



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-XIV, Issue-II, January 2026, Page No. 236-242

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Sribhumi, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

DOI: 10.64031/pratidhwanitheecho.vol.14.issue.02W.069



Mughal Penetration into Bengal: Insights from Contemporary Evidence

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Received: 22.12.2025; Accepted: 03.01.2026; Available online: 31.01.2026

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Abstract

The establishment of Mughal rule in India ushered in a new epoch in Indian history. The Mughals not only expanded their suzerainty over India but also cast some important landmarks in the years to come in many aspects, such as the economic, geo-political, as well as cultural fields. However, this expansion was not smooth at all. Starting from the time of Babur to Jahangir and more specifically up to the time of Aurangzeb, the Mughal expansion over various parts of the Indian subcontinent witnessed a series of battles with the native rulers, especially the Afghans, the Rajputs, and the Marathas. Each and every skirmish of the Mughals with the native rulers has its own importance while discussing the Mughal conquest over each and every part of India. In this paper, the present researcher will try to uphold the expansion of Mughal rule over Bengal during its very early stage and more particularly during the time of Akbar, on the basis of archaeological evidence such as numismatic evidence and the evidence of the construction of bridges, culverts, and mosques over various parts of Bengal.

Keywords: Mughal, Akbar, Bengal, Coin, Numismatic

The establishment and expansion of the Mughal rule in Bengal did not take place in a single day but took many years to get control over Bengal. The Bengal province was under control or subjugated during the Delhi Sultanate era. Such a power equation against the Bengal province continued even during the Mughal period. It was Humayun, the first Mughal emperor, who came to Bengal in the process of fighting a war with Sher Shah. The subsequent Mughal rulers took much greater interest in controlling the provinces, and this process reached its zenith during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. It was during the rule of Akbar, the grandson of Babar, that the transformation of the delta into a Mughal Suba gained momentum, and this has been the subject of historical discourse among scholars for long. This transformation was not simply political but social and cultural too. It was certainly the political change that brought several other changes in Bengal society. In other words, the political transformation of Bengal during the Mughal rule had a great impact on the history of Bengal. In the formation of Bengal into a Mughal Suba, the role of Akbar and his Subadars' various political and administrative policies and their implementation played a key role.

Mughal rule policies played a key role in expanding the possibilities of trade and commercial activities in Bengal. However, the history of this transitional phase Bengal has been neglected by the historians for a long time. Historians like Tapan Roychowdhury (Raychaudhuri, 1969), Abdul Karim (Karim, 2013, 2020), Anjali Basu (Basu, 1965) etc focus more on the different aspect of India during Mughal era. Numismatics likes H. Nelson Wright (Wright, 1907, 1908), Abdul Karim (Karim, 1960), Syed Ejaz Hussain (Hussain, 2003), Sutapa Sinha (Sinha, 2017), John. S. Deyell (Deyell, 1976), J.F. Richards (Richards, 1987) contributed a lot towards the history of Bengal. However, the Mughals' aggression into the inner side of Bengal, particularly the period surrounding the Battle of Rajmahal, has not been studied in detail. The present paper is an attempt to shed some light on this period. This paper is also an attempt to cover the early political expansion of the Mughal boundary during the Akbar era in Bengal. While covering this era, this paper also focuses on how Akbar's regime was involved in building and renovating bridges, culverts, and roads in Bengal for the purpose of expanding the Mughal boundary. Mughal policy also changed in architectural forms, which is taken into consideration while understanding the history of this period. In addition to these, sources like contemporary works, autobiographies, important research papers, and coin catalogues have been studied in writing this paper.

As it is well known, rulers during the medieval period used to issue coins as a way of declaring their political sovereignty. As a strategy for smooth control and expansion of the territory, the rulers used to maintain very cordial relations with several local prominent leaders and traders. While establishing special relations with the local leaders and local lords, the Mughals used to build bridges and culverts. Such a strategy helped them to expand their territory. In a prolonged war with the Mughals, the Karrani and Bara Bhuiyan rulers lost their supremacy and subsequently came under Mughal control, and the imprint of Mughal architectural style can be seen in the construction of various mosques over a large part of Bengal (Alamgir, 2021, p. 103).

