

Impact of Dutch in Bengal on Decline of Local Mughal Administration

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Abstract – The Dutch were in the front in maritime trade in the 17th and early part of the 18th century. De Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) or commonly known as the Dutch East India Company dominated the trade in Asian waters in the early modern time. The company created expansive network around the world, Asia in more particular. It is regarded as one of the earliest and largest joint-stock companies in the early modern time. The Dutch East India Company was officially founded and ratified by States General of the Dutch Republic on March 20, 1602 CE. Initially the Company was given 21 years time to trade from the Dutch Republic to the east of Cape of Good Hope and through the Strait of Magellan.[1] After its foundation the Company began to expand its trading network rapidly, first in South East Asia and then in South Asia and Japan. In this article we will make an attempt to shed some light on the Dutch activities in Bengal, their trading activities and their involvement in the geopolitics of Bengal. We will investigate the ramification of the Dutch trading and political activities in Bengal economy and politics.

Keywords – Indian History, Mughal, Administration etc.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In European trading, Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa were regarded as a natural unit known as "Bihar." It is interesting to note that there was high level of productivity achieved in the various sectors of the economy, which was a significant and unique characteristic of the province of Bengal

The Dutch had two separate directorates, one at Surat and the other at Chinsura for Bengal and modern Bihar. They had no territorial jurisdiction or political influence. They lived as European merchants on the backbone of a *Farman* received from the Imperial Court, and on each occasion substantial sums of money that had to be paid for new privileges. But the incomes of these establishments were the maximum in India, in spite of pestering by local officials and the competition and rivalry of other European traders.

As in order to search for alien spices, the Dutchmen had to make their way to the East Indies, just as the Portuguese and the English did. One of the problems Dutch companies in East Asia had to deal with was a shortage of resources. Therefore, in 1607, Admiral Matelief noted that "it was worthwhile to trade for out of the East, as far as the East Indies went, to clothe the populace in Indian attire" Thus, because of this, the Dutch Company needed to search for new markets in India in its early years.

The three main sources of Indian textiles were in the northern province of Gujarat, in the coastal regions of India, and in the Coromandel Sea. Thus, the fertile business opportunities in the Bay of Bengal attracted the Dutch. Van Berchem, director of the Coromandel factories, was arranging for a fixed factory in Bihar in 1612.

Dutch interest in Bengal for obtaining textiles (both quantity and quality), as well as rice, saltpetre, and above all, slaves, were necessary for supplying the labour force that was required for Jan Pieters's plantation development and strengthening and acquiring more Indonesian colonies. These factors have sent convicts to Bengal on a recurring basis to Coromandel Island each year since 1615. In truth, these vessels operated only in Balasore and Pipli, though they did little trade.

The competition of the European nations was no less eager in Bengal. In 1615, for the first time, the Dutch ships arrived in Bengal. The Dutch fleet joined the king of Arakan and fought the Portuguese near the Coast of Arakan. Subsequently, the Dutch began their trade in Bengal though they did not permanently settle in the province until towards the middle of the seventeenth century when they established their factory in Hugli.

Dutch extension to Bengal was gradual. The first ventures and voyages were in the surrounding areas of Cuttack. Subsequently, ships were taken

further north to the ports of Pipli and Balasore. In 1634, instructions were sent from Batavia to trade with Hugli itself. The early experiences of the Dutch at this port were not encouraging as the monopoly of all trade had been granted to two local merchants and the authorities were not friendly. It was around this time (1634) that the Dutch acquired an order from Azam Khan, the Mughal *Subahdar* (governor) of Bengal which a year later (1635) was followed by a second from his successor Islam Khan and a third from the Mughal Emperor Shahjahan himself in the following period. A quite favourable accord was settled with the viceroy of Bengal at Dacca, but it did not provide protection against local obstacles, and in 1636 the factors decided to move down to Pipli, where Bengal goods could be obtained without the coercion and extortion met with at Hugli.

In 1638, the Company succeeded in obtaining from Shahjahan yet another *farman* on the lines essentially of the one procured in 1636 except that this one specifically permitted the Company to trade, among other goods, in saltpetre thus negating the ban the *Kaul* granted by *Subahdar* Islam Khan in September 1636 which had imposed restriction on Dutch trade in this item. In the following period (1638), another factory was also set up at Patna but it was closed during the same year due to economic reasons. In 1639, Prince Shah Shuja, on assuming office of the *Subahdar* of Bengal, had written to the Dutch governor at Pulicat suggesting a re-opening of the Hugli factory. In January, 1641, by a *nishan* granted by the new *Subahdar* of Orissa the trading privileges at Pipli were confirmed.

