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The City of Bengala in the European Travel Accounts and Cartography

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I

While Tome Pires,¹ writing from Malay between 1512 to 1515 mentioned the City of Bengala, which one reaches after two days from the sea, it was the Introduction of S. Badger to the travel account of Varethma² in 1863 that sparked off a controversy on the existence of the city of Bengala. Varethma, writing in 1510, stated: "We took the route toward the City of Banghella one of the best that I had hitherto seen . . ."³. Six years later, Duarte Barbosa found in the north of the Gulf, "a right great city of the Moore, which they call Bengala . . ."⁴. The footnote of M. L. Dames added the controversy. These travellers were not the only ones. Vincent Le Blanc, a Frenchman, described the city in great detail in the 1570's, which we would see later.

The City of Bengala appeared in the European cartography from the middle of the 14th century with different locations and continued till the early 18th century. In this paper, we would discuss the problems of corroboration and would see whether such city really existed.

In the Mughal period, Gul Badan Begam⁵ mentioned Gaur Banglah atleast four times while Bayazid Bayat referred Banglah to Gaur, which had led Beveridge to identify the City of Banglah, which was a mint town, with that of Gaur.⁶ Hodivalla had shown in an article that the use of conjoint name in Mughal historiography was usual with Khafi Khan who used Rajmahal Banglah.⁷ The only snag, is that the Kandahar

inscription, written by Mir Muhammed Masum in 1007 A.H. had used Gaur-wa-Banglah, implying thereby that Gaur was a separate City than that of Bangalah.*

Badger, in his note to Varethma, clearly identified Gaur with the City of Bangla while in his Introduction, written later for the same work, tried to ascribe a different position to the City between Hathia and the Sandwip islands. Probably he was influenced by Rennell, who wrote in 1793: "In some ancient maps and books of travel, we meet with a City named Bengalla; but no trace of such a place now exists. It is described as being near the eastern mouth of the Ganges and I conceive that the site of it has been carried away by the river: as in my remembrances a vast tract of land has disappeared thereabouts. Bengalla appears to have been in existence during the early part of last century".

Badger was not the only one vacillate. Yule, in 1687, championed the cause of Sonergaon to dispute with Chittagong "the claim to be that City of Bengala". . . That there was ever a town properly so called I declined to believe. . . ."¹⁰ Yule then discarded the maps of *Portulano Medico* of 1351 and also the *Carta Catalana* of 1375, in which the city of Bengala was shown. We would come back later to the maps.

H. Beveridge,¹¹ basing on Ramusio's *Collection of Travels*, had identified the city with Gaur, which he corroborated from the account of Tome Pires. Dames, in his edition of Barbosa, presented several alternatives raging from Gaur, Chittagong, Satgaon, Sonargaon, etc., ultimately identifying the city with Gaur.¹²

At the same time one must take into account the fact that many contemporary European travellers, who visited Bengal, never mentioned the City of Bengala. Notable among them were Ralph Fitch (1586), William Hawkins (1608-13), Thomas Roe (1615) and Francois Bernier (1656-68). In the book of Pierre Du Jarric, culled from the contemporary letters of the Jesuit Fathers and giving detailed accounts of the Mughal, Portuguese and Bara-Bhuiyans contest in the early 17th century, the City of Bengala was never mentioned. Purchas always referred to Bengal as a large kingdom as done by these travellers. So did Tieffenthaler who often mentioned Ahmedabad as the city of Gujarat.¹³ Father Manrique, who gave a detailed description of Bengal from 1628 to 1641, mentioned Bengal as a sub-province of Bengal.¹⁴ A. Courtesao, in his article of 1945, had shown that the City of Bengala in the Portuguese account of the early 16th century was Gaur and when they settled at Chittagong, they called it the City of Bengala.¹⁵

Yet some of the descriptions of the city of Bengala given by the European travellers baffle us. Travelling between 1503 to 1510, Varethma described the route from Tenesserim to the port of Bengal and guessed the distance as 700 miles. He stated that this City of Bengala "was one of the best that I had hitherto seen. . . . The Sultan of this Place is a Moore. . . . It was a great emporium for trade. Fifty ships are laden every year in this place with cottonstuffs. . . we left this City of Bengala which I believe is the best in the world. . .".¹⁵

