

ECONOMIC PROFILE OF SONARGAON CITY (AD. 14th to 16th CENTURY)

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ABSTRACT

Sonargaon lies three miles east of Narayanganj sub division of Dhaka, the capital of modern Bangladesh. Sonargaon was an administrative unit and also acted as the eastern capital of Bengal during the period under review. It played a great role in the economy of Bengal. Mint was established there in the early 14th century. It produced rice and cotton cloth in large quantities. The city of Sonargaon also acted as a port city carried long distance commercial activities within India and outside of India. A number of foreign travelers like Ibn Battuta, Hou Xian, Ma Huan, Ralph Fitch, F. Pelsaert and others, came here and penned down about its richness, fertile land, population, products especially cotton cloth like muslin, maritime trade and so on.

Keywords: Sonargaon, Economy, Rice, Cotton cloth, Muslin, Mint, Port, Maritime.

INTRODUCTION

The kingdom of Sonargaon, for centuries the Centre of all interest in Eastern Bengal, today but a peaceful rural countryside, yet studded with the remains of its once great forts and palaces that, grass-grown and crumbling to decay, survive as fading memories of the past¹.

The city of Sonargaon² lies three miles east of Narayanganj sub division of Dhaka, the capital of modern Bangladesh. Literally Sonargaon means “Gold Town” or “village of Gold”, but all the historians failed to trace its connection with Gold, as no primary or even latter sources gives light on that. Ziya-ud-din Barani (14th century) was the first who mentioned the name Sonargaon, narrating the expedition of Ghiyas-ud-din Balban in Bengal and the friendly relation with Bhoj Rai (Danuj Rai), then ruler of Sonargaon in East Bengal³. It was Shams-ud-din Firuz Shah I (AD. 1301-1316); the Governor of Bengal, who after finishing the conquest of Sonargaon made it a seat of his kingdom in AD. 1301-1302 and with the final triumph of the Mughals in Bengal (AD. 1576) and the re-enforcement of the Imperial authority (AD. 1586) there, the days of

Sonargaon drew rapidly to an end. Twenty miles away, on the banks of the river Buriganga, raised the new city of Dacca (AD. 1608), from its inception to be the capital of *Suba* Bengal. From now onwards, “the political importance of Sonargaon was finished, but as a producer of cotton fabrics it held the field till the foreign competition ruined its business, and reduced the whole town into an unrecognizable village”⁴.

As the Turkish political institutions were stabilized in whole Bengal and a standard monetary system was formed, the trade and commerce received a new impulse at least from the early fourteenth century onwards. M.R. Tarafdar rightly pointed out, “what happened in Bengal in the period from the fourteenth to sixteenth century was the growth of a number of towns and ports, a considerable expansion in craft production and also a corresponding expansion in commercial activities”⁵. Among these cities, Sonargaon itself played a great role on that new impulse as Mint town was established here in the first decade of 14th century, also acted as a port city carried long distance commercial activities within India and outside of India.

References to this aspect are occasionally found in contemporary or near contemporary accounts. The foreign travelers are, however, very much important, as gives considerable light on the economic aspects of Sonargaon, started to come here from the early fourteenth century onwards, some are like the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta (AD. 1345), Chinese traveler Hou Xian (AD. 1415) and Ma Huan (AD. 1431), English traveler Ralph Fitch (AD. 1586), Dutch traveler F. Pelsaert (AD. 1620s) and others. The Ancillary Sciences can also be taken in hand.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION, BOUNDARIES AND ROUTES

Sonargaon was an administrative unit, possessed by a vast territory. During the Husain Shahi period (AD. 1494-1538) the whole Bengal was divided in to provinces, variously known as *iqlim* or *mulk* or *arsah* and the “Sonargaon was possibly included in the *iqlim* Muazzamabad”⁶. In the preceding period these terms were also in use. During the Mughal period in late 16th century the whole empire was divided into *Subas* and Abul Fazl (AD. 1595) mentioned, the *Suba* of Bengal consists of 24 *Sarkars* and the *Sarkar* Sonargaon further divided into 52 *mahals*⁷. Out of these 52 *mahals* of Sonargaon “it has been possible to locate only 17 *mahals*”⁸.