In fact, the contact of the Mughal rulers with Bengal took place much before the ascendancy of Akbar to the Mughal throne. Humayun, the father of Akbar, invaded Gaur to help Sultan Mahmud Shah, who was defeated by Sher Khan (Sher Shah). But before Humayun could reach Gaur, Mahmud Shah died of grief (Salim, 1902, p. 141). On the other hand, Sher Shah fled from Gaur towards Radha after learning that Humayun's imperial army had come to the region. Later, Sher Shah marched towards Bihar. Meanwhile, Humayun captured various places like Tanda and Gaur/Lakhnauti in Bengal, and these areas remained under Mughal control during A.D. 1538-39. He renamed Gaur as Jannatabad (heavenly city), read the imperial khutba, and issued silver coins from there to commemorate his victory.

Humayun was the first Mughal ruler who struck his coins in Bengal. These coins were struck in Gaur, the capital of Bengal, and carried the mint name *Adl Bangala*. When these coins were struck, Humayun stayed in Lakhnauti, and hence it is believed that these coins were issued from Lakhnauti or Gaur, then the capital of Bengal. Historians as well as numismatists like N. W. Lowick (N. M. Lowick, 1982, pp. 79-84) and Ken Wiggins (Ken Wiggins, 1996, pp. 17-18) used coins issued by Humayun as a source for publishing their papers. Lakhnauti remained under his control for nine months. After that, Humayun left Bengal for Delhi because his brother Abu'l-Nasir Hindal had assumed sovereignty in Agra

and had then been displaced by Kamran. Having negotiated with his brothers, Humayun was confronted by the forces of Sher Shah, and in the Battle of Kanauj (A.D. 1539), he was badly defeated. Later, he fled to Iran for his protection, leaving India under Sher Shah's rule. Humayun returned to India in A.D. 1555, and he ruled for a few months before his unfortunate death from falling down the stairs. He was succeeded by his son Jalal al-Din Akbar. In this way, Humayun could not keep Bengal, especially the Gaur region, under his control despite his nine months of rule.

From the above discussion, we may assume that the Mughals had visited Bengal for political expansion even before Akbar's time. However, the real consolidation of Mughal authority in Bengal occurred under able leadership Akbar, who not only extended his control over the region but also designated Bengal as one of the important Mughal subas. Nevertheless, the political expansion of the Mughal Empire in Bengal faced many obstacles and took a long time to be fully accomplished.

While Akbar was busy with the politics of Delhi after his victory in the Second Battle of Panipat in A.D. 1556, the Karrani rulers of Bengal strengthened their position in the region. Among them, Taj Khan Karrani seized control of Bengal by defeating the Afghan ruler Jallauddin (or Jalal Shah) and laid the foundation of the Karrani dynasty in A.D. 1564. After him, his brother Sulaiman Karrani came to power in 1565. He maintained friendly relations with the Mughal subadars of Jaunpur and Allahabad and occasionally sent gifts and presents to Akbar (Salim, 1902, p. 153). From the accounts of Abul Fazl, we learn that when Munim Khan marched towards Patna, Sulaiman Karrani came forward to welcome him and extended warm hospitality and respectful treatment. Munim Khan invited Sulaiman to his camp, where they dined together. Sulaiman, in turn, honored the Mughal throne by invoking the sacred name of Akbar, struck coins in the Emperor's name, and offered appropriate presents to him (Abul Fazl, 2006, p. 334). Though some of the anti-nobles of Sulaiman urged him to capture Munim Khan but Sulaiman did not hear their words (Abul Fazl, 2010, p. 479). He died in 1572 after eight years of rule and was succeeded by his elder son Bayazid Shah. The new ruler was famous for his harsh treatment towards his nobles. Due to his behaviour nobles like Lodi Khan and others rebelled against him and as a result he was dethroned in A.D. 1573. After him Sulaiman's younger son, Daud Kararani, ascended the throne in early 1573. Up to this time, the Mughals were not very worried about their political future in Bengal because by that time, they had a good relationship with the Kararani rulers.

The political scenario of Bengal changed when Daud Kararani ascended the throne. Being over-satisfied with his military power, he ignored the authority of Akbar and read the Khutba and issued coins from Tanda, his capital, in his own name. In this silver coin, he described himself as Sultan and inscribed the Sanskrit script 'Sri Daudshahi', probably to circulate his very existence among the Hindu-oriented people of that area (S. D. Ahmed, 1939, p. 73; Wright, 1907, p. 182).

