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Nature and Climate in Medieval Bengal; [A Historical Approach]

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Abstract:

Environment played an essential role in the process of historical developments. The history of evolution of society, culture and civilisation has greatly been influenced by the environmental feature because human society, like any other living organism, tries, to adopt itself to natural environment. Nature not only provided man with shelter and food but also played a significant role in the making of mankind. Ever since man emerged on the earth, there had been persistent dependency on nature. Natural resources available on this, earth, however their limits over exploitation of which leads to environment crisis in some form or other. The writing of the Indian history in proper perspective is incomplete without adequate knowledge of environment, geography, ecology and physical features through which it passed. The study of early Indian environmental history, in fact, is highly rewarding to the present generations.

Environment is a broad term which encompasses all natural things that surrounds us and is essential to sustain life such as air [atmosphere], water [hydrosphere], land [lithosphere], flora, fauna etc, and environmental history is the study of human interaction with the natural world. Environmental history shares a very messy boarder with economic and social histories, history of science and technology, disease history and with various other disciplines. The principal goal of environmental history is to deepen our understanding of how human beings have been affected by the natural environment and also how they have affected that environment and with what results and consequences.

Environmental historians base their understanding of human and nature relations on historical methodology, sometimes taking ideas and inputs not only from scientists but from the scholars working in other fields also. The study of ecology and environmental history in India is comparatively of recent origin. The intellectual root of the study of environmental history traced back to the Annals school of France which stresses on the significance of natural geographical features and their role in shaping a society. In this brief paper, a sincere endeavour has been made throw light on various aspects of environment in medieval Bengal in historical perspectives when their role in shaping society.

In this paper, an endeavour has been made to throw light on various aspect of environment in Bengal in historical perspective when there was no industrialisation. Medieval Bengal literatures are replete with references to different aspects of environment, its management preservation and protection. The foreign traveller's testimonies and who came to Bengal at different times refers to various aspects of environment in their eye witness itineraries.

Keywords: Climate, Ecology, Bay of Bengal, Environment, River, Nature.

The climate had a significant role in medieval Bengal. According to Ibn Battuta, the famous Moorish traveler, who visited Bengal in about 1345C.E, described Bengal as Dozakh-puri-ni-amat or a hell full of bounties. [1] Hell refers to the unhealthy climate of Bengal for upcountry hell full of bounties. Mughal emperors reportedly compared Bengal to paradise on the earth. Humayun designates Bengal for upcountry immigrants. It was, nevertheless full of bounties. Mughal emperors reportedly compared Bengal to paradise and Nations. [2] The official papers of the Mughal used to describe Bengal as the Paradise of India. Francois Bernier who visited Bengal around 1656-58 A.D described Bengal, as opulence [prosperity] and quoted the proverb that the kingdom of Bengal has a hundred gates open for entrance, but not one for departure. [3]

An alluvial land interspersed by numerous rivers the plains of Bengal were submerged in water for about half the year. According to Abul Fazl, the summer heat was temperate and the cold season was short in this province, the rains began in May and continued for six months or even more and at that time the soil was under water. [4] Even now this is a striking feature of Eastern and Southern Bengal and hence this region was called 'Bhati' or the land of the tides. The water level rose in floods and storms during the rains. Abul Fazl has given an account of a terrible flood accompanied by the hurricane that visited the Sarkar of Bakla [Area of Backerganj and Khulna] in 1584 A.D. [5]

Abul Fazl writes 'in the twenty-ninth year of divine era, a terrible inundation occurred at three o'clock in the afternoon, which swept over the whole Sarkar'. [6]

The Raja held an entertainment at the time. He at once embarked on board a boat, while his son Parmanand Ray with some others climbed to the top of a temple and a merchant took refuge in a high loft. For four hour and a half, the sea raged amid thunder and a hurricane of wind. Houses and boats were engulfed but no damage occurred to the temple or the loft. Nearly two hundred thousand living creatures perished in this flood. [7]

The rivers and rains imparting the benefits of natural irrigation as well as maturing on the soil of Bengal, contributed to its great productivity and prosperity. At the same time, these were also responsible for the appearance of many marshes and swamps in the province, particularly in its northern region. [8] The changes in the river courses left some watery portions in several places of their former beds. The long rainy season also had the effect of leaving behind some water-logged places scattered here and there. According to contemporary reports, these marshes and swamps bred foul climates and diseases. Abul Fazl

observes, 'For a long time past at the end of the rains the air had been felt to be pestilential and seriously affected animal life. [9]

