**JHSR Journal of Historical Studies and ResearchISSN:2583-0198**
**Volume 5, Number 1 (January - April,2025),PP.95-102.**
Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal
**Website:www.jhsr.in**
**Email:**jhsr.editor@gmail.com

# The Trade and Commerce in Early Bengal till the Establishment of the Muslim Rule in India

**Dr. Abhijit Datta[1]**

[1]Assistant Professor
Department of History
Islampur College
Islampur,West Bengal,India
Email:data.abhijit.82@mail.com

***Abstract:****The trade and commerce in early Bengal, from the 3rd century BCE to the establishment of Muslim rule in India in 1204 CE was very much vibrantas compared to other parts of India. Bengal's strategic location, with its access to the Bay of Bengal and the Ganges River, facilitated trade with various regions, including the Indian Ocean, Southeast Asia, and the Mediterranean.The region's economy thrived during the Mauryan (322-185 BCE) and Gupta (320-550 CE) periods, with the emergence of major trade centers, such as Tamralipta and Chandraketugarh. Bengal's merchants traded in various commodities, including textiles, spices, metals, and precious stones.The study examines the impact of various dynasties, including the Palas (750-1174 CE) and the Senas (1070-1230 CE), on Bengal's trade and commerce. The findings highlight the significance of Bengal's trade relationships with neighboring regions.*

***Keywords:*** *Bay of Bengal, Pala-Senas, Trade and Commerce,Tamralipta, Samandar etc.*

**Date of Submission: 17.01.2025 Date of Acceptance: 22.01.25**

## Introduction

The eastern part of Indian sub-continent is known a Bengal. It covers an area of 80000 square miles[1] with an immense source of alluvial deposit between the Tippara hills in the East, the Shillong plateau and Nepalese Terai in the North and the high lands of the Rājmahal and Chhotanagpur in the West, with the *janapadas* of Gauda-Pundra-Varendra-Rādha-Sumha-Tamralipti-Samataṭa-Vaṅga-Samataṭa-

Harikela-Vaṅgāla[2] watered by the Bhagirathi-Karatoya-Brahamaputra-Padma-Meghna and many other tributaries[3], played a very significant part in moulding the history of ancient India.

Since the very beginning of the human civilization, one of the important instruments for inter-cultural communication is trade. Colin Renfrew has ascertained that "it is reciprocal traffic, exchange or movement of materials or goods through peaceful human agency".[4] No country at any stage of its economic development has subsisted in a state of isolation. Its economic interests have ever been intimately linked up with those of other countries. Naturally, therefore, its international trade has formed an integral part of its own economic development. Giving a right fillip to the international trade our ancient people laid our economic development on a very stable and sound foundation.

There is a controversy among the scholars about the position of trade and commerce in the post-Gupta period. According to the prominent historian R.S. Sharma India, in post-Gupta period exhibited the characteristic of feudalism involving payment of services in land instead of coins which developed in an economy marked by the dearth of coins and the absence of trade and commerce.[5] According to Sharma, Indian feudalism was characterised by i) weakening of imperial powers, leading to regionalisation ii) emergence of powerful landholders, who controlled vast tracts of land, iii) kings granted land to Brahmins, temples ,and secular beneficiaries, creating a system of landholding, iv) landholders provided military services, administrative support, and revenue collection. Sharma argued that Indian feudalism was not a replica of European feudalism but had its unique characteristics, shaped by India's social, economic, and political context. Anti-Marxist historians have challenged the ideal of feudalism in early medieval India, arguing that the Indian society and economy during this period were more complex and nuanced. They argue that the central authority did not decline in early medieval India. Instead, many kingdoms, such as the Pallavas and the Cholas, maintained strong central control. They emphasise the importance of *Brahmadeya* in early medieval India. These land grants were not feudal in nature but rather a way of supporting the Brahmin class and other beneficiaries. The state played a crucial role in the period, collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, and providing public services. India's trade networks, established during the ancient period, continued to thrive during the early medieval period. These networks connected India to the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, and other regions. The significant expansion of maritime trade during this period marked a trade of Indian merchants with Southeast Asia, China, and the Middle East. The existence of merchants and guilds helped in facilitating trade and commerce. These organisations played a crucial role in regulating grade practices, setting standards, and providing financial support to merchants. So the theory of Marxist historians that feudalism in the early medieval period was market by the absence of trade and money economy does not bear scrutiny at least in Vaṅga-Samataṭa-Harikela as we have enough evidence in favour of the brisk trade of south east Bengal. [6] Perhaps a standard currency was

