

The Evolution of Mughal Bengal: Exploring Fortification and Statecraft

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Abstracts:Throughout the Indian history, fort has been the symbol of prestige and power. Adjusting with the difference of topography and environment, there are different types of forts in different region in India. From grand Mughal forts to Maratha stronghold and Rajputs bastions, each structure reflects unique strategy of defence and control. In Bengal, forts held particular significance, functioning was not only a defensive architecture but also the symbol of authority. In Bengal, the large numbers of forts made of mud and bamboo. The Mughals used the mud forts in deltaic Bengal to oust Afghan influence and that is how they were able to establish and extend their empire in Bengal. In this article I want to show that how Mughals adopted the technique to construct the forts and other architectural Monuments and exploring fortification and statecraft.

Key words:Bengal, Di-fortification, Environment, Fortification, Mud forts etc.

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Introduction

Fort is a military construction or building design for defence. In ancient times people used forts for protection from wild animals. Later on the fort became very essential for defence against barbarian attacks. Therefore fortified protections for city or towns were felt strongly for. This led to fortified cities or *fortresses* being raised. We can see the fortified areas in Jericho city in Palestine from 7000 BCE. It had a 21 foot high wall encompassing an area of 10 acres and 15

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foot wide and 9 foot deep outer moat to protect the city. The Great Wall of China was also built to defend from attacks of nomadic people in 3rd century BCE.¹ Uruk on the Euphrates is one of the oldest fortified cities of the world and existed in Mesopotamia.²

In Indian context fort is one of the important parts of statecraft. Ancient Indian literature also suggests fort as very important part or point of a kingdom. Kautilya has given great attention to forts in his legendary work *Arthashastra*. He suggested that *durga* (fort) and *danda* (army) as two essential elements for state defence system and fort as the important among these two. He represented fort as fortified capital of state, where king at any pressure situation can entrench himself and withstand siege over a long period. He also suggested there to be supply stores in the fort and also a secret passageway for escaping from it, if needed.³ Amarsingh's *Amarkosh* has also mentioned forts as *kotta* and *pura*. The description of forts and their classification are found in the *Puranas*, notably the *Agni Purana*, the *Matsya Purana* and the *Devi Purana*. According to the *Agni Purana* the king should make his residence in a fort. In *Mahabharata* and the *Manusmriti*, we find ample references to forts and fortifications. The different types of forts⁴ are as follows:

Bhudurga or *Nagaradurga* (City Fort on a plain terrain)

Giridurga (Mountain Fort)

Jaladurga (Water Fort)

Dhanvandurga (Desert Fort)

Naradurga (Man-made Fort)

Mahidurga (Mud Fort)

Vanadurga (Forest Fort)

The province of Bengal especially its eastern part is crisscrossed by innumerable rivers and is generally geomorphologically a wetland. Therefore here the sources refer to a number of mud-forts. The Sanskrit and Persian sources talk of three types of *mahi-durga*⁵ or earth fortress:

mrid-durga – forts which are encircled with earthen walls

panka-durga - the approaches to *panka-durga* are protected by fens or quicksand

parigha-durga - forts that are surrounded by walls made of earth and stone or brick

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In modern era, we can see a different typology of fortifications – fort, castle and fortress., Red Fort, Gwalior Fort, Ranthambor Fort, Lalbag Fort, Jahangirnagar Fort etc are usually known as forts in the Indian context. During the 17th -19th century, the word castle came to be used for military construction in India. Castle is actually a fort used by feudal lords, where the service of feudal livelihoods could be exercised. Fortress is a fortified settlement excluding a large area In Indian medieval period, the castle and fort is so close with its grandeur and beauty of construction. Short of the Indian castles occupy a substantial territory and therefore can be classified as fortress.⁶

In Bengal, there were different types of forts because of different types of topography and environment. The weather of Bengal is wet and rainy. Eastern Bengal is completely deltaic. There was availability of mud, bamboo, wood, grass and other natural goods like that. The paucity of stones and accessibility of mud and bamboo forced the state and others native powers to construct mud forts. The topography made the mud forts as very effective tools of state making. In western part of Bengal, there were some bricks forts. The gunpowder environment made massive changes to these mud forts as well as every strategic part of war. There were also holes made for firing cannon and they created extra protection of grass and mud for absorbing the fire balls.

