

Sino-Bangla Relation During the Ilyas Shahi Rule (1342-1487)

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Abstract

The systematic study of intercontinental relations between different counties with Bengal in the medieval history is comparatively recent in India and Bangladesh. It is now generally agreed that without a proper study of the local and regional history, no correct study of the national history is possible. Again, the local and regional history though undoubtedly a part of a national history has its own political, economic, social, cultural and religious characteristics. China-Bangladesh relations are in general regarded stable in the literature, and the causes of stability in bilateral relations are inadequately explained often by overemphasizing the geopolitics of bilateral relations. Nonetheless, the geo-economics of China-Bangladesh relations is as significant as the geopolitics of the relations for both the current state of affairs in bilateral relations and their future. This article focuses on Sino-Bangla relations during the Ilyas Shahi rule (1342-1487). Primarily from the geopolitical and geo-economical perspectives, it explores the implications of the political and economic relations for bilateral economic relations, in particular, between China and Bangladesh, and, for bilateral relations in general between the two states.

Keywords: Bangla, China, Ilyas Shahi rule, Geopolitical relation, Maritime power, Trade, Silk route.

Introduction

Since the beginning of history, China has been known of the enormous properties and wealth of Bengal and Bengal, in turn, knew of recognized China as the cradle of civilization. Both countries have had extensive and close historical cultural contact since the 1st century AD, particularly through with the transmission of Buddhism from Bangla to China. During the Ilyas Shahi rule (1342-1487), however, these relations became multi-dimensional because this dynasty was fully independent. In fact, the emergence of the independent Ilyas Shahi dynasty represented the political expression of a long-present cultural autonomy¹. The rulers of Ilyas Shahi dynasty cordially invited and honored ambassadors which had never been seen before. During this period many Chinese monks, scholars and traders, craftsmen, service holders and officers came to Bengal and many people from Bengal went to China for the same reasons.

Chinese Contact with Bengal During the Ilyas Shahi Period (1342-1487 AD)

After 11th century *Sena Dynasty* ruled Bengal for little over a century (1097-1225A.D.). The emergence of the dynasty, who supplanted the Palas in Bengal towards the close of the 11th century AD., is a very important chapter in the history of ancient India and Bengal. The Sena dynasty brought about a revival of Hinduism and cultivated Sanskrit literature in India. The rule of the Senas in Bengal is usually connected with the emergence of orthodox Hinduism within a Hindu-Buddhist society which for long had enjoyed the peaceful coexistence of the

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two religions resulting in an atmosphere of amalgam of the two. The Senas were very vindictive about Buddhist for their atheist ideology. An onslaught against the Buddhists in Bengal is believed to have started in this period, which resulted in large scale Buddhist migration to the neighboring countries. Senas also hated sea voyages and navel activities so they also blocked all sea routes. They even also obstructed two important trade routes *Teliageri* and *Shikligari* which were mother roads for foreigners.

In the 12th and 13th centuries, Chinese merchants, who had previously been absent from Indian Ocean trade, began establishing their own diasporic communities and merchant guilds in Southeast Asian ports. Similar to other foreign traders, the Chinese also eventually took on the role of tax collectors in Java and became involved in Indian Ocean commerce. In the 13th century, Chinese ships began to call directly on Indian ports. It may be noted that Chau-Kua-Kua in his *Chu Fan Chi* (Records of Foreign Peoples [and their trade]), written in 1225, refers only to ships from South-east Asia and from 'Tashi' (Arab-Iranian) countries calling at Malabar ports, and only those of 'Tashi' at Gujarat ports.²

The rulers of all China (at that time) were the powerful descendants of Genghis Khan and the Mongol Dynasty (Yuan Dynasty 1260 - 1368). Muslims were welcomed into China at that time and foreigners were recruited by the emperor. Muslims and even a few Europeans, like Marco Polo, held jobs in China such as tax-collectors, architects, and finance officers. Marco Polo also visited the coastal area of Bengal. He speaks of the extensive cultivation of cotton in Bengal.³ Yule remarks that, "Marco conceives of Bangala, not in India."⁴ Because the Mongol Dynasty had "an open door" policy which encouraged trade, Muslim merchants were welcomed into southern Chinese cities, especially Ch'uan-zhou (Quanzhou) and Canton (Guangzhou) on the southern coast. They generally lived in their own neighborhoods where they built mosques, hospitals, bazaars, and conducted trade by ship reaching all the way back to the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Indian Ocean ports. By the second half of the 13th century, Islam had obviously begun to gain political power, in the sense that as the rulers of Malaysian principalities became followers of the faith. One of the first principalities to have entered Islam was Samudra-Pasai where its first Muslim ruler, Malik as-Salih, died in 1297. Tradition adds that he was a Persian; the probability is that he was a Bengali, as Professor Fatemi very convincingly proved.⁵ Marco Polo, who was in Perlak in 1292, wrote that in the kingdom of Perlak the natives had been converted to Islam by a Muslim settlement or community in Samudra and they were influential enough to have sent two of their people to China as envoys on an important mission.⁶