no longer needed for measuring the prices of commodities in terms of money, for trade by barter or through cowries became usual practice in the country where foreign trade was either non-existent or negligible. Southeast Bengal had altogether a different feature. The regional rulers felt the necessity of maintaining metallic currency obviously for the purpose of catering to the economic needs of the country.

Trade and commerce formed an important part of the economic life of Bengal since remote past. It was a source of prosperity of Bengal which is attested by the accounts of various ancient sources. Human life in the Delta has been deeply influenced by the rivers and the variations of monsoonal climate.[7] The great rivers of Bengal had played a significant part in the agrarian production of the area. Besides renewing fields, the rivers carried immense number of fish which provided a readymade source of food to the Delta dwellers. Moreover the alluvial soil of the region resulted in the huge agrarian production. The warm humid climate, in conjunction with the fertility of land, made the region an extra ordinary productive agricultural land, made the region an extra ordinary productive agricultural and capable of supporting a large surplus consuming class. The surplus production caused by the above factors fostered the trade and commerce of the region. Over and above the gulf region of the South-eastern part of Bengal and so also many navigable rivers of the region. The network of rivers provided a readymade system of interconnecting waterways for easy communications and economical transportation. Similarly the qualitative and quantitative development of Bengal's production accelerated the process of the trade and commerce of the region.

We have dearth of information regarding our inland commerce in the remote past. The inscriptional source shed little light in that period. On the other hand the writings of the foreign travellers and historians do not come much to our assistance because the interests of the foreign travellers lay in the foreign trade of the province. The development of foreign trade of which our sources of information are plenty, asserts the existence of certain amount of internal trade of the region.[8] There are references to officials for collecting tolls (*śaulkika*) and supervisors of marts and markets (*haṭṭapaṭi*) and officer-in-charge of markets, customs, tolls and ferries which indirectly testify to the existence of brisk nature of internal trade and prove that the state derived from it a considerable revenue. The centres of inland trade were the towns. It has been gleaned from the inscriptional sources of Gopachandra, Dharmāditya and Samāchāradeva[9] that *navyāvakaśikā* was the centre of merchants and businessmen. The inscriptions of Budhagupta and Kumāragupta also give the similar information about the status of city of Koṭivarṣha.[10] We have references to ships and the dockyards and to custom officers called *vyāpāra-kāraṇḍaya* or *vyāpāranodoya*[11] in the two grants of the time of Dharmaditya and *vyaparaya-viniyukta* in the grant of Dharmaditya and *vyāpara-viniyukta* in the grant of Gopachandra. They were obviously officials in charge of the duty of looking after trade and commerce. The rivers of the

province and proximity of the Orissa and Chittagong coasts afforded great facilities for riverine and coastal trade .There can be no doubt that a large number of people were engaged in shipping and the province must have carried on brisk trade and such a department of commerce must have been an important source of revenue. Its duties would have been to levy custom dues on foreign trade and on internal trade .It must have been, as Pargiter has pointed out, a most lucrative office.[12] It is known from the Kathāsaritsāgara that Puṇḍravardhana had a great market place and its streets were lined with shops. Villages were also often centres of trade and business. There are references to *haṭṭa* or market in the Dāmodarpur copper plate of Kumāragupta[13] and *haṭṭika* in the Khālimpur plate of Dharmapāla.[14] The grant of villages with its market placed (*so-haṭṭa*)[15], shops (*haṭṭiya-gṛiya*) and big markets (*haṭṭa -varo*)[16] speaks of the existence of lucrative trade in village in ancient and early medieval Bengal. Though the rivers and canals of Bengal were the chief routes of internal trade, there were land routes also connecting different parts of the province. These are referred to by foreign travellers like Fa-hien and Hiuen-Tsang and the mention is made of *rāja-patha* or public highway passing by a village in the Chittagong copper plate of Dāmodaradeva.[17]

