

RAJMAHAL: A MEDIEVAL TOWN IN SUBAH BENGAL

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Abstract: *Far below Gour, but still in high repute, is Rajmahal, which has drawn interests to scholars of history. The city founded by Raja Mann Singh and adored by Sultan Shuja, at one time rivaled Delhi in splendor and luxury. Up to recent years we can spot many vestiges of the work done by Raja Mann Singh and Sultan Suja. Bishop Heber remarks of the palace of Sultan Sujah, of the stone roofed and delicately carved balcony 'stills retain traces of gilding and Arabic inscriptions.' This paper tries to resurface the lost pomp and opulence of the 'Town' and the nucleus of the whole argument aims at revival of history of 'Medieval Eastern Bengal', which is still in oblivion.*

Keywords: Ganga, Malli, Hiuen Tsang, "Key of Bengal", Teliagarhi.

INTRODUCING THE TOWN

A place of great geographical interest and strategically important, the town of Rajmahal is situated on the southern bank of river Ganga and northern skirts of Rajmahal hills at 25°2'N. Longitude and 84°43'E. Latitude. The European merchants designated Rajmahal a 'fair' and a 'water locked city, mounted with 'powerful flotilla'. The 'vast store of mobile artilleries' of the Zamindars of Bengal¹ and the Portuguese and Dutch captains² sailed on the river Ganga and Bhagirathi, were in strict adherence to the rebel prince, as Jahangir tells us in his memoirs.³ On account of the peculiar geographical features of Rajmahal and 'blockade of the Deccan-Delhi route, the city of Rajmahal tempted Shahjahan to his daring plan of the military march to reach Delhi. He crossed the Tapti with a large army, reached Golkunda and struck his camp at Machchlipattam and turned towards north-east. He advanced into Sarkar Jalesar, Suba Orissa and Bardwan, a Pargana of Sarkar Sharifabad, Suba Bengal and finally reached Rajmahal, a Pargana of Sarkar Tanda/Udambar, Suba Bengal. Rajmahal, as that of Purvanchal in U.P. appeared to be a good substitute for the Deccan, not only as a base of operations, but also as 'a recruiting ground and a source of supplies in the inevitable contest', so to speak, the rebel Prince had prepared to go to Rajmahal at the end of April, 1623.⁴

EARLY HISTORY

The earliest inhabitants of whom there is any record appear to be the Maler (Sauria Paharias), who are found to this date in the north of the Rajmahal Hills. They have been identified with the Malli mentioned by Megasthenes, who visited the court of Chandra Gupta at Pataliputra (Patna) in 302 B.C. According to his account, the Malli were a race

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holding the country between the Prasii, i.e., the people of Magadha or Bihar, and the Gangaridae, i.e., the people of Lower Bengal. Their territory was bounded by the Ganges and contained within its limits a mountain called Mallus, which is identified with the sacred hill of Mandar in the south of the Bhagalpur district, close to the boundary of the Godda subdivision. The Sauria Paharias are also believed by some to be the race referred to by the Greek geographers as the Suari, but the latter are generally held to be the Savars of Orissa.⁵

THE ACCOUNT OF HIUEN TSANG

We have no detailed account of this part of the country until the time of Hiuen Tsiang, a Chinese pilgrim, who visited India about 645 A.D. From the record of his travels, we learn that he visited the kingdom of Champa, the northern boundary of which extended along the Ganges from Lakhisarai to Rajmahal, while the southern boundary passed through "desert wilds, in which, were wild elephants and savage beasts that roamed in herds." To the east of Champa lay the kingdom of Kie-chu-u-khi-lo or Kie-ching-kie-lo, which, according to General Cunningham, was the tract of country included in the present Santal Parganas. "The distance and bearing," he writes, "bring us to the district of Rajmahal, which was originally called Kankjol after a town of that name, which still exists 18 miles to the south of Rajmahal. ...When independent, the petty state of Kankjol most probably comprised the whole of the hill country to the south and west of Rajmahal, with the plains lying between the hills and the Bhagirathi river as far south as Mursidabad."⁶