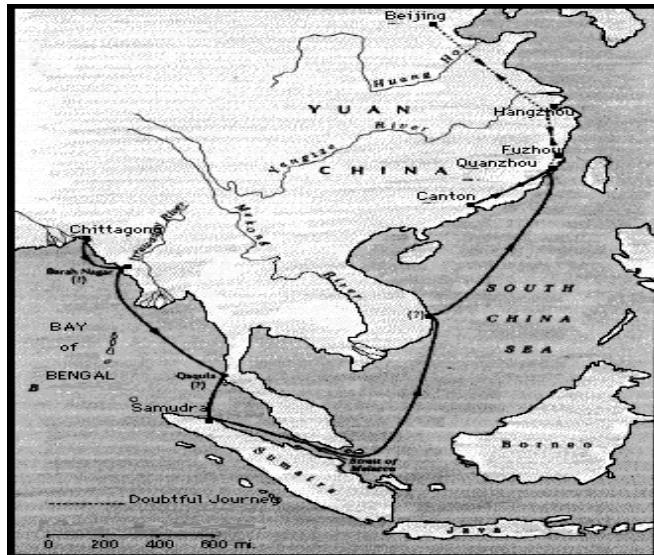
The Chinese were not only involved in missionaries or mercantile activities across the Indian Ocean, they also participated in maritime diplomacy; launched several naval raids beyond their southern shores; and engaged in trans-oceanic "civilizing" policies by bestowing titles on foreign rulers, exacting tributes, and meddling in the internal affairs of kingdoms in South and Southeast Asia. The transformation of China into a maritime power and along with the emergence of the Bengal coast as its new frontier can be discerned from the activities of the Chinese maritime voyagers to the Coromandel, Malabar, and Bengal regions between the 13th and the mid-15th centuries.⁷

Traders from China were able to make direct trips to the South Asian coast, a fact witnessed by Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth century. During Fakhr al-Din Mubarak's rule (1338-1346 A.D.) in eastern Bengal Ibn Battuta visited that country. After having travelled extensively through North Africa, Arabia and the Islamic world, and after having served as Qadi at Delhi, the Moroccan traveler started again on a journey to the far eastern lands, particularly China. From India Ibn Battuta and some traveling companions sailed to Chittagong, now the chief port of Bangladesh, a Muslim country next to India. He tells us that Chittagong was a city filled with food, but smelled bad - "a hell crammed with good things." Everything there was cheap, including slaves. He bought "an extremely beautiful" slave girl and his friend bought a young boy slave for a couple of gold dinar. Back in Chittagong he caught a Chinese junk and went to Samudra on the island of Sumatra. This really was the geographical end of Dar al-Islam as no territory east of this point was ruled by a Muslim ruler. Here he stayed for about two weeks in the wooden walled town as a guest of the sultan. The sultan then provided him with supplies and sent Ibn Battuta on one of his own junks to China. He described socio-economic conditions of Bengal in his famous book 'Rehala'.⁸ Ibn Battuta made specific reference to the economic prosperity of the land. The "country of Bangalah" is extensive with an abundance of rice, he says- Nowhere in the world have seen things cheaper than here, but it is unenlightened. The People of Khorasan call it *Dozakh-pur-Ni'amat*, meaning that it is a hell full of bounties.⁹ For about 40 days Ibn Battuta sailed. His voyage stopped in two places. At last he arrived in the busy sea port of Ch'uan-zhou (Quanzhou) on the coast of Fukien (Fujian) Province. He admired much of what he saw. He observed that "silk is used for clothing even by poor monks and beggars" and that the porcelain was "the finest of all makes of pottery." But he appeared to have suffered from culture shock - discomfort due to being in a culture he didn't understand or appreciate.

"China was beautiful, but it did not please me. On the contrary, I was greatly troubled thinking about the way paganism dominated this country. Whenever I went out of my lodging, I saw many blameworthy things. That disturbed me so much that I stayed indoors most of the time and only went out when necessary. During my stay in China, whenever I saw any Muslims, I always felt as though I were meeting my own family and close kinsmen."¹⁰

China was not a Muslim country and that offended him. "The Chinese themselves are infidels who worship idols and burn their dead like the Hindus . . . eat the flesh of swine and dogs, and sell it in their markets."¹¹

Ibn Battuta had arrived during the last peaceful years before the collapse of the Mongol (Yuan dynasty) rule. He described about peaceful environment for travelers in China. "China is the safest and most agreeable country in the world for the traveler", he said "You can travel all alone across the land for nine months without fear, even if you are carrying much wealth."¹²



