

**JOURNAL  
O F  
THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BANGLADESH  
(HUMANITIES)**

---

**Vol. 69**

**No. 1**

**June 2024**

---

**Editor  
Ahmed A. Jamal**

**Associate Editor  
Mohammad Abul Kawser**



**ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BANGLADESH**

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Chairperson	Professor Sajahan Miah
Editor	Professor Ahmed A. Jamal
Associate Editor	Professor Mohammad Abul Kawser
Members:	Professor Mahbuba Nasreen
	Professor Md. Fayek Uzzaman
	Professor Al Masud Hasanuzzaman

*Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* (Humanities) is published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in June and December every year. Scholarly articles relating to *Peoples and Nature of Asia* are considered for publication in the Journal. It also receives books for reviewing.

**Correspondence** : All correspondence may be addressed to- Editor, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities), 5 Old Secretariat Road, Nimtali, Ramna, Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh.

Telephone : (880+2) 9513783

E-mail : [asbpublication@gmail.com](mailto:asbpublication@gmail.com)

Website : [www.asiaticsociety.org.bd](http://www.asiaticsociety.org.bd)

**Published by** The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh

**Price** Tk. 200.00 (Two hundred taka)

**ISSN** 1015–6836 (Print)

## **Guidelines for Contributors**

The *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* is a peer-reviewed journal. Manuscripts submitted for publication in the journal should be printed, double-spaced on one side of A4 size paper with generous margins, and should not normally exceed 10,000 words using British spelling. In addition, a soft copy of the manuscript should be submitted. A *quotation* that will run more than fifty words should be set off as a single-spaced, double-indented paragraph. **Notes and references should be numbered consecutively throughout and be placed at the foot of the page.** *Tables* should be given separate numbers in the manuscript, such as Table 1, Table 2, etc. with running headings.

Notes and References should be cited as follows:

1. P.J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, The Cambridge History of India*, (Cambridge 1987), p. 77.
2. Willem Van Schendel, 'Economy of the Working Classes'. Sirajul Islam (ed.), *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971*, Vol. II, (Economic History), (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh 1992), pp. 542-99.
3. W.H. Morris-Jones, "Pakistan Post-Mortem and the Roots of Bangladesh", *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 18 (April-June), 1972, pp. 187-200.

### **DECLARATION**

A manuscript which is concurrently under consideration by another journal or press or which has been published elsewhere will not be considered for publication in the Journal.

The author of each paper agrees that (i) the work submitted has been written by her/him and that its similarity with any other published work/unpublished thesis does not exceed 25%; (ii) s/he takes all responsibilities for the content of the paper; (iii) the content of the paper has not been published before in any referred journal or has not been submitted to any such journal for publication; and (iv) s/he accords consent to the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh to publish the paper.

### **BOOK REVIEW**

Books sent to the journal for review should be given in duplicate.

The *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* (Humanities) is entitled to assign DOI to all individual papers starting from the June 2023 issue of the Journal. This will help scholars all over the world to easily locate the published papers. It will also increase the visibility and facilitate citation of the papers. With this, the Journal has taken another step forward in terms of academic excellence as well as international recognition.

JOURNAL OF  
THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BANGLADESH  
(HUMANITIES)

---

Vol. 69

No. 1

June 2024

---

CONTENTS

<b>Revisiting Hindu Marriage Norms: Unveiling Women's Agency in Ancient India</b> Gobinda Chandra Mandal DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74460">https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74460</a>	1
<b>Intersecting Identities, Gender and Health: A Mapping of Adolescent Health Challenges in Bangladesh</b> Tasnim Nowshin Fariha and Ayesha Banu DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74462">https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74462</a>	33
<b>A Reappraisal of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh and the Independent Geo-political Entity of Sonargaon</b> Sahidul Hasan DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74463">https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74463</a>	67
<b>Bangladesh-India Land Boundary Agreements, 1974-2015: Context, Correlations and Territoriality</b> Mohammad Golam Rabbani DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74464">https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74464</a>	89
<b>The Levy System in East Bengal and its Impact on the Peasantry (1949-1967)</b> S. M. Rezaul Karim DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74465">https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74465</a>	107
<b>Sketching the Tactical Position and Maritime Connectivity of Bengal with Malay Archipelago (321 BCE-750 CE)</b> Sharmin Akhtar DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74466">https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v69i1.74466</a>	123

**THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BANGLADESH**  
**Council 2024 & 2025**

President : Professor Dr. Harun-or-Rashid

Vice-Presidents : Professor Dr. Hafiza Khatun  
Professor Dr. Sajahan Miah  
Professor Dr. Yearul Kabir

Treasurer : Dr. Muhammad Abdul Mazid

General Secretary: Professor Dr. Mohammad Siddiqur Rahman Khan

Secretary : Professor Dr. Md. Abdur Rahim

Members : Professor Dr. Syed Anwar Husain (Fellow)  
Barrister Shafique Ahmed (Fellow)  
Professor Dr. A K M Golam Rabbani  
Professor Dr. Mahbuba Nasreen  
Professor Md. Lutfor Rahaman  
Professor Dr. Sadeka Halim  
Professor Dr. Asha Islam Nayeem  
Professor Dr. Abdul Bashir  
Professor Dr. Najma Khan Majlis  
Professor Dr. Md. Abdul Karim  
Professor Dr. Shuchita Sharmin  
Professor Dr. Sabbir Ahmed

## Revisiting Hindu Marriage Norms: Unveiling Women's Agency in Ancient India \*

Gobinda Chandra Mandal\*\*

### Abstract

This article extensively explores marriage norms in ancient India, focusing on women's agency. It begins by dissecting the concept of marriage and its variations in ancient India and sheds light on its significance from women's viewpoints. It scrutinises the roles of women within the institution, including debates surrounding the age of marriage, the qualities sought in brides, and the complexities of partner selection including the prohibited degrees of marriage. The paper delves into her roles in marriage rituals as well as post-marital positions. Contentious issues like divorce and remarriage of women have also been touched. Overall, this article aims to uncover obscure aspects of women's autonomy within marriage, analysing their roles and representations across all facets. By examining evolving Hindu marriage norms throughout the Vedic, Puranic and Smriti periods, it emphasizes the need for a refined understanding of women's agency. The paper seeks to contribute to a comprehensive understanding of marriage in ancient India, particularly from the perspective of women's representations, urging readers to reconsider conventional narratives.

**Key words:** Hindu marriage, women's agency, ancient India, matrimonial practices, socio-cultural dynamics.

### 1. Introduction

In Hindu society, the institution of marriage stands as the foundation of cultural, social and legal norms, which are deeply rooted in tradition and historical practice.<sup>1</sup> Yet, because of its perceived permanence, the dynamics of Hindu marriage, especially in the case of women's agency,<sup>2</sup> have often been overlooked or misunderstood.<sup>3</sup> In this article, a scholarly exploration of the multifaceted layers of marriage norms in ancient India is focused, specifically examining the role and agency of women within these norms.

---

\* This paper is drawn from the PhD thesis by the author.

\*\* Associate Professor, Department of Law, University of Dhaka, E-mail: [gobinda@du.ac.bd](mailto:gobinda@du.ac.bd)

<sup>1</sup> B.B. Satpathy, "Indian Culture and Heritage", *Culture*, Vol. 2, 2015, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> Women's agency refers to the ability of women to take action, make their own decisions, and exert influence over their lives and outcomes, despite the constraints and limitations imposed by patriarchal societies.

<sup>3</sup> M. N. Srinivas, "The Changing Position of Indian Women", *Man*, Vol. 2(2), 1977, p. 221.

Marriage in Hinduism goes beyond just the union of two people. It connects families, communities and cultures.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally the institution of marriage carries the weight of social expectations and cultural values of the parties.<sup>5</sup> However, the dynamics of power and autonomy within these unions, especially from the perspective of women, remain the subject of debate and scholarly enquiry.<sup>6</sup> Traditional narratives often portray women as passive actors with limited autonomy and agency when it comes to marriage and family life in ancient India.<sup>7</sup> However, recent scholarship and historical reevaluation challenge this simplistic picture. It rather sheds light on the subtle roles and agency used by women within marriage institutions.<sup>8</sup>

This paper aims to challenge the conventional narrative and reveal the hidden details of women's agency within the institution of marriage in ancient India. Through a refined understanding of the rules of Hindu marriage, the goal is to enrich scholarly discussion and contribute to the broader conversation about gender, power, and agency in ancient Indian society. Exploring the roles and experiences of women, the aim is to illuminate the complexities of marital dynamics and develop a deeper understanding of the diverse realities of marital life in ancient India. The article encompasses the evolving idea and dimensions of marriage, including its forms, significance from women's perspectives, the position of women within marriage, debates surrounding marriage age and bride qualities, partner selection criteria, prohibited degrees of marriage, women's roles in marriage rituals, and their post-marital positions. From this article, readers can gain insight into the extent of freedom and autonomy enjoyed by ancient Indian women in their matrimonial affairs and how these freedoms gradually diminished in later periods.

This article adopts a multifaceted approach, combining historical, sociological, and legal methodologies to explore Hindu marriage norms in ancient India and elucidate women's agency within this context. To investigate women's roles, scholarly works,

---

<sup>4</sup> G. R. Mehrotra, "South Asian Women and Marriage: Experiences of a Cultural Script", *Gender Issues*, Vol. 33, 2016, p. 353.

<sup>5</sup> E.S. Scott, "Social Norms and the Legal Regulation of Marriage", *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 86(8), 2000, p.1935.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 1964

<sup>7</sup> U. Roy, *Idealizing Motherhood: The Brahmanical Discourse on Women in Ancient India (Circa 500 BCE-300 CE)*, (SOAS1999), p. 182

<sup>8</sup> See, G. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (eds.), *Urbana Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (University of Illinois Press 1998); P. Parmar, 'Gender, Race and Class: Asian Women in Resistance', Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (eds.), *The Empire Strikes Back*, (Routledge, 1982), pp. 235-274; C. T. Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', C. T. Mohanty *et al.* (eds.), *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 333-358



and historical, and legal documents about Hindu marriage have been examined. Additionally, available primary sources including Vedic, Puranic, and Smriti texts, supplemented by relevant literature, have been scrutinized for historical analysis of the topic. Furthermore, it adopts a sociological perspective to analyse social structures, gender roles, and cultural norms prevalent in ancient India, aiding in contextualizing women's agency within the institution of marriage.

Despite inherent limitations such as limited availability of primary sources, interpretational challenges, difficulties in reconstructing historical context, and variations in Hindu marriage norms across regions and time periods, this article provides valuable insights into the interplay between Hindu marriage norms and women's agency in ancient India.

## 2. Concept of Marriage in Ancient India

In Indian civilisation, marriage was revered as a holy and divinely ordained union, with the parties bowing in front of the sacred fire to signify their commitment.<sup>9</sup> The evolution of marriage in ancient India witnessed a shift from promiscuity to conventional marriage, underscoring the sanctity and significance of marital bonds.<sup>10</sup> It is said that the great sage Shwetaketu commanded the replacement of promiscuity with regular marriage.<sup>11</sup>

As society progressed, the perception of marriage underwent a transformation. Marriage was considered a religious duty, with both partners deemed essential for reaching heaven.<sup>12</sup> The institution of marriage was sanctified, ritualized, and normalized, emphasizing the union of couples through sacramental wedlock.<sup>13</sup> The importance of marriage for women was highlighted by the significance attached to finding a good husband through fasting, prayers, and rituals.<sup>14</sup> Practices like bride-selling and wife-staking gradually waned, and marriage evolved into a joint ownership between husband and wife.<sup>15</sup> Vedic literature portrays marriage as a holy and divinely ordained institution.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day*, (Benares Hindu University 1938), p. 57

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 34

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, pp. 34-35

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 408

<sup>13</sup> B. S. Upadhyaya, *Women in the Rigveda*, (Nand Kishore & Bros. 1941), p. 40

<sup>14</sup> L. Dube, *Women and Kinship: Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia*, (UN University Press 1997), p. 114

<sup>15</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 409

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 57

In Vedic India, marriage was sanctified, ritualized, and perceived as a normal and desirable necessity in society. It was believed to be a means of attaining immortality and happiness, with particular emphasis on the birth of sons: "*Giving birth to many children and devoted to the Gods, be thou conducive to our happiness and well-being.*"<sup>17</sup> In early Aryan society, the significance of marriage stemmed from the imperative of ensuring the continuity of progeny and the augmentation of dominance over other races. Each Aryan aspired to contribute at least ten males to the tribe, a goal attainable only through the establishment of a permanent marital union. This aspiration found expression in a Vedic prayer: "*May the husband be the eleventh male member of the family, the rest ten being his sons.*"<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the notion of maintaining blood purity and a preference for monogamous marriages served to fortify the institution of marriage in Indian society. In religious beliefs that mandated the worship of manes, having a male child was deemed essential, particularly upon the demise of the father, symbolizing the transfer of responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> This was viewed as both a social and religious obligation, with the purpose of fulfilling the duty to have children to discharge the debts of the father to their ancestors.

The concept of marriage evolved throughout different historical periods, with various forms of marriage mentioned in ancient texts such as the Grihyasutras, Dharmasutras, and Smritis.<sup>20</sup> The position of widows and the practice of widow remarriage also reflected the complexities and traditions surrounding the concept of marriage in the Indian context. Marriages between close blood relatives were prohibited, although these restrictions were not firmly established during the Vedic era.<sup>21</sup> Since ancient times, almost all Hindu women have been destined for marriage. Historically, it stands out as the most crucial and prevalent institution in Hindu social life. In South Asian culture at large, adulthood is not considered complete until one is married. Men may delay marriage longer than women, as their parents tend to be less concerned about their marital status.<sup>22</sup>

The entire Subcontinent is permeated with arranged marriages. Hindus value negotiated marriage due to virginity, sex segregation, caste endogamy and exogamy (of the gotra, clan, lineage etc.), and class concerns. Since society values female

---

<sup>17</sup> Rigveda X. 85-44.

<sup>18</sup> Rig Veda, X. 85, 45

<sup>19</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at p. 44

<sup>20</sup> Regarding forms of marriage, the Grihyasutras, Dharmasutras, and Smritis specify eight types: Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapatya, Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasa, and Paisacha.

<sup>21</sup> D. N. Mitter, *The Position of Women in Hindu Law*, (Calcutta University 1913), p. 209

<sup>22</sup> Dube, supra note 13, at p.109

sexuality and requires girls to be virgins, it is the responsibility of the elders to arrange their marriages.<sup>23</sup> Young couples typically seek parental consent before getting married. Widow marriages are traditionally acceptable only in the middle and lower castes, and are still uncommon in the higher castes despite being permitted by law. Hindus believe that marriage sanctifies female sexuality. Since sex is a natural human craving, marriage is seen as an essential component of life, especially for women.<sup>24</sup> Since early times, patrilineal Indian societies considered marriage as the only ethical and respectable means of managing female sexuality. This impacts the marriage and motherhood of women. The marriage of a girl is expected to be a virginal one. Failing to adhere to this expectation is considered a sin and results in a loss of merit. Restriction on widow remarriage in higher castes stems from their firm conviction that Hindu marriage is sacred.<sup>25</sup> Even today, a woman can only be married once with full rites, and subsequent (widow) marriages are not as respected.<sup>26</sup>

Hindus emphasize the significance of marriage for women. Typically, blessings for males focus on requesting a long life, while blessings for females seek a good husband. Girls are expected to observe various vratas, including fasting and prayer rituals, to attract a suitable husband akin to Shiva and Vishnu. Marriage is believed to bring happiness and good fortune. In Hinduism, women with living husbands are referred to as "the fortunate one" or "the auspicious one."<sup>27</sup> On special occasions, enhancing one's luck is associated with feeding a "fortunate" married woman and exchanging items like kumkum (vermilion), glass bangles, a mirror, and a comb.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Forms of Marriage Practiced in Ancient India

In the Vedic age, there were various forms of marriage. These included eight forms, with the Brahma and Asura forms being the most prevalent today.<sup>29</sup> Manu and other sages<sup>30</sup> defined eight forms of marriage: (1) Brahma, (2) Daiva, (3) Arsha, (4) Prajapatya, (5) Asura, (6) Gandharva, (7) Rakshasa, and (8) Paishacha. Of these, the Brahma and Asura forms are still practised. While all eight forms were permitted in the Smritis, the first four were considered more suitable and are called approved

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. pp. 109-110

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.p.109

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 112

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at pp. 209-210

<sup>30</sup> Manu describes eight forms of marriage, and Apastamba, Gautama, Vasistha, Baudhayana, Vishnu, and Yajnavalkya, all agree with him.

forms. The last four were looked upon less favourably, known as unapproved forms. While Manu suggests that the Rakshasa form was permissible for Kshatriyas and the Asura form for Vaisyas and Sudras, it does not imply that they were obligatory.”<sup>31</sup> It is believed that these diverse marriage customs may have originated from the traditions of different tribal communities, which later merged into a single society.<sup>32</sup>

When the father of the bride personally invites a Vedic scholar, a man of good conduct, and bestows upon him the daughter adorned and honoured with valuable attire, it is called the Brahma marriage.<sup>33</sup> Originally, this form was open to all classes, but later even Sudras, who are not allowed to study the Vedas, were allowed to marry in this way, although strictly speaking, it seemed forbidden for them.<sup>34</sup>

In the Daiva form of marriage, a maiden was given in marriage to a priest officiating at a religious sacrifice.<sup>35</sup> This form was unique to Brahmins because only they could officiate in such ceremonies.<sup>36</sup>

The Arsha form of marriage occurred when a father gave his daughter in marriage after receiving a cow and a bull (or two pairs of cattle) as per the sacred law.<sup>37</sup> These animals were given in fulfilment of the sacred law and were not considered as the price for the bride. This form of marriage couldn't be seen as a sale because the number of cattle given remained constant, unlike a sale where the price might vary based on the bride's attractiveness.<sup>38</sup>

In the Prajapatya form of marriage, the daughter is given away by the father after he has shown respect to the bridegroom and addressed the couple with the phrase, “May both of you perform together your duties.”<sup>39</sup>

In the Asura form of marriage, the bridegroom receives a maiden after offering as much wealth as he can afford to the kinsmen and the bride herself, not necessarily following the instructions of sacred laws. This form essentially amounts to the purchase of the bride by the bridegroom, with the primary criterion being the exchange of money. The Asura form of marriage is prevalent among the Sudras in Southern and Western India.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 210-211

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 211

<sup>33</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 27-34

<sup>34</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 27, in Mitter, supra note 20, at pp. 211-212

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. III, 28

<sup>36</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 212

<sup>37</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 29

<sup>38</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 212

<sup>39</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 30

<sup>40</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 214

Manu described the Gandharva form of marriage as the voluntary union of a maiden and her lover, driven by desire and sexual intimacy.<sup>41</sup> This type of marriage was allowed only for the Kshatriya caste.<sup>42</sup> It's important to note that mere cohabitation without a clear intention and mutual agreement to marry is not considered a valid form of this marriage.<sup>43</sup>

In the seventh form of marriage, known as the Rakshasa, Manu described it as the forcible abduction of a maiden from her home while she cries out and weeps, after her relatives have been harmed, and their homes broken into.<sup>44</sup> This type of marriage was permitted for Kshatriyas by tradition.<sup>45</sup>

The eighth form of marriage called the Paisacha or diabolical form, was described by Manu as seducing a girl who is sleeping, intoxicated, or mentally impaired.<sup>46</sup> It is considered the most sinful form of marriage.

In various Puranas, including Agni,<sup>47</sup> Padma,<sup>48</sup> and Garuda,<sup>49</sup> the eight forms of marriage are elucidated. The Garuda Purana categorizes the first four forms as praiseworthy for Brahmanas, the next two as acceptable for Kshatriyas, the Asura form for Vaishyas, and the last one for Shudras.<sup>50</sup> The Skanda Purana expands the recognized forms to ten, namely Prajapatya, Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Gandharva, Asura, Rakshasa, Paisacha, Pratibha, and Ghatana.<sup>51</sup> It asserts that nothing should be taken in return for the girl. Additionally, it contends that even the Arsha form, where a pair of cow and bull is accepted for the girl, is tantamount to selling her.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> *"The voluntary union of a maiden and her lover, one must know to be the Gandharba Riti which springs from desire and has sexual intercourse for its purpose."*, Manu Samhita, III, 32

<sup>42</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 26

<sup>43</sup> *Chuckrodhaj vs Beerchunder* I. W.R. Civ. R. 194.

<sup>44</sup> *"The forcible abduction of a maiden from her home, while she cries out and weeps, after her kinsmen have been slain or wounded and their houses broken open, is called the Rakshasa (rite)." See, Manu Samhita, III, 33*

<sup>45</sup> Manu Samhita, III 26.

<sup>46</sup> *"When a man by stealth seduces a girl who is sleeping, intoxicated or disordered in intellect, that is the eighth, the basest and most sinful rite of the Pisachas."* See, Manu Samhita, III, 33

<sup>47</sup> Agni Purana., 154. 9-11

<sup>48</sup> Padma Purana., 233. 21-30

<sup>49</sup> Garuda Purana., I. 95.7

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. I. 95.11

<sup>51</sup> Skanda Purana, VI, 241. 35-36 in Roy A., Women in the Purana Tradition, (University of Allahabad 1998), p. 123

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. IV, 38. 17

While the Skanda Purana expands the forms of marriage from eight to ten, whereas the *Brahmanda Purana* reduces them to four unique types and calls them “Udvaha”. It denotes four distinct types of wives. The classifications include: (1) ‘Kala-krita,’ acquired for a specific time; (2) ‘Kraya-krita,’ obtained through outright purchase; (3) ‘Pitridatta,’ given by parents; and (4) ‘Svayamyuta,’ one who unites of her own accord. The text further specifies that the first type is akin to a prostitute, the second to a slave, the Svayamyuta corresponds to a marriage based on the Gandharva tradition, while the Pitridatta is termed ‘bharya,’ signifying a wife.<sup>53</sup>

After consulting the Vedas, Smritis, and Puranas, Upadhyaya categorized the subsequent forms of marriage into six types: (1) Asura-Brahma, (2) Prajapatya, (3) Svayamvara, (4) Gandharva, (5) Rakshasa, and (6) Contractual.<sup>54</sup>

Upadhyaya jointly called the Brahma and Asura marriages the “Asura-Brahma marriage” due to its dual nature. In Vedic literature, grooms often sought approval from the bride’s father through generous gifts, particularly if lacking charm and skills.<sup>55</sup> In some cases, grooms received dowries from the bride’s brother, but these marriages were categorized as Asura, where financial contributions were obligatory, distinguishing them from the Brahma style, which prioritized non-monetary considerations.<sup>56</sup>

While the spirit of Svayamvara marriage and Gandharva marriage may seem closely related, Upadhyaya identifies them as distinct types. Svayamvara, originating in the Vedic period, entails the bride actively choosing her husband from a pool of suitors, often involving challenges or conditions set by the bride’s family. It follows a formalized process with family involvement and specific goals for the suitors.<sup>57</sup> On the other hand, Gandharva Marriage is inferred from liberated social norms and expressions of affection. Rooted in love, it lacks formal proposals and family intervention, with unions forming based on genuine affection and mutual consent between the individuals.<sup>58</sup> Notable instances, like the story of King Dushyanta and Shakuntala in the Mahabharata, exemplify the essence of Gandharva Marriage,

<sup>53</sup> Brahmanda Purana., III, 4. 15. 4-5 in Roy, supra note 50, at p. 124

<sup>54</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at pp. 64-65

<sup>55</sup> Shastri S. R., *Women in the Vedic Age*, (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan 1954), p. 44

<sup>56</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at pp. 66

<sup>57</sup> In the case of the sun goddess Surya, a Svayamvara was arranged by her father Savita, with the condition that suitors must reach a specified goal. The Asvins won the race, securing the bride. The concept of choice is evident in other verses, such as when a maiden of noble birth chooses her husband as her lord. “*Then she who came for friendship, maid of noble birth, elected you as husbands, you as her lords.*” Rig Veda., 119, 5.

<sup>58</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at pp. 70-71

emphasizing the theme of love and consent without adherence to formal rituals or family arrangements.<sup>59</sup>

#### 4. Importance of Marriage from Women's Perspective

In ancient India, marriage was considered a social and religious duty for women, and it was seen as a sacred sacrament.<sup>60</sup> The primary purpose of marriage was to have children, especially sons, who were believed to clear the debts of the parents to their ancestors.<sup>61</sup> Motherhood was highly valued, and a son elevated a woman's status immediately. Additionally, women in Vedic society enjoyed considerable freedom and participated in social functions and interactions with potential suitors.<sup>62</sup> Marriage provided opportunities for young men and maidens to acquaint themselves and form a family.<sup>63</sup> The ideal husband-wife relationship was described as the essence of all kinship, the fulfilment of desires, and a source of solace.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, being a wife was seen as essential for them for the performance of religious rites and the procreation of sons. The wife was expected to bear heirs for the propagation of her husband's lineage, potentially for defending against enemies. Sons were crucial not just for inheritance but also for protecting the family. The Aryans traditionally desired a significant number of male children, often aiming for ten.<sup>65</sup>

In performing her domestic duties, the wife actively managed the household and cared for her family. She was described as an "honourable dame" and a diligent worker.<sup>66</sup> Her primary responsibility was to attend to her husband and oversee the entire household, including family members, domestics, slaves, and animals. The wife was expected to exhibit a benevolent temperament towards all, attending to the needs of in-laws and tending to the overall well-being of the family.<sup>67</sup> The wife, as the mistress of the house, was like a mother to all life, human and animal alike, affectionately caring for their needs. She played a crucial part in starting the day, opening the house like Usha unlocking the eastern gate of the sky to let in sunlight.<sup>68</sup> The Vedic texts emphasize her role in waking up and caring for all life. "*Rousing all life she stirs all creatures that have feet, and makes the birds of air fly up.*"<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. pp. 70-71

<sup>60</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 195

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p. 195; Altekhar, supra note 8, at p. 118

<sup>62</sup> Rig Veda., IV. 58, 8; VI. 75, 4; VII. 2, 5; X. 86, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. IV. 58, 8; VI. 75, 4; VII. 2, 5; X. 86, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Altekhar, supra note 8, at p. 117

<sup>65</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at p. 137

<sup>66</sup> Rig Veda., I, 79, 1

<sup>67</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at p. 138

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Rig Veda., I. 48, 5

The Brahmanas, Sutras and Puranas stressed the significance of a wife's presence in religious observances and highlighted the importance of a wife for the joint performance of religious duties. A passage from Taittiriya Brahmana deems unmarried individuals unholy.<sup>70</sup> The assertion in the Aitareya Brahmana posits that the designation of the wife as "Jaya" emanates from the notion that the husband is born within the wife as a son.<sup>71</sup> The Satapatha Brahmana asserts that a man is incomplete until he acquires a wife and begets a son.<sup>72</sup> The Apastamba Dharmasutra asserts the inseparability of husband and wife for the joint performance of religious duties.<sup>73</sup>

Similar sentiments are found in the Puranas. Vishnu Purana emphasizes that one desiring a household life must marry a woman with similar religious and civil obligations.<sup>74</sup> The Brahmanda Purana contends that a person fit for abhiseka must be accompanied by a suitable wife.<sup>75</sup> Matsya Purana highlights that only a Brahmana with a wife is eligible for alms.<sup>76</sup> The Brahmanda Purana narrates the story of Matanga, who, while performing penances, was accompanied by his wife.<sup>77</sup> In various contexts, the Puranas stress the significance of a wife's presence in religious observances. For instance, the Matsya Purana suggests that the participation of a wife in religious rites is an obligation recommended by tradition.<sup>78</sup> The Brahmanda Purana narrates instances where deities worshipped with their spouses.<sup>79</sup>

Overall, from the perspective of women in Hindu jurisprudence, marriage was seen as a crucial institution for fulfilling social, religious, and familial responsibilities, as well as for personal happiness and fulfilment. Since the Vedic period, marriage has been regarded as the primary means for women to achieve both worldly and otherworldly welfare.

##### **5. Position of Women in Marriage**

Hindu law views a man as the one who "marries," while a woman is considered to be "given" or "taken" in marriage. The man is the active participant, while the woman is

---

<sup>70</sup> Taittiriya Brahmana II, 2, 2.6.

<sup>71</sup> Aitareya Brahmana 33. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Satapatha Brahmana., Vol. 2, 1.10.

<sup>73</sup> Apastamba Dharmasutra., 11, 6. 13. 116-17

<sup>74</sup> Vishnu Purana II, 10. 13

<sup>75</sup> Brahmanda Purana., V. 14. 15

<sup>76</sup> Matsya Purana., 54, 24.

<sup>77</sup> Brahmanda Purana., II. 4. 32, 89-104.

<sup>78</sup> Matsya Purana., 58. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Brahmanda Purana., IV, 40. 93-97.



regarded as the passive party in the marriage process. For example, when Manu states that “a *twice-born man shall marry a wife of equal caste*,” he implies that the man (the doer) is engaging in the act of marriage, and the object of this act is the wife. However, the term “*marriage*” is used to describe the transaction regardless of whether we consider it from the perspective of the bride or groom. As Raghunandan explains, we speak of the “marriage” of a son in the same way as we speak of the “marriage” of a maiden daughter, citing a text of Vishnu to support this concept.<sup>80</sup>

Since the girl is considered the passive party in the marriage, the question arises: what conditions make a girl ineligible for marriage? In the code of Manu, there are instructions to avoid taking a wife from families where no male children are born, where the Vedas are not studied, or from families afflicted by constitutional diseases.<sup>81</sup> It is also advised not to marry a sickly, talkative maiden, or one named after celestial bodies, trees, rivers, mountains, and so on.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, a man should not marry a maiden who has no brother or whose father’s identity is unknown.<sup>83</sup> However, it is evident that these guidelines and similar recommendations were never intended to be mandatory or legally binding. They served as advice and cautionary rules, and it was at the discretion of the groom or their guardian to follow them or not when choosing a bride, whether for themselves or their ward. Kulluka Bhatta, while commenting on these texts, states that the violation of these injunctions does not invalidate the marriage. Raghunandan holds a similar perspective on this matter.<sup>84</sup>

In the realm of marriage in Hindu society, it is essential to understand that a girl or woman with a living husband is entirely unsuitable for remarriage. Even in ancient Vedic times, polyandry was widely condemned, with Draupadi’s case being considered exceptional and only justifiable for god-like or superhuman individuals.<sup>85</sup> Widows, according to some scholars, were also absolutely disqualified from remarriage,<sup>86</sup> while other sages allowed it.<sup>87</sup> Notably, the Indian Legislature has endorsed the view that permits widow remarriage, thereby allowing Hindu widows to remarry.<sup>88</sup> This change in legal perspective has been a significant development.

---

<sup>80</sup> See, Raghunandan's Udbahattwa, in Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 219

<sup>81</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 7

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. III, 8-9

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. III, 10

<sup>84</sup> See Raghunandan's Udbahattwa, in Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 219

<sup>85</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 219

<sup>86</sup> Manu Samhita, V. 161

<sup>87</sup> Parashara Smriti, Chap. IV; Narada Smriti, XII. 97

<sup>88</sup> The Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act, 1856 (Act XV of 1856)

A critical analysis of the position of girls in different forms of marriage in ancient India reveals that the forms of marriage were hierarchical and varied in terms of the consent, status and rights of the girls involved. The first four forms (Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, and Prajapatya) were considered approved (*prashasta*).<sup>89</sup> They involved the gift of a maiden (*kanyadana*) by her father or other guardian to the groom.<sup>90</sup> The last four forms (Asura, Gandharva, Rakshasa and Paishacha) were considered unapproved (*aparashasta*). Use of force, abduction or deception was involved in these forms of marriage.<sup>91</sup>

The position of girls in the approved forms of marriage was generally subordinate. They were dependent on their fathers or other guardians. The Brahma marriage was the most ideal and supreme form of marriage among all. In this kind of marriage, the girl was given to a learned and virtuous groom after adorning her with jewels and fine clothes. The consent of the maiden was not required, as it was assumed that the father would choose the best match for her.<sup>92</sup> The Daiva marriage was similar to the Brahma marriage. The only exception was that the girl was given to a priest as a fee for performing a sacrifice.<sup>93</sup> The Arsha marriage involved the exchange of a cow and a bull by the groom to the girl's father as a bride price. There is criticism that in this form of marriage, the girl was treated as a commodity.<sup>94</sup> The Prajapatya marriage was where the girl's father gave her to the groom with a blessing to perform their duties as householders. This form of marriage was more respectful than the previous ones.<sup>95</sup> The role of the maiden as a partner in the household was recognized in Arsha marriage.

The position of girls in the unapproved forms of marriage was even more precarious and vulnerable. In the Asura marriage, the groom somehow buys the girl from her father or guardian by paying money or giving valuable gifts. This form of marriage degraded the girl to a mere object of purchase. She was totally deprived of any

---

<sup>89</sup> L. K. Pallathadka, H. Pallathadka and M. S. Devi, "A Review of Marriage Rituals in Different Cultures", *Integrated Journal for Research in Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 2(5), 2022, p. 155.

<sup>90</sup> U. Chakravarti, *Of Meta-Narratives and Master Paradigms: Sexuality and the Reification of Women in Early India*, (Centre for Women's Development Studies 2009). p. 36

<sup>91</sup> L. R. Maharajh and N. Amin, "A Gender Critique of the Eight Forms of Hindu Marriages", *Journal of Gender and Religion in Africa*, Vol. 21(2), 2015, pp. 84-86

<sup>92</sup> N. Sengupta, *Evolution of Hindu Marriage with Special Reference to Rituals (C. 1000 BC-AD 500)*, (SOAS 1958), p. 152

<sup>93</sup> L. Sternbach, "A Sociological Study of the Forms of Marriage in Ancient India", *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, Vol. 22(3/4), 1941, p. 216.

<sup>94</sup> Sternbach, supra note 92, at p. 211.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 216.

dignity or choice in the process.<sup>96</sup> The Gandharva marriage was where the girl and the groom eloped or married secretly without the consent or knowledge of their guardians. This form of marriage was based on mutual attraction and love. But in many cases, the girl was exposed to social stigma and ostracism.<sup>97</sup> The Rakshasa marriage was where the groom abducted or forcibly married the girl against her will or after defeating her relatives in a battle. Maidens were used to be the subject of violence and coercion in this kind of marriage.<sup>98</sup> In the Paishacha form of marriage, the groom used to seduce or rape the girl when she was asleep, intoxicated.<sup>99</sup> This form of marriage was the most reprehensible, heinous and condemned in the society.

#### 6. Debates on Her Age of Marriage

Regarding the age of marriage for girls, the Rigveda lacks explicit statements specifying the precise age at which girls were married. The word “*vivaha*”, which means “carrying away” (of the bride), implies a marriage after puberty because the bride moved in with her husband immediately after the ceremony. Rigveda itself mentions that “*when a bride is fine looking and well adorned, she by herself seeks her friend from among men.*”<sup>100</sup> The wedding hymn describes the bride as youthful and aching for a husband. The bride should take over the household immediately from the in-laws. In verses 27-29 and 37, the wedding hymn describes the consummation of the marriage. The final sentence indicates that this event occurred immediately after the wedding. According to Altekar, this could only be done by brides between the ages of 16 and 18. This clearly indicates that girls were mature enough to choose their spouses.<sup>101</sup>

Upadhyaya observed that in the Rik Samhita, the marriageable age kicked in post-puberty, with no mention of child marriages. The maidens were aware of their choices, and the marriage rituals assumed a grown-up bride. Words like “*kanya*” and “*yuvati*” indicated mature women ready for marriage.<sup>102</sup>

The Vedic hymns suggest that brides were grown up and ready for consummation.<sup>103</sup> Terms referring to unmarried maidens conveyed a sense of mature youth. The

---

<sup>96</sup> Sengupta, supra note 91 at pp. 159-61

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. pp. 161-163

<sup>98</sup> Sengupta, supra note 91 at pp.158-159

<sup>99</sup> M. Singh, “Early Indian Society as Reflected in Indica of Megasthenes”, *International Journal of Innovative Research and Advanced Studies*, Vol. 2(3), 2015, p. 61

<sup>100</sup> Rigveda X. 27.12

<sup>101</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p.58

<sup>102</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at p. 50

<sup>103</sup> Rig Veda., VII. 55, 8

prevalence of post-puberty marriages is supported by instances of love, festivals, and meetings of lovers.<sup>104</sup> The rite of *Visvavasu* in the Vedas implied that marriages were performed with mature girls only. Visvavasu acted as a witness to the couple's abstinence from union until the first four days post-marriage were over. The husband addressed Visvavasu, signifying the readiness for consummation:

Rise up from hence, Visvavasu; with reverence we worship thee. Seek thou another willing maid and with her husband leave the bride.<sup>105</sup>

Verses of this kind clearly show that the marriage is consummated right after the wedding ceremony, indicating the bride's maturity. The Vedic rituals indicate that the bride was supposed to be mature with physical signs of puberty and was ready to give birth to children.<sup>106</sup> In this grown-up marriage, the bride, at least sixteen years old, assumes command of her household after marriage. This form of matrimony was widespread, juxtaposed with unions in older ages or the ageing of unmarried women; however, typically, marriages occurred when both partners were in their youth. Some exceptions may exist, like in polygamous cases, as seen with Kakasivan marrying early in his life and later taking Ghosa as his wife when her skin disease was cured.<sup>107</sup>

During the Atharva Veda there was no strict age requirement for marriage as a general rule. References to young people having natural affection for each other before marriage contradict the assumption of child marriage. The foundational elements of two types of marriages that emerged later, the Brahma and the Gandharva, can be found here. The fifth hymn in the fourth book includes an incantation to put the entire household to sleep when a lover visits his beloved. In other places, we come across several references to a young man's love for a maiden and his efforts to win her with charms and incantations.<sup>108</sup>

The Mantra-Brahmana prescribes a marriage ritual specifically designed for adults, evident in the terminology and verses directed at the bride during the ceremony. The purpose of marriage extends beyond lineage continuity to the attainment of complete unity and collaboration between spouses in the religious realm, as emphasized by the vows undertaken by both during the marriage ceremony.<sup>109</sup>

This continued until the fifth century B.C. According to the Grihya Sutra literature of this period, marriage should be consummated on the fourth day. The traditional name

---

<sup>104</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at pp. 50-51

<sup>105</sup> Rig Veda., X, 85, 22

<sup>106</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, at p. 52

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p. 54

<sup>108</sup> Rig Veda, VI, 8, 82

<sup>109</sup> Shastri, supra note 54, at p. 108

for the marriage consummation ritual is *Chaturthikarma*, or “the event of the fourth day.” Some Grihya Sutras permit the bride’s menstrual cycle to occur during the ceremony. In some of these works, the bride must be a *nagnika* at the time of marriage. The Mahabharata refers to a 16-year-old bride as a *nagnika*, and the Grihya Sutra stipulates that she must be a virgin on her wedding day. Matridatta defines “nagnika” as a woman who is able to privately welcome her husband after marriage. After child marriages became prevalent, this term came to mean an unclothed girl playing in the dirt.<sup>110</sup> During the period described in the Brahmanas, child wives were exceptional, as the rituals were exclusively designed for grown-up individuals.<sup>111</sup>

During the Grihya and Dharma Sutra periods, girls were typically married just before or immediately after reaching puberty. Gautama Dharma Sutra advocates marriage before puberty, emphasizing the neglect of this duty as a sin.<sup>112</sup> The Baudhayana Dharma Sutra recommends early marriage for girls, even to someone devoid of qualities.<sup>113</sup> Thus, from 400 B.C. to 100 A.D., the marriageable age decreased, and girls were married around or before puberty. The Kama Sutra assumes pre- and post-pubescent marriages at its conclusion.<sup>114</sup> The Kathasaritsagara includes both parent-arranged child marriages and self-arranged love marriages in its social narratives (Chapters 24, 124).<sup>115</sup>

The Skanda Purana specifies that the appropriate age for marriage for a girl is twelve.<sup>116</sup> The Brahmavaivarta Purana recounts instances where girls of twelve are portrayed as possessing enduring youthfulness.<sup>117</sup> However, Roy describes that under Puranic tradition, a woman’s prime was considered to be between eight and twelve years old.<sup>118</sup> The Smriti texts obligated guardians to ensure that girls were married before puberty. Manu suggested that the “proper age” for marriage could be eight years, but there was also an emphasis on marriage before puberty.

To a distinguished, handsome suitor of the same class, should a father give his daughter, in accordance with the prescribed rule, though she may have not attained the proper age.<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 60-61

<sup>111</sup> Shastri, supra note 54, at p. 83

<sup>112</sup> Gautam Dharmasutra, 18. 20-23

<sup>113</sup> Baudhayana Dharma Sutra., IV. 1, 12, 15

<sup>114</sup> Kama Sutra, III, 2-4

<sup>115</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p.65

<sup>116</sup> Roy, supra note 50, at p. 118

<sup>117</sup> Brahmavaivarta Purana, 1, 26, 8

<sup>118</sup> Roy, supra note 50, at p. 118

<sup>119</sup> Manu Samhita, IX, 88

When examining this text, Kulluka, Narayana, and Raghunandana suggest that ‘proper age’ refers to the age of eight years. In contrast, Medhatithi interprets ‘proper age’ as the time ‘before she is bodily fit for marriage.’ Several other sages emphasize the importance of marrying a girl before she reaches puberty.<sup>120</sup> Another important text from Manu states that a marriageable maiden should stay with her father instead of marrying someone without good qualities.