Many Historians depicted Bengal as a land of plague, malaria, and other diseases. In their statements, they have expressed the ideas of the upcountry people about the climate of this province. This is best reflected in the writings of Ibn Battuta, who informs that the people of Khurasan called Bengal a Duzakh-i-Pur nimat or a hell of all good things. [10] The people of Northern India were frightened of the climate and rains and generally avoided serving and staying in Bengal. After the capture of Gaur, Humayun appointed Zahid Beg as governor of Bengal. He said, 'Your Majesty could not find a better place to kill me than Bengal. [11] Even in the early part of the reign of Emperor Akbar, the Mughal soldiers did not like to serve in Bengal, although they were offered double the salary. Because of the unwholesome climate, the magnificent cities of Gaur and Pandua were deserted by the Mughal viceroys and officials. [12]

Indeed, the climate of a few places such as Gaur and Pandua became bad, on account of the receding of the river from near these cities and also because of the rise of swamps and marshes. It is also a fact that a great plague broke out in Gaur at the time of the viceroyalty of Khan Khanan Munim Khan in 1575. This epidemic carried away a large number of Mughul generals, officers, and soldiers and compelled the viceroy to shift the capital of the province from Gaur to Tanda. [13] But to say that the climate of the whole province was unhealthy would amount to a sweeping generalization. Even the climate of Gaur was not so unwholesome, as the Northern India contemporaries would have us believe. If it was so bad, as they say, then how could it have continued to be a flourishing city and was so much charmed with its pleasant climate and surrounding that he gave it the name of Jannatabad or Paradise? Nasir al-Din Bughra Khan son of Sultan Balban loved the refreshing climate and the greeneries of Bengal as dearly that he preferred the governorship of this province to the Sultan to the Sultanate of Delhi. [14]

According to Abul Fazl 'the climate of this province was not as bad, as it has been painted, as revealed from the writing. While speaking of the pestilential climate at the end of the rains, this Mughul historian also observes, 'Under the auspices of his present Majesty this calamity (of pestilential climate) has ceased. [15] It may well be argued that Akbar did not have the magic power to improve the climate of this province in the course of a few years. The rivers, rains, and marshes were still the same. Then how could this extraordinary change for the better take place? This revolution in Bengal's climate was the change of the idea of the Northern contemporaries about Bengal's natural atmosphere. The foul climate of the province was rather psychological than real it was born out of the fear of the Northerners of the rains and water in Bengal. They were for generations accustomed to living under the conditions of the dry climate and were quite naturally afraid of living in the rainy and wet climate of this province. So, they held some preconceived notions of Bengal's climate and shrank back with horror from the idea of serving and staying there. At the time of Emperor Akbar, they were however made to serve there. Once they lived in Bengal for several years, they realized that the climate was not as notorious as they had thought on the

other hand; they had many advantages in this province. This is the horror of the Bengal climate disappeared from the minds of the upcountry people and hence it improved during the reign of Emperor Akbar.

Instances from the history of the Mughal will best illustrate this type of psychological change in climate. Even after the acquisition of the sovereignty of Hindustan, Babur and his nobles and soldiers did not like to live in this country. They complained of its heat and pined for the mild climate of Kabul and Central Asia. One great chief Khwaja Kalan bade adieu to Hindustan and before leaving, he wrote on a wall in Delhi,

If safe and sound, I cross the Sind
Blacken my face ere I long for Hind.

Babur also, all the four years of his reign, yearned for Kabul. But stayed and established his family in Hindustan. The Mughal were thus acclimatized in this country. In the reign of Emperor Shah Jahan, the prince captured much of the territories of that country. But he did not like the mountainous and rugged regions of central Asia and became anxious to return to Hindustan. [16] He pined so much for the plains of this country that he left Bulkh without the Emperor's permission. What a great change it is from Babur to Murad. Babur disliked Hindustan and longed for the mountainous regions of central Asia. His descendants living in Hindustan were so much naturalized that they dislike staying even for a short time in their ancestral homes.