The Geographical location and boundaries of Sonargaon, as has been mapped in the *Atlas of the Mughal Empire*, prepared by Irfan Habib, at the West and South, *Sarkar* Fatehabad (23⁺,89⁺; 22⁺,90⁺; 22⁺,91⁺), at South, *Sarkar* Bakla (22⁺,90⁺), at North, *Sarkar* Bazuha (24⁺,89⁺; 24⁺,90⁺), at East the area of Tipara (23⁺,91⁺) were situated⁹. The whole area of Sonargaon watered by the rivers like Ganga (old Buriganga), Isamati or Ichhamati, Meghna, Lakhya, little Fenny and their countless tributaries and channels, flowing up to the Bay of Bengal¹⁰.

Sonargaon was situated in the frontier area of Eastern Bengal and having its economic factors there was the instant need to connect Sonargaon with the other trading, administrative or military centers. Sher Sha (AD. 1540-1545) took this seriously and constructed a long road from Punjab (modern days in Pakistan) to the city of Sunargaon¹¹. Hamida Khatun Naqvi rightly argued, "A man starting from Sonargaon could travel along the well-connected roads to reach Agra, Lahore, Kashmir, Kabul, Multan, Thatta, Ahmedabad, Cambay, Surat, Burhanpur, or Orissa and to back to Sonargaon again"¹². There was also a land route which connected Sonargaon with Assam, ran from Sibsagar of Assam (across the Jayantia hills) to Sonargaon via Sylhet and Mymensingh¹³.

Sonargaon was well connected through the water route also, as many rivers and their tributaries, passing by this city flow their water up to the Bey of Bengal. One can travel from Sylhet to Sonargaon through the *Blue River* (Meghna River) as travelers used to¹⁴. The main water route on the way of Sonargaon which connecting the outer world and played a great role in the oceanic trade mentioned by foreign traveler Ma Huan. This route was from Lakhnauti and then connecting Sonargaon goes on to the South-Eastern direction via Chittagong and reaches to the countries of Malay and Indonesia extending up to China¹⁵.

PRODUCTION AND POPULATION IN DISTRIBUTION

On productivity itself, we have unfortunately little to go on. The sources refer about some crops, cultivated here but we do not have knowledge in what proportions the cultivated area was distributed for the different crops. By all accounts, the most important products which were produced here in large quantities were rice and cotton cloth.

While journeying by boat from Sylhet to Sonargaon, Ibn Battuta found the cultivators on both sides of the *blue river* (the Meghna), extensively engaged in agriculture, abound in orchards, gardens....¹⁶ Niccolo Conti (early 15th century), a Italian merchant, while sailing up the river Ganga and passing through the city of *cernomen* (Sonargaon) which was very noble and plentiful...found fair gardens and habitations.... grew *giant canes* (bamboos), and the fruits called *musa* (bananas) and *nattes* of India (coconuts)¹⁷. Ralph Fitch witnessed that the people of the Sonargaon city live in rice, milk and fruits¹⁸.

Sonargaon was one of the chief center for the cotton textile, especially for the famous *muslin* production. Ralph Fitch gives the description of Sunargaon as "Sinnergan is a towne six leagues (1 league= 3 miles) from Serrepore (Sripur), where there is the best and finest cloth made of cotton that is in all India¹⁹". Abul Fazl writes that "The Sarkar of Sonargaon produces a species of *muslin* very fine and in a great quantity"²⁰. F. Pelsaert left the description as at "Sonargaon with the surrounding villages... all live by the weaving industry and the produce has the highest reputation and quality, especially the fine *muslin* (*cassa* and *malmal*), which is also

much longer and wider than elsewhere”²¹.

Having no statistical data, we failed to give a numerical form for the total population or the population in division. But then, whatever the sources we have, it can possible to draw a *crooked line* on the population according to their profession people had been working on. Ma Huan noticed a prosperous and deep population while he was travelling from Chittagong to Sonargaon and then Sonargaon to Gaur²². Ibn Battuta saw people, engaged in agriculture, fruit orchards and also in garden making.

The manufacturing of cotton fabrics made room for the rise of other occupations such as weaving, embroidery, bleaching, dying and manufacturing of printed fabrics. F. Pelsaert saw that the population of Sonargaon and its surrounding villages....all live by the weaving industry. So weavers formed a major part of the population in Sonargaon city. In Ain-i-Akbari (AD. 1595), Abul Fazl wrote that there is a place called Egarasindur in Sonargaon, where a large reservoir gives a peculiar whiteness to the cloths that are washed in it²³. Alexander I. Tchitcherov argues that the towns like Dacca, Patna, Surat, Ahmedabad, Masulipatam, Sonargaon also had special artisans who were engaged in the bleaching of fabrics where water of special quality was needed as the Ain-I-Akbari mentions a special reservoir in the Sonargaon, with water particularly suited for the bleaching of fabrics²⁴.