But the maiden, though marriageable, should rather stop at her father’s house until death, than that she should ever be given to a man, destitute of good qualities.<sup>121</sup>

This might suggest that marriages for girls were not compulsory during the time of Manu. However, Raghunandana argues that the true intent of this verse is to discourage bad matches and not to promote a lifelong maidenhood, as was seen in the Vedic age.<sup>122</sup> Manu’s next verse allows a girl to wait for three years after reaching puberty. If her father or guardian doesn’t find a suitable groom for her during that time, she is allowed to choose one for herself.<sup>123</sup> In practice, though, the selection of a bridegroom is typically done by the girl’s guardian, and the opportunity for her to make this choice is quite rare.

By the year 100 A.D., society started favouring prepubescent marriages. To ensure absolute chastity, marriages were always performed before the onset of puberty. Around this time, upanayana for girls ceased,<sup>124</sup> and they were forced to receive no education. Parents likely believed that marrying girls after puberty was optimal because they were no longer focused on school. Around 200 A.D., prepubescent marriages became the norm. Societal preference shifted towards pre-puberty marriages during this period, influenced by the idea that girls should be married before exhibiting distinct signs of femininity.<sup>125</sup> Yajnavalkya, who wrote around this time, advocates marrying girls before puberty in order to prevent the monthly destruction of an embryo by guardians. Another Smriti writer Yama, who arrived 400 years later, says that even if a suitable match is impossible, the girl should be married before she turns 18 to an unsuitable man. How dissimilar the views of Manu and Yama are? The former would permit a woman to remain unmarried until her death if

---

<sup>120</sup> Gautama, XVIII 20, 23; Vasistha, XVII, 69-71; Baudhayana IV, I, 11-14; Brihaspati, XXIV, 4; Yajnavalkya, I, 64; Kulluka in his comments on verse 4, chapter IX; Manu fixes the proper age to be before puberty.

<sup>121</sup> Manu Samhita, IX, 88

<sup>122</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at pp. 244-245

<sup>123</sup> Manu Samhita, IX, 90

<sup>124</sup> It is to be noted that during the Vedic period, upanayana was a common practice for both sons and daughters in the three twice-born classes of society.

<sup>125</sup> Roy, supra note 50, at pp. 117-118

no suitable husband could be found. The later did not object to a girl being bound for life to an unsuitable and undeserving husband if there was even the slightest possibility of her crossing the fatal line of puberty before marriage.<sup>126</sup>

According to Roy, this shift of social preference towards pre-puberty marriages may be attributed to the widespread influence of Buddhism, which encouraged monastic life and the perceived laxity of morals among nuns.<sup>127</sup> Between 500 and 1000 A.D., the authors of different Smritis advocated for prepubescent marriages. They believed that a ten-year-old girl who had reached puberty should be married. Eight-year-old Gauri was the most suitable for marriage.<sup>128</sup> Mitter observed that during the period of the Smriti texts, the age for marriage was shifted to eight years, and it was still obligatory to marry girls before they reached puberty.<sup>129</sup>

Initially, only Brahmanas were expected to marry before puberty, Kshatriyas were not expected to do so. The fighting classes refused to follow the new custom. We can therefore comprehend how Kshatriya heroines in Sanskrit dramas from 300 to 1200 A.D. were grown-up brides, despite universal and terrible condemnation of post-puberty marriages by the Smritikars.<sup>130</sup> Advocates of prepubescent marriage grew dissatisfied with girls marrying at ages 8 or 9. A vocal minority advocated for further age reduction. The Brahma Purana suggests marrying girls after the age of four. The text of Manu, which allowed a woman to stay single if she couldn't find a suitable husband, was interpreted as highlighting the importance of careful partner selection rather than endorsing marriage after puberty.<sup>131</sup>

In the eighth or ninth century A.D., the expansion of the caste system into hundreds of subcastes and the prohibition of inter-caste marriages exacerbated the problem of child marriage. The introduction of new waterproof subcastes made it more difficult to find a suitable groom. By postponing the wedding, the parents risked losing a suitable groom. Paradoxically, the custom of Sati, which gained popularity at this time, may have aided early marriages.<sup>132</sup>

Using the Upanayana analogy, the marriage age was lowered to this absurd degree. Parents who wanted their sons to excel in school were advised to have them perform

---

<sup>126</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p.67

<sup>127</sup> Roy, supra note 50, at p. 117

<sup>128</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p.68

<sup>129</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 242

<sup>130</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p.69

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p.70

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p.70-72

their upanayana by the age of five. At the same age, girls could marry.<sup>133</sup> Mitter in his research shows that the directive to marry girls while they are still infants was more of a moral guideline rather than a strict legal requirement. Disobeying this guideline did not invalidate or make a marriage void.<sup>134</sup> However, the influence of foreign invasions, one after another, and the changing social and cultural dynamics led to the perpetuation of child marriages and a decline in the age at which girls were married.<sup>135</sup>

### 7. Qualities of a Bride

The qualities of a bride in marriage varied during different historical periods in Hindu jurisprudence. It has been observed that the rules governing the selection of brides are considerably more intricate than those for selecting bridegrooms, although in some respects they are similar. In the Vedic Age, qualities, character, and intelligence were emphasized when selecting a bride. They were expected to be mature women capable of bearing strong offspring.<sup>136</sup>

The Satapatha Brahmana articulates the prevailing view that women with broad hips and slender waists are more conducive to procreation.<sup>137</sup> Additionally, the Ashvalayana Grihya Sutra advises marrying a girl possessing intelligence, beauty, good character, and auspicious qualities, emphasizing health.<sup>138</sup> The Sankhyayana Grihya Sutra specifies that the girl should possess auspicious characteristics, categorized as visible (bodily features) and invisible.<sup>139</sup> Manusmriti warns against marrying a girl with excessive hair, abnormal limbs, talkativeness, or yellowish eyes. It further advises marrying a girl with flawless limbs, a graceful gait, slight hair growth on the head and body, small teeth, and a delicate body.<sup>140</sup> Given the difficulty in assessing these qualities of a girl, a test is devised wherein the bride selects a lump of earth representing different attributes. Once the girl passes this test, the marriage is finalized.<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. at p.70

<sup>134</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 243

<sup>135</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 5-6

<sup>136</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 198

<sup>137</sup> Satapatha Brahmana., 1, 2, 5.16

<sup>138</sup> Asvalayana Grihya Sutra., 1, 53.

<sup>139</sup> Sankhyana Grihya Sutra., 1. 56

<sup>140</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 8, 10

<sup>141</sup> "...a test is arranged in which the bride has to pick up a lump of earth out of the eight lumps taken from different places, each signifying a different quality or attribute of the bride. Thus the earth taken from a field yielding two crops signified richness in food, that of a cow-shed signified richness in cattle, that of a Vedi, richness in holy lustre, that of a pool (that never dries



As mentioned earlier, Manusmriti prohibits marrying a girl with names associated with lunar mansions, trees, rivers, mountains, birds, snakes, or with negative connotations such as frightening names.<sup>142</sup> In the code of Manu, there are instructions to avoid taking a wife from families where no male children are born, where the Vedas are not studied, or from families afflicted by contagious diseases.<sup>143</sup> Manu also dictated a man should not marry a maiden who has no brother or whose father's identity is unknown.<sup>144</sup>

Turning to the Puranas, the *Vishnu Purana* offers detailed criteria for selecting a bride, emphasizing moderate hair, complexion, and physical form. It cautions against marrying girls with vices, health issues, improper upbringing, or masculine traits.<sup>145</sup> The *Padma Purana* adds that the bride should be of average height, have appropriate body hair, normal eyebrows, and a name unrelated to rivers, serpents, mountains, trees, or birds.<sup>146</sup> *Skanda Purana* advises avoiding girls with goddess or river names. It also suggests that marrying a girl with very short hair or extreme height leads to premature death within six months.<sup>147</sup> In the Puranic period, the fundamental motive for marriage was described as the propagation of progeny, with violation of this purpose seen as a loss of lustre.<sup>148</sup> The Puranas consistently highlight the significance of married life and the distinguished status of the householder.<sup>149</sup> All these texts suggest that the physical appearance and attributes of the bride were considered important in the selection process.

### 8. Choosing Partner in Marriage

Maidens in Vedic society enjoyed considerable freedom, participating in social functions and interacting with potential suitors.<sup>150</sup> The institution of *samanas*, where maidens and suitors met, facilitated marriages by spontaneously resolving difficulties. Elders supported this institution, recognizing its role in easing parental concerns about finding suitable matches. Festive gatherings provided frequent

---

*up) richness in everything, that of a gambling place, a gambling nature, that of the junction of four roads, a restless nature (that wanders in different directions), that of a barren spot, poverty, and that of a burial ground, death of her husband.” See, Shastri, supra note 54, at p. 120*

<sup>142</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 9.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid. III, 7

<sup>144</sup> Ibid. III, 10

<sup>145</sup> Vishnu Purana., III, 10

<sup>146</sup> Padma Purana, Uttarakanda., 223, 17-22, 45.

<sup>147</sup> Skanda Purana, IV, 135. 6-7.

<sup>148</sup> Vishnu Purana., V, 38.38.

<sup>149</sup> Matsya Purana., 67, 25-29; Agni Purana., 265.3; See, Roy, supra note 50, at p. 113

<sup>150</sup> Rig Veda., IV. 58, 8; VI. 75, 4; VII. 2, 5; X. 86, 10.

opportunities for young men and maidens to acquaint themselves, eventually leading to marriages.<sup>151</sup>

In Vedic society, marriage by free choice was considered normal. Typically, a young maiden had the freedom to choose the man with whom she would unite her destiny. However, this freedom was somewhat constrained by parental advice. The father or, in his absence, the brother, had the responsibility to assist the maiden in securing a worthy husband. The brother even had a degree of control over her social habits and movements.<sup>152</sup> The absence of the brother could potentially lead the sister astray, according to the 'Rigveda,' emphasizing the need for vigilance to prevent unsuitable men from taking advantage of her vulnerability.<sup>153</sup> If both the father and brother were absent, the maiden had to take the initiative and seek out her husband herself.<sup>154</sup> "*She seeketh men, as she who hath no brother mounting her car as't were to gather riches.*"<sup>155</sup>

Despite the apparent freedom, parental sanction, especially if the parents were alive, was almost imperative. It may be challenging to believe in the extraordinary freedom enjoyed by women, but it is established that, in normal circumstances, the father or brother sought a suitable match for the girl.<sup>156</sup> Marriage, according to Vedic Aryans, was not an end in itself but a means to an ideal. It was regarded as a discipline, not an adventure. The father's hand played a role in controlling his daughter's marriage because the Vedic Aryans understood the consequences of allowing inexperienced girls to seek their matches without guidance.<sup>157</sup>

In the Indo-Aryan community, marriages were often stopped if parents objected. The control over a daughter's marriage was often greater for the mother than the father or brother. Despite the guiding hand of parents, the maiden herself played the chief role in the marriage. The Atharva Veda mentions parents entertaining suitors but ultimately allowing the daughter to choose her husband from among them. Parents acted more as intermediaries in the process.<sup>158</sup>

## 9. Prohibited Degrees of Marriage

For a long time, society was unaware of the current rule prohibiting same-gotra marriages. During the Vedic period, a gotra did not exist as a spiritual or blood-

---

<sup>151</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, atp. 45

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p. 46

<sup>153</sup> Rig Veda, IV. 5, 5.

<sup>154</sup> Rig Veda., I. 124, 7.

<sup>155</sup> Rig Veda., I. 124, 7

<sup>156</sup> Upadhyaya, supra note 12, atp. 47

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. p. 48

<sup>158</sup> Rig Veda., X. 78, 4; 85, 15, 23. In Upadhyaya, supra note 12, atp. 49

related group. The prohibition on *sagotra* and *saprarava* marriages likely derives from a non-Aryan custom prohibiting marriages between totem worshippers. Later authors of *Smriti* and *Nibandha* took *sagotra* marriages seriously.<sup>159</sup> In the writings of Smritikars, there is a list of forbidden alliances for men, from which we can infer a corresponding list for women. Manu, for instance, states:

A damsel, who is neither the Sapinda of the father nor of the mother and who is not the Sagotra of the father or the mother, is recommended to the twice-born man for wed-lock and conjugal union.<sup>160</sup>

The key terms in this statement are “Sapinda” and “Sagotra,” and there has been some debate regarding their precise meanings, which differ when applied to the mother or the father.<sup>161</sup> This passage from Manu forms the foundation for the rule of prohibited degrees in Hindu Law, and scholars and commentators have extensively examined the exact scope and implications of this rule.<sup>162</sup> In general, it can be said that in Bengal, the interpretation of Raghunandan’s views on this matter has been accepted, while other schools have embraced the viewpoint of Kamalakara from the *Nirnaya Sindhu*.

Therefore, a bride who is from the family of the bridegroom’s mother, and whose ancestors and family name can not be traced, is unsuitable for marriage. However, those who do not fall into this category can be considered for marriage. Vyasa’s view supports this by stating that one should not desire to marry a girl from the same gotra as his mother, but if the family name is unknown, then she can be married, even if she belongs to the same family as the maternal grandfather of the bridegroom. Medhatithi agreed with Vasistha regarding the prohibition of marrying a girl who belongs to the same gotra as the mother.<sup>163</sup>

The prohibition on marriage in Hindu law not only applies to girls who are closely related to the father and mother but also to those who are connected to the *bandhus* of both parents. This principle is based on a text by Narada, as referred by Raghunandan, which states that:

Girls descended from the father’s or mother’s bandhus, are not to be taken in marriage, as far as the seventh and fifth degrees respectively, as well as girls of the same gotra or equal pravaras.<sup>164</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 88

<sup>160</sup> Manu Samhita, III, 5

<sup>161</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 220-221

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 222

<sup>164</sup> Narada cited at p. 572 of the *Udbahatattwa* of Raghunandan

To clarify, the term “*bandhus* of the father and mother” refers to specific relatives. The *bandhus* of the bridegroom’s father include his father’s sister’s son, his mother’s sister’s son, and his maternal uncle’s son. On the other hand, the *bandhus* of the mother consist of her father’s sister’s son, her mother’s sister’s son, and her maternal aunt’s son.<sup>165</sup> According to Narada, a girl is not considered a suitable match for a man if she is related within the seventh degree to his father’s *bandhus* and their six ancestors or within the fifth degree to his mother’s *bandhus* and their four ancestors. This regulation restricts marriages between individuals who share close family ties to ensure social and cultural compatibility.<sup>166</sup>

Raghunandan provides insight into the significance of “sagotra” and “pravara.” “Sagotra” refers to individuals belonging to the same lineage or clan, and it is considered taboo for a person to marry someone from the same “gotra.” For Brahmins, their “gotra” is derived from the name of the principal sage from whom their lineage originates, such as Kasyapa, Sandilya, or Bhardwaja. So, a Brahmin from the Kasyapa “gotra” should not marry someone from another family of the Kasyapa “gotra.”<sup>167</sup>

However, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas, who don’t trace their lineage to sages, adopted the “gotra” of the Brahman priest who conducted their religious ceremonies. Raghunandan emphasizes that not only should the bride be from a different “gotra,” but she should also belong to a different “pravara.” In ancient times, those who officiated as “Hota” during rituals were known as “pravaras.” It’s possible for sages from different “gotras” to share the same “pravaras” since they might have performed these roles during sacrifices.<sup>168</sup>

In the mentioned rules regarding the eligibility of girls for marriage, it appears that girls related as sapindas on both the father’s and mother’s sides, up to the seventh and fifth degrees, respectively, face significant restrictions when it comes to marriage. This limitation results in a very limited pool of potential marriage partners, making marriage more challenging.<sup>169</sup> To address this issue, commentators have introduced exceptions to soften these strict rules. The primary exception is when a girl being considered for marriage is at least three gotras apart from the groom. In such cases, she becomes eligible for marriage, even if she is a cognate relation within the seventh or fifth degree, as per the texts of Manu and Narada.<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 226

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. p. 226-227

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. p. 227

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. p. 228

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

This exception can be understood by considering that a woman's gotra changes upon marriage. For example, a girl from the Bhardwaja gotra, after marrying a boy from the Biswamitra gotra, adopts the gotra of her husband, and her gotra henceforth is Biswamitra, not Bhardwaja.<sup>171</sup> Yajnavalkya suggests that a man who has completed his Vedic education should marry a woman who is auspicious, has not been defiled by relations with other men, is agreeable, not closely related (non-sapinda), younger, shorter, healthy, born in a different gotra and pravara (lineage), and is beyond the fifth and seventh degrees from the mother and father, respectively.<sup>172</sup>

The Mitakshara, in its commentary on this text, explains that a sapinda relationship arises when two individuals share a common body. Non-sapinda relationships, therefore, occur when individuals do not share a common body. The sapinda relationship is defined as directly or indirectly related through a common body. However, this definition may include relationships that should not be considered sapinda, so it's specified that the sapinda relationship ceases beyond the fifth degree in the mother's line and beyond the seventh degree in the father's line.<sup>173</sup>

The prohibition of marriages between close-blood relatives, which became stringent in later times, was not firmly established during the Vedic era.<sup>174</sup> The Vedas allowed certain marriages between near-blood relatives, such as maternal uncle's daughter or paternal aunt's daughter. There is a reference in the Nirukta that supports this practice.

Indra, come by easy paths to this sacrifice, accept my offering, the seasoned Vapa (meat) which is thy due as one's maternal uncle's or paternal aunt's daughter is his.<sup>175</sup>

In the Sathapatha Brahmana, it is mentioned that such marriages were permitted up to the third or fourth generation. "*In the third or fourth generation, we unite.*"

There were some legal implications of prohibited degrees in marriage. Violation of the rule of prohibited degrees impacts the legality of a marriage. Kulluka, in his commentary on verse 11, Chapter III from the Code of Manu, discusses the consequences of marrying within certain close relationships:

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. p. 229

<sup>172</sup> "Let a man, who has finished his studentship of the Vedas or sacred literature, espouse an auspicious woman who is not defiled by connection with another man, is agreeable, non-sapinda, younger in age, and shorter in stature, and free from disease, is born of a different gotra and pravara, and is beyond the fifth and the seventh degrees from the mother and the father (respectively)." See, Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 229

<sup>173</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at pp. 229-230

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. p. 209

<sup>175</sup> Nirukta, 14 A 31.

In this topic, in connection with marriage with sagotras, desertion has been ordained 'He who inadvertently marries a girl sprung from the same original stock (sagotra) and so forth, must support her, as a mother'; and penance has been ordained by the text 'If a man marries etc.'; consequently, together with her, girls related as mother's sapindas, do not become wives.<sup>176</sup>

According to the text, a man who unknowingly marries a girl from the same gotra must provide for her as he would for his mother. Penance is also prescribed in such cases. Mandlik points out that a woman married within these prohibited degrees cannot be the wife of the groom for any marital or religious purposes. She cannot be married to someone else and should be financially supported by the groom she initially married. Raghunandana cites a similar text from Sumantu to emphasize this point.

that a person should, after deserting father's sister's daughter, maternal uncle's daughter, a girl of the same gotra as the father and mother and also a girl with the same pravara as himself, whom he may have married, perform penance and maintain the girl.<sup>177</sup>

Certain close family relationships do not appear to be forbidden for marriage in Hindu tradition. For example, marrying your wife's sister, step-mother's sister, wife's sister's daughter, paternal uncle's wife's sister, and paternal uncle's wife's sister's daughter is not prohibited.<sup>178</sup> There are also moral guidelines, such as not marrying a girl with the same name as his mother or a girl older than him.<sup>179</sup>

#### **10. Dowries in the Ancient Indian Marriage System**

The concept of dowry in ancient India differed significantly from its contemporary understanding. In prehistoric India, it was the father of the bride who had the authority to demand a dowry, not the groom. The groom, in turn, benefited from the bride's services. Any request for additional money would have been deemed absurd. The early Indian societies were unfamiliar with the dowry system as it is recognized today.<sup>180</sup>

Weddings in ancient India witnessed wealthy and devoted families bestowing gifts upon their sons-in-law. Notably, royal brides mentioned in the Atharvaveda were known to bring substantial gifts, such as 100 cattle.<sup>181</sup> It highlights the tradition of expressing affection through valuable offerings from the bride's family. Draupadi,

---

<sup>176</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 234

<sup>177</sup> See Raghunandan's Udbahatattwa, in Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 235

<sup>178</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 235

<sup>179</sup> Yajnavalkya Samhita, I. 52.

<sup>180</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 83

<sup>181</sup> Ibid. pp. 82-83

Subhadra, and Uttara left their parents' home with horses, elephants, and precious stones.<sup>182</sup> In Raghuvamsha, when his sister Indumati marries and departs with her husband, the king of Vidarbha sends lavish gifts along with her.<sup>183</sup> These gifts were bestowed out of love, not as dowries. The dowry, a prenuptial contract between the bride's father and the groom or his guardian, is not mentioned in either the Smritis or any other Sanskrit literature.<sup>184</sup> In medieval Rajputana, the dowry system became an issue. Primarily it was prevalent among royal and noble families. The marriage market value of a blue-blooded<sup>185</sup> Rajput prince soared, making him a sought-after son-in-law.<sup>186</sup> However, this practice was not widespread in average families until the mid-19th century when the dowry system evolved into a scandalous phenomenon.<sup>187</sup>

Each of the eight forms of marriage has its own set of rituals and implications for gifts/ *danas*.<sup>188</sup> Among the ideal approved forms, the Brahma marriage emphasized parental sacrifice without incorporating dowries as an inherent component.<sup>189</sup> The Prajapatya marriage is closely related to the Brahma form. Traditionally the provision of ornaments and robes for the bride is involved in it, showcasing the high standards set by Vedic Aryans. Despite the degeneration of the system, the ideal is upheld valiantly by Hindu parents. They rarely partake in meals at the bride's expense. It underscores their commitment to preserving the sanctity of marriage.<sup>190</sup>

### 11. Her Roles in Marriage Rituals

In ancient India, particularly during the Vedic era, women occupied a notable position in marriage rituals. They were actively involved in the process, particularly in selecting their life partners.<sup>191</sup> Love marriages during the Vedic age were not uncommon. As a wife, she enjoyed a level of equality with men in religious matters. Although traditionally they held a subordinate role, women were recognized as joint owners of the household with their husbands.<sup>192</sup> Monogamy was the norm in ancient India, with few exceptions. Widows were not subjected to the practice of *Sati*, and

---

<sup>182</sup> Ibid. pp. 83-84

<sup>183</sup> Raghuvamsa, VII, 32.

<sup>184</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 83-84

<sup>185</sup> The term "blue blooded" refers to a person who has been born into a family belonging to the highest social class, typically associated with nobility or aristocracy.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid. p. 84

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. p. 85

<sup>188</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at pp. 209-210

<sup>189</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p.49-50; Upadhya, supra note 12, at p. 67

<sup>190</sup> Upadhya, supra note 12, at pp. 67-68

<sup>191</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 408

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. p. 408-409

they had the option to remarry if they chose to do so. However, in the later period their proprietary rights became restricted.<sup>193</sup>

As time progressed into the later Samhitas, Brahmanas and Upanisadas, the role of women in marriage rituals became more formalized and restricted. The age of marriage for girls decreased, leading to a decline in their active participation in religious ceremonies. The freedom women enjoyed during the Vedic Age slowly diminished during this period. Remarriage of widows became restricted, and the practice of Sati began to emerge.<sup>194</sup> Love marriages became rare, and girls had limited influence in choosing their life partners. Also, the period saw a declination of education opportunities for women. Many rituals that were once performed by wives were delegated to male substitutes.<sup>195</sup>

In later periods, marriage rituals became more extensive and complex. These additional elements laid the foundation for contemporary marriage ceremonies in Hinduism.<sup>196</sup> Despite these changes, the sacred and unbreakable nature of marriage persisted. Prohibitions against marriages between close blood relatives were not firmly established during this era. Certain unions up to the third or fourth generation were permitted.<sup>197</sup> It became more stringent over time.

Transitioning into the Smriti tradition (500 B.C. to 500 A.D.), the status of women declined significantly. Widow remarriage was prohibited, the Sati tradition reemerged, and polygamy became more prevalent. Smriti writers started directing unfair criticism and judgment at women. Society expected proper care for women but failed to address the challenges they faced.<sup>198</sup>

## 12. Post-Marital Positions of Women

### *Status of Wife in Relation to Husband*

The Vedic term “*dampati*” etymologically signifies the joint owners of the house, indicating their equal partnership and shared ownership of the household. In Vedic and epic society, wives were treated with utmost courtesy and regard, being considered the ornament of the house.<sup>199</sup> Home management was under the direct

---

<sup>193</sup> Ibid. p. 409

<sup>194</sup> Ibid. 411

<sup>195</sup> Ibid. 420-421

<sup>196</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 208

<sup>197</sup> Ibid. pp. 208, 209-210

<sup>198</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 437-439

<sup>199</sup> Rigveda, 1, 66. 3



charge of the wife, and her views were to prevail there.<sup>200</sup> The husband and wife were viewed as complements to each other.<sup>201</sup>

The wife had specific duties and obligations, including fidelity in her marriage vows and leading the life of an ideal “*pativrata*.” She was expected to strive for her husband’s happiness.<sup>202</sup> According to traditional beliefs, neither the father, mother, son, nor friend could provide for a woman what a husband could. The assistance a husband could offer was considered unlimited.<sup>203</sup> The real happiness of a woman was seen as centered in her husband.<sup>204</sup> If separated from her husband, she would desire neither pleasure, prosperity, nor heaven; she would prefer death to separation from him.<sup>205</sup>

In the Puranic tradition, the prescribed conduct for a housewife is explicitly outlined. She is expected to be open-hearted towards her husband, respectful to his siblings, devoted to his mother, affectionate towards her own family, considerate towards servants, amiable even to co-wives, courteous to her husband’s friends, and disdainful to his enemies. A wife fulfilling these duties is considered a true *pativrata*, embodying the sanctity of gods, sages, and holy places. Her mere presence sanctifies the world, absolving it of sins.<sup>206</sup>

In the Purana tradition, the relationship between a wife and husband is highly praised. The Brahma Purana emphasizes that a girl is not singularly praised but is regarded as a means to perform religious duties. Offering a well-ornamented chaste girl to a suitable bridegroom is deemed as significant as gifting the entire earth with all its mountains and forests.<sup>207</sup> According to Brahma, Vedic sacrifice could not be accomplished without the wife. He created the wife from half of himself.<sup>208</sup>

#### ***Question of Divorce and Remarriage of Women***

Hindu law prohibits divorce in general. It has been stated that in no way a wife can be released from her husband: “*neither by sale nor by repudiation is a wife released from her husband*”<sup>209</sup> While a wife can be forsaken due to conjugal infidelity, there is

---

<sup>200</sup> Atharva Veda, XIV, 1.43.

<sup>201</sup> Roy, supra note 50, at p. 187

<sup>202</sup> Mahabharata., XII. 144. 20

<sup>203</sup> Ramayana, II. 27. 6; II. 40. 3

<sup>204</sup> Ramayana, II. 37. 30

<sup>205</sup> Mahabharata, III. 297.53 in Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 94

<sup>206</sup> Brahmavaivarta Purana, 35. 119, 37

<sup>207</sup> Brahma Purana, 165, 9-11

<sup>208</sup> Brahma Purana, 161, 33-35

<sup>209</sup> Manu Samhita, IX, 46

no formal divorce process. According to Yajnavalkya, desertion does not necessarily imply banishment from the household. Instead, it pertains to the discontinuation of conjugal privileges and religious obligations.<sup>210</sup>

The prohibition of divorce in Hindu law can be attributed to the nature of the marriage relationship, which is seen as permanent during the joint lives of the husband and wife. According to Manu, cited earlier, a wife who is sold or repudiated by her husband can never become the legitimate wife of another, even if another person buys or receives her after she was repudiated.<sup>211</sup> It's important to note that even the apostasy of either party in a Hindu marriage does not automatically dissolve the marriage, and the rights and obligations of the husband and wife remain intact.<sup>212</sup>

However, a careful examination of the earlier dharmashastra literature reveals that divorces were permitted in some well-defined circumstances. Subject to certain conditions, Manu allowed a wife to abandon a husband who is impotent, insane, or suffering from an incurable or contagious disease.<sup>213</sup> The Atharvaveda describes a woman remarrying, presumably during the lifetime of her first husband, and prescribing a ritual to permanently unite her with her second husband in heaven.<sup>214</sup> Inevitable divorce followed her second marriage. According to the Dharmasutra authors (400 B.C. to 100 A.D.), a Brahmana wife should remain patient for five years during her husband's extended absence on a journey. This period is reduced by Kautilya to 10 months (III 4). If he does not return within that time and she is unwilling or unable to join him, she should consider him dead. The Arthashastra of Kautilya allows for second marriages upon court approval. Only regarding the waiting period, which never exceeds eight years, do jurists disagree.<sup>215</sup> Parashara's

---

<sup>210</sup> YajnavalkyaSamhita, I, 72

<sup>211</sup> Mitter, supra note 20, at p. 343

<sup>212</sup> Ibid. p. 322

<sup>213</sup> Manu Samhita, IX, 176

<sup>214</sup> Atharva Veda, IX, 5, 27-8

<sup>215</sup> Before marrying, a childless wife, whose husband is "hrasva-pravasin" should wait only for a year, but more than a year, if she is mother of children. She should wait twice as long if she be provided by her husband; if not, she is likely to be maintained by her relatives for 4 to 8 years after which she is allowed to remarry. If the husband is a Brahmana, studying abroad, his childless wife should wait for 10 years and mother of children, 12 years. The wife of a Kshatriya, however, is not allowed to remarry. But if she bears children to a Savarna husband in order to keep her race, she shall not be disgraced or degraded. Again, a Kumari engaged in any of the first four kinds of marriage must wait for 7 months for her husband who has gone abroad, but is heard of, provided his name is not published, otherwise, for one year. But in case the absent husband is not heard of, the wife shall wait for 5 months. The wife who receives the shulka from her absent husband who is not heard of, shall wait for 3 months, but 7 months, if he is heard of. But the wife who has received the whole amount of shulka shall wait for 5 months,

approval for a woman to remarry, in cases where her husband is impotent, a religious recluse, or boycotted, implies a form of divorce:

*“Naste mrite pravrajite klive ca patite patau  
Pancasu apatsu narinam patiranyo vidhiyate.”*

In [case of] the disappearance or death or renunciation or impotence or lost caste status of her husband: in these five predicaments, a woman is allowed to take another husband.<sup>216</sup>

Kautilya provides detailed divorce rules for incompatible couples. If a couple loathed one another, Kautilya advised divorce. If a man filed for divorce out of fear of his wife, he was required to return all wedding gifts. If the wife complained, she was required to relinquish her rights to her husband's family. However, divorce was not permitted if the marriage was conducted using one of the four approved forms.<sup>217</sup>

However, only a small number of divorces were recorded, and Buddhist literature indicates that divorce was uncommon in a cultured society. In Kanhadipayana Jataka (No. 444), a woman tells her husband that she never loved him, but she did not remarry because it was against the family tradition. Due to the prevalence of divorce among the lower classes, women from the upper class were hesitant to resort to it.<sup>218</sup>

In the 5th century BCE, asceticism swept Hindu society. It led society to believe a woman could be married only once. Due to marital dissatisfaction, divorce and remarriage became grossly sensual. Thus, society held that a wife could not divorce her husband, even if he was a wreck or mistreated her.<sup>219</sup> Nevertheless, only upper-class Hindus ceased divorcing. Sudrakamalakara of the seventeenth century authorised it for sudras and other lower castes. Midway through the 20th century, Gujarati caste panchayats divorced. Initially, the Bombay High Court acknowledged this right, but it was later declared invalid because it violated Hindu law. However, low-class divorces are straightforward to obtain.<sup>220</sup>

In ancient India, widow remarriage was accepted and prevalent among different classes.<sup>221</sup> However, over time, there was a shift towards resistance, with some texts emphasizing celibacy and discouraging remarriage for women. In the Smriti

---

and 10 months, if the husband is heard of. Further, a woman whose husband is dead is also allowed to remarry. See, Das, Sudhirranjan. “The Position of Women in Kautilya's Arthashastra,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 3 (1939), pp. 537–63

<sup>216</sup> Parasara Samhita, IV, 28.

<sup>217</sup> Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, III, Chap. 3.

<sup>218</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 100-101

<sup>219</sup> Ibid. pp. 101-102

<sup>220</sup> Altekar, supra note 8, at p. 102

<sup>221</sup> Ibid. pp. 151-153

tradition, different categories of 'punarbhus' were delineated, highlighting the changing attitudes towards remarriage.<sup>222</sup> Various texts reflect divergent perspectives on widow remarriage. While some scholars disallowed it, others permitted it under specific circumstances, such as the husband being untraceable, deceased, or unfit for procreation.<sup>223</sup> The changing laws and societal norms led to a significant development in allowing Hindu widows to remarry.

### 13. Conclusion

In revisiting Hindu marriage norms through the lens of women's agency in ancient India, a rich tapestry of cultural, social, and historical dynamics emerges, shaping matrimonial practices and gender relations. From the conceptualisation of marriage to the post-marital positions of women, each aspect reveals intricate nuances of women's roles, rights and agency within the institution of marriage.

Women's agency within ancient Indian marriage systems fluctuated according to the prevailing time periods and cultural contexts, showcasing significant variations. In prehistoric times, there were traces of promiscuity and marriage was not common.<sup>224</sup> However, over time, marriage became established as a social institution, with women playing an integral role in the process. During the Vedic period, women had relatively more agency in choosing their life partners, and love marriages were not uncommon. They also participated in religious rituals and had equality with men in religious matters.<sup>225</sup> However, as time went on and rituals became more complex, the age of marriage for girls decreased, leading to a decline in their active participation in religious ceremonies.<sup>226</sup>

In the Vedic era, women enjoyed significant autonomy in selecting their husbands.<sup>227</sup> They were able to make independent choices based on personal preferences and charms, regardless of parental influence. This freedom extended to pursuits of love and separation, reflecting liberal attitudes towards relationships.<sup>228</sup> However, social shifts led to a more structured approach to marriage, with later texts advocating for marriages based on seniority, initially met with resistance.<sup>229</sup> Despite evolving norms, inter-caste marriages were common, showcasing the freedom of individuals to form

---

<sup>222</sup> Vasishtha Dharmasutra, 17. 19; Vishnu Dharmasutra, 15, 8-9; Manu Samhita IX, 176; Narada Smriti (Stripumsa). V. 45.

<sup>223</sup> Parashar Smriti, Chapter IV; Narada Samhita, XII, 97

<sup>224</sup> Altekhar, supra note 8, at p. 34

<sup>225</sup> Ibid. p. 408

<sup>226</sup> Ibid. pp. 418-419

<sup>227</sup> Rigveda, X, 27, 12

<sup>228</sup> Upadhya, supra note 12, at p. 188

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. pp. 54-55

connections across social boundaries.<sup>230</sup> While the tradition of maidens choosing partners with guidance persisted, societal expectations around marriage gradually transformed over time.<sup>231</sup>

The Vedic girls used to receive education similar to boys, could become distinguished poetesses.<sup>232</sup> They enjoyed the freedom to participate actively in society and religious gatherings.<sup>233</sup> Despite their subordinate role, they were recognized as joint owners of the household. Monogamy was the norm, and widows had the option to remarry.<sup>234</sup> The rarity of dowry in antiquity underscores the moral value placed on women and the dignity of marriage. The practice of giving away wealth, including gold, cattle, chariots, and horses, alongside the bride, was common and facilitated the search for a suitable husband.<sup>235</sup> The selling of daughters in the name of marriage was unambiguously denounced in ancient India. Religious figures, legal scholars, and social thinkers, everybody raised their voices against it. They aimed to establish marriage practices grounded in principles of dignity, honour, and adherence to Dharmashastra traditions.

In the Purana tradition, some aspects of women's status improved. While religious and philosophical education became limited, women's strong religious devotion led to the emergence of religious literature. Women played a crucial role in preserving and shaping religious rituals. They also acquired cultural and traditional wisdom through Puranic narratives.<sup>236</sup> However, the period also witnessed the rise of the *Purdah* (veiling) custom in certain royal families.<sup>237</sup>

Although women were recognised as joint owners of the household with their husbands in terms of family structure, they often held subordinate roles.<sup>238</sup> The notion of wives being their husband's property persisted, but there were exceptions where the husband-wife relationship was viewed as joint ownership of family property.<sup>239</sup> Additionally, some texts challenge the traditional view of women being treated as property and lack of proprietary capacities in early Hindu law, suggesting a different perspective on women's rights.<sup>240</sup>

---

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. p. 55-56

<sup>231</sup> Ibid. p. 46

<sup>232</sup> Altekar, *supra* note 8, at pp. 408-409

<sup>233</sup> Ibid. pp. 406-408

<sup>234</sup> Ibid. p. 409

<sup>235</sup> Upadhyaya, *supra* note 12, at p. 67

<sup>236</sup> Altekar, *supra* note 8, at p. 433-434

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. pp. 434-435

<sup>238</sup> Ibid. p. 409

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. p. 255

<sup>240</sup> Mitter, *supra* note 20, at p. 57

Critical analysis of women's positions in marriage affairs across different periods reveals a dynamic and evolving landscape. During the Vedic Age, women experienced a relatively better status. They enjoyed equal education and freely participated in social events. They had the freedom to choose their partners. However, as time progressed, especially in the Smriti tradition, their position declined with restrictions.<sup>241</sup> Several interrelated factors can be attributed to the decline in women's participation. Firstly, women were systematically excluded from Vedic education and religious duties, which greatly diminished their active involvement in rituals.<sup>242</sup> Secondly, the absence of sacred initiation ceremonies for girls, coupled with prevalent practices of early marriage and neglect of female education, contributed to a decline in women's active participation.<sup>243</sup> Moreover, shifting social attitudes towards women over time, accompanied by foreign influences and invasions, further marginalized their role.<sup>244</sup> Additionally, cultural changes such as the adoption of purdah (veiling), the prohibition of widow remarriage, the resurgence of the Sati tradition, and the prevalence of polygamy all played a role in diminishing women's involvement.<sup>245</sup> These practices reinforced patriarchal norms that relegated women to subordinate roles. This exclusion served to reinforce social beliefs about women's inferiority and restricted their opportunities for meaningful participation in religious life.

In the context of the ongoing personal law reform debates in Bangladesh, it is crucial to consider whether we can draw upon our past for insights into gender equality and women's active participation in matrimonial affairs. Hopefully, rediscovering our historically gender-friendly past can guide us towards establishing a gender-friendly modern Hindu society in Bangladesh.

---

<sup>241</sup> Altekar, *supra* note 8, at pp. 415-416, 436-437

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 418-419

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 420-421

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 435

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 437-438

## **Intersecting Identities, Gender and Health: A Mapping of Adolescent Health Challenges in Bangladesh\***

Tasnim Nowshin Fariha<sup>1</sup> and Ayesha Banu<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

This article discusses the importance of adolescent health and wellbeing for realising the dreams of future Bangladesh. Using data from secondary sources, the paper provides an overview of the challenges faced by adolescents with a focus on gender and intersectionality. Adolescents have unique health needs that are often neglected, and gender norms and values play a significant role in shaping access to resources and opportunities, eventually affecting the physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health of males and females differently. The contemporary world becomes constrained for girls and they face additional health risks due to child marriage, childbirth, reduced contraception usage, gender-based violence, malnutrition, household and care giving responsibilities. On contrary, the world tends to open up for boys making them vulnerable to health risks like child labour, occupational injuries, physical violence, substance abuse, and suicide. Furthermore, the marginalised groups of adolescents including sexually diverse groups, children of sex workers, street children, orphans, disabled individuals, coastal and indigenous inhabitants face multiple layers of discrimination and health inequalities due to their geographical, socio-economic, gender and sexual identities. All of these diversities need to be taken into account while designing policies for addressing the specific health needs of different groups. Their health needs should be incorporated from a

---

\* This article is inspired by an earlier manuscript which was developed for Chapter Six “Dreams of Adolescents” of the Bangladesh National Human Development Report (BNHDR), 2021 of Bangladesh by Nazneen Ahmed and Ayesha Banu. This paper has picked up the thread from BNHDR chapter with particular focus on gender, health and wellbeing of the adolescents based on expanded research and exploration. The authors would like to express their gratitude to Nawshin Tabassum (Graduate Student, Analysis and Design of Social Protection Systems, Bonn Rhein Sieg University of Applied Sciences, Germany), Mashrur Arafin Ayon (Researcher, South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance, North South University), Neela Akter (Credential, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka), and Sanzana Tabassum Hridita (Executive, Research and Meal at Development Research Network, Bangladesh) for their contributions with secondary data collection at the initial stage of the manuscript writing.

