

Social transformation and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Sultanate Bengal: Insights from Travelers

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Abstract: The Bengal Sultanate (1352–1576 CE) was a busy government that ruled over a delta in a river. It combined Bengali traditions with those from Persia, Arabia, and Southeast Asia. Coins, inscriptions, and chronicles from the area talk about powerful people who support the throne and want to take it for themselves. They don't tell us much about how people get along with each other in real life, how different religions get along, or how different cultures mix. Travelers from other countries fill in these gaps by giving us clear pictures from the outside that add to the story of the past. This study examines Ibn Battuta's depictions of the Sufi diversity and agricultural prosperity of Sonargaon; Ma Huan's accounts regarding Gaur's cosmopolitan markets and diplomatic initiatives; and European chronicles by Varthema and Barbosa concerning Satgaon's multiethnic trade and permissive governance under Alauddin Husayn Shah. These show that society was always changing. Sufi mediation helped Hindus and Muslims get along, and women worked in markets and craft guilds. Trade along the rivers brought the Persian and Bengali languages together. Visitors' accounts are biased toward their own culture, but they show that Bengal is a global center that people from different cultures can agree on. This helps archaeology by showing that there can be more than one point of view in a hierarchy and by calling for a new look at local history from outside points of view.

Introduction

The Bengal Sultanate (about 1352–1576 CE) was a very important time in the history of South Asia. The Tughlaq rule in Delhi ended, and a new government was formed with leaders like Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah. People from different governments and areas, such as Lakhnauti, Pandua, Gaur, Sonargaon, and Satgaon, came together in a place where trade was booming and cultures were mixing. Trade networks grew because there was too much rice and textiles in the Indian Ocean. People from Persia, Arabia, China, and Europe came to do business. Sufi groups also helped rural areas become more Islamic without getting rid of all the Hindu ways of farming (Hussain, 2003). The sultanate was able to govern a society that was very different. Persianate *iqtas* ruled over Muslim elites, zamindars kept local power, and artisanal guilds kept pre-Islamic crafts alive even as vernacular Bengali literature with Sufi mysticism began to grow. Mosques and mints in Khalifatabad and Mahmudabad show that cities along the river were places where people from different cultures could meet and share ideas. For instance, people could read

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Persian poetry or celebrate Vaishnava bhakti while on a pilgrimage to a dargah (Chowdhury, 2020a). But we still don't know everything about how society changed during this time. For instance, how hierarchies shifted, how gender roles evolved in markets, and how religious dialogues transformed. This is because native sources are more interested in the lives of kings than in the lives of ordinary people. In the 14th and 16th centuries, travelers from other countries wrote about these changes. This gives us an outside look at how society in Sultanate Bengal was changing. Coins and inscriptions from the area tell us who was in charge and who was on their side. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah's 734 AH/1333 CE issues, for example, showed that Sonargaon was free. On the other hand, travelers had short-lived social interactions, such as busy ports, communal ceremonies, and cultural negotiations (Hasan, 2023). In the early 1340s, when Sonargaon was still becoming independent, Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta went there. He called it a deltaic paradise of fertility, where Sufi saints like Shah Jalal mixed Islamic mysticism with Bengali folk devotion. A lot of people came to see it, and it showed that there were tolerant hierarchies that let Hindu advisors work in Muslim courts (Chowdhury, 2018). His *Rihla* notes elite hospitality—lavish feasts and academic exchanges—reflecting Persian-influenced cosmopolitanism, while also rural endogamy and women's veiled participation in trade, suggesting subtle deviations from pre-sultanate norms.

Chinese diplomats from the Ming dynasty, like Ma Huan, thought the cities were stronger than Zheng did. He traveled to Gaur and Pandua from 1405 to 1433 CE. In *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, Ma wrote about bazaars that were well-organized and full of pearls and muslins. People from the area wore saris and turbans, and traders from Western Asia mixed with them. This showed that there were a lot of languages, like Persian for the government and early Bengali dialects. The giraffe that was given to the Ming court is a well-known example of a diplomatic gift that showed how important Bengal was to the world. The morning music and the tiger shows are examples of how cultures mixed. Sufi khanqahs were places where people of different religions could get along (Sinha, 2020). These stories show how society has changed: people who live in cities have adopted Indo-Islamic styles, but people who live in the country still have caste-like systems. Rivers helped artisans think of new things and women get more power over money, which has led to a layered hierarchy.