We have got much more information about the overseas trade of Bengal. The reason is probably that the over sea trade of a large part of north India passed through Bengal and its well known ports were at the mouths of the Ganges. Strabo, the Greek geographer and historian, who wrote his famous 'Geography' between A.D. 17 and 23, refers to the "Ascent of vessels from the sea by the Ganges to Palibothra."[18] We further come to know from the Jātaka stories[19]that the merchant took ships at Benaras or lower down at Champa (modern Bhagalpur) and then either made coasting voyage to Ceylon or crossed the Bay of Bengal to Suvarṇabhūmi. We also learn from the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* that Bengal maintained an active over sea trade with South India and Ceylon in the first century A.D. Articles like malabathrum, Gangetic spikenard, pearls and muslins of the finest sorts were exported. "These were all ships from a market town called Gañge (probably the same as Tāmralipta)". According *to Milinda Pañha*, the trade was carried on from Vaṅga across the sea to many countries.[20] Among the important ports of ancient Bengal, mention should invariably be made of Tāmralipta. It is hardly necessary to stress the fact that in all periods the city which controlled the mouth of the Ganges was commercially the most important in Eastern India, just as the city which controlled the gates of the Euxine was commercially the most important in Hellas.[21]

Ancient Bengal, which corresponds to the modern day Indian state of West Bengal and the country of Bangladesh, was a significant hub of trade and commerce in the ancient world. The region's strategic location, with the Ganges River flowing through it and the Bay of Bengal to its south, made it an important centre for maritime trade. This route also connected ancient Bengal to Southeast Asia, particularly the kingdoms of modern day Indonesia and Malaysia. Another route passing through

Indian Ocean connected ancient Bengal to the Middle East, Africa, and the Mediterranean region. The China Trade route also connected ancient Bengal to China, with ships sailing up the Brahmaputra river and then crossing over to the Yangtze River.

Ancient Bengal had several important ports and trade centres that facilitated trade and commerce. Some of the notable ports and trade centres are Tāmralipta, Chandraketugarh, Wari-Bateshwar. Located on the banks of the Ganges River, Tāmralipta was an important port city that connected ancient Bengal to Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean region. The over sea trade of Bengal from Tāmralipta followed different courses. The first course was along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal right up to Malay Peninsula and through the Malay straits to Southeast Asia a far as China. The second was the coastal voyage to Palaura near modern Chicacole and then right across the Bay of Bengal to the opposite coast. The third route was along the eastern coast of India to Ceylon and then turning north along the western coast to the mouth the Indus and then up to the ports of Arabia and Eastern Africa.[22]

After the fall of Tāmralipta around the 8th century AD the centre of attention and attraction for maritime trade shifted to the littorals of the south east Bengal and from 9th century AD there was an extensive rise of the port of Samandar or Sudkāwān very close to Chittagong and the port was in flourishing condition and carried on brisk trade till the 14th century AD. The port of Samandar was surrounded by many other harbours in Bengal littorals. These were mostly riverine ports and they played very significant role in the inland riverine communication with coastal Bengal. These riverine harbours provided vital linkage of the deltaic hinterland with the major ports in seaboard. In the context of riverine port, mention should, first of all, be made of Devaparvata located in or about Mainámati in Comilla district of Bangladesh. It was a port on the river Kshīrodā (modern Khīrnāi). It flourished as early as in the second half of the 7th century AD. The port Devaparvata was first mentioned in the Kailān inscription of Śrīdharanarāta[23]. Devaparvata was once again mentioned as riverine port in the copper plate of Bhavadeva Abhinavamṛigāṅka (765-780 A.D), a Deva ruler of Samataṭa.[24] Devaparvata was once again mentioned in the Paśchimbhāg copper plate (930AD) of Śrīchandra (925-975 A.D), the greatest ruler of the Chandra dynasty.[25]

