

Dozakhpur to Jannatabad: Myth and Reality as An Environmental Episode in the History of Bengal

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Abstract

Bengal presently divided as West Bengal, a state in Eastern India and Bangladesh as an independent state since 1971 had abundant wealth from the ancient times which was plundered and attacked by the foreign invaders several times. Visitors and travellers as well visited this land of natural beauty. It is also historically true that from the ancient time a number of travellers visited Bengal and praised lavishly in different names its nature and people. They also provided valuable information and presented the pen-picture of Bengal in their writings from their own experiences about this country. Among the foreign travellers Ibn Battuta (1304-1369 C.E.) came here in 1345-46 C.E. during the reign of Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah and visited different parts of this country particularly, Chittagong, Sonargoan and Sylhet. His narratives '*Tuhfat un Nuzzar fi Gharaib al Amsar wa Azaib al Asfar*', gives us a pen-picture of socio-economic, political and environmental condition of contemporaneous Bengal. Battuta entitled Bengal as '*Dozakh-i-Pur Nimat*' a hell full of wealth where plenty of resources existed but not a suitable place for livelihood. He also presented the geographical condition of Bengal in his writing from his own experience. He mentioned that Bengal has huge wealth but its environment is not favorable to live here happily; even man cannot stay here permanently on account of natural disaster and epidemic diseases along with turmoil political condition.

Within a span of two centuries the geographical phenomenon of '*Dozakhpur*' was changed into '*Jannatabad*' by the Mughal Emperor Humayun (1504-1556 C.E.) and '*Jamat-ul-bida*' (Paradise of Province) by Emperor Aurangzeb (1618-1707). Humayun the Emperor of Mughal India marched towards Bengal to defeat Sher Khan and stayed a long time at Gaur of Bengal in July 1538 C.E. Humayun changed the name of the city as '*Jannatabad*' which indicate that Bengal is very suitable place for living and Mughal Emperor got obviously appeasements and was highly satisfied to come here whom he compared as *Jannat*, a city of heaven. Later Emperor Aurangzeb mentioned Bengal as '*Jamat-ul-bida*' (Paradise of Province) while even famous Mughal historian Abul Fazal in his monumental book '*Ain e Akbari*' highly estimated the natural and environment beauty of Bengal. Such kind of description of the above mentioned personalities always draw the attention to the environmental historians who are critical of the climatic condition of Bengal of that time due to which it came to be known as *Dozakhpur* by Ibn Battuta and *Jannat* by Emperor Humayun.

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Aims and Objective

The main objective of this research article is to understand two terminology viz., *Dozakhpur* and *Jannatabad* which was presented by the two great personalities, traveler Ibn Batuta and Emperor Humayun. Then a new idea should be focused about the environmental phenomenon of the history of medieval Bengal from the comprehension of the two commentators. The reality or myth of that terminology will be highlighted also. It is historically true that from the ancient time Bengal was rich for its natural wealth and beauty which enchanted the foreign invaders and travelers as well. Foreign travelers, Persian chroniclers, company officials and even the Mughal Emperors spoke highly of the wealth and prosperity of Bengal in the pre-British period. In the modern era Adam Smith (1723-1790) characterized Bengal as one of the richest countries of the contemporary world. At the end a discussion will be presented that how the 'Paradise Theory' was later reinforced by the leaders of the nationalist movement against the foreign rule. Even this theory vividly reflected the minds of the great poet and the son of soil of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) who gave Bengal the nom de plume of *Sonar Bangla*. Later the dream of *Sonar Bangla* became the reality as an independent country in 1971 by the great leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Methodology and Literature Review

In the modern world of research both conventional and non-conventional methods have been applied in this research article. This research work has been undertaken by using the primary and secondary sources. The original works of international scholars regarding this issue have also been taken to develop the idea of *Dozakhpur* and *Jannatabad*. The importance of this study can hardly be over estimated as it will add to the existing knowledge on medieval history of Bengal.

The renowned researchers and academicians have produced various scholarly works in different aspects of medieval history of Bengal. World renowned scholars like Ross E Dumm, N.K. Bhattasali, Aga Mahidi Hussain, Richard Maxwell Eaton, Abdul Karim and others have undertaken various original research works regarding this issue. *Humayun-Nama* of Gulbadan Begum and *The Rehla* of Ibn Battutahas been taken as the primary sources in this research study.