European travelers wrote more about these ideas in the late sultanate period. Around 1505, a Venetian named Ludovico di Varthema was amazed by Gaur's wealth, which came from fleets that sent textiles to Ottoman lands. Alauddin Husayn Shah ruled during a time when people of different religions were able to live together peacefully. He wrote about a merchant class that included people from many different faiths. Hindu officials got along well with Muslim nobles and traded cowries in the markets of Satgaon (Ray, 2020). A Portuguese historian named Duarte Barbosa wrote about the trade that happened in Chittagong between Arabs, Abyssinians, and Bengalis. He also wrote about the fun things that happened there and the people who changed their minds. He also said that the villages still had a lot of Hindu traditions. These stories show how tensions can rise, like when the elites play favorites or when Sufi-mediated conversions change the way people relate to each other. The ecology of the rivers, which have deltas that are likely to flood,

needed flexible hierarchies, such as zamindar-led flood barriers and guild-based resilience (Rahman & Mita, 2023).

These impressions are important because they come from outside the culture and aren't affected by the culture's tendency to follow the rules or praise people. People who traveled didn't think of Bengal as a single Islamic country. Instead, they thought of it as a place where people from different cultures lived together and were strong, even though there was a hierarchy. People's clothes, speech, and rituals made it clear. The Sultanate's control made society more fluid, as shown by Ibn Battuta's amazement at Sufi miracles, Ma Huan's accurate ethnography, and Barbosa's focus on trade. This meant giving women more power in textile economies, promoting Bengali dialects, and finding ways for Sufi-Hindu interactions to deal with their differences. This outside view shows that Bengal was a crossroads between Europe and Asia. This goes against stories of sudden Islamization (Shahnawaz, 2020) and shows how many cultures now live together in South Asia.

We know a lot about the sultanate's political and economic history, but there is still a gap in research. There are a lot of books on that topic, but not many that talk about how people from other countries saw the sultanate's society. Studies often prioritize indigenous archaeology, exemplified by the mosques of Khalifatabad as representations of Islamic urbanism, or numismatics for chronological examination, thereby overlooking travelers' qualitative insights into experiential transformations (Hasan, 2023). External accounts, frequently criticized for their brevity and cultural singularity, remain insufficiently employed in rectifying the inadequacies in local comprehension of gender, caste, and cultural brokerage. This study addresses that shortcoming by meticulously juxtaposing travelers' narratives with archaeological contexts. It argues that these stories show how the social fabric of Sultanate Bengal is always changing, and that this is due to negotiation rather than imposition. Thematic exegesis—hierarchy, diversity, and transformation—shows that the sultanate is a place where different ideas can come together. This makes history more interesting by showing it from different points of view.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine the accounts of foreign travelers from the 14th to the 16th centuries regarding the social and cultural milieu of Sultanate Bengal, and to analyze how these descriptions enhance our comprehension of intercultural interactions. To accomplish this goal, the research first seeks to outline the main social structures and cultural practices of Sultanate Bengal, including urban hierarchies, artisanal guilds, agrarian communities, and examples of religious syncretism as described in the travelers' accounts. It also wants to look at how foreigners talked about the relationships between different social groups, such as the Muslim nobility, Hindu zamindars, artisans, peasants, merchants, and religious groups like Sufis, Brahmins, and local devotees. The study also looks at how Arabs, Persians, Central Asians, Chinese, and Europeans have changed each other in Bengal. It focuses on language, trade, diplomacy, clothing, and religious practices. Lastly, the study looks at the travelers' biases, cultural views, and ways of understanding that they used to see Bengal's society. It examines the

reliability and limitations of their narratives in reconstructing the historical facts of Sultanate Bengal.

