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THE AGENT OF THE EUROPEAN MERCHANTS: BENGALI TRADING COMMUNITY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SOUTH-WEST BENGAL

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Abstract:

In the eighteenth century, the Bengali trading community took a vital role in the trade of South West Bengal as well as the entire Bengal. They were known as 'gomotah', 'baniyan', 'dadni bonik', 'paikar', 'dalal' etc. They acted as the agents of foreign traders mainly the Europeans. They were merely middlemen when the foreign traders came to Bengal but their trading flourished when the European traders operated their trading in Bengal. The foreign traders were not familiar with the local languages, customs system, trading centres, measurement of goods etc. Moreover, local communication and local markets were quite unknown to them. In that cases, the foreign traders needed local representatives who became their helpers and solve all the problems. Historically it is seen that in the second half of the eighteenth century the foreign company's merchants and the indigenous traders had a special control over the economy of Bengal. The people of this country accepted the participation of Europeans in the administration and economy of Bengal. The native traders became the subsidiary of the Europeans in the business. The Indigenous merchants also develop their own business. It is said the indigenous merchants created a favourable situation for the trade and business of the Europeans.

Key Words: Dadni bonik, Paikar, Dalal, Gomostah, Baniyan, chakla.

Introduction: In the eighteenth century, the Bengali trading community took a vital role in the trade of South West Bengal as well as the entire Bengal. They were known as 'gomastah', 'baniyan', 'dadni bonik', 'paikar', 'dalal' etc. Previously they operated their trading as free traders but in the period of my discussion, they acted as the agents of foreign traders mainly the Europeans. They were merely middlemen when the foreign traders came to Bengal but their trading flourished when the European traders operated their trading in Bengal. It was evident from different sources. The foreign traders were not familiar with the local languages, customs system, trading centres, measurement of goods etc. Moreover local communication and local markets were quite unknown to them. In that cases, the

foreign traders needed local representatives who became their helpers and solve all the problems. The trader's community of Bengal took the advantage of the situation like other places in the world.

This trading community not only took part in the internal trade but they took an important role as middlemen in external trade also. They knew very well about the real situation of the markets. A great number of middlemen were found in the European investment to the trading goods like weaving industry¹, salt² in South West Bengal. They became landholders with their income as the middlemen and they controlled the local areas. But in this context, it is said that the control of colonial administration became stable gradually and the condition of the traders as middlemen got worsened. In this article as the agents of the European, the uprising and activities of the middlemen trading communities will be discussed.

South West Bengal the so-called entire Bengal was favourable in trade. In addition to the favourable trading environment, there were many large and small markets and organised commercial infrastructure. From the past entire Bengal was so much important to the foreign traders. So the Portuguese, the British, the French and the Dutch came to Bengal following the Parsian, Turkey and the Arabian. Among them, the British, the French, and the Dutch became a major trading community in Bengal. In the second half of the eighteenth century the participation of the European companies in the trading made some reformation in the trade, trading organization, and markets of entire Bengal. Active participation of the European companies influenced the trade, trading centres and mercantile structure of the entire Bengal. Among the European companies, the English East India Company stabilized the political power as a corporate body.³

In the eighteenth century, there were so many large markets in the entire Bengal among them Sonargaon, Jagadia, Dhaka, Chhattagram, in the east, Murshidabad, Kasimbazar, Satgaon, Hoogly, Calcutta, Balasore, Cinsura, etc. in the west were the main centres. Besides these so many smellers, important trade centres were set up locally like Hijli, Tamluk, Badwan,⁴ Ghatal,⁵ Khirpoy, Radhanagar, Chandrokona, Sonamukhi,⁶ Bissenpore, Anandapore, Medinipore,⁷ and Balasore, Boloramgori⁸ In South West Bengal.