Another traveller of the same period, Duarte Barbosa, found the City of Bengala "a very excellent sea-haven; it has its own independent Moorish kings. The inhabitants thereof are white men well built: and there dwelt there as well as strangers from many lands, such as Arabs, Persians, Alexis and Indians. . . . All these are great merchants and they possess great ships after the fashion of Mecca. . . in this city there are many cotton fields. . . ". The detailed description of Barbosa of the dress, eating habits etc., of the local merchants, given in page after page, leaves us in no doubt that Barbosa was there for some time.¹⁶

Ramusio's *Della Navigatione*¹⁷ gives us some idea of the location of the City of Bengala and the internal structure which we would see in the writings of Le Blanc, who claimed to have visited Bengal in the 1570's.

Ramusio stated that the principal city was Bengalla "from which the kingdom takes its name. One goes down in two days from the mouth of the Ganges to the city (mouth of the Ganges) now goes by the name of Sino Gangetico or the Gulf of Bengal and in the roadstead the water is three brassier deep. . . . The City contains about 40,000 hearths and the King has a residence there at all times which is the only one covered with tiles and is built with well-made bricks".¹⁸ The distinguishing feature therefore were three: a) two days journey from the sea; b) 40,000 hearths and c) well-built palace with tiles. This description, collected from several Portuguese travels, fitted Gaur admirably as had been shown by S. Abid Ali.¹⁹ It may be mentioned that both Joam de Barros and Fernam Lopes de Castenhada had clearly called the city of Gaur as the principal city while the latter have even described the tiles of the palace of the King. Even the walls were "covered with ornamental tiles". They did not mention anything about the City of Bengala although some of them came from Chittagong.²⁰

This remarkable similarity with the description of Gaur given by others could be seen very clearly in the account of Vincent Le Blanc, although his account, along with that of Thomas Herbert, had been termed as fictitious.

According to Le Blanc,²¹ he visited Bengal before the Mughal conquest which he mentioned as a recent event. This could not be taken from Ramusio as the latter was published in 1563. Also there was no other publication between 1570 and 1580. Since Le Blanc's book was published in 1648, there was no need for him to mention the Mughal conquest as a recent event. After separately mentioning Satgaon and Chittagong, but not Gaur, Le Blanc stated that "the principal city is also called Bengala by the Portuguese and other nations: but those of the country called it *Battacouta*, one of the oldest cities of India, royal city on the river Ganges. . . ." This identification is very clear. He stated that "the City is situated on one of the mouths of the river of Gange, which has two principales". Further, he said, it took traffic and merchandise, "which come straight to Bengal from the mouth of the Gange, climbing atleast six miles of distance, but more than 20 miles by land; here, low water is in the full moon but not less than three brassiers of height around the city. . . ." The similarity with that of Ramusio is obvious. The two rivers, one on the west and one in the east (Mahanadi), run past Gaur.

The next sentence of Le Blanc is taken verbatim from that of Ramusio. Le Blanc stated that "This City is estimated to have forty thousand hearth and the King generally resides there in a beautiful palace build by brick. . . ." The number unmistakably points to Ramusio, which casts doubt to Le Blanc's actual visit to Bengal. Since Le Blanc did not mention Gaur, it may safely be surmised that Le Blanc meant Gaur as the City of Bengala. The difficulty of accepting two days journey can be met easily. The sea was nearer to Gaur in the 16th Century than it is now as the Portuguese used to take big ships as far as Bettore while Hughli around this time began to grow. This may explain why only two days time was required to bring up the merchandise from Hughli and Satgaon to Gaur. Elsewhere, Le Blanc stated that even ships could come easily from all parts, "which one sees in infinite number". Castenhada stated that the Ganges enclosed "Gauro" in front and "behind there is a great and deep lagoon, in which naos of four hundred tons float. . . ."²² The descriptions of Barbosa, Ramusio and Le Blanc coalesce at this point.