Chinese, Arab, Persian Traders And Ibn Battuta's Itinerary in Southeast Asia and China during Turko-Afgan period

Wang Dayuan visited Bengal with accompanied Chinese seafaring traders across the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal in 1330. He wrote an account titled *Daoyi zhilüe* 島夷誌略 (brief records of the island barbarians). Wang's record indicates that by the early 14th century, the Indian and Bengal coasts had become key destination for Chinese merchants. Wang Dayuan said-

"The Five Ranges 五嶺 (i.e., Rajmahal Hills) have rocky summits and are covered by a dense forest. The people [of the kingdom] reside around these [hills]. [The people] engage in plowing and sowing throughout the year, so there are no wastelands. The rice fields and arable lands are spectacular. Three crops are harvested every year. Goods are all reasonably priced. During the ancient times, it was the capital of Sindu.

The climate is always hot. The customs [of the people are to be] extremely pure and honest. Men and women cover their head with a linen cotton cloth and wear long skirts. The official tax rate is twenty percent. The kingdom mints silver coins are called Tangjia 唐加 (i.e., tangka), two of which weigh eight hundredths of a Tael (i.e., Chinese ounce), that is circulated and used [by the government]. They can be exchanged for more than 11,520 pieces of cowrie shells. The lightness of the coins is convenient and very beneficial to the people.

[The kingdom] produces [fabrics such as] bibu 苾布 (bairami/bata), gaonibu 高你布 (kain cloth?), tuluojin 禿羅錦 (malmal), [and also] kingfishers' feathers. [The Chinese traders] usesouthern and northern [varieties of] silks, pentachrome tafetas and satins, cloves, nutmegs, blue and white China-ware, white tassels and such things [to trade with native merchants]."¹³

International relations of Bengal flourished during early 15th century. Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1390–1410 AD) sent his embassies to Persia, Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and China. He dispatched his 1st embassy in 1405. According to Chinese accounts, ambassadors were sent from Bengal in 1405, 1408, 1409 and 1412 during Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah's reign. The Ming Dynasty and the sultanate frequently exchanged diplomatic missions. Emperor Yongle reciprocated by sending several missions to Bengal between 1406 and 1413.¹⁴ When the ambassador of Bengal reached the port city Cheng Chiang in China in 1410, Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah had already died. After upon hearing the news, the emperor of China sent royal court representatives to Bengal for the funeral ceremony.¹⁵

The Chinese influenced the geo-politics of Bengal and Jaunpur. In 1420, the king of Bengal Raja Ganesh (Gonesh or Kans.) complained to the Ming ruler that king of Jaunpur¹⁶ Ibrahim Sharki (ruled 1402-1440) forces had carried out several military raids into Bengal territory. The Ming ruler responded and the Ming court dispatched the eunuch Hou Xian 侯顯 and others "with Imperial orders of instruction for them (Bengal and Jaunpur), so that they would both cultivate good relations with their neighbors and would each protect their own territory." The entourage led by Hou Xian arrived in Bengal in August or September 1420 and was welcomed with a grand reception. It was Hou Xian's second visit to the region and this time he seems to have brought along Chinese soldiers, who were all presented silver coins by the ruler of Bengal. The entourage then proceeded to Jaunpur to convey the Yongle emperor's message to resolve the territorial dispute peacefully.¹⁷

