

Conclusion

In the foregoing pages, a critical research has been done on trade and commerce in Bengal along with Bengal's historical geography, its society, economy, polity, arts and crafts, means of exchange and trade centres and trade routes. First of all, attempts have been made to resolve the dispute among the scholars over the beginning and duration of the medieval period. It appears that after the fall of the Guptas, some features of medieval culture emerged there. In the post-Gupta period, some radical changes occurred which were seen as the signs of the medieval period. Thus, it has been called the early medieval period. The period marks the transition from the ancient to the medieval period. The discussion highlights Bengal's unique character from the ancient to the period under survey. We know that Bengal was famous for her distinct agricultural products, trade and commerce from the very beginning. But when eminent scholars like D.D. Koshambi, R.S. Sharma and B.N.S. Yadav gave an opinion of declining industries, trade and commerce, money economy etc., there was a clash to that long-cherished notion of a flourishing trade. They viewed that due to the feudalistic character of the economy in Bengal, self-sufficient economy developed, central administration suffered a break down, regionalism appeared, and industries, trade and commerce and urbanization declined and means of exchange were almost extinct. Their views created a commotion in society. But the eminent scholars such as D.C. Sircar, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, B.N. Mukherjee, and Ranabir Chakrabarty refute the theory of interrupted and unabated feudalism quoting many reliable references. It appears from their discussion that there was little scope for feudalistic features to flourish in early medieval north India as compared to European feudalism. The same thing was applicable in the case of Bengal. The geo-political history always played a leading role in making the history of any country. Therefore, how the geo-political factors of Bengal prepared the ground for the development of economy of Bengal has been highlighted here. The geographical location of Bengal connected her with

neighbouring regions and the outside world very firmly. In the discussion, it is established that the littoral tract of Bengal played a crucial role in maintaining trade and commerce. The Pālas and the Senas formed kingdoms extending up to Bengal and Bihar. They had maintained peace and order in Bengal for a long time. On the other hand, the regional dynasties of eastern Bengal also kept peaceful situation which created a conducive environment for trade and commerce. Apart from this, the rulers also patronized the commercial activities so that the economy of the country got enriched. They provided smooth communication by making roads and taking measures to ensure security to the travellers and traders from the hazards of the journey. They also employed officers to look after the commercial activities. The officers such as *vyāpāra kārāṇḍaya* and *vyāpāra viniyukta* referred to in the inscriptions were employed to look after the trade and commerce along with the collection of *śulka*. Sometimes, the government also exempted *śulka* to stimulate trade.

The numerous rivers and its tributaries brought about the fertility of a large tract of Bengal. The fertile land provided huge surplus production that fostered trade and commerce. The indigenous and foreign accounts referred to the prosperity of Bengal in the field of agriculture. Naturally, the economy of Bengal got flourished in terms of different agricultural products such as rice, wheat, barley, maize, mustard, kidney beans, sesame, mustard seeds, etc. Apart from this, the area favoured the growth of different kinds of vegetables and fruits. Such vegetable were brinjal, long gourd, radish, arum, trichasanthes, dioeca (*patal*), chilli, turmeric etc. The fruits were mango, bread fruit, pomegranate, plantain, basia latifolia, date, figs, tamarind, coconut etc. Areca and betel-vines were also grown there. The natural resources were fruitfully utilized by the artisans of Bengal. They manufactured the variety of industrial products. They were highly skilled and artistic. Thus there was a great demand of products of Bengal in her neighbouring countries. We know that *muslin* was very popular in foreign markets since the ancient times. Thus, it inspired people to export their products to other areas, thereby keeping trade and commerce in

alive. After meeting local consumption, the surplus was brought to deficit areas where the demand was mounting along with other economic forces. The readymade source of fish was also traced in the innumerable branches of rivers which met the demand of human food. Not only that, these rivers also framed a route of network which was a cheap and available to those who were interested in trade. The hinterland gave the people of south-eastern Bengal the easy communication via sea with south-east Asia and West Asia also. Tāmralipta and Gañge situated in the Ganges delta were the famous ports from where traders went off to the different parts of India and also outside. Samandar was another riverine port situated in Chittagong interconnecting interior parts of Bengal via rivers. It was also a route connecting with *samudra* or sea. These ports kept the economy of Bengal vibrant at that time. The overland routes also developed during this time. Tāmralipta was well connected via land routes with other parts of the country. Due to hazards the travellers and traders preferred overseas routes. It was cheap and safe. Hiuen-Tsang, I-tsing who came to Bengal in the 7th century AD observed the productivity of Bengal.

The gulf regions of south-eastern Bengal were well connected with the outer world for the purpose of cultural and commercial transactions. The accounts of the Chinese, Arab and Persian travelers provide sufficient information which proves that there was brisk trade and commerce between Bengal and South-east Asia, China, Sri Lanka, some parts of western Asia. The archaeological remains found from these sites also attest to the fact. The discoveries of high quality of silver coins, cowry-shells, *chūrṇī* or *chūrṇa* in different part of Bengal were also the proof of the existence of money economy. The existence of coins indicates the progress of trade and commerce. Cowrie was a special feature of money economy of Bengal in the period under survey. It is presumed that *cowrie* was not an indigenous product. It came from Maldives in exchange of rice regularly. Thus, it also proves the commercial transaction of Bengal keeping economy of Bengal vibrant. On the other hand, cultural transactions also happened in early Medieval Bengal. Trade relation of Bengal

and outside world also developed through the cultural communication. Fa-hien, Huen-Tsang, and I-tsing came to Bengal to learn about religion. Following their path, many traders and merchants also became enthusiastic to trade.

Generally, if peace and order persists in society, economy can flourish. So, in the work, an image of society has been highlighted being peaceful and prosperous. Such terms such as *haṭṭa*, *haṭṭika*, *sambhāṇḍāriyaka*, *navyāvakāśikāyam* found from inscriptions assigned to Early Medieval Bengal testify to the fact of brisk internal trade and commerce. Puṇḍravardhana located at the meeting point of north and south Bengal was a great centre of trade. The travelers and historians frequently mention Puṇḍravardhana where traders used to come and from where they went. In many cases Bengal played a role of entrepot. The horse from mountainous region, central Asia or China came to Bengal and they were exported to south-east Asia as is proven from archaeological evidence. The other various items such as malabathrum and elephants were also not local items, but traded through the ports of Bengal. Ancient Bengal not only exported the trading items, but also imported and kept the economy vibrant. Horses, precious stones, Chinese silk, *cowie* etc. were of the list. The *Tābāqat-i-Nāsiri* mentions Lakhnauti, where about over thousand horses were sold. The *Periplus* also points out that Chinese silk came to Bengal.

Thus, it may be said that the economy of Bengal was rich, prosperous and dynamic in character in early medieval Bengal. This economy had not been faded even with a hundred blows. The feudalistic economy did not hamper the economic prosperity of Bengal. The trade and commerce continued as it was before, and in many cases, it actually increased. The south-east Bengal kept the economy of Bengal vibrant and active. The location of the region tempted both the indigenous and non-local traders to trade. They earned enormously from the commercial transactions. Thus their financial well-being encouraged and inspired them. We find several references in this regard. But this prosperity of economy did not change the lives of the common people. There are always shadows under the dazzling light. Bengal economy substantiates the proverb. The diverse

economic activity raised the standard of life of the traders and those in the upper sections of the society. Thriving economic activity with magnitude of income from various sources led them to lead lives of pomp and pleasure, whereas evidences are not scanty to show that economic prosperity was confined to the fortunate few enterprising communities and many had to make the both ends meet only.