<sup>1</sup> Researcher, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. E-mail: [tasnimnowshin82@gmail.com](mailto:tasnimnowshin82@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka. E-mail: [a.banu@du.ac.bd](mailto:a.banu@du.ac.bd)

more holistic and broader perspective, using both gender and intersectional lens. This paper emphasises the necessity to include the perspectives and voices of diverse adolescent groups in policymaking to ensure appropriate and effective solutions.

**Key words:** Bangladesh, adolescents, gender, physical health, mental health, sexual health, voice, agency.

## 1 Introduction

Adolescence can be defined as a phase of socialisation process and a period of human development that take place between childhood and adulthood. It is considered as one of the most critical stages of human life involving multi-dimensional changes such as biological, psychological, mental and social triggering new pressures and challenges. Pubertal changes and changes in brain structure take place as a part of biological change. Adolescents' cognitive capacities mature along with the development of critical thinking skills as a part of their psychological and mental change. They also encounter social changes due to the transitions in their responsibilities and the multiple roles adolescents are expected to play in different spheres including family, community and school.<sup>3</sup> These changes take place simultaneously but at a different pace for each adolescent based on gender identity, educational background, socio-economic conditions, and exposure to other structural and environmental factors.<sup>4</sup> The transitioning period from childhood to adulthood also marks a phase of increased autonomy and independent decision-making that influence an individual's health-related behaviour in the long run.

The global adolescent population stands at more than 1.3 billion constituting 18% of the total world population, most of whom live in the Global South<sup>5</sup> including Bangladesh. Around 36 million adolescents live in Bangladesh, which account for 20 percent of the country's total population.<sup>6</sup> This huge bulk of young population represents a demographic window of opportunities. However, adolescents can contribute to the development of a country only if they are well harnessed and invested in. Turning adolescent population into human resource through ensuring their health and well-being is the pre-requisite for realising the benefits of

---

<sup>3</sup> N. Jaworska and G. MacQueen, "Adolescence as a Unique Developmental Period", *J Psychiatry Neurosci*, Vol. 40 (September), 2015, pp. 291-293

<sup>4</sup> N. Jones *et. al.*, "Intersecting Inequalities, Gender and Adolescent Health in Ethiopia", *International Journal for Equity in Health*, Vol. 19, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> *Adolescent Data Portal*, (UNICEF 2023)

<sup>6</sup> A. Sigma *et. al.*, *Adolescents in Bangladesh: A Situation Analysis of Programmatic Approaches to Sexual and Reproductive Health Education and Services*, (Population Council 2017)



demographic dividend. In line with it, this paper specifically addresses the issue of adolescent health challenges in Bangladesh. This area requires special attention in the arenas of both research and policy since adolescents are particularly vulnerable to health risks encompassing areas of physical, sexual, reproductive and mental health.

The reality, however, is that adolescents remain an unexplored area, often neglected, silenced and pushed back into oblivion as a problematic entity from the mega national, social and cultural discourse. Adolescence, as a stage of life develops and moves on without proper attention. In Bangladesh, adolescents remain one of the under-served priority targets under existing health programmes.<sup>7</sup> Through the inclusion of Sustainable Development Goals and Vision 2041, the government undertook a range of policies targeting adolescent health i.e. National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030),<sup>8</sup> but the agenda remains far from complete. The mainstream policies lack intersectional understanding on health issues and mostly focus on the health problems of married adolescents, limited to their maternal health or menstrual hygiene practices. The existing policies overlook important issues including healthy lifestyles, substance abuse, violence and injury prevention and most importantly mental health and well-being.<sup>9</sup> The picture, however, is not all bleak. Over the past decades, Bangladesh has shown achievements in numerous health indicators including adolescent mortality, malnutrition, and communicable diseases.<sup>10</sup> The gains have not been equal for all. The specific health needs of marginalised adolescent groups have remained neglected including adolescents living in streets, informal settlements, coastal belts, brothels, detention centers or the ones working under hazardous conditions.<sup>11</sup>

More precisely, girls in Bangladesh remain starkly disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts in every adolescent cohort. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS 2011)<sup>12</sup> estimated the country having 14.4 million girls and 15.1 million boys. The

---

<sup>7</sup> T. A. Chowdhury, "Adolescent Health in Bangladesh", *Journal of Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons*, Vol. 33 (January), 2015, pp. 01-02

<sup>8</sup> *Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2016)

<sup>9</sup> A. Williams *et al.*, "What We Know and Don't Know: A Mapping Review of Available Evidence, and Evidence Gaps, on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health in Bangladesh", *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 29, 2022

<sup>10</sup> T. Sultana, "Present Health Status in Bangladesh: Challenges and Achievements", *Journal of Economics and Business*, Vol. 2 (November), 2019

<sup>11</sup> J. Dejaeghere and S. K. Lee, "What Matters for Marginalised Girls and Boys in Bangladesh: A Capabilities Approach for Understanding Educational Well-Being and Empowerment", *Research in Comparative and International Education*, Vol. 6 (January), 2011, pp. 27-42

<sup>12</sup> *Bangladesh Population and Housing Survey 2011*, (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2015)

proportion of both male and female populations who make it to the age bracket of 15-19 from 10-14 has increased in Bangladesh. However, the proportion is higher among boys than girls that clearly indicates the existing gender gaps in health and well-being among the adolescents.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (2022) hints at a striking gender gap for the age cohorts of 10-14 and 15-19. Both the cohorts constitute more number of boys than girls, and the gap widens during late adolescence (aged 15-19).<sup>14</sup> This large under-enumeration of young women in comparison to their male counterpart has been termed as “missing female youth”<sup>15</sup> and it reveals some serious social biases against this gender and age group which is likely to affect appropriate policies and provisions for young women's health services. Gender disparity thus becomes crucial to scrutinising the cohort of adolescent population in Bangladesh. It is important to analyse the unequal gender norms and roles for a better understanding of how the socially constructed identities and gender power relations exacerbate the health related risks, behaviour and outcomes for women in different age and social groups. It is essential that the matter of inequitable expectation in behavioral pattern and roles of male and female adolescents is addressed to understand the societal view of the power relations between the genders, the health risks they face and how they seek remedies to those risks, and its consequences on different genders across age and social groups.

Adolescents are a distinct group in the society and display major differences compared to other groups like children and adults. Despite such concerns, adolescents often get cornered or neglected as a population group in health research, being either generalised with younger children or with young adults.<sup>16</sup> Existing academic literature also treats adolescents as a homogenous group with paying inadequate attention to the inequalities related to socioeconomic status, age, gender, ethnicity, place of residence or disability among this group.<sup>17</sup> Against this backdrop,

---

<sup>13</sup> This paper has drawn statistics from the previous census of 2011. According to the census of 2022, male population was higher for the age group of 10-14. While, for the next age cohort (15-19), female population has been reported to be higher than male population. The paper preferred not to use the latest census data due to the controversial questions raised against its authenticity

<sup>14</sup> *Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics: Key Findings (2022)*, (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Statistics and Information Division, Ministry of Planning)

<sup>15</sup> R. I. Rahman, *Demographic Dividend and Youth Labour Force Participation in Bangladesh*, (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies 2014)

<sup>16</sup> M. Stelin, *Thinking about Adolescent neglect A Review of Research on Adolescent Neglect Focusing on Identification, Assessment and Intervention*, (University of York 2018)

<sup>17</sup> J. Dejaeghere and S. K. Lee, “What Matters for Marginalised Girls and Boys in Bangladesh: A Capabilities Approach for Understanding Educational Well-Being and

this paper offers an overview of adolescent health status and challenges in Bangladesh by applying both gender and intersectional lens.<sup>18</sup>

## 2 Who are the ‘Adolescents’?

Defining the age of adolescence has long posed a conundrum. There is no universally accepted definition of adolescence, it varies from culture to culture and changes across time. The definition provided by United Nations is widely accepted, setting the age range of 10-19 years for defining adolescents. Alike their parent organisation, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) and WHO (World Health Organisation) also adhere to the same age range (10-19) for defining adolescents. UNCRC (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child) identifies anyone under the age of 18 as children. The transitional phase of adolescence is further divided into two developmental stages; (i) early adolescence (10-14 years) and (ii) late adolescence (15-19 years).<sup>19</sup>

In Bangladesh, the age of adolescents has been a subject to huge debate over the decades. The state documents refer to different age bars to define adolescents/children<sup>20</sup> depending on the context of laws/policies, leading to immense confusions and ambiguities.<sup>21</sup> The Majority Act (1875) has laid down the age of maturity at 18. The Suppression of Women and Children Act (2000) lowers the bar and identifies anyone under the age of 16 as a child. Bangladesh Penal Code (1860) and Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) also lower the age bars to define children based on specific contexts. Bangladesh National Child Policy (2011) defines every citizen under the age of 18 as a child and specify the age range of 14-18 for adolescents. The Children Act (2013) sets forward that anyone before reaching the age of 18 should be treated as a child. Under the provisions of Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017), men reach adulthood at the age of 21 and women at the age of 18.<sup>22</sup> Historically, the laws and policies have been using different age bars to define the term “adolescents”.

---

Empowerment”, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, Vol. 6 (January), 2011, pp. 27-42.

<sup>18</sup> Intersectional lens enables us to recognise the fact that membership in a particular group can make people vulnerable to various forms of oppression. Because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience oppression.

<sup>19</sup> “Age Limits and Adolescents”, *Paediatrics & Child Health*, Vol. 8 (November), 2003.

<sup>20</sup> In some occasions, the terms ‘children’ and ‘adolescents’ have been used interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>21</sup> S. R. Nath, *Adolescents and Youths in Bangladesh: Some Selected Issues*, (BRAC 2006)

<sup>22</sup> A. Banu, and N. Ahmed, *Dreams of Adolescents, Bangladesh National Human Development Report*, (Ministry of Finance 2021)

Following the National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030) and WHO's framework, this paper defines individuals aged 10-19 as adolescents with the age cohort of 10-14 as early adolescents and the age cohort of 15-19 as late adolescents.

### **3 Methodological Issues**

As it was mentioned earlier that the paper emanated from the Chapter on “Dreams of Adolescents” in BNHDR, 2021,<sup>23</sup> but this paper went beyond and looked into issues which could not be accommodated in the report due to scope limitation. BNHDR addressed the health issues of adolescents from a more conventional approach, broadly in areas of physical, mental, and reproductive health. Our paper departed from the preceding report with an expanded focus on sexual health. It captured how sexuality issues and sexual practices affect adolescent health, the topics often considered as controversial and difficult to be addressed in a traditional society. The discussions of BNHDR was confined to the gender based health inequalities while our paper has adapted a broader and more intersectional approach. We elaborated how unequal social and gender norms at both public and private spheres shape the health ramifications for adolescents. Furthermore, we explored how multiple horizons of vulnerabilities intersect each other leading towards various levels of victimhood and health inequalities.

The paper was written based on data derived from secondary sources, focusing on both qualitative as well as quantitative studies. Extensive data was collected through governmental, non-governmental, and independent sources. Journal articles, government reports, research papers, newspaper articles, reports from various NGOs including Interweb resources and websites were analysed through a gender and intersectional lens. Quantitative studies and statistical data were helpful to understand the broader picture and overall trends and patterns of adolescent health in Bangladesh. However, they often seemed inadequate to explain and understand how socio-cultural dimensions, intra-household power dynamics, and personal choices shape the nexus of gender, intersectional identities, and health outcomes. Adolescent health related disparities are deeply rooted in social and cultural factors embedded in values, norms, sanctions and barriers, and these are not always reflected in quantitative macro-data alone. Capturing these critical issues, which are often unquantifiable, required us to review qualitative studies, narratives, and insights. Qualitative studies, although not representative and often difficult to reach a generalized conclusion, were crucial in revealing multiple layers of inequalities

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

otherwise blurred in macro-data. They allowed exploration of new issues and horizons beyond numbers and facts.

Writing about adolescents however was not easy. It soon became apparent that our knowledge of adolescents was quite limited. Our own adolescence, no matter how glowing and/or traumatic it seemed are often muted, sometimes to be painted rosy and radiant, shifted further away from the reality. How many of us have truly tried to delve into the lives of adolescents with all its trauma and triumph, dreams and disappointments as experienced across class, gender, sex, location and other diverse situations? How far is it justified to write about them without really listening to their voices? We again are limited by focusing on health issues only while adolescent's wellbeing like any other issues in our lives are shaped and molded by myriads of factors which are all linked in a web of entangled reality. We remain humble and inadequate in attempting to fathom the landscape of this deep, dark and unknown terrain through secondary data only. Hope this meagre attempt will open up windows for further research based on primary data, which will carve out spaces for the adolescents to raise their voices in their own terms.

#### **4 Impact of Gender Norms and Values on Adolescent's Health**

Adolescence is a period that fosters personal growth towards adulthood. It is a transitional period in which social expectations and conventions create a greater impact on what young people do and are expected to do. As children enter into adolescence, they enter into a different set of roles and expectations as a result of the manifestations of their sexual maturity. One's nature of engagement with peers and the outside world changes during puberty which influences the values and aspirations they carry into adulthood.<sup>24</sup> Gender norms which start to influence adolescent trajectories and influence many life-altering decisions in adolescence and beyond are central to those values. Gender norms are the unspoken rules of society that establish what qualities and actions are regarded favorable for men, women and other gender minorities.<sup>25</sup> The distribution of power and resources, both inside and outside the home, as well as the formal and informal sociocultural institutions embedded in a patriarchal society impact on adolescent health, wellbeing, their educational and employment opportunities across gender categories.

Romanticising adolescence as the most crucial period of life's journey is not unproblematic across diverse categories of adolescents. Adolescents are frequently

---

<sup>24</sup> R. W. Blum *et. al.*, "It Begins at 10: How Gender Expectations Shape Early Adolescence Around the World", *J. Adolesc Health*, Vol. 4 (October), 2017, pp. S3-S4.

<sup>25</sup> B. Barnett, "Gender Norms Affect Adolescents", *Network (Research Triangle Park, N.C.)*, Vol. 17, 1997, pp. 10-13

misunderstood by the society as troublesome (*balai*/ বালাই in Bangla),<sup>26</sup> a misfit who does not belong to either world of children or adults. Particularly male adolescents are often judged as being arrogant, unruly, hooligans, rough and insolent, easily criminalised, to be controlled, avoided, or tortured, and careless disregard towards their particular physical and mental needs remain a reality in Bangladesh, as it does in many other countries. Due to gender norms that prioritise girls' sexual and reproductive capacity at the expense of their education, agency, and talents, this period of life can be much more problematic for girls and have life-threatening ramifications for future generations.<sup>27</sup>

Adolescent girls in low- and middle-income countries, like Bangladesh, may be especially vulnerable to the endorsement of gender stereotypes. A girl might not have a say in the major life decisions due to unfair gender norms. The world of girls frequently becomes more constrained during the early adolescent years when they are forced to leave behind their comparably carefree childhood in order to pursue the norms of adult womanhood. It often places a focus on household and caregiving duties which usually lead to school dropouts, restriction of female sexuality, child marriage, childbirth, reduced contraception usage, violence against women/girls, malnutrition, neglect, rape, and suicide.<sup>28</sup> These gendered expectations have a significant impact on girls' health and development which persists throughout adulthood and to the following generation. Unequal gender norms are associated with a number of negative health consequences including maternal death, infant and/or child mortality, inadequate child nutrition and other outcomes.<sup>29</sup>

Contrarily, throughout the early stages of puberty, the world tends to open up for boys but this comes with a price. The extroverted personalities of young boys make them more likely to engage in risky criminal activity. They experience physical violence, die in car accidents, suffer injuries or homicide, engage in interpersonal violence, use drugs, and commit suicide.<sup>30</sup> Male gender norms are characterised by a need to prove their masculinity through dominating women and other minority

---

<sup>26</sup> R. Tagore, *Chhuti (Bangla) Homecoming, in Golpo Guccho (Bangla): A Collection of bengali short stories*, (Edition Next 2015).

<sup>27</sup> H. B. Shakya *et. al.*, "Adolescent Gender Norms and Adult Health Outcomes in the USA: A Prospective Cohort Study", *The Lancet*, Vol. 3, 2019, pp. 529-38

<sup>28</sup> C. Harper *et. al.*, *Empowering Adolescent Girls in Developing Countries: Gender Justice and Norm Change*, (Routledge 2018).

<sup>29</sup> M. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*, (Harvard University Press 2011).

<sup>30</sup> L. Puma, *Gender Violence in Poverty Contexts: The Educational Challenge*, (Routledge 2015)

groups, likely to trigger a range of health hazards for men related to injury, violence, and substance use.<sup>31</sup> These normative discourses about adolescent boys encourage them to engage in criminal activities namely “Kishore gangs”,<sup>32</sup> or suffer from low self-esteem. Male adolescents have a far higher frequency of physical disability than female adolescents, mostly because they are more exposed to the outside world and frequently work in dangerous or physically taxing child labor which increases their risk of occupational injuries.<sup>33</sup>

Although girls tend to have higher rates of adolescent self-harm and suicide tendencies, young men typically have higher rates of suicide deaths. Young men are nearly universally more likely to have substance use problems and dangers associated with alcohol, cigarette, and illegal drug use. Boys die earlier than girls from mid-adolescence onwards, yet, girls and women often have higher levels of health-related impairment and lower subjective well-being.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most prevalent outcomes of gender inequalities on the lives of adolescent girls is the unfair share of food and resource allocation at household level. In a patriarchal society, a household having enough grains does not necessarily ensure everyone’s equal access to food and nutrition.<sup>35</sup> Women and girls are the first ones to be left out of this list. Patriarchal values encourage parents to invest more on raising boys than girls. Boys are expected to fulfil family responsibilities while girls would be married off into other households.<sup>36</sup> The unequal distribution of food, access to health and nutrition, and access to education are only a few examples of the intra-household inequities between boys and girls that are brought on by this prejudiced assumption. Making concessions in relation to food distribution and consumption is

---

<sup>31</sup> T. S. Betancourt *et. al.*, “Past Horrors, Present Struggles: The Role of Stigma in the Association between War Experience and Psychological Adjustment among Former Child Soldiers in Sierra Leone”, *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 7, 2010, pp. 17-26.

<sup>32</sup> A. A. Mamun, “Kishor (Youth) Gang Culture: A Threat to the Erosion of Social Values”, *International Journals of Progressive Science and Technologies*, Vol. 23, 2020, pp. 224-229; Adolescent gangs who engage in criminal activities such as gang murder, gang robbery or gang rape.

<sup>33</sup> R. W. Blum *et. al.*, “It Begins at 10: How Gender Expectations Shape Early Adolescence Around the World”, *J Adolesc Health*, Vol. 4 (October), 2017, pp. S3-S4.

<sup>34</sup> R. G. Levitov *et. al.*, “Pathways to Gender-equitable Men: Findings from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey in Eight counties”, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 17, 2014, pp. 1-35.

<sup>35</sup> A. Banu, *Human Development, Disparity and Vulnerability: Women in South Asia*, (UNDP 2016)

<sup>36</sup> M. A. Razzaque & A. Ahsanuzzaman, “Intrahousehold Resource Allocation and Women’s Bargaining Power: New Evidence from Bangladesh”, *SSRN*.

another aspect of female socialisation. Many adolescent girls, married and unmarried, have absorbed the altruistic gender norms to sacrifice food for their fathers, siblings, and husbands.<sup>37</sup> Factors such as birth order, the number of female children, and family size have an impact on how highly valued women are, further highlighting how discrimination against girls is changing.<sup>38</sup> The preference for sons is waning in Bangladesh as more and more parents believe that daughters will provide them with more security as they age<sup>39</sup> but this is yet to be reflected in the lives of girls ('*konnya shishu*' in Bangla) and female adolescents ('*Kishori*' in Bangla) real life opportunities and transformative changes. Despite many changes, the girls and female young adults are still encouraged to internalise the gender norms of being a wife, a mother and looking after their home and hearth as their primary responsibilities. While the young males are systematically picking up the masculine roles as expected of them. Gender norms and values thus significantly affect the entire spectrum of physical, mental and reproductive health of the adolescents of Bangladesh.

## 5 Physical Health

Adolescence brings about a change in the physical health of a person which sees quick changes in body functions, sexual, neurological changes as well changes in behaviour<sup>40</sup> which is again shaped by the social and cultural settings. For girls, the prevalent traditional roles that they are expected to fulfil in the family imposes heavy burden on their physique,<sup>41</sup> e.g. daily household duties like collecting water and firewood or caring for the younger children etc.<sup>42</sup> That being the case, girls in lower income countries naturally have poorer nutritional profiles given that the adolescents need more nutrient intake than adults.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> L. Erin, "Complicating Narratives on Women's Food and Nutrition Insecurity: Domestic Violence in Rural Area", *Elsevier*, Vol. 104, 2018, pp. 271-280.

<sup>38</sup> R. W. Blum *et al.*, "Using a Gender Lens to Understand Eating Behaviour of Adolescent Females Living in Low Income Households in Bangladesh", *Maternal and Child Nutrition*, Vol. 15, 2019, pp. 1-13.

<sup>39</sup> N. Kabeer *et al.*, "Diverging Stories of 'Missing Women' in South Asia: Is Son Preference Weakening in Bangladesh?", *Feminist Economics*, Vol. 20, 2014, pp. 138-163.

<sup>40</sup> J. K., Das *et al.*, "Nutrition in Adolescents: Physiology, Metabolism, Nutrition Needs", *Annals of New York Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 1393, 2017, pp. 21-33.

<sup>41</sup> R. Oniang'o, and M. Mukudi, *Nutrition and Gender*, (Nutrition: A Foundation for Development 2002)

<sup>42</sup> C M. Blackden, and Q. Wodon., *Gender, Time Use and Poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (World Bank 2006)

<sup>43</sup> R. Caleyachetty *et al.*, "The Double Burden of Malnutrition among Adolescents: Analysis of Data from the Global School-based Student Health and Health Behavior in School-aged



In Bangladesh, girls suffer from alarmingly lower nutrition than their male counterpart, and two factors contribute to this state, namely – poor diets and bearing child at early age. The latest adolescent health and wellbeing survey (2019-20) reported one-third of female adolescents as physically stunted compared to one-fifth of their male counterparts.<sup>44</sup> Impaired growth in adolescents is 36 percent while the body mass index (BMI) is 50 percent.<sup>45</sup> Between 25–27% adolescent is anemic and 30% in the age group of 14-18 suffer from iron deficiency. While the number of adolescents suffering from zinc deficiency is unknown nearly half i.e. 47-54% are deficient in Vitamin A. Expectant women and breastfeeding mothers have insufficient caloric intake by about 60% or over, impacting on the fetus and resulting in malnourished-born babies.<sup>46</sup>

Higher undernourishment produces higher number of under-weight female adolescents. A consequence of undernourishment is enhanced likelihood of illness and death, poor mental development resulting in reduced productivity.<sup>47</sup> In Bangladesh, prevalence of underweight adolescent girls also is high – in as much as 33 percent of them are thin and of them 11 percent is severely or moderately thin. Notably, adolescent girls from low-income families living in urban areas have more severe thinness than girls living in rural areas and are more so in their early life.<sup>48</sup> Besides, more number of unmarried than married adolescent girls suffer from under-nutrition.<sup>49</sup> Nutritional deficiency is also contingent on one's geographical location, like hill areas, vulnerable zones in terms of food deficit, flood, river erosion, other natural disasters or pandemic like COVID-19.<sup>50</sup>

---

Children Surveys in 57 Low- and Middle-Income Countries", *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, Vol. 108 (August), 2018, pp. 414-424.

<sup>44</sup> *Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (2019-20)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021)

<sup>45</sup> S. Ahmad *et al.*, "Nutritional Status of Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh: Findings of a Community based Survey", *American Journal of Public Health Research*, Vol. 8 (July), 2020. pp. 122-124

<sup>46</sup> S. Ahmad *et al.*, "Nutritional Status of Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh: Findings of a Community based Survey", *American Journal of Public Health Research*, Vol. 8 (July), 2020. pp. 122-124

<sup>47</sup> M. Blössner and M. Onis, *Malnutrition: Quantifying the Health Impact at National and Local Level*, (WHO 2005)

<sup>48</sup> S. Ahmad *et al.*, "Nutritional Status of Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh: Findings of a Community based Survey", *American Journal of Public Health Research*, Vol. 8 (July), 2020. pp. 122-124

<sup>49</sup> *Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (2019-20)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021)

<sup>50</sup> *Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2016)

Another evolving area of concern is the increasing number of obese and overweight adolescents. In an epidemiological study carried countrywide it was revealed that the percentage of childhood overweight and obesity is 9.5 and 3.5 percent respectively.<sup>51</sup> Around 16% of adolescent girls are reportedly overweight compared to 9% of adolescent boys.<sup>52</sup> The causes contributing to this are speedy urbanisation, socio-economic development, changes in the way of living made pronounced by lack of physical activities, shrinking space for outdoor games, easy access to new technological devices and quick demographic and epidemiological changeover.<sup>53</sup> Obesity is a class issue since its prevalence is higher among urban adolescents, mostly among girls from middle and higher socio-economic groups.<sup>54</sup> In developing nations, malnutrition and caesarean delivery exert considerable influence in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in children and adolescents.<sup>55</sup> From the above discussions, it is evident that urban adolescent girls at the same time occupy the highest rates of both over and undernutrition. A raft of issues dictates the differences in the nutritional status, and those could be the different conditions of domestic economy, intra-family disparate gender norms, assumption related to girls needing less calorie, lack of mobility and physical exercise, quantity and quality of diet and access to healthcare and nutrition services, disease burden, lack of awareness of the long-term costs of undernutrition of adolescents, and being deprived from the process of household decision making.

Nevertheless, the situation is not entirely grim. Bangladesh, a poverty and hunger-stricken country following its independence achieved remarkable progress in eradicating undernutrition in past decades. The status of child nutrition has improved steadily in the country. The undernourishment rates have dropped from 37% in mid-1990s to a recently estimated rate of 16.4% of the population in 2015.<sup>56</sup> One of the

---

<sup>51</sup> T. Bulbul and M. Hoque, "Prevalence of Childhood Obesity and Overweight in Bangladesh: Findings from a Countrywide Epidemiological Study", *BMC Pediatrics*, Vol. 14 (April), 2014.

<sup>52</sup> *Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (2019-20)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021)

<sup>53</sup> S. Akter *et al.*, "Socio-demographic Factors Associated with Obesity among Primary School Children: A Cross-sectional Survey from Khulna District of Bangladesh", *Journal of Population and Development*, Vol. 2 (December), 2020, pp. 84-96

<sup>54</sup> A. F. Urmi and K. Bhuyan, "Obesity in Children and Adolescents and the Factors Responsible for it: A Case Study among Children of Some Affluent Families", *Integrative Diabetes and Cardiovascular Diseases*, Vol. 2 (August), 2018, pp. 56-66.

<sup>55</sup> R. M. Carrillo-Larco *et al.*, "Delivery by Caesarean Section and Risk of Childhood Obesity: Analysis of a Peruvian Prospective Cohort", *PeerJ*, Vol. 3, 2015.

<sup>56</sup> N. Nisbett *et al.*, "Bangladesh's Story of Change in Nutrition: Strong Improvements in Basic and Underlying Determinants with an Unfinished Agenda for direct Community Level Support", *Global Food Security*, Vol. 13 (June), 2017, pp. 21-29.

main reasons behind such progress has been state efforts and policies. Both National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030) and National Plan of Action for Adolescent Health Strategy (2017-2030) have prioritized nutrition as one of the four key areas.<sup>57</sup> While the 8th five-year plan (2020-2025) has made special efforts to mainstream gender issues in adolescent nutrition programs.<sup>58</sup> National Nutrition Policy (2015) have also included specific key objectives for improving under-nutrition of adolescent girls, especially pregnant and lactating girls through enhancing dietary diversity, scaling up nutrition-specific, and nutrition-sensitive activities.<sup>59</sup> The Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (2016-2025) prioritizes promotion of adolescent nutrition and healthy life style through formal and informal curriculum and programs.<sup>60</sup> However, our whole national health policy environment is biased towards married girls, with lack of emphasis on the health needs of unmarried girls. Obesity issues have also received inadequate attention. National Youth Policy (2017) briefly promotes the necessity of nutritious food, the dangers of fast/junk food, and the benefits of healthy lifestyle.<sup>61</sup> Hence, we need more tailored policies to address the gender specific physical health needs of adolescents.

## 6 Mental Health

Mental health of adolescents is another area which is ignored, unrecognised and often stigmatised and thus unreconciled. Adolescence is a phase in life that exposes one to increased psychosocial vulnerability with half of all mental illnesses beginning by age 14 years.<sup>62</sup> Around 16% of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged 10–19 years is mental disorders.<sup>63</sup> Neuropsychiatric disorders are now being identified as the leading cause of disability and other complexities in adolescents.<sup>64</sup> Gender, age, vulnerable economic standing, educational achievement, education of

---

<sup>57</sup> *Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2016)

<sup>58</sup> *Eighth Five Year Plan (July 2020-June 2025)*, (General Economics Division, Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2020)

<sup>59</sup> *National Nutrition Policy (2015)*, (Government of Bangladesh 2015)

<sup>60</sup> *Second National Plan of Action for Nutrition (2016-2025)*, (Public Health and World Health Wing, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2017)

<sup>61</sup> *National Youth Policy (2017)*, (Ministry of Youth and Sports Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh)

<sup>62</sup> M. Solmi *et al.*, "Age at Onset of Mental Disorders Worldwide: Large-scale Meta-analysis of 192 Epidemiological Studies", *Molecular Psychiatry*, Vol. 27 (June), 2022, pp. 281-295.

<sup>63</sup> GBD 2019 Mental Disorders Collaborators, "Global, Regional, and National Burden of 12 Mental Disorders in 204 Countries and Territories, 1990-2019: A Systematic Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study 2019", *The Lancet. Psychiatry*, Vol. 9, 2022, pp. 137–150.

<sup>64</sup> V. Patel *et al.*, "Mental Health of Young People: A Global Public Health Challenge", *The Lancet*, Vol. 369 (April), 2007, pp. 1302-13.

parents, living with the family, consumption of alcohol and other drugs, and sleep satisfaction or deprivation are some of the social-demographic and lifestyle factors contributing to mental health. Gender inequality, gender-based violence, child marriage and adolescent maternity and substance use are also intricately linked with mental health issues.<sup>65</sup> The causalities and effects are intermixed underpinning each other and defining the path of the future generation.

Mental health problems among children and adolescents are increasing in Bangladesh. Another adding factor to this might be the gradual acceptance of the issue in the society, creating more space for the adolescents to come out with the “problem”. Culturally, mental health is considered a pejorative term related to abnormality and synonymous to being crazy and “pagol/পাগল”<sup>66</sup> in Bangla. Overall prevalence of mental illness varies from 13.4 to 22.9% among children.<sup>67</sup> Depression and anxiety have been found to be most common mental disorders (CMDs) among adolescents. The rate of adolescence depression is 36.6% in Bangladesh, with higher prevalence among girls than boys<sup>68</sup> that makes the country to have the highest ratio of female to male suicides of any nation in the world.<sup>69</sup> During this transitional phase in life, female adolescents face more challenges that stem from changes related to puberty including structural development, physiological changes and other physical indications (e.g. skin changes, growth spurt and menstrual period) along with the burden of socio-cultural norms and values. Family history of depression is associated with depressive symptoms for boys; and reproductive illness and sexual abuse for girls. Upon encountering sexual abuse, adolescent boys and girls react to the situation in different ways which is likely to play a critical role in developing depressive symptoms.<sup>70</sup> In Bangladesh, a greater number of girls than boys face sexual abuse which creates a major negative psychological impact on girls.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>65</sup> M. Alegria *et al.*, “Social Determinants of Mental Health: Where We Are and Where We Need to Go”, *Curr Psychiatry Rep*, Vol. 20 (September), 2018, p. 95.

<sup>66</sup> Mad, crazy

<sup>67</sup> M. D. Hossain *et al.*, “Mental Disorders in Bangladesh: A Systematic Review”, *BMC Psychiatry*, Vol. 14 (July), 2014.

<sup>68</sup> H. Nasreen *et al.*, Prevalence and Associated Factors of Depressive Symptoms Among Disadvantaged Adolescents: Results from a Population-Based Study in Bangladesh, *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing: Official Publication of the Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nurses, Inc*, Vol. 29 (August), 2016, pp. 135-144; *Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (2019-20)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021)

<sup>69</sup> *Mental Health: Suicide Data*, (WHO 2017)

<sup>70</sup> X. Ge *et al.*, “Trajectories of Stressful Life Events and Depressive Symptoms during Adolescence”, *Development and Psychopathology*, Vol. 18, 2006, pp. 253–273.

<sup>71</sup> R. I. Sifat, “Sexual Violence against Women in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 Pandemic”, *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 54 (December), 2020.

The degree of muscularity and macho image for males and slenderness for females play a significant role in the life of adolescents in forming a measure for body image and standard of weight. Cultural mores and social appeal may influence the intellection on weight, where one may indulge in a process of self-scrutiny and social-evaluation of one's physical appearance and charm affected by widespread imported Western media and "alien" advertising, fashion and lifestyle among adolescents.<sup>72</sup> Given that overweight/obesity is not only looked down upon but viewed as unwanted and associated with bias and discrimination,<sup>73</sup> the fear of disgrace, discrimination and isolation may engender a feeling of depression among those who see their own body weight not in accordance with and the accepted ideal norms in the society.<sup>74</sup> Trying to conform to the superficial beauty standards of patriarchal societies jeopardise the mental wellbeing of female adolescent population.

On the other hand, male adolescents were found to be experiencing loneliness and seclusion more than female adolescents due to lack of emotional support and inability to create closeness and bonding during puberty which led to high rates of aggression and anti-social activities.<sup>75</sup> Urban and slum-dwelling adolescents have higher prevalence of mental "maladjustment".<sup>76</sup> Gender norms, roles and expectations to take financial, educational achievement and other responsibilities create tremendous mental pressure on boys.

The most fatal consequence of inadequate adolescent mental health is the inclination towards suicide. Suicidal ideation<sup>77</sup> is higher among adolescent students aged 18–19 years. In Bangladesh, a total of 364 students committed suicide from January to August (2022) and most of them belonged to the age group of 13–20. Female students continue to outnumber the males in suicides, accounting for 60.71% of all the

---

<sup>72</sup> A. Hossain *et al.*, "The Association between Obesity and Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Disorders among University Students at Rajshahi City in Bangladesh", *Journal of Psychiatry and Psychiatric Disorders*, Vol. 6, 2022, pp. 263–270

<sup>73</sup> R. Puhl, and K. D. Brownell, "Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity", *Obesity Research*, Vol. 9 (December), 2001, pp. 788–805.

<sup>74</sup> R. Riahi *et al.*, "Association between Weight Perception and Psychological Distress", *Osong Public Health Res Perspect*, Vol. 10 (October), 2019, pp. 315–324.

<sup>75</sup> S. M. Rice *et al.*, "Adolescent and Young Adult Male Mental Health: Transforming System Failures into Proactive Models of Engagement", *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, Vol. 62 (March), 2018, pp. S9–S17.

<sup>76</sup> L. E. Murphy *et al.*, "Integrating Urban Adolescent Mental Health into Urban Sustainability Collective Action: An Application of Shiffman & Smith's Framework for Global Health Prioritisation", *Front. Psychiatry*, Vol. 11 (February), 2020,

<sup>77</sup> Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts, contemplation, or fantasies about taking one's own life.

cases.<sup>78</sup> While report of depression frequently originated from married adolescent girl, which was linked to age, body and beauty, pregnancy, pre-and post-natal blues.<sup>79</sup> Factors related to pregnancy in adolescents such as unplanned pregnancy and consequences of pregnancy, experience of oppression and mistreatment add adversely to adolescents' psychological distress, such as enhancing anxiety and depression levels which in turn may create suicidal tendencies.<sup>80</sup>

Nevertheless, it merits to mention that mental health along with sexual and reproductive health, nutrition and violence, has been recognised as one of the four priority areas by both Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030) and National Plan of Action for Adolescent Health Strategy (2017-2030).<sup>81</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> five-year plan also addresses the necessity of mental health services for young population.<sup>82</sup> Mental health has been specially emphasized in the National Health Policy (2011)<sup>83</sup> while the mental health of adolescents has been a priority area in both National Youth Policy (2017)<sup>84</sup> and National Mental Health Policy (2019).<sup>85</sup> National Mental Health Strategic Plan (2020-2030) calls for special attention to children and adolescents with mental health conditions and neurodevelopmental disabilities.<sup>86</sup> The country's first ever mental health law, Mental Health Act (2018), has separated the needs of children and adolescents from adults in the mental hospitals. However, all these policies are still largely unimplemented since the mental health sector is underfunded and has small human resources.<sup>87</sup> Gender issues

---

<sup>78</sup> 364 students committed suicide in last 8 months: Survey, *The Business Standard*, September 2022.

<sup>79</sup> M. Ghaedrahmati *et. al.*, "Postpartum Depression Risk Factors: A Narrative Review", *Journal of Education and Health Promotion*, Vol. 6 (August), 2017, p. 60.

<sup>80</sup> I. I. Ria *et. al.*, "Depressive Symptoms Among Adolescents in Bangladesh", *Int J Ment Health Addiction*, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> *Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2016)

<sup>82</sup> *Eighth Five Year Plan (July 2020-June 2025)*, (General Economics Division, Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2020)

<sup>83</sup> *National Health Policy (2011)*, (Health and Family Welfare Ministry, People's Republic of Bangladesh 2011)

<sup>84</sup> *National Youth Policy (2017)*, (Ministry of Youth and Sports Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh)

<sup>85</sup> *National Mental Health Policy (2019)*, (Ministry of Health, People's Republic of Bangladesh 2019)

<sup>86</sup> *National Mental Health Strategic Plan (2020-2030)*, (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2020)

<sup>87</sup> M. Hasan, "An analysis on the Mental Health Act 2018", *The Daily Star*, 2021, <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/analysis-the-mental-health-act-2018-2037885>

in mental health treatment has also not received adequate attention within healthcare system. In fact, these services are lacking at the primary care level with mental health support predominantly available only in major city hospitals.

However, the government does co-sponsor two large-scale programmes to address violence against women/girls, which includes seven One-Stop Crisis Centres in public hospitals, where victims receive medical, psychosocial and legal assistance. Despite the presence of a National Trauma Counselling Centre and Helpline,<sup>88</sup> there is no data available on whether these services are accessed by adolescents. However, according to National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), girls tend to seek less professional help than boys.<sup>89</sup>

Lack of reliable data on mental health is a common problem in Bangladesh. Recognition of mental health as a priority concern is a global demand in the contemporary world and more research and sex disaggregated data would only pave the path to a healthy happy and able group of young people to realise their dreams for a new Bangladesh. An enabling situation with sensitive approaches to age, gender and diversity is essential for any sort of transformation for the future of Bangladesh.

## 7 Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH)

There is a causal relationship between SRH and total wellbeing of adolescents. Adolescents are not just inactive and pliant recipients of the standard rules and behaviour adopted by the adults and societal messages regarding sexuality, but are active participants who interpret, understand and internalise meanings and chart their path between what it is expected of them and between their needs, feelings and want. Just like adults, adolescents have both physical and biological needs, desires, fantasies and dreams, and just any other rights that adults enjoy.<sup>90</sup> However, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) issues are contentious for many countries. In Bangladesh sex is a taboo topic which remains outside the periphery of public discussion. Perceived notions around body and sexuality, the idea of purity and pollution, moral judgement and stigma and associated issues are shaped and formed by the socio- cultural and religious ideals. An adolescent's SRHR is circumscribed by the precise social, cultural, and economic environment they live in. Experiences

---

<sup>88</sup> R. Manjoo, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences*, (OHCHR 2014)

<sup>89</sup> Z. Uddin *et. al.*, "Psychotherapy for Child and Adolescent with Psychiatric Disorders", *Bangladesh Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 28 (June), 2017, p. 53

<sup>90</sup> L. M. Atuyambe *et. al.*, "Understanding Sexual and Reproductive Health Needs of Adolescents: Evidence from a Formative Evaluation in Wakiso District, Uganda", *Reproductive Health*, Vol. 12 (April), 2015.

also vary according to age, sex, marital status, education, residence, migration, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, among other characteristics.<sup>91</sup>

The environment in which young people are making decisions related to SRHR is also rapidly evolving. Today, adolescents are growing up in an environment quite different from their previous generation with greater exposure to western media, internet and tele communication. Over the decades, the minimum age of marriage has increased for both men and women which means longer period of years spent as unmarried. Furthermore, the growing prevalence of sexual activities before marriage, including a number of adolescents trying to explore sex life even before coming of age pose a rapid and continuing growth of sexual and reproductive health needs among young population.