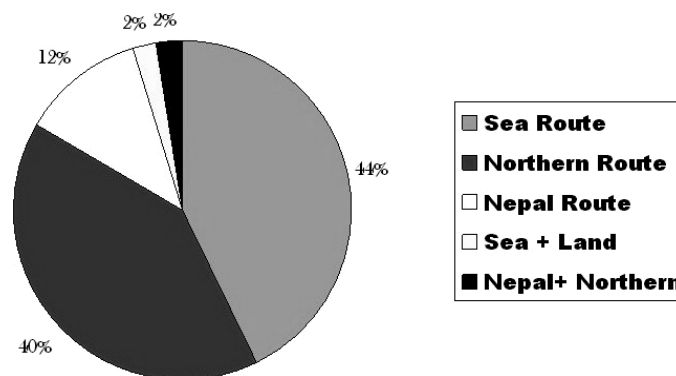


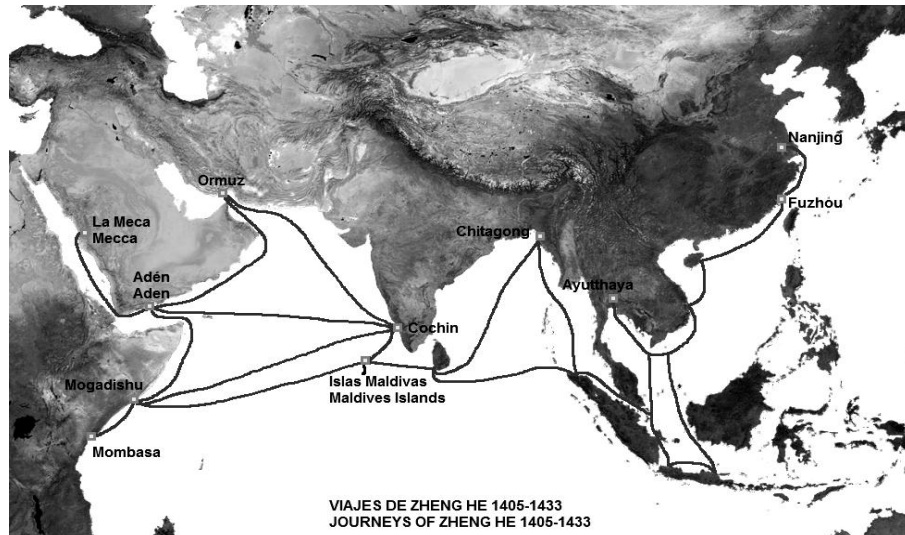
Chart of the traveler's rout in greater Bengal during Turko-Afghan Period (1203-1538A.D.)

Chinese explorer Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433), formal name Cheng Ho, was a Hui Muslim, mariner, explorer, diplomat, and fleet admiral during China's early Ming Dynasty. Zheng commanded expeditionary voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and East Africa from 1405 to 1433, undertook at least four voyages to Bengal: 1st time in his 5th voyage (1417-1419 A.D.), 2nd time in his 6th voyage (1421-1422 A.D.), 3rd and 4th time in his 7th voyage (1430-1433 A.D.) An excerpt from the contemporary journals of the time describes his journey to Sonargaon, Chittagong, Satgaon during the reign of Sultan Gias Uddin Azam Shah.

"We started from the Kingdom of Sumatra, sailed with the wind for twenty days and anchored in Chittagong. From there we took small boats for over 500 li (250 kilometers) to Sonargaon....There was a guard of honor of thousands of people accompanying us along the way....

The Sultan's palace was tall and spacious with pillars in the color of brass and decorated with flower and animal carvings. There were long corridors on both sides with thousands of armed cavalry squads inside and extraordinarily strong and dignified soldiers equipped with swords, bows and arrows outside. On the left and right of vermilion steps leading up to the palace there were over a hundred parasols made of peacock feathers. Hundreds of elephant squads were lined up in front of the palace. The Sultan wore a crown studded with eight gems and sat on the throne with a sword on his knees. Two men with silver staffs came and guided the emperor's envoy forward..."¹⁸

Bengal had sent at least eight embassies to the Ming court before 1420 and the traders from the region were actively engaged in commerce across the Bay of Bengal.



Zheng He's voyages in greater Bengal

Order	Time (A.D.)	Regions along the way
5th voyage	1417–1419	Ryukyu, Champa, Pahang, Java, Malacca, Samudera, Lambri, Chittagong, Bengal, Ceylon, Sharwayn, Cochin, Calicut, Hormuz, Maldives, Mogadishu, Barawa, Malindi, Aden
6th voyage	1421–1422	Champa, Chittagong, Bengal, Ceylon, Calicut, Cochin, Maldives, Hormuz, Djofar, Aden, Mogadishu, Brava
7th voyage	1430–1433	Champa, Java, Palembang, Malacca, Semudera, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Chittagong, Bengal, Ceylon, Calicut, Hormuz, Aden, <i>Ganbali</i> (possibly Coimbatore), Bengal, Laccadive and Maldive Islands, Djofar, <i>Lasa</i> , Aden, Mecca, Mogadishu, Brava

Another great traveler Ma Huan (馬歡 died 1460 AD.) Ma Huan is short version of Muhammed Hussain who was a Muslim voyager and translator who accompanied Admiral Zheng He on three of his seven expeditions to the Western Oceans. Ma Huan was an interpreter and assistant to the Chinese ambassador. During the 1431 expedition, he visited Bengal, Chittagong, Sonargaon, Gaur and Calicut. From Calicut, he was sent by the eunuch Hong Bao as an emissary to Mecca. According to J. V. G. Mills, however, "Ma Huan voyaged in a detached fleet under the Eunuch Hung Pao straight from China to Bengal, which he visited during the first half of 1432."¹⁹ During his expeditions, Ma Huan took notes about the geography, politics, weather conditions, environment, economy, local customs and even the method of punishment for criminals of Bengal.