Research Questions

This study is guided by several primary research questions that collectively seek to clarify how foreign travelers perceived and represented the social landscape of Sultanate Bengal. First, it looks at how these travelers talked about Bengal's social structure, paying special attention to the differences in status between the merchants, artisans, peasants, and nobility. The investigation subsequently centers on the cultural practices and societal norms that fascinated the travelers, encompassing daily rituals, lively markets, festivals, and distinctive clothing styles, which collectively depicted the region's dynamic life. Another part of the study looks at how religion, gender, and class change these pictures. It talks about how different religions get along, what women do in society, and the differences between rich and poor people. The study investigates the impact of intercultural exchanges with Arab, Persian, Chinese, and European visitors on perceptions of Bengal's society, influencing both current and future views on trade, diplomacy, and the evolution of hybrid cultural practices. Finally, it examines the travelers' narratives for deficiencies and biases, such as their ethnocentric perspectives, brevity of visits, and inclination to concentrate on urban areas, to assess the impact of these factors on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of their portrayals of the social fabric of Sultanate Bengal.

Literature Review

The Bengal Sultanate (c. 1352–1576 CE) arose as an independent Muslim state following the disintegration of Tughlaq authority, with Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah consolidating the three iqtas—Lakhnauti, Sonargaon, and Satgaon—into a unified realm (Hussain, 2003). Numismatic reappraisals, specifically Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah's gold coin from 734 AH/1333 CE and Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah's issues from 832 AH/1428 CE, delay the commencement of sovereignty by five years, resulting in a 205-year independent phase (Hasan, 2023; Goron & Goenka, 2001).

Gaur, Pandua, Khalifatabad (Bagerhat), and Mahmudabad (Jhinaidaha) are some of the geo-political centers that grew up along busy river channels like the Padma, Bhagirathi, and Gorai. These places had mints (like Chatgaon, which had 369 issues) and epigraphic clusters (like Gaur, which had 80+ inscriptions) that showed the government was getting better even though the delta was unstable (Sinha, 2020; Mitra, 2012). Persianate bureaucracy superimposed indigenous hierarchies: Afghan-Turkic military elites coexisted with Hindu zamindars, while Sufi khanqahs facilitated rural Islamization without disturbing caste-like agrarian structures (Chowdhury, 2020a; Eaton, 1993). The Adina Mosque and terracotta plaques in Barobazar show how Indo-Islamic architecture combines different styles. Another example is the rise of Bengali vernacular literature, like **Srikrishna Kirtana**, which Husayn Shahi helped. Persian was still the language of the court (Shahnawaz, 2020; Karim, 1992). The economy relied on muslin exports, cowrie currency, and riverine ports, resulting in the emergence of cities where merchants from diverse ethnic backgrounds congregated (Deyell, 2010).

Foreign itineraries improve incomplete records of native peoples. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah helped Ibn Battuta travel through Sonargaon in 1345 or 1346 CE. He wrote about Sufi shrines (Shah Jalal in Sylhet), rivers that could be crossed, and rice fields that were good for growing rice. This demonstrates early pluralism and elite hospitality (*Rihla*, trans. Gibb, 1994; Chowdhury, 2018). Niccolò de' Conti (c. 1420–1430 CE), while focusing on Vijayanagara, referenced eastern Indian Ocean ports, thereby indirectly contextualizing Bengal's textile trade (Major, 1857).

In the book *Ying-yai Sheng-lan* (1405–1433 CE), Ming envoys Ma Huan and Fei Xin wrote about Gaur and Pandua. They talked about fortified bazaars, giraffe diplomacy, and mixed sartorial norms, such as white turbans and gold-embroidered saris, as well as multilingual trade (Ma Huan, trans. Mills, 1970; Sinha, 2020). Ludovico di Varthema (c. 1505) wrote about Gaur's fifty annual textile fleets to Ottoman markets, and Duarte Barbosa (c. 1518) wrote about Satgaon's Arab-Persian-Abyssinian-Bengali markets and how people of different religions got along under Alauddin Husayn Shah (Varthema, trans. Jones, 1997; Barbosa, trans. Dames, 1918; Ray, 2020). Later, Caesar Frederick (1569) wrote about village endogamy and judicial floggings, which made the rural setting more interesting (Frederick, trans. Hakluyt, 1904). You can't find social ephemera in epigraphs, but you can find it in these short texts.