The Glimpse of Battuta's *Dozakhpur*

Shaykh Abu Abdullah surname Ibn Batuta (1304-1369 C.E.), a Moroccan Muslim traveller visited Bengal in 1346 C.E. as a part of his

world journey. He visited glorious towns, cities and *Khanqahs*¹ of Bengal. History records that Battuta visited Bengal through the sea route and Sudkawan (present Chittagong) was his as the first town in Bengal. From there he went to Kamaru (present Kamrupa) and then came to Sylhet to meet with the great Sufi Shaykh Jalaluddin.² Battuta came later to Sunurkawan (present Sonargaon the then capital of Sultanate Bengal) on 14 August 1346. According to *Banglapedia* Battuta stayed in Bengal less than two months i.e. between July and August 1346.³

Completing his world tour Battuta came back in his homeland Morocco where he described his personal experience on the visit of the universe which was listened and composed by Ibn Jaazayy⁴ as the ‘*Tuhfat-un-Nuzzar fi Gharab-il-Amsar wa Ajaib-il-Asfr*’⁵. This book gives us valuable information about the history of Medieval Bengal where Battuta mentioned Bengal as ‘*Dozakhpur*’ a city of hell in reference to the attitude of Khorasani traders. Such kind of comments had created a sensation in the intellectual arena and scholars have undertaken various steps to find out the reason of mentioning Bengal as ‘*Dozakhpur*’ by Ibn Battuta.

Actually Battuta mentioned that Bengal has plenty of resources but the daily life of the common masses is very harder and the slavery system existed, slave boys and girls used to be sold and purchased in the open market. History records that he himself purchased a young slave woman named Ashura.⁶ But he was surprised to observe the cheap price of daily commodities which he would not find in other place of the world. He mentioned that “Bengal is a vast country and abounds in rice. In the whole world I did not see a country where commodities were cheaper than in Bengal.”⁷ His descriptions mentioning Bengal as a heavily populated water-soaked garden of immense fertility give us the environmental phenomenon of Bengal. From Sylhet he went southward of Bengal through the Meghna River whom he compared with the river Nile of Egypt to see the water wheel, gardens, and villages on the river bank.⁸ Battuta also describes that the inhabitants of the East Bengal hills are noted for their devotion to and practice of magic and witchcraft.⁹ He also mentioned the social aspects of Bengal and remarked the influence of the Sufis on both Hindu and Muslim society. When he stayed in Sylhet he observed that people certainly come and visit Shaykh Jalaluddin.¹⁰ Bengal had the flourishing domestic and foreign trade links and local markets were full of goods and merchandise caravans always borne by the waterways.¹¹ All these indicates that Bengal is rich in her economy, trade and commerce as well.

In spite of this reality Bengal is not suitable habitation to live in. The environment is very foggy and disasterable. Mosquito, snake, various harmful insects and epidemics is the part of their daily life. Life is always in risk in fear of death. Life expectancy of the people here is very short. Environment of Bengal is sometime a curse for their livelihood. On the other hand this environment has given Bengal plenty of wealth. Here is the ill-treatment of the nature that the people of Bengal have the huge wealth but they cannot consume their wealth on account of unfavourable jealousy of nature. The title of Bengal as '*Dozakhpur*' by Ibn Battuta has the reality and the environmental philosophy of composing history which was associated in his writing. History cannot be objective without having knowledge on geography. It is noted that how geography affected the daily life of Bengal during that time can be understood by the writing of Ibn Battuta.

Bengal as Jannatabad of Humayun

Mughal Emperor Humayun came to Bengal (Gaur, the northern part of Bengal) which is unique for its natural beauty on account of its nearest position with Himalayas) in 1538 to defeat his rival Sher Khan (1486-1545 C.E.).¹² Actually Humayun came to know of Sher Khan's stronghold in Bengal and he immediately advanced towards Gaur and captured the city.¹³ History records that the Mughal captured Gaur and renamed the city as *Jannatabad*.¹⁴ The climate of Northern part of Bengal is very lucid and calm. During June-July the North Bengal are blessed with huge number of seasonal fruits and flowers. People became very happy with the abundance gift of nature. Humayun was surprised to observe abundance of property, peace and prosperity of Bengal and compared this country with heaven and entitled as *Jannatabad*. It is said that Humayun stayed six months in merriment and appeasement in Bengal.¹⁵ But *Humayunnama* refers that Badsha stayed in Bengal nine months.¹⁶

However, the Mughal Emperor visited only the northern part of Bengal and he never came to the eastern and southern parts. There is a distinct difference of climatic status of Bengal especially of its northern and southern part. Northern part is generally beautified with natural green and fruits trees and very close to the Himalayas. The natural beauty and availability of flowers and delicious fruits enchanted the mind of the Emperor whom he compared with heaven.