MINT TOWN, COINAGE SYSTEM AND LAND REVENUE

The nature of the establishment of Mint in Bengal was connected to the political establishment, stability and also with the need of circulation of coins, as the Mints were situated at a peculiar Geographical location that must be bear in mind, especially in the early period of the Turkish rule in Bengal. For example, after Lakhnauti (Gaur) as a Mint town (first decade of 13th century), Sonargaon Mint issued its first coin in AD. 1305-06. (AH. 705), Satgaon Mint issued its first coin in AD. 1327-28 (AH. 728), as the full stability of administration was formed there in AD. 1204-05, AD. 1301-02 and AD. 1325-26 respectively. The Geographical location is most important as Lakhnauti situated in far West, Sonargaon in far East and Satgaon in far South of Bengal and all were acted as Port Town also.

The issuing of coins from the Sonargaon Mint continued till the time of Sikandar Shah (AD. 1357-90) whose last dated coin from here is known for the year AD. 1361-62 (AH. 763). Abdul Karim has pointed out that between the periods of AH. 763-817, no coins were issued from here, probably because Muazzamabad (few miles south away from Sonargaon) Mint was given prominence²⁵. The Sonargaon Mint was revived for a short period by Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Shah (AD. 1415-32) whose last dated coin from this Mint is of the year AD. 1421. (AH. 824), henceforth, no coin is known to have been issued from this Mint.²⁶

It is very tough to make an assertion, why the Mint of Sonargaon was closed although it was commercially active in latter period also. So there was the need of the circulation of coins. We can see there were a number of mint town, established at the adjacent or in a very short distance of Sonargaon, from where the coins were issued, as for example already Muazzamabad Mint was established. On the Eastern side of Sonargaon Fathabad (Faridpur) Mint; coins were issued from AH. 827 (AD. 1423-24) to AH. 952 (1545-46 CE.), on the South-Eastern side Muhammadabad Mint; coins were issued from AH. 839 (AD. 1435-36) to AH. 938 (AD. 1531- 32), were established²⁷.

An organized coinage system was necessary in facilitating small and big business transactions. The Bengal sultans instituted their *bi-metallic* (gold and silver) coinage system, which “partially replaced the natural economy inherited from the Pala-Sena period (AD. 750- 1204) by introducing a money-economy in an organized form”²⁸. These coins were in different types and varieties, carrying different ornamental designs and Calligraphical styles and generally circular in shape. *Cowries* also prevailing which constituted the most *democratic currency* for the *poor* (petty) transactions. Regarding the Copper currency, Ejaz Hussain argues that “due to the minting of small denominations in silver as well as wide use of *cowries*, the copper coins were perhaps not in demand by the business community”²⁹. Sonargaon was one of the prominent Mints from where the Silver coins had been issued. Ghiyas-ud-din Bahadur (AD. 1310-28), son of Shams-ud-din Firuz Shah, issued coins of Gold and Silver from the Sonargaon Mint³⁰.

Calculating the gold coins regarding their quantities, minting places and dates, issued from Sonargaon and other Mints in Bengal, Ejaz Hussain argues that “the purpose of the issue of these gold coins occasionally by the Bengal rulers to commemorate an event... were not issued to facilitate commerce.... these gold coins were given as presents to the sultans of Delhi as well as to the envoys of the foreign countries”³¹. But, the Silver *tankas* were not merely ceremonial as it was intended to facilitate trade and meet the demand of the business community.

Prior to Ain-i-Akbari (AD. 1595), we have no statistical data of land revenue, extracted from Sonargaon. Although sources like, Ibn Battuta (AD. 1345), who witnessed that the villagers living by the *blue river* (Meghna), subjected to the payment of half of their crops as taxes together with some other contributions³². Wang-ta-Yuan, writing at about the same time, says that the state demand in Muslim Bengal was two-tenth or one-fifth of the total produce³³. So we are unable to trace the rate of revenue demands perfectly as sources gives difference of opinion and probably there could be hardly any uniformity in the rate of revenue demands which was likely in local variations. During the period of Akbar (AD. 1556-1605) the general revenue demand was one-third of the total crops. The total revenue of *Sarkar* Sonargaon was 10,331,333 *dams* (RS. 258, 283/ year), among the 52 *mahals* of Sonargaon, Bikrampur used to give highest

amount of revenue (3,335,052 *damsl* year) and Bath Kara used to give the lowest amount of revenue (4,080 *damsl* year)³⁴.