It is to be noted here that we are using the name Gangābandara even though for the Romans the port ‘Gañge’ and ‘Ganges’ were the same. Since the name is reminiscent of the river Ganga, we must keep in mind that the name was given by foreigners, and there is no way to verify what this port was actually called by the local residents. The port was named after the

Ganga. The traces of ships, boats on the terracotta seals and seal impressions found from Chandraketugarh strongly suggest that it was probably a riverine port having facilities of access to the sea. It bolstered up long distance trade through this port. It bolstered up long distance trade through this port. Excavations conducted have yielded archaeological remains of different ages, from the time of the Mauryas to that of the Pālas.

Wari and Bateshwar, two adjacent villages in Narsingdi district in present Bangladesh were also famous for its relation with nearby regions. It flourished as a trade centre found from the discoveries. Its location was on the bank of an ancient course of the Brahmaputra. This can mean only that it was an estuarine port. During the early historic period, Wari-Bateswar functioned as a maritime port and was already integrated in the Bay of Bengal littoral trade network. The port was possibly made up for public utilities, warehouses and production centres for manufacturing semi-precious stone beads, pottery

Devaparvata figured in the Kailān Copper plate of Śrīdharanarāta (c. AD 665-750), was another port, which carried out a transit trade with other regions. The place was encircled by the river Ksīroda( modern Khīra or Khīrnai). Both the banks of the river were adorned by boats, elephants bathed in the river. Devaparvata is further described as *sārvatobhadra*. It means that either it was approachable from all four sides or it had gates on all four sides.

There were several seaside trade centres including Vaṅga mentioned in the *Milind-pañha*. The archaeological references indicate a place named, Vaṅga*sāgara*, meaning 'the sea (*sāgara*) of Vaṅga'. While Vaṅga generally covered the central part of deltaic Bengal, it also occasionally included areas near the coast known in ancient times vario0usly as Vaṅgāla and *Anuttarvanga*(Southern Vaṅga).[26]

Regarding the land routes which connected the north-eastern, northern and western India with this region we have got some information. It is to be noted that the relation between Bengal and the outer world was first established through land routes.[27] The existence of the land route from Pāṭaliputra to Puṇḍravardhana, Puṇḍravardhana to Kāmarupa, Kāmarupa to Samataṭa, Samataṭa to Tāmralipta, Tāmralipta to Karṇasuvarṇa, Karnasuvarna to Kalinga, Tāmralipta to Bodhgaya, Tāmralipta to Ayodhya, Tāmralipta to Mithila and Tāmralipta to Aandhra have been mentioned in the inscriptions.[28] These routes, which had changed their directions from time to time, served the purpose of inter-regional mobility and communication within Bengal. It also extended deep into some other regions of the Indian subcontinent and mainland south-east Asia. The one route connected Bengal with Kāmarupa and China. Hiuen Tsang travelled through this route in the 7th century A.D.[29] This route was continued up to the 9th century A.D. The famous Silk Road is often associated with China, its also

had a branch that passed through ancient Bengal. This route connected India to Central Asia and the Mediterranean region. Another route following the Ganges joined the network of highways which converged at Benaras. Merchants travelled from different areas of Bengal to Ayodhya, Paṭaliputra etc. through this road. Another important land route passed through the Himalayas across Nepal Sikkim and Chumbi valley to Tibet and China. Another important land route followed the coast of Kalinga and ran up to South Indian peninsula. The ancient road named as *Uttara Patha* connected ancient Bengal to the rest of India, including the cities of Pāṭaliputra and Taxila. Another route connected ancient Bengal to Southeast Asia, particularly the kingdoms of modern day Myanmar and Thailand.

