

The *Magh* Raiders and the Mughals in the First Half of Seventeenth Century Bengal

Dr. Varun Kumar Roy

[Editorial Note: The present paper narrates about the nature of the defence system of the Mughals against the *Magh* raiders of Arakan. The Mughals were weak at river warfare hence they were not able to counter the raids by the *Maghs*. Further the paper gives a detailed description of the about the efforts made under Jahangir to put an end to the *Magh* depredations. In the later part of the article the author enlightens us about the Mughals successfully conquering Chittagong and strengthening the Mughal hold over Bengal against the *Magh* raiders.]

***Abstract:** This research article tries to understand the nature of Mughal defence against the Arakanese rulers in the first half of the seventeenth century. The atrocities of the magh raids in the various parts of medieval Bengal could not be countered by the Mughals because they were very weak at river warfare. The occupation of Chittagong by the Arakanese, making it a strong base for raids and keeping the Portuguese pirated as their front line of defence as well as attack kept the Arakanese rules at upper hand. It was only after the Fort of Chittagong was brought under Mughal rule; they could tame the Pirates and stop the raids.*

***Keywords:** pirates, flotilla, army, river, raids.*

Introduction

Medieval Bengal has a long line of sea-coast extending from Chittagong to Balasore. Long distance trades were carried out from the forts of Bengal to Ceylon, Java, and Sumatra. But it is imperative to mention the relation of Mughals with that of the Arakanese. Nihar Ranjan Roy says that the region Arakan was which is now Burma was more a frontier province of Eastern India than the province of Burma. (Roy 1932). Chittagong, the Ports Grande of the Portuguese was the main bone of contention between the Muslims rulers of Bengal and the Arakanese rulers. Chittagong was under their occupation till 1666 (Hervey 1925-40). Prior to Mughal conquest there was anarchy prevalent in Bengal and this led the Arakanese to consolidate their stronghold over Chittagong. They were even successful in conquering the districts of Naokhali and Tipperah upto Meghna River (Karim 1974: iii). It developed into a major base of operations of the *Maghs* and the Arakanese

strongly defended this prized outpost. Tallish points out that every year Raja of Arkan used to send hundreds ships full of soldiers and artillery munitions and also carried gold coins stamped with his own name in Chittagong (JASB 1907:421). The strategic position of Chittagong enabled the *Maghs* to carry on raids to South Bengal. They built a strong fort at Chittagong and left a large fleet to guard it. (Karim 1974:112).

Who were the *Maghs*?

There is much controversy about the origin of the word *Magh*. According to the New Standard Dictionary published by the Statesman, the word '*Magh*' is commonly applied to the inhabitants of Arakan, particularly those living near the district of Chittagong. Whether the word *Magh* is of Bengali origin is not precisely known. But it can be said that the word is not a Burmese word. The authors of the book Bengali Literature in Arakan Court (D'Hubert 2020) have expressed the view that it is not proper to call the Mongoloid Arakanese *Magh* and that the word *Magh* is derived from Magadh where their ancestors came. The Census Report of 1931 refers that the term *Magh* is ordinarily applied to two distinct groups, viz. a Chittagonian Buddhist group and the Arakan *Maghs* of Chittagong Hill Tracts and Chittagong. The Bengali speaking Chittagonian *Maghs* petitioned for the use of a distinct name. This caste claims them to Kshatriya status and they trace their descent from the Buddhists of Magadha who are alleged to have migrated from their old houses on the revival of Brahmanism and the advent of the Mughals. Risley has distinguished this as 'Marmagri *Maghs*' and the Arakanese as 'Jumia, Roang and Rakhaing', but the group speaks Bengali and a Burmese description of this kind is not used among themselves and suggests of Burmese source.' It is true that during the rule of the Senas in Bengal, thousands of Buddhists crossed over to Arakan from Bengal. Hence it can be said with some amount of certainty that the royal house of Arakan belonged to a different stock than the raiders who were given the name *Magh* as that of the ruling tribe of Arakan (Roy 1968:220).

Mills points out that the *maghs* were certainly of Tai origin as their ancestors being Tai Long (Greater Tai) who were driven out of China towards the south and the south-west. Though the *Maghs* are now Buddhists they admit that they were once headhunters. Their language is Arakanese, a dialect of Burma, and as per physical figures the *Maghs* are stout and strong and sturdy. The face is broad and rather Mongolian and the complexion a sallow brown. The men usually have a straggling

moustache and occasionally a beard. The earliest home of which they have any definite traditions is Arakan, where they migrated in the 17th century into what is now Cox's Bazar Sub-division. Some migrated further into Bengal and their migration did not stop till early in the 19th century (Mills 1926).

