

The Zamindars and Chieftains of Mughal Bengal in the 17th Century

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Abstract:

The 17th century marked a significant period in the history of Mughal Bengal, characterized by the complex interplay between the Mughal administration and local power structures. This paper examines the role of zamindars and chieftains in the socio-political and economic landscape of Mughal Bengal during this period. It explores their relationship with the Mughal state, their administrative functions, and their contributions to the agrarian economy. The study highlights the dual role of zamindars as both intermediaries and autonomous rulers, shedding light on their influence in shaping the region's history.

Introduction

The Mughal Empire's expansion into Bengal in the late 16th century brought significant changes to the region's political and economic structures. By the 17th century, the Mughals had established a centralized administration, but their control was heavily reliant on local intermediaries, particularly the zamindars and chieftains. These local elites played a crucial role in revenue collection, maintaining order, and mediating between the state and the peasantry. This paper investigates the nature of their authority, their interactions with the Mughal state, and their impact on the socio-economic fabric of 17th-century Bengal.

The Zamindars: Intermediaries of the Mughal State

Zamindars were landholders who exercised control over agrarian resources and were responsible for revenue collection in their respective territories. The Mughal administration recognized their authority and integrated them into the imperial revenue system. Zamindars were required to pay a fixed sum (jama) to the state, while retaining a portion of the revenue for themselves. This system allowed the Mughals to extract resources efficiently while minimizing administrative costs. However, the relationship between the zamindars and the Mughal state was not always harmonious. Zamindars often resisted Mughal demands for higher revenue, leading to conflicts and rebellions. For instance, the revolt of the zamindar Raja Shobha Singh in 1696 highlighted the tensions between local elites and the central authority.¹ Despite such conflicts, zamindars remained indispensable to the Mughal administration, as they provided stability and ensured the flow of revenue.

¹ . Richards, J. F. (1993). *The Mughal Empire*. Cambridge University Press.

The zamindars of Mughal Bengal were pivotal figures in the 17th century, serving as intermediaries between the Mughal state and the agrarian population. Their role was multifaceted, encompassing revenue collection, local governance, and the maintenance of social order. This section delves into the origins, functions, and complexities of the zamindari system, highlighting their significance in the Mughal administrative framework.

Origins and Evolution of the Zamindari System:

The term "zamindar" derives from the Persian words "zamin" (land) and "dar" (holder), signifying their role as landholders. The institution of zamindari predated the Mughal era, with roots in the pre-Mughal polities of Bengal. However, under the Mughals, the zamindari system was formalized and integrated into the imperial revenue administration. The Mughals recognized the zamindars as essential intermediaries who could bridge the gap between the state and the peasantry.²

The zamindars were not a homogeneous group; they ranged from small landholders controlling a few villages to powerful elites governing vast territories. Some zamindars were hereditary rulers who had held power for generations, while others were appointed by the Mughal state as revenue collectors. The Mughals often confirmed the authority of existing zamindars in exchange for their loyalty and regular revenue payments.³

The primary function of the zamindars was to collect revenue from the peasantry and remit a fixed portion (jama) to the Mughal treasury. The revenue system, known as the zabt system, required zamindars to assess and collect taxes based on land productivity. The Mughal state set the revenue demand, but the zamindars were responsible for its implementation at the local level.⁴ Beyond revenue collection, zamindars exercised significant administrative and judicial authority within their territories. They maintained law and order, resolved disputes, and provided patronage to local institutions such as temples, mosques, and schools. This decentralized governance allowed the Mughal state to extend its influence without the need for a large bureaucratic apparatus.⁵

Zamindars also acted as military leaders, raising militias to defend their territories and assist the Mughal state during conflicts. For instance, during the Mughal campaigns against the Ahom kingdom in Assam, zamindars provided troops and logistical support.⁶ This dual role as administrators and military leaders reinforced

² Ibid.

³ Eaton, R. M. (1993). *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*. University of California Press.

⁴ Habib, I. (1999). *The Agrarian System of Mughal India, 1556–1707*. Oxford University Press.

⁵ Alam, M. (1986). *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–48*. Oxford University Press.

⁶ Op.Cit., Richards, J. F. (1993)

their importance in the Mughal administrative structure. The relationship between the zamindars and the Mughal state was not without tension. The Mughals sought to maximize revenue extraction, often increasing the jama to meet imperial demands. This led to frequent conflicts, as zamindars resisted higher revenue assessments and sought to protect their autonomy.⁷ One notable example of such resistance was the revolt of Raja Shobha Singh in 1696. Shobha Singh, a zamindar in Burdwan, led a rebellion against the Mughal authorities, citing excessive revenue demands and administrative oppression. The revolt spread across Bengal, highlighting the fragility of Mughal control and the potential for local elites to challenge imperial authority.⁸ Despite these conflicts, the Mughals relied on zamindars to maintain stability and revenue flow. In many cases, the state adopted a conciliatory approach, granting titles and concessions to rebellious zamindars to secure their loyalty.⁹