They were not the only ones to note the characteristics of the City. Peter Heylyn (1599-1622)²³ found Bengala the principal city in the kingdom of Bengal, "situated on a branch of the river Ganges and reckoned as one of the most beautiful towns of all the Indies. Exceedingly enriched by trade, but more by pilgrimage, by reason of the

holiness and divine operations ascribed by the Indians of it: there being a few years in which not visited three or four thousand pilgrims". It may be mentioned that Le Blanc also stated about the pilgrims and the holiness of the Ganges. One may safely put it to Gaur since neither Chittagong nor Satgaon nor even Sonargaon was situated on a branch of the Ganges while another river runs by it. In any case, the location of the new site in the European cartography does not fit in here as we would be seeing later. D. C. Ganguly came to the conclusion, after analysing the Chinese sources, that there was never a city of Bengala.²⁴

In the 17th century, Mandelslo visited Bengalla, Gauro, Ougely, Chatigam, Tanda, Dacca and Rajmahal, omitting Satgaon, which he probably equated with the city of Bengala. While this theory is far more acceptable than that of Ganguly, who tentatively put Gangasagar as a possible location, as Satgaon was situated on the Saraswati river, one of the branches of the Ganges. The problem is that by that time (1738), Satgaon was in ruins. Also, Vincent Smith had cast doubts about the authenticity of the writings of Mandelslo.²⁵ Both Varethma and Barbosa spoke of the Moor King in the city of Bengala, when Alauddin Hussain Shah was ruling over the whole of Bengal. If the Abyssinian King was meant as a Moor, then that King was murdered six years before the coming of Varethma and twelve years before Barbosa. In any case the Abyssinian King was reigning at Gaur before he was murdered by Alauddin Hussain Shah.

Besides Mandelslo, we have several other travellers of the 17th century who mentioned the City of Bengalla. De Laet, travelling in the reign of Jahangir, stated that the "chief town is called Gauro and the second Bengalla: both cities are finely built and rich. . . ." He also mentioned Chittagong and Tanda separately.²⁶ From this it may be inferred that De Laet meant Satgaon as the City of Bengala.

The Dutch traveller, Gautier Schouten, travelling around 1658 to 1665, stated that the city "also bears the name of Bengal, seem to have at one time the capital of the city. . . ." He then mentioned Chittagong and Satgaon, obviously referring to Gaur as the City of Bengala.²⁷ Within a span of 50 years or so, the two travellers had put two different places for the City of Bengala.

Hodivala²⁸ had discussed the issue of coins from Banglah mint during the 39th and 40th years of Akbar. Abul Fazl stated that Banglah was one of the four big places in the Mughal Empire in which all the three metals were coined when he drew up the list of Akbari mints in the

Courtesao mentioned the connection between the Portuguese travellers and cartography; it appears that the connection did not continue once the location had been fixed.

Finally, it is clear that the City of Bengala did not exist as a separate city. From the end of the 16th century till its disappearance, Gaur was considered as the City of Bengala till it was replaced by Rajmahal. Prof. Nihar Ranjan Ray⁴¹ came to the conclusion that it was Gaur. In view of the above discussion, we would have to accept the opinion of Hodivala, who showed the change of the identification of the City with the passage of time, by first identifying it with Chittagong, then latter with Gaur and finally with Rajmahal. In other words, Hodivala suggested that the City which was most prominent at that time, was called the City of Bengala. With the coming of the Portuguese first in Chittagong and then into Satgaon or Hughli, it would have been proper that the latter two would have also been called the City of Bengala. It is possible that Gaur overshadowed others in so much opulence, that Hughli or Satgaon was never compared with it. The palace of Shuja, vividly described by Nicholas de Graaf⁴² made it a strong contender after the fall of Gaur. The problem of Hodivala however remains; the early Portuguese maps did not show Chittagong as the City of Bengala. The maps and the travel accounts thus can not be accommodated.