Myth and Reality of Dozakhpur and Jannatabad

In his itinerary Battuta presented a geographical description of Bengal by mentioning some important places, rivers, mountains, climate and natural view. The picturesque landscape and the wealth of green in every possible shade always attracted the mind of foreigners but due to the

presence of heavy rain, foggy atmosphere, the cloudy and gloomy weather Bengal is not suitable habitation for living permanently.¹⁷ Nature of this country is the gift of the Almighty but the natural calamity and disaster is the curse for its people. This phenomenon of the nature has been compared with *Dozakhpur* by Battuta which has the reality in the sense of environmental episode of history.

But how can we compare Bengal as *Dozakhpur* where the people are devoted in practicing magic and witchcraft and have complete devotion on religion and Sufi-saints play a dominant influence on Hindu and Muslim society? In this regards *Dozakhpur* may be a myth without reality.

But Battuta's statements on slavery system in Bengal and the existence of the political chaotic situation has the reality to compare Bengal with *Dozakhpur*. In contrast of the abundance of food grains and cheapness of the commodities of daily use which is unparallel during those times and the existence of domestic and international merchandise caravans proves Bengal as a wealthy country which cannot be compared with *Dozakhpur*.

Actually Bengal is a vast region and its nature is different from one place to another. Battuta came in the southern part of Bengal as a result he had no experience on the nature of northern Bengal though he mention Gaur in his itinerary. Southern part is very close to the sea and most of the part of south Bengal is surrounded with river. So the environment is very foggy and nature is disaster- able. In the rainy season everywhere is washed with flood suppressed by worm, snake, mosquito and other poisonous insects. People sometimes suffer from malignant diseases like malaria, plague and cholera. In spite of cheap rate of daily commodities people are also sold in the market as goods which indicate that though Bengal is full of wealth but people are not rich. Battuta's living sense of observing the beauty of nature, keen perception and his lucid style of expression, made his description of the picturesque view of the natural phenomenon vivid. Thus the observation of Battuta is accurate and his comment on Bengal as '*Dozakhpur*' mainly based on environmental phenomenon.

On the other hand, Humayan, Mughal Emperor remarked Bengal as *Jannatabad* by comparing its beauty with the heaven. Thus a contrast has been created with the title of *Dozakhpur* by Ibn Battuta. Humayun's comments on Bengal have some realities. He would not come in the southern and eastern Bengal which has totally a different climatic condition. He only observed the northern part of Bengal. But his statement can be a myth by a statement of Sayyed Fayyaz Mahmud that "When Humayun, who

was really no match for the and wily Afghan general, left Gaur after three months, his army was weakened by rains, fever, and dysentery.”¹⁸

The myth of Jannatabad can be very clear by the statement of Zahid Beg whom the Emperor appointed as the governor of Bengal. After his appointment Beg very humbly remarked, “Jahapona- have you not ever found other country except Bengal for my death.”¹⁹

Zahid Beg knew better about the adverse climatic condition of Bengal where life is very in secured due to over rain, flood, snake and mosquito. Epidemic diseases like malaria and cholera certainly evolved and bring huge death. The foreigners could not stay in Bengal due to the adverse environment. The question is here why the Emperor entitled Bengal with *Jannat*. It may say that during his visit in Gaur Humayun passed the fancy days in merriment and appeasements. The blessings of the nature of Bengal, the beauty of Northern Bengal gave appeasement in the busiest life of the Emperor whom he compared as *Jannat*. Humayun’s observation as *Jannat* has the reality according to his experience of passing the fancy days in staying northern Bengal but it may be a myth in environmental phenomenon because of his governor Zahid Beg would regret to stay Bengal in spite of getting order from the Emperor due to the environmental cause.