## Notes and References

[1] Morgan, T.P. and W.G. Mc Intire, "Quaternary Geology of the Bengal Basin, East Pakistan and India" in *Bulletin of the Geological Society of America*, LXX(1959), pp. 319-342

[2] The geographical areas of ancient Bengal include Puṇḍravardhana and Varendrī (North Bengal),Suhma (Hooghly district), Rāḍha (the Birbhum-Bankura-Hooghly-Howrah and portions of Medinipur districts, thus including at times the ancient Suhma region),Tāmralipti or Tāmralipta (modern Tamluk in the Medinipur district )and Daṇdabhūkti (Danton and its adjoining regions in the Medinipur district, sometimes including northern portions of Orissa),Vaṅga (traditionally located in the central deltaic Bengal, i.e. Dhaka, Vikrampur, Faridpur areas of present Bangladesh),Samataṭa (comprising Chittagong, Comilla and Noakhali districts of present day of Bangladesh), Harikela (Comilla, Sŕīhaṭṭa and Chittagong districts of Bangladesh) , Chandradvīpa (Barisal district of present Bangladesh)and Vāṅgalā(Chittagong, Noakhali and Barisal districts of present Bangladesh). These names have come to us from ancient epigraphic and literary records. The detailed analysis of the relevant information shows that they were geographically associated with Gauḍa or Vaṅga, that is, Western and Eastern Bengal

[3] Roy, N.R., *Bangalir Itihas*, Adiparva, Pratham Khanda, 1356 B.S., p.17

[4] Renfrew Colin, 'Trade and Culture Process in European Pre-history', *Current Anthropology*,Vol.10(2-3),1969,p-152

[5] Sharma, R.S.Sharma, *Indian Feudalism c. AD 300-1200*, Calcutta, University of Calcutta. 1965,pp. 58;

[6] Ghosh, G.C., and Abhijit Datta, "A Critical Approach to the Trade and Commerce in Vanga-Samatata-Harikela during the Early Medieval Period', Barnalipi, Vol. I, Issue. VI, April, 2012

[7] Morrison, B.M., *Political Centres and Cultural Regions of Early Bengal*, Jaipur: Rawast Publication, 1980(rep.) p.10

[8] Majumdar, R.C., *History of Bengal*, Vol. I, Dacca University, 1943, pp 659 ff

[9] Sircar, D.C., 'The Faridpur Copper Plate of Gopachandra', Select Inscriptions Bearing Indian History and Civilisation, Vol. I, Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1942, p.370; *Indian Antiquary*, 1910, p. 20; 'The Faridpur Plate of Dharmaditya, *Indian Antiquary*, 1910, p
. 195; The Faridpur Plate of Samāchāradeva, unpublished

[10] 'The Dāmodarpur plate of Kumāragupta', *Epigraphia Indica*, VOl. XV, p. 130; 'The Dāmodarpur plate of Budha Gupta', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XV, p. 133

[11] From the copper plate of Gopachandra we found the officers or persons who were under district administration. They were *sādhanika* and the officer who looked after *the vyāpāra*. The word sādhanika is not in dictionary .It would likely seem to mean to mean a person who transacts and kind of trade or who carries any matter through. He had been no doubt employed by the lord of the district of trade purposes on his behalf. The position of the vyāpāra officials depend on the of the term used in the plate, namely, *vyāpāra-kāraṇḍaya* and *vyāpāraṇḍya* and *vyāpāraya viniyukta* and *pradhāna-vyāp*.
It ordinary Sanskrit *vyāpāra* means occupation, business, and trade or professional ones. But here it seems to have particular trade, traffic, commerce with reference to merchandise. There is special meaning in Bengal where bepari means merchants or trader not given in the dictionaries. *Kāraṇḍa*, therefore, refers to one who

