

THE GREAT AGE OF CHITTAGONG

and our failure to understand it



Equestrian portrait of Shayista Khan, by Ilyas Khan, Delhi, c. 1666. The painting commemorates Shayista Khan's role in the Mughal conquest of Chittagong in 1666, depicting the imperial commander on a rearing horse in the restrained grisaille style characteristic of late seventeenth-century Mughal court painting.

Until modern borders partitioned it, Chittagong's location on the ethnic, linguistic and cultural frontier between South and Southeast Asia made it central in a honeycomb of contiguous material spaces of hazy social configurations but clearly visible routes connecting west to Magadha; northwest to the Tripuri, Koch and Ahom regions; northeast to the Shan domains, Burma, Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan; southeast to Arakan. Buddhism linked it to Sri Lanka, Lan Na, Arakan, Burma and Siam. A meshwork of land-river routes connected it to port-towns and caravan-cities in Burma, Yunnan and China.

RILA MUKHERJEE

Accessing the sea through the Karnaphuli River, Chittagong's site was exceptional in the early modern age of commerce. No other port had such an excellent harbour. Duarte Barbosa (1518) saw 'a very excellent sea haven'. With lesser siltation and fewer geomorphological changes, Chittagong, controlling navigation at the Meghna's mouth, showcases a long history. Unlike in the Ganges estuary, the Feni River to its north and the Sangu's and Matamuhuri's arms in the south are accessible to the largest barges in all seasons. The Karnaphuli, at the centre of these water courses, is navigable year-round, although Alexander Hamilton noted (1718) that its entry was 'pestered with sand banks, and some rocks within'.

Until modern borders partitioned it, Chittagong's location on the ethnic, linguistic and cultural frontier between South and Southeast Asia made it central in a honeycomb of contiguous material spaces of hazy social configurations but clearly visible routes connecting west to Magadha; northwest to the Tripuri, Koch and Ahom regions; northeast to the Shan domains, Burma, Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan; southeast to Arakan. Buddhism linked it to Sri Lanka, Lan Na, Arakan, Burma and Siam. A meshwork of land-river routes connected it to port-towns and caravan-cities in Burma, Yunnan and China.

Chittagong's political status was indeterminate. Under Bengal from 1340 to 1448, it then went under Arakan, came back into Bengal when recovered by Rukn-ud-din Barbak (1459-74), thereafter lost to Arakan and Tripura, again under Bengal (1516/17-1531), and under Bengal and Arakan until the Mughal conquest of 1666. The conquest was not conclusive. Mrauk U king Sanda Wizaya (1710-31) invaded Chittagong in 1723, enslaving Bengalis who were then donated as pagoda-slaves in the ordination halls and monasteries at the Mahamuni complex. The Bengal nawabs recovered Chittagong in 1729 and it saw some trade again.

The last great port
Chittagong's location attracted Europeans seeking autonomy from

the English-controlled Hughly zone. In the 1620s, Manrique dreamt of a second Portuguese empire based on Chittagong. In the 1730s, Duplex fancied creating a Chandernagore-Chittagong trading bloc which would connect to Arakan, Pegu and Ava through coastal sailings and the Brahmaputra-Meghna-Chindwin-Irrawaddy waterway. In the 1750s, Chevalier saw Chittagong as the centre of a maritime continental bloc linking Bengal-Assam-Tripura-Ava-Arakan-Pegu-Mergui-Andaman/Nicobar Islands-Southeast China. All these schemes failed.

For the British, Chittagong was only a conduit to the Pegu trade. The Hunter report (1785) recommended developing this 'peddling trade', but as Company surveyor John Ritchie was preparing the Andamans hydrography charts in the 1770s, the focus shifted, Port Blair was founded, and Chittagong languished. The great earthquake of 1762 did not help matters.

Cordier noted in 1823 that Chittagong was no longer commercially sustainable. But Burmese vessels, navigating the northwest monsoon through coastal channels, still made an annual voyage from Bassein, Rangoon and Martaban to Chittagong, where they sold their produce—mainly Rangoon rice—and brought back cloth and Indian goods. Its deepwater port and proximity to Ava, Arakan and Burma provided for a limited rice-and-salt trade at Jugdia, Srirampur, Dhaka, Sylhet and Goalpara. Surrounded by populous villages, Chittagong still contained 12,000 people. In 1836, around 300 vessels of between 40 and 100 tons called there, including 'several large Maldiv boats of incredible construction'. Penang's Tamil Muslim shipping called in 1838.