Zamindars were not merely economic and political actors; they also wielded significant social and cultural influence. As patrons of art, literature, and religion, they played a key role in shaping the cultural landscape of Mughal Bengal. Many zamindars commissioned the construction of temples, mosques, and public works, which enhanced their prestige and legitimacy.¹⁰

The zamindars were of various kinds. Some of them flourished long before the introduction of Muslim rule in Bengal who submitted to the Muslim conquerors and agreed to pay hence they were allowed to enjoy the Zamindari estates in their possession. The second kinds of zamindars were those who cleared off jungles and brought that land under proper cultivation. They were known as jungle-lords. The third kinds of zamindars were those who were assigned lands as free-gifts. The fourth kind of zamindars were called Sanady zamindars who were granted a certain tract of waste land to be brought under cultivation, after which the zamindars paid revenue to the government.¹¹

From the sanads and parwanas issued to quite a large of zamindars by the Mughal emperors and subahdars, it appears that the zamindars enjoyed almost hereditary proprietary rights over their estates and were responsible for the payment of revenue and the maintenance of peace and order, “in those days the zamindars amongst other duties would appear to have performed police duties and were held responsible for maintenance of peace in their mahals the village chowkeedars and watchmen being directly under them. They were also in charge of village ferries, village ponds and village roads in their mahals, and performed more or less the

⁷ Op.Cit., Eaton, R. M. (1993)

⁸ Sarkar, J. N. (1985). *Mughal Administration*. Orient Longman.

⁹ Op.Cit., Habib, I. (1999)

¹⁰ Op.cit., Eaton, R. M. (1993)

¹¹ N. K. Sinha, Zamindari System in Bengal, etc., vide, Bengal—*Past and Present*, 1957, Vol. 75, Pt. I.

duties of 'justice of the peace'. They were more or less quasi-official functionaries and received sanads on appointment and were liable to removal for gross misconduct. Their mahals were not liable to auction-sale for arrears of revenue, but liable to attachment by the Crown for realisation of revenue and defaulting zamindars were liable to punishment. They were quasi-state functionaries or quasi-official landed aristocracy maintained by Mussalman sovereign for state purposes. They were quite a different species from the Bengal zamindars of today." The zamindar was to receive 'rasum' and 'nankar'. In the district of Burdwan¹² a 'mothot' or capitation contribution by the ryots enabled the zamindar to meet the charges of certain kinds of relief works. 'Begar' or unpaid services of the ryots were also requisitioned for this purpose by most of the zamindars. The zamindars were responsible for robberies and thefts committed in their estates and this was an ancient usage. In bigger estates, there were 'bakshis' immediately under the zamindars. It was the responsibility of the 'bakshi' to compensate the sufferer for his loss.¹³

In addition to zamindars, chieftains (often referred to as rajas or local kings) held significant power in Mughal Bengal. Unlike zamindars, who were integrated into the Mughal revenue system, chieftains often ruled semi-autonomous territories and maintained their own armies. They were particularly prominent in frontier regions, where Mughal control was weak. In the 17th century, the chieftains of Mughal Bengal represented a distinct category of local rulers who operated with a significant degree of autonomy, often outside the direct control of the Mughal state. Unlike the zamindars, who were integrated into the Mughal revenue system, chieftains (often referred to as rajas or local kings) ruled semi-independent territories and maintained their own armies. This section explores the origins, political dynamics, and socio-economic roles of these chieftains, highlighting their complex relationship with the Mughal Empire. Chieftains such as the Rajas of Jessore and Chandradwip played a pivotal role in resisting Mughal expansion and asserting their independence.¹⁴ Their power was derived from their control over land, military resources, and the loyalty of local communities. The Mughals often sought to co-opt these chieftains by granting them titles and incorporating them into the imperial hierarchy. However, many chieftains continued to challenge Mughal authority, particularly during periods of weak central control.¹⁵

The chieftains of Mughal Bengal were often descendants of pre-Mughal ruling families or tribal leaders who had established their authority in frontier regions. These areas, such as the jungles of Sundarbans, the hills of Chittagong, and the marshy tracts of eastern Bengal, were difficult for the Mughals to penetrate and

¹² Mukherjee. D.K. (1910). "The annals of Burdwan Raja". *The Calcutta Review*.

¹³ K. N. Sinha, Vide, *Bengal—Past and Present*, 1957, Vol. 75, Pt.I.