Nevertheless, significant challenges persist including low educational attainment rates, limited sex education, lack of awareness, and traditional attitudes towards sexuality.<sup>92</sup> One of its major consequences is vulnerability to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Study shows that as little as 12% of ever-married adolescents of Bangladesh have full knowledge about HIV/AIDS.<sup>93</sup> Comprehension and awareness about other STDs are even worse. Girls are more vulnerable to STDs, which is the consequence of lack of knowledge coupled with the risk of sexual violence and exploitation which includes introduction to sexual acts at an early age while at the same time unable to insist on safe sex, lack of power, strong discrimination and access to contraception.<sup>94</sup>

It needs to be acknowledged that Bangladesh has achieved commendable gains in family planning compared to other countries with similar socio-economic conditions. Major challenges however are still there, especially around adolescent fertility. Adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19) in Bangladesh is 81.66, which is the highest among South Asian countries. The contraceptive prevalence rate is only 15.3% among adolescents with 10.7% modern and 4.6% traditional

---

<sup>91</sup> A. Kapilashrami, "What is Intersectionality and What Promise does it Hold for Advancing a Rights-based Sexual and Reproductive Health Agenda?", *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health*, Vol. 46, 2020, pp. 4-7.

<sup>92</sup> R. Kumar *et al.*, "Knowledge Attitude and Perception of Sex Education among School Going Adolescents in Ambala District, Haryana, India: A Cross-Sectional Study", *J Clin Diagn Res.*, Vol. 11 (March), 2017, pp. LC01–LC04.

<sup>93</sup> HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)/ AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome)

<sup>94</sup> M. N. Hasan *et al.*, "Knowledge of HIV/AIDS among Married Women in Bangladesh: Analysis of Three Consecutive Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS)", *AIDS Research and Therapy*, Vol. 19 (December), 2022.



methods.<sup>95</sup> The prevalence of contraception use is even lower among child brides which exacerbate their risk of experiencing unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortion and maternal death.

Girls are poorly informed about the physiology of menstruation while boys have very poor knowledge about wet dreams.<sup>96</sup> Bangladesh adolescent health and wellbeing survey (2019-20) mentions, the mean age of menarche is 12.8 years for married adolescents and 12.9 years for unmarried adolescents. Only 23% of married and 30% of unmarried adolescents reportedly had prior knowledge of menstruation.<sup>97</sup> As a result, adolescent girls experience menarche as a fearful, unusual and scary event. A common belief about menstrual bleeding is that it is '*nosto or kharap rokto*' in Bangla (contaminated blood). There are prevalent prejudices which restricts movement often along with common custom restricting intake of certain food, particularly fish and sour foods during menstruation, which again negatively affecting girls' nutritional status.<sup>98</sup>

Management of menstrual hygiene for the girls are circumscribed by environment, culture and finance such as, cost of commercial sanitary napkins, lack of water and latrine facilities, and absence of private rooms for changing sanitary napkins. The school absenteeism rate is 41% among girl's post-menarche. Lack of gender-separated accessible toilets and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities is a major reason behind their absence. Moreover, high prices of sanitary products lead more than half of the female population to rely on old-unhygienic cloths to manage their menstrual bleeding.<sup>99</sup> Girls often reuse them without properly washing or drying them which increases the risk of sexually transmitted disease, Human Papillomavirus (HPV) infection and adverse pregnancy outcomes.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> M. M. Islam *et. al.*, "Adolescent Motherhood in Bangladesh: Trends and Determinants", *PLoS One*, Vol. 12 (November) 2017.

<sup>96</sup> E. Coast *et. al.*, "Puberty and Menstruation Knowledge among Young Adolescents in Low- and Middle-income Countries: A Scoping Review", *International Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 64 (March), 2019, pp. 293–304.

<sup>97</sup> *Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (2019-20)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021)

<sup>98</sup> A. Afiaz and K. Biswas, "Awareness on Menstrual Hygiene Management in Bangladesh and the Possibilities of Media Interventions: Using a Nationwide Cross-sectional Survey", *BMJ Open*, Vol. 11, 2021.

<sup>99</sup> M. Hasan *et. al.*, "Menstrual Hygiene Practices and School Absenteeism among Adolescent Girls in Bangladesh: A Cross-sectional Study", *Popular Medicine*, Vol. 3, (March), 2021

<sup>100</sup> A. Afiaz and K. Biswas, "Awareness on Menstrual Hygiene Management in Bangladesh and the Possibilities of Media Interventions: Using a Nationwide Cross-sectional Survey", *BMJ Open*, Vol. 11, 2021.

As mentioned earlier, in Bangladesh the scope of sex education is limited, it being a culturally and religiously “traditional” society. A very small part of the SRHR is included in school curriculums. While the NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) textbooks contain lessons on the reproductive system, mental changes during puberty, personal hygiene, relationship with parents and peers, adolescent nutrition and HIV/AIDS, the sections on physical changes during puberty only highlights the menstrual cycle and the physical changes of adolescent boys is not covered at all.<sup>101</sup> There is tendency for teachers to avoid the chapters on adolescent health, and they often ask students to read them at home.

In Bangladesh, adolescent sexual and reproductive health was not a policy priority until recently. Adolescent Health Strategy (2017–2030), launched in 2017 identifies adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health as one of four priority thematic areas for intervention.<sup>102</sup> The national strategy lays down specific objectives to make adolescent friendly services available nationwide consisting of information, counselling, and treatment for a range of health issues, including menstruation, reproductive tract infections, and family planning information and services.<sup>103</sup> In reality, our current healthcare systems are under-funded and under-staffed to deliver the services in distant locations. Majority of programmes limit their attention to reproductive health issues (e.g. family planning, and maternal health) bypassing the concerns pertaining to sexual health. Moreover, sexual and reproductive health related programmes neglect adolescent boys compared to girls. Government initiated adolescent friendly health corner which remain operational from 9 am - 2 pm, clashing with the school timings and making it difficult for the adolescents to visit the government facilities.<sup>104</sup> More importantly, social taboo, lack of cultural space to talk about SRHR issues, personal hesitation and shyness discourage adolescents and their families from visiting adolescent friendly health centres. Current government guidelines and family planning manuals state that only married couples are eligible for government family planning services and counselling, limiting the access of

---

<sup>101</sup> U. Roy *et. al.*, “Unpacking the Contributing Factors of Inadequate Sex Education at Schools in Bangladesh: Policy Recommendations”, *CMU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 9 (May), 2022, pp. 1-15

<sup>102</sup> *Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2016)

<sup>103</sup> A. Williams *et. al.*, “What we know and don’t know: a mapping review of available evidence, and evidence gaps, on adolescent sexual and reproductive health in Bangladesh”, *Sexual and Reproductive Health Matters*, Vol. 29, 2022, pp. 479-485

<sup>104</sup> T. Sultana, and M. Tareque, “Bangladesh National Adolescent Health Strategy: A Policy Analysis and Legal Basis”, *International Journal of Legal Studies (IJOLS)*, Vol. 5 (June), 2019, pp. 179-206

unmarried adolescents to family planning and contraception methods.<sup>105</sup> Lack of safety and privacy related concerns and ethical issues also hinder the accessibility of adolescents to these services.

Government's latest five-year plans of 2016-2020 and 2020-2025 have addressed adolescent sexual and reproductive health needs without paying any specific attention to the health challenges of boys and unmarried girls.<sup>106</sup> Government's lack of efforts to introduce tailored and age-sex appropriate SRHR programme, especially for younger adolescents aged between 10 and 14 also remain as other challenges.<sup>107</sup> The specific health needs of early adolescents need to be addressed in plans and policies, as sexual norms and gender values start forming around the age of 12 and many adolescents become active with both pre and post marital sexual activities during this period.<sup>108</sup> National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030) excludes third gender and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) adolescents from its measures and strategies. It also lacks an explicit focus on sexually transmitted diseases, especially HIV services for adolescents.<sup>109</sup>

This scenario asks for the urgent need of awareness and access to sexual health information services, option and choices, agency and voice, decision, control and rights over their own body and beauty, menstrual health and hygiene etc. Addressing expression of love, desire and passion requires massive transformation in our mindset, including our ethical position, policing and judgement towards the adolescents. We need to rethink, rephrase and re-plan the sexuality issues particularly in relation to adolescents for the sake of their physical and mental wellbeing with particular emphasis on gender disparity.

### **8 Child Marriage and Adolescent Health: A Cross Cutting Issue**

UNICEF defines child marriage as marriage of a girl or boy before the age of 18. It includes both formal marriages and informal unions in which children under the age

---

<sup>105</sup> *Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights of Adolescents and Young People*, (Naripokkho, 2018)

<sup>106</sup> F. Haseen *et. al.*, "Gender lens review of adolescent health care services: A mixed methods study in Bangladesh", *Journal of Global Health Reports*, Vol. 8, 2024, pp. 1-10

<sup>107</sup> S. M. Igras *et. al.*, "Investing in Very Young Adolescents' Sexual and Reproductive Health", *Glob Public Health*, Vol. 9 (May), 2014, pp. 555-569

<sup>108</sup> C. Moreau *et. al.*, "Assessing the Spectrum of Gender Norms Perceptions in Early Adolescence: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Global Early Adolescent Study", *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 69, (July), 2021, pp. S16-S22

<sup>109</sup> M. Sultan, and S. Nazneen, *Policy and Legal Analysis Notes: Bangladesh A Review of the National Strategy for Adolescent Health*, (GAGE 2018).

of 18 live with a partner as if married.<sup>110</sup> In Bangladesh, instances of child marriage are the highest in Asia. It is one of the four countries with the highest rate of child marriage in the world. Almost three out of five young women get married as children with more than one in five married by the age of 15.<sup>111</sup> Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (BDHS, 2022)<sup>112</sup> shows that 26.7% of women were married before age of 16 while 50.1% before the age of 18. However, the percentage of women married between the age of 16-19 and 20-24 have gradually declined since 2011.<sup>113</sup>

As girls are usually married with much older men, they enter sexual union at very early age. According to BDHS (2014),<sup>114</sup> 33% of women aged 20-49 had sexual intercourse by age 15 which compares with 69 % by age 18.<sup>115</sup> This situation is clearly falling under the broad umbrella of marital rape, early and forced pregnancy, forced abortion, frequent child birth, lack of contraception use, domestic violence, and divorce etc. This percentage of child marriage is higher in rural area than in urban. Among the districts, Rajshahi has the highest rate of child marriage while Sylhet has the lowest.<sup>116</sup> However, an inverse relationship between percentage of married before age 15 and age 18, and education and household wealth was also detected. The poorest section of the population has the highest tendency of early marriage (74.2%) and it gradually decreases with wealth accumulation, with 45.4% of child marriage among the richest section of population.<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>110</sup> Y. Efevbera and J. Bhabha, “Defining and Deconstructing Girl Child Marriage and Applications to Global Public Health”, *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 20 (October), 2020.

<sup>111</sup> Nazmunnessa Mahtab and Tasnim Nowshin Fariha, ‘Pandemic within a Pandemic: Gendered impact of COVID-19 in Bangladesh with a focus on Child marriage and Domestic violence’. Sajal Roy and Debasish Nandy (eds.), *Understanding Post COVID-19 Social and Cultural Realities: Global Context*, (Springer 2022), pp.199-226.

<sup>112</sup> *Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2022*, (NIPORT and ICF, 2023)

<sup>113</sup> J. Bhowmik *et. al.*, “Child Marriage and Adolescent Motherhood: A Nationwide Vulnerability for Women in Bangladesh”, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, Vol. 18 (April), 2021.

<sup>114</sup> Age of first sexual intercourse related statistics was not available in Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey of (2017-2018) and Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (2022)

<sup>115</sup> M. B. Hossain *et. al.*, “Identifying Factors Influencing Contraceptive Use in Bangladesh: Evidence from BDHS 2014 data”, *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 18 (January), 2018.

<sup>116</sup> J. Bhowmik *et. al.*, “Child Marriage and Adolescent Motherhood: A Nationwide Vulnerability for Women in Bangladesh”, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, Vol. 18 (April), 2021.

<sup>117</sup> J. Bhowmik *et. al.*, “Child Marriage and Adolescent Motherhood: A Nationwide Vulnerability for Women in Bangladesh”, *Int J Environ Res Public Health*, Vol. 18 (April), 2021.

Child marriage leads to various hazards like dropping out from school, gender-based violence, early pregnancy, maternal morbidity, poverty, malnutrition, sexually transmitted diseases, unsafe sex, abortion as well as adverse mental health outcomes and risky behavior.<sup>118</sup> It has serious consequences on the overall development of children and young adults, in as much as it transgresses their human rights, restricts their choices and opportunities, exposes them to violence, abuse and manipulation.

There is a ripple effect of child marriage and adolescent maternity. The psychical, nutritional and socio emotional challenges imposed by early marriage set a vicious cycle in motion which entraps the children born of adolescent mothers resulting in making them susceptible to the same malaise – under-nourishment leading to being underweight and consequently stunted.

For adolescent pregnant women, under-weight is a red alert. It carries a host of high risks – miscarriage, giving birth preterm babies, anemia, osteoporosis and low birthweight (LBW) baby, obstructed delivery, hypertension, pre-eclampsia, eclampsia etc.<sup>119</sup> A UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) report states that in Bangladesh, one in every 10 girl has a child before the age of 15 and one in three adolescent becomes mother or pregnant by the age of 19.<sup>120</sup> Childbirth and pregnancy-related complications are causes of death of teenage mothers twice more than adult mothers.<sup>121</sup> About 134 adolescent mothers per one lakh live births die as a result of complications during pregnancy or childbirth.<sup>122</sup>

Bangladesh has formulated the Child Marriage Restraint Act (2017) to fulfill its commitment to eliminate child marriage by 2030 in line with target 5.3<sup>123</sup> of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, there is an inherent lacuna in the Law. Section 19 of the law includes a provision where a court can allow child marriage in

---

<sup>118</sup> C. Misunas *et al.*, "Child Marriage among Boys in high-prevalence countries: An Analysis of Sexual and Reproductive Health Outcomes", *BMC International Health and Human Rights*, Vol. 19 (August), 2019.

<sup>119</sup> S. Elnakib *et al.*, "Understanding the Impacts of Child Marriage on the Health and Well-being of Adolescent Girls and Young Women Residing in Urban Areas in Egypt", *Reproductive Health*, Vol. 19 (January), 2022.

<sup>120</sup> M. M. Islam *et al.*, "Adolescent Motherhood in Bangladesh: Trends and Determinants", *PLoS One*, Vol. 12 (November) 2017.

<sup>121</sup> S. Mayor, "Pregnancy and Childbirth Are Leading Causes of Death in Teenage Girls in Developing Countries", *BMJ (Clinical Research Ed.)*, Vol. 328 (May), 2004, p. 1152.

<sup>122</sup> T. Ganchimeg *et al.*, "Pregnancy and Childbirth Outcomes among Adolescent Mothers: A World Health Organisation Multi-Country Study", *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, Vol. 121 (March), 2014, pp. 40-48.

<sup>123</sup> SDG 5.3: Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations

“special cases”, dispensing with the need to seek the child’s consent. The fact, that no definition of the “special circumstances” has been given as yet, has weakened the law since it lends itself open to misuse, invariably wrecking the law and risking further worsening of an already dire situation.<sup>124</sup> National Action Plan to End Child Marriage (2018-2030) also has not defined “special cases”, allowing people to continue misusing section 19 of Child Marriage Restrain Act (2017).<sup>125</sup>

On the positive side, in the “Report on Violence against Women Survey 2015”, forced sexual act in any marital relation has been recognised as sexual violence against women and has an age-specific data about the age cohort 15-19. But the report also makes a startling revelation that many adolescents don’t consider forced sexual act as violence against them.<sup>126</sup> Thus, child marriage becomes an extremely pertinent area of attention as this cross-cutting issue shapes the entire gamut of physical, mental, sexual, and educational opportunities and formulates the vision and goal of the adolescents of Bangladesh.

### 9 Violence and Adolescents: An Overarching Issue

The high prevalence of gender-based violence and its aftermath remain a matter of worry for women and girls in Bangladesh. BBS statistics shows that adolescents girls, irrespective of whether they are married or not, remain prone to all types of violence which necessitates the effectuation of preventive mechanisms from the both socio-economic and health perspectives. About one-fifth of female adolescents experience physical violence and one in three adolescents experience verbal abuse in their lifetime.<sup>127</sup> In case of married women, prevalence of both physical and sexual violence is higher in rural areas, and the main perpetrators are husbands. While, in case of non-married women, the prevalence of sexual violence is higher in urban areas.<sup>128</sup> Women and Children Repression Prevention Act (2000) is a specialized act to prevent sexual violence against women/girls, however, gender insensitive legal

---

<sup>124</sup> N. Mahtab and T. N. Fariha, ‘Pandemic within a Pandemic: Gendered impact of COVID-19 in Bangladesh with a focus on Child Marriage and Domestic Violence’. Sajal Roy and Debasish Nandy (eds.), *Understanding Post COVID-19 Social and Cultural Realities: Global Context*, (Springer 2022), pp.199-226.

<sup>125</sup> *National Action Plan to End Child Marriage (2018-2030)*, (Ministry of Women and Children Affair 2018)

<sup>126</sup> M. Ahmed *et. al.*, “The scenario of Violence against Women in Bangladesh: A Trend Analysis”, *Technium Social Science Journal*, Vol. 33 (July), 2022, pp. 606-614.

<sup>127</sup> *Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (2019-20)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021)

<sup>128</sup> M. Ahmed *et. al.*, “The scenario of Violence against Women in Bangladesh: A Trend Analysis”, *Technium Social Science Journal*, Vol. 33 (July), 2022, pp. 606-614.

system, restricted resources, and bureaucratic inefficiencies impede its implementation.<sup>129</sup> Besides, the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act (2010) has been formulated to prevent physical, mental, economic, sexual violence against women/girls in domestic sphere. Due to the inherent weakness of the law, no case was filed under it between 2010-2020.<sup>130</sup> There is no national policy dedicated to prevent violence against women/girls. Only a part of National Women Development Policy (2011) is dedicated towards it, including domestic violence.<sup>131</sup> While the National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Children (2013-2025) denotes violence as a public health concern, and lays down specific guidelines and multi-sectoral plans to prevent violence against young girls.<sup>132</sup>

In Bangladesh, another pervasive form of violence and criminal activities revolves around teenage gang culture, popularly known as “Kishore Gang”. The gang members are mostly school dropout boys who get involved in drug dealing, mugging, extortion, eve teasing/stalking, rape and even murder. Multiple factors trigger the emerging prevalence of criminal activities among teenagers including lack of recreational activities, social degradation, weakening roles of the family, unlimited access to internet, misuse of android phones, lack of moral lessons in the family and school, lack of extra-curricular activities and sports in schools, porn addiction, and apprehension regarding lack of employment opportunities in future.<sup>133</sup> This is a form of violence, where boys constitute not only the greater portion of perpetrators but also the greater numbers of victims/sufferers. The opportunity to offset their experience of structured powerlessness, being a part of a gang acts as the pull factor for adolescents to gangs.<sup>134</sup> Participating in gang violence offers the opportunity to young men on the threshold of adulthood to assume the role of the “hard” and macho

---

<sup>129</sup> E. P. Khan and A. Karim, “The Prevention of Women & Children Repression Act 2000: A Study of Implementation Process from 2003 to 2013”, *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 22 (July), 2017, pp. 34-42

<sup>130</sup> Z. Afrin, “Combating Domestic Violence in Bangladesh: Law, Policy and Other Relevant Considerations”, *Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law*, Vol. 22, 2017, pp. 161-173

<sup>131</sup> N. Rahman, “Preventing Domestic Violence against Women”, 2020 <https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/preventing-domestic-violence-against-women-2000193>

<sup>132</sup> *National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Children* (2013-2025), (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, 2013)

<sup>133</sup> S. Atkinson-Sheppard, “The Gangs of Bangladesh: Exploring Organised Crime, Street Gangs and ‘Illicit Child Labourers’ in Dhaka”, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Vol. 16 (November), 2015.

<sup>134</sup> J. W. Messerschmidt, “Becoming “Real Men”: Adolescent Masculinity Challenges and Sexual Violence”, *Men and Masculinities*, Vol. 2 (July), 2016

man, to be counted among the peers and recognised as tough guys.<sup>135</sup> These gangs however cannot be dealt with effectively by the police because they are mostly linked to the ruling party or work under the patronage of local leaders. Besides, there is an inadequacy of existing laws concerning juvenile crimes and issues in Bangladesh.<sup>136</sup>

There are consequences of violence against or by adolescents in terms of the economic costs. And it goes beyond the immediate price which the health sector has to bear, because in the long run, those youths who experience violence over a period of time, either as a perpetrator or a victim, or merely as a witness, may not be fully equipped to contribute to the economy.<sup>137</sup> It is thus incumbent on the government, the health sector in particular, not to accept violence as a *fait accompli*, but prevent it through innovative and educational programmes to raise awareness of the harmful consequences of violence. In countering gender based violence, coordination is required among different ministries such as women and children affairs ministry, health ministry, cultural affairs ministry, education ministry and ICT ministry to explore the exact health needs of adolescents—for both boys and girls, and ensure that all relevant information and services are at hand to meet those effectively. Dialogue with the adolescents, hearing their voices related to various measure to combat the issues linked to their life choices and security, addressing their dreams and aspirations are all interlinked and needs to be addressed.

#### **10 Marginalised Adolescents and their Health Challenges: Intersection of Multiple Vulnerabilities**

The average success stories of Bangladesh improving adolescent health hide the wide variations in health status and behavior that are prevailing across regions and sub-groups by socio-economic strata. Adolescents are not only a distinct age group, neither a homogeneous category. There are different sub-groups of adolescents and their experiences of health problems vary depending on the biological, sexual, socio-economic, geographical, and other contextual factors of their lives. For some adolescents, multiple horizons of vulnerabilities intersect each other leading towards various levels of victimhood and health inequalities.

---

<sup>135</sup> V. Bozkurt *et. al.*, “Masculinity and Violence: Sex Roles and Violence Endorsement among University Students”, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 205 (October), 2015, pp. 254-260.

<sup>136</sup> T. K. Das, “Gangs of teens cause concern across Bangladesh”, New Age Bangladesh, 2019, <https://www.newagebd.net/article/84035/gangs-of-teens-cause-concern>

<sup>137</sup> S. Atkinson-Sheppard, “The Gangs of Bangladesh: Exploring Organised Crime, Street Gangs and ‘Illicit Child Labourers’ in Dhaka”, *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, Vol. 16 (November), 2015.



While the phenomenon of “adolescence” is itself a contested one, when we talk about non-conforming adolescents such as *LGBTQs* (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) and *transgenders*, the discussion invariably becomes more complex. Section 377 of Bangladesh Penal Code<sup>138</sup> makes it difficult to address the issues of sexuality in the light of socio-religious, cultural and legal domains leading to high prevalence of death, abuse and discrimination against the sexually diverse groups of the country.<sup>139</sup> The failure of state and society to recognise their unique sexual orientation and subsequent exclusion drive them towards violent resistant, anti-social and criminal activities, self-harm and suicide.<sup>140</sup> In terms of diverse sexual identity beyond the normative bipolarity, the *hijra* community has been a historically marginalised group of our country. Although the government of Bangladesh has recognised this transgendered group of people as “third gender”, the members of the mainstream society are still reluctant to develop any social relation with hijra community. The social construction of gender and stigmatised hijra identity plays an important role in constraining their access to economic opportunities and health care facilities –all in physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health.<sup>141</sup>

This brings us to another ignored area of social reality, sex workers and their children. Involvement with sex work under the age of 18 is illegal in Bangladesh,<sup>142</sup> still more and more adolescents are entering the commercial sex market either voluntarily or by force.<sup>143</sup> Although transgenders and boys are also involved in sex work, female sex workers are subjected to additional health challenges, abuse and

---

<sup>138</sup> Section 377 penalises homosexuality. The section lays down: whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine.

<sup>139</sup> H. Anjum *et. al.*, “Ensuring Human Rights for the Gender Diverse Population in Bangladesh: The Protection Perspectives”, *Beijing Law Review*, Vol.12, 2021.

<sup>140</sup> P. Alam, and C. Marston, “Bending’ against Straightening Devices: Queer Lived Experiences of Sexuality and Sexual Health in Bangladesh”, *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 23 (January), 2023.

<sup>141</sup> S. I. Khan *et. al.*, “Living on the Extreme Margin: Social Exclusion of the Transgender Population (Hijra) in Bangladesh”, *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition*, Vol. 27 (August), 2009, pp. 441-451.

<sup>142</sup> Q. Z. Hossain *et. al.*, “Lives of Brothel Based Sex Workers in Khulna, Bangladesh”, *International Journal of Social Work and Human Services Practice*, Vol. 3, 2015, pp. 131 - 136

<sup>143</sup> C. Bagley *et. al.*, “Commercialised Sexual Exploitation of Children, Adolescents and Women: Health and Social Structure in Bangladesh”, *Advances in Applied Sociology*, Vol. 7 (April), 2017.

social stigma due to the patriarchal norms.<sup>144</sup> Children of sex workers are facing different levels of vulnerability and discrimination due to the prejudices against their mothers. Irrespective of gender identity, these children get deprived of social recognition and basic needs. Often they get psychologically affected by the knowledge of the kind of work their mothers are engaged in which might adversely force them to get involved with risky health behaviours.<sup>145</sup>

Street children, often called “Tokai”<sup>146</sup> is another neglected group of adolescents in Bangladesh comprising of 74.3% of boys and 25.7% of girls.<sup>147</sup> They suffer from various complicated diseases due to poor living conditions, substance use, unhealthy diet<sup>148</sup> and remain highly susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases since sex is easily available on the city streets.<sup>149</sup> Slum dwelling adolescents fare no better even though they have a permanent place to sleep at night.<sup>150</sup> The social realities of a poverty driven Bangladesh sabotage all the legal mechanisms to end child labour.<sup>151</sup> Therefore, adolescents living on both streets or slums need to work in hazardous conditions which not only endanger their physical and mental development but also divest them of their right to a meaningful “normal adolescence”.<sup>152</sup> Young girls

---

<sup>144</sup> B. Willislan *et. al.*, “The Health and Social Well-being of Female Sex Workers’ Children in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Study from Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet”, *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*, Vol. 9 (September), 2013, pp. 123-131.

<sup>145</sup> M. C. Shohel, “Access to Education for the Children of Sex Workers in Bangladesh: Opportunities and Challenges”, *Child Studies in Diverse Contexts*, Vol. 3, 2013, pp. 13-31

<sup>146</sup> “Tokai” signifies a collector, often denoting underprivileged children gathering discarded items from streets, bins, and public areas for recycling. Coined by renowned artist Rafikunnabi, “Tokai” rapidly transformed into an iconic cartoon character symbolising destitute youths engaged in waste collection.

<sup>147</sup> S. Chowdhury *et. al.*, “Life Style and Risk Behavior of Street Children in Bangladesh: A Health Perspective”, *Health*, Vol. 9 (April), 2017.

<sup>148</sup> S. Chowdhury *et. al.*, “A Health Perspective of Street Children in Bangladesh”, *Health*, Vol. 9, 2017, pp. 577-591

<sup>149</sup> M. J. Uddin *et. al.*, “Vulnerability of Bangladeshi Street-children to HIV/AIDS: A Qualitative Study”, *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 14 (November), 2014.

<sup>150</sup> M. M. Islam *et. al.*, “Risk Factors of Stunting among Children Living in an Urban Slum of Bangladesh: Findings of a Prospective Cohort Study”, *BMC Public Health*, Vol. 18 (January), 2018.

<sup>151</sup> S. Zaman *et. al.*, “A Study on Present Scenario of Child Labour in Bangladesh”, *IOSR Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM)*, Vol. 16 (June), 2014, pp. 25-36.

<sup>152</sup> M. Kamruzzaman, “A Review on Child Labour Criticism in Bangladesh: An Analysis”, *International Journal of Sports Science and Physical Education*, Vol. 3 (January), 2018.

employed in garment factories or as domestic servants in private households also remain at high risk of overwork and sexual abuse.<sup>153</sup>

Another group of adolescents often deprived of a normal adolescence is orphans. Apart from insufficient number of orphanages, adolescents living in these homes beset with the problems of identity crisis, lack of care, security and sense of belonging. Adolescents living in Juvenile Development Centres face similar kinds of problems.<sup>154</sup> A study found that in the juvenile centres 66.0% of boys and girls are victims of either physical or mental repression.<sup>155</sup> Care and treatment required to address drug addiction, rehabilitation and psychiatric treatments are not available, and neither are initiatives taken to obtain those, as obligatory by the Child Rights Convention.<sup>156</sup>

In the context of Bangladesh, adolescents with disabilities reside in exceptionally difficult living conditions<sup>157</sup> due to the physical limitations stemming from their handicaps which eventually restrict their ability to leave home and divest them of their capacity and the chance to acquire health information and services.<sup>158</sup> Although, incidence of disability occurs more among adolescent boys, girls with disabilities suffer from double victimhood and suffering on multiple counts. Social isolation, disability-related stigma and lack of family support result in high rate of depression, loneliness and low self-esteem.<sup>159</sup>

Indigenous population constituting 1.13% of the country's population generally remains at a higher risk of poor health due to various socio-economic, political and

---

<sup>153</sup> S. Ahmed, and M. Raihan, "Health Issues of Female Garment Workers: Evidence from Bangladesh", *Cankiri Karatekin Universitesi Iktisadi ve Idari Bilimler Fakultesi Dergisi*, Vol. 4 (June), 2014, pp. 43-58

<sup>154</sup> S. Shubin, and T. Sowgat, "Contested Experiences and Potential Justice at the Limit of the Law for Poor Urban Children in Bangladesh", *Children's Geographies*, Vol. 18 (February), 2020, pp. 516-528.

<sup>155</sup> M. S. Islam *et. al.*, "Physical and Mental Health Status of Adolescents of Government Juvenile Development Centers in Bangladesh", *Bangladesh Medical Journal*, Vol. 47, 2019, pp. 7-11.

<sup>156</sup> S. Shubin, and T. Sowgat, "Contested Experiences and Potential Justice at the Limit of the Law for Poor Urban Children in Bangladesh", *Children's Geographies*, Vol. 18 (February), 2020, pp. 516-528.

<sup>157</sup> M. N. I. Mondal *et. al.*, "Childhood Disabilities and Child Protection in Rajshahi City, Bangladesh", *The Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, 2013, pp. 579-584.

<sup>158</sup> N. Groce, and M. Kett, *Youth with Disabilities*, (Leonard Cheshire Disability and Inclusive Development Centre UCL 2014).

<sup>159</sup> A. Akter and M. M. Rahman, "Women with Disabilities in Bangladesh: Accessibility in the Built Environment", *ROSHIKHYAN, A Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 26, 2019, pp. 1-12.

geographical factors.<sup>160</sup> Gender and age add on new horizons to their inequality. Minority status and political instability coupled with remote geographical location expose indigenous girls to high risk of sexual violence.<sup>161</sup> As a result, adolescent fertility and unintended pregnancies are already worryingly higher among indigenous women compared to the national average.<sup>162</sup>

Geographical location also poses additional health challenges for adolescents living in coastal areas. Menstrual health and hygiene management remains a big challenge for adolescent girls in coastal belts, especially during times of disaster. Due to difficult access to clean water is forcing coastal women to stop menstruating by abusing contraceptive pills, putting their long-term reproductive and mental health at risk.<sup>163</sup> Adolescent girls suffer high degree of harassment and sexual abuse following a disaster and especially due to lack of privacy in the emergency shelters.<sup>164</sup>

This section has outlined, how gender identities intersect with other marginal identities and trigger off additional layers of health inequalities for vulnerable groups of adolescents. All of these diversities need to be taken into account while designing a policy addressing the specific health needs of vulnerable adolescent groups. Their health needs require to be understood through a more holistic and broader perspective. The National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030) and National Plan of Action for Adolescent Health Strategy (2017-2030) undertake a range of strategies to address the special health needs of vulnerable groups who live in challenging conditions (streets or slum children, coastal children, disabled adolescents, married or pregnant girls, adolescent sex workers/children of sex workers, adolescents in child labour or detention centers). Although the strategy addresses all adolescents irrespective of their gender diversity and sexual orientation in its vision statement, there is no mention of the third gender and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) adolescents in the suggested measures particularly

---

<sup>160</sup> S. Hussain *et al.*, “From Knowing our Needs to Enacting Change: Findings from Community Consultations with Indigenous Communities in Bangladesh”, *International Journal for Equity in Health*, Vol. 14 (November), 2015.

<sup>161</sup> M. M. Haque *et al.*, “Nutritional Status of Settler and Indigenous Women of Reproductive Age Group in Khagrachari District, Bangladesh”, *Journal of Enam Medical College*, Vol. 4, 2014, pp. 98–101

<sup>162</sup> S. Akter *et al.*, “Access to Maternal Healthcare Services among Indigenous Women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh: A Cross-sectional Study”, *MJ Open*, Vol. 9, 2019.

<sup>163</sup> M. A. Nuruzzaman *et al.*, “Reproductive Characteristics and Nutritional Status of Coastal Women”, *Chattagram Maa-O-Shishu Hospital Medical College Journal Volume*, Vol. 14 (January), 2015, pp. 38-41.

<sup>164</sup> M. M. Khan, *Disaster and Gender in Coastal Bangladesh: Women's Changing Roles, Risk and Vulnerability*, (Springer 2022).

in the section on vulnerable adolescents and adolescents in challenging circumstances.<sup>165</sup> Similarly, National Youth Policy (2017) also emphasises the necessity to provide special health care to the backward youths with special needs without any reference to sexually diverse groups.<sup>166</sup> In reality, all these policies and interventions fall short of implementation due to socio-cultural barriers and lack of human and financial resources. Lack of reliable data on vulnerable groups is another major impediment to the formulation and implementation of inclusive policies.

### 11 Adolescent's Voice and Agency

A 2019 study conducted by GAGE (Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence) identified that there are three important elements in voice and agency namely- mobility, access to information, and participating in decision-making. The degree to which adolescents can exercise their voice and agency has direct correlation with the degree of their empowerment, the socio-cultural milieu, economic participation and the status of their family in the society and its political connection. However, there is little research available on agency and voice of adolescents.<sup>167</sup>

While one notices a shift in the mind frame that is favorably disposed towards gender egalitarianism, especially for younger cohorts, adolescent girls' voice and agency are highly circumscribed by social standards and customs that see their roles as biologically and religiously determined – confined mainly to child bearing. Throughout childhood, girls' voices are silenced as they are socialised to be pure, virgin, domestic, submissive and obedient.<sup>168</sup> Girls' activity becomes even more limited at puberty, and it is deemed a parental responsibility to protect the virginity and chastity of their daughters, and restricting their mobility and arranging marriage for them are ways of ensuring that.<sup>169</sup> Restrictions on mobility are also sex and age biased. While 74% of 12-year-old girls can visit friends and 43% can play outdoor games, only 35% and 7% of 19-year-old girls can do so.<sup>170</sup> Girls' lack of agency is

---

<sup>165</sup> *Bangladesh National Strategy for Adolescent Health (2017-2030)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2016)

<sup>166</sup> *National Youth Policy (2017)*, (Ministry of Youth and Sports Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh)

<sup>167</sup> K. Mitu *et. al.*, *Adolescent Psychosocial Well-being and Voice and Agency in Chittagong, Bangladesh*, (GAGE 2019).

<sup>168</sup> N. Jones *et. al.*, "Constrained Choices: Exploring the Complexities of Adolescent Girls' Voice and Agency in Child Marriage Decisions in Ethiopia", *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol. 20, 2020, pp. 296–311

<sup>169</sup> K. Heissler, "Children's Migration for Work in Bangladesh: The Extra- and Intra-Household Factors that Shape 'Choice' and 'Decision-Making'", *Childhoods Today*, Vol. 2, 2008, pp. 1-19.

<sup>170</sup> S. Amin *et. al.*, *From Evidence to Action: Results from the 2013 Baseline Survey for the Balika Project*, (Population Council 2014).

most evident in matrimonial decisions and girls are less likely than boys to make a range of important decisions, particularly in family matters.<sup>171</sup>

Internalisation of patriarchal norms and values by adolescents is another area of concern about raising transformative voices and decisions. Studies showed that both girls and boys are of the opinion that it is the exclusive preserve of the men in the family to make household decision and women should do their husbands' biddings.<sup>172</sup> According to Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey 2019-20, one-third of married and one-fifth of unmarried girls believed that women should not be allowed to work outside of the home. More than 40% of married girls believed household chores are for women only, while over one-third of them perceived that husband has the right to beat his wife when she does not listen to him.<sup>173</sup> In general, girls have no voice or bargaining power in household decision-making. Married girls aged 15-19 are more likely to be excluded from decision making process related to household purchases, healthcare or education for their children.<sup>174</sup>

## 12 Concluding Remarks

This paper has outlined adolescent health related challenges in Bangladesh. Adolescents are a separate group whose health needs and challenges are different from children or adults, as it is a period of rapid progression with unique health features. Adolescent girls in Bangladesh are at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts because of gender based disparity and discrimination. Unequal standards of expected gender behaviour and activities at both within and outside the household, limit their rights, access to resources and opportunities, restricts their roles and individual choices. These adversely affect their physical, mental, and sexual and reproductive health. In Bangladeshi society, preference is accorded to adolescent boys over girls when it comes to the matter of health and nutrition because of their perceived role in society as future bread earners. For many girls, the onset of adolescence brings not only changes to their bodies but new vulnerabilities like human rights abuses, particularly in the areas of sexuality, marriage, childbearing, violence and dignity. The compulsion faced by adolescent boys to conform to

---

<sup>171</sup> K. Mitu *et. al.*, *Adolescent Psychosocial Well-being and Voice and Agency in Chittagong, Bangladesh*, (GAGE 2019).

<sup>172</sup> C. Laura *et. al.*, *Exploring Bangladeshi Adolescents' Gendered Experiences and Perspectives*, (GAGE Digest 2017).

<sup>173</sup> *Bangladesh Adolescent Health and Wellbeing Survey (2019-20)*, (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare 2021)

<sup>174</sup> E. Presler-Marshall, and M. Stavropoulou, *Adolescent Girls' Capabilities in Bangladesh: A Synopsis of the Evidence*, (GAGE 2017).

prevailing norms of masculinity, drives them to risky behaviors such as unsafe sex, violence and substance use.

Adolescents are not a homogeneous cohort rather exhibit diversity based on biological, sexual, social, cultural, economic, familial, environmental, geographical, religious, and contextual factors. As a result, their encounters with health issues vary from one individual to another. One needs to keep in mind that health issues of the adolescents are not isolated from the larger context of both local and global, neither is it to be placed outside the umbrella of the socio cultural and economic milieu of a context.

The usual success stories of Bangladesh improving adolescent health hide the wide variations in health status and behavior that are prevailing across different vulnerable groups. Gender identities intersect with other marginal identities and trigger off additional layers of health inequalities and challenges for some groups of adolescents. The health requirements of marginalised adolescents are particularly at risk due to the widespread neglect of their living conditions. This includes adolescents living in streets, slums, coastal areas, those with disabilities, engaged in sex work, born to sex workers, involved in child labor, or residing in detention centers or orphanages.

This area deserves adequate attention since investment in adolescent health will have a direct bearing on the country's health goals. Bangladesh has a range of policies to ensure the health and well-being of adolescents, but they often fail to address the unique needs of diverse groups, by applying both gender and intersectional lens. Besides, lack of reliable data, funding and human resources, poor logistics, top down policy making practices, and bureaucratic complexities impede successful implementation of the existing policies. Ensuring adolescent voice and agency can be the departure point of improving adolescent health and well-being, and realizing the windows of demographic opportunities and to reach gender parity by 2041.<sup>175</sup> Lack of voice and agency hamper adolescents' well-being, especially adolescent girls' access to intra household resources and services, which results in poor health outcome. The nation can reap a collective benefit by incorporating adolescents' voice defining their health issues in their own terms. Bottom up approaches with a holistic view, using a gender lens are crucial to design a context specific and effective policy for the adolescents. This is consequential not only for them, but for all of us.

---

<sup>175</sup> C. Laura *et. al.*, *Exploring Bangladeshi Adolescents' Gendered Experiences and Perspectives*, (GAGE Digest 2017).

## A Reappraisal of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh and the Independent Geo-political Entity of Sonargaon

Sahidul Hasan\*

### Abstract

This article proposes a fresh reading of the coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to reappraise the political history of this ruler. In the light of recent numismatic sources the present research challenges all the earlier calculations of the reign period of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh. In doing so this study makes an intervention in the political chronology of Bengal and proposes 205 (1333 to 1538 CE) years of Independent Sultanate Period instead of 200 (1338-1358 CE) years. What was the force behind the rise of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh? What facilitated him to become an independent authority? In attempting to answer these questions this article analyses the multi-dimensional factors - manmade and natural- that acted as catalysts in the making of Sonargaon as the first independent geo-political entity in the trans-Meghna region.