It is interesting to note that on the strength of Shahjahan's *farman* of 1645, additional concessions were granted to Arnold Bernard Muiskensz, the director of Surat, the Dutch were officially allowed to set up an agency at Hugli. Shortly after the factory started functioning, its warehouses were swept away by floods. New buildings were erected further inland and the Dutch continued to operate from Hugli till 1656 when they were allowed to build a much larger establishment at Chinsura.

More Imperial orders followed from Shahjahan and several succeeding *Subahdars* which put the Dutch position in Bengal on a firmer foothold, it seems that, the local authorities had come to understand that the Dutch were not to be pushed around and were fairly able to bite back if they chose. Soon afterwards the Dutch, besides their presence at Pipli, established factories in Balasore, Dacca, Patna, Kasimbazar and Chinsura (a village in the proximity of Hugli).

In the seventeenth century, the most significant interesting characteristic in the composition of Bengal merchants engaged in overseas trade was the presence of *Subahdars*, *Faujders* and other members of the ruling class in Bengal. The Bengali merchants took passes from the Dutch as well as the Portuguese, assuring safe conduct. The Dutch had

taken the southern port of Galle in 1640, after which Bengali ships touched on Galle with Dutch passes. It is remarkable to note that the elephants of Sri Lanka were the main attraction of this trade and with the great demand in Bengal for these animals, they were being exported both from the Dutch port of Galle in the South and the Portuguese port of Jaffna in the north. Ships sailing into Sri Lanka brought large quantities of Bengal rice and other foodstuffs such as sugar, butter and edible oils.

Again in 1645 the Company's interests were threatened even more dangerously when the Danes began to confiscate ships belonging to the merchants of Bengal by way of retaliation for injuries suffered at the hands of the local authorities.

In February 10, 1648, by the *farman* granted by the *Nawab* Fidai Khan, who had recently replaced Shah Shuja as the *subahdar* of Bengal, as the Company was exempted from the payment of transit-duties on goods transported between any two points under the *nawab's* jurisdiction. In this way, in 1649, with the recrudescence of Danish piracy, the authorities once more demanded that the Dutch should guarantee the security of Bengal ships on the high seas. And in 1650 after returning to the office of the provincial *Subahdar* Shah Shuja issued a *nishan* to the Dutch in which they were exempted from transit and other duties between Pipli and Patna route in accordance with the Imperial *farman* (of November 1642). Between 1653 and 1656, Shuja issued at least four more *nishans* along similar lines.

The biggest crisis that faced the Mughals in admiration of freedom of navigation was in the 1640's, when the Dutch attempted to take on the mantle from the Portuguese to control and redirect Indian Ocean trade. The Dutch denied passes to Indian ships originating from the ports of Gujarat and Bengal to sail to Southeast Asia ports, on the ostensible appeal that they were at war with the rulers of Achen, Perak and Kedah.

In 1654, the English factors reported that the Dutch were doing their best to make the English unpopular with the local people, but they were themselves unpopular and it is also reported that Shuja, *Subahdar* of Bengal was so incensed against them that "those Dutch in Bengal were forced to stand upon their guard in such part of their warehouses with a large quantity of goods in them, which was done, and two of their men killed, by those natives, and in January last the Dutch Comissary and the Governor of Piple were treating about the business, but not any conclusion made when the two Bengalajunks came out of the Bay". The King of Macassar and Mir Jumla were both very annoyed with the Hollanders and waited for an opportunity to make a break with them, while it was

reported that they were already evicted of their Japan trade.

As we have already mentioned that Shuja tried to monopolise some sectors of the province's overseas trade and made himself the sole purchaser of elephants. Consequently, he (Prince Shuja), had a personal interest in freeing the trade. When any interference in the South East Asian ports was reported, the officials threatened reprisals against the Dutch trade in Bengal. They kept harassing the Dutch Company servants in Chinsura and Pipli for passes and safe conduct for their ships to South East Asia. For example, in 1654, on one occasion, Mughal forces threatened to overrun the Company's factory in Pipeli for denying passes to Bengal ships. Dutch trade in Bengal was expanding fast and they did not wish to jeopardize this trade. So their servants in Bengal were forced to grant passes to Tenasserim, Achein, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and ensure that Bengal shipping was not harassed.