Hiuen Tsang does not give any account of the interior of this kingdom, merely stating that, having been conquered by a neighbouring state, the towns were desolate and most of the people were scattered in villages or hamlets. He adds, however, that on the northern boundary, nor far from the Ganges, was a lofty tower made of bricks and stone, which General Cunningham identifies with Teliagarhi. "The pilgrim", he writes, "does not say what was the nature of the tower; but from his description I gather that it must have been a Buddhist building, as its four faces were ornamented with panels filled with figures of saints, Buddhas and Devas. From the mixture of brick and stone in the building and its position on the northern frontier of the district and on the south bank of the Ganges. The place was certainly an old military post, as it completely commanded one of the three passes leading into Bengal. But it must have also been a place of consequence, as it possessed a considerable number of large statues, both Buddhist and Brahmanical. Most of these were removed to a great house at Kahalgaon (Colgong) built on the top of the hill facing the rocks, but, since the establishment of the railway close by, many of them have disappeared no one knows where."⁷

After this, there is no record of the history of the district for many centuries, but there is an interesting reference to it in the *Bramanda* section of the *Bhauishyat Purana*, which was probably compiled in the 15th or 16th century A.D. from ancient materials. It refers to the tract comprising the present district and Birbhum as Narikhanda, and describes it as

follows: "Narikhanda is a district abounding in thickets. It lies west of the Bhagirathi and north of the Dwarikeswari river. It extends along the Panchakuta hills on its west, and approaches Kikata on the north. The forests are very extensive, chiefly of *sakhota*, *arjuna*, and *sal* trees with a plentiful addition of brushwood. The district is celebrated for the shrine of Vaidyanath. The deity is worshipped by people from all quarters, and is the source of every good in the present age. Three-fourths of the district are jungle; the remaining fourth is cultivated. The soil of a small part of it is very fertile, but by far the greater portion is saline and unproductive. There is no want of water, and numerous small streams run through the forest: the principal of these is the Ajaya. In many places there are iron mines. The people are, in general, small, black and of immoral propensities, and ignorant of religious duties; a few only are attached to the name of Vishnu. They are dexterous bowmen and industrious cultivators."⁸

THE MUHAMMADAN PERIOD

The authentic history of the district may be said to begin with the rule of the Muhammadans, when their armies marched to and from Bengal through the Teliagarhi pass. The Muhammadan historians show that this pass, the "Key of Bengal" as it was called, was the scene of numerous battles. In 1538 A.D. Sher Shah fortified it during the rebellion against the Emperor Humayun, but the entrenchments were forced by the Emperor's army.⁹ On the 12th July 1576 the decisive battle of Rajmahal was fought in its neighbourhood. Three years before this Daud Khan had proclaimed himself King of Bengal and, relying on his Afghan troops, defied the Emperor Akbar. Akbar placed himself at the head of the imperial forces. and the loss of Hajipur forced Daud Khan to abandon Patna and fly to Tandah. On the way he stopped at Teliagarhi and found the fortifications so strong, that he told the garrison he expected them to hold the Mughal army at bay for a year. His hopes were vain, for the Afghan troops fled and the Mughal general, Munim Khan, took possession of the pass without the loss of a man. Shortly afterwards Daud Khan, aftersome more crushing defeats, submitted and swore allegiance to Akbar. In 1575, however, Munim Khan having died, with a large portion of his army, in an epidemic which broke out at Gaur, Daud Khan seized the opportunity to head another rising of the Afghans. He soon found himself in command of an army of 50,000 men, and drove the Mughal forces back to Patna. Reinforcements were hurried up under Husain Kuli Khan, the Governor of the Punjab, whom the Emperor sent to Bengal as his Viceroy in order to quell the rebellion, with the famous Raja Todar Mal second in command. Daud Khan took up a strong position at Rajmahal behind the entrenchment of Teliagarhi which were garrisoned by 3,000 Afghans. There he held the Mughal force at bay for several months, but at last was compelled to give battle. Daud Khan led the centre of his army, while Kalapahar the well-known conqueror of Orissa, commanded the right wing. Kalapahar having been killed, the Afghans gave way, and Husain Kuli Khan then charged on the centre of the enemy's line, which was soon broken. Daud Khan himself was captured, promptly condemned as a rebel, and beheaded, his head being sent by