People who traveled talked about a hierarchy that was both open and layered. Ibn Battuta noted that the Muslim aristocracy included Hindu advisors, with Sufis promoting interfaith relations, while rural peasants preserved endogamous communities (Gibb, 1994; Chowdhury, 2018). Ma Huan said that the rich people who lived in cities and wore silk robes were not the same as the poor people who lived in the country. He also talked about merchant guilds in Satgaon that were made up of Arabs, Persians, and Bengalis who used cowries (Mills, 1970; Deyell, 2010).

Barbosa says that the roles of men and women have changed over the years. For example, women sold jewelry and textiles in fancy places while still wearing veils. He also said that Islamic patrons helped artisanal guilds keep pre-Islamic techniques alive (Dames, 1918; Karim, 1992). Sufi pirs and Brahmin priests lived together in the same shrines, but there were clear class differences between the educated elites and the people who lived in flood-prone areas (Hasan, 2023; Eaton, 1993). Military elites (Afghans, Turks) ran the courts, and zamindars linked rural power, which helped people adapt and stay strong (Rahman & Mita, 2023; Chowdhury, 2020b). This mosaic, which had elite cosmopolitanism on top of peasant continuity, showed how hierarchies could change. When people met travelers, they changed the way they thought about things and the way they did things. Ibn Battuta's encounters with Sufis illuminated Central Asian mysticism, thereby enriching Bengali hagiography (Gibb, 1994; Chowdhury, 2020a). The giraffe gift from Chinese diplomats made Bengal a more interesting place to do business, and Ma Huan's accurate ethnography helped Persian become a lingua franca, which led to linguistic hybridity (Mills, 1970; Sinha, 2020).

European traders were interested in textiles (Varthema) and ports (Barbosa), which linked Bengal to trade routes in Eurasia. Arab-Persian traders also brought Islamic traditions to the markets (Jones, 1997; Dames, 1918). Travelers learned how to steer boats and eat

rice. Rich people in Bangladesh used styles from other countries in their homes and mosques, like Chinese porcelain and Persian calligraphy (Shahnawaz, 2020; Karim, 1992). These interactions cultivated syncretism, as demonstrated by Sufi-Hindu dialogues, hybrid festivals, and attire that combined turbans and dhotis, signifying an antecedent to cultural pluralism (Hasan, 2023; Eaton, 1993). However, ethnocentrism—distorting wealth and misinterpreting rituals—necessitates a critical comparison with archaeology (Mitra, 2012).

Theoretical Framework

The research "Social Transformation and Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Sultanate Bengal: Social Insights from Travelers" is based on the tenets of Social Constructionism and Cultural Exchange and Diffusion. Social constructionism elucidates the impact of foreign travelers' cultural backgrounds, biases, and perspectives on their perceptions and discourse concerning Bengal's society. It stresses that their stories are made up and not true. The theory of cultural exchange and diffusion explains how long-term interactions between Bengal and the Islamic, Central Asian, and European worlds changed religion, trade, social norms, and material culture. These different points of view show that the stories of travelers were both reasons for and results of conversations between people from different cultures. They also show how the time of the Sultanate changed how people in Bengal thought, acted, and talked to each other.

Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative, historical, and comparative methodologies. The primary objective is to gain insights into Bengal's social and cultural life by examining the accounts of foreign travelers during the Sultanate period. The main sources for this study are the travel stories of famous foreign travelers like Ibn Battuta and Niccolò de' Conti, as well as stories from people who lived at the same time and wrote about their time in Bengal. These stories tell us about the lives of people in Bengal and how they got along with people from other places. Secondary sources, including academic articles, books, and journal papers, are employed to furnish contextual background and elucidate the historical framework of Sultanate Bengal and the viewpoints of these foreign travelers. Content analysis is one part of the analytical method. That means looking for patterns in what the travelers wrote about the social hierarchies, customs, and cultural exchanges they saw.