If we go on to the *Rational Calculation* of the statistical figure of revenue collection of *Suba Bengal*, given by Abul Fazl, then we will find, it is not that one particular *Sarkar* possessing so many *mahals* means revenue figure would be in high and the *Sarkar* possessing few *mahals* means revenue figure would be in less, in comparison. For example the *Sarkar Bazuha* had 32 *mahals* and revenue was 39,516,871 *damsl* year; *Sarkar Mahmudabad* had 88 *mahals* and revenue was 11,602,256 *damsl* year; *Sarkar Chittagong* had only 7 *mahals* and revenue was 11,424,301 *damsl* year³⁵. As Bengal was much more fertile, the fact lies on its fertility of land, capacity of the production, crops they sowed and the products they manufactured, varied from *Sarkar* to *Sarkar* or region to region.

TRADE AND COMMERCE

Sonargaon had an *updated* trade and commercial relation with the countries in and outside India, the period under review. Hou Xian came to Bengal and visited Sonargaon, mentioned it as a “walled place with tanks, streets, bazars and which carries on a business in all kinds of goods”³⁶, which suggest that this city was well-peopled with a good emporium of trade, acting also as a Entrepot.

There was a land route, carried trade from Sonargaon to Assam, which ran from Sibsagar (across the Jayantia hills) to Sunargaon via Sylhet and Mymensingh. This trade relation had been carried on from long back to the period we are talking about. Muzaffar Alam has used a Persian sale deed dating back to AD. 1589, which gives details of a transaction in Samarkhand, where napkins, handkerchiefs, coarse and fine calico (*mindil sonargami* and *khassa sonargami*) of Bengal, passed between a Multani merchant and a local noble³⁷. These products must had been manufactured in Sonargaon as took the suffix *sonargami*. The important point is that a noble bought it and these products had exported up to Samarkhand. Evidence comes from Peter Mundy, a 17th century British traveler, came to *Puttana* (Patna in Bihar district), where he count some sundrie commodities like a fine and thin cloth (*ckassaes* or *khassa*) produced at Sunargam³⁸.

Sunargaon was well connected with the Bay of Bengal through the water root as many rivers, their channels passing through the whole area of Sunargaon fall into the Bay of Bengal. It acted as a good center for maritime trade also. Ibn Battuta writes that as “we reached the city of *Sunurkawan* (Sonargaon), where we found a junk on the point of sailing for the land of Jawa (Sumatra), which is a journey of forty days from there, so we embarked on it”³⁹. Reference comes from Ralph Fitch (AD. 1586), who found here, great store of cotton cloth goes from here,

and much rice, wherewith they serve all India, Ceylon, Pegu, Malacca, Sumatra and many other places⁴⁰. So, one can presume from these two sources which give considerable light on the overseas trade carried from Sunargaon port which had exported its products in the neighbor countries and in the overseas countries, mentioned above.

CONCLUSION

In this short Monograph we discussed a *family of linchpins* regarding the *space, time* and *discipline* under review. We saw Sonargaon as, a Centre of Production, a Mint town, a Port city and also dealt some *prefix and suffix* under the *economical demarcation*. The geographical location was such that some main rivers, their tributaries and channels, passing through the whole area of Sonargaon, join the Bay of Bengal. The land of Sonargaon was very fertile as produced rice and cotton in plenty. The *muslin* of Sonargaon was very famous as contemporaries or latter contemporaries praised it. Besides that, people were involved in gardening and orchards making where fruit trees were planted. It was well connected with the outer Bengal and outer India also, through the land and water routes which carried on overland and overseas commercial relations. That is why the Sonargaon was for centuries the Centre of all interest in Eastern Bengal.

The nature of this paper, somehow to study the *Economic profile of Sonargaon (AD.14th-16th century)* in its local spectacle without comparing the other Trading Centers or Port towns of Bengal and whole India so far. We saw here that Sonargaon is an administrative division, comprised with a vast areas. Agricultural crops were cultivated or planted in the whole of its area and so far as commerce and industry in concerned, was carried on in the main city and the locality around the city. This is because cities were the trading or commercial Centers, ruling and professional people used to live, followed by ordinary people including artisans, in search of employment opportunities.

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