

Habshi rule in Bengal (1487-94)

Very few people know that Bengal was once ruled by Habshi African sultans. Four rulers from an African background occupied the Sultanate of Bengal during 1487-94. Those who know about that period are mostly confined to a narrow group of academics, whose interest levels on the topic seem to have been also very limited.

How was it possible when there was no African invasion in Bengal or the size of the African community was not sufficiently large in our country, at any time, to enable this to happen?

The main primary materials I have consulted are two books and coins issued by the four respective sultans. The books are *Tarikh-i Firishtah*, written by Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah (Firishta) during the first decade of the 17th Century, more than one hundred years after the Habshi rule had ended; *Riyazu-s-Salatin* (A History of Bengal), written by Ghulam Husain Salim, in around 1778, nearly three hundred years after the episode.

During 1487-94, the Bengal Sultanate was ruled by a series of African kings. From the beginning of the Muslim rule in northern India, in addition to Turkish slaves, enslaved Ethiopian men were imported to serve nobles, military commanders and the sultans, primarily as slave soldiers. Some of them rose through the ranks and achieved high positions as military commanders, senior officials, nobles, governors and even rulers. In the case of the Bengal, four Africans ruled the Sultanate for a brief period of nearly seven years.

The city of Gaur – whose another name was Lakhnauti – was the capital of the Bengal Sultanate at that time, a large city by the standards of the period. The Italian Ludovico Di Verthama, who visited Gaur during the first decade of the Sixteenth Century, described the Bengal capital as ‘the best place in the world, that is, for living in’. A small part of that city now lies within the border of present-day Bangladesh, the rest being in Malda in West Bengal, India.

The ruler of Bengal immediately before the start of the Habshi period in 1487 was Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah. He was the last

a slightly different, but not contradictory, account of why Malik Andil was summoned to the capital: it was ‘in order to imprison him by means of a trap’. Both sources state that Malik Andil rightly understood the intention of Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah and took steps to pre-empt the latter’s plan.

According to the sources, Malik Andil entered the capital fully prepared with a large force. On seeing the strength and support of Malik Andil, Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah refrained from executing his plan to capture and kill Malik Andil. Instead, he, through overtures of friendliness, invited Andil Malik to the palace and then demanded that the latter, his hands on the Quran, promise never to injure him, in one account, and not to kill him, according to another. Malik Andil responded to that demand by answering that as long as Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah was on the throne, he would not harm him. Malik Andil, according to how Firishtah and the Ghulam interpreted the conversations between the sultan and the commander, did not promise not to ever kill the Sultan – whom he considered to be an illegitimate ruler of Bengal – but only that he would not kill him while he was on the throne. Firishtah says that Malik Andil’s promise was specific, who said to Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah that ‘since he had ascended the throne, he would never lay hands on him while he “filled that seat”, which only meant seating on the throne.

Although Malik Andil swore on the Quran that he would not harm Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah, he, nevertheless, planned to avenge the killing of Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah, the previous sultan whose loyal servant he was to the end. His efforts in this regard were said to have made some inroads into winning the confidence and support of some of the personal guards of Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah. As such, in one evening, Malik Andil was secretly let into the palace, who then ‘entered the harem to kill the eunuch’ sultan.

According to the Ghulam, ‘when he found the latter asleep on the throne’, due to being intoxicated by ‘excessive indulgence in liquor’, Malik Andil ‘hesitated, on recollecting

MUHAMMAD AHMEDULLAH



Firuz Minar. This five-storey tower is attributed to Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah, the second Habshi ruler of Bengal.

appreciate the value of money which has fallen into his hands, without toil and labour. We ought to set about discovering a means by which he might be taught the value of money, and to withhold his hands from useless extravagance and lavishness.” They laid out one lakh rupees in a place for the king to see for himself what one lakh looks like so that he can learn the value of money. But when the king saw the money, he said: “How can this amount suffice? Add another lakh to it.”

Ghulam says that he died after three years of rule and that the cause of death, from the most reliable account, was that he was killed by the palace Paiks. Based on coins and inscriptions during the rule of Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah, Syed Ezaz Hussain concludes that he ruled for about three years from 1488 to 1491.

victorious, Mahmud Shah, the King, son of Firuz Shah, the King”.

According to some accounts, Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah treated the infant son of his master, Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah, as if he were his son, and might have even adopted him. If that were the case, then describing Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah as the son of Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah would not cause any problems.

Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah was only a young child when he ascended the throne, and, as such, he could not have played much of a role, if any, in decision making. Habash Khan, the prime minister, as the regent and de facto sultan, acted on behalf of Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah. It might have been Habash Khan who decided to name Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah as the father of Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah on coins issued in the new sultan’s name.

As the new sultan was young, he was unlikely to have been actively engaged in running the administration of the Sultanate. Like in many other places around the world when a young child inherited the throne, a regent was normally elected or appointed to run the affairs of the government on behalf of the child while underage, with support from a council of nobles and officers. Whether he was the son of Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah or Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah, Habash Khan was the regent placed in charge of the government.

Habash Khan’s ‘influence so completely pervaded all affairs of government, that, except a bare title, nothing of sovereignty was left to Mahmud Shah’. However, he was soon challenged and murdered by another Abyssinian named Sidi Badr Diwana, also described as a slave. Then, shortly afterwards, he conspired with the palace paiks, and

closely to the tenets of the orthodox faith’.

Firishtah also states that Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah’s Prime Minister, Syed Hussain Sharif, encouraged the sultan to disband the greater part of his standing army, which lead to the reduction of the number of soldiers on service so low that many of the army chiefs quitted their jobs. Firishtah suggests that the activities of Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah that made him very unpopular and hated were engineered by the prime minister, deliberately designed to malign the sultan.

With the increasing unpopularity of Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah and the many plots that were being hatched against him by some nobles, army chiefs and officers, the prime minister decided to join hands with the rebels to oust the sultan from power. The move of the rebel group against the sultan at Gaur palace, however, did not result in an immediate victory for the rebels. Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah was said to have barricaded himself at the palace with five thousand Abyssinians and thirty thousand Afghan and Bengali forces. Hand to hand, sword and the use of arrow were parts of the methods of warfare employed by both sides. According to one report, the battle raged for about four days, and according to another, it lasted four months. Many people were killed on both sides during the fierce fighting over a few months.

Finally, after a major push by the rebels against the besieged palace, they became victorious and Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah, with many of his relatives, got killed. According to Firishtah, the end part of the battle came when the prime minister gained the confidence of the palace paiks. They let him enter the palace with eleven others who then killed Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah. After that, the prime minister, Syed Hussain Sharif, got installed on the throne and became the new sultan.

Soon after the killing of Sultan Muzaffar Shah, according to Ghulam, a council of nobles was called. There the nobles supported Syed Hussain Sharif’s desire to become the sultan after he had answered their questions satisfactorily.

Syed Hussain Sharif was asked, “If we elect you king, in what way will you conduct yourself towards us?” To this, he answered, “I will meet all your wishes, and immediately I will allot to you whatever may be found over-ground in the city, whilst all that is underground, I will appropriate to myself.” This gave licence to the nobles and soldiers to pillage the city – the city of Gaur that Ghulam described as eclipsing Cairo in terms of wealth.

The new sultan, enthroned in 1494, became known as Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah. However, after a few days of ascending the throne, the sultan forbade the continuing pillaging of the city. When some did not adhere to his edict, he killed about twelve thousand plunderers, which brought the pillaging to an end.

Syed Ejaz Hussain, after analysing relevant coins and inscriptions, including newly discovered ones, concludes that Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah ruled for two years and a few months.

The new sultan, who was said to have been of Arab descent, founded a new ruling family called the Hussain Shahi Dynasty. During its forty-year rule, it produced the rule of four sultans until it was ended by the Afghan Sher Shah when he defeated the last Hussain Shahi ruler, Sultan Mahmud Shah, in 1538.

Muhammad Ahmedullah is a researcher. He is a founder member of Brick Lane Circle, London.



Firuz Minar. The photo was taken in the 1860s by John Henry Ravenshaw.



Firuzpur Gate, Gaur. The photo was taken in the 1860s by John Henry Ravenshaw.

Ilyas Shahi ruler of Bengal, who ascended the throne in 1481.

According to Firishtah, one day, a Habshi called Khawajasara, ‘one of the eunuchs of the palace... murdered the king’. After that, he became the new ruler of the Bengal Sultanate, calling himself Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah. The eunuch sultan then took steps to consolidate his power by collecting ‘together all the eunuchs of the palace, as also men of low station and desperate fortunes’. But the ‘chief officers and nobles of the state... resolved together to depose’ the usurper.

Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah could not have moved against Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah without a prior conspiracy and support from a significant section of the dissatisfied nobles and officers at the court. Unless the murder of the sultan was the result of a heat of the moment event, the eunuch who killed the sultan, surely, would not have had the courage to kill him without significant support from within the court.

Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah (1487)

The next phase of the drama was the conflict between Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah and Malik Andil, the Habshi commander, loyal to the murdered Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah. At the time of the murder, Malik Andil was somewhere at the frontiers. When Malik Andil learned of the murder of Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah he wanted to punish the ‘usurper’ and avenge the death of his master. Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah, fearing what Malik Andil might be planning against him, summoned the latter to return to the capital ‘for the purpose of seizing and putting him to death’, according to Firishtah. Ghulam Husain Salim provides

his vow’, made while holding the Quran, not to harm him while sitting on the throne. However, one thing led to another and within a very short time that night, there was a swift end to the life of Sultan Shahzada Barbak Shah at the hands of Andil Malik. The eunuch sultan ruled only for a few months.

Although at first Andil Malik was hesitant in accepting the wishes of the dowager Queen, the widow of Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah, to become the new sultan, later changed his mind when a unanimous assembly of noblemen at the court agreed that he would be the best person for the job. He took the regnal title of Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah.

Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah (1487-90)

Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah ruled for nearly three years. He was both admired and feared; known as a good king who brought justice and stability to the Sultanate; carried out many public works; undertook initiatives to improve the conditions of the poor. Though neither Firishtah nor Ghulam includes in their accounts details of public works that were said to have been part of his legacy, the latter mentions that “a mosque, a tower and a reservoir in the city of Gaur, were erected by him”.

Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah’s levels of public expenditures, especially in supporting the poor, alarmed many officers and nobles at the court. An example of that has been provided by Ghulam.

On one occasion, Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah instructed his officers to distribute one lakh rupees to the poor, who disliked the ‘lavishness’ of the new ruler and used to say to one another: “This Abyssinian does not

Firuz Minar

The Firuz Minar in Gaur is usually associated with the ‘tower’ mentioned by Ghulam. Some commentators have said that, just like the Qutub Minar in Delhi, the Firuz Minar was also built as a symbol of war victory. However, no war or victory achieved by Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah has been chronicled by either Firishtah or Ghulam or anyone else. Another point to note is that the building of the Firuz Minar was supposed to have begun in 1485, according to some sources, which was about two years before this sultan was enthroned. If it were true that the construction of the Firuz Minar was started in 1485 then this means that it was Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah who commissioned the project.

Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah (1490-91)

When Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah was killed or died a natural death in 1490, a child became the new sultan, who became known as Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah. According to Firishtah, Jalaluddin Fateh Shah, the last Ilyas Shahi sultan, was his father. In contrast, Ghulam says that when “Firuz Shah passed to the secret-house of non-existence, the nobles and the ministers placed on the throne his eldest son, Mahmud.

However, based on the study of ‘recently discovered coins’, Syed Ejaz Hussain concludes that Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah was the son of Sultan Saifuddin Firuz Shah. Ejaz bases his conclusion on the wordings on the coins when describing Sultan Qutubuddin Mahmud Shah: “*Qutub-ul-duniya wadin Abul Mujahid Mahmud Shah Al-Sultan ibn Firuz Shah Al-Sultan (pole-star of the world and religion, the father of the crusader*



Some of the coins issued by Habshi rulers in Bengal. COURTESY: WWW.WORLDOFCOINS.EU

killed Sultan Mahmud Shah and established himself on the throne and called himself Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah.

According to an analysis of relevant coins by Syed Ejaz Hussain, Sultan Mahmud Shah’s reign lasted only for a few months.

Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah (1491-94)

Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah, described as a slave, has a very negative reputation. He was painted as blood-thirsty, short-sighted, cruel and unwise. Ghulam states that he killed ‘many of the learned and the pious and the nobility of the city, and also killed the infidel Rajas who were opposed to the sovereigns of Bengal’.

Other unwise acts attributed to him include cutting the pay of soldiers to build up a treasury for which he also ‘committed oppressions in the collection of revenue’. Firishtah adds that those that Sultan Shamsuddin Muzaffar Shah killed were ‘whose principles induced them to adhere