The Paradise Theory

Foreigners especially travellers, chroniclers, company officials and the Mughal Emperors spoke highly of the wealth and resources of Bengal in the pre-British period. Batuta called Bengal as *Dozakhpur*, Emperor Humayun called as *Jannatabad* and Aurangzeb described as *Janat-ul-Bida* or the Paradise of Provinces. Amartya Sen has mentioned how Adam Smith characterized Bengal as one of the richest countries of the contemporary world. Again in 1703 C.E. Jhornton termed Bengal as ‘The Rich Kingdom’. Similarly travellers from Morocco, China, Portugal, Italy and France recorded similar opinion about the richness and prosperity of Bengal. According to Bernier who visited Bengal twice in the seventeenth century, Bengal was more prosperous than Egypt which was represented in every age as ‘The Finest and the most fruitful country in the world’. Thus the paradise theory²⁰ can be evolved to identify Bengal. This theory was later reinforced by the leaders of the nationalist movement against the foreign rule and by the Noble Laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore. The task of evaluating such a nation will naturally be difficult one. However the paradise theory later reinforced as the concept of ‘Golden Bengal’ which is deep-seated in our mindset. The theory of Golden Bengal as

visioned by the charismatic leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman has been aptly reflected in the nationalistic wave which became reality by achieving independence in December 1971.

Conclusion

While winding up discussion it may be averred that the two commentators like Batuta and Humayun would not visit Bengal as whole, they only came to particular areas of Bengal and commented ‘*Dozakhpur*’ and ‘*Jannatabad*’ after observing the geographical condition prevailing in their visited region. But their writings reveal that Bengal is proud for her natural beauty and resources from time immemorial. Their observation gives us a clear concept on the environmental phenomenon of medieval Bengal. From their observation it is noted that Bengal has huge wealth but natural calamity and disaster is the curse to live here permanently. This explains way foreigners would not stay here permanently. Battuta’s observation as *Dozakhpur* can be a myth in accordance of the presence of huge wealth of Bengal but in the environmental episode it has the reality. Bengal is a riverine delta. In rainy season flash flood occurred and epidemic diseases is spread throughout the flood affected area where inhuman sufferings and trouble caused by hostile insects. Battuta visited Bengal in the rainy season and the green environment of everywhere charmed him but the foggy atmosphere remind him tells of Khorashanis about Bengal as *Dozakhpur*.

Humayun would not come to Bengal to live permanently but to defeat his foe Sher Khan who made a stronghold in Bengal. Humayun stayed six to nine months in the northern part of Bengal where nature is beautiful. Emperor got the flavor of *Jannat* to come here for his mental appeasement. But his *Jannat* may be a myth on account of the presence of natural calamity and disaster in the southern part of Bengal. However Bengal had plenty of wealth from the ancient time which has been estimated by the foreigners. The paradise theory and the phenomenon of Golden Bengal later became a deep-seated phenomenon of Bengali nationalistic poets, philosophers and politicians as well.

Notes and References

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- Adventures of Ibn Batuta: A Muslim Traveller of the Fourteenth Century*, University of California Press, p.255
3. Sirajul Islam (ed.) *Banglapedia* (Bengali Version), Dhaka, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Vol.10, 2003, p. 412
 4. Ibn Juzzayy (in Arabic, ابن جزى الكلبي الغزطى) was a court literary secretary of Abu Iran Marini, the Sultan of Morocco. He wrote the Rihala whom Ibn Batuta dictated an account of his travels.
 5. *Tuhfat-un-Nuzzar fi Gharaib-il-Amsar wa Ajaib-il-Asfr*, is a book written in Arabic which has been translated in various languages. In English it is called (An Excellent Book on Visit through the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travels.); Ibn Batuta, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, trans. Agha Mahdi Hussain, Baroda Oriental Institute, 1953
 6. Muhammad Jalaluddin Biswash (trans.), *Ibn Battutar Safarnama (Travels of Ibn Battuta)*, Dhaka, Kamiyab Prokasan, 2004, p.251
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 16. Gulbadan Begum, *Humayun-Nama(Biography of Emperor Humayun)* trans. Mustafa Harun, Dacca, Bangla Academy, 1978, p.41
 17. Abdul Karim, *Banglar Itihas Sultani Amol (History of Bengal Sultanate Period)*, Dhaka, Jatiyo Grantha Prokasan, 2001, p. 41
 18. Sayyid Fayyaz Mahmud, *A Short History of Islam*, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 1960, p.508
 19. Abdul Karim, *Ibid.* pp. 41-42
 20. Akbar Ali Khan, 'Golden Bengal:Myth and Reality' in Sirajul Islam (ed.) *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971*, Vol. 2, Dhaka, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007, pp.132-154