After being satisfied with the identity of the Bengali middlemen the English East India Company engaged them as '*gomostah*', '*baniyan*', '*dadni bonik*', '*paikar*', '*dalal*' etc and made an investment with them and operated the trading. As a trading organisation, the East India Company was far more ahead than the other European companies and the merchants of Asia because of the dominance and integrated communications from places of manufacture to the selling markets by the heads and the subordinate officials of the factory (centres of production) and '*aurung*' (wholesale trade centres / a place where any article of trade was manufactured and collected for wholesale disposal or export).⁹ In the seventeenth century, the factories and *aurungs* were controlled by the council of the main centre of trade in Hoogly.¹⁰ Later Calcutta became the main centre of trade and since then the factories and *aurungs* were controlled directly by the council.¹¹ The European Companies had

established factories in the important production and trading centres in South West Bengal to collect the trading commodities before the establishment of the English East India Company's permanent dominance in South West Bengal. Of these Radhanagar, Khirpai, Sonamukhi, Haripal, Golaghar, Kashijora,¹² etc.

The East India Company gained its permanent dominant position in South-West Bengal when *chakla* Midnapore and *chakla* Burdwan came under them in 1760. In those places, so many factories and *aurungs* were set up. One Resident in *chakla* Midnapore and one Resident in *chakla* Burdwan were appointed as the heads of judicial, administration and revenue.¹³ John Stone and Hey were the first residents of *chakla* Midnapore and *chakla* Burdwan respectively.¹⁴

In the eighteenth century, the Indian Ocean linked with the unknown regions of India through European ships.¹⁵ Their arrival connected the hinterland of South-West Bengal with the larger world. The European Companies set up so many factories in search of essential goods and to collect them. In course of research in South- West Bengal, it is noticed that most of the factories and *aurungs* were set up in the places of production and trading convenient to good communication. Unlike Birbhum most of the factories and *aurungs* were connected with navigable channels. It was a usual fact that every part of Bengal had some navigable channels, even in the dry seasons, within 25 miles. It was more common to find a navigable channel within 'a third of that distance'.¹⁶ So many large and small rivers flowed from the plateau of Choto Nagpur through South West Bengal. Rennell's map reflects a clear idea of the navigation system of South West Bengal.

The economic development of rural Bengal was the boon of the fluvial network. Transportation through navigable channels was more profitable as well as convenient and secured in commercial activities. During the time of Rennell 30,000 boatmen (*Majhi*) were engaged in internal navigation.¹⁷

Communication took place through four stages inland route or water channel – from villages or production areas to the *bazars*, from one *bazar* to another, from that *bazars* to larger *bazaars* or cities and from cities to the outer world.¹⁸ It is argued that space is partly produced by the 'connections (of a given place) to the rest of the world' and that different connections line at the heart of the production of different kinds of spaces. Similarly, it is seen that the European Companies, mainly EIC made communication through the weaving goods trading that reflects a model like:

Model: 1 I

Production Centre/ Village → Factory → *Aurung*/Residency → Main
Centre/Calcutta → Outer World

It was the most vital aspect of production organisation that the organisations were tied with an agreement. The agreement was made between the middleman (*paikar*) and the weaver based on the goods which would be sent to the markets.¹⁹ The *paikars* would supply the raw materials or give money to the weavers in advance. With the advance cash from the *paikars*, according to the agreement, the weavers would buy raw materials or use the money

for the necessity of their families during the production period. The principal elements of this system were — a financial requirement of the weavers, their limited buying capacity from the markets and their non-risk attitude regarding the demand of the markets.²⁰

We mentioned earlier, the European Companies made use of the more dominant form of production in their trade. The institutional structure of production, procurement and trading organisation conducted by the Europeans were skilled and sophisticated.²¹ Firstly, the East India Company collected goods through the agreement with the native merchants. The East India Company made contact with the local or grass-root producers with the help of those native merchants. The native merchants acted as agents and they collected goods from the producers by paying money as advance supplied by the European Companies. It was known as '*dadan*' and those native merchants were called as '*dadni* merchants'.²² The East India Company paid one-fourth in cash and the rest third-fourth as *dadan* of their investment for collecting goods.²³ In this system the producers were supposed to provide goods if they had taken the advance (*dadan*) from the *dadni* merchants. After supplying goods, according to the *dadan* system, the producers would deal in independently; sometimes with the other merchants.