Ideas about how society is changing

The Sultanate of Bengal (about 1200–1576 CE) saw a lot of changes in society. Islamic rule took over, cultures started to mix, and the economy of a society that was mostly based on farming and rivers changed. Travelers' accounts are first-hand accounts that show how the social structure of Bengal has changed over time. They show what this change looks like from the outside. These stories aren't like court records, which are mostly about politics. They don't tell us what happened in the past; instead, they tell us a lot about how people live now, how they practice their religion, how they live in cities, and how people from different communities get along.

Two important travelers from this time are Ibn Battuta (mid-14th century) and Ma Huan (early 15th century). They show how janapadas (regional groups like Pundra-Varendra and Samatata) that existed before Islam became Islamic geopolitical entities like Lakhnauti, Sonargaon, and Satgaon. Their observations indicate a society undergoing gradual transformation influenced by Islam, urban migration, and cultural amalgamation, all shaped by rivers, monsoons, and demographic shifts.

This essay utilizes the aforementioned accounts, as cited in the thesis, to examine social transformations, emphasizing religious shifts, economic growth, gender roles, and urban development. It employs primary sources such as Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* and Ma Huan's *Ying-yai Sheng-lan*, alongside epigraphic and numismatic evidence from the thesis, to illustrate the relationship between geography and social change.

Ibn Battuta was a Moroccan traveler who went to Bengal between 1345 and 1346 CE, when Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah was in charge and then Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah. He wrote one of the first long stories about how things changed in society. In his book *Rihla* (Travels), he said that Bengal was "a hell full of good things." This shows how strange it was to find so much good in such a bad place (Ibn Battuta, 1929). He noticed how quickly Islam was spreading in the eastern delta. People who lived in the forest communities changed their religion with the help of Sufi saints and pirs. This supports the thesis's claim that rivers played a role in the growth of political groups. Ibn Battuta, for example, saw that being able to travel on rivers helped spread Islamic practices. This turned societies that were mostly Buddhist and animist into ones that were mostly Muslim, like in Sonargaon (Chapter 4). He talked about how Hindus in the area adopted Islamic rituals or shared holy places, which are examples of syncretism. This showed that the social line could move and wasn't set in stone. He said that the area had a lot of extra rice, busy ports, and cowries that people used as money. This made Arabs, Persians, and locals into a group of traders. The economy was getting better, which made it easier for people to get ahead. Before the Sultanate, there was a strict caste system that said only slaves and people who had converted to Islam could work for the government. Ibn Battuta didn't like the fancy courts in Lakhnauti because they were run by slaves and men who had their testicles cut off. This illustrated a shift in social hierarchies from lineage-based frameworks to merit-based structures, notwithstanding their intrinsic inequities (Tarafdar, 1965). His narrative substantiates the numismatic evidence presented in the thesis, exemplified by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah's 734 AH gold coin, which signifies autonomous authority and economic stability that facilitated social transformations (Karim, 2013).

Admiral Zheng took Ma Huan, a Chinese traveler, with him. We learn more about the Husain Shahi dynasty, which ruled from 1494 to 1538 CE, from his trip from 1413 to 1415 CE. In *Ying-yai Sheng-lan* (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores) (Ma Huan, 1970), he talks about Bengal as a rich "Bang-ge-la" and its cities, like Pandua and Gaur. Ma Huan saw a society that welcomed people from all over the world, such as traders from India, China, and Persia. Because of this, people from different cultures shared things like food and buildings. He talked about the many mosques and madrasas in Gaur, which showed that Islam was a part of life there. He also said that Hindu and Buddhist

traditions are still strong in the countryside, like when people eat vegetarian food and celebrate holidays.

This shows that Islam changed over time to fit in with how things were done in the area. The thesis, for instance, says that Khalifatabad (Bagerhat) was a Muslim city that could survive floods in the delta. It has writing on it, just like the Jor Bangla Mosque (Siddiq, 2017; Rahman & Mita, 2023). Ma Huan has some really interesting thoughts on what women should do. He said that women in cities wear veils, but women in the rural deltas work on farms and trade. This is not the same as the stricter purdah that is common in northern India.

This shows that men and women are getting along better. It is based on Islamic ideas, but the matrilineal traditions of Bengal make it less strict. He was shocked by the slave trade and the textile industry. He said that the arrival of slaves from Africa and Southeast Asia changed life in the US. They formed families and military units, transforming their way of life (Chowdhury, 2020). His observations align with the thesis's epigraphic data from the Hooghly district (circa 1298–1532 CE), illustrating urban expansion and cultural development facilitated by riverine trade (Chapter 4).