In September 1574, Munim Khan entered Tanda. With his arrival, the era of Mughals had begun in Bengal. After Munim Khan's entry in Tanda, huge numbers of Afghans marched into the forested hinterland, where for the next forty years they continued to hold out against Mughals. To consolidate the power against Mughals, they took support of Muslim and Hindu *zamindars*, Portuguese renegades, tribal chieftains and all of whom perceived the Chagatai Turks from northern India as foreigners and supplants.⁷ The Mughals had to wait for almost 40 years, until 1612 CE, when they killed the last independent local chieftain of Sylhet.⁸

The forts in Bengal have greatly been influenced by the purpose of its erection. Ayesha Begum divided Mughal forts in three categories; 1. Border outposts, 2. River forts & 3. Palace forts.⁹ Because of the riverine environment of Bengal, the border outposts played a significant role in designing the military strategy. The outposts were the entry points from where they could make strong observation over their territory. Islam Khan completed the project of consolidation

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from the new outposts which was set in by Man Singh. The Mughal authority founded the border outposts of Chatmohor, Selimgarh, Shujabad, Bokainagar, Egarasundur, Jagalbari, Ghoraghat, the Quella Tejpur, and Ander Quella. Bastion was the primary feature of the forts, within which the guard house was built for watching the activities of attackers.¹⁰

These river forts and outposts were built up to strengthen the defence of Mughal territory in Bengal. Besides in Dhaka, they established Hajigang, Sonakanda, Idrakpur etc. From the functional point of view the Mughal fort architecture could be divided into two categories – the fortified defence centre, only for use in military purposes like Sonakanda, Idrakpur, Hajigang and the other category was the fortified area used in both military and administrative purposes as the fort of Dhaka.¹¹

The system of siege was changed over the time. New types of Mughal forts were constructed. The systematic development and defence tactics were directly affected by arms. Before the Mughals, the use of guns and ammunition were very limited. But during the Mughals, the guns and cannons made significant changes in Mughal fort architecture. At that time one of the common features was the loopholes at the wall of the fort for ease of gunfire. Another new feature was the presence of artillery platform in river forts.¹² From these platforms defenders could attack on the enemies by large and small cannons. Due to these changes, the organization of long-range warfare with cannon and guns backtrack the massive and expanded wall of siege forts.

During Mughals invasion in Bengal, they also give more importance to forts. The topology of Bengal is different from the entire subcontinent. So, in this rainy and riverine land, Mughals focused on river forts and the war forts basically on the line of rivers flow. They established all the forts with the compatibility of Buriganga and others small rivers flow. As the invading forces used the river route to loot and plunder, Mughal forts were so sited as to be able to safeguard the river routes from these forces. These structures were commonly constructed on the river banks using the topography to one's advantage.¹³ From the narrative of *Baharistan*, in the beginning of the statesmanship of Islam Khan in Bengal the first three forts were constructed at khal jogini. The Mughals felt threatened from the invading forces, so they sifted or centralized their power point to Dhaka from Rajmahal. So Dhaka became more powerful or important than

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the border outposts and other small forts or rivers forts. And we should agree to remember the topography of Bengal, that the riverine forts were very important for Mughals to control eastern Bengal.¹⁴

Mughal had few techniques at siege battle. When Mughals felt such difficulty in Chittor, they must have adopted more siege techniques. *Naqb zadan* was one of the traditional methods of siege. Mines were hollowed in underground chambers, dug from the camp of the besiegers till underneath the rampart of the fort. After construction, it would be fulfilled with highly combustible articles and eventually set on fire. The resultant combustion would bring down the fortification that stood above these hollow chambers. Once the fort had collapsed, they would rush in and seek to take the fort by storm¹⁵. Another technique was *sor kob*, in this technique Mughals used a hill higher than the fort they were attacking. And their canons, matchlock and artillery pieces installed on the hill point to fire the forts interior parts to demolish it. Akbar used *sor kob* in Ranathombar and drugged up fifteen *zarbuzans* to the top of the hill.¹⁶

