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RESEARCH ARTICLE

AGRICULTURAL FOODS, FRUITS, ARTS AND BUSINESS ROUTES: 14TH & 15TH CENTURY EASTERN INDIAN REGION (AN ANALYSIS)

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Abstract

Different varieties of fruits trading routes and agricultural foods are found in records, while shedding new lights on socio-economic and cultural activities of the people in eastern region specially Bengal and adjoining territories. Clear sketching about prosperity and flourishing trading business along with architecture and other artistic activities are drawn here with the help of travellers account and some other reference noted from contemporary historical chronicles and literatures. The centre of political gravity in 14th and 15th century Bengal, different name of towns like 'Gaur and Pandua' rose one after another to be treated as capital town later on. Gaur became strategic town and commanded the routes that ran in different direction upward and downward the line of river Ganga leading to Chittagaon and other cities of this region. Even 'Pandua' was also elevated and designed a well-planned and populated town, without any doubt, with all possible amenities of human life and centre of commercial activities with other parts of kingdom with rivers and land routes.

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Introduction:-

13th century onward, we have the history of war, treaty, conquest, political aggrandisement of different kings, warrior and their daily routine life are mainly noted from historical literature, epigraphic records and some translated works of medieval period in India.

Agricultural foods, trading routes and different varieties of fruits are noted and elaborated, indirectly shedding new lights on socio-economic and cultural activities of the people in eastern region specially Bengal and adjoining territory. A very clear outlining sketch about prosperity of people and flourishing trading business along with architecture, sculpture and other artistic activities are drawn with the help of traveller's account and some other references noted from historical literatures and chronicles.

Tabqat-i-Nasiri written by Minhaj-us-Siraj give reference about a merchant who was settled in Lakhnauti capital town of Bengal in 13th century India. Another name (Baba Haji) as kotwal of this city along with a well-known foreign resident popular for his literary activities specially translating a Sanskrit work 'Amritkund' into Persian language and title are also mentioned.¹ The river Ganges served to be the main routes for transportation and communication with the region west of Lakhnauti. Modern day, Dinajpur District (Gangarampur) became the centre

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of attraction, whereby town Devkotwas well connected to Nagarkot near Suri with state support. Hence, it was believed that first arterial road constructed in medieval time in Bengal was from Devkotto Nagarkot, two commercial market town being evolved and developed to become commercial centre. The region west of Gaur constituting modern Manbhumi, Banbhumi, Dalbhumi and Kankjol was of less significance in the 11th century history of Bengal. The early ruler in this region started a new trend of moving up the Ganges river with their small boat and fleet to check the invasion indirectly pointing to the continuation of river routes as an adventurous avenue for military exercise and commercial exchange of business activities.

The port of "Satgaon" grew into a hub of commercial centre later on, frequently visited by traders and merchants from 'Caspian' coast and 'Alleppo' as testified by some inscriptions of 14th century found near this place and corroborated with literary contemporary references noted in some Persian and Arabic literatures.²

This part of strategic region in the last decade of 14th century and first half of 15th century was situated on the border line of Orissa guarded and controlled by high grandees of this age like Khan-i-Azam, Khaquan-i-Muazzam, Ulugh Ajmal Khan and others from Laobela, nearly ten miles east of Tirbeni to modern day Hajigarh a flag station twenty-five-mile south of Vardhman.

Approximately 15 miles north-west of Hugli, 'Pandua' became another commercial centre of attraction in the 15th century of sultanate power. The extinct ruins and some inscription found at this place indicate very clearly that 'Pandua' was an important link in chain of Fortresses protecting South Bengal (Radha) from east side external aggression.³

Merchandise Activities

The commerce, carried through 'Satgaon' port received great attention with the expansion of Sultanate of Bengal to 'Bagerghat' and Patuakhali; sub-division of 'Bairasal' region. The North Western portion of Murshidabad district, shaped like a triangle by the arms of Bhagirathi and Padma river bed was removed from main current of political and commercial life. But again, epigraphic references discovered in the tip of this triangle and presence of same old broken wall pieces indicate this zone to have been a prosperous centre during the Hussain Shah period. The ruined masonry art and similar bricks work in shape, size and texture, extending from 'Sagardighi' to 'Ghiyasabad' on Bhagirathi line give a clear impression to presume that these areas were emerging as mini-qasba or small town.⁴

'Varendra' the territory in northern side of Ganga in eastern part of India, formed the centre of political gravity during Sultanate of Bengal. Different town like Gaur and Pandua rose one after another to be treated as capital town later on, Gaur became strategic town and commanded the routes that ran in different direction upward and downward the line of Ganges leading to Dacca and Chittagaon, while on the westside it opened the doors to the cities of northern India.⁵ Nearly twenty-two miles north east of Gaur city, another city known as Pandua, grew up as Ferozabad at that time and served for a long period as capital of kingdom, Pandua was elevated and designed without any doubt, a well-planned and populated town with all amenities of human life and centre of commercial activities, linked with other parts of kingdom with river and land routes. Memoires of Sufis and merchandise activities cling round this city specially in the second half of 14th century Bengal having cultural, political and commercial ties with Kamrupa, Tibet, China and Herat as well. Even after Pandua had ceased to be the capital of Bengal Sultanate, this city bearing the shrines of Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrezi and Hazrat Noor Qutub Alam, Locally Known as Bari Dargah and Chhoti Dargah here visited frequently by people at least on auspicious occasion and days. Qutub Shah Mosque, Ekhahi Mausoleum as well as Adina Mosque also become the pious centre of attraction for Pilgrims for centuries, even in modern times.