After returning home from his first expedition, Ma Huan began writing a book about his expedition, the first draft was completed around 1416. He expanded and modified his draft during later expeditions. The final version was ready around 1451. The title of his book was *YingyaiShenglan* (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores). He described Bengal as follows:

The kingdom of Pang-ko-la (Bengal) is extensive, the population dense, the wealth and property abundant and great. The kingdom Pang-ko-la (Bengala), travelling by sea from Su-men-ta-la (Sumatra), and some Islands (Nicobar Islands) are sighted. Going north-westward for twenty li (sic. days) one arrives at Che-ti-Kiang (Chittagong). Here one changes to a small boat and after going five hundred and odd li one comes to so-na-elukiang (Sonargaon), whence one reaches the large and small palaces of the nobility and temples—all are, in the city. They are Musalmans.

The customs are pure and honest. The men and women all black colored; white ones are rare. All the men tie up (or cut off) their hair and wear a white cotton turban and on their bodies a long gown with a collar and held around them by an embroidered sash. On their feet they wore leather slippers.

The king and his highest officers follow, in their caps and clothing, the Muslim style. They are very clean and neat. The language in universal use is P'ang-Kei-li (Bengali); there are also those who speak in Pa-eul-si (Persian). ... They have two crops of rice a year. They have three or four kinds of wine-coconut, rice tary and kadjong. Spirits are sold in the open market place. The streets are wide. Not having tea, they offer their guests betel nuts in its place. The Streets are well-provided with shops of various kinds, drinking and eating houses, and bathing establishments. There are Mo-hei-mo-lah (Mul-mul, Moslin) made up in length of 20 feet or more and widths of four feet. On both sides it has a facing, four to five-tenth in thickness resembling Chinese Twolkein. ... Mulberry trees and silk-worms are here. Silk handkerchiefs and caps embroidered with gold, painted wares, basins, steel guns, knives and scissors are all to be had here. They manufacture white paper from the bark of a tree which is smooth and glossy like deer skins. ... The currency of the country is silver coins, but for small purchase they use sea-shells called Kaoli (cowri). Their Marriages and funerals are both according to the Muslim religion. The climate is constantly as hot as in summer. Their punishments include beating with heavy bamboo and banishment. Their officials have seals and communicate by dispatches. They have a standing army with pay and rations. The commander of the army is called *pa-sse-la-eul* (sipah-salar or chief of commanders). There is a class of musicians. These men go to the house of big officials at four in the morning. When they commence, their tune is always slow, generally increasing near the end when they stop. They go from house to house, where they receive present of food and money. Besides these there are also every other kind of players ..."²⁰

A few years later when Ghiyasuddin's son, Sultan Saifuddin Hamza Shah, was on the throne of Bengal in Pandua, another Chinese ambassador visited him around 1411–1412. This ambassador provided the following account of Sonargaon and the splendor of Bengal's court:

... When the king heard that our precious boat had reached their country, he sent the district officials with clothes and presents and thousands of troops to welcome them. They landed at the harbour of Chati (Chittagong). Starting from there, they reached Sona-oul-kiang (Sonargaon) after sixteen stations. It is a walled city with broad temples, tanks and bazaars (markets). All goods are collected and distributed here. He sent elephants and horses to carry presents for the reception. After 20 stations they reached Pantua (Pandua). It is the capital of the king. Both the city and the outskirts are decorated. ... The place of the king is made of bricks and lime. The building is high and broad. The roof of the building is flat and polished white. There are three inner gates and nine courtyards. The pillars are molded in brass with decorations of flowers, beasts and other animals. On the veranda, there are thousands of horsemen in armour holding swords, bows and arrows. ... To the right and left of the platform there are hundreds of fans of peacock feathers. Again, in front of the courtyard there are hundreds of elephants. The king was on a high seat, decorated with eight precious things, sitting cross-legged. The sword was placed on his lap. Then he ordered two men holding silver sticks and turbans to show the way. When advancing, they saluted at every fifth step. They stopped on reaching the middle. Two men again came with golden sticks and received them as before. The king saluted, placing his hand on the forehead and received the Chinese emperor's mandate. This was read and handed to the king. The woolen carpets were spread over the court-yard where our ambassador and the troops were entertained. It was very ceremonious. They offered roasted beef and mutton: but as there was a prohibition on drinking wine at the court, which changes our nature, they offered instead rose juice and honey for drink. When the feast was over, helmets, belts, vases and golden pots were presented to the Ambassador. The vice Ambassador was presented with helmets, belts, vases and silver pots. The officers of the lower rank were given golden belts a long gowns of Jen (?), Chu (?), and See (?) All soldiers were given silver coins. The country is rich and generous. The king with his own hands put his letter, written on a golden leaf in a golden casket and sent an Ambassador with products of the country as presents to the Emperor (China). Since then, Ambassadors came occasionally from the country."²¹