In 1753, the East India Company introduced an agency system instead of *dadni* system as the traders failed to provide goods under the agreement due to various obstacles. In this system, the Company would collect their necessity goods for exportation directly by their agents or *gomastah* from the factories and *aurungs*.²⁴

In the newly introduced agency system (1753 A.D.) a large number of *gomastahs*, *paikars*, *dalals* were needed to be appointed to collect goods from the producers and the manufacturers. They would also supervise the goods at the factories and *aurungs*. William Bolts in his '*Consideration on Indian Affairs*' says that the factors or the agents were called *gomastahs*. Since 1753 the *gomastahs* became the official agents of the Company and soon acquired the status of the Company's representatives.²⁵ In the various *aurungs* the Company procured its goods. Besides the master given to each *gomastah* to guide him in providing the Company's investment, he was given monthly salary (5-50 rupees) and a palanquin (in keeping with the official status as a Company official) and a few staff under him.²⁶ The staffs were a clerk or *mohuri*, a cash keeper, a few peons and some *harkaras* with a *gomastah*. The lodging for the *gomastah* was arranged at the factories or *aurungs*. It was called *cutcherry* where he summoned the *dalals* and the weavers by the peons or *harkaras*. They signed a bond and promised that they would provide goods on a stipulated rate on a scheduled day. At that time the *gomastah* would give them a part of stipulated amount as advance.²⁷

The *gomastahs* played a vital role in the Company's business. They had to provide in order to enter the Company's service besides pledging their allegiance and exclusive service to the Company. They not only enjoyed the administrative power but also raised financial stability from the *gomastah* of Warren Hastings it is evident that the *gomastahs* were able to raised their small empires for them besides being powerful.²⁸

The *gomastah* and the agent, as well as tagadgeer or collector of textile, jassendar or appraiser of the valuation of the production, played a crucial role in the textile production and the Company's investment. The natives were appointed to those posts in a nominal salary.²⁹ The *dalal* or *baniyan*, according to Bolts, was the important person in this system. 'He is interpreter, head book-keeper, head secretary, head broker, the supplier of cash and cash-keeper'. 'He conducts all the trade of his master, to whom, unless pretty well acquainted with the country languages; it is difficult for any of the natives to obtain accesses'.³⁰ The *paikars* under the *dalals* were an inferior set of brokers. The *paikars* maintained the connection between the *dalals* and the weavers as well as the *gomastahs*.³¹

The *dalal* and the *paikars* were found in every village in the entire district. They intervened in any type of exchange of goods in *haats* and markets. To get the maximum profit they bought goods at the lowest price and for this purpose, they threatened the producers and shopkeepers. They dozed the customs duties in the name of the Company through the Company was the sole authority to enjoy such duties. In 1767 the *paikars* were entrusted to supply weaving goods to the *aurungs* of the EIC in South- West Bengal. It is clearly found in the chart (I: 1):

Table No: I.1At the *Aurung* of Chandrakona (26 *paikars*)

Name of the <i>Paikar</i>	Number of pieces per month contracted for in 1766	Number of looms assigned to each <i>Paikar</i> in 1766	Number of looms assigned to each <i>Paikar</i> in 1767
Kamdev Thakur	66	49	48
Raghudev Thakur	15	19	16
Janki Thakur	27	22	21
Gangaram Thakur	27	27	24
Hari Ghosal	21	18	18
Udirt Thakur	18	19	19
Sadhu kar	90	77	70
Jugal Poddar	75	57	60
Kaliram Hai	51	38	38
Gauranga Dutta	45	41	41
Govardhan sarkar	45	40	40
Raghu sarkar	24	25	27
Bhagirath Das	24	19	29
Motiram poddar	24	21	21
	30	20	22
	45	28	30
	54	49	50