Other unfinished stories, like those written by Portuguese travelers like Duarte Barbosa in the early 1500s, support these ideas from the late Sultanate period. Barbosa, who went to Gaur around 1518 CE when Husain Shah was in charge, said that the city was busy with people from many different backgrounds, including Moors, Gentiles, and Armenians (Barbosa, 1921). He saw that the city was changing. For instance, big mosques and bazaars showed how strong Islam was, while people who married outside of their faith and shared markets showed how open-minded they were. The thesis asserts that urban expansion depended on the river, with the Bhagirathi enabling trade and cultural exchanges, leading to a diverse society (Sinha, 2023).

Barbosa also said that the sultans were good for the arts. This made Bengal a cultural hub where Persian and local Vaishnava traditions came together. Persian histories, such as Minhaj-i-Siraj's *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* (circa 1260 CE), augment these narratives. This book isn't about travel; it's about how Bakhtiyar Khalji's rule changed the way people lived. It tells the story of how the powerful people in the area took over Nadia and how they were made to follow Islamic law (Minhaj-i-Siraj, 1881).

These travelers' stories show how politics and geography have changed over the years. People didn't have to change their religion to Islam; they did it on their own, as shown by Sufi-led conversions in deltaic frontiers (Eaton, 1993). Urbanization changed how society worked by moving people from the countryside to the city. For example, coins and inscriptions found in Mahmudabad show that wealthy Muslims lived there (Shahnawaz, 1999). Floods and earthquakes made it harder to make these changes, so the units were rebuilt.

People of different social classes and genders lived in different ways. For example, women became more important to the economy even though slavery was still going on. In conclusion, travelers' accounts from the Sultanate period illustrate a society undergoing transformation, progressing from pre-Islamic disunity to Islamic cohesion. The thesis's framework of geopolitical units demonstrates the interplay between

geography and culture in effecting social change. We can learn about how Bengal stayed strong even when things were always changing by reading these stories and looking at things like coins. Subsequent research might investigate lesser-known narratives, including those of Persian merchants, to improve understanding.

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Sultanate Bengal

Many different cultures came together in Bengal during the Sultanate period (about 1200–1576 CE). The delta's rivers and streams had parts from Turkish, Persian, Arab, and native Bengali cultures. People from other countries who came to see us gave us different points of view that helped us understand how religion, the economy, and society changed during this time. These stories, which came from Arabs, Chinese, and Europeans, were different from the stories that natives told, which were more about political legitimacy. They showed how flexible, open-minded, and strong Bengal was. Some of the important travelers who came to the area were Ibn Battuta (Arab), Ma Huan (Chinese), and Duarte Barbosa (Portuguese). Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah and other independent sultans were in charge when Ibn Battuta came in the middle of the 14th century. Ma Huan arrived in the early 15th century, during the prosperous reign of Ilyas Shahi, and Barbosa came in the early 16th century, during the reign of Husain Shah. Their accounts, bolstered by archaeological and numismatic findings from geopolitical centers such as Sonargaon and Gaur, illustrate Bengal's assimilation of Islamic influences alongside native traditions, promoting tolerance and cultural hybridity. These insights contest Eurocentric or insular perspectives, depicting Sultanate Bengal as a dynamic frontier of exchange, akin to the agrarian civilizations examined by Marc Bloch in medieval France, where geography influenced persistent social structures (Bloch, 1966).

These narratives depict Bengal's progressively transforming deltaic society, reminiscent of Fernand Braudel's Mediterranean realm, wherein environmental contexts shaped cultural exchanges across centuries (Braudel, 1972). They are grounded in the Annales school's emphasis on long-term historical processes rather than discrete events. Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* (Travels), written after his stay in 1345–1346 CE, is an example of an intra-Islamic cross-cultural view that looks at Bengal from the ummah's point of view. Ibn Battuta, a Maliki scholar from Morocco, met Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah in Sonargaon. He called him a "great ruler" who liked dervishes, Sufis, and foreigners (Ibn Battuta, 1958–2000).

