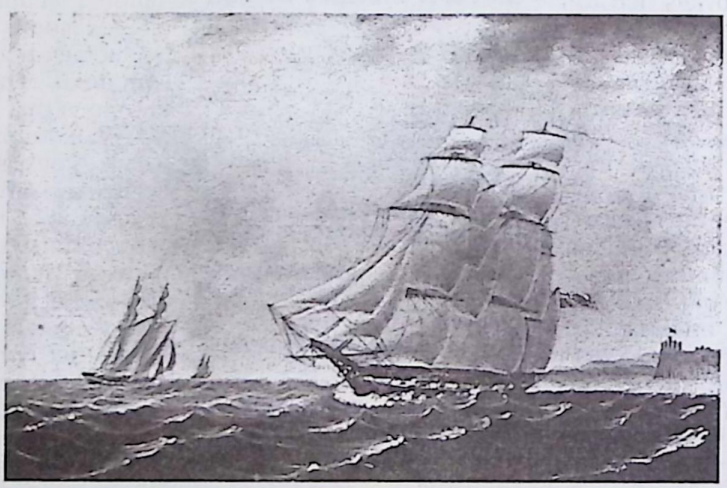
Tales of the First Traveller from Bengal to Europe 1765-68

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By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Mughal Emperors were sovereigns in India only in name. In Bengal, the battle of Plassey was already lost by Nawab Sirajuddoula. Lord Clive, heading the East India Company affairs in India, was manipulating the puppet Nawab in Bengal and Emperor Shah Alam in Delhi. He did it by cunning, deceit and military threats to extract the most lucrative and advantageous terms for the British side. The Mughals had become submissive and servile to the British and increasingly dependent on their backing and protection to maintain even a semblance of their rule from local challenges to their authority.



Against this backdrop, Mirza Sheikh Itesamuddin, born in Bengal, grandson of a Persian immigrant and historian of Mir Zumla's Assam campaign, Shihabuddin Talish, came to be associated with the British as a Farsi writer and secretary. Emperor Shah Alam planned to send a letter to the British king George III, appealing to him to sanction troops for his protection. A man with good knowledge of Farsi was to accompany a British military officer carrying the letter and a gift of a hundred thousand rupees from India to the British monarch. Itesamuddin, an employee of the company, was chosen to be that person. He was himself given four thousand rupees for the trip and promised generous rewards on his successful return from England. The following is an account of what followed, why his visit to England was prolonged and impressions of the visit as given in his book in Farsi in 1779. The book was named "Shigarf-nama-e-Bilayet", written long eleven years after his return to India at the urging of his friends. It was translated into Bangla in installments by A.M.Habibullah for Bangladesh Itihash Parishad journal 'Itihash" and later published in Dhaka by Muktadhara in 1981in a Bangla book "Bilayetnama." It would be fair to say that Sheikh Itesamuddin was the first known visitor to Europe from Bengal.

A few days after he set sail for England, British Captain Swinton, who was accompanying him, informed that Clive had seized the Emperor's letter and no gift of money was going along with them. Clive had told the Captain that he himself would travel to England later with the two items and submit these to George III personally. Itesamuddin was completely taken aback and saddened but had no option at that stage other than to continue. On the way to England, he had to stay in Boulogne and Cape Corn in France for about a fortnight. He arrived in England after a long journey of eight weeks. At the port, his luggage was not cleared by the customs. He had to leave them behind temporarily and proceed to London, where he was put up by Captain Swinton in his brother's house on Coventry Street in Haymarket. The customs department after a delay of a fortnight released his goods by order of a court which found his importation of silk handkerchiefs were for gift-giving and not for sale and since he was a visitor who did not know the rules and regulations of the country, he should be given back his goods without any penalty.

Eventually, Lord Clive arrived from India and the deceptive person he was, presented the money sent by the Indian Emperor as his personal gift. He decided not to submit Shah Alam's letter to the king, as it would be inconvenient to the company's interest. Because of the on going debate whether administration of India should be taken over directly by British government personnel and not left with the company, a mere business corporation, Clive argued that the East India Company's forces have suffered casualties and monetary loss in establishing British supremacy in large parts of India, particularly in Bengal. Therefore, it would be fair to give the company administrative and revenue collection responsibilities in India. The company