



Zamindars under the Nawabs of Bengal: A Case Study of Dinajpur

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of zamindars under the Nawabs of Bengal through a case study of the Dinajpur Raj, one of the most influential zamindaris of eighteenth-century Bengal. It analyses the evolution of the zamindari system from the Mughal to the Nawabi period, focusing on the administrative, political, and economic functions of zamindars in Bengal. Special attention is given to the policies of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan and their impact on the consolidation of large zamindaris such as Dinajpur. The paper highlights the rise of the Dinajpur zamindars, particularly Raja Prannath and Raja Ramnath, and their close relationship with the Nawabi administration. It also explores the role of the Dinajpur Raj during the Maratha invasions and the political crisis leading to the Battle of Plassey. The study argues that zamindars were not merely revenue intermediaries but important political and military actors who contributed significantly to regional administration and stability in eighteenth-century Bengal.

Introduction

The position of zamindars in Mughal India has attracted the attention of many scholars. Attempts have been made to analyse their rights, functions and role in the agrarian economy.' Though practically present throughout the Mughal Empire, the zamindars are recognised to have been socially quite heterogeneous; their rights, as well as obligations, must have varied a great deal according to localities. In administered areas, they were a major support of the Mughal land-revenue machinery, while in other



regions, they were little more than tribute payers and collected the land tax from the peasantry mainly for their own coffers.ⁱ

The term zamindar became popular during the Mughal era. It served as a symbol for the different kinds of hereditary interests, from strong, self-governing chieftains to minor middlemen at the village level. The chieftains were known as rajas, rais, thakurs, etc. before the Mughals, and the little diaries were called chaudhuris, khots, muqaddams, etc. The Mughals deliberately used a generic term to encompass the diverse types of landed interests, reflecting their strategy to curtail the power of chieftains by reducing them to the status of intermediaries, while simultaneously compensating them through other means.ⁱⁱ

For the province of Bengal, at any rate, the term zamindar was a Mughal revenue innovation introduced for the first time by Emperor Akbar.ⁱⁱⁱ Zamindar is a Persian compound word, but was not used in Persia. In India, it was used in the fourteenth century by the Persian historians, Barani and Afif, to denote Hindu chieftains, but the term was not then a revenue-administrative category, and the official terms for landholders of various types within the Delhi Sultanate were '*khuts*', '*muqaddams*' and '*chaudhuris*.'^{iv}

A few farmans of Aurangzeb help us to trace some zamindars in Bengal.^v According to Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari*, the *subah* (province) of Bengal was divided into 19 apparatus throughout Bengal's whole territory.^{vi} In the days of the Bengal sultanate, the zamindar was applied to a tax gatherer. Within the province, tax gatherers such as Raja Ganesh of Dinajpur and Kamsa Narayan of gained considerable power and acted much as local chiefs.^{vii}

The pre-Muslim and pre-Mughal periods appear to have relied on feudal chiefs and ijaradars for revenue management, with rajas and zamindars serving as key figures in the administrative system. Historical records indicate the existence of powerful landlords or zamindars even before the advent of Mughal rule. These influential figures were collectively known as the Baro Bhuiyas or Bhumiya, meaning twelve landlords. The Baro Bhuiyas exercised significant autonomy in administering Bengal, with each leader maintaining an independent administrative system and a powerful army. Although they were unable to establish a unified administrative framework, their individual territories were well-defended. Their resistance posed a formidable challenge to the Mughal expansion into Bengal, forcing the Mughals to engage in several battles to assert their control, encountering stiff opposition from the Baro Bhuiyas along the way.^{viii}



Abdul Karim notes that the Baro Bhuiyans inherited the administrative legacy of Bengal's independent Sultans, who had ruled the region for two centuries.^{ix} Ultimately, they were decisively defeated by the mighty Mughal army, resulting in the loss of their small territories.^x