**Key words:** Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, Sonargaon, Numismatic evidence, Geo-political entity, Geo-morphological setting

Little is known about the early life and the lineage of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh except that he was the *silāhdār* (armour bearer) of Bāhrām Khān, the then governor of *iqlīm* Sonargaon appointed by the Tughlaqs.<sup>1</sup> He is credited for establishing an independent authority in the eastern and southeastern parts of the Bengal Delta. Contemporary Persian chroniclers like Ziāuddin Baranī, Shāms Shirāj Āfif recorded that his popular name was '*Fakhrā*'. Both the authors never visited Bengal but Ibn Baṭṭūṭā visited Bengal during Fakhruddin's reign and he had also introduced the ruler in the same approach.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s Sukhamaya Mukhapadhaya published a book titled *Bānglār Itihāser Dusho Bachar: Swādhīn Sultānder Āmal (1338-1358 Khrī)*.<sup>3</sup> The beginning of this book is the year when Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh declared independence and cut off all authoritarian (lord-vessel) relations with the imperial authority of Delhi. He writes that after the declaration of independence in 1337-38 CE till the defeat of

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka; E-mail: [sahidul.hasan@du.ac.bd](mailto:sahidul.hasan@du.ac.bd)

<sup>1</sup> *Silāhdār* is a Persian word which denotes the meaning of the officer, who is in the charge of armory.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Battuta called him a *mawālī* of Bengal. Mahdī Husain, the translator of his travelogue identified him as an ally of the House of Sultan Nasiruddin. Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1976), p. 237.

<sup>3</sup> Sukhamaya Mukhapadhaya, *Banglar Itihaser Dusho Bachar: Swadhīn Sultānder Āmal (1338-1358 Khrī)* (Kolkata: Bharati Book Stall, 1988, 4th reprint, 1st published in 1960).



Ghiyāsuddin Māhmud in 1538 CE, Bengal enjoyed a continuous independent political existence. These two centuries formed a glorious chapter in the history of Bengal, when the rulers came to be recognised as the best among all the rulers of India by virtue of their competence, power and wealth.<sup>4</sup> Sukhamaya Mukhapadhaya's proposal of two hundred years (1338 -1538 CE) of independence got accepted in historical narrative. Till the beginning of the present century, no one had challenged the date 1338 CE as the year of his independence or even tried to revisit the relevant sources. Numismatic evidence discovered in the last three decades necessitated a reappraisal of this proposition. Even rereading of an old coin took the debate further ahead. This paper is an attempt to revisit the dates and the political career of this ruler in the light of recent numismatic sources. In doing so this paper has been divided into three sections:

(A) Survey of earlier research; (B) Analysis of textual and numismatic records and (C) Factors that led Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh to declare independence.

#### **(A) Survey of Earlier Research**

More than two centuries ago, Charles Stewart first wrote a political history of medieval Bengal and proposed a chronological framework of the Sultans. According to him, Bhiram (Bahram) Khan died in 739 AH/ 1338 CE at Sonergong (Sonargaon). At that time, Muhammad bin Tughlaq had conquered a huge area in Deccan and was very busy with the transfer of his capital to Daulatabad. He wrote:

This occasion presented a favourable opportunity to Fakher Adden [Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh] the armour-bearer of Bhiram Khan, not only to assume the government of Sunergong without permission, but also to declare him an independent monarch, assuming the title of Sultan Sekunder.

.... Fakher Adden ... succeeded in regaining his authority, caused himself to be proclaimed sovereign of Bengal; and ordered the coin to be stamped, and all public papers were issued in his name.... Bengal remained for many years afterwards an independent and distinct Kingdom.<sup>5</sup>

Stewart's inference was further elaborated and glorified by later scholars. Edward Thomas in his book titled *The Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi, Illustrated by Coins, Inscriptions, and other Antiquarian Remains* examined a silver coin of this ruler and stated that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh declared independence in 737 AH.<sup>6</sup> He deciphered the date portion as:<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 25 (Translations are mine).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Stewart, *The History of Bengal* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1813), pp. 81-82.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart's proposal was further clarified and glorified by later historians. Edward Thomas in *The Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi, Illustrated by Coins, Inscriptions, and other Antiquarian Remains* (London: Trubner And Co., 1871), pp. 262-63.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 265-66.

ضرب هذه السكة بحضرة سناركانو سنة سبع وثلثين و سبعمائة

[Translation: This *sikkāh* was issued from Hadrat Sonargaon Year Seven Hundred Thirty Seven.]

Edward Thomas accepted this silver coin as the earliest dated coin of Fakhruddin. Henry Blochmann also analysed available textual records and numismatic evidences. He suggested correction in the reading of Edward Thomas and commented that in the absence of *nuktah* or the diacritical marks in the Arabic word, the initial *sin* (س) and *tā* (ت) look identical as well as the word *سبع* (*sābā*) and *سبع* (*tisā*). As a result the reading of the date portion will be 739 AH/ 1338 CE. Blochmann proposed that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh ruled for ‘ten years and some months’ and on the basis of coins, he assigned Fakhruddin’s date as 739-750 AH.<sup>8</sup> It is notable that the main focus of the debate was the reading of the date engraved on the coins of this Sultan.

Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay in his *Bangalar Itihasa* made an attempt to reconstruct the chronology and reign period of the Bengal Sultans. He critically reviewed the Persian chronicles and found many of the dates presented there were inaccurate. The coins of Fakhruddin are more reliable sources. He recognised the reading of 737 AH/ 1336 CE as correct one and uninterrupted rule of Fakhruddin over Sonargaon.<sup>9</sup> Later historians like Rajanikanta Chakrabarty, R.C. Majumdar have accepted 739AH/1338 CE as the starting point of independent sultanate in Bengal.<sup>10</sup>

Another contemporary versatile scholar Nalinikanta Bhattasali projected a new chronological framework of the Independent Sultans of Bengal on the basis of a coin hoard found in Rupganj, Narayanganj.<sup>11</sup> Bhattasali noticed that coins of Mubārak Shāh with earlier date of his rule are rare. Finishing and designs are inferior compared to his later dated coins. He rejected the reading of 737 AH and concluded that the earliest date engraved on the coins of Fakhruddin is 739 AH. It is surprising to note that

<sup>8</sup> Henry Blochmann, *Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal (Muhammodan Period)* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1968), pp. 76; ‘Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal’, 1873, pp. 46; this was reprint and it was originally published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in three subsequent years viz. 1873 (Part 1, No. 3), 1874 (Part 1, No. 3), 1875 (Part 1, No. 3) under the title ‘Contribution to the Geography and History of Bengal’.

<sup>9</sup> Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, *Bangalar Itihasa*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Naba Bharat Publishers, 1376 BS), p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Rajanikanta Chakraborty, *Gaurer Itihasa* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 1999, Reprint, 1st print, 1905), p. 196; R.C. Majumder, *History of Mediaval Bengal* (Kolkata: Tulshi Prakashani, 2012, Reprint, 1st published 1973), pp. 18-19

<sup>11</sup> Nalinikanta Bhattasali, *Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal* (Cambridge: W. Heffers and Sons, 1922).

Bhattasali expected that further numismatic evidence may bring changes in his proposed dating. He wrote:

If however, the dates on future samples of this class [of coin] turn out undoubtedly to be much earlier than 739 AH; these coins then will have to be taken as witness of Mubarak Shah's attempts at assuming sovereignty earlier in his career by deposing Bahram Khan.<sup>12</sup>

The hope expressed by Bhattasali became a historic reality at the beginning of the twentieth century. New coins of Sultan Fakhruddin have been discovered and published by professional researchers as well as coin-collectors. These new coins and rereading of an old gold coin are the main pillars for the present research, which will be critically analysed in the second part of this article.

Sir Jadunath Sarkar, while editing his *History of Bengal, Vol.2* made critical observations on the sources and methodical issues, which are closely related to the Sultanate period. Sarkar clearly underlines that the contemporary Persian chronicles i.e. *Tārīkh-i-Firūzshāhī* (both by Ziāuddin Barani and Shāms Shirāj Āfif), *Tārīkh-i-Mubārakshāhī* (Ābdul Qādir Badāyuni) or later works like *Tabāqāt-i-Ākbarī* (Nizāmuddin Āhmad), *Riyāz-us-Sālātin* (Golām Hussāin Salīm) have errors and sometimes contradict each other. As a result, Sarkar relied on the coins and that makes him more dependable than others. Clipped margins, scarcity of numbers and clumsy sprawling scripts of the coins have created controversy among historians and numismatists. Sarkar put emphasis on the importance of placing side by side all the coins of a Sultan and carefully reading the dates from several specimens.<sup>13</sup> Till then only Bhattasali had taken such an initiative and his proposals are the best “working hypothesis”. Jadunath Sarkar records that Tatar Khan *alias* Bahram Khan was the Tughlaq governor in the eastern part of Bengal. In 739 AH/1338 CE he died and his servant Fakhruddin ascended the throne of Sonargaon and ‘continued to rule that portion of Bengal till his death in 750 AH.’ Sarkar followed Bhattasali’s conclusion, which is reflected in the inference that Fakhruddin’s power was centred on Sonargaon, situated in the eastern part of Bengal and he never issued any coin from the northern power base of Pandua.<sup>14</sup> All his coins were issued from the Sonārgāwn [Sonargaon] mint and covered every year from 740-750 AH/ 1339-1349 CE.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal, Muslim Period, (1200-1757), Vol. II* (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1948), pp. 95-97.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

Abdul Karim accepted Bhattasali's reading of 739 AH/ 1338 CE, but rejected the four types of categorisation of Fakhruddin's coins.<sup>15</sup> Abdul Karim in his later works on the Sultanate period tried to present an up to date political history of Bengal with the help of textual and archaeological sources; specially the epigraphs and the coins. For Fakhruddin's initial date he referred to his Corpus of Coins and concluded that several coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh have been discovered issued in between 739 and 750 AH/1338-1350 CE. The only mint mentioned in his coins was Sonargaon— most of the time prefixed with the adjective '*Hazrāt Jālāl Sonārgāon*'.<sup>16</sup> Abdul Karim also accepted the two hundred years of independence till 1538 CE and all the efforts to subjugate Bengal failed during these two centuries. Two initiatives of Firuz Tughlaq, attacks from Sultan Ibrāhīm Sharqī or Sultan Sikāndār Lodī became unsuccessful. Bengal kept her independent authority in the eastern part of India.<sup>17</sup>

Firoz Mahmud published a gold coin issued by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh and preserved in Bangladesh National Museum. It was discovered from Sylhet and later collected by the Museum authority. The gold coin contains the date in the marginal section of the coin in words, which is quite readable, although the upper portion seems cutoff.<sup>18</sup> This gold coin was issued probably to commemorate the declaration of independence by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in 739 AH/ 1338 CE.

Richard M. Eaton<sup>19</sup> also accepted the reign period of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh as proposed by earlier scholars *i.e.* 1338-49 CE. He further remarked that firm control over the eastern part of Bengal by Fakhruddin followed increased supply of silver. But in his *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765* Eaton<sup>20</sup> mentioned that the imperial Governor died in 1338 CE and Ilyās Shāh seized power and declared independence. In next four years, he defeated his rivals in other parts of the delta. After that he declared himself Sultan of the whole delta. He ruled Bengal till his death in 1357 CE. Eaton's conclusion cannot be accepted considering two issues: (a) Sonargaon remained as an independent authority till 1350 CE and (b) Ilyās Shāh issued coins from Sonargaon after 1350 CE. A K M Shahnawaz also accepted the reading of the earliest date as 739

<sup>15</sup> Abdul Karim, *Corpus of the Muslim Coins of Bengal (Down to A.D. 1538)* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, reprinted in 2013, first published Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1960), pp. 36-37.

<sup>16</sup> Abdul Karim, *Banglāra Itihāsa: Sulatani Amala* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977), pp. 165-66.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Firoz Mahmud, 'Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah-er Ekti Swarna Mudra Ebang er Mudratattwik Guruttva', *Itihāsa Samiti Patrika*, 1973, pp. 1-8.

<sup>19</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *Rise of Islam* (California, University of California Press, 1993) p. 324.

<sup>20</sup> Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765* (California, University of California Press, 2019), p. 78.

AH/1338 CE.<sup>21</sup> Habiba Khatun in her research on Sonargaon based on inscriptions and archaeological sites had accepted Abdul Karim's scheme on the chronology of the events.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting to note that an expert numismatist like Abdul Karim did not think that there is a possibility of error in the reading of coins. However, new numismatic evidence may lead us to revisit the issue. Abdul Karim in 1999 wrote that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh ascended the throne of Sonargaon in 1338 CE and issued coins immediately. He placed the date, as he did earlier, in the chronological bracket of 1338-1349 CE.<sup>23</sup>

Muazzam Hussain Khan's monograph (*Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah of Sonarganw*) is a classical work on this Sultan. He had rigorously scrutinised earlier researches and found that the reading of 739 AH/ 1338 CE as the earliest date of Fakhruddin's coin was a doubtful issue. But the gold coin published by Firoz Mahmud had brought an end to this confusion.<sup>24</sup>

Historians cannot make any final conclusion regarding the past. New reading of a coin puts the earlier reading as a misreading. However, the reading of Firoz Mahmud needs a critical review. This article is an humble attempt re-reading of this gold coin and reappraise the date of commencement of independence by Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh in Sonargaon. In doing so, we have to reconsider the primary sources with special attention to the coins discovered in the last three decades.

### **(B) Analysis of Textual and Numismatic Records**

Persian chronicles, written under the patronage of the North Indian rulers, have incidental references to Bengal. Two *Tārikh-i-Firuzshāhī*s (Ziauddin Baranai and Shāms Shirāj Āfif) are the only contemporary texts. Later works like *Tārikh-i-Mubārakshāhī*, *Tabāqāt-i-Ākbarī*, *Tārikh-i-Firishtā* also contain important information on Fakhruddin and the affairs of Bengal. The 18th century historical compilation by Golam Hussāin Salīm (*Riyāz-us-Sālātīn*) also had a separate section on Fakhruddin

<sup>21</sup> A K M Shahnewaj, *Mudra of Shilalipete Madhyajuger Banglar Somaj-Sangskriti* (Dhaka, Novel Publishing House, 2018, Reprint, 1st edition, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999), pp. 110-13

<sup>22</sup> Habiba Khatun, *Iqlim Sonargaon History Jurisdiction Monuments* (Dhaka: Academic Press & Publishers Library, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Abdul Karim, *Banglar Itihas Muslim Bijay Theke Sipahi Biplab Parjauta (1200-1857 Khri:)* (Dhaka: Jatiya Shahitya Prakash, 2012, Reprint, first published in 1999), pp. 59

<sup>24</sup> Muazzam Hussain Khan, *Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah of Sonarganw* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Society for Oriental Studies, 2005), pp. 38-39, for coinage see pp. 111-16.

Mubarak Shāh. Except the last one, all the other texts were written outside Bengal and none of the above writers ever came here. The imperial lens is the salient feature of these works, which was reflected in their writings on Bengal. They approached the events of Bengal with their imperialist-telescope. As a result, some of the works cited Bengal as a land of traitors, disobedient and troublemakers.<sup>25</sup> Incorrect dates, missing links and partial narratives of events mentioned in these texts led historians to depend on the coins issued by the Sultans and their counterparts.

In the last three decades, new coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh have been discovered and published by professional numismatists like Syed Ejaz Hussain,<sup>26</sup> Md. Rezaul Karim,<sup>27</sup> Sutapa Sinha<sup>28</sup> and collectors<sup>29</sup> like Noman Nasir and Md. Shariful Islam. Their researches can also be categorised as works by expert numismatists. But the catalogue published by Stan Goron and J.P. Goenka<sup>30</sup> on all Indian Sultanate coins is still a groundbreaking compilation. All these researchers had approached the subject and tried to reassess the chronology and history of Bengal with their expertise on coins. It should be accepted here that our aim is not to reject or reevaluate all of their opinions. Rather we would attempt to reconfirm some of their conclusions and place them in the main stream of historical narrative on Bengal.

Stan Goron and G.P. Goenka published seven new coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in their Catalogue titled *The Coins of the Indian Sultanates: Covering the Area of Present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*.<sup>31</sup> The gold coin kept in Bangladesh National Museum was placed first in their list which was dated in 739 AH/ 1338 CE by historians and numismatists. The second one is a quarter *tankā* made of gold. Stan Goron and G.P. Goenka proposed a new reading of the gold coin (Picture 1). Their reading is given below:

<sup>25</sup> Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate Politics, Economy and Coins* (Delhi, Monohar, 2003), p. 36.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-85, 346-47.

<sup>27</sup> Muhammad Rezaul Karim, "A Critical Study of the Coins of the Independent Sultans of Bengal (From 1205 AD-1538 CE)", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Dhaka, 2000, pp. 93-96, 305, 346-48.

<sup>28</sup> Sutapa Sinha, *Coin Hoards of the Bengal Sultans 1205-1576 A.D. From West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam and Bangladesh* (Gurgaon: Shubhi Publication, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Noman Nasir, 'A Surprising Date of Sultan Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah of Bengal', *Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society*, Vol. 175, 2003, pp. 17-18.

<sup>30</sup> Stan Goron and J.P. Goenka, *The Coins of the Indian Sultanates: Covering the Area of Present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (New Delhi, Munshiram and Monoharlal, 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., pp. 165-66.

**Picture 1: Gold Coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, 734 AH**

Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: Bangladesh National Museum)

**Obverse:** *ālsultān āl āzam fakhr āl-dunyā wā'l din ābul muzāffar mubāarak shāh***Reverse:** *yāmin khalifāt Āllah nāsir āmir āl-muminin*

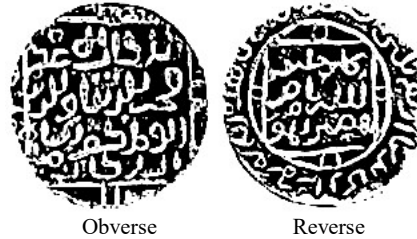
In the border, the date is read as 734 AH. They also mentioned a silver coin of Mubarak Shah which was not included in the catalogue. The other silver coins listed by them are presented below:

Type	Date (AH)	Mint	Obverse	Reverse
B 132	Not clear	Hadrat- Jālāl-Sonārgāon	<i>ālsultān āl āzam fakhr āl-dunyā wā'l din ābul muzāffar mubāarak shāh</i>	<i>yāmin khalifāt/ Āllah nāsir/ āmir āl-muminin</i>
B 133	737-739	Hadrat- Jālāl-Sonārgāon	as on B 132	on B 132
B 134		Off the flan	as on B 132	on B 132
B 135	740-744	Hadrat- Jālāl-Sonārgāon	as above but in a plain field	on B 132

In 2006 J.P. Goenka published a silver *tankā* (Picture 2) which was minted from Sonargaon. He proposed following reading of the coin:

**Obverse:** *alsultan al azam/ fakhr al-dunya wa'l din/ abul muzaffar mubarak shah/alsultan***Reverse:** *yamin khalifat/ allah nasir/ amir al-muminin*

Picture 2: Silver Coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, 734 AH



Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: S. M. Iftikharul Alam)

The reverse contains the epithet within a square field bounded by a round circle. An annulet is placed at the centre in between the square and the circle in the every line of the square. The date and the mint name are outside the circle. Usually the mint name Sonargaon in Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah's coin is prefixed with the adjective *jālāl* (greatness). However, this coin is an exception and here it is *shahr* (city or urban center). J. P. Goenka questioned the established narrative that Fakhruddin declared independence in 1338 CE on the basis of this silver coin and the gold coin mentioned earlier. Coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh dated 734 AH/ 1333 CE, 737AH/1336 CE, 738 AH/1337 CE and 739AH/ 1338 CE indicated his authority in the eastern part of Bengal. The absence of Tughlaq coins from Sonargaon added further support to this conclusion. J.P. Goenka accepted Firoz Mahmud's proposal that the gold coin was issued to commemorate Fakhruddin's authority and independence in Sonargaon. He concluded that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh became the first Muslim ruler of independent Sonargaon, who issued coins of at least five types and ruled in the eastern part of Bengal up to 750 AH (1350-51 CE) with a probable short interregnum gap around 735-736 AH/ 1334-1335 CE.<sup>32</sup>

Syed Ejaz Hussain, placed Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in 737 AH (1336-37 CE) in Sonargaon after the death of Bahram Khan with a critical analysis of the numismatic, epigraphic and textual sources.<sup>33</sup> He agreed with the reading of Edward Thomas. He found the same type of coins in a private collection in Kolkata.<sup>34</sup> He also mentioned that Singapur Coin Auction published a coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh dated 737

<sup>32</sup> J. P. Goenka, 'Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah's Independence in Sonargaon : Numismatic Evidence', *Oriental Numismatic Society Journal*, No.186, 2006, pp. 27-28.

<sup>33</sup> Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate*, Delhi, Monohar, 2003, p. 83.

<sup>34</sup> He reported another specimen of the same type in a separate private collection, *Ibid*, p. 87.



AH/1336-37 CE.<sup>35</sup> All these coins examined by Syed Ejaz Hussain further strengthen the reading of the date portion as 737 AH/1336-37 CE. He accepted the short interregnum of one year and remarked that “we do not find his coins with the year AH 738/ (AD 1337-38), which was probably the year of his exile.”<sup>36</sup> Sutapa Sinha analysed several hoards containing Sultanate coins of Bengal, now preserved in various Museums and Collections around the world. She found thirty three coins of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh in Colonel Charles Seton Guthrie Collection, Bode Museum, Berlin. The lot originated from the Kooch Bihar Hoard and travelled all the way to Germany. In this collection the earliest dated coin is 737 AH/ 1336 CE and there is a gap of three years (738-740 AH/ 1337-1339 CE), followed by continuous dates up to 750 AH/1339 CE. Sutapa Sinha accepted the date of 737 AH/1336 as the earliest one.<sup>37</sup>

A Hoard found from Sylhet district, Bangladesh is known as the Kastabir Mahalla Hoard. It contains coins of Bengal Sultanate issued in the 14th century by the imperial governors of the independent rulers of Bengal. Out of 97 coins, 17 were issued by Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh, dated 741-749 AH, yearly without any gap.<sup>38</sup>

A classic monograph on the coins of the Independent Sultanate period was produced by Md. Rezaul Karim on the basis of the coins kept in the Bangladesh National Museum. He proposed a chronological outline for the period and put the reign period of Fakhruddin as 737-750 AH. Rezaul Karim read a silver coin preserved in BNM (Acc No. 78.1839) and identified it as type B3 of the 5 types of coins issued by Mubarak Shah. The date and its mint name are recorded in the margin as:

*Duribā hāzād dināra fī Haḍrat Jālāl Sonārkanw sānāh sāmān wā sālās īn wā saba miyāh.*

(This dinar was struck in Hazrat Jalal Sonargaon in the year thirty-eight and seven hundred).<sup>39</sup>

This coin clearly proves that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh was in power in Sonargaon in 738 AH. The same type of coin issued one year earlier (737 AH) has also been found.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Taisei-Baldwin-Gillio, “Singapore Coin Auction Catalogue 28”, Singapore, 1999, Catalogue 28, No. 743.

<sup>36</sup> Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate*, Delhi, Monohar, 2003, p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> Sutapa Sinha, ‘A Note on an Important Coin Collection of the Bengal Sultans in the Bode-Museum, Berlin’, in Gerd J.R. Mevissen and Arundhati Banerji (eds.), *PRAJÑĀDHARA: Essays on Asian Art, History, Epigraphy and Culture in Honour of Gouriswar Bhattacharya* (New Delhi, Kaveri Books, 2009), p. 362.

<sup>38</sup> Sutapa Sinha, *Coin Hoards of the Bengal Sultans*, 2017, p. 186.

<sup>39</sup> Muhammad Rezaul Karim, “A Critical Study of the Coins of the Independent Sultans of Bengal”, 2000, p. 305.

Fakhruddin's coins dated 740 and 741 AH are rare.<sup>41</sup> Recently a book on the coins of Sultanate period of Bengal has been published by Md. Shariful Islam and Mohammad Abdur Rahim.<sup>42</sup> This cannot be termed as a coin catalogue. Methods and techniques of deciphering coins as enunciated in this book have attracted special attention of scholars and numismatists. The book contains one or two best specimens of every ruler of Bengal and two-dimensional images of legends engraved. Islam and Rahim agreed with Stan Goron and J.P. Goenka's dating of Fakhruddin's coins. But their book included only one coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, dated 747 AH. The present researcher has followed the aforementioned method and attempted to decipher afresh the only gold coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh preserved in Bangladesh National Museum.

Historians agreed that 750 AH is the latest date among Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh's coins. Bengal Sultanate coins are a world of mystery. Noman Nasir published a silver coin of this ruler. On the obverse of the coin, the legend is the usual one: *āl sultān al a'zam fakhr al dunyā wa'l dīn abū'l muẓaffar mubarakshāh al sulṭān*. On the reverse, the epithet is: *yamīn al-khalīfa-nāṣir amīr al mū'minīn*. The margin records the date as: *ḍuriba hathihi sikkah bi[ba] ḥadrat jalāl sunārgānū sanah thalath wa khamṣīn was saba 'miya*. [this *sikkā* was issued from the mint of Hazrat-Jālāl-Sonārgāon in the year seven hundred fifty three *i.e.* 1353 CE].<sup>43</sup> He concluded with following three explanations:

- (a) Probably Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh was ousted by Gāzi Shāh in 750 AH and recaptured his authority in 753 AH for a short time.
- (b) It was mistake and an old mould of Fakhruddin's coin was used in the obverse.
- (c) The date 753 AH is not correct and the correct date is 743AH. Most likely the die makers of the coin must have made this mistake.<sup>44</sup>

Bangladesh National Museum authority published one gold coin (accession ID 01.01.003.1967.00322) and 36 silver coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh preserved in their store. The Museum authority permitted the present researcher to examine the coin

<sup>40</sup> Nalinikanta Bhattasali, *Coins and Chronology*, 1922, p. 11; Muhammad Rezaul Karim, "A Critical Study of the Coins of the Independent Sultans of Bengal", 2000, p. 347.

<sup>41</sup> Reported only two specimen with 740 AH is known in *Suppl. Shillong Cabinet* No.8, Pl II and *Suppl Shillong Cabinet*, Pl. 118-119 dated 740 AH. No. 2133, dated 741 no 2 134.

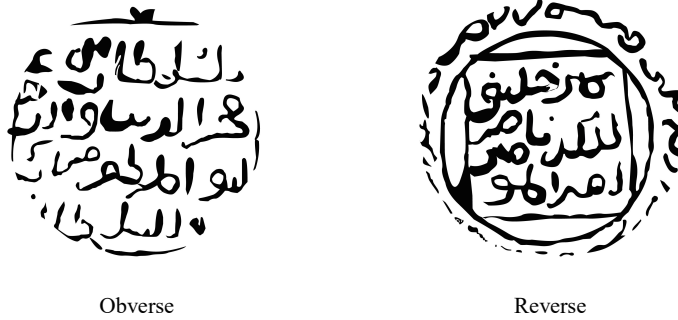
<sup>42</sup> Md. Shariful Islam and Mohammad Abdur Rahim, *The Sultānate Period Coins of Bengal: Focus on the Epigraphic Study, Calligraphy and History* (Dhaka, Black N Orange, 2020), pp. 79-83.

<sup>43</sup> Translations are mine.

<sup>44</sup> Noman Nasir, 'A Surprising Date of Sultan Fakhr al-DinMubarak Shah of Bengal', 2003, pp. 1-18

personally in the office of the Deputy Keeper, Department of History and Classical Art.<sup>45</sup> Reading of this specific gold coin is given below:

Picture 3: Two-dimensional Sketch of the Legends, 734 AH Coin

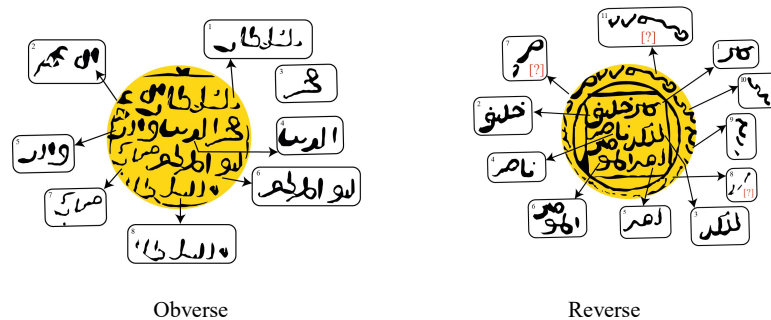


Obverse

Reverse

(Sketch: Md Sazid Arefin)

Picture 4: Two-dimensional Sketch of the Legends, 734 AH Coin



Obverse

Reverse

(Sketch: Md Sazid Arefin)

<sup>45</sup> A colored photograph has been produced in *Coins of the Bengal Sultans, Bangladesh National Museum Descriptive Catalogue Series Volume: 05/2017 (part-1)* (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2017), p. 139

Table 1: Arabic Script and Typed form of the Legends (Obverse)

No.	Legends	Arabic Script	Roman Script
1	السلطان	السلطان	<i>āl sultān</i>
2	الاعظم	الاعظم	<i>āl āzam</i>
3	فخر	فخر	<i>Fakhr</i>
4	الدنيا	الدنيا	<i>āl dunyā</i>
5	والدين	والدين	<i>wā'l dīn</i>
6	ابوالمظفر	ابوالمظفر	<i>ābu 'l muzāffar</i>
7	مبارك شاه	مبارك شاه	<i>mubārak shāh</i>
8	السلطان	السلطان	<i>āl sultān</i>

(Chart: Sahidul Hasan)

Table 2: Arabic Script and Typed form of the Legends (Reverse)

No.	Legends	Arabic Script	Roman Script
1	يمين	يمين	<i>yāmīn</i>
2	خليفة	خليفة	<i>āl-khalīfā</i>
3	الله	الله	<i>Āllah</i>
4	ناصر	ناصر	<i>Nāsir</i>
5	امير	امير	<i>Āmīr</i>
6	المؤمنين	المؤمنين	<i>āl mūminīn</i>
7	?	?	?
8	?	?	?
9	اربع	اربع	<i>Ārba'</i>
10	ثلثين	ثلثين	<i>sālāsīn</i>
11	وسبعائة	وسبعائة	<i>wāsābāmīāh</i>

(Chart: Sahidul Hasan)

The present researcher noticed that the last three alphabets *ra* (ر), *ba* (ب) and *ain* (ع) are very clear. In written form of Arabic numeric only the four (أربع) ends with these three alphabets. So it is more likely to be *ārbā* (أربع) i.e. four. So the reading of the date portion is *arba salasin* (34). There are at least three silver coins (Picture 2, 4 and 5) of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh dated 734 AH.

**Picture 5: Silver Coin of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh, 734 AH**



Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: Muhammad Shamsuddin, Personal Collection)

**Picture 6: Silver Coin of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh, 734 AH**



Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: Noman Nasir, Personal Collection)

The following dates are found in the 36 silver coins listed in the catalogues include: 737 AH/1336 CE, 738 AH/1337 CE, 741 AH/1340 CE, 742 AH/ 1341 CE, 743/ 1342 CE, 744 AH/ 1343 CE, 745 AH/ 1344 CE, 746 AH/ 1345 CE, 747 AH/ 1346 CE, 748 AH/ 1347 CE, 749 AH/ 1348 CE, 750 AH/ 1349 CE. Among these 36 coins, four (No. 110-113, Picture 4) bear date 744 AH/1343 CE.<sup>46</sup> The date and the mint name are given below:

ضرب هذه السكه بحضرة سناركانو سنة اربع و اربعين وسبعمأة

All the legends are similar to the silver coin of 734 as mentioned by J.P. Goenka except two words:

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, pp. 150-53.

1. *Sālāsīn* (ثلاثين) of 734 AH coin is replaced with *ārbāin* (اربعين) in 744 AH coin.
2. *Shahr* (شهر) of 734 AH is replaced with *jālāl* (جلال) in 744 AH coin.

The following table shows that *ārbā* is identical in his coins.<sup>47</sup>

**Table 3: 744 AH Coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, Bangladesh National Museum**



On the basis of the above numismatic evidence, it can be concluded that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh declared independence in Sonargaon in 734 AH/1333 CE and continued to rule till 750 AH/1349 CE. The sixteen years sovereignty was interrupted for a short period. Accepting this chronology, the last section of this article will be a modest endeavour to analyse the circumstantial as well as spatial context that led or rather should we say inspired Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to revolt and declare independence against the mighty Tughlaqs.

### (C) Factors that led Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to Declare Independence

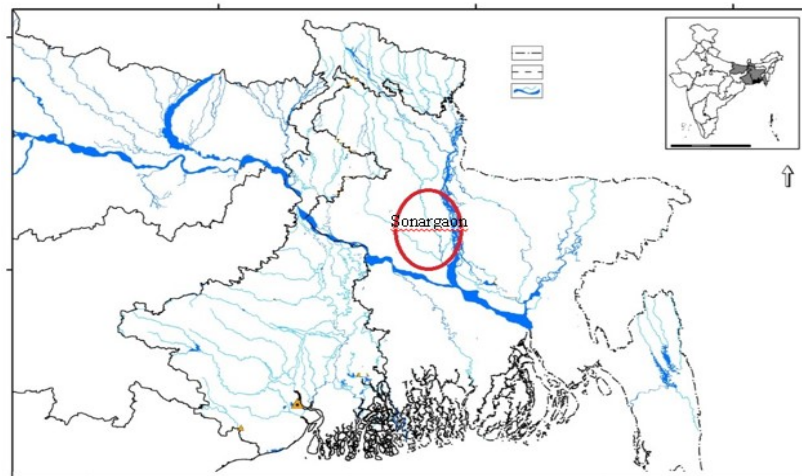
On the basis of textual and numismatic evidence the following statements on Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh will not be unjustified:

- (a) He was an efficient high official under Bāhrām Khān, the Tughlaq governor of Sonargaon. After the demise of Bāhrām Khān he declared independence in the eastern part of Bengal in 1333 CE.
- (b) The Governors appointed by the Tughlaqs in the Eastern India marched towards Sonargaon with their joint force under the leadership of Qadar Khān. The date

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. These photographs are taken from *Coins of the Bengal Sultans, Bangladesh National Museum Descriptive Catalogue*.

of this collective attack is still a matter of controversy among historians. In the initial phase, Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh was defeated by the joint army led by Qadar Khān. However, Fakhruddin tactfully left his capital Sonargaon for a short time as a part of his war strategy.

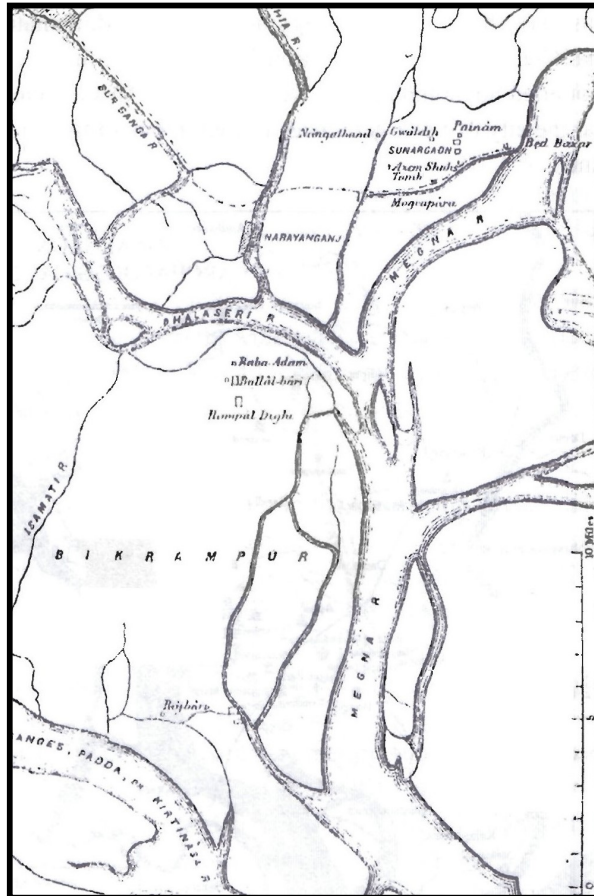
- (c) During the stay of the imperial soldiers of Qadar Khan in Sonargaon resentment occurred among them. It was in the middle of monsoonic heavy rain. Taking the advantage of rainy condition and the chaotic situation of the resentment, Fakhruddin reestablished possession of his capital *Hazrāt-Jālāl Sonārgāon*.
- (d) Fakhruddin ruled till 750 AH. It has been mentioned earlier that after 740 AH his coins were issued every year. Specimens of earlier dates are found less in number.
- (e) A brief discussion on the topographical features of Sonargaon and its surrounding areas will help us to understand the issue. At present, Sonargaon is an upazila under the Narayanganj district, about 27 miles northeast of Dhaka and covers an area of 24 square miles. It is accepted that the modern name bears the historical memory of the toponym. The 14th century's *Shahr/Iqlim/Hazrāt-Jālāl* was located somewhere around modern Sonargaon.<sup>48</sup>



**Map 1:** Major Rivers of Bengal, focus on Narayanganj, Bangladesh  
(Map modified by Sahidul Hasan, not to scale from the map of Monalisa Rakshit.)

<sup>48</sup> Sahidul Hasan, “The Making and Remaking of Geo-political and Cultural Units in Bengal (13th to 18th Centuries)”, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Dhaka, 2024, pp. 203-04.

The Dhaka-Chittagong four-lane expressway runs through the area.<sup>49</sup> Shāmsuddin Firūz was the first Sultan who issued coins from the Sonargaon mint dated 705 AH/1305 CE.<sup>50</sup> The area is located in the middle of the delta. The ancient capital of



Vikramapura was not far away from Sonargaon. Major rivers and their tributaries played a dynamic role in the rise and development of Sonargaon as a capital city. The Brahmaputra (old course) created a defence line on the northern side of Sonargaon. The River Sitalakhya flows through the west. The Meghna passes over the east and south of the area (Map 1). The northern boundary of Sonargaon was less definite but three rivers— Sitalakhya, Dhaleshwari and Meghna— created a natural defence in the southern part of Sonargaon.<sup>51</sup> Menikhal, a

**Map 2:** Major Rivers of Narayanganj, Bangladesh

(Alexander Cunningham, *A Tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879-80: From Patna to Sonargaon*, *Archaeological Reports*, Vol. 15, Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1882.)

<sup>49</sup> Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Sonargaon', in Abdul Momin Chowdhury (eds.), *History of Bangladesh Sultanate and Mughal Period (c. 1200-1800 CE)* (Dhaka, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2020), p. 541; Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Sites and Surroundings', in A.B.M. Husain (ed.), *Sonargaon-Panam* (Dhaka, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997), pp. 1-32.

<sup>50</sup> Abdul Corpus of the Muslim Coins, 2013, p. 158.

<sup>51</sup> Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Sonargaon', 2020, pp. 541-542; Md. Rezaul Karim and Saikat Asgar (eds.), *Sonargaoner Itihas: Utsaa o Upadan* (Dhaka, Rahman Group of Industries, 1993), pp. 33-34.



watercourse that runs in between the Sitalakhya and Meghna, had created another defence line. The river network around Sonargaon (Map 2) facilitated the formation of a political entity as well as its economic prosperity. It was connected with the Bay of Bengal through the southern river networks of the Delta.

The geomorphology and spatial context created an opportunity for Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to declare and retain his independent political authority. Location, topography and environs of eastern part of the Delta were suitable for naval warfare. Moonsonic heavy rain acted as a natural barrier against the invading imperial army during the rainy season. Rivers around Sonargaon not only provided natural security but also facilitated quick movement of the fleet and the army. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh was well acquainted with this area. One may raise question that what is the basis of such conclusion? Is there any particular written text on Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh's war strategies? – the answer is negative. However, analysis of Ibn Baṭṭūṭāh's travelogue and *Tārīkh-i-Mubārakshāhī* support the conjecture. Yahyā bin Āḥmad Sarhindī wrote that there was resentment among the soldiers of Qadar Khan in Sonargaon. At that time Fakhruddin was hiding in a safe place opposite of the river. Name of this river is not mentioned by Sarhindī. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh succeeded in establishing a rapport with the recalcitrant soldiers of the imperial army. At one stage, Qadar Khan was killed by his own soldiers. After that Fakhruddin marched towards his capital to recapture it. He distributed the wealth of the *khāzānā* (treasury) to the soldiers according to his promise made for gaining their friendship.<sup>52</sup>

The above narrative of Yahyā bin Āḥmad Sarhindī indicates that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh was hiding on the other side of a river which was flowing at that time near the capital Sonargaon. He was waiting for a suitable moment to reclaim position of his capital Sonargaon. Jadunath Sarkar also explained the situation in the same tone. The excessive rain resulted in dampness. The soldiers of Qadar Khān were not habituated to such a climate.<sup>53</sup> Jadunath Sarkar depicted the political scenario of Sonargaon in a very romantic way: 'like the ever-shifting course of the rivers the political current in the eastern capital took bewildering spins.'<sup>54</sup> The geo-morphological setting, river network and heavy moonsonic rain prompted defeat of the imperial army within a very short time.