The Bone of Contention

Prior to its conquest by the Muhammadans, Chittagong, lying on the disputed frontier between- the Hinduism of Bengal and the Buddhism of Burma, formed a source of chronic fend between the rulers of Tippera and Arakan. It frequently changed masters, being at one time subject to the king of Arakan, and at another attached to Tippera, a kingdom which at different periods extended from the Sundarbans in the west to Burma in the east and northwards as far as Kamrup of North Bengal. In the ninth century A. D. the country was conquered by the Buddhist king of Arakan, who erected a pillar at Chittagong, and according to Burmese tradition, the town derives its name from a remark made by the Buddhist king of Arakan '*sit-ta-gung*', ie.,to make war improper. In the latter period it appears to have been lost by the Arakanese, as per the evidence of a copper-plate found at Nasirabad, a village close to Chittagong, which records the Land grant, dated 1243 A.D. The inscription refers to a dynasty of kings who were Vaishnava by religion, one bearing the title of Deva, and it has been conjectured that they were the Rajas of Tippera (JASB 1874).

As early as 12th century there was free commercial intercourse between Baghdad south-eastern sea-board of Bengal and the Arab ports of Basra; and it is probable that the commercial activity of the Muslims paved the way for Muslim domination in the district, Fakhruddin Mubarak, sultan of Bengal (1338-1349 A.D.), the founder of the earliest independent Muslim sultanate in Bengal with his headquarters at the historic city of Sonargaon, was the first muslim ruler to cross the Meghna river and establish his supremacy as far north of Syleth, to the east and Noakhali, and to the south into Chittagong. When Ibn Battuta visited Chittagong in the year 1350, he acknowledged the suzerainty of the Bengal king and said that it was an important centre of trade and "a great place situated on the shore of the Great Sea" (Dunn 1986:255).

The Arakanese regained possession of Chittagong, for the account of Ralph Fitch's visit leaves no doubt that in 1585 it was held by them, and at the same time that their rule was maintained only by means of constant fighting. "*From Satagam _*

(Satgion),” he wrote, “I travelled by the country of the king of Tippara or Porto Grande, with whom the Mogores or Mogen (Maghs) have almost continually warred. The Mogen, which be of the kingdom of Rogen (Arekan) and Rame, be stronger than the king of Tippara, so that Chatigan or Porto Grande is oftentimes under the king of Reoon” (Harvey 1899:116)

The troubles of Sher Shah’s revolution, the Mughal invasion, the aggressions of the Portuguese, and the Bengal military revolt helped the Arakanese to conquer Chittagong. The Arakan king Sikandar Shah (Meng Phalaung—1571-1593) established his undisputed sway over the whole of Chittagong and brought a large portion of Noakhali and Tippera under his sway. His son Salim Shah (Meng Radzagni — 1593-1612) was equally ambitious and capable. His son Husain Shah (Meng Khamaung—1612-1622) proved to be the greatest and most successful conqueror. The two latter kings of Arakan led a series of campaigns against Bengal and by their policy of open war and secret help to the malcontents and rebels in Bengal, proved to be a great menace to the Mughal peace and a challenge to Mughal authority in Bengal (Sarkar 1943:243).

The Magh Raids in Bengal

The Arakan King kept the Portuguese mercenaries as advanced guards for the protection of his frontier, permitting them to live in the seaports of Chittagong and Dianga and making them grants of land. The Arakan coast was a place of retreat for the fugitives from Goa, Ceylon, Cochin and Malacca. It bred a race of daring seamen. For centuries they remained a terror of the Ganges delta and lower Bengal.

Bernier points out that every kind of ‘criminals from Goa or Ceylon, Cochin or Malacca, mostly Portuguese and half-caste’, flocked to Chittagong where the King of Arakan designed to welcome any sort of allies against his formidable neighbour the Mughal and permitted them to settle. They soon developed a ‘busy trade in piracy, scoured the neighbouring seas in high galleasses, entered the numerous arms and branches of the Ganges, ravaged the island of lower Bengal, and, often penetrating forty or fifty leagues up the country, surprised and carried away the entire population of villages, and married the poor gentiles, and other inhabitants of this quarter at their assemblies, their markets, their festivals and weddings, seizing slaves both men and women, small and great perpetrating strange, cruelties and burning all that they could not carry away’.(Bernier 1916:175-82)

