

Abstract

It is generally believed that Bengal in the Early Medieval Period saw a transformation in the field of society, political and economic life. Some noticeable changes in the society were the proliferation of castes, the upgradation of the position of the *vaiśyas* and the *śudras*, and the deterioration of the position of women. As regards political history, there was no central power. The regional powers became powerful and they established sovereign kingdoms in their respective areas. These regional powers include the Vaṅga kings in Vaṅga-Samtaṭa, the Bhadra dynasty in Samataṭa, the Khaḍgas, the Nāthas, the Devas and the Rātas in Vaṅga and Samataṭa, the dynasty of Kāntideva in Harikela, the Chandras in Vaṅga-Samataṭa, Varmans in Vikramapura, the kingdom of Paṭṭikera in Tripura, the Gauḍa kingdom, the Pālas and the Senas in eastern Bengal. In absence of a central powers, there emerged feudal lords, who controlled over the vast area of land. The landholders who appeared in Bengal in this era have generally been compared to the lords of Europe. This system of economy has been called feudalism by the scholars. In this system the regional powers became more powerful. They mostly depended on land and naturally concentrated on agriculture. The exclusive focus on agriculture brought about the prosperity of agricultural products and gave the economy a self-sufficient character. The new landholders ignored the manufacturing of industrial products leading to the decline of trade and commerce. The lack of trade and commerce resulted in the extinction of a solid exchange system, deurbanisation etc.

The present study is done to refute the traditional concept of declining trade and commerce in Early Medieval Bengal. This is an attempt to prove the fact that though some part of Bengal as well as North India suffered some crisis in terms of industry, trade, commerce and money economy, a large area of north India and Bengal maintained an active role in the economy of India. This fact is established by the inscriptions issued by the rulers from time to time. The accounts left by foreign who visited India in the period under survey, have also

been duly explored. In this regard, it must be mentioned that south-east Bengal kept her prominence in the economy of Bengal.

The present study has been broadly divided into five chapters excluding introduction and conclusion. It also includes also an appendix of three chapters which focus on the role of the state towards trade and commerce, guild system and means of exchange.

The first chapter 'Historical Geography of Bengal' has been further divided into two different parts. The first part seeks to locate the principal political divisions of Bengal from time to time, and delimit the areas over which the inhabitants of Bengal exercised control and date the periods of their activity. In the discussion four principal political and cultural regions have been identified, each of which had a distinct character of its own. The study also highlights the area overlapping from time to time in nearby areas. The second part explores various details of political rulers from the time of the Guptas (the 4th to fifth centuries) to the coming of the Muslims (13th century). The rulers established sovereign kingdoms in different parts of Bengal from where they ruled over.

The second chapter 'Society and Economy' contains the social and economic aspects from the ancient time upto the period under survey. The social part deals with the issues of caste, position of women, education and learning, food and drink, dress and ornaments, leisure entertainments, manners and customs, conveyances, luxury and immorality. The economic side highlights the necessities, comforts and luxuries of the people of those days. Naturally, agriculture, crafts and industries, trade and commerce and means of exchange has been given importance in this chapter.

The fourth chapter 'Crafts and Industry' intends to explore the foundation of Bengal's economy. Along with agriculture, the different kinds of industries including textile, sugar, oil, pottery, metal, stone, wood, leather, and glass, etc., help to retain the stability of economy of Bengal. The enrichment of the economy deriving from the industrial development filed to touch the artisan class and they lived in distress.

The fifth chapter 'Trade and Commerce I' focuses the trade and commerce in Bengal from time immemorial. The chapter also has been divided into three parts. The first part highlights the factors that contributed to the growth of trade and commerce. The second part highlights agricultural products, trading items, local markets and its local and inter-state trade. The third part focuses the external trade carried out with different outside countries. The items that were imported and exported are given a place in this portion. Overall the discussion clearly refutes the notion of scarcity of trade and commerce happening due to the system of feudal economy in Bengal.

The sixth chapter 'Trade and Commerce II' deals with the discussion of trade centres which once developed, but declined in subsequent times. The discussion also seeks to find out the trade routes from the very beginning to the period under survey. In this regard, land and sea routes facilitating trade and commerce are highlighted here. Without transport, the routes could never have been developed and continued for long. So, transport must have developed in that period and the discussion seeks to focus on the transportation that connected Bengal with nearby and far areas and abroad. In this respect, the trading items being stored in the areas called warehouse have also been discussed here.

The study concludes with the remark that though there were some features of feudalism in the spectrum of Bengal, it did not hamper the economic prosperity that Bengal derived from trade and commerce. It may be said that as compared to northern India, the south-eastern part of Bengal having a brisk trade and money economy was not neglected though the economy was feudal in character. At the same time, brisk trade being prevalent in the narrow regions of south-east Bengal had some impact over other parts of Bengal. The territories of south-east Bengal might have used other regions of Bengal as hinterland and that augmented trade and commerce of the area.

As mentioned before the study also includes three appendices. The first 'State towards Trade and Commerce', tries to explore the role played by the

state towards the development of trading activities. From the early period, the state adopted various measures to ensure trade and traders. The second one 'Guild System' explores the different aspects of organisation (guild) formed by the various professions of cultivation, industry, trade and commerce. Finally a solid system of exchange has been highlighted in the discussion and an attempt has been made to prove that from the earliest times to the given period of study, an organised system of coinage had been prevalent in Bengal.