Early modern Chittagong
This sad state of affairs is belied by the flourishing trade that took off once Bengal became independent of the Delhi Sultanate. Already, Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah of Sonargaon had conquered Chittagong in 1340, but with the Ilyas Shahis (1342-1415) its networks expanded. Religious, diplomatic and commercial ties bound Chittagong to Hijaz, Timurid Herat and Ming China. Ibn Battuta saw 'a

junk about to set off for the country of Javan which is forty days distant'. Under the later Ilyas Shahis (1437-87), as many as 20 mints existed, including at Chittagong, where a fleet of 62 Ming ships called in 1405. Until 1448, when it went under Arakan, its mint was active.

Chittagong was equally important to the Husain Shahis. Baghdadi merchant Alfa Husaini, who traded with Chittagong, supposedly instigated the 1516/17 reconquest, assisting Sultan Husain Shah with ships, manpower and material. After taking Chittagong, Husain Shah founded Bhalwa town and Suluk Bahr port, settled people, built mosques at Hathazari and Fathabad, and a tank commemorating his victory.

The earliest recorded Portuguese missions were under Joao Coelho's and Dom Joao de Silveira's leadership in 1517 and 1518 respectively. An incognito mission passed through Chittagong in 1521. The mint was active from 1523 to 1526 under the Husainids until it reverted to Arakan in 1531. Yet in 1552 Barros remarked: 'Chittagong is the most famous and wealthy city of the kingdom of Bengal, on account of its port, at which meet the trade of all that Eastern region'. Federici saw 'eighteen ships of Portugals great and small... From the great port of Chitigan they carie for the Indies great store of ryce, verie great quantitie of Bombast cloth of everie sorte, Suger, Corne, and Money, with other merchandise. And by reason that Warres was in Chitigan, the Portugall shippes tarried there so late'.

Ships came from Yemen, the Arab peninsula, the Ottoman Empire, Europe, China and Southeast Asia. Visitors included Ralph Fitch on his return voyage (1588) and Dutch merchant-traveller Jan Huygen van Linschoten, who regarded Chittagong as the 'chief townne' of Bengal (1596). In 1607, Francois Pyrard de Laval saw it as the 'port of the kingdom of Bengal'. Fernao Guerrero, also in 1607, saw its ruler as the most powerful of Bengal's kings.

Pyrard makes this distinction: 'On landing, they took me with them to salute the king, who is not, however, the great king of Bengal, but a petty king of this province, or rather a governor, with the title of king, as is generally the case in those parts. The great king of Bengal lives higher up the country, thirty or forty leagues off. On being presented to this petty king, he received me with great kindness...'



Folio 3 recto from the Miller Atlas, completed in 1519 for King Manuel I of Portugal, depicting a richly decorated map of the northern Indian Ocean, with Arabia and India.

The great king [of Arakan] is a pagan; he of Chartican, whom I saw, was a Mohammedan.'

Mint output matched trade whenever silver inflows corresponded with periods of sultanate control. John Deyell has computed that the period 1291 to 1357 saw heavy inflows; 1358-66 saw a net outflow; 1367-1415 saw moderate to heavy inflows; 1416-29 saw heavy outflow; the China and Portugal trade during 1430-1533 saw steadily increasing inflows. But until Chittagong's reconquest in 1666, Arakan's lack of a money economy meant that whenever the Chittagong port was under its control, Arakan issued trade coins intended for transactions with foreign merchants.

From 1539 to 1573, in the absence of a ruling authority, Chittagong's trader-banker nexus engaged in producing a trade coinage which was reliable as money but spurious as a message-bearing medium. The impulse came from those engaged in intra-regional trade; coins carried no mint name and were struck to the old tanka weight standard favoured throughout the region from Arakan to Tripura inclusive, as opposed to the prevailing rupiya standard current throughout Bengal and India. The transitional coinage reinforced a frontier character,

in contrast to the administered Arakan and Burma trades. It stopped when Arakan established its Chittagong mint in the 1580s, producing crude and stylistically plain Arakanese/Arabic coins.

Unstable borders, capricious rivers
Borderlands were tense throughout this period. Chakmas ('Chacomars' in European maps), from Tripura and the Chittagong hills, raided Arakan between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the seventeenth century, local rulers, Portuguese and Arakanese fought over Sandwip, a strategic salt-producing gateway south of Chittagong. The neighbouring 'Regno (Kingdom) de Codovascam' saw conflict with the Arakanese and Portuguese. King Min Khayi had pillaged 'Cukkara' port there in 1439 and founded Ramu north of the Naaf River, affirming Arakanese control until that point. The Bengal-Arakan border pact had shattered.

The sixteenth century's west-to-east fluvial shifts and large-scale flooding in Chittagong's western hinterland affected trade. The Mathabhanga, Bhairab, Garai-Madhumati and Arialkhan rivers linked the Meghna-Brahmaputra and Ganges estuaries, enabling the western ports to access Southeast Bengal's goods directly. Trade based on Chittagong's wide hinterland collapsed once Mughal occupation rendered the western ports prominent. It is no accident that Dhaka town, directly connected to these ports through the Padma River, rose after 1610.