In the same way in Bengal also, when the upcountry people had once begun living they became acclimatized and naturalized. If the climate was bad and the people died of epidemics and diseases. Bengal could not have developed into the most densely populated part of this subcontinent. [17]

It is also to be noted that no other contemporary writer except the Muslim historians of Northern India, has made any reference, and Chinese envoys visited this province and left quite interesting accounts which reflect the nature of this land and people as well as its social and economic life. They lived here for some time and had personal experience of its climate whereas the Muslim Ibn Battuta lived a few months in this province. [18] He had all praise for Bengal. He had simply quoted the notion of the upcountry people that Bengal was a hell of all good country to live in. Mirza Nathan lived in Bengal many years and had an intimate contact with and knowledge of its climate. But he has never complained of it. So the statement of the Delhi historians cannot be his entertainment there. [19]

It, therefore, appears that the climate of Bengal was not as bad as it was supposed in those days. Bengal had a climate that was perfectly natural in a country of rivers rains and waters. The climate was strange to those who were strangers to such kind of natural environment.

The Sultan had also a private physician Mukundaram Das was the royal physician of Sultan Hussain Shah. [20] There was a court astrologer whom the ruler consulted to find out an auspicious moment for important undertakings such as setting out on a campaign etc. An

executioner, called Jallad, was an indispensable office of the court. His duty was to carry out the deadly orders of the rebels and persons guilty of heinous crimes.

That the climate of this province was not so bad, as it has been painted, is revealed from the writings of Abul Fazl, while speaking of the pestilential climate at the end of the rains, the Mughal historians also observe ‘under the auspices of this province in the course of a few years. [22] The rivers, rains, and mashes were still the same. Instances from the history of the Mughal will best illustrate this type of psychological change in climate. Even after the acquisition of the Hindustan. Babur and his nobles and soldiers did not like to live in this country.

Famines, Cyclones, and Deserter Managements in Bengal

Year	Affected Areas	Remarks	Sources
300 BCE	North Bengal	It contains royal edicts to provide food grains to distressed people from the state granary	Mahasthan Grah Inscription
8th century	Bengal Famine	According to Jaswal, this famine occurred in the 4th century	Manjusree Mulakalpa
1584 CE	Bakargang Cyclone	Devastating cyclones and tidal bores caused the death of two hundred thousand living creatures	Ain-i-Akbari
1585 CE	The mouth of Meghna Cyclone	Devastating cyclone and tidal bore caused the death of three hundred thousand living animals and creatures	Banglapedia vol-3
1661 CE	Dhaka Famine	The famine is attributed to the virtual suspension of the movement of merchandise on account of insecurity illegal exactions and toll collection.	Fatheya-e-Ibriyya
1752 CE	Murshidabad Famine	The price of rice at Murshidabad rose to six times its previous level.	Record of East India Company

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Scientific Adversities of Poverty and Disasters [Fullara’s Baramashya]

Month	Adversities
Baisakh [April- May]	Subsistence Crisis [only vegetables could be afforded] Severe heat- recession in trade
Jaishta [May June]	The subsistence crisis deepens survival by eating wild biochips [berries], and summer heat continues.
Ashara [June July]	Subsistence crisis [only broken rice [khud-kura] available continuous rains attack by leeches
Sravana [July- August]	Continuous rain
Bhadra [August September]	Floods triggered by rainfall miserable life
Ashwin [September October]	The month of the Puja festival lack of money is a matter of concern
Kartik [October- November]	Winter comes Fullara can use only the hides of deer for protection against cold
Agrahayana [November December]	Abundance of food but cold weather makes life miserable
Poush [December- January]	Terrible winter also dust makes life miserable
Magh [January-February]	Subsistence crisis only vegetables eaten
Falgun [February- March]	Subsistence crisis broken rice procured by mortgaging earthenwares
Chaitra [March- April]	Hunger and Sickness for Fullara through rich people enjoy the bliss of spring

Conclusion: Bengal had witnessed many foreign invaders. During this period, hardly there was concern about protection of nature and climate. Since the down of human civilization, man has been modifying nature but never with an intention of destroying it completely as is evident today. It is a very true fact that environment has been, is and will be man's permanent teacher. In the present scenario, globalization and capitalism has changed the very nature and quality of the environment.

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