After the occupation of Sandwip by the Arakanese from the band of Gonzales, the Portuguese settlers in Arakan gave up all attempts at independence and lived on as the obedient instruments of the Arakan King. Manrique had given the King some valuable information to the effect that it was the declared policy of the Portuguese government, both in Lisbon and Goa to assist the Arakanese against the Mughal emperor on the ground that the latter aspired to make himself lord paramount of the whole of India and must be resisted by the creation of some sort of balance of power. Thiri Thudamma, the Arakanese King (1622-1638), was grateful to have this authoritative statement of foreign policy (JBRS, 1923:215). It is to be pointed out that the Arakanese Kings had the greatest trouble with the Portuguese along the Chittagong coast. These people were nothing but pirates, free booters and adventurers, independent of the viceroy of Goa. King Thiri Thudamma, in fact, had no confidence in the Portuguese. But, since his kingdom now included Chittagong, he had no way of defending that state against the Mughals except with the assistance of the Portuguese and he deemed it prudent to make use of them as long as they found it convenient to serve his purpose.

The *Maghs* used to raid from Chittagong through Bhalwa, which was within Bengal Subah, and moved up to Jessore, Hugli, Bikrampur, Sonargaon and Dacca (JASB, 1907:424). They came up to Dacca for plunder and looting by the streams flowing by Khizrpur and Jatrapur (Rennel Atlas, Sheet 1). By these raids the *Maghs* grew rich at the cost of Bengal. The areas raided were often left desolate and impoverished. According to Talish the district of Bakla (Bakarganj), which was formerly full of cultivation, was deserted by their raids (JASB, 1907:423). The Arakanese navy, reinforced by the Portuguese, was superior to that of the Mughals. Talish says, "Their cannons are beyond numbering, their flotilla exceeds the waves of the sea (in number). Most of ships are *Ghurabs* and *jalbas*; *Khatus* and *dhums* are larger than *ghurabs*, these are so strongly made of timber with a hard core that the balls of Zamburaks and small cannons cannot pierce them" (JASB 1907:423). The *Magh* depredations were frequent during the reign of Jahangir. In Islam Khan Chishti's governorship the *Maghs* once with 300 boats to the environs of Sripur came raided, burnt and looted a large number of villages and carried away the villagers as captives. They fed with ease before Islam Khan could send any help and Shaikh Yusuf, the *Thanadar* of Sripur Vikrampur, could not withstand them. The *Maghs* led another expedition against Abdul Wahid, the Mughal *thanadar* of Bhalwa (B.G.Vol.1:46). Ibrahim Khan Fath Jang, the governor of Bengal, had been commanded by Jahangir to subdue the King of Arakan. The conquest of Tipperah

towards that purpose. Ibrahim Khan was assigned to Mirz Nurulla Tipperah's capital, Udaipur where he was appointed as the administrative chief (Sardar). From Thāna Udaipur, Mirza wrote to Ibrahim Khan about the possibility of invading Arakan. Accordingly an expedition was sent which ended in failure because of the scarcity of food and the adverse communication system (B.G.Vol.2:628). During Shahjahan's the new *Magh* King Thiri Thudhamma (1622-38), sent a friendly mission to the rebel prince. Common hostilities to the Emperor obviously induced the new King to conciliate the rebel prince by friendly gesture. It has been already pointed out that the Arakan King sent his envoys to Shahjahan with rare gifts worth Rs. 100,000 as *peshkash*. Shahjahan also sent a valuable dress of honour along with many precious gifts to the *Magh* King and issued a Farman confirming his sovereignty over his territory (B.G.Vol.2:717-711).

The Arakan King appears to have taken advantage of the preoccupations of Prince Shahjahan in Bengal to indulge in a raid on Bhalwa. After the restoration of imperial rule in Bengal in 1625, Khanahzad Khan, son of Mahbat Khan, who left the governmental affairs in the hands of his favourites, failed miserably to check an incursion of the Arakan King. The Arakanese proceeded unopposed from Khizrpur along the Dulai to the environs of Jahangir Nagar, entered the city, burnt and looted it and retired with a large number of captives. The Subahdar's attempt to obstruct the passage of the Arakanese war boats by means of iron chains across the river Dulai proved unavailing (Sarkar, 1948: 314). The frontier raids of the *Maghs* continued on Mughal Bengal even after the accession of Sahajahan. The Arakan King tried to undermine the Mughal authority by sporadic raids on villages and townships and by assisting their enemies in Bengal. He sent his own Portuguese Mercenaries from Chittagong to assist the Portuguese, who were fighting against the Mughals at Hugli during the governorship of Qasim Khan (Houston 1927: 420). However, their help arrived at Hugli too late. Thudhamma invaded the Mughal territory in 1626 with a fleet of 70 *galeotas* and 500 *gelias* carrying thirty Portuguese and other Christians who were in their service. They reached Dacca and received very feeble or no resistance from the Mughals. Taking the possession of the Nawab's palace in which he found great wealth. The *Magh* King spent three days sacking the city, destroying the Nawab's palace and levelling it to the ground and then returned home (Houston 1927:279). Perhaps the most obnoxious activity of these pirates was their slave trade, in which the more peaceful settlers also participated. A graphic picture of this gruesome trade has been preserved in the detailed account of Shihabuddin Talish. The extent of the ravage caused by it may