Hughly, Kasimbazar, Patna and ultimately British Calcutta became primate ports, compared to whose reach Arakan-held Chittagong was only a minor emporium and a limited gateway to eastern contacts which had decayed. China, its major trading partner, withdrew from the Indian Ocean trade. A belligerent Burma started exerting pressure on Arakan. The Portuguese, embedded in small river valleys, could not arrest the decline. The local elite class could no longer bounce back.

Fluvial shifts made Chittagong a slave-raided zone, yet the slave trade positioned it within a new network of slave ports and slave markets headed by seventeenth-century Achin in Sumatra. Portuguese-Arakanese bands called magh raided Southeast Bengal to provide slaves for Arakan to sell and trans-ship, and for public

successfully defend their interests against Bengal and Arakan, although, in the absence of a ruling authority, Chittagong's businessmen managed to produce a reliable trade coinage.

Partly due to the political destabilisation in western Bengal, Chittagong was unable to leverage the new economy; it was incapable of consolidating its position with other ports and powerless to forge new connections. When the Surid Afghans conquered Gaur in 1538, the Portuguese lost the privileges granted by the last Husain Shahi sultan. But Mughal emperor Humayun's capture of Gaur in July that year saw the Afghans routed.

The Afghans moved towards Chittagong. With old networks changing and the Gaur connection severed, various elements jostled for power: Bhati's chief Suleiman Baisia; Portuguese renegades; Afghan commander 'Nogazil'; Chittagong's governor Amirza Khan; his enemy Codovascam, or Khuda Bakhsh Khan, feudatory chief of south Chittagong. Chaos ensued. An Arakan silver plate inscription shows it coming under Arakan ca. 1540/41, but this may have been only a formal occupation, since Federici in 1569 and Fitch in 1586 saw both Chittagong and Sandwip under Bengal. Turmoil from Devamanikya's death and Bijoymanikya's succession in 1540 prevented Tripura from meddling in Chittagong's affairs, but there would still be periods of Tripuri, Afghan and Bengali control until ca. 1582, when Arakan recovered it.

As endemic conflict affected routes and hampered mint operations, other ports started challenging Arakan-held Chittagong. Bakla's Paramananda Rai and Viceroy Constantino de Braganza signed a treaty on 30 April 1559. Bakla was opened to Portuguese shipping with low and fixed customs duties if they stopped visiting Chittagong. In exchange, Bakla got cartazes to send four ships to Goa, Hormuz and Melaka. Given this flux, it is unclear as to what extent Chittagong could retain its status as a great regional port.

Reading Chittagong

In true mandala fashion, borderlands like Chittagong are often claimed as part of some regional problematique, but always from the centre's viewpoint. But which centre we privilege—Bengal, Arakan, or the Mughal Empire—is the main issue here. The 'Bengal' lens shows a borderland oscillating between it, Tripura, Arakan and the Mughal Empire. For Arakan, which was re-networking its coast, it was an integral part of its territory. For the Mughals, Chittagong was the last frontier.

Before the 1666 conquest, the Mughal frontier retreated to nearby Bhalwa, where a cultural and political cohesion was visible. Portuguese was spoken, customs were 'Moorish', and Arabic-speaking rulers and Portuguese guards dominated. So, instead of seeing these polities as composed of concentric, mandala-like circles of power that occasionally included Chittagong, it makes more sense to see it as an autonomous port-city coming under multiple sovereignties, negotiating many cultural realms throughout its millennium-plus history, sometimes oscillating west towards India and at other times southeastward to Arakan.

Another reason for our inadequate understanding of Chittagong is over-dependence on European sources. Europeans living within early modern Europe's state system knew of sovereignty as operating within strictly defined borders. They little understood how regions were constituted in Asia: where one polity's borders ended and another's began, which spaces overlapped, which were the tributary states and what were their realms of jurisdiction, and what the different forms of rulership implied. So, they were quite unable to comprehend the bewildering array of 'little' states existing between China and India.

The Mughal Empire was seen as South Asia's paramount state, and all polities were subject to, or in the process of subjection to, that state. Those that occupied an indeterminate space were badly understood. Ultimately, Chittagong became a borderland within a larger peripheralised region, and Arakan's expansive seventeenth century was lost to the traveller's gaze in a baffling assortment of rivers, central towns, polities, tributaries, states and satellites in eastern South Asia. Clearly, Chittagong challenged European notions of territoriality.

Rila Mukherjee is a historian and the author of India in the Indian Ocean World: From the Earliest Times to 1800 (Springer Nature, 2022) and Europe in the World from 1350 to 1650 (Springer Nature, 2025).