It also indicate the settlement and conglomeration of population in the city of Pandua maintained its unique position as most popular religious shrines of Islam in eastern region.⁶ Prince Shah Jahan's pilgrimage to this place and installing a pillar by a pious Muslim saint Pirzada Khan for support to the canopy over the saint's tomb is clearly

stated in available records of the period.⁷ These references noted from time to time pointed to the fact that Pandua had become a big urban centre. This city is again referred in numismatic record as “Baladat-Al-Maharusa” translated as walled city.⁸

Another popular city that came into prominence under the Hussain Shahi dynasty is identified as old Malda town. It was situated in that period at the junction of Kalindri and Mahananda rivers. This fact is elaborated and established with the help of some inscriptions of Hussain Shahi dynasty and existence of old remains of numbers of mosques, including the Jama Masjid bearing some worth praising lines; this sanctuary obtained celebrity throughout the world.⁹

Agriculture was the most common pursuit for rural people with a sense of pride in sultanate period. It served as backbone for people’s livelihood to a great extent and also fed the industries which were initially agriculture based at first. All attempts for expanding avenues in agriculture activities were made right from its beginning of Turkish rule in this region. It is also mentioned that ‘Mohd. IwazKhilji’ one of the famous army chief of Bakhtiyar had built a long Dyke between the river Ganges on the Lakhnor side. While the Mahananda and Punarbhawariver on the other side to overcome the devastation of annual flood which inundated the territory and destroyed standing crop of the region.

One Chinese merchant ‘Wang Ta Yuan’ who visited this area around middle of 14th century observed that Bengalis owe all their peace prosperity and tranquillity to themselves due to their full devotion to agriculture.¹⁰ It is also mentioned that Nasiruddin Mahmood IV, before ascending the throne, was too much engrossed in agricultural activities¹¹. The agricultural produce in universal demand were betel leaf and sugar (gur) manufactured out of sugarcane, consumed by all classes of people. Other produce betel leaf was used mainly by royal families and members. However, the staple crop was paddy (Shali) which was cultured three times a year and there was such bumper harvest that assessment of revenue was based on average estimate of the produce, instead of Masuhat or measurement.

The main item in the diet of people in this region was also mentioned as “rice and fish”, very common diet in all section of society residing near the river.¹² As regarding to delicious variety of different fruits Barbakabadi, Rajsahi, bananas occupy top position, frequently appreciated by all even in the beginning of 15th century. References are found in the memoir of Babur about its sweetness and availability in this region of eastern India.¹³ In other delicious variety of fruits, mango, primarily switch over the top list, being preferred by all ruling class people. Other fruits were Jackfruits which grew in more than two hundred number in single tree and also very big in size and shape. Orange, another popular fruit was more sweet and tasty than Narangi, as depicted in another literary medieval record¹⁴.

Artistic Dimension:

The art of sculpture allied with other artistic taste, painting and bronze casting constituted one of the fascinating avocation of skilled semi-skilled craftsman of this region. Architecture in this region noted as religious in nature was turned by the rulers for secular character as well. The art of decorative design of architecture was encouraged too much from royal families of 14th centuries mainly, harnessing native talent for building structures as per their own will and wishes. This factual points are attested with the surviving monuments found at Pandua, Gaur, Devtalla, Satagaon and other places, such as beautiful palaces, mosques, gateways, water reservoirs etc. Some references about the palaces of Barbak Shah, who ruled in the middle of 15th century (inscription dated 1466AD) clearly justified felicity of expression and serenity in depiction above all water channel flowing gently underneath the palace as

'Salsabil' or heavenly fountain. Even local well known Hindu architect and designer 'Gopal' and Ramundal son of Ganpati contributed in constructing a mosque and erecting pillar in Raj Shahi, last decade of 15th century¹⁵.

The high excellence of decorative ornamentation of edifices erected in different parts of this region got impetus under the Muslim ruler, but old indigenous representation of living creatures was restricted. Major William Franklin who wrote about the ruins of 'Gaur' praised very high which was supposed to be unparalleled for elegance of style and standard of any architecture, noted so far in Bengal. Elaborating all appearance for a mosque, (sona masjid) stated that golden colour of the domes blended with ornamentation of surface, represented the entire structure, projecting like a fire of gold under the glitter of full sun rays.¹⁶

Conclusion:-

Already noted references and other epigraphic and literary records, provide very clear presumption to conclude that general prosperity in the form of agriculture foods and fruits like sugar, cotton, rice of different qualities, honey, bee-wax, consumable oils and other beneficial products, were very much in existence during the period under review. Trading routes and network of navigating rivers and tributaries not only encouraged commercial progress but also shielded the territory from any outside aggression. Rulers, during this period patronised and protected indigenous art, architecture and sculpture, what they liked the most to satisfy the needs and luxury keeping at the top priorities the prestige of the state monarchic state system.

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