But there in Bengal, there are no hill to use *sor kob* and the topology was wet so the Mughals could not access the capacity if *naqb zadan*. Then they focused to utilize the technique, they never used. They decided to start fortifications similarly as local Afghan and *zamindars* fortress. They took help of some local chief as advisories; those were completely aware about the topography. Raja Raghunath of Susang was one among them, who sketched the plan of campaign against Musa Khan.¹⁷ The major weapons of the gunpowder tactics were; the making of ditches and the second one was big cannons. The major weaponry ditches were not applicable for Bengal, because of the wet weather, gunpowder became wet and the destroying tactics collapsed. Then they focused on the boats and mud forts. It must be remembered that to write the war history of Bengal one must consider the importance of the mud forts. They were important tools to control the routes, and also the base of power. *Baharistan* shows us that huge numbers of mud forts out there and when Mughal commanders had campaigned against a local *zamindar* or Afghan chiefs, Mughals had to destroy these mud forts to control or destroy the power of local chiefs.

The huge accessibility of riverine silt and mud compelled Mughal armies to construct new type of fortress in Bengal. They found that their Afghan and local adversaries constructed

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mud forts and took up position inside them. Mud forts were constructed within a very short time,¹⁸ and with very low cost. These forts were meant to defend strategic locations commanding riverine communications. They were inexpensive, yet outstanding in their resilience. Built of riverine mud so the walls would not break when hit by the cannon shots as the stone wall might, instead the force would be absorbed by mud and the short rangers became harmless. Provided with firearms, these mud forts could be defended by a small garrison and could only be occupied by the besieger after investing a huge endeavour.¹⁹ Mughals also started to construct mud forts²⁰ and used lime mortar, brick and installed heavy artillery in these forts.²¹

In Bengal, there were few big fortresses as Rajmahal, Ghari, Jahangirnagar, Chittagong etc. These forts were made of bricks and lime mortar. During conquest Mughals captured these forts. There were also huge number of forts made of mud and bamboos. These types of forts were barriers for Mughals because in Bengal, rivers and canals are the main way to organize an attack. In the first phase of Mughal expansion, Afghans and local *zamindars* made mud forts and used them as garrison. Mughal commanders were so confused to do so as they were not accustomed to fight yet in this type of condition.

During the Mughal invasion of Bengal, the importance of forts was too much than other war weapons. The forts were always important tools in warfare in Bengal. In the very nascent phase Mughals conquered Rajmahal and used the fort as war house and power point. In deltaic Bengal, Mughals constructed nine forts in a row.²² Their enemies also constructed their forts. When they attacked Satrajit of Bhushna, Satrajit had constructed fort at Ata Khal. When Satrajit fought for Mughals against Musa Khan, Satrajit wanted to build a fort at Motibhanga.²³ Mughal campaigned against Musa Khan, Nathan was the captain, and he wrote a letter to Islam Khan, to get permission for attacking Musa fort at Dakchara and Jatrapur. And after getting the permission, Mirza started the attack and it was a difficult one to conquer.²⁴ Nathan also conquered Sunergao river fort²⁵ during the conquest of Mathang, Mughal commander Haji Samsuddin was instructed to raise a fort between Pahalwaan territory and the fort of Taraf. In this invasion, Haji lost his life, and after massive resistance his son conquered it for the Mughals.²⁶ At the time of invasion of Jessore, against Pratapaditya, fort also played nuclear role here. Paratapaditya's son build a fort at Salka. This fort was standing with water on every side.

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Here Nathan ordered to build two forts on the river banks. After a hard toiling siege Mirza gained control over the fort of Pratapaditya.²⁷ From here we can understand that the riverside mud forts were the power bases of the territory. So getting the control over these forts also meant to be equal of getting the control over the territory. On the basis of earlier discussions, Mughals conquered Bengal, but not by their rock solid cavalry. They changed their military tactics to adjust with the topography. They use elephants to demolish the mud forts.²⁸ And boats and mud forts were the most important weapons to control over the Bengal.

