INTRODUCTION

The long line of sea-coast of Bengal extending from Chittagong to Balasore had been a source of strength and weakness. In the pristine days of Buddhist and Hindu rule, it enabled Bengal to send sea-going vessels from its ports to colonise Ceylon and eastern countries beyond the seas as far as Sumatra and Java with message of Buddhist faith and culture. Immense trade was carried on by Bengal not only with other coastal regions of India but to other countries both in the east and in the west. These have been fully told in that admirable book on “History of Indian Shipping” by Prof. R. K. Mukherjee. Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy has truly described in his Bramhinical Gods of Burma ‘Arakan now in Burma is more a frontier province of Eastern India than a province of Burma’. But with the fall of Hindu Empire, Bengal became a prey to foreign aggression, Chittagong or Catigan, the Porto Grande of the Portuguese, was the main sea-port and the target for occupation, while Sandwip was the jumping-off ground for occupation of Chittagong by the Mughals. The tale of Chittagong is told here while that of Sandwip will be dealt with in a separate chapter.

As regards West Bengal, the only way of entry from the sea was near Sagar Island. The present Hooghly River was the only means of communication from there to West Bengal. As has been told before, Hussain Shah built a fort to prevent incursion of Maghs. It is stated that in the pristine days of the Mughals, Shaista Khan, constructed a Fort at the mouth of the Rupnarian to repel the Maghs from going up the river. There is a village named Chakraberer Garh at the mouth of this river, known to the sailors as Rogue’s River. The Hijli Fort under Masnad-i-Ala was probably at this site.

When the Maghs were strengthened by their alliance with the Portuguese pirates and slave-traders, Kasim Khan the Viceroy of Shah Jehan took the wise step of driving the Portuguese from their Bandel or trading centre on the Hooghly river, where they had established themselves under a Firman
obtained from Akbar. The plea was that they had sold Bengal slaves to Maghs for their galleys. This was a diplomatic step—although other European nations were equally guilty of piracy and slave trade but action was taken only against the Portuguese. Had not the Portuguese been thwarted at that time, they would have established themselves firmly in Bengal as on the west coast with what result it is easy to surmise. Even before this, Jehangir did not look with favour the growing influence of the Portuguese on the west coast and received Sir Thomas Roe envoy of the English with cordiality.

Bengal, the land of rivers, was infested by pirates from time immemorial. In a Charja-giti, (more than a thousand years old) of Buddhist monks discovered by Mahamohapadhyya Haraprasad Sastri in Nepal, we find reference to river pirates. A free English translation of a song as rendered in modern Bengali by Dr. Sukumar Sen is given below:—

“The Baj-boat (is it Bajra boat ?) after crossing (the river) sailed through Padma Khal, the merciless Dangalia (river-pirate) plundered the country, today you Bhusuk (the poet) has become a Bengalee, your own wife has been taken away by Chandal. Five Patans were burned, the riches of Indra were destroyed, I do not know where my heart entered. No gold or silver was left to me……”

Whatever may be the hidden meaning, its plain meaning shows the devastation made by pirates including kidnapping of women and loss of caste.

Two lines of the above verse as in original is given below:—

আজি তুমি বংগালী তমলী—

নিশ ঘরিনি চণ্ডীলে পিলি।

It has been established that these songs were of 10th or 11th centuries and the language is Bengali. As a matter of fact, in the 10th and 11th centuries, Oriya, Pabi Hindi (for example Bhojpuri, Maghi Maithili) were regarded as being other forms of the Bengali. This fits in with the claim that the Buddhists from Bengal and Maghad migrated to Arakan in the tenth century.
The stories in *Mymensingh-Gitika* are replete with stories of river-dacoits who infested “from the Garo Hills to the sea on the south washed by the rivers Dhanu, Kangsha and was full of *bils* and *haors* which was infested by dacoits.”*

To those who are enraptured by the sweet melodious songs of *Mymensingh Gitika*, I may say that I have enjoyed these songs sung by a helmsman in a boat sailing downstream on a moonlit night, and felt that this was indeed the land of birth of Narayande and Chandrabati. On the other hand, I have seen the river police outposts in these vast expanses of *haors*, keeping ineffectual check over the movements of dacoits declared as ‘Criminal tribes’ under the Code of Criminal Procedure, then my imagination was roused to the days when dacoits and Magh pirates committed unbelievable atrocities on boat passengers going about in these *haors*. Truely in a popular novel, a convict escaping to these areas says that *Bhati* is an *ajabdesh* (unique area).

