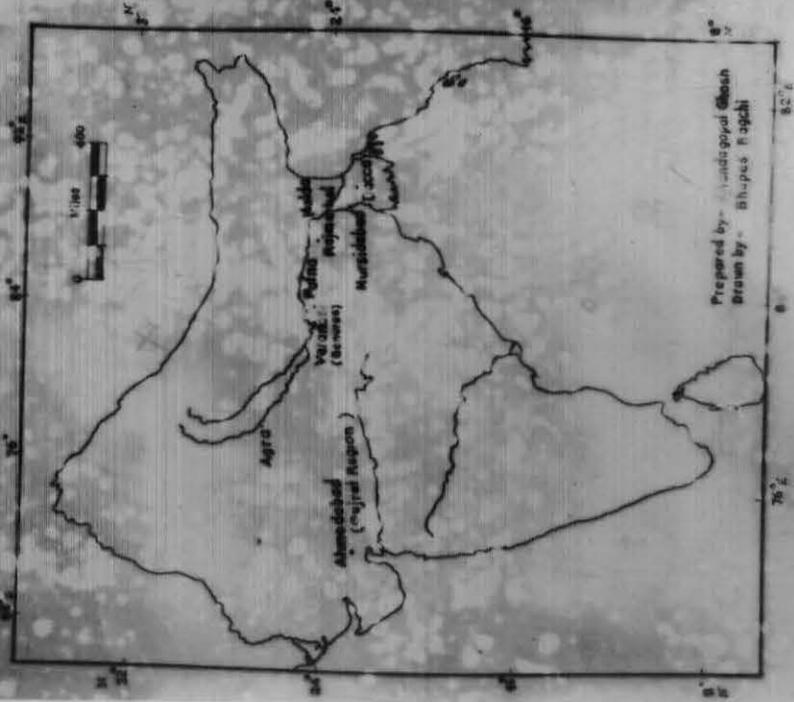
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(26) Carey, Good Old days of the John Company, p.35.

(27) D.P.Sinha, The Educational Policy of the East India Company. in Bengal to 1854, p.9.

(28) B.Dey, I.E.S.H.R., Review Article, Vol.I.(April - June) 1964.

# TRADE OF MALDA WITH OTHER PARTS OF INDIA (17th Century)



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