He said that Bengal was a "hell full of good things," which meant that even though monsoons were dangerous, the area was full of textiles, rice, and elephants. This is in line with the thesis's main idea, which is how the shape of a river affects where people live (Hasan, 2023). Battuta said that Hindus and Buddhists could join Muslim society by going to Sufi shrines. This shows that Islam spread in deltaic frontiers by adapting to the people there instead of by force.

His description of lavish courts in Lakhnauti, ruled by eunuchs and slaves, shows how hierarchies changed: before the Sultanate, caste systems were based on merit for people who converted or moved. Battuta, on the other hand, saw how cultures mixed with each

other. For instance, he noticed that Hindus shared mosques for rituals, which showed that Bengal was not as strict as the Delhi Sultanate.

This view is backed up by numismatic evidence, like Mubarak Shah's 734 AH gold coin that stands for sovereignty (Karim, 2013). It shows that Arab travelers saw Bengal as a remote but religiously important Islamic area, which helped cultural exchange between Central Asia and the east.

Similar to Bloch's examination of French rural history, which analyzed the impact of environmental transformations on field patterns and seigneurial systems, Battuta's observations illustrate how Bengal's agricultural delta, susceptible to flooding and fluctuations, influenced the formation of mixed social units (Bloch, 1966). Lucien Febvre, a co-founder of the *Annales* school, would interpret this as geographical determinism, asserting that rivers facilitated the transportation of goods and mentalités—collective mindsets—while integrating Islamic and indigenous perspectives (Febvre, 1925).

Ma Huan's *Ying-yai Sheng-lan* (1433 CE) adds to this by giving a Sinocentric view of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah's time, focusing on how well the government worked and how the economy was connected. Ma Huan, who translated for Zheng He, said that "Bang-ge-la" (Bengal) had "imposing city walls" and "well-arranged bazaars" in places like Gaur (Ma Huan, 1970).

From a Confucian point of view, he liked the sultan's centralized government. It had Persianate influences that mixed with the trade of Chinese porcelain and showed how Bengal was connected to other places in the Bay of Bengal. Huan observed the presence of ethnic diversity—Persians, Arabs, and locals—in markets, where women engaged in trade despite wearing veils, indicating that economic pragmatism mitigated traditional gender norms. His observations of mosques and Hindu temples highlight religious pluralism, similar to the urban clusters in Khalifatabad (Rahman & Mita, 2023). Huan's admiration for Bengal's wealth was different from China's imperial isolationism. He thought of the Sultanate as a place where ships came to get Chinese goods like satin and left with textiles. This corresponds with epigraphic records from Hooghly (circa 1298–1532 CE), demonstrating cultural osmosis (Siddiq, 2017), and underscores how Chinese travelers perceived Bengal not as a tumultuous frontier but as a refined polity rivaling Ming magnificence. Huan's account emphasizes Bengal's agrarian foundation—rice surpluses and river trade—as a catalyst for cross-cultural integration, echoing Eric Hobsbawm's analyses of pre-industrial societies, where rural economies facilitated broader transformations (Hobsbawm, 1965).

Braudel's notion of conjunctural history—medium-term economic cycles—applies here, as Bengal's trade booms were instigated by changes in the Indian Ocean region that affected the area and brought in outside influences (Braudel, 1981).

European viewpoints, as illustrated in Duarte Barbosa's *Book of Duarte Barbosa* (circa 1518 CE), exhibit a mercantile and ethnographic perspective during the tolerant rule of Alauddin Husain Shah. While he was on his way to Portugal, Barbosa wrote about the ports of Bengal, such as Satgaon. He said that Gaur was a city with people from many

different cultures who did business with each other, including "Moors, Gentiles, and Armenians" (Barbosa, 1918). He talked about how Hindus were becoming Muslims to improve their lives, but he also stressed the need for communal harmony, like shared marriages and festivals, to fight stories of oppression.