The *Jaliar haor* is no less awe-inspiring than the dense forest of Biswati on the Mymensingh-Sylhet border where the members of Mymensingh Suhrid Samity (a revolutionary society) practised revolver shooting in the ruins of a two storied building of the dacoits. On the upper story was the image of Goddess Kali whom they worshipped before starting for committing dacoity.

These lands of *haors* and *bils* are known as *Bhati*¹ literally meaning the lower reaches of the rivers, which flow from Garo, Khasi, Jaintia and Tripura hills. Boro paddy is the only crop which keeps a cultivator engaged for 4 months in a year. By crop cutting experiment I found in a land of good growth 40 maunds of boro paddy per acre. During the rains, the people are cooped up in their houses on raised grounds. In night journeys, I have found snakes dropping from trees by being brushed by the boat not unlike the experience of Indranath in Sarat Chandra’s novel. Once I had to spend a whole night on a bed with *Daraj* snakes stretching at full length outside.

* Bangabhasa-o-Sahitya.
¹ Blochman’s History and Geography of Bengal J. A. S. B. 1878.
Side by side with these unusual discomforts, there is an unbelievable abundance of fish and milk in the dry season. In some revenue paying units or estates in these areas of Mymensingh district, I have found the entire assessed revenue is based on jalkar (fishery) assets only without any “occupied area” of land. Fish is so much in abundance that the whole atmosphere is charged with the stench of drying fish in kholes (places where fish is dried) and sticks to one’s nose. A Munstff Asst. Settlement Officer—a new-comer was so much oppressed by the smell that he had his milk boiled with Tejpatra. In a playful mood, I once picked up a whole lota-full of kai fish from a shallow land over which they were swimming upstream. During night, the whole area is resounded with splashing of oars of boats going to the various markets or railway stations. As regards milk, suffice it to say that the famous Dacca cheese comes from bairans of buffaloes herded in chars of the Meghna river. All these are experiences of 40 years back.

Mymensingh border land—a debatable land where races and interests meet and sometimes clash has a vivid life which often takes on spontaneous expression. And the Mymensingh swamps and spreading rivers a refuge to struggling independence a region where Bengal and Assam, Aryan and Mongolian meet and merge have sheltered through the centuries much more than moving and beautiful stories. A great deal of Bengal’s forgotten and neglected history lies hidden in these ballads. (From a review of Eastern Bengal Ballads in the Times Literary Supplement of 7th August 1924.)

It is, therefore, natural that the people of the locality are fearless, hardy and desperate by nature and furnished war-boats of the Imperial Nawara with crews and Golandazas as will be seen later on.

During the middle of the tenth century a Mahomodan kingdom under a Sultan was established whose authority extended probably from the eastern bank of the Meghna to sea-side on the north of the Naff river.†

1 Baden Powell’s Land System.
† Bengali literature in the Court of Arakan. This would be the area covered by the present districts of Chittagong, Noakhali and Tippera.
On the authority of the Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal Vol. XIII, page 36, it is stated that in 953 A.D., the King of Arakan led an expedition to Bengal and defeated the Sultan and erected a victory-stone at Chittagong which means “it is wrong to go to war”.