For the invasion of eastern Bengal, imperial authority constructed nine mud forts in a row.²⁹ When they attacked Satrajit of Bhusna, Satrajit constructed forts in Ata Khal. Then Mughals had to demolish the forts of Satrajit to conquer Bhusna. When Satrajit fought for Mughals, he built up a fort at Motibhanga.³⁰ During the invasion against Musa Khan, Mirza Nathan wanted to demolish the forts of Dakchatra and Jatrapur.³¹ During the invasion of Matang, Nathan had to destroy the fort of Taraf. Because based on the fort of Taraf, Afghan chief Samsuddin resisted strongly.³² At the invasion of Jessore Mirza Nathan build two forts before the fort of Pratapaditya in Salka. Depending on these two Mirza utilized his military activities here. During the second battle against Musa Khan and Bara Bhiuyans, imperial commander Mirza Nathan and Shaikh Kamal started to construct forts in the river bank of Khizirpur and Kumarsar.³³ When Mirza Nathan proceeded against Daud Khan, Mirza constructed a strong fort and strengthen it with big cannons.³⁴ When the *zamindar* of Bharuria, Pitambar and Ananta rebelled, Mirza marched against them. Ila Baksh, the *zamindar* of Alaipur gave them the shelter. So Mirza marched against Ila Baksh. Based on these forts Ila Baksh resisted. Then Mirza utilized his elephants to demolish the forts of Ila Baksh. After that the rebel fled away.³⁵

Conclusion

In the Mughal invasion of eastern Bengal, we can see the importance of mud forts, which both side made within quick times. Mughal had exercised the gunpowder extensively but the local ruler also had gunpowder weapons. So Mirza Nathan used his elephants to demolish the forts of enemies as the native and the Afghan chiefs had resisted strongly based on their mud forts. Initially because the ecology was unknown to the imperials, they suffered in initial phases but

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later on they understood the impact of mud forts and they also build up huge mud forts and demolished the enemies' forts to stable their sovereignty in deltaic Bengal. So the history of Mughal conquest of Bengal, specially eastern Bengal is the history of utility of forts. Here forts utilized in both way of stabilized sovereignty in Bengal. They demolished huge numbers of forts of local chiefs to uproot their sovereignty and other hand Mughals also constructed huge number of forts to stable their own sovereignty in Bengal. So the Mughal sovereignty in Bengal is closely connected with the Mughal fortification and de-fortification campaign.

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¹⁸ During the Mughal campaign against Musa khan, in a single night Musa constructed in this place a high fort and a deep trench on that bank of the river Padmavati which the imperial army was halting. In Bengal, there were no ancient forts except those at Gawr, Akbarnagar alias Raj mahal, Ghoraghāt, Dhaka, and some other places of this type; but in time of need, the boatmen quickly construct such a fort that even the expert masters are unable to build one like it within months and years. Such a fort was made, and arranging the artillery and the weapons of defence of the fort, he (Mūsā Khan) became ready for battle. *Baharistan-i-ghaybi*, pp.56-57.

¹⁹ Nath, op. cit., p. 64.

²⁰ When Ihtimam Khan reached the Trimohana of the Khal Jogini with his fleet. He halted there by constructing three forts on the three Mohānas. Islam Khan, after reaching the Mohānā (mouth) of Katasgarh in two marches, summoned the fleet and the artillery. Ihtimam Khan left his camp at mid-day and joined the imperial army at the Mohana of Katasgarh. *Baharistan-i-ghaybi*, p. 54.

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²³ *Baharistan-i-ghaybi*, p.59.

²⁴ *Baharistan-i-ghaybi*, pp.68-69.

²⁵ *Baharistan-i-ghaybi*, p.84.

²⁶ *Baharistan-i-ghaybi*, pp.117-119.

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