Records of Some Renowned Travelers Who Have Visited Bengal

Hundreds of Chinese monks made pilgrimages to India during the first millennium AD and up to the Turko-Afghan period. The detailed accounts of their journeys have made some of them more famous than others. These travel records are important historical resources for several reasons. First, they provide meticulous descriptions of Buddhist doctrines, rituals, and monastic institutions in South, Central, and Southeast Asia. Second, they contain vital information about the social and political conditions in South Asia and the kingdoms situated along the routes between China, India and Bengal. Third, they offer remarkable insights into cross-cultural perceptions and interactions. Additionally, these accounts shed light on the arduous nature of long-distance travel, commercial exchanges, and the relationship between Buddhist pilgrims and itinerant merchants.²²

Some of these records are:

- *Tao yicheleo*, compiled by *Wang Ta-yuan* – most probably visited Bengal in the winter of 1349–1350.
- *Ying Yai sheng lan*, compiled by Ma Huan between 1425 and 1432. He visited Bengal as an interpreter with the first two Chinese missions early in the fifteenth century. His description is a general account of Bengal without any reference to its king or court.
- *Shing-cha-Sheng-Lan* compiled by *Fei-sin* in 1436 AD. In this record, the Chinese traveler (speaking of Bengal) says,

“The men wear a white cotton turban and a long white cotton shirt. On their feet they wear low sheep-skin shoes with gold thread. The smarter ones think it a correct thing to have designs on them. The women wear a short shirt, wrap around them a piece of cotton, silk or brocade. They do not use cosmetics, for they have a naturally white complexion; in their ears they wear ear rings of precious stones set in gold. Around their necks they hung pendants and they do up their hair in knot behind. On their wrists and ankles are gold bracelets and on their fingers and toes rings.”²³
- *Si Yang Ch’ao Kung tien-lu*, compiled by Huang Sing-ts’eng (1520 AD) refers to the various embassies sent by the Bengal ruler to China until 1438. He says,

“All men cut off their hair and wrap their head with a cotton turban of white colour. They wear long gowns with a round collar with a coloured sash on the lower part of their body, and put leather slippers on their feet. The women dress their hair in knots on their heads. They wear a short shirt and wrap their body with a piece of coloured cloth, silk or brocade. They wear ear-ring of precious stones set in gold. Around their neck they have pendants, on their wrists and ankle gold bracelets and on their fingers and toes rings.”²⁴
- *Shu yuchoutseulu*, compiled in 1574 by *Yen Ts’ong-kein*. It has been said that, “This is the most complete of all accounts,” based “not only on the previous accounts but also on other sources not known to us at present.”²⁵

The Role of Bengal as a Key Trading Partner of the Chinese:

Bengal was part of a trading network that linked the Southeast Asian islands of Java and Sumatra to the kingdoms of Jaunpur, Delhi, and Tibet. Thus, the coasts of the Bay of Bengal may have been vital to the Chinese because they formed part of a trading network that extended to the Middle East. Bengal provided the Chinese with an access to the South Asian hinterland.

Bangladesh and China have a rich heritage of trade interactions which developed on the South-West Silk Route, the ancient tea route and the maritime silk road. The Silk Route in Sikkim is an offshoot of an ancient trade route which came from Lhasa, crossing the Chumbi (Cumbi) Valley, passing through Nathula Pass and finally on to the port of Tamralipti (presently in West Bengal). From Tamralipti, this trade route took to the sea and reached Samatata, Harikela, Sri Lanka, Bali, Java Palembang (Sribhoja), Canton (Gaungzhou), Hangzhou and other parts of the Far East. We find mention of Tamralipti, Gange and Herikela (Chittagong) as a busy sea-route on the Bay of Bengal in Fa Hein’s accounts as early as AD 400. This portion of the Old Silk route through Bhutan, East Sikkim and West Bengal was quite less travelled but is expected to have been discovered

by traders as early as the first century AD. Most of the mountain passes in this region of the Eastern Himalayas are around 14,000 feet above sea-level and stay snow covered from November to April. That makes this route one of the most inhospitable regions on earth. The distance between Lhasa and Tamralipti, through this nearly obscure part of the Ancient Silk Route, was around 900 km, which is significantly shorter than other seaports from Lhasa and this route was (comparatively) a safer land route option for the traders' caravans. Most popularly termed the South West Silk Route, this is one of the most ancient parts of the route which connected the Yunnan Province of China to Tibet and finally to India and as far as North Bengal. This trade route was very familiar to the traders and religious teachers and preachers, especially of Buddhism, and was had been used to visit that land since at least the time of the Palas. There was also traffic, as Minhaj-i-Siraj mentions, in horses which were brought through Tibet to Kamrup and thence to Bengal.²⁶ The first Muslim ruler of Bengal, Amir Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhaammad Bakhtiar Khilji (1203–1206), wanted to go back to his country by this Silk Route, and also, perhaps, to discover a short-cut route to Turkistan through Tibet. This route was controlled by the Mech, the Kooch and the Tharu (Thiharu). The converted Muslim Ali Mech was Bakhtiar's guide along the Silk Route.²⁷ According to Minhaj-i-Siraj, his starting point was Bardhawankuti, most probably the cantonment town near Deokot (It is located in the Gangarampur Sub-division of West Dinajpur district of West Bengal, where the Shiran of Bakhtiyar Khilji situated)²⁸. In the end, however, Bakhtiar did not reach his motherland; he was defeated by the Tibetan king and returned with great loss.²⁹ It proves, however, that the South West Silk Route was open in the 13th century and that large numbers of merchants came to Bengal and India during that time.