As stated before, Paragal Khan general of Hussain Shah after driving away the Magha from Chittagong, established the village Paragalpur on the Feni river after his name. His descendents are still living in the village. Paragal’s son Chhuti Khan was also a great patron of learning like his father and under his orders Srikar Nandi compiled a translation of *Aswa-medh Jagna*; in this book it is written about the prowess of Chhuti Khan was such that for fear of him Raja of Tripura left the country and entered the hills.*

At all times Eastern Bengal owing to its remoteness and inaccessibility as a safe place for refugees there was a compact block of Buddhist states in Tippera, Noakhali, Chittagong and Arakan. It seems that Paragal Khan succeeded in establishing his authority only over a limited area, round above Paragalpur, and it appears that before the beginning of the sixteenth century, there was at Chakrashala within Chittagong a Magh King named Raja Jaychandra whose court poet Bhowaminath composed a poem named Lakshan Digbijoy. This view of Mr. Bhattacharyya is not substantiated by Dr. D. C. Sen according to whom Bhowanidas lived near Nabadwip. Possibly Mr. Bhattacharyya is correct as it seems there was a competitive atmosphere for poets in Chittagong, Tippera and Assam. In Patikura, there was a small kingdom during Buddhist period and the Raja had marriage alliance with the King of Arakan. A sixteen headed image of Buddhist goddess Chunda was discovered in this area.† Patikura was a small pargana on the south of Tippera district and was held by Zemindars during the British period who claimed Kinship with Raja of Tippera but converted to Islam.

As a summary of the earlier events regarding the happenings in Chittagong the following extract from the

* Bangabhasa-O-Sahitya.
† History of Bengal Vol. I.
Noakhali Settlement Report will be interesting although these are some obvious mistakes:

"Even before the Mahomedans established themselves at Dacca, Noakhali became the jumping-off place for their attacks on Chittagong and the Arracanese and the first part of their dominion to be harried when the latter tried to turn the tables upon them. Muhammad Tugrail (A.D. 1279) was the first Muhammedan to make his power felt on the east of the Meghna. Samsuddin, the Governor of Sonargaon in 1347 defeated Raja Pratap Manikya of Tippera and conquered Chittagong. It relapsed almost immediately to Arakanese and for the next three centuries it was taken or retaken several times by each of the three parties the Muhammedan Governor of Sonargaon, the Raja of Tippera and the king of Arakan."¹

In the Rajmala of Tripura there are interesting accounts of the struggle, in some of which the Raja of Tripura got possession of Chittagong. Thus in 1513, Raja Dhanya Manikya (1490-1526) defeating the forces of Gaur Sultan Hussain Shah

¹ Rabindranath's novel Rajarshi relates to one of these periods in the seventeenth century, as it is mentioned that the King died in 1639 A.D. when the King of Arakan was in possession of Chittagong. King Gobinda Manikya of Tripura after abdication of his throne stayed on the bank of the hill-stream Miani in Chittagong Hill Tracts. His subsequent stay in the plains was in a Fort of Arakan Raja near Ramu which is close to present-day town of Cox's Bazar. Historians say that the fate of Shah Suja and his family after their arrival in Arakan is not known. But Rabindranath's statement that Suja and two daughters were killed and the youngest daughter married to the Raja of Arakan is borne out in a Bengali book written in Arakan Court which hints at the disagreement of Suja with the Raja, the outcome can be easily surmised. There is Sujah Masjid in Comilla town as mentioned in Rajarshi.

Rabindranath acknowledged the help he received from Maharaja Birchandra Manikya at various times specially at the time of the writing Rajarshi the Raja got printed the Sanskrit texts from Rajmala and sent them to Rabindranath. From those, he had the true history of Govinda Manikya.

"তার থেকে আমি গোবিন্দমানিক্যের প্রকৃত ইতিহাস পেয়েছিলাম !"