Another most successful weapon against the extortions and greediness of the local administration was the threat to give up Bengal altogether, putting a total stop to their trade in the region. For instance, in 1655, the Company's relation with Mohammad Yusuf, who was the *faujdar* of both Pipli and Balasore, became so strained that he asked the *nawab* of Orissa to dismiss Mohammed Yusuf from both of his posts.

Again in 1656 the *Faujdar* of Hugli appealed for a pass for his vessel to Colombo and Shah Shuja had asked for three passes for Colombo, Cochin and Jaffnapatam. But all these requests were politely refused because of Shah Shuja's attempt to monopolise some sectors of the province's external trade. The Dutch Company similarly refused a request for the services of one of their mates for a ship sailing for Persia.

The trade in Bengal was partially fostered by the contribution of the Bengal officials from the *subahdar* downwards. This was started by Mir Jumla on a large scale and continued till the early eighteenth century when MurshidQuli Khan brought the Mughal system back with some deviations. To counterpoise the Portuguese support to Shuja, Mir Jumla began to make a diplomatic use of his position as Mughal general in Bihar and Bengal in his relations with the Dutch and the English factors there.

English factors reported in 1659 that Mir Jumla summoned Dutch factors from Kasimbazar to his camp at Suti to join their help in artillery. There is also reference about Dutch chief (Directeur), Mattheus van den Broeke, who was on his way from Hugli to Mir Jumla's head-quarters. Halstead's letter of 3 June mentions a rumour of "M er-Jumbelows (Mir Jumla) offering the government of Heugley (Hugli) to the Dutch and the report of their lending him two lack of rupees'. The mission is again

referred to in a letter from Sheldon of 5 July (1659), which says: 'The Dutch doctor was here Yesterday, and told me privately that the Directore had engaged to Mere Jumblar (Mir Jumla) to aford him all assistance possible, and that he had ordered all their greatgunns to be put aboard their sloopes for the keepeing the river".

European factory records affirm that (in 1660) Mir Jumla desired European help to conquer Hijli (Hugli). He helped Khan-i-Dauran in subduing Bahadur Khan, the rebel *Zamindar* of Hijli. Subsequently, he (Mir Jumla) induced the Emperor Aurangzeb to transfer Hijli from the jurisdiction of Orissa to that of Bengal. Thanks to the help rendered by the Dutch, Hijli was now conquered.

Hugli wrote the letter on January 29, 1661. It refers to an attempt by MirzaLutfullah Beg, Diwan of Patna, to monopolize the sale of saltpetre for the gain of imperial revenues. Regardless of their contracts with the Dutch, he forced the dealers to sell their saltpetre to him. The Dutch confirmed that Chamberlain was behind these deeds, working through the English broker Ganga Ram, who had agreed to buy saltpetre from the Diwan. Matheus van den Broek, the Dutch Director at Hugli, lodged a complaint with both Mir Jumla and the English agent Trevisa. Trevisa, who denied any involvement in these charges and agreed with the Dutch chief not to deal with the Diwan, and replied that no transactions were made except at first hand and on the old terms, owing to the dispatch of a Parwana from Mir Jumla to Lutfullah Beg, forbidding him to obstruct the Dutch from freely trading in that commodity.

In 1662, Dirk van Adrichem, the Director of Surat factory (from 1662 to 1665), was sent as an ambassador to Aurangzeb by the Governor of Batavia.

He succeeded in obtaining a 'concession', or *farman* dated Delhi, 29th October 1662, from Aurangzeb, which granted valuable privileges upon the Dutch in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. And the Dutch were exempted from transit duties in these three provinces. They were asked to pay custom duties according to their former (or ancient) rate, which was 3% at Pipli and Balasore and 4% at Hugli.⁵⁸ This *farman* also instructed that the officials of these port towns acted in accordance with that *farman*, of 1662 by Aurangzeb, order has been issued that the officials of that place were prohibited from harassing or molesting them (the Dutch) on any account whatsoever and should not obstruct them out of avarice and greed. They should consider it obligatory and shall not deviate from whatever had been ordered.

In 1664, English factors reported that Shaista Khan demanded help from both English and Dutch in his war against Arakan pirates. He evidently expected

more assistance from the Dutch than from the English, because he sent an envoy to Batavia with a letter and a gift for the Governor-General. The Director of the Dutch Business, eager to smash Portuguese force, readily agreed and dispatched two battleships to join the Mughal fleet in the Bay. As a result, preparations for war against Arakan began. Shaista Khan met the chiefs of the Dutch East India Company at each port on his way from Rajmahal to Dacca and ordered them all to write to the Firingi pirates of Chittagong to come over to the nawab's service.