express messenger to the Emperor at Agra as a tangible proof of the victory. This Mughal victory was of signal importance, for it ended the Afghan supremacy in Bengal and the rule of the independent Muhammadan kings; and after it the Province became a subordinate *subah* of the Mughal empire. The next important event in the history of the district was the establishment of Rajmahal as the capital of Bengal in 1592. Sher Shah had selected it as the seat of government about half a century before, but it was left to Man Singh, Akbar's Viceroy in Bengal, to carry out this measure. From 1202 till 1576 Gaur had been the capital of the Province, except for some 60 years when it was transferred to Pandua, and more recently when Tandah had taken its place; but the Ganges had receded westward until Tandah stood a league from it, and Gaur, deserted by the river, had become more and more unhealthy, the population being decimated by the epidemic of 1575, after which it was abandoned. It was in these circumstances that Man Singh decided to remove the capital to Rajmahal, where he built himself a palace and also erected a strong rampart, strengthened with bastions, which encircled the city. He is also said to have changed its name from Agmahal to Rajmahal, the seat of empire; subsequently, as the city grew, the Muhammadans, in complement to the Emperor, called it Akbarnagar. It did not long continue to be the capital, for in 1608 the Nawab, Islam Khan, made his head quarters at Dacca, that being a more central position for the defence of Bengal against the raids of Magh (Arakanese) pirates and Portuguese buccaneers.¹⁰

Shortly after the transfer of the head-quarters, Teliagarhi was the scene of a sanguinary battle between Prince Shah Jahan and Ibrahim Khan, Viceroy of Bengal, brother of the Empress Nur Jahan and uncle of Shah Jahan. The fort of Teliagarhi, known as the key of Bengal, which stands hoary with age, on the Rajmahal hills near Sahibganj, has unfortunately failed to receive the prominence or attention it deserves¹¹. That it proved a veritable 'key' to Bengal's political problems throughout the ages has escaped the notice of the present day historians. The Jahāngīr Nāmāh describes the fort of Teliagarhi as a burial ground¹² - burial indeed of many political ambitions. But physically too it bears many burials though the fort is too big to be described in the fashion of Jahāngīr Nāmāh. A casual observer can only catch a glimpse of its central structure and goes satisfied with the idea that it is only as big as it can arrest the attention of his eyes, but to a regular visitor of the site it reveals its real dimension now lying hidden under nature's vegetable vagary. In length it is two-third of a mile. The northern limit is a natural precipice just below which the swift-going Ganges runs. The area is bounded with a strong-built rampart on all other sides barring a small portion on the south where the fort is imbedded with the mountains difficult to ascend. As we approach the area from the west we may yet see the rampart which has been described by Ain-i-Akbari¹³ as a "raised stone"

Shah Jahan had risen in rebellion against his father Jahangir and invaded Bengal. Ibrahim Khan marched from Dacca to Rajmahal with all the forces he could collect in order to cut off his retreat, upon which Shah Jahan hurried back from Burdwan. Ibrahim Khan, realizing that with his small forces he was incapable of holding the city against a siege,

retired to the fortifications of Teliagarhi, on which were mounted a number of cannons, served, we are told, by "vagabond Europeans of different nations whom he had encouraged to enter his service." The defences, however, were mined and blown up, and Shah Jahan's soldiers pouring through the breach put the garrison to the sword. The main battle also went against Ibrahim Khan, who rushed into the thick of the enemy crying : "My life is at the service of the Emperor. I will conquer or die." He fell covered with wounds, and his army, left without a leader, fled from the field leaving their camp to be plundered by the enemy. This battle decided the fate of Bengal for the time being, Shah Jahan being left undisputed master of the Province. His rule was short lived, for in 1624 he was decisively defeated by the imperial forces near Allahabad. He fell back on Rajmahal, and, after taking from it 'the household paraphernalia' which he had left there, retreated, hotly pursued, to the Deccan.¹⁴ In 1639 Rajmahal was again made the seat of government by Shah Shuja, the second son of Shah Jahan, on his appointment as Viceroy of Bengal. He built a splendid palace, strengthened the fortifications erected by Man Singh, and spent large sums of money in making the town worthy of its position as the capital of Bengal. According to Stewart, 'the following year, nearly the whole of the city and the principal part of the palace were destroyed by dreadful conflagration, in which many lives were lost and the family of the prince with difficulty escaped. About the same time, the current of the Ganges changed its bed and poured its torrents against the walls of the new capital washing away many of the stately edifices. Previous to that time, the course of the Ganges was along the northern bank, running under the walls of Gaur, but since that period, it pours its torrents against the rocks of Rajmahal forming eddies and whirlpools, dangerous to the incautious or impatient traveller.' In spite of this, Rajmahal appears to have continued to be the capital till 1660.¹⁵