<sup>52</sup> Yahya bin Ahmad Sirhindi, *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi*, English translation by K. K. Bose (Karachi: Karim Sons, 1977), pp. 106; Abdul Qadir Badaoni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, English translation by George S. A. Ranking, Vol. 1 (Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1986, pp. 106-07.

<sup>53</sup> Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, 1948, p. 98.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

North Indian political scenarios need to be mentioned for logical explanation of the declaration of independence by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in Sonargaon. It is mentioned earlier that the governors appointed by the Tughlaq rulers posted in eastern part of India marched against Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh. No textual references noted that any military support came from north India i.e. from capital Delhi. What were the reasons behind such attitude of the central authority? Was it negligence from Muhammad bin Tughlaq? The answer is hidden in the contemporary north Indian politics. It is a known fact that Muhammad bin Tughlaq was a famous ruler for his mega projects. In 1327 CE, he started shifting his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, Deccan. This particular initiative caused him a great loss of wealth and human life. In 1334 CE a revolt took place in Mewar. Muhammad bin Tughlaq himself became very ill due to a bubonic plaque. The Karachil expedition in 1333 CE was also a disastrous project for him in terms of money and human resources. More than one lac soldiers were killed in Karachil expedition and the imperial army had to retreat. His mega projects and a possibility of Mongol attack in the north-western frontier kept him fully occupied. He was not in a situation to concentrate on the state of affairs in Bengal. The north Indian political scenarios hosted a perfect stage for Mubarak Shah. Located on the easternmost border of the empire Sonargaon became an independent political authority under his leadership.

Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan globe trotter of the 14th century, started his return journey from the river port *Sunārkaḡwān* i.e. Sonargaon. He came to this port city from Sylhet after travelling for 15 days through the river *Nahar-ul-āzraq*, identified as the River Meghna. He noted that there was a constant war between Lakhnauti and Sonargaon. He wrote: “During the winter and the midst of mud caused by the rains Fakhruddin raided Lakhnauti by water on which he was strong. But when the dry season came, ‘Ali Shah invaded Bengal by land since he was strong on land.”<sup>55</sup> The statement indicates that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh had taken full advantage of the river-network and monsoonic weather for his war against the Tughlaq army.

The topographic importance of Sonargaon is also found in the writing of F. B. Bradley-Birt. He described that the area was bounded by the big rivers of Bengal which makes it a very suitable land mass in terms of defence. The centre of attraction was the southern area, where the Meghna joins with an old course of the Brahmaputra.<sup>56</sup> Mirzā Nāthān, a Mughal naval officer, vividly described the importance of *nāwārā* and river-

<sup>55</sup> Ma Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla*, 1976, p. 237.

<sup>56</sup> F. B. Bradley-Birt, *The Romance of an Eastern Capital*, p. 72.

based war strategy of Bengal.<sup>57</sup> Islām Khān's war tactics showed that his prime concern was to control the major river routes of this area, especially the Sitalakhay, the Meghna and its tributaries. Considering the above geo-morphological settings it can be inferred that like the Mughal Subahdar Islām Khān Chistī Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh may have taken full advantage of his location and topography to keep his sovereignty intact over the trans-Meghna region.

The above discussion shows that being aware of political condition of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh took advantage of his geographic settings and declared independence in Sonargaon. His reign period was sixteen years (734-750AH/1333-1350 CE) with a short interregnum. These sixteen years of rule established an independent political structure in the 14th century. Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh's authority included the eastern and southeastern areas of the Bengal delta. He attacked Lakhnauti and Satgaon, but his success was limited. Shihābuddin Tālīsh, author of *Fathīya-i-Ibriyyā*, recorded that Fakhruddin conquered Chittagong.<sup>58</sup> Historians credited Fakhruddin for establishing an independent Sultanate in Bengal.

In 1340 CE, Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh proceeded through Sylhet to the north, Tippera and Noakhali. He defeated the Tippera king and the modern districts of Comilla and Noakhali were annexed to his own kingdom. Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh's domination over Comilla, Noakhali, Sylhet and Chittagong threatened the Tippera and Arakan kings. His political authority was spread over the eastern and southeastern part of present day Bangladesh. It was separated from the other entities by the Jamuna on the western side and by the Padma on the north.

### Conclusion

The scarcity of information in textual sources led historians to depend on numismatic evidences to reconstruct the history of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh. Creepy legends and sometimes cut off parts on the edges of coins resulted confusion about the chronology of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh's rule. In the initial phase, the debate was centred on 737 AH/ 1336 CE and 739 AH/1338 CE. Recent reading of the only gold coin and silver coins shows that 734 AH/1333 CE is the date of independence of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh. My reading also reconfirms that 734 AH/1333 CE is the earliest date of this Sultan, which took the beginning of his reign five years earlier. As a result, the year of

<sup>57</sup> Abdul Karim, *History of Bengal Mughal Period*, Vol. 1, (Rajshahi: Institute of Bangladesh Studies, 1999), pp. 217-86.

<sup>58</sup> Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal* (1948), p. 98; Muazzam Hussain Khan, *Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah* (2005), pp. 72-83.

Independent Sultanate should be reconsidered as 734 AH/1333 CE and count as 205 years instead of 200 years. This new dating on the basis of coins is the main finding of this research. The political crisis faced by Muhāmmād bin Tughlaq and the geographical advantages prepared a perfect stage for Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to establish his sovereign political authority in Sonargaon in 1334 CE.

In the pre-13th century phase, the Deva, the Chandra and the Harikela rulers created a separate political authority centred round the trans-Meghna region. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh's kingdom was the first attempt in the 14th century phase to establish such an entity. The mint named *Hazrat-Jālāl* or *Sahr* Sonargaon repeated the same history. Bisected by the Padma and the Jamuna, Sonargaon and its surrounding areas were under Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh. In course of time, his territorial jurisdiction extended towards the east and southeast. Control over Chittagong was one of the prime successes of this ruler. It should be noted here that the coins of Fakhruddin dated after 740 AH/ 1339 CE are available and comparatively large in number. It was needed as a result of flourishing trading activities through *Sadkawan*, a port that was situated somewhere in the coast of modern Chittagong. His construction activities, the coins issued by him or the text of Sarhindhi lead us to conclude that in the sixteen years (734-750AH/ 1333-49 CE) of independence, Sonargaon grew as a geo-political entity, which had a flourishing trading centre under its jurisdiction. As a result of trading activities through the Bay of Bengal, Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh had to issue more coins. These coins bear the testimony of his sovereign authority in the trans-Meghna region. In the third decade of the 14th century Sonargaon stood as the first independent geo-political entity in the eastern and southeastern parts of Bengal.

## **Bangladesh-India Land Boundary Agreements, 1974-2015: Context, Correlations and Territoriality**

Mohammad Golam Rabbani\*

### **Abstract**

Bangladesh and India share 4096.7 km. land boundary, which was drawn between India and the eastern part of Pakistan (East Bengal) by the Radcliffe Award during the partition of 1947. This boundary became the Bangladesh-India boundary after the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. Therefore, the Pakistan-India land boundary disputes over the un-demarcated boundary, adverse possessions and enclaves transformed into Bangladesh-India ones. These land boundary disputes witnessed one summit-level agreement between Pakistan and India and three summit-level agreements between Bangladesh and India. However, the land boundary disputes were eventually resolved under the land swap deal of 2015. This striking background led to the question as to why these issues were hung up for 68 years, what contexts led to several summit-level agreements on the same issues, and what were the correlations among the agreements. Against this background, this article attempts to shed light on how India, being the big neighbour, dominated the entire trajectory of the land boundary disputes and how it changed its agreed positions from one agreement to another. However, the main objective of this article is to see whether India's territoriality towards its border with Bangladesh was gradually transformed into the pattern of a zero-sum game during the period from 1974 to 2015, and what was the corresponding territoriality of Bangladesh.

**Key words:** Land boundary, enclaves, adverse possessions, agreement, border guidelines, context, correlation, territoriality

### **Prelude**

Through India's generous support in the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971, a strong relationship was built between these two countries at the outset. It is memorable that after the historic speech of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 7 March 1971, which was an implicit declaration of the independence of Bangladesh, the Parliament of India adopted a resolution on 11 March 1971 in favour of the Liberation War of Bangladesh. The resolution stated in part, "This House records its profound conviction that the historic upsurge of 75 million people of East Bengal

---

\* Professor of History, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka-1342

[Bangladesh] will triumph. The House also wishes to assure them that their struggle and sacrifices will receive the wholehearted sympathy and support of the people of India”.<sup>1</sup> Subsequently, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi paid a state visit to Bangladesh just three months after its liberation, which was the first-ever visit of any Head of Government to independent Bangladesh. This visit was concluded by signing the “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Peace” on 19 March 1972 (referred to as Friendship Treaty). Thus, the initial bilateral relations were set based on reciprocal respect for each other’s territorial integrity, sovereignty, and shared interest.

Though the initial bilateral relations were set for mutual interest, there were some inborn disputes over the land boundary between these two countries, which Bangladesh inherited from Pakistan. Bangladesh and India share a 4096.7 km land boundary, which was drawn between India and the eastern part of Pakistan (East Bengal) by the Radcliffe Award during the partition of 1947. After the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, the East Pakistan-India boundary became the Bangladesh-India boundary. It is pertinent to note that three areas of disputes arose out of the provisions of the Radcliffe Award, such as the un-demarcated land boundary, enclaves, and adverse possessions. Remarkably, these disputes were resolved in the “Agreement between India and Pakistan on Border Disputes (East Pakistan), New Delhi, September 10, 1958” (referred to as Nehru-Noon Agreement), which India could not execute due to political confrontations and legal wrangles. Subsequently, with the independence of Bangladesh, the Nehru-Noon Agreement became outdated. However, soon after the independence of Bangladesh, the outstanding land boundary disputes drew the attention of both governments. Consequently, the “Agreement between the Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh and the Government of the Republic of India Concerning the Demarcation of the Land Boundary between India and Bangladesh and Related Matters” (referred to as Land Boundary Agreement) was signed on 16 May 1974 in New Delhi. It may be pointed out that the Prime Ministers of the two countries decided to append their signatures to the agreement underlining the importance sought to be given to the agreement by both nations.

In both countries, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 faced writ petitions in the court against ceding territories. In Bangladesh, the Supreme Court dismissed the case shortly after a few hearings. Subsequently, the Bangladesh government ratified the

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *The Bangladesh Times*, 19 June 1974.

agreement through an amendment of its constitution on 23 November 1974<sup>2</sup> and carried out its tasks under the agreement in the same year. However, in India, the petitions against the agreement took 16 years to get dismissed. The Calcutta High Court had a verdict in favour of leasing the Tin Bigha Corridor to Bangladesh under the agreement, which was challenged in the Supreme Court of India. The Supreme Court of India also ruled in September 1990 that the Tin Bigha Corridor could be leased out without ratifying the agreement in the parliament. The Supreme Court also asked the government to implement the agreement as early as possible.<sup>3</sup>

Ironically, even after the discharge of the case by the Supreme Court of India in 1990, the agreement was hung up until 2015. Eventually, after many bilateral negotiations vis-à-vis confrontations in domestic politics, the government of India succeeded in implementing the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 in 2015 under two new summit-level agreements, i.e. the Protocol of 2011 and the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015. However, the hang-up of the agreement for 41 years (1974-2015) was the source of escalating tensions between Bangladesh and India. It is remarkable that as a big neighbour, India dominated the entire trajectory of the land boundary disputes and changed its agreed positions from one agreement to another. This striking background led to the question as to why these issues were hung up for 68 years, what contexts led to several summit-level agreements on the same issues, and what were the correlations among the agreements. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to see whether India's territoriality towards its border with Bangladesh was gradually transformed into the pattern of a zero-sum game during the period from 1974 to 2015, and what was the corresponding territoriality of Bangladesh.

To shed light on the changing nature of India's territoriality toward its border with Bangladesh and the corresponding territoriality of Bangladesh, this article analyses the context and correlations of the land boundary agreements based on ground reality. In doing so, extensive fieldwork has been carried out in the borderlands of Bangladesh using qualitative research tools such as observation, in-depth interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). Oral history has been a key tool for studying the perception of the borderland communities about the changing nature of India's territoriality. Context analysis methodology has been used to investigate the land boundary agreements between Bangladesh and India case by case. Each agreement has been contextually interpreted to see how domestic politics often led India to

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Constitution of Bangladesh* [Third Amendment] Act, 1974, [Act No. LXXIV].

<sup>3</sup> *The New Nation*, 28 March 1992; *The Telegraph*, 28 March 1992.

depart from its agreed position from one agreement to another. Moreover, the border guarding forces of Bangladesh and India signed the Border Guidelines in 1975, which materialized the territoriality on the ground. However, the Border Guidelines were replaced by the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) in 2011. Hence, the correlations between these two have been observed to see the changing nature of India's territoriality towards its border with Bangladesh.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The relationship between Bangladesh and India seems complex because both governments maintain that their relationship is of mutual trust, friendship and cooperation, which is not evident in the management of their land boundary. However, many critics argue that the relationship between Bangladesh and India often suffers from trust deficits. It is viewed by some scholars that India's territoriality has been gradually getting the nature of a zero-sum game leading to the trust deficit between the two countries, which is often reflected in the land boundary agreements.

The word 'territoriality' refers to the monopolization of space by an individual or group. However, territoriality is the pattern of behaviour of a state related to the defense of its territory. It is a particular mechanism of a state, employed in a political frontier within which its border lies. The whole process and action through which a state constructs and maintains borders can be called territorialization. In most cases, states employ 'territoriality' as "a spatial strategy" to "affect, influence, or control resources and people by controlling area" in the borderlands.<sup>4</sup> It means that territoriality is a product of social context. Looking at the land boundary of India, which it shares with several countries, one can see that it has developed different strategies for managing its border with different neighbouring countries. Thus, based on bilateral relations and social contexts of different borders, graduated territoriality was developed by India, such as a 'soft' or open border with Nepal and Bhutan, a 'hard' or war-driven militarized border with Pakistan, and a frightening fenced border with Bangladesh.

Borders must be continuously "maintained and socially reproduced through particular practices and discourses", which emphasise the 'other'.<sup>5</sup> However, emphasising the 'other' itself is a source of conflict. Whether employed by peaceful

---

4 Robert D. Sack, "Human Territoriality: A Theory", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 73(1), 1983, pp. 55-74.

5 James Anderson and Liam O'Dowd, "Borders, Border Regions and Territoriality: Contradictory Meanings, Changing Significance", *Regional Studies*, Vol. 33(7), 1999, pp. 593-604.



or violent means territoriality is inherently conflictual.<sup>6</sup> John Agnew argued, “There is an essential conflict of interest between states in which one state’s gain is always another state’s loss unless, in more liberal and idealist accounts, the states can negotiate a temporary regime of cooperation over their antagonistic interests.”<sup>7</sup> In reality, “territoriality actively encourages the zero-sum-game characteristic of national and border conflicts”.<sup>8</sup> Thus, “border even between friendly states can be a site of quite considerable violence”<sup>9</sup>, as in the case of Bangladesh and India.

### **Context of the Land Boundary Agreements**

The Indo-Pakistan and Indo-Bangladesh land boundary disputes witnessed one international tribunal (Bagge Awards, 1950), four summit-level agreements, i.e. the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974, the Protocol of 2011, the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015, and two ‘Terms of Lease’ of the Tin Bigha Corridor in 1982 and 1992. All these agreements were concluded on the same issues, namely the un-demarcated boundary (approximately 6.1-kilometre), adverse possessions and enclaves. Now, the question is why these issues were kept unresolved for several decades. The second question is why several summit-level agreements were required to resolve these issues. In this regard, it is pertinent to note that with time changes, the context of the issues mentioned above also changes. Moreover, with all progress remains a problem in Bangladesh-India relations that when there is a change of government in either country, the territoriality in the Indo-Bangladesh border also changes. However, the contextual trajectories of the land boundary agreements between Bangladesh and India are discussed below.

### **Context of the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974**

The initial disputes on the India-East Bengal border were resolved in the Bagge Awards of 1950. The rest of the disputes were resolved in the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958, which India could not execute apparently because of legal wrangles and the opposition of the provincial government of West Bengal. History attests that the border issues were deliberately kept alive during the Pakistan period. On the contrary, the governments of Bangladesh and India felt the urge to resolve the land boundary disputes at the earliest possible time. At this end, Bangladesh Prime

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> John Agnew, “The Territorial Trap: The Geographical Assumptions of International Relations Theory”, *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 1(1), 1994, pp. 53-80.

<sup>8</sup> James Anderson and Liam O’Dowd, *Op cit.*

<sup>9</sup> Willem van Schendel, *The Bengal Borderland: Beyond State and Nation in South Asia*, Anthem Press, (London 2005), p. 3.

Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman paid an official visit to New Delhi from 12 to 16 May 1974. The entire gamut of the bilateral relations was covered in this summit meeting and at the end, the Land Boundary Agreement was signed on 16 May 1974.

#### **Hang up of the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974**

The foresightedness of the governments of Bangladesh and India led to the signing of the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974, which provided detailed guidelines for an amicable resolution to the land boundary disputes. However, the political scenario in Bangladesh radically changed after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on 15 August 1975. This assassination “transformed what promised to be an amicable relationship into an essentially adversarial relationship. The following military regimes seemed to have believed that India was a hostile neighbour rather than a prospective friend...India became equally recalcitrant and eventually indifferent in its approach towards resolving mutual problems”.<sup>10</sup> The foreign policy of the first military regime of Bangladesh, led by Ziaur Rahman (1975-81), kept India away from Bangladesh. The stubborn unwillingness of Indira Gandhi to maintain bilateralism with the military regime of Bangladesh was equally responsible for keeping away from each other. However, when Morarji Desai succeeded Indira Gandhi in 1977, Ziaur Rahman tried to improve relations with India. Eventually, a 5-year interim agreement on the Ganges water sharing was signed in November 1977, which expired in 1982 without being renewed. Yet, “the respite in the Indo-Bangladesh relations proved rather temporary as with the return of Indira Gandhi to power in January 1980” as “she remained as uncompromising as ever” with Zia’s regime.<sup>11</sup> The second military regime led by H. M. Ershad (1981-90) did not see any significant change in the relations with India set during Zia’s regime. Instead, the erection of the border fence by India led to bilateral rhetoric.

Though democracy was restored in Bangladesh in 1991, the first BNP-led Government (1991-1996) was viewed by India as of anti-Indian spirit. Even though Prime Minister Khaleda Zia visited New Delhi in 1992, tensions in bilateral relations continued. As a whole, from 1975 to 1996, “Bangladesh’s approach was derived, in part, from the nature of its adversarial domestic politics where confrontation with India was seen as a point of differentiation with the political forces who were seen as

---

<sup>10</sup> Rehman Sobhan, “Restoring Commonsense into Indo-Bangladesh Relations (Part I): Graduating diplomacy and politics into the 21st century”, *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 5 September 2011.

<sup>11</sup> A. S. Bhasin, *India-Bangladesh Relations: Documents 1971-1994*, Volume One & Two, Siba Exim Pvt. Ltd, (New Delhi 1996), p. ci.

Pro-Indian”.<sup>12</sup> Under these circumstances, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 was sent to the back burner for four decades.

### **Context of the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015**

The relations between Bangladesh and India began to improve when Awami League leader Sheikh Hasina came to power in 1996. Notably, a significant policy change occurred in Bangladesh on the India issue during the first tenure of Sheikh Hasina’s government (1996-2001). In reciprocity, India also changed its stance towards Bangladesh. Though no remarkable progress in implementing the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 was made several other outstanding issues including the water-sharing issues of the Ganges River were resolved. After signing the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty in 1996, the second breakthrough was made by Sheikh Hasina when she assumed office in 2009 for the second term. Sheikh Hasina’s visit to New Delhi in 2010 was the ice-breaker in Bangladesh-India relations. This summit was indeed a determined step towards the revitalization of the relationship. In this summit, several initiatives were taken to implement the long-pending Land Boundary Agreement of 1974.

Sheikh Hasina’s visit to New Delhi was followed by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh’s visit to Dhaka during 6-7 September 2011. Manmohan Singh’s visit to Dhaka was expected to be a breakthrough. However, Manmohan Singh could not succeed due to the non-cooperation of West Bengal’s Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. Nonetheless, the Protocol to the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 was signed at the Dhaka summit, which directed the demarcation and determination of the un-demarcated land boundary, adverse possessions and enclaves. It is worth mentioning that the disputes over the land boundaries were settled on the ground by this protocol. Thus, a significant development was made towards implementing the agreement. After that, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina created an atmosphere for intensifying cooperation by addressing India’s security concerns at the border. Narendra Modi’s government adopted the ‘Act East Policy’<sup>13</sup> for which India needed

---

<sup>12</sup> Rehman Sobhan, *Op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> India’s ‘Act East Policy’ (AEP) concentrate on the extended neighbourhood in the Asia-Pacific region. Under this policy, India has elevated its relations to a strategic partnership with Japan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia, South Korea, Australia, Singapore and with the ASEAN. India’s north-eastern provinces have been in the priority of AEP, and Bangladesh enjoys its strategic location in this regard. See for details, V. K. Singh, “Act East Policy”, Press Information Bureau (PIB), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 23 December 2015; retrieved from <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=133837> (accessed on 20 February 2019).

multi-purpose transit through Bangladesh. Therefore, Sheikh Hasina's government took several joint projects to provide India with transit, which might have helped the long pending land swap deal in 2015.

However, India's policy towards Bangladesh in 2015 would have been motivated by several other reasons and China was at the top of the list. Modi's visit came immediately after the visit of Chinese Vice-Premier, Liu Yangdong in May 2015, when six MoUs were signed. Bangladesh also paid attention to China's 'One Belt, One Road' project, while India gravely suspects it as she felt that "it was a Chinese ploy to encircle and undermine India".<sup>14</sup> Therefore, India needed to dispel the Chinese influence in Bangladesh. In these contexts, Narendra Modi accepted Sheikh Hasina's invitation and visited Dhaka in June 2015, when the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 was eventually implemented.

#### **Correlations among the Land Boundary Agreements**

As discussed earlier, the Indo-Bangladesh land boundary disputes witnessed four summit-level agreements - the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974, the Protocol of 2011 and the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015. Since all the agreements were concluded on the same issues, such as the undemarcated land boundary, adverse possessions and enclaves, they are intricately correlated. For instance, in many cases, the terms of one agreement were taken as the point of departure in a new agreement. However, the correlations among the land boundary agreements will now be discussed case by case.

#### **Correlations between the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958 and the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974**

The Nehru-Noon Agreement was signed to resolve the land boundary disputes in the India-East Pakistan border, which was not implemented during the Pakistan period. So, after the liberation of Bangladesh, this agreement became outmoded and was replaced by the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974. Therefore, the terms of the Nehru-Noon Agreement were taken as the point of departure in the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974, and thus, this agreement was profoundly correlated to the Nehru-Noon Agreement. Firstly, the exchange of enclaves without claim to compensation for the extra areas going to Pakistan was agreed upon in the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958, which was again stipulated in the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974.

---

<sup>14</sup> Mahmood Hasan, "Modi's charm offensive in Dhaka", *The Daily Star*, 8 June 2015.

Secondly, in pursuance of the resolution to the conflict over Berubari Union No. 12, the Nehru-Noon Agreement directed,

This [Berubari Union No. 12] will be so divided as to give half the area to Pakistan, the other half adjacent to India being retained by India...Pakistan Government agreed that the two chitlands [Dahagram-Angarpota enclaves] of the old Cooch Behar State adjacent to the Radcliffe line should be included in West Bengal, and the Radcliffe line should be adjusted accordingly.

Thus, the Berubari Union was divided, and its southern half was given to Pakistan in this agreement. However, while signing the agreement, the government of India was not cognizant of the fact that most of the residents of the Berubari Union were Hindu refugees who were uprooted from East Pakistan during the partition of 1947. So, if the southern half of Berubari was given to Pakistan those Hindu refugees would have been gravely affected. When the fact was brought to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's attention, he was much disturbed, which was evident in what he said in the Parliament on 20 December 1960,

I did not realize then that there is a certain human aspect of it...my mind was not applied to it, nor did anybody tell me what the population was and how many people will be affected. Somehow it happened. I am sorry it did not come before me and it was not put before me.<sup>15</sup>

Nehru was in a moral bind- on the one hand, there was an international agreement and, on the other a humanitarian issue. Therefore, he tried to resolve this sensitive issue by offering Pakistan in exchange "an equal or about an equal quantum of territory" for the southern half of Berubari. But, Pakistani President Ayub Khan was not only unsympathetic to Nehru's proposal but even condemned Nehru for going back on international agreements.<sup>16</sup> However, neither was the Berubari issue resolved nor was the Nehru-Noon Agreement implemented during the Pakistan period.

In this background, at the request of India, Bangladesh made a significant departure from the Nehru-Noon Agreement and generously ceded the southern half of the South Berubari Union to India. In return, Dahagram-Angarpota enclaves were given to Bangladesh. In this regard, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 (Article I, Section 12) directed-

India will retain the southern half of South Berubari Union no. 12 and the adjacent enclaves measuring an area of 2.64 square miles approximately, and in exchange, Bangladesh will retain the Dahagram and Angarpota enclaves. India will lease in

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in A. S. Bhasin, *Op. cit.*, p. cti.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

perpetuity to Bangladesh an area of 178 metres × 85 metres near Tin Bigha to connect Dahagram with Panbari Mouza (P.S. Patgram) of Bangladesh.

Here, the decision of the Nehru-Noon Agreement was altered for practical reasons and the southern part of South Berubari was given to India in exchange for Dahagram-Angarpota enclaves. As mentioned earlier, South Berubari was inhabited by the Hindu people uprooted from Pakistan during the communal riots, who were not favourably inclined to adopt Bangladeshi citizenship. Likewise, people living in Dahagram-Angarpota, mostly Muslims, were unwilling to adopt Indian citizenship. So, handing over the southern half of Berubari to Bangladesh and Dahagram-Angarpota to India would have displaced the population on both sides, causing humanitarian problems.<sup>17</sup> So, to alter the decision of the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958 in the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 was, however, a better solution regarding the inclination of the inhabitants of Berubari Union and Dahagram-Angarpota enclaves.

#### **Correlations between the Land Boundary Agreements of 1974 and 2015**

To complete the demarcation of the land boundary, Bangladesh and India signed a protocol in 2011 corresponding to the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974. On the other hand, the “Letters on Modalities for Implementation of the LBA (Land Boundary Agreement of 1974) and its Protocol” (referred to as the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015) was signed at the Dhaka summit in 2015. It is pertinent to note that the protocol of 2011 provided the demarcation of the un-demarcated borders and the determination of the adverse possessions and enclaves on the ground. In contrast, the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015 provided the modalities of executing the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 and the Protocol of 2011. However, the correlations among these three agreements are discussed below case by case.

#### ***Demarcation of the un-demarcated boundaries***

**Muhuri River (Belonia) Sector:** It is mentionable that the Muhuri *Char* (sandy tracts of land, often created by river erosion) has been the boon of contention between these two countries since the beginning because India and Bangladesh claimed different maps as the basis for demarcation in this area (Figure 1). The dispute started due to the erosion of the Muhuri River on the Bangladesh side, which has created this small landmass on the Indian side.

---

<sup>17</sup> A. Z. M. Haider, “The Delhi Summit-I”, *Morning News*, Dhaka, 21 May 1974.



**Figure 1:** Muhuri Char, showing temporary pillars and flags on the boundary line, demarcated in 2015. The temporary Sub Pillar No. 45-S shows the Bangladesh border (inset). The photo was captured during the fieldwork in 2019.

However, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 (Article 1, Clause 5) directed, “the boundary in this area should be demarcated along the mid-stream of the course of the Muhuri River (Figure 2) at the time of demarcation. Both governments agreed to raise embankments on their respective side to fix the boundary permanently”. Conversely, the Protocol of 2011 directed,

Boundary in this segment shall be drawn westward from the existing Boundary Pillar No. 2159/48-S along the agreed line as depicted in the index map prepared jointly till it meets the southern limit of the Burning Ghat as shown in jointly surveyed map of Muhuri River area in 1977-78. Thereafter, it shall follow the external limit of the Burning Ghat in south-west direction and then turn northwards along the external limit of the Burning Ghat till it meets the centre of the existing Muhuri River. Thereafter, it shall run along the mid-stream of the existing Muhuri River up to Boundary Pillar No. 2159/3-S. This boundary shall be the fixed boundary. The two governments should raise embankments on their respective sides with a view to stabilising the river in its present course as stipulated in the 1974 Agreement. The parties agree to fencing on “zero line” in this area (Article 2, Clause I).



**Figure 2:** The Muhuri River, showing its erosion on the Bangladesh side (left side) and sedimentation on the Indian side (right side). The sedimentation on the Indian side has created the Muhuri Char (inset). This photo was captured during fieldwork in 2019.

It is pertinent to note that as per the joint survey of 2012, the total area of Muhuri Char is 92 acres, of which Bangladesh owned 72 acres and India owned 20 acres.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the long-standing disputes over Muhuri Char were resolved. The land was demarcated with temporary pillars. The temporary pillars were to be replaced immediately by permanent pillars, which did not take place till the fieldwork of this research in 2019. The local people, who owned land in Muhuri Char but did not get access to their land due to the disputes, are now waiting to get access to their land. Mohammad Ibrahim (2019), a landowner in Muhuri Char, says,

I have roughly 3/4 acres of land in the Muhuri Char, which I inherited. Due to the erosion of the Muhuri River, this area became disputed.... After many years of conflicts, skirmishes and negotiations, this area was demarcated in a joint survey in 2012/2013. As a result of the survey, roughly 20% of the char goes to India, and Bangladesh retains 80%. The area is now demarcated, and temporary border pillars have been erected. We have heard that we will be handed over our land after the erection of the permanent pillars...We are eagerly waiting for the access to our land. The governments should give us our land back quickly so that we can cultivate our land for our subsistence.

On the other hand, the long-standing disputes over the demarcation of Lathitilla-Dumabari areas were resolved in the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015 without any significant changes to the terms of the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974.

<sup>18</sup> Subadar Fazlul Huq, the Commander of Mazumdarhaat Border Outpost (BOP), Personal Interview, (interview was taken at the Mazumdarhaat BOP), Porshuram, Feni, 6 April 2019.



### ***Exchange of Territories in Adverse Possessions***

The adverse possession referred to the territories of one country beyond its border, which have been the source of conflict between India and Bangladesh since the beginning. However, to resolve the issue, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 (Article 2) stipulated the exchange of the adverse possessions in the demarcated borders by 31<sup>st</sup> December 1975 and in the un-demarcated borders within six months of the signing of the relevant boundary strip maps.

Regarding the citizenship of the people in the territories of adverse possessions, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 (Article 3) directed, “When areas are transferred, the people in these areas shall be given the right of staying on where they are, as nationals of the country to which the areas are transferred”. But, by 2015, this became difficult to implement because the circumstances of the adverse possessions changed vividly over the years. It is pertinent to note that people living in the “territories of Adverse Possession were technically in occupation and possession of land beyond the boundary pillars but were administered by the laws of the country of which they were citizens... They had deep-rooted ties to their land, which went back decades and were categorically unwilling to be uprooted”.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, on this point, the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015 departed from the decision of exchanging territories in adverse possession and directed to keep the *status quo* of the adverse possessions in favour of people’s will to remain in the country of their original citizenship. Thus, instead of exchanging territories in adverse possessions as was agreed in the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974, the territorial jurisdictions were exchanged in the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015. Thus, by exchanging territorial jurisdictions in adverse possession, India retained 2777.038 acres of land while Bangladesh retained 2267.682 acres.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Exchange of Enclaves***

Regarding the enclaves, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 (Article 1 Clause 12) directed, “the Indian enclaves in Bangladesh and Bangladeshi enclaves in India should be exchanged expeditiously, (except the enclaves mentioned in paragraph 14) without claim to compensation for the additional areas going to Bangladesh”. And, this was executed in the Protocol of 2011 thus: “111 Indian enclaves in Bangladesh

---

<sup>19</sup> MEA (Ministry of External Affairs), *India and Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement*, Public Diplomacy Division, (New Delhi 2015); retrieved from [http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/24529\\_LBA\\_MEA\\_Booklet\\_final.pdf](http://www.mea.gov.in/Uploads/PublicationDocs/24529_LBA_MEA_Booklet_final.pdf) (accessed 23 January, 2019)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

and 51 Bangladeshi enclaves in India as per the jointly verified cadastral enclave maps, signed at the level of DGLR&S, Bangladesh and DLR&S, West Bengal of India in April 1997, shall be exchanged without claim to compensation for the additional areas going to Bangladesh” (Article 2, Clause II). Eventually, the Land Boundary Agreement of 2015 directed, “the Bangladeshi enclaves in India and Indian enclaves in Bangladesh exchanged under the LBA and the Protocol of 2011 shall be stand transferred to the other with effect from the midnight of the ‘Appointed Day’ of July 31, 2015” (Article I). Thus, the long-awaited exchange of enclaves was eventually implemented in 2015.

### **Correlations between the Border Guidelines and the Coordinated Border Management Plan**

The territoriality of India in its border with Bangladesh in the initial stage was humanistic and friendly to the borderland people. The Border Guidelines of 1975, for instance, set the tune of territoriality in which there were no detrimental provisions for the borderland people of Bangladesh. It is pertinent to note that during the Pakistan period, tensions prevailed on this border, which often victimized the lives and livelihoods of the borderland people. Under these circumstances, Bangladesh and India proceeded to normalise the life and livelihoods of the borderland people at the outset. After that, both governments felt the necessity for coordinated vigilance and joint action against the illegal flow of arms, smuggling and other cross-border crimes. Therefore, a three-day high-level Indo-Bangladesh border conference was held in Kolkata from 21 to 23 April 1975. This conference was concluded by signing the “Joint India-Bangladesh Guidelines for Border Authorities of the two Countries” (referred to as Border Guidelines). In principle, the Border Guidelines were comprehensive dos and don’ts for the border guarding forces of Bangladesh and India.<sup>21</sup> Though many of the provisions of the Border Guidelines were often violated on the ground, especially by India, the guidelines were very pragmatic, humanistic and dynamic in managing the border and borderland people.

In the summit talks held in New Delhi in 2010, the Prime Ministers of Bangladesh and India directed their governments to cooperate actively on security issues on the border. Subsequently, Bangladesh and India signed the Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP) on 30 July 2011. Thus, the Border Guidelines were

---

<sup>21</sup> Mohammed Mostafa Faruque, “Outstanding Issues in Bangladesh-India Relations”, Salman Haider (ed.) *India-Bangladesh-Strengthening the Partnership*, CRRID, (Chandigarh 2005), pp. 1-13.

seemingly replaced by the CBMP. Both governments perceived that the CBMP “would enhance cooperation between the border guarding forces, and enable them to manage the identified vulnerable areas to prevent criminal activities, illegal movement and acts of violence”.<sup>22</sup>

In principle, there was no difference between the Border Guidelines of 1975 and the CBMP, but surprisingly, no reference to the Border Guidelines was made in the CBMP. What weakness of the Border Guidelines of 1975 made the necessity to sign the CBMP and whether the CBMP was a supplement to the Border Guidelines or a replacement have not been made clear by either government. However, in the border management principles, some significant deviations from the Border Guidelines have been made in the CBMP. Hence, the correlations between these two would help to understand the changing nature of India’s territoriality on its border with Bangladesh.

Firstly, the Border Guidelines of 1975 directed,

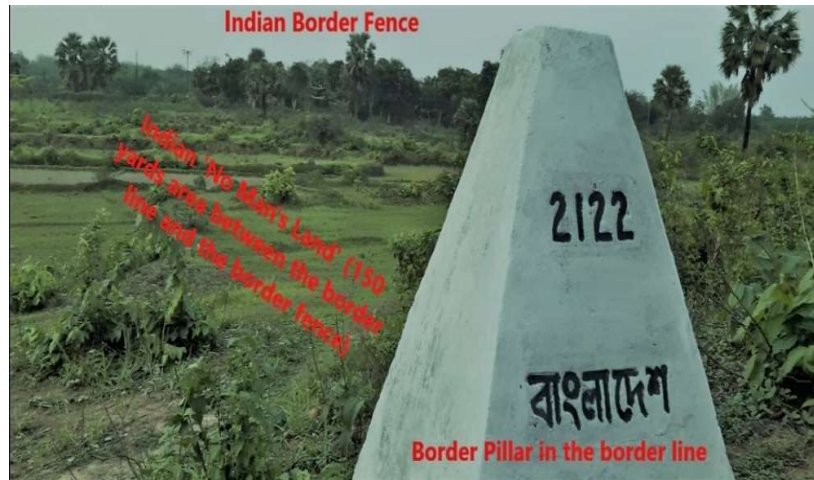
After the identifiable boundary line, whether ‘real’ or ‘working’ has been fixed, neither side will have any permanent or temporary border security forces or any other armed personnel within 150 yards on either side of this line [Article 8, Clause c]... if defensive works of any nature, including trenches, exist in the stretch of 300 yards (150 yards on each side of the boundary) these must be destroyed or filled up[Article 8, Clause e].

Also, Article 8 (Clause f) of the Border Guidelines of 1975 directed, “it will be the duty of the border security forces on either side to prevent armed civilians entering the 300 yards stretch of the border”. The 300-yard stretch of the border (150 yards on each side of the boundary line) is referred to as “No Man’s land” (Figure 3). Initially, there were no problems with these provisions of the Border Guidelines of 1975 in either country but problems arose when India took the project of fencing its border in the 1980s. Being abided by the Border Guidelines of 1975, India started erecting fences within its territory beyond 150 yards from the boundary line. However, it was not possible to build the border fence thoroughly beyond 150 yards from the boundary line because there were some sensitive establishments, including temples and other religious institutions within 150 yards from the boundary line at 46 points.<sup>23</sup> For example, a religious establishment was within five yards of the boundary line in the Hilli border. So, if the border fence had been built beyond 150 yards from the boundary line, these Indian establishments would have fallen outside the Indian border fence.

---

<sup>22</sup> The Joint Statement, Dhaka, September 7, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> See for details, Coordinated Border Management Plan (CBMP); retrieved from [https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pdf/bi\\_doc/scan0020.pdf](https://www.hcidhaka.gov.in/pdf/bi_doc/scan0020.pdf)



**Figure 3:** Indian No Man's Land. This photo was captured during fieldwork in 2019.

The terrains at some points of the border were also tricky for erecting fences 150 yards away from the boundary line. For instance, Agartala (the capital city of Tripura State) is very close to the Bangladesh-India boundary line. So, if the border fence had been erected 150 yards away from the boundary line in this area, the densely populated terrain of Agartala city would have fallen outside the Indian border fence. For this kind of practical reason, India sought consent from Bangladesh to erect border fences within 150 yards from the boundary line at 46 points. Against this background, having deviated from the Border Guidelines of 1975, Bangladesh agreed in the CBMP (Article 7, clause d) to allow all developmental works (except for military), including border fences within 150 yards of the borderline, if required. Thus, Bangladesh has allowed India to erect fences at 12 points, having important establishments, including temples. This deviation from the Border Guidelines of 1975 was necessary for addressing the needs on the ground. Following the CBMP, India has erected fences even on the zero line at the Azampur border in Akhaura Upazila of Brahmanbaria District (Figure 4). India has also allowed Bangladesh to build structures within 150 yards at 11 points, including a bridge in Laxmipur, expanding a wall in the Hilli border and the construction of approach roads in Moulavi Bazar and Bhomra.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Rezaul Karim, "High Hopes pinned on PM's India visit", *The Daily Star*, Dhaka, 10 January 2010.



**Figure 4:** Indian border fence close to the boundary line in the Azampur border in Akhaura Upazila of Brahmanbaria District. This photo was captured during fieldwork in April 2019.

Secondly, the Border Guidelines of 1975 directed, “if nationals of one country ingress the working boundary and enter illegally and commit or attempt to commit an offence, the border security forces would be at liberty to take appropriate action in the exercise of the ‘right to private defence’ preferably without resorting to firing” (Article 8, Clause i). However, it is striking enough to note that nothing is mentioned in the CBMP in this regard amid the frequent killing of unarmed Bangladeshi citizens on the border by the Border Security Forces (BSF) of India.

Thirdly, the Border Guidelines of 1975 directed that “wherever the boundary ‘real’ or ‘working’ runs through the mid-stream of a river, the main channel will be used” by the nationals of both countries. Both countries will adopt coordinated procedures to regulate the traffic and ensure that no people are harassed using the channel (Article 8, Clause h). Ironically, nothing is stipulated in the CBMP in this regard. As a result, the borderland people of Bangladesh have been deprived of access to the bordering rivers for their subsistence. These instances of the deprivation of the borderland people of Bangladesh from their access to the natural resources in the borderland including the rivers demonstrate the zero-sum game nature of India’s territoriality.