manages, regulates trade. Vyāpāraṇḍya would be a word of precisely similar formation from the root vya-pr or the word vyāpāra. Vyaparaṇḍa would mean one who mages trade, and *vyāpāraṇḍya*, the business of managing trade. Thus, both *vyāpāra-kāraṇḍaya* and *vyāparaṇḍya* used to say the same words and who that there was an official who was appointed in charge of trade and this refers *to vyāpāraya-viniyukta* as the third expression. The fourth phrase *pradhāna-vyāp* seems to refer rather to the principal traders or merchants. The *sādhanika* was clearly a higher officer who looked after the *vyāpāra*. Pargiter, F.E., 'Three Copper plate grants from East Bengal', *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XXXIX, 1910, PP.193-216

[12] Pargiter, F.E., 'Three Copper plate Grants from East Bengal', *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XXXIX, 1910, p-212

[13] Basak, R.G., 'The Five Damodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions of the Gupta Period', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XV, 1919,p.133

[14] *ibid*, p.138

[15] Majumdar, N.G., 'Irda Copper plate of Kamboja king Nayāpāladeva', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXII, 1933,pp-150-159; Gupta, K.M., 'The Bhatera Copper plate Inscription Govinda-Kesavadeva(c. 1049 AD)', *Epigraphia Indica,* Vol. XIX, 1927, pp. 277-285

[16] Majumdar, N.G., 'Irda Copper plate of Kamboja king Nayapaladeva', Epigraphia Indica, Vol. XXII, 1933, pp. 150-159; Gupta, K.M., 'The Bhatera Copper plate Inscription of Govinda Keśavadeva (c. 1049 AD)', *Epigraphia Indica,* Vol. XIX, 1927, pp. 277-285; Gupta, K.M., 'The Bhatera Copper plate Inscription of Govinda-Kesavadeva (c. 1049 AD)', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XIX, 1927, pp. 277-285

bid, XXIX, p. 277

[17] Majumdar, N.G., *Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. III*, Rajshahi, The Varendra Research Society, 1929, p. 158

[18] Mc. Crindle, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, London, Trubner & Co. 1901, p. 63

[19] *Jataka*, IV, 15-17(No. 442), 159 (No. 466), VI. 34 (No. 539)

[20] Rapson, Edward James, *Cambridge History of India, Vol.* I, Cambridge: The University Press,1922,p. 212

[21] Majumdar, R.C., *opcit*, p-661

[22] Majumdar, R.C., *opcit*, p. 346

[23] Sircar, D.C., 'Kailān Copper Plate of Śrīdharanarāta of Samataṭa', *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XXIII, pp. 221-241

[24] Sircar. D.C., 'Copper Plate Inscriptions of King Bhavadeva of Devaparvata', *Select Inscriptions bearing on Indian History and Civilisation, Vol. II*, Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1942, pp. 744-750

[25] Sircar. D.C., 'Paścimbhāg-plate of Śrīchandra, Regnal Year 5', *Epigraphic Discoveries in East Pakistan*, Calcutta: Sanskrit College, 1973, p. 64

[26] Bhattacharyya, Amitabha, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal*, Calcutta, Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1977, p. 51

[27] It has been mentioned that close contacts between Bengal and the Western countries was facilitated firstly by the advent of Achaemenids towards the east and then by the conquest of Alexander in Asia. But in India, at the beginning of the 6th century B.C. the process of development of interconnection started with the rise of 16 *mahājanapadas*. Under the patronage of most generous ruler of these *mahājanapadas*, the main paths were constructed in their regions, which were further expanded later. Buddhist tradition leaves the impression that Jivaka, the famous physician of Buddha's time living at the capital of the Magadhan Empire, went by the overland linking road going to Taxila to receive his medical education.

[28] Hood, John. W., (tr.), History of Bengali People (From the Earliest Times to the Fall of the Sena Dynasty), tr. From original Bengali Bangalir Itihas of Niharranjan Ray, Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1994, p. 252

[29] Beal, Samuel. (tr.), *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World tr. From the Chinese of Hiuen Tsang (AD 629),* Vol.III, p.195