Ukmitjan Teli	27	18	23
Trilok	27	22	20
Chaudhuri	40	35	35
Titu Sarkar	30	29	29
Trilok Sarkar	18	15	15
Lokicharan	18	10	12
Chaudhuri	15	70	12
Jaganath Das	17	8	9
Sani Sarkar	27	26	26
Hit kar			
Ganesh Poddar			
Jaganath Bairagi			
Jugal Bari			
Bairagi Das			

At the *Aurung* of Khirpoy (9 *Paikar*)

Sarveshar Pahari	225	180	205
Kirparam Teli	90	72	70
Panju Dutt	30	24	40
Sitaram Pal	30	24	25
Sundar Mahi	90	72	70
Manik Mondal	60	48	46
Baburam poddar	60	48	50
Kashi Pal	30	24	25
Gokul Das	521/2(half)	42	40

At the *Aurung* Radhanagar(2 *Paikar*)

Jugal Chaudhuri	60	48	46
Motiram Dutt	30	22	25

At the *Aurung* Ghatal(1 *Paikar*)

Dukhiram Doba	100	80	60
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At the *Aurung* Udayraj pur(1 *Paikar*)

Sarbhot Thakur	28	23	23
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At the *Aurung* Ramjibon pur and Hajipur(1 *Paikar*)

Hiranand Chaudhuri	60	48	50
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At the *Aurung* Sammraat (1 *Sarkar* or *gomastahh* being an employee of the English Company)

Name not given	150	150	231
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Source: Om Prakash, 'From Market –Determined to Coercion –based: Textile Manufacturing in Eighteenth-Century –Bengal', in Giorgio Riello and Tirthankar Roy(eds), *How India Clothed the World of South Asian Textile, 1500-1850*(Leiden; Brill,2009), pp. 217-52

In 1788 the commercial agents were appointed. Since then the so-called middlemen and the *paikars* got vanished from the system of investment in collecting goods. From the identity of the *paikars* it was known that most of the *paikars* were the local money lenders and the traders who acted as the link men between the producers, weavers and the Company. In 1750-60 they were not too rich *baniyan* in Calcutta. Some of them were landlords. The Company in the initial stage of their region protected those middlemen landlords. Narrain Satpatty took the responsibility of collecting raw cotton and engaging weavers to supply the goods of the best quality. Narayan Satpati, the weaving merchant of Midnapore can be mentioned in the context of the Company's investment directly by the agents. He was sent to the *mufassal* to collect goods as a *tahasilder*.³² An account of his collected goods is mentioned.

Table No: I.2

Year	Advance(current rupees)
1762	8640 (advance made by Burdett)
1763	4518.8.9
1764	34093.7
1765	36103.14.6(advance made by Mr.watts }
1766	78389..9(made by Mr.Graham)
1767	72210.14.3
1768	91733.2.9
1769	85245,1
1770	25694.4
1771	11474.10 (Mr babar)
1772	21900.6
1773	43200

Source: PCR Burdwan 8th March1776, p 182-185

At that time the *paikars* and the *dalals* unlawfully grabbed a certain amount of the weavers' income. The *paikars*, the contractors and the *gomastahs* jointly made the same oppression.³³ The *paikars* deceived the producers of the mulberry plants, the *rearers* of silk worms, the winders and the weavers. The silk *chassars* of Radhanagar or *aurung* under Burdwan *chakla* appealed the Company to take initiative to stop this. The Company assured them in this regard. Any Bengali or European can go to the *mufassal* to buy silk for the Company. But they could not pressurise the producers to receive advance and supply silk. They have sent a strict *parwannah* to Burdwan district in this regard on 22 *Jaistha*, 1182. They could receive or refund the advance without fear. They could submit the petition. They would not face any trouble at any point of time in this respect.³⁴

The *chassars* and the mulberry *ryots* (sometimes these two persons were the same) took the whole responsibility in cocoon rearing and feeding of worms. Even they had to face so many problems during the heavy rainfall and flood. But they had to depend on the condition of the *paikars*. The records of the 'Board of Trade' contained complaints of the *ryots* against the landed proprietors and the *paikars* when they put impediments deliberately on their labour, used force and compulsion to sell cocoons in their own terms.³⁵