be gauged from the fact that between 1621 and 1624, the Portuguese brought to Chittagong alone 42,000 slaves from the various districts of Bengal. The settlers at Hugli regularly bought these slaves from the *Maghs* and so did the Portuguese at Tamluk. It is a significant fact that at the time of the fall of Hugh the bulk of its defenders consisted of slaves. Shahjahan accused the Portuguese at Hugli of selling Bengali prisoners to the *Maghs* for their galleys. The slaves purchased at Chittagong and Dianga were sent to different parts of India by Indian and Portuguese dealers. Manrique has also referred to the enslavement of the Bengali peasants by the *Maghs* as he says: "After purchasing slaves from the *Maghs* either at Dianga or Pipli in Orissa, the slaves were taken in ships for sale, tied together through holes in their palms and sustained by a daily allowance of dry rice thrown to them carelessly as to birds" (Houston 1927:279).

The Noakhali District Gazetteer contains horrible stories of the atrocities committed by the *Maghs*. Many are the tales told of the fierceness and cruelty of the robbers and how the whole countryside would tremble at the cry of 'the *Magh*,' 'the *Magh*', that told of their approach. Surprising the villagers in their homes or at the markets they would carry off men, women and children, holding some to ransom and keeping the rest as slaves either to sell them to the Portuguese of Goa or Ceylon and other places or forcibly converting them to Christianity to train them up as rowers in their own service. Women were sometimes sold for marriage in other parts of Bengal where it was difficult to secure brides in those days. These women were called 'Bharer Meye' (Webster 1911:9)

Since the reign of Emperor Jahangir, the Feringi pirates and the Arakanese constituted a great terror to the people of the coastal regions till the conquest of Chittagong by Shaista Khan. Throughout this period, the Mughals never succeeded in crushing the power of the pirates or in preventing them from carrying raids and plunder into the heart of the province. In spite of the strong militia and 'nawara' which the Mughals maintained, the pirates "did not cease to make frequent and strange ravages and to penetrate into the country, laughing at all the army of Mughals, having so bold and so expert in the use of arms and in navigating these galleasses that four or five of their vessels would not hesitate to attack 14 or 15 of those of the Mughals—destroying, taking or sinking them and coming off with flying colours" (Campos 1919:164). In fact, the Mughals were no match in respect of the use of firearms and naval dexterity and often they were on the defensive. It was Shaista Khan who succeeded in bringing peace in the region.

The Mughals and the Conquest of Chittagong

The Mughals had to wage severe and prolonged warfare with the Arakanese. After the disastrous failure of the Arakanese invasion of Bhulua in January 1616, the Mughal viceroy Qasim Khan launched an aggressive expedition against the Arakan king. It was the repeated instruction of Emperor Jahangir “to conquer Arakan, to seize the white elephant and to send it to the sublime court”. The viceroy himself advanced to Bhulua in February 1616 with a force of 5000 cavalry, 5000 musketeers, 200 war-elephants and a fleet of 100 war-boats in the direction of Chittagong. Qasim Khan with a large army, remained encamped on the bank of the river Feni in order to encourage the army of the vanguard. While the imperial army had been steadily proceeding towards Chittagong, the Arrakan king was not sitting idle. He made necessary arrangements for defence. He decided to check the advance of the imperial army. Notwithstanding the fact that the fort of Chittagong: was well fortified and equipped, the Arakan king sent his ‘*Karamkari*’ with a hundred thousand infantry, one thousand war-boats and four hundred elephants to a place called Kathgar, a strategic point 20 miles north-west of Chittagong. The king himself started from his capital' Merohaung for the defence of the fort of Chittagong with an army of 300,000 infantry and 10,000 cavalry besides a large number of war boats (Roy 1968:229).