Interestingly, silk was not the most treasured item traded in this part of the route – it was horses, cloth and tea, so the Chinese often referred this route as Dianzang Chama Gudao (ancient road of tea, cloths and horses between Yunnan, Tibet and India). Other important items traded on this route were sugar, salt, copper and cotton. Unlike its counterparts in Central Asia, the caravans on the South West Silk Route were horse caravans and not Bactrian camel caravans.

P. C. Bagchi pointed out that the Ming records of Bengal confirm Wang Dayuan's description of the kingdom and the trading goods.³⁰ Haraprasad Ray has suggested that Bengal may have been exporting as many as sixty items, including cotton and horses, to China during the Ming period.³¹

There were further offshoots of this South West Silk Route from Lhasa and Lanzhou which crossed the Eastern Himalayas and reached Sikkim at different high altitude passes (other than Nathula) like Jelep La and Dhonka La. All these routes converged at Eastern Sikkim and finally led to the plains of Bengal from where they bifurcated to various sea ports and trade centers of the coastal Bay of Bengal – like Tamralipta in India, and Wari-Bateshwar,³²Bhitagarh, Mahasthangarh, Bikrampur, Chittagong and Sonargaon in present day Bangladesh. A section of the South West Silk Route crossed Lhasa and entered India through Nathula from China, while another section of the route crossed Burma (present day Myanmar) and entered India through Assam (Kamrup) and further continuing onward to the sea ports of Bengal and present day Bangladesh.

Bengal was not only linked to the China, it was also part of a trading network that linked the Southeast Asian islands of Java and Sumatra with the kingdoms of Jaunpur, Delhi, and Tibet. Though Bengal was the center of trading and international business it has often been ignored in South East Asian studies. As Tansen Sen pointed out, modern scholars have underscored the role of Bengal as a key trading partner of the Chinese.³³

Conclusion

During 16th to the 18th century, the presence of European colonial powers in the regions around the Far East and the Indian Ocean made the China – Bangladesh relation temporarily stagnant. China and Bangladesh had relatively little modern political contact before 1971. However, after the Great Independence War in 1971, the relation was revived and as of now it is growing quite steadily for the mutual benefit of the peoples of China and Bangladesh. In recent years, this relation has become a focal point of discussion among global geo-political leaders. Numerous research works have explored various aspects of the relations between China and Bangladesh. Surprisingly, no single study has focused on the the Ilyas Shahi Rule (1342-1487) when the Sino-Bangla relations were at their peak and could be called the golden period. This study aims to fill that gap and hopes to act as a catalyst to intensify aspects of the relationship between China and Bangladesh.

Notes

- ¹ Richard, M. Eaton; *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204–1760*. University of California press, 1993. page-27.
- ² Habib Irfan; *Economic history of Medieval India, 1200–1500*. PHISPC; Centre for Studies in Civilization. Vol-viii, part-i. Page-165.
- ³ Tr Gibb, *Marco Polo, Ser Marco Polo*, II, p. 115 (Bengal), 393 (Gujarat). Habib Irfan; *Economic history of Medieval India, 1200–1500*. PHISPC; Centre for Studies in Civilization. Vol-viii, part-i. Page- 47.
- ⁴ *The account of Marco Polo* translated by Yule. Yule takes Bangala to refer to the entire province of Bengal Vol. I I , p. 98.,note 99, 100; for the account of the Bangala country, see pp. 114 ff. 2 Ibid., p. 128.
- ⁵ Fatemi, S.Q. *Islam comes to Malaysia* (Singapore:1963) p.35
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 10
- ⁷ Sen, Tansen; “*Maritime Interactions between China and India: Coastal India and the Ascendancy of Chinese Maritime Power in the Indian Ocean*”. *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies*, Volume 2 (May 2011): 41–82 © 2011 Center for Central Eurasian Studies.
- ⁸ Elliott &Dowson,III, 304; IbnBattuta, op. cit.,611–613.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 610.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 612
- ¹¹ Ibid. p. 612
- ¹² Ibid. p. 612
- ¹³ Tatsuro Yamamoto, “*International Relations between China and Countries along the Ganga in the Early Ming Period*,” *The Indian Historical Review* 4, no. 1 (1977): 13–19; P. C. Bagchi, “*Political Relations between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period*,” *Visva- Bharati Annals* 1 (1945): 96–134; For more on the relations between the Ming court and Bengal, see Geo. Phillips, “*Mahuan’s Account of the Kingdom of Bengala (Bengal)*,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1895 (July): 523–25; Haraprasad Ray, *Trade and Diplomacy*.