This type of misbehaviour by Daud created trouble on the border of the Mughal Empire, which forced Akbar to take harsh steps against Daud. Finally, Daud was chased by the Mughal forces led by Munim Khan Khan-i-Khanan. Munim Khan came to Bihar and joined with the army of Lodi Khan (one of the important nobles during Sulaiman's court). However, Daud killed Lodi Khan and struck his coins from the Patna mint. Thus, Akbar's supremacy in this region vanished for some time. However, Akbar soon sent troops

headed by Raja Todar Mal to assist Munim Khan. In A.D. 1573 the Mughal army finally siege Patna fort. Daud fled from there. In A.D. 1574 Akbar reached Patna and got control over there and issued his silver coins from there. In this coin, he proclaimed himself as 'Jalauddin Muhammad Akbar Badshah Ghazi' (Wright, 1908, p. 29). Thus, the Mughal Empire extended up to Patna and its surroundings. The rest of Bihar, including Tanda, was however out of his control at that time.

The Mughal army under the leadership of Munim Khan, Raja Todar Mal and Muhammad Quli Khan cheased Daud who first took shelter in his capital as well as the fort at Tanda. When the imperial army reached Tanda, he fled from there to Orissa and took shelter in Cuttack. Thus, Tanda region came under the control of Akbar. Within a few months the Mughals captured Satgaon (ancient Saptagram of modern West Bengal). Muhammad Quli Khan, the then Mughal commander issued silver coins for the first time from this mint in the name of Akbar in A.D. 1574-75. Though, the coins of Akbar from this mint are very rare. This is the strong evidence of the establishment of Mughal authority in this region (Syed Ejaz Hussain, 1997, pp. 322-328). R.B. Whitehead in an article mentioned a couplet type of coin of Akbar bearing the mint name 'Bandar Satgaon' (Whitehead, 1956, pp. 13-14). We do not have any numismatic evidence based on which we can say that this mint issued coins on a regular basis after the conquest. Hence, a number of coins issued from this mint in the name of Akbar may have been commemorative in nature.

After the establishment of the Mughal sway over a large portion of Bengal the Mughal battalion reached Orissa by chasing Daud Kararani and defeated him in the Battle of Tukaroi or Mughalmari (north of Jalesore, Orissa) on 3rd March, 1575. Daud was forced to sign the Peace Treaty of Cuttack with Akbar. According to this treaty, the Mughals annexed Bengal and Bihar, while Orissa remained under Daud's possession. Though Daud was compelled to agree to rule Orissa in his own name but on behalf of Akbar (G. B. Malleson, 2008, p. 122).

Daud was not at all satisfied with his new position and was anxious to regain his power. Meanwhile, Munim Khan (the then Mughal Governor of Bengal) died at Gaur due to plague. Taking advantage of this situation and the absence of Todar Mal in Bengal, Daud marched from Orissa, attacked Bengal, pushed the Mughal army up to Bhagalpur, and regained his lost position over Bengal by the end of 1575. On hearing the news of these development Akbar immediately sent one of his able general Husain Quli Khan along with Muzaffar Khan Turbati (the Mughal governor of Bihar) against Daud. The Mughal contingents finally meet Daud at Rajmahal or Akmahal (now at Jharkhand) and in the battle of Rajmahal Daud, defeated and beheaded on 12th July 1576 (Salim, 1902, p. 154). With the defeat of Daud Khan Karrani, the first phase of the Mughal expansion over Bengal during the time of Akbar ended.

The victory against Daud Karrani gave the Mughals simply the military occupation over some regions of Bengal, and it took at least a half of a century to completely establish Mughal rule in Bengal. The Afghan military chieftains and the influential semi-independent landlords known as the Bara-bhuiyans resisted the Mughal aggression after the fall of Daud, along with the descendants and chiefs of the Afghan rulers. Besides, there were some covetous and agitated Mughals who, trying to establish their own identity in this region by taking advantage of the political situation of Bengal, also joined hands with these anti-forces. This made the process of the annexation of Bengal take a long time to

complete. As we can see, in A.D. 1594, when Akbar divided his whole empire into fourteen subas, Bengal became one of the important subas, which was further divided into eleven sarkars. In this year, Orissa, which had been a separate province, directly came under the control of Suba Bengal with its five sarkars (Abul Fazl, 2006, pp. 129–138). So, it was after the fall of Daud Karrani that the political history of Bengal took a new dimension.