Barbosa talked about the slave trade and cowry currencies in relation to the mint data in the thesis, like the Satgaon epithets in Appendix C. He also talked about riverine ports that let people from Africa and Southeast Asia come in, which made society more varied. He criticized polygamy from a Christian point of view while praising Bengal's hospitality. He compared the values of the Iberian conquest to those of the Sultanate. Barbosa's remarks regarding the configuration of cities, such as bazaars along the Bhagirathi, parallel findings by archaeologists in Mahmudabad (Hasan, 2023). This shows that trade deals were making Bengal more friendly to Europeans. Hobsbawm considered the impact of the Annales school, particularly Bloch's emphasis on enduring rural structures. Barbosa's narrative exemplifies how Bengal's deltaic "agrarian civilization" enabled persistent cultural dialogues in the face of environmental changes (Hobsbawm, 2013). Febvre and Braudel's "total history" perspective on the Annales expands upon this by interpreting Bengal's syncretism as a *mentalité* influenced by geographical necessities, wherein rivers facilitated long-term cultural connections (Febvre & Martin, 1958).

Travelers wrote these stories to show how people from different cultures lived in Sultanate Bengal. Ibn Battuta's ummah-centered hope, Huan's admiration for administration, and Barbosa's ethnographic pluralism all show a society where rivers helped with both geo-political units and cultural conversations. Islamization was a process of mutual influence, combining Sufi ecstasy with Vaishnava bhakti, as seen in groups of mosques that were built in the middle of floods (Eaton, 1993). These viewpoints, coupled with the thesis's material emphasis, illustrate transformations—economic booms advantageous to merchants, migrations altering hierarchies—that contest monolithic narratives of Islamization. But they show that there are problems: travelers often ignored what the less powerful had to say and instead focused on what the powerful were saying.

Cross-cultural traveler insights depict Sultanate Bengal as a resilient mosaic, in which deltaic exigencies fostered hybridity. Incorporating these components with the thesis's archaeology enhances historiography, fostering nuanced perspectives on medieval frontiers, influenced by Bloch's regressive methodology regarding rural developments (Bloch, 1966) and the Annales' comprehensive framework on global interrelations (Braudel, 1972).

Conclusion

Travelers' accounts that go beyond just political history show that the Sultanate period in Bengal (around 1200–1576 CE) was a time of big changes in society and culture. The stories in this thesis show how Islamic rule changed the delta's society as the river's landscape changed all the time. The thesis is based on the cultural and political groups it talks about, like Khalifatabad, Sonargaon, Lakhnauti, and Gaur. Ibn Battuta said that

Bengal was a "hell full of good things" because it had a lot of problems but also a lot of resources. Sufi-led Islamization made it easier for people to convert in the eastern frontiers, where it mixed with local animist and Buddhist practices. People of different religions can share holy places and rituals that change over time. This shows that social boundaries are not set in stone and that change is not always the best choice. Ma Huan's Sinocentric view of Bengal shows it as a rich "Bang-ge-la," with cities like Gaur encouraging ethnic diversity and economic interconnectivity through trade networks in the Bay of Bengal. His observations about how women are becoming more involved in farming and business show how gender roles are changing. Islamic norms are softening them, but they are still based on local matrilineal traditions. Duarte Barbosa's European mercantile perspective underscores social cohesion in multicultural urban centers, where markets and interfaith conversions signify social and economic advancement. These views show that Bengal was a strong mosaic. Rivers not only changed the political landscape, as shown by archaeological finds and numismatic discoveries, but they also changed cultural exchanges by helping merchants and integrating migrants into new hierarchies. These insights, coupled with the Annales school's long-term perspective, demonstrate the existence of enduring environmental frameworks that influence social evolution, akin to those observed in rural France or the Mediterranean. But there are still differences: travelers often liked elite points of view and didn't include stories from the subaltern. The change from pre-Islamic janapadas to Islamic urban units in Sultanate Bengal is an example of adaptive hybridity. This demonstrates that contemporary historians ought to employ methodologies from various disciplines to enhance their understanding of medieval borders. The thesis asserts that rivers represented wealth and transformation, demonstrating Bengal's cultural resilience in the context of global interconnectedness. The legacy of this time period is that it was able to bring together different parts of society into one system. This teaches us a lot about how to be open-minded and flexible when dealing with people from different cultures.

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