The year before, Shah Shuja, in order to make good his claims to the throne of Delhi, which had been seized by his brother Aurangzeb, marched north with a large army, but being defeated at Kadba, fell back on Monghyr, where he threw up entrenchments. The imperial army under Aurangzeb's son Prince Muhammad and Mir Jumla soon forced him to quit this position. Raja Bihruz of Kharagpur, in spite of his professed loyalty, intrigued with Mir Jumla and showed him a practicable route through the hills, along which Mir Jumla pushed forward a large force. Shah Shuja, finding that he was being outflanked, abandoned Monghyr and retreated to Rajmahal, where he fortified Teliagarhi and Sakrigali. The imperial army followed hard after him, and, having stormed the defences at Teliagarhi and Sakrigali, invested Rajmahal on one side, while Mir Jumla, coming through the hill passes, besieged it on the south. For six days Shah Shuja held out, but by that time the enemy's artillery had effectually breached the fortifications, which, Bernier tells us, consisted only of 'made earth, sand, and fascines,' Shah Shuja, realizing that the place was untenable and that the approach of the rains was likely to widen the breaches and render his retreat difficult, fled to Tandah with this family. That very night the rains broke, and Mir Jumla, finding pursuit impossible, was compelled to canton his army for four months at Rajmahal. He was not left unmolested, for the troops of Shah Shuja

frequently crossed the Ganges, fired into his camp, and kept his soldiers in a constant state of alarm. He therefore abandoned the city and encamped his army at some distance from the river side. The difficulties of Mir Jumla were soon increased by the conduct of Prince Muhammad. The latter, it is said, having received a pathetic letter from the daughter of Shah Shuja, to whom he was betrothed, resolved to join her and throw in his lot with her father. He therefore secretly intrigued with Shah Shuja, won over a large part of the army to his cause, and went over to Tandah, where he married the princess. Mir Jumla found the army bordering on mutiny and, deciding that only active employment would prevent an outbreak, crossed the Ganges and advancing against Shah Shuja, decisively defeated him.

CONCLUSION

Subsequent to this, Rajmahal ceased to be the capital of Bengal, which was removed to Dacca. The reasons for this change will be apparent from the account left by Tavernier, who visited Rajmahal in January 1666 with Bernier. "Rajmahal is a city upon the right hand of Ganges: and if you go by land you shall find the highway for a league or two paved with brick to the town. Formerly the Governors of Bengal resided here, it being an excellent country for hunting, besides that it was a place of great trade. But now the river having taken another course, above a good half-league from the city, as well for that reason as to keep in awe the king of Arakan and several Portuguese banditti, who are retired to the mouths of Ganges, and made excursions even as far as Dacca itself, both the Governor and merchants have removed themselves to Dacca, which is at present a large city and a town of great trade." Rajmahal, however, was a mint town in 1661, to which merchants sent golden plates to be coined; and it was the head-quarters of the *Faujdar* or Governor of Akbarnagar. We find also that in the time of Murshid Kuli Khan (1704-25) an officer was sent here every year during the winter to make ice in the Rajmahal Hills to supply the Nawab's table. "The Nawab," says the *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, "had stores of ice for full twelve months, used ice daily, and received his supplies of ice from Akbarnagar. Similarly in the season of mango-fruit, which is the best of the fruits of Bengal, the superintendent of mangosupplies was posted in the *Chakla* of Akbarnagar and he, counting the mangoes of the *khas* trees, entered them in the accounts, and showed their collection and disposal and the watchmen and carriers, and levying the expenses of carriage from the zamindars, sent the sweet and delicious mangoes from Malda, Katwa, Husainpur, Akbarnagar, and other places. And the zamindars had no power to cut down the *khas* mango-trees: on the contrary, the mangoes of all the gardens of the aforesaid *Chakla* were attached. And this practice was more rigorously observed in the times of previous Nazims of Bengal."¹⁶

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- ¹⁵ Abdus Salam (tr), *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, Calcutta, 1903, p 190
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