During the Mughal period, four notable land settlements were implemented in the province of Bengal. These included: (a) the settlement undertaken by Todar Mal, Akbar's finance minister, in 1582; (b) the settlement introduced by Shah Shuja, the provincial governor of Bengal, in 1668; (c) the reforms carried out by Murshid Quli Khan in 1722; and (d) the experiments conducted by Shuja-ud-Din Khan in 1728.^{xi} During Murshid Quli Khan's reign, a new class of zamindars, known as *ijaradars*, was established. These *ijaradars* were strictly prohibited from collecting more revenue than the fixed amount. After deducting their allotted share, they were required to pay the full revenue to the state, down to the last farthing.^{xii} If the zamindars failed to pay the revenue on time, they were subjected to severe punishment.^{xiii} Nawab Alivardi Khan maintained the revenue system introduced by Murshid Kuli Khan and made revenue settlements with the zamindars in line with that framework. During the Maratha conflict, the zamindars contributed additional financial support to assist Nawab Alivardi Khan.^{xiv}

During the reign of the Bengal Nawabs, the administrative system was primarily dependent on the zamindars. However, after Siraj-ud-Daulah's defeat in the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the English acquisition of the Dewani (stewardship) in 1765, the land administration of Bengal underwent a significant transformation. The introduction of yearly and ten-yearly settlements, followed by the Permanent Settlement of 1793, marked a radical shift. Under the Permanent Settlement, zamindars were granted landownership, replacing the previous system of *ijara* (tax farming) or contracts.^{xv}

As a result, the zamindars gained full rights over the land from this point onward. Due to the English adopting various policies at different times, many former large zamindari estates either lost their status entirely or partially, while new zamindaries were created. Additionally, smaller landowners, who were considered inferior to the zamindars, such as *talukdars*, *pattandars* (leaseholders), *dar pattanidars* (sub-leaseholders), and *gantidars* (smaller sub-leaseholders), emerged. These individuals were referred to as petty zamindars of Bengal. Consequently, within a century of the Permanent Settlement, the number of zamindars reportedly increased to nearly 1.5 lakh.^{xvi}

The Dinajpur zamindars under the Nawabs of Bengal

Murshid Quli Khan introduced significant changes in the revenue department by appointing new *ijaradars* (revenue contractors), most of whom were Hindus. During this time, the primary source of



government income was the taxes paid by zamindars. In the Nawabi period, Bengal had numerous zamindaris. Murshid Quli Khan divided Bengal into 13 administrative units, known as *chaklas*, and placed smaller zamindars under the authority of the chakladars. The policy of consolidation aimed to recover overdue and unpaid revenues from the smaller zamindars.

Murshid Quli Khan handed over a large number of *parganas* to a few trusted revenue contractors or officials, centralising zamindari rights. This centralisation policy proved highly profitable for him and subsequent nawabs. By collecting revenue through a few major zamindars at a lower cost, the nawabs gained financial benefits, and the government also saved money. However, this system had unintended consequences.

For instance, the zamindar of Dinajpur, Prannath, effectively expanded his zamindari by exercising unchecked authority against neighbouring zamindars and talukdars. In the first half of the eighteenth century, Prannath not only obtained the position of chakladar but was also appointed as a *qanungo* or *chowdhury*, further strengthening his ties and personal connections with the court. This arrangement undoubtedly enabled him to develop close relations with the darbar. Such zamindars, who enjoyed monopoly privileges, prospered under this system. Raja Prannath of Dinajpur was no exception. At the beginning of the Nawabi period, he played a significant role in Bengal's administrative history. His forty years of rule as a zamindar also made Dinajpur an important part of Bengal's administrative and political history.^{xvii}

After Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, Shujauddin Muhammad Khan became the Nawab of Bengal. In 1733, he incorporated Bihar into the Bengal Subah and reorganised administration by dividing Bengal into two regions. Shujauddin directly governed western, central, and northern Bengal while appointing two deputy Nazims—one for eastern and southern Bengal, based in Dhaka, and another for Bihar and Orissa. The Dinajpur region remained under the Nawab's direct control.

Shujauddin introduced new *abwab* (additional levies), increasing revenue demands on estates like Dinajpur. Following Raja Prannath's death in 1722, his adopted son Ramnath succeeded him. To retain control of the Dinajpur zamindari, Ramnath paid a tribute of 421,450 rupees to Shujauddin. Like Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia, Ramnath was a prominent figure at the Nawab's court in Murshidabad.^{xviii}

As a result, Ramnath received three *sanads* from the Nawab, granting him the zamindari of Patiram, Patnitala, and Gangarampur. Witnessing the immense power and wealth of Raja Ramnath, Syed



Muhammad Khan, the newly appointed Faujdar of Rangpur, was overcome with jealousy and resentment.