### **Conclusion**

As has been discussed in this article, the land boundary disputes, which arose out of the provisions of the Radcliffe Award during the partition of 1947, were resolved in the Nehru-Noon Agreement of 1958. However, India could not execute the agreement. Subsequently, Bangladesh inherited the disputes from Pakistan through

its independence in 1971. Therefore, to resolve the same disputes, Bangladesh and India signed the Land Boundary Agreement in 1974. Ironically, the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 was also hung up for 41 years (1974-2015) by India after Bangladesh had ratified the agreement through a constitutional amendment and ceded territories to India under the agreement in the same year. Whatever the reasons, India's failure to stand by the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 could be viewed as negligence towards the norms and practices regarding international agreements. In the end, while executing the Land Boundary Agreement of 1974 in 2015, the government of India changed many terms stipulated in it, which indicates the changing nature of India's territoriality to its border with Bangladesh.

The context and correlations of the land boundary agreements between Bangladesh and India suggest that India, being the big neighbour, dominated the entire trajectory of the land boundary disputes and has changed its agreed positions from one agreement to another. Moreover, India's territoriality to its border with Bangladesh underwent gradual changes in the pattern of zero-sum game, which has been evident in the correlations among the land boundary agreements and the correlations between the Border Guidelines of 1975 and the CBMP of 2011. In localized studies, it is evident that the Bangladesh-India land boundary has been characterized by policy uncertainty and subtle changes in settled issues. For instance, some border haats have been established for the benefit of the borderland people of both countries by the decision of the high contract parties. Ironically, because of high restrictions and lack of necessary flexibility on the ground the border haats have been proved of little or no benefit to the stakeholders. However, the borderland people of Bangladesh have been deprived of their access to natural resources including the rivers for many years. On the other hand, the extra-judicial killing of unarmed Bangladeshi citizens has been a common phenomenon on the Bangladesh-India border. All these reflect the zero-sum-game nature of India's territoriality. On the contrary, the corresponding territoriality of Bangladesh became more and more acquiescent towards India.

## The Levy System in East Bengal and its Impact on the Peasantry (1949-1967)

S. M. Rezaul Karim\*

### Abstract

The peasants of Bengal have been living through exploitation since ancient times. The intensity of exploitation of farmers increased manifold from the ancient period to the colonial period. The main reason for this was that on the one hand, the land tax or rent paid to the state during the pre-British period was increased many times and on the other hand, apart from rent, many kinds of *abwabs* were levied on the peasants. During the British era, the farmers thought that this exploitation and deprivation would end if the country became independent. But after the departure of the British in 1947, in the independent state of Pakistan, the farmers of East Bengal were subjected to exploitation and oppression as in the colonial period. During the Pakistan period, like the British period, the taxes and *abwabs* paid to the state were increased. Moreover, the levy system, a unique type of agricultural land tax that was assessed based on the total production of the farmer's total land, was introduced by the Muslim League government. As a result, the level of exploitation and oppression of the farmers of East Bengal increased manifold during the Pakistan period. Based on primary and secondary sources, this paper attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the introduction of the levy system and investigate its impact on the farmers. The paper will also shed light on the reactions of politicians and peasants to this newly introduced levy system in East Bengal during the Pakistan period.

**Key words:** East Bengal, East Pakistan Provincial Council, Muslim League, *abwab*, paddy, levy system, Permanent Settlement.

### Introduction

From ancient times to the Pakistani period, there were various tools for exploiting the peasantry. Notable among these were the increase in revenue or land rent, the collection of *abwab*<sup>1</sup> as additional revenue and the issue of certificates etc. In ancient times the cultivators had to pay 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the produce to the king. Additional payments were to be paid in the name of tax. It was also customary to pay the king on the

---

\* Professor, Department of History, University of Dhaka, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh

1 Murshid Quli Khan (1722-1725) first introduced an *abwab* or additional revenue called *abwab-i-khasnawisi*. Abdul Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1963), pp. 78 and 85.

occasion of the birth of a prince, the marriage of a princess, etc.<sup>2</sup> During the Maurya reign, the rate of revenue was 1/4<sup>th</sup>.<sup>3</sup> But it is known that in ancient times farmers were also forced to do unpaid work.<sup>4</sup> During the Muslim period, farmers were subjected to more exploitation as revenue was raised to increase the state's income. Even the land revenue was collected one-half of the produce at the end of the Mughal period.<sup>5</sup> Sher Shah charged one-fourth of the total produce of the land as revenue.<sup>6</sup> The State's share of the produce had been increased from 1/6<sup>th</sup> to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> in Akbar's time.<sup>7</sup> And in the time of Aurangzeb, the rate of rent increased to half of the produce.<sup>8</sup> Note that, during the Muslim period, 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the production or even half of the crops was collected as rent, but during any natural calamity including crops failure etc., the government helped the peasants in overcoming these difficulties and provided *taqawi* loans to help the agricultural work.<sup>9</sup> However, the British government introduced the rule of collecting revenue in currency<sup>10</sup> instead of crops

- 
- 2 Niharranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People: Ancient Period* (Calcutta: Dey'j Publishing, 1400 B.), pp. 198-199 and 207.
  - 3 *Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal*, Vol. II, Appendices (I to IX) and Indian Land System Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern, Government of Bengal (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1940), pp. 146-147.
  - 4 Ram Sharan Sharma, *Social and Economic History of Ancient India*, (Calcutta: Orient Blackswan pvt. Ltd., 2013), pp. 164-165.
  - 5 *Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal*, Vol. II, Appendices (I to IX) and Indian Land System Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern, Government of Bengal (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1940), p. 155.
  - 6 Nurul Islam Khan (General Editor), *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Faridpur*, Cabinet Secretariat Establishment Division, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (Dacca: Bangladesh Government Press, 1977), p. 267; S. N. H Rizvi (General Editor), *East Pakistan District Gazetteers: Dacca*, Services and General Administration Department, Government of East Pakistan (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1969), p. 359.
  - 7 W. H. Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India: A Historical Essay with Appendices* (Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1968), p. 196; Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times*, p. 74; Md. Habibur Rashid (ed.), *Bangladesh District Gazetteers: Bakerganj*, Cabinet Secretariat Establishment Division, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, (Dacca: Bangladesh Government Press, 1981), p. 264.
  - 8 Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times*, p. 85; *Report of the Land Revenue Commission, Bengal*, Vol. I, With Minutes Dissent, Government of Bengal (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1940), p. 11.
  - 9 Nurul H. Choudhury, *Peasant Radicalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal: The Faraizi, Indigo and Pabna Movements* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2001), pp. 14-18; Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal, 1494-1538 A.D.: A Socio-Political Study* (Dhaka: University of Dhaka, Second Revised Edition, 1999), pp. 146-147; Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times*, p. 77.
  - 10 Note, the practice of land tax collection in cash started from the Mughal period. See details, Moreland, *The Agrarian System of Moslem India*, pp. 198-199 and 204-205; W. H. Moreland, *From Akbar to Aurangzeb: A Study in Indian Economic History* (Delhi:



which required the farmers to sell more crops than before. During the British period, the rent of the peasant's land increased manifold due to the increase in government revenue, such as in 1790 when the ten-year settlement was announced, the land revenue of Bengal was Rs. 1,90,40,000 and in 1793 it was perpetual. The land revenue was Rs. 2,85,87,722 at the time of settlement, which rose to Rs. 3,12,00,000 in 1936-37.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, *abwab*, the age-old means of exploiting the peasantry, continued even during the British colonial period. Moreover, numerous new *abwabs* were imposed on the peasants during this period. The Collectors' Report of 1872 reveals that the zamindars used to collect 12 types of *abwab* from the peasants.<sup>12</sup> In 1875 it was reported through the newspaper that the zamindars collected 14 types of *abwab* from the farmers in addition to the basic land revenue tax.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, the abolition of the zamindari system in 1950 did not benefit the peasants in practical terms. The Zamindari Abolition Act did not have any provisions or steps to uproot the exploitation and oppression of the peasants in the Permanent Settlement system.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the Pakistan regime continuously increased land revenue and levied various types of additional taxes, and due to the harshness of its enforcement, the peasants were subject to severe exploitation and oppression.

In addition to all the previous tools of exploitation, the Pakistan government introduced a new tool known as the levy system which received less attention from scholars than it deserved. As a consequence, the introduction of the levy system and the increase in the exploitation and deprivation of the peasantry during the Pakistan period are still not clear. The aim of this paper is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the introduction of levy system and investigate its impact on the farmers. The paper will also shed light on the responses of politicians and peasants to this newly introduced levy system in East Bengal during the Pakistan period. The

---

Low Price Publications, 1990), p. 180; Karim, *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times*, pp. 74 and 86-87.

11 *Report of the Land Revenue Commission*, Bengal, Vol. V, Replies to the Commission's questionnaire by Government Officers and their oral evidence, Government of Bengal (Alipore: Bengal Government Press, 1941), p. 111; Sirajul Islam, *The Permanent Settlement in Bengal: A Study of Its Operation 1790-1819* (Dacca: Bangla Academy, 1979), p. 3.

12 Nurul Islam Khan (ed.), Pabna, pp. 253-254; K.G.M. Latiful Bari (ed.), *Bangladesh District Gazetteers*, Bogra, pp. 256-257.

13 *Sangbad*, April 19, 1975.

14 Badruddin Umar, *Peasant and Peasant Movement in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya Prakash, Second edition, 2015), pp. 11 and 32-33.

paper is qualitative in nature. Following the historical method, it uses primary, e.g., Assembly Proceedings, Government Reports, Newspapers, and secondary sources, e.g., books, scholarly articles etc.

### **Introduction of the levy system**

The East Bengal provincial government announced on October 1, 1947, due to food grain shortages caused by various reasons, that food grains should be collected and stored in government warehouses. For this, the government takes two steps namely procurement of food grains from abroad and domestic procurement of food grains. Through these two measures, the bureaucracy claimed success in food grain collection, but in reality the government failed to collect food grains. It may be noted that the government first called upon the farmers to voluntarily pay a portion of the total paddy produced on their land to the government. By the middle of 1948, the government was able to collect only a small amount of food grains. In this context, on September 19, 1948, by announcing 'The East Bengal Compulsory Levy of Food Grains Order 1948', the government started the food grain collection campaign as a compulsory levy. On April 1, 1949, the Muslim League government announced that 2,50,000 to 3,20,000 tons of food grain should be stored in the country during the Boro and Aus seasons. The government's objective was to collect food crops from surplus food crop-producing Districts like Rajshahi, Bogra, Dinajpure, Rangpur, Mymensingh (with the exception of Kishoreganj and Tangail Sub-division), Sylhet, Khulna, Jessore, Kushtia, and Bakerganj (present day Barisal) and ensuring food supply in deficit districts like Faridpur, Pabna, Chittagong, Noakhali, Chittagong Hill Tracts, Tippera (present day Comilla) and Dhaka. On September 30, 1948, the government appointed the Union Board and Preliminary Surveyor to conduct a survey on all the large producers (large producers<sup>15</sup>) and try to find out the total

---

15 The Gazette defined a 'large producer' as a person or persons who habitually dined together and who as owner, tenant, bargadar, or in any other capacity cultivated land not less than 10 acres under any one seasonal crop, and grew paddy with or without the aid of members of his family or paid labours or by adhiars, bargadars or bhagidars. A 'large producer' also includes a person who held or cultivated on behalf of himself and other members of a joint undivided family irrespective of whether they dined together or not. A 'family' meant a family of a larger producer and included all persons living in the same mess with him and dependent upon him but for the purpose of procurement, children below the age of 3 were not considered members of the family. Seen, *The Dacca Gazette*, Extraordinary, 19 September, 1948, Dacca and Ahmed Kamal, *State Against the Nation: The Decline of the Muslim League in Pre-independence Bangladesh, 1947-54* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2009), p. 44.

amount of their land and the exact amount of paddy that could be collected from it. On October 15, 1948, the government announced the collection of the levy and inspectors checked the list of major producers to ensure that the government's operation was successful. The government announced that anyone who gave false information regarding production would be imprisoned for 3 years and fined food grain (rice). However, on November 15, 1948, the government allowed producers to appeal without a lawyer. The government announced 1.5 *maunds*<sup>16</sup> of paddy per acre for farmers owning 10 to 20 acres of land, 3 *maunds* of paddy per acre for farmers owning 20 to 40 acres of land and 4.5 *maunds* of paddy per acre for farmers owning more than 40 acres of land should be paid to the government at the price fixed by the government as levy. It was called the Compulsory Levy Order.<sup>17</sup> The levy system emerged as a new tool of peasant exploitation during the Pakistan period. It was in effect during the Muslim League government of East Bengal (1949–1954) and during the rule of military ruler Ayub Khan (1965–1967). The first levy system was introduced by Nurul Amin, the Prime Minister of the Muslim League government of East Bengal. It is to be noted that although the levy system was abolished in 1954 after the victory of the United Front, considering the deprivation of the vast peasant class of East Bengal, the military ruler Ayub Khan re-introduced it in 1965 to stockpile food grains on the pretext of the Indo-Pak war, and it continued till 1967.

### **The impacts of the levy system on the peasantry**

The Muslim League government's policy of introducing and enforcing the levy made the Muslim League Party and party leaders enemies of the leaders of other political parties, the *jotdar* class and the peasantry in East Bengal. Many farmers were levied by showing production in excess and subjected to various harassment for collection. Due to the levy policy of the Muslim League government, the Muslim League Party became an unpopular organization with the people of East Bengal. As a consequence, the newly formed East Pakistan Awami Muslim League (present day Awami League) in 1949 became a popular organization among the people of East Bengal as it strongly opposed the levy system. Even the Hindu community of East Bengal, especially the leaders of the East Bengal Congress Party, supported the Awami League's opposition to this levy policy and played a role in improving Hindu-Muslim relations.

---

<sup>16</sup> Note, 1 *Maund* = 40 *Seers*/40 kg and 1 *Seer* = 16 *chtaks*.

<sup>17</sup> See in detail, Kamal, *State Against the Nation*, pp. 42-59; S. M. Rezaul Karim, *Emergence of Bangladesh and Politics of Land Conflict, 1885-1971*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Dhaka, Department of History, University of Dhaka, June 30, 2021, p. 210.

Among the districts declared by the government as surplus foodgrain producers, a number of districts did not have surplus production. For example, in Netrakona of Mymensingh district levy was levied more than the amount of land. People could not pay the levy even by selling their land. Again, despite Khulna being a surplus food-producing district declared by the district government, local members of the East Bengal Provincial Council of the concerned district complained that due to lack of brackish water and dam maintenance, paddy was not produced in all areas of Khulna district. However, during the assessment in Khulna district, the production rate of good land was taken as the average production rate. Because Khulna was considered as surplus-producing district when levy was imposed, levy should have been levied keeping in mind the cost of dam and then the way of crop production in brackish water land but the government officials did not do that.<sup>18</sup>

It is known that in Khulna district, paddy was collected from the farmers through a compulsory levy system. People were handcuffed and robbed of their paddy by giving the price of paddy at Rs. 7.25 maund. As a result of the levy, there were groans all around. The local members of the Provincial Council complained that if the government wanted to collect the paddy Rs. 7.25 from the farmers even if they had the power to collect it without payment. But the levy system could not help all people in deficit areas. They were of the opinion that a handful of people who lived in the city could do something to help them. Under the levy system, the government bought paddy at Rs. 7.25. However, no account has been maintained of the farmer's vehicle rental, bag cost, day labourer cost etc. to reach the godown of the government. And from where the government was buying paddy at Rs. 7.25 per maund, the price of rice per maund was Rs. 38 to Rs. 40. As a result, if rice was purchased according to the government rate in this region, it was natural that farmers were tortured.<sup>19</sup>

In 1948, the Muslim League government announced that rationing would be done in every urban area. The government announced from September 14, 1948 to April 3, 1954 that rationing would be arranged for 16 lakh people in deficit areas. In 1949, the

---

18 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Bengal Legislative Assembly, Vol. III, No. 3, Third Session, 1949, The 26th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st March and 1st April, 1949 (Dacca: East Bengal Government Press, 1952), p. 63.

19 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Bengal Legislative Assembly, Vol. III, No. 3, Third Session, 1949, The 26th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st March and 1st April, 1949 (Dacca: East Bengal Government Press, 1952), pp. 315-326; Karim, *Emergence of Bangladesh and Politics of Land Conflict*, pp. 209-210.

members of the East Bengal Provincial Council opined that rationing the people of the deficit areas creating a food crisis for all the people of the province was in no way justifiable. There was a serious danger to this rationing, because there were 4 crore 48 lakh people living in East Bengal, out of which paddy were being procured for 16 lakh people oppressing the farmers of the country.<sup>20</sup> At the time of buying paddy, one anna of batta per maund and three annas of sacks are cut for sewing. Then the government bought paddy at the rate of seven and a half taka including expenses and after deducting the expences peasants got Rs. 7.25 per maund. The government sold it at the rate of Rs. 11 and fourteen annas in the surplus area and Rs. 13 and two annas in the deficit area. This was done before the eyes of the producers. As a result, they realized their financial losses and created hoarders by hiding paddy and rice. As a result of the levy, there were groans all around. If 100 *maunds* of paddy is cultivated in a land and half of the paddy goes to the government warehouse, then the farmer would not be interested in cultivating paddy. The members of the East Bengal Provincial Council opined that if this levy was not abolished then the production of paddy would subsequently decrease. Levy was levied more than the amount of land. Moreover, the procurement of levy was illegal. Many became proletarians and could not pay the levy even after selling their land. Members of the East Bengal Provincial Council complained that the government's compulsory levy system had failed.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, this farmer's misery was endless. From 1949 to 1954, the exploitation and oppression of the farmers through the introduction and implementation of the levy system during the rule of the Muslim League government was clearly proven from the deliberations of the East Bengal Provincial Legislature.

In 1954, the end of the rule of the Muslim League government in East Bengal, the farmers were saved from the exploitation and oppression of the levy system for a while, but in the context of the Pak-India war in 1965, Ayub Khan's military government re-imposed the levy system ("Purchase of rice and paddy in the compulsory levy scheme of the Government") introduced. So in 1965 compulsory levy was made for war (compulsory levy in the form of a war fund). An indirect taxation system was introduced on farmers through the levy. It came into effect on December 15, 1965. The announcement of the government said that it would collect food grains through the levy system with the aim of ensuring the food security of Pakistan. Although the government announcement said that the levy would be on the lands on which Aman paddy was sown, in reality the levy was levied on all the lands

---

20 Karim, *Emergence of Bangladesh and Politics of Land Conflict*, p. 209.

21 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Bengal Legislative Assembly, Vol. III, No. 3, Third Session, 1949, The 26th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st March and 1st April, 1949 (Dacca: East Bengal Government Press, 1952), pp. 315-326.

as before. In the system, the levy was levied on the farmers if they had more than 5 acres i.e. 15 bighas of land.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that in 1949 the Muslim League government imposed a levy of 3 maunds per acre but in 1965 Ayub Khan's government levied a levy of 4 *maunds* per acre. The government announcement states that the levy for paddy is Rs. 13 as the price of paddy to the farmers will be paid.<sup>23</sup> Despite the attempt to pay farmers for the paddy, most of the previous means of exploitation came back and the farmers were again subjected to severe oppression.

On January 18, 1967, in the East Pakistan Provincial Council, in the question-and-answer session on "Purchase of rice and paddy in the compulsory levy scheme of the Government", a member of the Council asked, "How much paddy has been collected from each district-based purchase center of East Pakistan as part of the compulsory levy program of the Government?" The quantity of paddy and rice purchased from each centre of East Pakistan district-wise in the compulsory levy scheme of the Government in response to the question marked with an asterisk, the information provided by the Minister of Agriculture shows that a total of 34,01,641 *maunds* 3 *seers* 8 *chtaks* from the whole of East Pakistan Paddy and rice had been collected.<sup>24</sup> Below is the district-wise paddy collection amount:

**Amount of district-wise paddy-rice collection**

Sl.	District name	Number of purchasing centers	<i>Maund</i>	<i>Seer/kg</i>	<i>Chtak</i>
1.	Dhaka	23	30,147	26	0
2.	Mymensingh	46	4,00,622	11	8
3.	Faridpur	17	27,599	25	0
4.	Chittagong	15	31,437	0	0
5.	Chittagong Hill Tracts	9	26,167	28	0
6.	Noakhali	19	1,01,764	18	0

22 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), pp. 477-478.

23 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), p. 70; *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), pp. 473-474.

24 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, First Session, 1967, 18th January, 1967 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), pp. 92-106; Karim, *Emergence of Bangladesh and Politics of Land Conflict*, p. 210.

7.	Comilla	23	69,232	23	0
8.	Sylhet	38	3,80,824	0	0
9.	Jessore	19	17,141	0	0
10.	Khulna	26	3,92,075	39	0
11.	Barisal	34	2,89,802	0	0
12.	Kushtia	13	19,691	12	0
13.	Rajshahi	26	4,80,106	39	8
14.	Rangpur	29	2,32,320	0	0
15.	Dinajpur	28	7,50,553	29	8
16.	Bogra	16	1,19,087	1	0
17.	Pabna	7	33,067	31	0
Total		388	34,01,641	3	8

Source: *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, First Session, 1967, 18<sup>th</sup> January, 1967 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), pp. 92-106; Karim, *Emergence of Bangladesh and Politics of Land Conflict*, p. 344.

From the above table, it can be seen that 34,01,641 *maunds 3 seers 8 chtaks* of paddy-rice have been procured by the government through 388 procurement centres. Analyzing this table, it can be seen that Dinajpur district ranks highest and Jessore district ranks lowest in paddy production. Also, from the question and answer on the levy, it is known that the reason for the levy rice collection in Jessore district was very low due to heavy rains in some police stations in Jessore district. The members of the Council complained against the levy and said that there was no limit to the sufferings of the farmers in collecting the levy. Due to the levy, in 1966 the price of paddy rose to Rs. 50 per *maund* everywhere in East Pakistan. Whereas the price of levy paddy was fixed at Rs. 13 per *maund* and in the border regions at Rs. 13.50 per *maund*. It is said by the government that in 1966 the province-wide levy target figure was 3 lakh tonnes. It is also known that in Madaripur sub-division not even a *maund* of paddy was found in the levy because the farmers did not pay paddy, although a case was filed against them for that. It was alleged by the government that the movement of opposition party members in Madaripur was also a reason behind the non-availability of *levy* paddy in Madaripur. It may be noted that the government had directed to deposit money in United Bank Ltd. for the levy. Why did the government direct United Bank Ltd to pay this amount despite the fact that there were other banks in East Pakistan? In response, the government told the Council members that no other bank had agreed to take the money generated from the levy.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> See in detail, *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXXI, No. 2, First Session, 1967, 18th January, 1967 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), pp. 106-109.

### **Reaction to the levy system in the Parliament**

In the East Pakistan Provincial Council, the ruling party members took a position in favor of the levy system and a number of independent members took a stand against the levy system. Ayub Khan's military government and members of the pro-government East Pakistan Provincial Council argued in favor of the levy system. They said that some districts of the province such as Barisal, Dinajpur, and Rangpur produced quality paddy and this paddy could be smuggled into Hindustan, so the Pakistan government collected that entire paddy in time by imposing a compulsory levy. By doing this there would be no chance of smuggling. The members of the government party in Council were of the opinion that the compulsory collection of paddy levied by the government and the price fixed by the Governor of East Pakistan in consultation with members of the government and opposition parties was indeed commendable. Their argument was that East Pakistan was an agriculture-based province, 90 percent of the people were farmers. It was indeed a matter of happiness that a huge amount of money has been allocated to this agricultural sector.

In addition, they appealed to all the members of the Council to ensure that this levy was collected properly and that the farmers got a fair price.<sup>26</sup> Another member of the ruling party in the East Pakistan Provincial Council opined that the levy system was imposed not only in this country but in all countries of the world during emergencies. This was nothing new. The question was whether the purchase would be compulsory, or on voluntary basis. When there was an emergency in the country, the method should be chosen so that the paddy was collected properly. According to him, the people of the country had no reason to be dissatisfied with the policy adopted by the government and it was not a matter of controversy. In the current emergency situation, everyone needed to cooperate to ensure that paddy was harvested properly.<sup>27</sup> Another government party member said that crores of foreign exchange was being saved by purchasing paddy from farmers through levy. If this paddy had to be brought from abroad, it would have cost a lot of foreign currency.<sup>28</sup> Note that the

---

26 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), pp. 487-489.

27 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), pp. 483-485.

28 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), pp. 485-486.



government claimed that enough paddy was available in the market. Even the finance minister of the East Pakistan government claimed that many Deputy Commissioners had informed him that paddy should be purchased to keep the price of paddy stable.<sup>29</sup>

On the other hand, the anti-government and independent members of the East Pakistan Provincial Council strongly criticized the negative aspects of the levy system. Members of the Council complained that many members of the Council thanked the finance minister for no taxation in the budget. It is true that he did not take direct tax in the budget, but if you look a little deeper, it will be seen that he had imposed paddy levy on farmers' land even though he had not done any direct tax.

A member from Faridpur district of East Pakistan Provincial Council complained that rice did not grow well in Faridpur, jute used to grow but farmers have given up jute cultivation due to the price stability. Farmers in areas where jute was cultivated were then cultivating sugarcane instead of jute. The main reasons for this were high prices and the calculation of farmers' profits. However, the government was saying that enough paddy was available in the market, so is it necessary to buy paddy by levy? If the government bought paddy from the surplus area at Rs 10 and gave it at Rs 13 to the deficit area, they have no objection.<sup>30</sup> Anti-government and independent members of the Council complained that Ayub Khan's government did not do this. His government levied 4 *maunds* of paddy per acre of cultivable land on the farmers. During the season, wet paddy was sold in the market at Rs. 14/15 per *maund* whereas the government bought dry paddy at the rate of Rs. 13 per *maund* at the end of the season. The reality is that wet paddy was reduced by 4/5 kg of its yield during drying. There was no limit to the plight of the people in the area due to government procurement of food.<sup>31</sup> The members of the Council were of the view that the government was levying a tax on the crops grown by the farmers on the lands that had been made available for cultivation through the East Pakistan Water and Power Development Authority's (EPWAPDA) Embankment Project and irrigation. They hoped that the introduction of the levy system would benefit the people. But levy has

---

29 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, Second Session, 1965, The 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th December, 1965 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), p. 194.

30 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, Second Session, 1965, The 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th December, 1965 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), p. 194.

31 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), pp. 468-470.

been levied on people on whom it was not reasonable to levy. Those who were being levied were the poor.<sup>32</sup> The members of the Council said that the government had made arrangements for the collection of paddy in the country through levies. The government started with a program and its intentions were not bad, but the levy system fell into the hands of such offices and people that the levy system took a good beating and caused the people of the country no end of misery. It was said that the levy would be imposed by giving a prior notice if a farmer failed to pay levy for any reason, an appeal could be made and he would have a hearing, but in practice, everything turned out to be the opposite. There was no need for notice, appeal, or any complaint, and no letter fixing a date of the hearing after taking action. It was full of anarchy and disorganization. As a result, it has become a field of exploitation.<sup>33</sup>

Members from the Rajshahi region of the Council complained that deep water Aman paddy production in Rajshahi region was only three maunds per bigha on average. The survey was also not conducted during the harvesting of Aman paddy in this region. A levy of 4 *maunds* per acre was levied here, and more than one-third of the total produce had to be paid to the government. As a result, farmers have suffered greatly.<sup>34</sup> Members from Dinajpur district of the council complained that Dinajpur paid the highest levy in East Pakistan. The district had contributed 12 lakh maunds of paddy to the government's grain store. But unfortunately, the levy was levied on many people on whom the levy was not applicable at all. The case was hanging on their heads like a sword.<sup>35</sup> The members from Noakhali district of the Council said that despite Noakhali district being a deficit district, the government announced that 50 thousand maunds of paddy would be collected from there. The government did not keep this promise. Instead of 50 thousand maunds, the government had collected 1 lakh 8 thousand maunds of paddy from Noakhali. As a result of taking twice as much paddy from there, the price of rice there had been increased to more than one rupee per kg. There the price of rice had gone up to one rupee two annas to five siki

---

32 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXX, No. 3, Budget Session, 1966-67, The 20th and 21st June, 1966 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), p. 22.

33 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXX, No. 3, Budget Session, 1966-67, The 20th and 21st June, 1966 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), pp. 95.

34 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), pp. 66-67.

35 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXX, No. 3, Budget Session, 1966-67, The 20th and 21st June, 1966 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), p. 25.

and even one and a half rupees.<sup>36</sup> They alleged that in different areas of Raipur police station of Noakhali district, there were complaints of harassment of innocent farmers in the name of levy. A huge amount of levy was unfairly levied on the farmers at the behest of some Union Council Chairman, creating panic among the public.

The members of the East Pakistan Provincial Council complained that due to the levy system, the deficit areas such as Noakhali, Faridpur, Chittagong, Comilla, Pabna, and Dhaka had seen immediate price hike of Rs. 5 per maund, while the government bought 1 lakh maunds in Chittagong, 50,000 *maunds* in Dhaka and 10,000 maunds in Faridpur. Also after the government's announcement the price of paddy rose there despite the market price being low. For example, in Chittagong and Noakhali, whenever paddy was purchased from there, the price of paddy went from Rs. 18 to Rs. 20. On the other hand, the paddy from Dinajpur, Rangpur, Mymensingh etc. which were surplus districts also went to the government warehouse. As a result, it can be seen that the price of the deficit area had increased by Rs. 5 per maund. The question of the members of the Council was whether the land which was generally cultivable were cultivated. Farmers of this country took two or three harvests with great difficulty and cultivated whichever land was cultivable. That is, they cultivated the land they owned. Now if the cultivable land was counted then they had to either lie or else they have to steal or buy it and paid the levy. In this regard, the members of the council asked the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Agriculture, 'what will the government do if the arable land produces paddy but there is less production?' The government said that the government should be paid 4 maunds of paddy per acre only in case of cultivation. As a result, the one who had not got paddy would be legally obliged to pay paddy and if he had to pay it, he would have to buy it from the market. Who was affected now? The farmers of course.<sup>37</sup> The members of Faridpur district of East Pakistan Provincial Council directed the finance minister that he did not impose direct tax in the budget but imposed paddy levy on the land of farmers despite not taking any direct tax. The members of the Faridpur region of the Council requested to exclude the deficiency from the levy of Faridpur, Jessore, Kushtia districts, but the government did not agree.<sup>38</sup>

---

36 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXX, No. 3, Budget Session, 1966-67, The 20th and 21th June, 1966 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), p. 18.

37 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, Second Session, 1965, The 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th December, 1965 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), pp. 195-196.

38 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), p. 70.

Members of the East Pakistan Provincial Council alleged that the levy was introduced by the government to harass farmers. They requested that at least deficit districts be exempted from the levy. Faridpur district members of the Council were of the opinion that Faridpur district was a deficit area. The crops were destroyed by floods for several years. 27,000 acres of land have been washed away by the Padma River. Then the farmers did not get the land rent waived despite the protests. The government had admitted this. In those places where paddy was grown more like Dinajpur, Mymensingh, Bogra, the price of paddy had decreased. And where the price of paddy was more than Rs. 20, the government should not harass the farmers by levy. They said that 90 percent of the people of this country depended on the labour of farmers for their survival. Therefore, it was clear that the government had a two-pronged policy, an anti-maternal policy regarding these farmers. Because the government was taking their paddy by levy without providing any income to the farmers. If the government had made granary factories for the farmers here, they could have earned some money from that too. They had no objection to paying taxes to the government. But the government did not do anything for the farmers in East Bengal. They requested the government to revise this levy system again. They requested the government to exclude deficit districts like Faridpur, Jessore, Kushtia from the levy.<sup>39</sup>

#### **Peasants' reaction against the levy system**

There was no precedent of a united country-wide peasants reacting against the levy system even though it has been severely affected. But the reaction of the peasants against it was known in isolation. For example, a farmer named Momtaz Uddin Akhan of Charbangshi Union of Raipur Thana of the said district complained to the Deputy Commissioner of Noakhali district due to harassment of innocent farmers by charging levy in different areas of Raipur *Thana* of Noakhali district. The said peasant complained to Deputy Commissioner that initially 36 maunds of paddy levy was levied on his 13 and a half acres of land, but later, without any evidence, the 13 and a half acres of land was increased to 95 acres and 380 *maunds* of paddy levy was levied. Mumtaz Uddin Akhan submitted all his documents to the concerned Development Circle Officer but the documents were ignored and the said illegal levy was levied. Thus, many peasants in the area expressed great dissatisfaction against the illegal levy.<sup>40</sup> On December 15, 1965, Asaduzzaman Khan, a member of the East Pakistan Provincial Council, said that the chairmen of all the union councils in his

---

39 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, Second Session, 1965, The 10th, 11th and 13th December, 1965, (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1965), p. 70.

40 *The Daily Ittefaq*, February 5 1966.

area had sent him a telegram that there was no aman paddy anywhere in Chuadanga. But despite this levy has been levied on the peasants there. As a result, the peasants of his area telegraphed him to be saved from the levy.<sup>41</sup> Thus the peasants of different regions expressed their reaction against the levy system of the government. Their voices were echoed by the opposition members of the East Pakistan Provincial Council

### Conclusion

Since ancient times, the ruling class has been exploiting and torturing the farmers of Bengal. At the end of the British period, the peasants dreamed that they would be freed from exploitation after the establishment of Pakistan. However, their dream was not fulfilled even after the establishment of the independent state of Pakistan. In addition to previous means of exploitation, e.g., increase in land rent, land development tax, additional land development tax, education tax, road tax, various types of additional taxes, etc., the farmers were subjected to a new kind of tax known as levy. Immediately after the independence of Pakistan, the Muslim League government introduced the levy system to relieve food grain shortage. Though it was abolished by the United Front government in 1954, following the Indo-Pak war in 1965, the military government of Pakistan re-introduced it. As a consequence, the levy emerged as a new tool of exploitation and increased the sufferings of the farmers. The political leaders of East Pakistan opposed the levy as it caused peasant harassment and called for an end to the exploitation of farmers inside and outside of the Parliament. In 1954, the United Front government, winning the farmers' vote, abolished the levy system to the interest of the peasants. Eventually, Ayub Khan's military government also abolished the levy system in 1967, fearing opposition from politicians and losing its own popularity. Thus the peasants of East Bengal were freed from the exploitation and harassment of the levy system.

---

41 *Assembly Proceedings*, Official Report, East Pakistan Provincial Assembly, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, Second Session, 1965, The 14th, 15th, 16th, and 17th December, 1965 (Dacca: East Pakistan Government Press, 1967), pp. 191-193.

## Sketching the Tactical Position and Maritime Connectivity of Bengal with Malay Archipelago (321 BCE-750 CE)

Sharmin Akhtar\*

### Abstract

This study examines the geographical and strategic proximity of Bengal and the interplay between the Bengal and Southeast Asian regions which two entities had a linkage and a great bonding from 321 BCE to 750 CE concerning maritime activities. At that time, Southeast Asia; mainly the Malay Archipelago was known as the Golden Chersonese. Despite having infinite reciprocal geographical and maritime significance, their tactical positions and strategic factors that impacted inter-linkages are seriously marginalised and infrequently looked at from the historical perspective. The study adopts historical research method in analysing the accounts of ancient Greek-Roman geographers and Chinese travellers, ancient texts, and archaeological documents qualitatively to unfold the contextual geographical factors between these two regions. The findings of this study show the strategic proximity of Bengal and its role in creating linkages with Southeast Asia through ports and maritime connectivity. It also demonstrates the socio-cultural impacts on the Southeast Asian regions created by the Bengal's contacts during the ancient period.

**Key words:** Bengal, Southeast Asia, geographical position, connectivity, ancient.

### Introduction

The geographical entities, strategic locations, natural richness, and various ethnic elements are responsible for establishing a good relationship between the two regions. In this connection, Bengal and Southeast Asian connectivity in the early period is a significant issue for historical research. A few number of scholars worked in the areas related to the maritime trade, and cultural linkages of Bengal-Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>, but Southeast Asian physical features as a significant factor behind the

---

\* Professor, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

<sup>1</sup> See Abdul Momin Chowdhury, "Bengal and Southeast Asia: Trade and Cultural Contacts in the Ancient Period", In: Amra Srisuchat (ed.), *Ancient Traders and Cultural Contacts in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok. 1996, pp. 96-101; Ashok Datta, *Bengal and Southeast Asia-Early Trade and Cultural Contacts*, Bengal Art, Vol. 5, 1999, pp. 49-60; Shahanaj Husne Jahan, *Excavating Waves and Winds of (Ex) change: A Study of Maritime Trade in Early Bengal*, (Oxford: John and Erica Hedges Ltd.2006).

connectivity remained largely unexplored. Moreover, Bengal's geographical factors were also overlooked, although these factors created Bengal's proximity to the major ports of Southeast Asia. To better understand historical events, the historian should consider the merits of linking history and geography from a long-term perspective.<sup>2</sup> In line with the *Longue duree* approach, Braudel mentioned that such linking is essential for making historians more geographically aware and geographers more historically sensitive.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Wallerstein showed in his world-system theory that rather than a nation-state or a united political unit an organised human society has emerged with the progression of the updated sciences and capitalism that creates a longstanding history. Such development happened just because of universal networking or connection like the ancient maritime-based contact. According to the location theory of Weber,<sup>4</sup> 'optimal location' is essential to maritime trade. The trade network connects 'market-places' which can be conceived in 'nodal points' within the network. Hence, strategic location, geographical aspects, routes and settlement-related information can help illustrate the connectivity of regions. The objective of the study is to examine the geographical and strategic proximity of Bengal and the interplay between the Bengal and Southeast Asian regions. Additionally, it analyses the multifactual capacity of Bengal and its impact on the Southeast Asian region in the ancient period, especially from 321 BCE to 750 CE concerning maritime activities. The issues have been described based on its littoral position and movement of the people, geographical connectivity, and the bilateral and combined forces that interacted in the process of the maritime relationship between these two entities.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study adopts historical research methods in explaining the strategic elements of the advantageous location of Bengal and the Southeast Asian region that created maritime connectivity between both regions. Data and information were collected from ancient literary texts such as *Arthashastra*, *Jataka*, *Kathasaritsagara*, archaeological excavation reports analysis, classical and Chinese geographers and travellers accounts. Visiting the National Museum of Malaysia author gathered some authentic information regarding the maritime connectivity of Bengal and Southeast Asian regions such as Buddhagupta's inscriptional document, Indian semi-precious

---

2 Alan Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging and Divide*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 22.

3 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. 2, (California: University of California Press. 1995), pp. 1-3.

4 Alfred Weber, *Über den Standort der Industrien* (Theory of the location of industries), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.1909), pp. 29, 34.

beads and pottery sherds. Hence, this study has been carried out by using both primary and secondary sources through archival and library research.

### 3. Geo-Political Features of Bengal

‘Bengal’, in this research, refers to the geographical area of present Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. It was a British province called by this name from the Muslim conquest of this territory in the 13th century. In the ancient period, the Bengals’ territory covered the geographical entity or the ancient Indian township of Vanga, Samatata, Harikela, Vangala, Gauda, Radha, Pundra, Varendra, Suhma etc. At that time, these townships were part of ancient India and occasionally, some townships were independent. All these ancient townships were under the geographical area of present Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE to the partition of India in 1947 it was known as Bengal.<sup>5</sup> Though the word Bengal is derived from Vanga, the latter was sometimes bigger or smaller than the Bengal of pre-partition days, in relation to its expansion and contraction under different ruler’s authority. Regarding Vanga and Bengal, D. C. Sircar referred to Vanga country including parts of the central, eastern and southern parts of Bengal that referred to most of the area of Bengal. Ancient texts *Arthasastra* of Kautilya and *Milindapanha* mentioned Vanga as denoting a territorial unit. In this research, Bengal refers to a period before the name Bengal came into existence. As a name, to take ‘Bengal’ perhaps is more convenient than denoting the territory where the Bengali language is spoken today. According to Majumder<sup>6</sup>

It comprises the Indian state of West Bengal and the whole of East Pakistan and some Bengali-speaking tracts included in the Indian States of Bihar and Assam, and Indian Union Territory of Tripura.

Bengal’s geographical location played an important role in its international connectivity since ancient times. The geographical position of Bengal corresponds to the highland boundary in the north, eastern and western borders. The area of this region is almost entirely plain land and silt alluvial as a result of overwhelming streams of the river system of northern India. This riverine-tangled network is the largest delta<sup>7</sup> in the deltaic region and was divided into the sub-montane Terai, the western border (Rajmahal hills) of the Indian Peninsular block, the Ganga-

---

5 Ramesh Chandra Majumder, *History of Ancient Bengal*. (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co.1971). pp.1-14.