- ¹⁴ Ali, Mohammad Mohar; *History Of The Muslims of Bengal*. Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa`ud Islamic University Vol-1 A (1985),141.
- ¹⁵ Karim, Abdul. *History of Bengal*. (Sultanic Period).
- ¹⁶ Jaunpur was then located on the west of the district of Varanasi in the eastern part of the North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. In the medieval age Jaunpur was adjacent to Bengal.
- ¹⁷ Tansen Sen, "Maritime Interactions between China and India: Coastal India and the Ascendancy of Chinese Maritime Power in the Indian Ocean," *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies*, Volume 2 (May 2011): 41–82 (©2011 Center for Central Eurasian Studies).
- ¹⁸ J.V.G. Mills, Ma Huan: Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan, *The overall survey of the ocean's shores* (1433), translated from the Chinese text, edited by Feng Ch'eng-Chun, with introduction, notes and appendices, Cambridge, Hakluyt Society (1970), Extra Series, no. 42, pp. i-xix, 1–393
- ¹⁹ J.V. G. Mills, Ma Huan: Ying-Yai Sheng-Lan, pp. 35.
- ²⁰ Taifoor, Syed Muhammed. *Glimpses of Old Dhaka*. The Pioneer Printing Press Ltd. Dhaka, Bangladesh. 1956. p-xv-xvii. B) Dreyer, Edward L. (2007). *Zheng He: China and the Oceans in the Early Ming Dynasty, 1405–1433*. New York: Pearson Longman. ISBN 9780321084439
- ²¹ Ibid., xviii. All Chinese accounts were translated by P. C. Bagchi in the *Visva Bharati Annals, volume- 1*, 1945, pp. 96–134.
- ²² Boulton, Nancy Elizabeth "Early Chinese Buddhist Travel Records as a Literary Genre," 2 vols. (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 1982).
- ²³ Karim, Abdul; *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, (Down To AD. 1538), Baitush Sharaf Islamic Research Institute, Chittagong. 1985. p. 250.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 1985. .250–251.
- ²⁵ All Chinese accounts were translated by P. C. Bagchi with the help of his Chinese friend and colleague in the *Visva Bharati*, Mr. Hsiang-ling Wu," and published in the *Visva Bharati Annals, volume- 1*,1945, 96–134.
- ²⁶ *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, tr, Elliot& Dawson, Vol. II, p. 310.
- ²⁷ *Tarikh-i-Firishta*, Vol. 1., p. 59, in Elliot & Dawson, Vol. II, p. 310.
- ²⁸ Following Blochmann, most scholars believe that the town of "Bardhawankuti" was some town in north Bengal, then also known as "Pundravardana," where the great Buddhist Bihar Mahasthangar Bihar was situated.
- ²⁹ Ali, Mohammad Mohar; *History Of The Muslims of Bengal*. 1985, Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa`ud Islamic University. Vol-1 A, Page-68.
- ³⁰ P. C. Bagchi, "Political Relations between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period," *Visva-Bharati Annals* 1 (1945): 96–134;
- ³¹ Ray, Haraprasad. *Trade and Diplomacy*, c. 140 B. C. –A. D. 1500 (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2003); p.131
- ³² The Wari-Bateshwar region in Narsingdi, Bangladesh is the site of an ancient fort city dating back to 450 BCE. The 2500 year old ruins, being unearthed near the old course of the Brahmaputra River, are a major archaeological discovery in South Asia. It challenges the earlier notions of early urban civilization in Bengal. The current scientific study is being carried out by a team from the Archaeology Department of Jahangirnagar University led by Professor Sufi Mostafizur Rahman. Prof. Rahman believes that Wari-Bateshwar is the rich, well planned, ancient emporium (a commercial city) "Sounagora" mentioned by Greek geographer, astronomer and mathematician Ptolemy in his book *Geographia*.
- ³³ Sen, Tansen; "Maritime Interactions between China and India: Coastal India and the Ascendancy of Chinese Maritime Power in the Indian Ocean". *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies*, Volume 2 (May 2011): 41–82 © 2011 Center for Central Eurasian Studies.