When Bengal came under the sway of the Mughals, they expanded the territorial limits of the Mughal boundary into the core parts of Bengal, particularly in the present West Bengal and Bangladesh regions with the help of the appointment of a galaxy of able generals as Subadar of Bengal. Raja Man Singh, Islam Khan Chisti, Qasim Khan Chisti, Ibrahim Khan Fateh Jang etc. were the names of such generals who helped in the extension of the boundary of the Mughal empire. With the coming of Shah Shuja as the Governor of Bengal a number of caravanserais established over various parts of Bengal which were the example of the starting of the economic prosperity of Bengal under the Mughals. It was under his time the English east India Company established its factory at Hughli in A.D. 1651. Not only had that, Shah Shuja also prepared a new rent-roll for Bengal in 1658 which undoubtedly increased the revenues of Bengal from Jagir and Khalisa lands (Salim, 1902, p. 253). When Mir Jumla appointed as the governor of Bengal, he transferred the capital of Bengal from Akbarnagar (Rajmahal) to Jahangirnagar (Dacca). In A.D. 1661 Mir Jumla attacked the Kuch-Behar. Pran Narayan, the Raja of Kuch Behar fled to Bhutan and Kuch Behar subsequently came under the control of the Mughals. Mir Jumla renamed Kuch Behar as Alamgirnagar after the name of Aurangzeb Alamgir, the then Mughal Emperor (Jadu Nath Sarkar, 1948, p. 346) and issued coins from here bearing the mint name Alamgirnagar. Establishment of Mints over the various parts of Bengal and issuing of coins from these mints along with the making of various bridges and culverts and renovation of those which had been constructed prior to them for the smooth passage of the Mughal army were also bears the strong proof of the establishment of the Mughal strong hold and their penetration into the core parts of Bengal Suba.

Three arched bridge (Teen Mukho), Gaur; Bridge of Seven Arches, Gaur, Malda; the remaining single span of the Sultanate Bridge near Madina, Hooghly District; culvert at Gaur, Chapai Nawabganj (now in Bangladesh); Sreerampur Bridge, Patuakhali, Bangladesh; Bridge of Five Arches, Gaur, Malda, West Bengal, which stands on the east side of the Malda–Mahdipur Road, Gaur; Masir Sanko (bridge of aunt) under Ketugram P.S., Bardhaman, built during the reign of Jahangir; Futi Sanko under Ketugram P.S., Bardhaman; and Radhaganj Bridge in Bardhaman city, built during the reign of Subadar Azim-ush Shan; Pagla Bridge, erected by Mir Jumla in 1660 A.D. and situated on the Dhaka–Narayanganj road; Champatali Bridge, built by Lala Rajmal in 1690–91 A.D. by the order of Subedar Ibrahim Khan, etc., are some of the evidences which prove the gradual expansion of Mughal suzerainty over Bengal over a long period of time (Alamgir, 2015, pp. 251–268). This expansion of the Mughals into the heart of Bengal is also reflected in the changes seen in the styles connected with the construction of various mosques in different parts of Suba Bengal. The Persian inscription found at Chatmohar Mosque, Pabna (built by Khan Muhammad Tuwi Khan Qaqshal in 1582 A.D.) states that this mosque was constructed by Masum Khan Kabuli, who rebelled against Akbar and subsequently acknowledged the supremacy of Akbar (Alamgir, 2021, pp. 103–114).

Conclusion:

In this way, we can see that the Mughals faced a lot of difficulties in their initial phase of expansion or penetration in Bengal. The Afghans, and especially Daud Karrani, the Karrani ruler, created huge difficulties for the Mughals during this initial phase of expansion. After the fall of Daud Karrani, the Mughals faced difficulties again from the Bara Bhuiyans, and it was during the reign of Jahangir that the Mughals were able to establish their stronghold over a great part of Bengal. However, their expansion still continued after the fall of the Bara Bhuiyans and remained active until the time of Aurangzeb. It was during his reign that we come to know about the partial construction of the bridge by Munim Khan. This expansion was further supported by the construction of various bridges, culverts, and mosques across various parts of Bengal, in which we can see the influence of Mughal architecture. Thus, with the establishment of the Mughal authority over Bengal trade and commerce also expanded with Middle East and various parts of the world.

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