6 Ramesh Chandra Majumder, *History of Ancient Bengal*, (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co.1971). pp.1.

7 Kanan Gopal Bagchi, *The Ganges Delta*, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1944), p. 37, Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1938), p.120.



Brahmaputra para delta, the Surma-Meghna valley and the Sylhet and Chittagong hills and plains, and the delta core region in the south. It had the sharing of the mountainous border with ancient Burma on the south edge rather than the other parts were the ancient Indian territory and an extension of the ancient block of Peninsular India. It regarded an entity that was close to the early Southeast Asian region<sup>8</sup> in terms of maritime communication.

Moreover, the seafarers of Bengal knew the sea involving wind, water currents, tides, and weather conditions since the third millennium BCE. The geographical settings of the Indian Peninsula support all along its coastline from the majority of the rivers of India, and their distributaries are suitable for navigation and ports developed along the estuarine mouths. The inhabitants of Bengal unquestionably dealt with boats and ships as seafaring nature. Based on Mulvaney's study,<sup>9</sup> before 40,000 BCE, the proto-Australoid people<sup>10</sup> had sailed from Southeast Asia to Australia, the earliest Bengal settlers. Through the anthropological study, Ray<sup>11</sup> argued that the descendants of these people are still familiar as Mundas and the Santals (indigenous people) who live in present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal.

It should be mentioned here that ancient Bengal had a 4000-year-old civilisation that thrived between the banks of the Ganges to the Brahmaputra and sustained itself with the riches of the Ganges Delta where these two rivers acted as a geographical marker of the region. This geographical network provided a unique environment throughout the early history of Bengal, but it also linked Bengal to the larger Ganga<sup>12</sup> and Brahmaputra valley networks on the one hand and the east coast and Bay of Bengal systems on the other.

---

8 Harunur Rashid, "The Geographical Background to the History and Archaeology of South East Bengal", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1979-81, pp.157-178.

9 Derek Jhon Mulvaney, *The Prehistory of Australia*, (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p.81.

10 Different Indian sub-divisions have been populated by diverse indigenous peoples. Among them, the Proto-Australoid sect has a sort of racial affinities with Australian Aborigines. Specifically, eastern Bengal is strongly suggestive of mixed Mongoloid and Proto-Australoid strains. Alongside Eastern Bengal, they lived in Bihar, Orissa, Madhya and Andhra Pradesh of India, mainly the Mundari-speaking tribes. They are classified as Munda, Santal, Ho, Juang, Saora and others, and are known as the Austro-Asiatic language group. From the eastern part of India, a group of this large family migrated to Mainland Southeast Asia and scattered throughout parts of Burma, Siam, Laos, Malay and Southern China.

11 Niharranjan Ray, (1994). *History of the Bengali People (Ancient Period)* translated. Calcutta: Orient Logman. pp.32-34.

12 Ganga is the big river of India. according to Ptolemy after passing these the course turns again to the east, and if sail with the ocean to your right and the coastal far to your left, you reach the Ganges and the extreme of the continent towards the east called Khrys (The Golden Khersonese). The river of this region called the Ganges is the largest in India, it has an annual increase and decreases like the Nile.

### 3.1 The Core Region of Bengal

The 'Gangetic Valley' was the core area of Bengal, and the parts of lower West Bengal (including its coastal area) and western sections of coastal Bangladesh included in the early centuries in a country called *Ganges* (Ganga) in foreign sources, and *Vanga* in ancient Indian texts.<sup>13</sup> According to *Periplus*,<sup>14</sup> the name Gange was not only familiar as a river but also a country and its capital was located near the principal mouth of the river and the bank of this river was also considered a market town as Gange. So, the name 'Gange' was known as a river and the capital of a region that was considered as Bengal. Through this place, some trading goods like malabathrum and Gangetic spikenard, and pearls used to take away beyond Bengal. Another product was Bengal's muslin of the finest sort which is called Gangetic Muslin exported through this port.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the name *Gangaridae* is sometimes taken as a Greek corruption of the Sanskrit *Ganga-rastra* (the country of Ganga), *Ganga-radha* (the heart of Ganga) or *Ganga-hrdaya* (the heart of Ganga). Moreover, *Gangaridae* refers to the people Gange or Ganges, which simply means Gangian people and the particular area of Bengal that was inhabited by the *Gangaridae* mentioned both in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (80 CE) and the *Geography of Ptolemy*<sup>16</sup> (140 CE). The people called the Ganges received their name from the Ganges also a river and a city. The Ganges people lived in lower Bengal and were considered a powerful group of people to the foreign writers. As a whole, this region was also the same as Vanga and Bengal.

Ancient *Vanga* is the heartland of the Ganga Delta that is situated in the Ganga Valley. Bagchi confined this deltaic region within the limits of the two farthest distributaries of the Ganges Bhagirathi-Hoogli and the Padma-Meghna rivers.<sup>17</sup> Though it is hard to determine its exact boundary, it corresponds to the land to the

---

13 Vanga is frequently referred to in the ancient Indian texts Aitareya Aranyaka, Baudhayana Dharmasutra, Arthashastra of Kautilya, Mahavasya of Patanjali, the Ramayana, the Raghuvamsa of Kalidasa, several Buddhist texts. See more. Bratindranath Mukherjee, "The Territory of the Gangaridai", Indian Journal of Landscape Systems and Ecological Studies, 1987, pp.65-90.

14 The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century (trans.), W.H. Schoff, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher, 1995). p. 94.

15 Sharmin Akhtar, Bengal's Perspective on Maritime Connectivity with Major Ports of Southeast Asia, 321 BCE- 750 CE, PhD thesis (Unpublished), (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 2023).

16 Gerolamo Emilio Gerini, Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia (Further India and Indo-Malay Archipelago), (London: Royal Geographical Society, 1909), p. 98.

17 Kanangopal Bagchi, The Ganges Delta, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1944), p. 35;H. Blochman, Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Vol. 62, No. 1, 1873, p. 211.

east and beyond the Delta of the Ganges.<sup>18</sup> The earliest definite reference to Bengal is found in the classical accounts of Alexander's invasion and interpreted as equivalent to Gangadha, Gangarid or Gangarastra.<sup>19</sup> It should be stated that Bengal was encircled by the sea, washed by the Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers, and many of their tributaries and distributaries. It appears to have attained fame for naval and maritime activities.

The Bengal coast is a significant area of study of maritime trade that is a unique *asamudrahimacala*<sup>20</sup> zone that stretches from the Himalayas to the sea. From here, Inland riverine communication was considerably facilitated by numerous rivers in the Ganga delta.<sup>21</sup> At the Danananda's time (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), *Gangaridae* and *Prasii* were his steady provincial state, which was mentioned in ancient Greco-Roman accounts. Several modern scholars have located *Gangaridae* in the Ganges Delta of Bengal. It has also been identified as the area of Chandraketugarh of West Bengal. *Periplus of the Earythrean Sea* (1<sup>st</sup> century C.E.), and the *Geography* of Ptolemy mentioned the 'Ganges Country' on the Bay of Bengal to the east of Desarene (coastal Orissa) or ancient Kalinga as having the river Ganges around or all sides of it. The Gange Valley and Prasii were under the Maurya empire Chandragupta Maurya (324-297 BCE), and Pataliputra was the capital of the Maurya empire.

### 3.2 Uniqueness and Individuality of Bengal

Bengal belongs to its own 'distinct entity' and geo-feature in India's entire subcontinent. Its strategic location, geological settings and climatic conditions are appealing.<sup>22</sup> The geographical situation constructs its identity, socio-cultural attitudes, economic life, and commercial connections with several regions beyond this land.

The period dealt with in this research is from the earliest time to the seventh century CE. Then, Bengal's physical existence depended mainly on the river system in that period. Over time, rivers change their courses differently, and their considerable effect is shown upon the history and civilisation of this region and localities. For

18 Narottam Kundu, *Cast and Class in Pre-Muslim Bengal* (Studies in Social History of Bengal), PhD Thesis, (London: SOAS University, 1963). Upham, Edward, 1776-1834. *The Mahāvānsi, the Rājā-Ratnācari and the Rājā-Vali*, from the sacred and historical books of Ceylon: also, a Collection of tracts illustrative of the doctrines and literature of Buddhism; tr. from the Singhalese (Vol. 2), (Parbury, Allen and Co. 1833).

19 Himanshu Prava Ray and J. F. Salles (eds.), *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contact in the Indian Ocean*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), p.24

20 It is a Sanskrit word, used for the area of the Bengal coast that extends from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal.

21 Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), p.19.

22 J.P. Morgan and W. McIntire, *Quaternary Geology of the Bengal Basin, East Pakistan and India*, *Bulletin of the Geological Society of America*, Vol. 10 (No. 3), 1959. pp.319-342.

instance, the principal river was the Ganges, which divides itself into the branches of the rivers of Bhagirathi and Padma. Though formerly the Bhagirathi was in the more important channel of the Ganges running almost due south, the Padma was flowing in a south-easterly direction. Nowadays, the enormous volume of the Ganges' water is carried mainly by the Padma, while the upper part of the Bhagirathi has shrunk to a very shallow stream.<sup>23</sup> Other essential streams were the Sarasvati flowing into an estuary near modern Tamluk, the Yamuna (Jamuna) running course southeast down its present bed, and the Bhagirathi proper.

The frequent changes in rivers' course have been responsible for ruining many old places.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes these changes cause the decline of established port cities. For example, Tamralipti, Gange (Chandraketugarh), Wari-Bhateshwar, and Kotalipara were the thriving seat of civilisation and centres of sea-borne trade and commerce. The Kalyani inscription stated that Bengal's occupancy colonised the settlement in Suvarnabhumi and Tamralipti played a key role in this process. As an important international port of the Indian subcontinent since the early historic period, it flourished from the third century BCE to the eighth century CE. Many foreign travellers, pilgrims, and geographers remark about the port of Tamralipti as a famous and bustling one and a religious centre on the eastern coast of India or Bengal. It also became an indispensable and prominent port in the Maurya Empire in maritime trade with overseas destinations

Though it is hard to get a definite chronological and political history before the Gupta period, there is sufficient evidence of this region's trade and commerce at that time. Ancient Indian literature, religious texts, and Greek and Roman (Classical) accounts referred to some important clues about the glorious economic activity of the Maurya and Gupta period of Bengal. Their references prove that the overseas trade of a large part of North India passed through Bengal. Since Bengal was a riverine and deltaic<sup>25</sup> region from the early times, most of the ports and cities were built beside the river as well. *Gangaridai* was such a prominent Bengal kingdom, known as the trading centre, Gange.

Some archaeological discoveries proved a strong and vital relationship between Bengal and Southeast Asia. Among the archaeological clues, the Kharosti and

---

23 Ramesh Chandra Majumder, *History of Ancient Bengal*, (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co. 1971), p.6.

24 *Ibid*, p.1,2,6.

25 Bengal is the largest Delta in the world.

Kharosti-Bramhi inscriptions<sup>26</sup> found from U Thong<sup>27</sup> in Lopburi province in Thailand, Sembilan in Bali (Indonesia) and Oc-Eo in Vietnam are important. Because of this significant evidence, this trade connection proved factual.

#### 4. Geo-Features of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a geographical entity between India and China bounded by Australia and the Pacific Ocean. The culture, nature, and politics of the Southeast Asian region are diversified with plain land and island areas called mainland Southeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia, respectively. Its physical geography contained beaches, gulfs, bays and inlets. The mainland territory comprises Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar and has contact with India and China and is called Indochina. Maritime Southeast Asia consists of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, East Timor, and the Philippines and is surrounded by water bodies.<sup>28</sup> Two major sea routes along the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea were linked to India and China's great markets.<sup>29</sup>

However, in ancient times, the Southeast Asian classical kingdoms were located in the Red River delta of Vietnam, Pagan in Myanmar, Angkor in Cambodia, Sukhothai in Thailand, and Majapahit in Java.<sup>30</sup> During the ancient period, the whole of the Malay Peninsula was under Siamese predominance.<sup>31</sup> The early maritime activities and handling goods transportation across the areas now include the Indochina region, the Andaman Gulf or the Gulf of Siam and the Strait of Malacca or Sunda, between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, or Sumatra and Java as well as in a broad scale between India and China. Hence, the mainland area of ancient Southeast Asia covered from the Irrawady to Yagzi and has been confined to consist of the valleys of the main rivers like the Red River, Mekong and Chao Phraya and the mediating

---

26 Bratindra Nath Mukherjee, *Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi Inscriptions in West Bengal (India)*. Mukherjee, B. N. *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XXV,1 1990. pp. 9-80. ... *Currency Systems of the Maurya and Post Maurya Period*, In B, N, Mukherjee (ed.), *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal (up to c. A.D. 500)*, (Calcutta: Progressive Publication, 2000). pp 43-45.

27 The texts of this inscription are the native of lower Bengal.

28 Royal Berglee, *World Regional Geography: People, Places and Globalization*, (Kansas: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2012), pp. 925.

29 Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (London: Palgrave, 2017). p. 16.

30 Craig J. Reynolds, *A New Look at Old Southeast Asia*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 54 (No.2), 1995. p.107.

31 Georolamo Emilio Gerini, *Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia (Further India and Indo-Malay Archipelago)*, (London: Royal Geographical Society, 1909), p. 79.

territory. The whole region is attractive to extend the area of the islands of Southeast Asia and surface to the north to west, including the uneven nature.<sup>32</sup> Scholars used the terms ‘Greater India’ or ‘Further India’ or ‘India beyond the Gange’s to refer to the whole region.<sup>33</sup>

#### ***4.1 Natural Recourses and Attractive Landscape of Southeast Asia***

The ancient cities of Southeast Asia were rich hubs that provided a multitude of products to exchange. The jungle, sea and riverine water bodies were the sources of those material products. The jungle-covered landscape and rainforest supplied aromatic woods, resins and rattans, exotic birds, and animal products for which the Malay world became renowned. Hence, the surrounding warm and shallow seas provided an ideal breeding place for marine products.<sup>34</sup>

The prime reason and motivation for inbound travellers of the ancient Southeast Asian region was the emergence of profitable international maritime trade. This region produced materials and items from its natural resources that met the demand of the overseas merchants, and they used to make a profit adequately. International traders crowded the port cities of Southeast Asia to exchange export-import products.<sup>35</sup> In this way, Southeast Asia has been in touch with various international markets throughout Asia and Europe, and their economic development materialized by depending on this trade connection.<sup>36</sup> Historically, the entity of Southeast Asia engaged in intra-Asian and regional trade. India and China were the bases of intra-Asian trade activities that had a long history, spanning more than two thousand years. Contracts with the Indian subcontinent over a longer period are reflected in India's cultural penetration and influences over Southeast Asia. During the first millennium CE, the skills of merchants and sailors both from India and the Southeast Asian maritime world synchronized together which made a close tie of trade relationship.<sup>37</sup>

---

32 Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia (From 10000BC to the Fall of Angkor)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.1-3.

33 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1968), pp. 15-16.

34 Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (London: Palgrave, 2017), p.16.

35 Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells. And Jhon Villiers, *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 23.

36 Rytuo Shimada, *Southeast Asia and International Trade: Continuity and Change in Historical Perspective*, In *Paths to Emerging State*, (Chapter.3), (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019). pp. 75-81.

37 Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (London: Palgrave, 2017), p.16.

## 5. Bengal-Southeast Asian Connectivity (321 BCE-750 CE)

Siam-Malay Peninsula and Indochina were closely related to Bengal from the Maurya to the Post-Gupta period (321 BCE-750 CE) as part of the transaction with ancient India. The Pre-Gupta period was an excellent example of this contact (Law, 1954) proved by archaeological research and some ancient texts and classical literature. It may be noted here that ancient sources *Jataka*<sup>38</sup> (Vol.VI, 22) and *Arthashastra*<sup>39</sup> show the Bengal trade connectivity with Suvannabhumi. However, Bengal-originated archaeological material such as semi-precious beads, sherds identified as NBPW (Northern Black Polished Ware), Rouletted ware, circular seals with Brahmi and Kharosti letters of the second century<sup>40</sup> and ivory comb<sup>41</sup> found in the different excavations from several archaeological sites in Southeast Asia that bore authentic hints of Bengal maritime connectivity with this region. On the other hand, ancient Indian literary sources *Arthashastra* of Kautilya,<sup>42</sup> *Jataka's tales*,<sup>43</sup> *Kathasarit Sagara*<sup>44</sup> and other Greco-Roman classical texts such as *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*<sup>45</sup> Chinese accounts<sup>46</sup> frequently mentioned some clues of cultural and commercial linkages of Bengal and Southeast Asia. In those sources, the Southeast Asian part was known by different names, such as Suvannabhumi, Suvarnadvipa, Dipantara or Golden Khersonese. It should be stated that though Bengal was a small part of the ancient Indian subcontinent, its proximity constantly echoed in various sources regarding the linkages of India and Southeast Asian regions.

### 5.1 Kra-Isthmas Zone and Bengal Connectivity

The ancient Thai region, especially the Kra Isthmus zone, was historically significant as an aerial of India's early commercial and cultural contact (Map: 2). This zone

38 The Mahajanaka Jataka ( no.539), The Jataka or Stories of Buddhists Former Birth -Translated from the Pali by Various Hands (Vol. VI). Cowell, E. B., Rouse, W., & Little, M.E. Cowell, (Ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907).

39 The Kautiliya Arthashastra, Part II, An English Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes. Klange, R. P. (Bombay: T.V. Chidambaran, University of Bombay, 1963). Pp. 102,115,119-120.

40 Aung Thaw, Report on the excavation of Beikthano, Rangoon, 1968, pp. 4-6.

41 B. Bronson & G. f. Dales, Excavations at Chansen, Thailand 1968 and 1969: A Preliminary Report, Asian Perspectives, Vol. 15, 1970, pp. 15-46.

42 The Kautiliya Arthashastra, Part II, An English Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes, R. P. Klange, (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1963).

43 The Jataka or the Buddha's Former Births (translated from the Pali by various hands), E. Cowell, (London: Luzac & Co. 1957).

44 The Ocean of Story being C. H. Twaney's translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagar, N. M. Penzer, Vol.2,3, (London: Chas.J. Sawyer Led. 1924, 1925).

45 The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century (trans.), W. H. Schoff, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher, 1995).

46 S. Beal. Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-yun, Buddhist Pilgrims from China to India (400 AD and 518 AD), (London: Trubner and Co.1868).

provides the early historical data for Bengal connectivity with this region. Bengal-originated archaeological evidence made this region more significant. Regarding maritime connection, Ban-Don-Ta-Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo these two port-sites are essential concerning Bengal trade linkage. These sites were important for trading activity from the fourth-fifth century BCE and Bengal's contact was identified by Glover's<sup>47</sup> excavation. Jahan's<sup>48</sup> study also provides the same statement. Glover's Study (1990) defines trade contact between India and Southeast Asia from the third century BCE based on founding etched semi-precious beads, Northern Black Polished Ware, Roulleted Ware and other artefacts in Ban Don ta Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo. He also indicated these products originated in the Bengal or Gange region. The founding of artefacts offers a clear indication that trade communication using the Bay of Bengal network was not occasional rather than regular voyages.

### **5.2 Kedha-Tamralipti Connection**

In the legacy of the maritime connectivity of Bengal with Southeast Asia in the early period, some ports were maintaining their earlier promptness during the Gupta period (320 CE-520 CE) of Bengal. The ancient Kedah of the Malay Peninsula was one of the most hectic ports that had close contact with the Bay of Bengal and the most vibrant Bengal port Tamralipti alongside the other active ports. The early history of Kedah can be traced from the prehistoric archaeological site of Bujang Valley<sup>49</sup> of Lembah Bujang. It was the early maritime trading centre, which had a connection with India and Bengal, Persia, and Arab and Chinese territories. It was located in the northwestern part of Peninsular Malay. It supplied tin, and jungle products such as rattan, resin, honey, beeswax, elephants, ivory, areca nuts, sepang wood and black woods in ancient times. It used to profit from tax collections. From 110 CE, it was established as a trade route for maritime activity with India and China. The Indian merchants already came to this area before the first century CE. However, the discoveries in Bujang Valley also made the ancient Kedah the oldest civilisation in Southeast Asia.

The *Kathasaritsagara* (XIII, 74) refers to merchants embarking at Bengal's port Tamralipti on ships bound for Kataha, which has been identified with ancient Kedah on the Malay west coast Peninsula. As late historical data, the archaeological material Buddhaguptas inscription is the more authentic proof regarding the Bengal

---

47 Ian Glover, *Early Trade between India and Southeast Asia: A Link in the Development of a World Trading System*, (Hull: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), p. 4.

48 Shahanaj Husne Jahan, *Maritime Trade between Thailand and Bengal*, *Journal of Fine Arts*, Vol. 3(2), 2012. pp 205-228.

49 Richest archaeological site in Malaysia.



connectivity with the Malay Archipelago. Bengal's *Mahanavika* (great sailor) Buddhagupta sailed from Tamralipti to the Malay Peninsula for the business depicted in a fragmentary stone inscription of Buddhagupta and with the quotations in the *Sagarmati-pariprccha* discovered by Dr. Wales from Bujang valley, Kedah (Wheatley, 1961, p. 193) of about the sixth century CE.

### **5.3 Bengal's Connectivity with Oc-Eo and Ko-Ying**

Moreover, under Indo-China, the Funan Kingdom was famous in ancient times for Indian contact as an important Indianized state of early Southeast Asia. The Funan capitals were at Vyadhapura (today's Baphnom) and Narabaranagara (Angkor). It was the gateway for the local maritime traveller, and it was used as the most crucial place for South Asian and Middle Eastern merchants, sailors and pilgrims. Sa Huynh society played a significant role in trans-regional exchange networks. Desirable exotic materials were imported from India for local consumption and exported their distinctive products. Austronesian settlements existed in the coastal region because of the harbour.<sup>50</sup> The first sign of the port city of Funan was Oc-Eo, which flourished as a major trading centre for Bengali merchants. Now it is an important archaeological site. This port was well known for trading activity with India and Bengal from the first to the seventh century. Oc-Eo may have been the port known to the Romans Kittigara as well. This name Kittigara was probably derived from Sanskrit *Kirti-Nagara*, a renowned city or 'strong city'.<sup>51</sup> Oc-Eo was a part of the Funan culture, a pre-Angkor society based on international trade with an extensive network of canals. Trade goods flowing through Oc-Eo came from Rome, India and China. It was never a capital city but served as the economic power for the rulers in the ancient period.

The Southeast Asian ports with which Bengal established its maritime trade in the Gupta period Ko-Ying was one of them. Even since the Maurya and Post-Maurya period, this port was connected with Bengal for trading, especially horse transaction. This port is situated in the Malay Peninsula's littoral and identified its position as the coastal port of the Malay Peninsula<sup>52</sup> whereas Wolters showed its location in the middle of the southern Malay Peninsula and the southern coast of Sumatra<sup>53</sup> near the Sunda strait. The ancient Chinese people assumed that the commercial centres on

---

50 Li Tana, A View from the Sea: Perspectives on the Northern and Central Vietnamese Coast, *Journal of the Southeast Asian Studies*, 2006. pp.83-102.

51 Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Indian Culture*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998), p. 413

52 B. N. Mukherjee, *Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi Inscriptions in West Bengal (India)*. *Indian Museum Bulletin* (1990), XXV, 9-80.

53 O. W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins Srivijaya*. (London: Cornell University Press. 1967). p. 56.

the Sumatran coast near the Sunda Strait as Ko-Ying. This vital trade centre enjoyed a strategic location between the Java Sea region and China. In the sixth century, Chinese documents mentioned Ko-Ying and remarked as a cut-off place from China. Because of the changing phase in the international trading route in the early fourth century, the Funan legacy in trade diminished during the third century, and it had control over the commercial points on the Malay coast and dominance over the commercial flow in Southeast Asia.<sup>54</sup>

#### **5.4 Bengal Connectivity with Srivijaya**

Srivijaya was a famous city-state or kingdom of early Indonesia. It was based on the Island of ancient Sumatra.<sup>55</sup> The inscription of Kedukan Bukit mentioned the existence of Srivijaya since the 4th century. It was the first unified kingdom to dominate much of the Indonesian Archipelago. Srivijaya's power is based on its control of international maritime trade. In the seventh century, this place became familiar to the Malay people as a famous kingdom that was situated near Jambi in Sumatra. In the nearby Palembang, Indonesia, it was later consolidated as a powerful and more extensive empire.<sup>56</sup> Srivijaya became a strong kingdom with colossal trade and commercial hegemony in the Southeast Asian region.<sup>57</sup> During the seventh century, Srivijaya achieved fame as more significant, richer in terms of maritime trade and a centre of Buddhist religion-cultural primacy.<sup>58</sup> The most archaeological vestige is a statue of Buddha in Amravati style found from the west of Palembang. This statue is made of granite that is unknown in Palembang. Scholars assumed, perhaps it came from Bangka, an island off the east coast of Sumatra, which if Bangka identified with the Vanga mentioned in the Pali Mahaniddesa, was certainly frequented at an early date by Indian seamen.<sup>59</sup> It also proves the Bengal penetration in this region.

Srivijaya was the most significant entrepot and had regular connectivity with India and Bengal in terms of international maritime trade activities. After the fifth century, Srivijaya started to come into position in the region when the economic situation of

---

54 R. K. Hall, *A History Early Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade Societal Development 100-1500*. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2011). p. 38.

55 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1968). p. 54.

56 M. S. Yaapar, *Malay Navigation and Maritime Trade: A Journey Through Anthropology and History*. *IJUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies*, 2019. 2(1), 53-72.

57 O. W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins Srivijaya*. (London: Cornell University Press. 1967). pp. 417-424.

58 Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells. And Jhon Villiers, *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 48.

59 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (1968). p. 54.

Ko-Ying faced challenges from the western Java commercial centre of Ho-lo-tan. A new Southeast Sumatra commercial centre replaced both places. With the demise of the strategic position of Funan, Srivijaya dominated maritime in the western Java Sea realm<sup>60</sup> from 670 to 1025 CE in the Southeast Asian region.

The most connected ancient townships and ports from the Southeast Asian end such as; Takkola, Ban-Don Ta Phet, Khao Sam Kaeo, Krittinagara or Oc-Eo, Kataha or old Kedah, Ko-Ying and Srivijaya (Map. 1) were also linked with Bengal's ports Tamralipti, Gange and Wari-Bateshwar.



**Map 1: Major Ports of Southeast Asia (321 BCE-750 CE)**

Source: Produced by Author.

60 K. R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1985). p. 39.

## 6. Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (BBIS)<sup>61</sup>

The maritime trade contact of Bengal with the Southeast Asian region was part of the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (BBIS) since the prehistoric period. The activities orbiting the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere were mainly functional from 1000 BCE to 500 CE. Scholars assume that the historical material makes Southeast Asian participation responsible in the far-distance maritime transactions since the early period of the first millennium BCE. This region was much more functional as the second phase of ancient Indian urbanisation with the techno-cultural expansion. In addition, it comes with the riverine skilfulness of its dwellers who had the experience and knowledge in navigation, and boat to operate maritime trade activities with international destinations. However, the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere broadly comprises the area of littoral tracts surrounding the Bay of Bengal. The eastern part of the Indian subcontinent was included in remote areas of this realm that covered the areas of present-day Sri Lanka, the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh. From the Southeast Asian end, its western part participated in the maritime activities of this sphere were the ancient land of today's Myanmar, coastal Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian Islands of Sumatra and Java.

Moreover, some indications of the activeness of the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere are found in the archaeological finds like the Bengal-originated beads and pottery. These archaeological items were mainly exported to Southeast Asian regions from the Gangetic Valley<sup>62</sup>. As the actions orbited the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere, the items imported to ancient India and Bengal from Southeast Asian regions were gold,

---

61 'Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (BBIS) is an essential term of recent research on early Indo-Southeast Asian interplay by a new generation of researchers. See more... in Sunil Gupta, *The Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (1000 BC-AD 500)*. Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Bulletin, 2005, 3(25), 21-30. S. Gupta, (2006). *Early Indian Ocean in the Context of Indian Relationship with Southeast Asia*. In G. Pande ed., *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilisation*, Vol. I, Part-3. (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilisation, 2006). pp. 111-142. B. Bellina & I. C. Glover, *The archaeology of early contacts with India and the Mediterranean World from the fourth-century BC to fourth century AD*, In I. C. Glover & P. Bellwood (eds.) *Southeast Asia, from the Prehistory to History*, (London: Routledge, 2004). pp. 68-89.

62 P. Bellwood, *Southeast Asia before History*, Cambridge History, Vol. I, 1992, pp. 55-136.; I. C. Glover, *Archaeological evidence for early maritime contacts between India and Southeast Asia*, in *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean: Proceedings of the International Seminar, Techno-archaeological Perspectives of Seafaring in the Indian Ocean, 4th Cent. BC-15th Cent. AD*. Himanshu Prabha Ray and Jean-Francois Salles (eds.), (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996). pp.126-158.; Q. Higham, *Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). p.330.

high-tin, and high-tin bronzes<sup>63</sup> These littoral interactions were significantly prominent in cross-cultural and bilateral trading within these two regions, Bengal and Southeast Asia.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, the maritime connection of the Bengal region with Southeast Asia is sometimes signified by the involvement of other coastline activities like the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea with the Bay of Bengal.<sup>65</sup> Bengal was fortunate because of its position in the mid-point, between the region of South India and Sri Lanka at one side and Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia at the other.

Monsoon wind is a crucial and predominant factor for voyaging through the sea. Sometimes weather disturbances occur during the pre-monsoon, monsoon and post-monsoon periods when travellers refrain from sea voyaging. Sometimes they use monsoon winds and currents to sail towards any distant land. Tripathi and Raut mentioned that sailors on the east coasts of India were the first to obtain knowledge on the use of monsoon winds and currents for maritime trade. The ancient people were knowledgeable about monsoon wind and they passed it on from one generation to another. The knowledge of using monsoon wind may be passed down, and Tripathi and Raut showed that there is no change in the seasons of monsoon over around past 2000 years.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the Bay of Bengal route and sphere, in the early period, the voyagers determined their movement time-table by using and sensing the monsoon winds, and blown breezes on sea and land during the monsoon period (August-September) for sailing to Bengal from Sri Lanka and South India and the period of November to April for voyaging towards Southeast Asia from the Bengal region.<sup>67</sup>

The evidence for the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere activities is found through archaeological findings and the classical texts that show the trade relations between Bengal and Southeast Asia from the earlier Maurya Era and such a maritime connection possibly initiated from the fourth century BCE. After the Kalinga War of Asoka (261 BCE), maritime trade between these two regions increased rapidly. Though Coedes opined that the Indian cultural influence incepted towards the ancient

---

63 Himanshu Prabha Ray, In search of Suvamabhumi: early sailing networks in the Bay of Bengal, in *Indo-Pacific Prehistory*, P. Bellwood (ed.), (Indo-Pacific Association Bulletin 10,1991), pp.357-365.

64 B. Bellina & I C. Glover, *The Archaeology of Early Contact with India and the Mediterranean World, from the Fourth Century BC to the Fourth Century AD.* (2004).

65 Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade in Early India*, (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2001). p. 34.

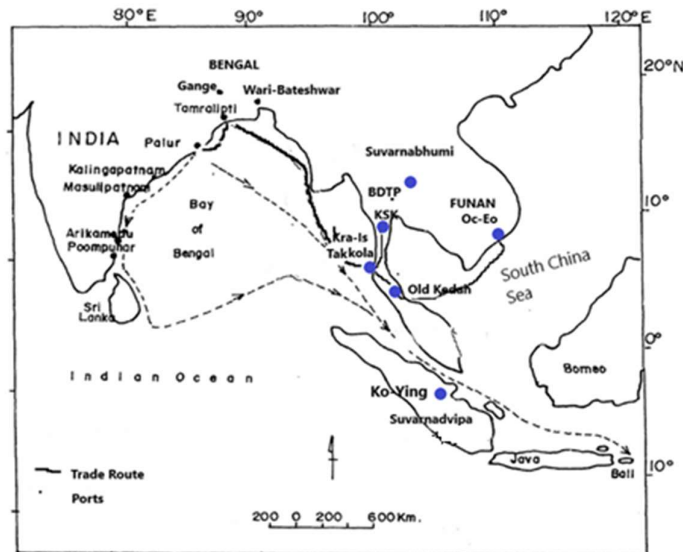
66 S. Tripathi and L. N. Raut, Monsoon wind and maritime trade: A case study of historical evidence from Orissa, India, *Current Science*, Vol. 90 (6). 2006. pp.864-871.

67 S. H. Jahan, Rouletted Ware Links South and Southeast Asia through Maritime Trade. *SPAFA*, Vol. 20(3), 2010. pp. 5-16.

Southeast Asian regions during and after the Christian era,<sup>68</sup> and other scholars mentioned the period of 400 BCE about this connectivity based on the archaeological remains.

Therefore, the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere was a broad network for an interplay of maritime activities between Bengal and Southeast Asia and other coastal regions. The trade and consequential cultural contact between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia worked as a bridge from the Neolithic period to the early Christian Era. Strategically, the location of the Bay of Bengal was significant as it was in the middle point of both of these regions (Map2). As a result, it plays a moderating role in creating critical contact between these two regions. Most importantly, as the Indian eastern coastal region, Bengal was in an advantageous position that facilitated gaining the opportunities derived from the maritime interactions sphere that made Bengal the rising sun in the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere before the Christian Era.

**Map 2: Connectivity of major ports of Bengal and Southeast Asian regions (321 BCE-750 CE) and the domain of BIBS**



Source: Reproduced by Author from the source of Tripathi (2017).

68 I C. Glover, *Early Trade Between India and Southeast Asia: A Link in the Development of A World Trading System*, (Hull: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1990). p.1.

### 7. Geo-Proximity of Bengal and Socio-cultural Impact on Southeast Asian Regions

The cultural norms of India were injected into Southeast Asian society and influenced its culture hugely. This cultural impact was created by the maritime trade activity that was primarily initiated from Northwest India, later from the eastern coast (Bengal) of India and South India. Compared to India, Southeast Asia has traditionally been considered cultural and political motionlessness and the people of this region were habituated to receiving the foreign culture rather than creating their histories and legacies. For this instance, based on diffusion theories, Southeast Asian civilisation was influenced by the external forces of ancient India and China. For instance, Yasodharapura (Angkor) in Cambodia, Pagan in Burma and Borobudur in Java all incorporated religious motifs from India, especially Bengal. On the other hand, Vietnamese rulers had religiously and meticulously copied Chinese administrative forms.<sup>69</sup>

As a result, an organized cultural expansion happened with the Indian conception of royalty. Since the Indian people believed in the mythology of Puranas and their language was Sanskrit, they demonstrated cultural superiority through the Sanskrit language in the Southeast Asian region. That's why the domination of Indian culture in that region is named 'Sanskritisation'.<sup>70</sup> Indian culture continued from the early historic to the late historical period in Southeast Asia. In this scholarly issue, Coedes opined, that people from Northwest India and its eastern coast frequently travelled to Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal to operate the maritime trade and religious propagation since before the Christian era. Using the established bilateral relationship, Indian people started to extend their staying period in Southeast Asia which aided in enhancing Indian influence in the people's daily lives in that new region. *Jataka* referred to Bengal's merchant class known as *Sresthies* and *Banik*, the big dealers in the early times who went to this distant land.

These merchants were involved in this process since it was the flourished centre for overseas merchandising. In this way, Indian people set up the first kingdom in Funan, a part of Cochin-China, located on the lower course of the Mekong delta which was in touch with ancient Bengal. It assumes that the Mekong was the modified vision of Ma Ganga (Mother Ganga) encompassing Southern Vietnam and the central Mekong,

---

69 G. Carter Bentley, *Indigenous States of Southeast Asia*, Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol.15, 1986, pp. 275-305.

70 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1968), pp. 15,16.

a large part of Menam Valley and the Malay Peninsula.<sup>71</sup> And, gradually, various ancient Southeast Asian territories took Indian names like Suvarnadwipa (Malay Peninsula), Balidwipa (Bali), Karpuradwipa (Borneo, land of Camphor), Indradwipa (Myanmar), Yavawipa (Java), Kataha (Kedah), Srivijaya (Sumatra), Ayudhya (Siam or Thailand).

As a part of Indianisation, ancient culture penetrated the area of Southeast Asia at that time by the spreading of Indian original culture along with Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>72</sup> This process is also called Farther India or India beyond the Ganges. From this viewpoint, 'Indianization' is a crucial term to understand the vastness of the migration of the Indian people in ancient Southeast Asia, with which Bengal was also actively connected. The archaeological elements prove this connection and the impact of Indianization.<sup>73</sup> Bengal-originated seals and potteries with Kharosthi-Brahmi scripts, Buddhagupta's inscription, Northern Black Polished Wares, Rouletted Wares, Beads and many other archaeological remains are the prudent evidence that shows the drastic influence of Indianization in the society of Southeast Asian regions.

Indianisation was the development of a systematised culture that originated upon the Indian notion of royalty, which was characterised by Hindu or Buddhist Cults, the mythology of the Puranas, and the compliance of Dharma Sastras. All these norms were injected through the Sanskrit Language, and possibly, the 'Sanskrit Civilisation' of Bengal and Tamil countries was blown out by sea due to the connection of maritime trade.<sup>74</sup>

---

71 Radha Kumud Mookherjee, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-born Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Time*, (Bombay, Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1912), p.75.

72 Ibid, p.28.

73 Indian links with Southeast Asia can be traced back to the prehistoric times. However, the early centuries of the Christian Era witnessed definite forms of interaction and an overwhelming Indian civilisational influence on the region. The early references Ptolemy (1st-2nd century CE) about Southeast Asia in terms of 'trans-Gangetic India', 'Indian countries beyond the Ganges' (Raffel, as quoted in Kulke, 1990, p. 28), 'Farther India' (Coedes, 1968, p-XV) are symptomatic that for centuries together the large parts of present Southeast Asia remained under intensive Indian influence in terms of political, social and cultural value systems, trade and agriculture, rise and growth of urban centres and imperial kingdoms. Such a tremendous influence could not have been possible without the migration and settlement of people from the Indian subcontinent. This is also corroborated by hectic trading activities across the two regions with all the major port cities strewn with large Indian settlements.

74 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, pp. 15,16.



## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be stated that some vibrant factors were causal behind the East-West connectivity of Bengal and Southeast Asia in that early period. Firstly, Bengal's geographical location and socio-economic individuality worked significantly in this connection. Bengal was used as a corridor for the merchants from several regions of India and created linkages with distant lands like the Malay World in maritime activity. The Bengal-engrossed Sea and river system helped the Bengal territory connect with Southeast Asia. 'As the world's largest and tide-dominated delta encircled by the sea and the triangle river system by the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, and many of their tributaries and distributaries, Bengal was at an advantageous position to dominate the domestic and international trade, especially with the Southeast Asian regions.

Secondly, Bengal's maritime capacity played a contributory role in the 'Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere.' This Sphere broadly comprises the area of littoral tracts surrounding the Bay of Bengal. Along with ancient Sri Lanka and different provinces of India, Bengal was the leading entity in this domain on one side and ancient Myanmar, coastal Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian Islands of Sumatra and Java on the other.

Thirdly, in terms of the connection of Bengal's ports with the ports of Southeast Asia enhanced the opportunities for moving cargo from one place to another, whether regional or internationally, the entity of ancient Bengal facilitated these linkages that were possible because of the strategic position of Bengal. As a wealthy geopolitical entity under the ancient Indian administration, Tamralipti and Gange were its two main international seaports alongside many other internal ports of Bengal that all connected with the Bay of Bengal. These two ports were linked with Southeast Asian ports like Ban-Don Ta-Phet, Khao-Sam-Kheo, Oc-Eo, Kedah, Ko-Ying and Srivijaya from 321 BCE to 750 CE.

Fourthly, Bengal's proximity and the assimilation and expansion of culture to Southeast Asia are other factors that worked behind this linkage. Through maritime connectivity and as a part of the Indianisation process, Bengal's culture penetrated into the Southeast Asian regions. Similarly, the strategic location of the Southeast Asian region was significant in terms of its overseas maritime connectivity and the geographical configuration of this region and ports dedicated to bringing rich tradition and keeping an undisputed role as 'cultural brokers'.<sup>75</sup> In such a way, a sort of cultural meeting and mingling materialised between Bengal and Southeast Asia.

---

<sup>75</sup> J. Kathirithamby-Wells and J. Villers, Introduction and Overview, In: J. Kathirithamby-Wells (ed.), *Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 3.

Therefore, the process of ancient Indian tactical connectivity was mostly dependent on Bengal, and the Southeast Asian connection was tremendously prominent. The geographical and strategic position of Bengal was proactive in maritime trading and cultural reciprocation. In terms of cultural and societal reciprocity, the Indianisation process expedited the stream through its collective force of maritime traders, religious preachers and individual intellects in which the Bengal elements and potency were foremost and preeminent.