¹⁴ Op.cit., Eaton, R. M. (1993)

¹⁵ *Calcutta Review*, Vol. LXI, 1873, p. 6

control. As a result, chieftains in these regions retained their autonomy even after the Mughal conquest of Bengal in the late 16th century. Chieftains derived their legitimacy from their control over land, military resources, and the loyalty of local communities. They often claimed divine or ancestral rights to rule, which reinforced their authority. For example, the Rajas of Chandradwip and Bhushana traced their lineage to ancient Hindu dynasties, while the chiefs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts were tribal leaders with deep roots in the region¹⁶

One of the defining features of the chieftains was their military strength. Unlike zamindars, which relied on the Mughal state for legitimacy, chieftains maintained their own armies and fortifications. This military capability allowed them to resist Mughal encroachment and assert their independence. For instance, the Chakma chiefs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts successfully resisted Mughal attempts to subjugate their territory throughout the 17th century. Similarly, the Rajas of Jessore and Bakla (present-day Barisal) frequently clashed with Mughal forces, using guerrilla tactics and their knowledge of the local terrain to their advantage.¹⁷ These conflicts underscored the limits of Mughal power in Bengal's frontier regions and highlighted the resilience of local chieftains.

The Mughal state adopted a dual strategy in dealing with the chieftains: coercion and co-optation. On the one hand, the Mughals launched military campaigns to subdue rebellious chieftains and bring their territories under imperial control. On the other hand, they sought to incorporate compliant chieftains into the Mughal administrative system by granting them titles, jagirs (land grants), and positions in the imperial hierarchy. For example, Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore, a powerful chieftain, was initially a Mughal ally but later rebelled against imperial authority. His eventual defeat and capture by Mughal forces in 1612 demonstrated the state's willingness to use force against recalcitrant chieftains. In contrast, the Rajas of Chandradwip and Bhushana accepted Mughal suzerainty and were recognized as vassals, allowing them to retain their autonomy in exchange for tribute and military support.¹⁸

Chieftains played a vital role in the local economy and governance of their territories. They oversaw agricultural production, trade, and resource extraction, often investing in infrastructure such as roads, markets, and irrigation systems. Their control over strategic resources, such as timber, elephants, and salt, made them important players in regional and interregional trade networks. In addition to their economic contributions, chieftains were responsible for maintaining law and order, resolving disputes, and providing patronage to religious and cultural institutions. Their courts often served as centers of learning and artistic expression,

¹⁶ Bhattasali, N.K. (1928). "Bengal Chief's struggle for Independence in the reign of Akbar and Jahangir". *Bengal Past and Present*.

¹⁷ Op.cit., Eaton, R. M. (1993)

¹⁸ K. K. Datta. 1936. *Studies in the History of the Bengal Subah*. University of Calcutta.

attracting scholars, poets, and artisans. For example, the court of Raja Ramchandra of Bhushana was renowned for its patronage of Sanskrit literature and Hindu religious traditions.¹⁹

Chieftains were not only political and economic leaders but also cultural and religious patrons. They played a key role in preserving and promoting local traditions, particularly in regions where Hindu and tribal cultures predominated. Many chieftains commissioned the construction of temples, monasteries, and other religious structures, which served as symbols of their power and piety. For instance, the Rajas of Chandradwip were known for their patronage of Vaishnavism, a popular Hindu devotional tradition in Bengal. Similarly, the chiefs of the Chittagong Hill Tracts supported Theravada Buddhism, which was the dominant religion among the tribal communities of the region. This cultural patronage reinforced the chieftains' legitimacy and strengthened their ties with local communities.²⁰

By the late 17th century, the power of the chieftains began to wane as the Mughal state intensified its efforts to consolidate control over Bengal. The establishment of a more centralized administration under subahdars (provincial governors) such as Mir Jumla and Shaista Khan reduced the autonomy of the chieftains and brought their territories under greater imperial scrutiny. However, the legacy of the chieftains endured in the cultural and political fabric of Bengal. Their resistance to Mughal authority and their contributions to local governance and culture left a lasting impact on the region's history. The chieftains' ability to balance autonomy and accommodation with the Mughal state provides valuable insights into the dynamics of power in early modern South Asia.

The zamindars and chieftains of Mughal Bengal were not merely political actors; they also played a vital role in the region's agrarian economy. They invested in land reclamation, irrigation, and the cultivation of cash crops such as rice, cotton, and indigo. These efforts contributed to the growth of Bengal's agricultural output, making it one of the wealthiest provinces of the Mughal Empire. Moreover, zamindars and chieftains facilitated trade and commerce by maintaining local markets and providing security to merchants. Their patronage of artisans and craftsmen also stimulated economic activity. However, their economic power often translated into social dominance, as they exploited the peasantry to maximize revenue.

The zamindars and chieftains of Mughal Bengal were central to the region's political and economic life in the 17th century. While they served as intermediaries for the Mughal state, they also wielded significant autonomy and influence. Their

¹⁹ R. C. Banerjee *The Career of Mir Jafar Khan. —State Patronage to Hindu and Muslim Religion during the East India Company's Rise* (vide, Bengal—*Past and Present*, Vol. LXI, 1939).

²⁰ Shihabuddin Talish *Fatheyya-i-ibriyah* (Part trans. by J. N. Sarkar in *J.A.S.B.*—1906 and 1907)

dual role as revenue collectors and local rulers highlights the complexity of Mughal administration in Bengal. By examining their contributions and conflicts, this paper underscores the importance of local elites in shaping the history of Mughal Bengal.

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