Again, in 1665, factors reported that the Dutch had granted the *Nabob* (*Nawab*) six ships, with men and munitions, to assist him in his wars against Arakan. Thus in 1666, after receiving the news about the victory of Shaista Khan over the Arakans with the help of the Dutch, the English factors felt embarrassed and observed that "with their assistance, they (Dutch) will tend much to their reputation in these parts and throughout India, and much advance their commerce".

In spite of Imperial *farmans* and grants, local officials along the Hugli were inclined to impede the Dutch vessels carrying grain, opium, saltpetre, and sugar. Though, the Dutch preferred to triumph over these difficulties with their own brand of commercial diplomacy, sometimes using threats, at other times with presents and bribes. Hardly ever did they interfere in the politics of Bengal, preferring always to engross their trade.

Again Charnock wrote from Patna on July 3, 1664, that Shaista Khan wanted "to take the whole trade of peeter (saltpetre) into his own hands and to sell it again to us (English) and the Dutch at his own rates, knowing that the ships cannot go from the Bay empty". And it is also noted that Shaista Khan wanted to engross (monopolize) all those goods in which he conceived commercial benefits.

Despite their attempts to avoid conflict with the local Mughal officers in Bengal, who constantly interfered with the passageway of boats laden with saltpetre and sugar, as well as silk and cotton cloth, the Dutch were not free from the dilemma they endured at the hands of the nawab Shaista Khan in Bengal. The incident in which the Dutch were involved, for example, occurred in 1672 and is thus mentioned in a letter from Hugli to Fort St.

However, upon his return to Hugli, Malik Qasim infuriated the nawab and diwan against the Dutch to the point where orders were given to all parts of Shaista Khan's government banning the Emperor's subjects from trading with or serving them. As a result, Dutch trade was disrupted. They were not permitted to export rice purchased for that reason at Hugli. The Dutch, on the other hand, settled the matter by paying the nawab and his officers money.

On the 17th November 1676, there was an open quarrel between the Dutch and Malik Zindi, who refused to allow them to put their rice on board their ship. A skirmish seemed imminent, but 'upon second thoughts after marching towards the Dutch factory, he 'returned againe.' A week later Verburg, the Dutch 'Directore', sent a deputation to him, in charge of Fentsell, his 'Second' to offer to settle 'their differences'. Fentsell, however, committed a breach of etiquette which so enraged Malik Zindi, that he called him 'giddy' (*gadha*, an ass). Fentsell retaliated with a most opprobrious epithet, 'which the Governor returned to him againe', and the two parties separated. Malik Zindi almost immediately after sent a request to the Dutch 'to return back, to him, which they refused to doe', and, up to the time of Master's departure for Balasore, they acted as the affronted parties.

On the 21st November, Master with some members of the Council, paid a visit to the Dutch and found Verburg 'very obligeing'. He was greatly impressed with the spaciousness of the Dutch factory, the solidity of its construction, its gardens, granary, weavers' apartments, and rope walk. Verburg confided to him that "though they had carried some rice off by force', in despite of Malik Zindi, yet they did not intend to 'breake with these people. But though his words were boastful, Master was of opinion that he and his colleagues 'seemed to be cast downe and not to like the face of their affaire".

In 1676, Streyنشam Master informs us that the Dutch had left their factory of Pipli (Pipli), pulled down their house there, and built a new one at Ballasore, which was a handsome square building. Under the Directorship of Bengala they had six factories, vizt., Hugly [Chinsurah], Cassambazar (Kasimbazar), Ballasore, Patna, Dacca, and Malda.

The French and Danes first arrived in Bengal during the reign of Shaista Khan, about the year 1676. The exact date of the Dutch arrival is unknown; however, the agents of these nations prudently obtained land on which to build their factories, some distance below Hugli, where the present towns of Chinsura, Chandernagore, and Serampore now stand. The English agent, on the other hand, built his factory in the middle of Hugli, which caused frequent disputes with the locals and resulted in their expulsion from the region.

CONCLUSION

As a result, it is concluded that the period from 1686 to 1690 is considered to be the most prosperous period for Dutch trade with Bengal. When the English East India Company declared war on the Mughals in 1686, the Dutch East India Company's directors were more concerned with profit than with acquiring land. Finally, the Dutch would not be able to maintain their dominance for long. The increasing resources of the two rival

English firms, as well as their increased exports to Europe, undercut Dutch activities in Bengal.

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