



SPECIAL FEATURE

The rebellious gene

WE are a rebellious lot. And this thirst for freedom and the tendency for rebellion has been bred in our genes. Bengalis have revolted against oppression since time immemorial.

One glorious example can be the sultanate era of Bengal. Initially, Bengal was under the Delhi Sultanate. Our rulers were primarily under that organisation, with the throne of Delhi holding the most supreme authority. But the governors appointed in Bengal revolted and claimed independence whenever they got the opportunity -- providing us an inspiring and thrilling chapter of history.

Gour Bijoy

The gateway to the Bengal Sultanate was opened by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammed Bin Bukhtiyar Khalji in 1204AD. The invader is a legendary personality in Bengal history. His entrance and capture of Nadia (an important city in Bengal under the then in power Sena dynasty) is one heroic and enthralling tale.

"Keeping aside the myths and fables, Bukhtiyar Khalji was a superbly strategic warrior, who planned the mission very intelligently, thus making it successful," Dr. A.K.M. Shahnawaz, Professor, Department of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University said while explaining Bukhtiyar's strategies.

He went on to conquer another important city, Gour.

Bukhtiyar Khalji was sent by a Delhi Sultan. But his coins hint that he sought an entity of his own. "He did issue coins by the name of the Delhi sultan, where one side had inscriptions in Arabic," the professor said. "But on the other side of it, he put these two words in Sanskrit: 'Gour Victory'. A case may be made that by doing this, he wanted to establish his own identity and role. According to the legend of the coin the status of Bukhtiyar was not that of an independent ruler, but of a governor."

The adamant Khaljis

After his death, the Khalji noblemen were adamant in not giving up power. Abdul Karim in 'Social History of the Muslims in Bengal' wrote, "The history of Khalji Amirs, after the death of Bukhtiyar when each of them tried to establish his own authority... shows how jealously they clung to their conquered territory. It is not unlikely that they regarded this land as their own heritage against the Delhi Sultanate..."



But the dream of an independent sultanate still had a long way to go before it came to be fulfilled. Whenever a governor crossed his authority to declare independence, the Delhi Sultans crushed their power.

An esteemed Bengal

Eventually the Khalji monopoly was broken by the Delhi Sultanate. The supreme authority of Delhi continued to be passed through appointment of governors.

Being a governor of Bengal was a highly promising job. "...the emperors conferred upon the governors titles, privileges of drum beating, umbrellas and flags," Abdul Karim mentions in his book. "The wealth and special status of Lakhnawti (Gour) became proverbial in Delhi and every ambitious servant of the state aspired to the high post of the governor of Lakhnawti."

This shows how promising a land Bengal

had been.

"At one point, a Delhi Sultan named Ghiyasuddin Balban sent his son Bughra Khan as the governor. What happened afterwards is an amazing example of how important and loved Bengal was," explained Shahnawaz. "Bughra Khan, when asked by his father to take over the supreme throne of Delhi, had refused. Happy with the Bengal governorship, he did not want to go away from this land."

On one hand, Bengal had always been a prosperous region, with fertile lands and varied trades. On the other, your masters are far away -- in Delhi. It is therefore only natural that you would rebel and seek independence.

Glorious 200 years: Independent Sultanate of Bengal

And the rulers of Bengal enjoyed a God-gifted competitive advantage. On top of the

fact that the communication between Delhi and Bengal was poor, the latter was an area boasting big rivers and numerous canals.

Any invader must master this geography and prepare accordingly if he wanted to attack. This was not easy, thus forming a natural barrier.

To make things worse, monsoon, when vast areas get covered by water, "... always damped the enthusiasm of the adventurers from drab and dry homelands..." S. M. Taifoor in Glimpses of Old Dhaka explained the situation further. "With spectacular flourish their kings and captains, to whom Bengal was known to be a country of 'Hellish Paradise' came to Bengal with a huge expeditionary force during the dry season..." However, when it was the rainy season, Taifoor wrote, the troops were helpless.

How can any power prevent fearless, shrewd rebels from achieving freedom? A power as powerful as the Delhi Sultanate was able to retain their grip over such rebels for a long time (more than 100 years), but it eventually had to give it away.

When Mohammad bin Tughluq's (a Delhi Sultan) governor at Sonargaon (named Bahram Khan) died, the city was won by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah (1338). Two other governors of the same Delhi Sultan tried to stop him. That unsuccessful attempt cost them their lives.

Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah was the first independent ruler. Later on Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (who was a governor of another part of Bengal at that time) conquered Sonargaon.

Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah accomplished the difficult task of bringing the whole of Bengal under one rule, and for the first time in the sultanate era, Bengal was united.

"This was possible for him by siding with the interests of the local people, the Hindu 'zamindars' and the Muslim nobility. These people stood firmly with him when Firuz Shah Tughluq (a Delhi Sultan) invaded Bengal, and it was mainly due to their support that Ilyas Shah could retain his independence," Abdul Karim wrote in his book.

This period of 200 years (1338-1538) was a glorious one. The Sultans developed Bengal and worked in favour of it and also heavily promoted culture and literature.