In another sector, we see even before 1757 the European private traders were engaged in salt trading. They operated their trade in the name of indigenous merchants. In a word, it can be said that at that period the monopoly over the salt trade was in the clutches of indigenous merchants. The political changes in the 1760s led to the establishment of the East India Company's monopoly over salt trade and by phases the capitalist interest of the British Raj developed a monopoly over the system of salt production. From 1760 to the beginning of 1770 the private traders and the servants of the East India Company operated the salt trade. In that period in spite of losing their monopoly over salt, the local traders operated salt trading with the Europeans. It is cited in the chart below. (I.3)

Table No: I. 3

Year	Name of the Merchants	Quantity purchased	Quantity contracted for	Place of manufacture
1768	Lokenath Nandi	2,00,022	-	Hijli
1768	Anadiram Naik	2,34,415	-	„
1768	Sridhar Saha	90,750	-	„
1772	Kashnath Sen	1,74,820	-	Hijli, Sujanmota Tamluk
1772	Ghanashyam Sarkar	80,572	-	„
1772	Sridhar Saha	1,65,600	-	Hijli, Sujanmota
1773	Sridhar Saha	1,65,600	-	Hijli, Sujanmota
1773	Loknath Nandi	62,444	-	Sujanmota Hijli
1773	Arup Narayan & Narrain Chand	62,976	-	Mahisadai
1775	„	126,482	-	„

Sources: [Comptrolling Committee of Revenue Progs, Vol. 2 , 25th April, 1771, P. 130, Progs of the Revenue Board Consisting of the Whole Council, Vol. 8, Part 1, 19th November, 1773, Calcutta Committee of Revenue, Progs , Vol-2, Part 1, 2nd March, 1774 , Progs. Vol-6, Part -3, 22nd May, 1775 Consult No. 3]

The seth and Basak family were the traditional *baniyan* of Calcutta whose business spread throughout entire Bengal. Apart from them these were also some well-known mediator *baniyans* with them. Some of them were Gokul Ghosal, Baranasi Ghosh, Hidaram Bandopadhaya, Akrur Dutta, Manohar Mukhopadhaya, Krishnakanta, Nandi.³⁶

Conclusion: Historically it is highlighted that in the second half of the eighteenth century the foreign company's merchants and the indigenous merchants had a special control over

the economy of Bengal. The people of this country accepted the participation of Europeans in the administration and economy of Bengal. The native merchants became the subsidiary of the Europeans in the business. The Indigenous merchants also develop their own business. It is said the indigenous merchants created a favourable situation for the trade and business of the Europeans. As a result, when the British Company occupied the political power of Bengal the indigenous merchants earned a great deal of property by using the political power of the Europeans and in return, they helped the Europeans to earn a large lump of money.

The Second half of the eighteenth century and the 1st half of the nineteenth century were much important from the socio-economic and political point of view. In this period the Company took so many changes in land and revenue after acquiring political power. Some new policies were also applied in trade and business consequently. So many new traders communities arose and Bengalese traders' one of them. Farukshier's Forman opened a new vista for the Company. It was seen that that the Bengali traders helped the Company's business to be stabilized though the position of these traders were not so high. But they had a vital role in the external trade.

A radical change came in trade and business in South West Bengal after the Battle of *Plassey* in 1757. It was seen that the special power in Bengal i. e. acquiring *dewani* accelerated the company's business rapidly. Latter the number and importance of the *baniyans* got increased. The Company provide the *baniyans* so many facilities. Their development reached the top when the Company banned the private trading of its employees in 1772.

After the overall review of the role of middlemen's, one point clearly appears that middlemen extended their best possible co-operation to the Europeans when they arrived here first for a business mission. They also extended full support to the English for developing a colonial economy in this region and in return they acquired plenty of wealth. This worth of middlemen to the British merchants in South West Bengal so-called entire Bengal declined in the latter period for many reasons like the establishing of a new English educated class, the English people became well acquainted with the local languages, social norms and mannerisms, and the changed situation of the world.

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