NOTES

1. Tome Pires, *Suma Oriental*, 1644, 2 Vols., I, 88-95.
2. Varethma, Hakluyt Society, 1863.
3. *Ibid.*, 210.
4. Duarte Barbosa, *The Book*, 2 Vols., II, 135.
5. Gul Badan Begam, *Humayun Nama*, tr. by Beveridge, London, 1902, Indian edition, New Delhi, 1983.
6. H. Beveridge (tr.), The Memoirs of Bayazid Biyat in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1898, No. 4, 296.
7. S. H. Hodivala, "Bengala" in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1920, Vol. XVI, 199-212.
8. J. Darmester in *Journal Asiatique*, 1890, February-March, 195-230, particularly 205 (French).
9. James Renell, *Memoir of a Map of Hindostan or the Mogul Empire*, Indian Reprint, 1976 (1st ed. 1793). 140. Hosten did not believe that the City was swept by a tidal wave and had called for collation of terms and places (see his article "The Twelve Bhuyians of Bengal" in *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, November 1913, Vol. IX, 443-445).
10. H. Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither*, London, 1866, II, 456-457.

11. H. Beveridge, *The District of Backerganj*, London, 1876.
12. M. L. Dames, *Op.cit.*, II, fn. to p. 145, ". . . Gaur taken together with its subsidiary ports was the place known as Bengala in the early part of the sixteenth century". A. Courtesao, the editor of Tome Pires, also concluded that Pires meant it as Gaur (fn. 2 of p. 90).
13. Joseph Tieffenthaler, *Geographie de l' Indoustan*, tr. by J. Bernouillie (French), Berlin, 1791.
14. *Travels of Fray Sebastian Manrique*, tr. & ed. by G. Luard, Oxford, 1677, 52. He stated that Dacca "is the chief city in Bengala." (43).
15. *Op. cit.*, 210.
16. *Op. cit.*, 135-38.
17. Ramusio, *Della Navigatione*, Venice, 1563.
18. Quoted in D. C. Ganguly entitled "Vangla Desa" in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, December 1943, Vol. XIX, No. 4, 310.
19. S. Abid Ali, *Ruins of Gaur and Pandua*, reprint, Calcutta, 1987.
20. R. B. Smith, *The First Age*, Bethesda, 1969, 133-34.
21. Vincent Le Blanc, *Les Famous Voyages*, Paris, 1648, 125-34.
22. Smith, *Op. cit.*, 133.
23. Quoted in Ganguly, *Op. cit.*, 311-12.
24. *Ibid.*, 317.
25. Vincent Smith in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1915, 243-54.
26. *The Empire of the Great Mogul of De Laet*, tr. by Hoyland & Banerjee, 1928 (1st ed.), reprint, Delhi, 1975, 71-75. The editors commented that "there was never a city called Bengala" and "the term has been applied to a variety of places. . ." (72).
27. *Voyage of Gauquier Schouten aux Indes Orientales*, tr. from the Dutch in French, Amsterdam, 1707, 2 Vols., I., 154-55.
28. Hodivala, *Op. cit.*, 210-12.
29. *Ibid.*, 211.
30. J. Ovington, *A Voyage of Suratt in the Year 1689*, London, 1929, 554.
31. A. Courtesao, "The City of Bengal in the Early Portuguese Report", in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Third Series, II, 1945, 10-11.
32. Susan Golay, *A Series of Early Printed Maps of India*, New Delhi, 1980, 8.
33. *Ibid.*, No. 11 (a).
34. *Ibid.*, No. 12.
35. *Ibid.*, No. 14.
36. *Ibid.*, No. 15.
37. *Ibid.*, No. 16.
38. *Asiae Descriptio Nova Impensis* (1666), quoted in Ganguly, *Op. cit.*, 315. It may be mentioned that Gastaldi was closer to Chittwind in locating Bengala.
39. Golay, *Op. cit.*, No. 17 (a).
40. *Ibid.*, No. 19 (b).

41. *Ibid.*, No. 20.
42. *Ibid.*, No. 21.
43. *Ibid.*, No. 24.
44. *Ibid.*, No. 25 (a) & (b).
45. *Ibid.*, No. 27 (a) & (b).
46. *Ibid.*, No. 29.
47. *Ibid.*, No. 36 (a).
48. Presidential Address to the annual conference of Geographical Society of India, Calcutta, 1979.
49. *Voyage de Nicholas de Graaf aux Indes Orientales, 1639-1681*, Amsterdam, 1707.