(প্রবাসী, কাঠুন, ১৩৬০)
struck Mohurs or gold coins in his name in 1435 Saka year declaring the victory and possession of Chittagong by him. But he did not rest here but proceeded to conquer Arakan and here we get mention of the name Rosung

"রামু আদি ছয় সীম মারিয়া লইল।
রণাঙ্গ তিকেটে জাইয়া পুনরিঘি দিল।"

Seeing the army of Tripura, the Maghs fled and friendship between Maghs and Feringis began. During the reign of Amar Manikya (1577-1586), in 1586 the king of Arakan Sekender Shah (there were three names of Arakan Kings viz:— Maghi, Pali and Persian) defeated Amar Manikya and took possession of Udaypur, the capital. Amar Manikya committed suicide. We find mention of Feringis (Portuguese) in Tripura army and also the Maghs making alliance with them. Upto the last moment, Amar Manikya did not surrender Adam Shah of Arakan who had taken asylum in Tripura. The defeat is recorded thus in Rajamala thus:—

রসকালে জিপুরে নি মাগ জিনিল।
অর মাধিকার কালে জিপুরে হারিল।

In all times Tripura had conquered Maghad but in Amar Manikya’s time Tripura was defeated. After this defeat of the Raja of Tripura, the kings of Arakan became firmly established in Chittagong. The unsuccessful attempt of Islam Khan and of the subsequent Viceroy Ibrahim Khan has been detailed in Baharistan¹. On the other hand after the subjugation of Bhuiyas, like Pratapaditya, Kedar Roy, Isa Khan, there was nobody to resist. Selim Khan, the King of Arakan became very powerful. He had eleven wives. He married the daughter of the ruler of Chittagong as also the daughter of Tripura King and most strange of all, he married the beautiful sister of Ratta Rai of Sripur.

¹ History of Bengal Vol. II p. 270. It was only after the Arakan King had threatened Dacca that Ibrahim Khan offered resistance pp. 302-308.
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If the above stories of alliances be true, then it is quite believable that the King of Arakan and Kedar Rai of Sripur jointly attacked Saptagram in West Bengal as mentioned in the Ain Akbari. This historical information has been discovered by Mr. Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharyya from the New History of Arakan written by Chhanda Malalamkar and published in the Burmese year 1293.¹

Such marriage alliance was not uncommon in those days. Sir Alexander Mackenzie in his Memorandum on the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal, 1869, mentions of a Bramhin Raj Family giving in marriage a daughter to the Headman of a hill-tribe apparently to buy peace. But this did not degrade the family.

Again continuing from the Settlement Report:—

"The Ain-i-Akbari (1587 A.D.) shows that Chittagong was in Muhammadan hands but the revenue of the district was almost entirely from the town and port. The Muhammadans had not strong enough hold to be able to assess land revenue outside the immediate neighbourhood of the town. It was taken almost immediately by the Aracanese and then began long struggle between the Maghs and the Muhammadans in which the Portuguese pirates of Sandwip by throwing themselves in one side or the other were able to hold for a time the balance of power. Muhammadan power was firmly established only after the final conquest of Chittagong by Isa Khan(?) in 1666. The incursions of the Maghs continued for another century. Parts of the Delta specially in Bakergunj were more or less deserted on account of their ravages."

In the above extract, Isa Khan, the leader of the Bhuiyas, is mentioned wrongly instead of Buzrukumed Khan the general of Aurangzebe. For some years after the conquest of Chittagong from the Maghs no revenue had been realised and had been in fact a financial burden on the Dacca Government, justified presumably by its position as a buffer province at the time when Dacca itself was threatened by Magh raiders.

¹ Banglar Magh Douratiyer Bibaran by D. C. Bhattacharyya, in Prabasi 1858 B.S.
As local resources were developed, the contribution paid by Dacca for its defence gradually decreased but annual payment of Rs. 49,421 on account of land defence and of Rs. 18,000 on account of naval defence were still being made by Dacca to Chittagong at the time when Chittagong was ceded by Mir Kasim to the English.

Verelst and his Council took the earliest opportunity of establishing friendly relation with the ruler of Arakan. Although commercial possibilities were given as the foremost consideration but further reason urged was “that a connection with that country by friendship and correspondence were for putting a stop to inroads of the Mugs—the annual invaders of this country”.

The raiders continued to come and ravage Bengal as has been told before.