Informed by the spies that the fortification at Kathgar was not yet complete and the Arakan king had not yet arrived at Chittagong with his main force, the Mughal commander of the vanguard Abd-un-Nabi, with the expectation of an easy victory, marched forward without delay. He left behind Sarhad Khan and Shaikh Kamal to erect a fort and hold it for the purpose of maintaining communication with the advancing army. The latter two generals were displeased at being made subordinate to Abd-un-Nabi. So taking advantage of their knowledge of the routes, they left the highway and following a short out way, they reached Kathgar and without delay made an assault on the *Magh* fort (Roy 1968:230). The *Maghs* offered stiff resistance and discharged cannon, guns, arrows upon the invaders. Many soldiers on both sides were killed and wounded. The victory on the Mughal side was almost certain. But some of the ‘mansabdars’ in collusion with Sarhad Khan did not desire a complete victory at that stage and under the plea of the approach of night, they proposed suspension of the hostilities till next morning. Abd-un-Nabi, an inexperienced man, could not read through their plea and hence suspended the hostilities accordingly (Borah ed. 1936: 406). While the assault resumed the next morning, the situation was completely changed. The *Maghs* within the fort of

Kathgar meanwhile had recovered from the shock of the surprise attack and offered a determined resistance. The Murals fought the whole day and when they found it impossible to storm the *Magh* fort, they made a division of the trenches and proposed to keep the fort in the centre and surround it. But as there was a high hill on one side of the fort, it was impossible to surround it and hence the siege was protracted. The *Magh* '*Karamkari*' ordered ten thousand *Maghs* to raise a strong stockade between the hills in the rear of the Mughal vanguard and in front of the camp of Sarhad Khan and Shaikh Kamal who had fallen behind for the purpose of bringing ration for the troops. Accordingly the *Maghs* raised a stockade and put the people who carried on communication, between the two divisions of the imperial army, into great difficulty. The besiegers themselves were soon reduced to the position of the besieged. Ultimately, the possibility of the food supply to the main army being threatened, the imperialists raised the siege and retreated towards Dacca leaving behind their heavy artillery and destroying about 500 mounds of gunpowder (Borah ed. 1936: 407). Thus the maiden attempt of the Mughals to conquer Chittagong ended in a complete failure.

During the viceroyalty of Ibrahim Khan (1617-1623) the Arrakan king Meng Khamaung (Husain Shah) launched another expedition. Meanwhile the latter had strengthened his *Magh* invasion, by conquering Sondwip from the possession of 1620 Sebastian Gonzales. The Arakan king, with a fleet of 700 '*ghurabs*' and 4000 '*jalia*' boats, made a surprise attack upon the villages along the bank of the river Meghna. As there was no opposition, the *Maghs* plundered the villages with impunity and advanced as far as the island of Baghchar threatening the city of Dacca. Upon the appraisal of the *Magh* advance, Ibrahim Khan collected 32 war-boats and advanced towards the scene, reaching the vicinity of the enemy camp with a few personal attendants. The rest of the Mughal '*mansabdars*' and the landlords of Bengal joined the viceroy afterwards with a force of 8000 cavalry and about 5000 war-boats (Roy 1968:229).

Conclusion

During the Jahangir's reign, no serious effort was made by the Mughal government to put an end to the *Magh* depredations by conquering Chittagong, 'the nest of the pirates'. When Prince Shah Jahan rebelled against his father in Bengal, the king of Arakan took this opportunity to come to an understanding with the former. A friendly mission from the Arakan came to Bengal. The rebel prince valued the assistance of the *Maghs* in his war against the Delhi emperor. In fact, common

hostility to the emperor brought them together and Shah Jahan reciprocated the friendly gesture of the Arakan king. “No tangible result, however, followed and the whole thing proved more than a diplomatic game.”(Sarkar 1957:311). In the words of Karim, the Mughal Eastern frontier policy under Shahjahan was neither ‘aggressive nor forward’. The Mughals aimed primarily at maintaining the territorial integrity of Bengal. In doing so they were sometimes unavoidably involved in frontier skirmishes and disputes but, on the whole they tried to keep their involvement to the minimum. In the case of Arakan they could not tackle the Chittagong 'nest of pirates' mainly because of their weaknesses on sea (Karim 1974:119). It was in 1666 that the Bengal viceroy Shaista Khan under whom the Mughal flotilla of Bengal was substantially strengthened and utilised against the *Maghs* which ultimately succeeded in conquering Chittagong.

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