It is said that Syed Muhammad Khan, with a large army, advanced toward the royal palace near the town of Dinajpur, intending to attack and plunder it. In response, Ramnath also marched forward with a massive army to confront Syed Muhammad Khan and his forces. In the fierce battle that ensued, Syed Muhammad Khan was eventually captured by Ramnath. Later, at the request of Nawab Shuja Khan of Bengal, the defeated Syed Muhammad Khan was released by Ramnath.^{xix}

Raja Ramnath (1722–1760) served as the zamindar of Dinajpur for about forty-two years, during which he witnessed significant political changes in Bengal. During his tenure, following the death of Nawab Shujauddin, Sarfaraz Khan ascended as the Nawab of Bengal in 1739. However, after a short rule, Alivardi Khan took over the throne in 1740.

This period was marked by the devastating invasions of the **Bargis**, a term used by Bengalis to refer to the Maratha raiders. The Bargis' ruthless plundering brought immense turmoil to Bengal. Their incessant raids, beginning in 1742 and continuing until 1751, caused widespread destruction. Villages and towns were attacked annually, leading to extensive looting, violence, and oppression. These invasions gravely affected Bengal's trade, commerce, and industries. In fear of losing their wealth, lives, and honour, many people fled in large numbers to the eastern banks of the Bhagirathi River.

The Bargi invasions were a persistent challenge for Nawab Alivardi Khan. To address the crisis, he often employed a dual strategy—at times pacifying the raiders by paying them off and at other times engaging them in battle. Despite his efforts, the Bargis' havoc remained a significant source of distress for him and the people of Bengal.^{xx}

The Bargis (Marathas) were unable to carry out significant activities in Dinajpur, Rajshahi, or Rangpur; however, Rajmahal did not escape their attacks. To resist the Maratha invasions, the Nawabs of Murshidabad collected money and troops from their subordinate zamindars. During repeated Maratha incursions, the zamindars of Bengal supported the Nawab with financial and military assistance. Raja Ramnath of Dinajpur played a key role during this period by providing substantial financial support and military aid, thereby alleviating the economic burden on the Nawab. It is said that Nawab Alivardi Khan supplied Raja Ramnath with 10 cannons to bolster defence in the border regions during this time.^{xxi}

After the death of Nawab Alivardi Khan in 1756, Siraj-ud-Daulah ascended the throne of Bengal. During this period, conspiracies by foreign powers began to intensify across Bengal. Notably, the machinations



of Mir Jafar contributed significantly to the growing influence of the English in Bengal. Ultimately, these developments culminated in the rise of the English and the fall of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah at the Battle of Plassey.

In 1760, Raja Ramnath of Dinajpur passed away. After his death, his son, Baidyanath, ascended the throne of Dinajpur. During his reign, the Nawab's court in Murshidabad was plagued by internal conflicts. Meanwhile, on July 3, 1760, Miran, the son of Mir Jafar, died suddenly after being struck by lightning. The British took advantage of this opportunity to tighten their dominance over the Nawab.

This period saw intense political turmoil characterised by wars, repeated defeats, and betrayals by military commanders. These crises left the Nawab's government in Murshidabad completely subjugated by the British. In 1765, Mir Jafar fell gravely ill and, sensing his impending death, hastily declared his minor son, Najm-ud-Daulah, as his successor in the presence of British officials and prominent dignitaries. He also appointed Nandakumar as the Diwan (chief revenue officer).

Mir Jafar passed away on February 5, 1765. With his death, the era of independent Nawabi rule in Bengal effectively came to an end, as the British fully consolidated their control that year.^{xxii}

From 1760 to 1765, until the death of Mir Jafar, the Dinajpur royal zamindari was under Raja Baidyanath (1760–1780). During this period, the Raja of Dinajpur remained one of the most prominent zamindars in Bengal. After the death of Raja Ramnath, Raja Baidyanath ascended to the throne of Dinajpur, but his half-brother, Kantanath, began conspiring against him to claim the throne.

Kantanath's conspiracies led to significant challenges for Raja Baidyanath, who could not retain his position on the throne for long. Kantanath, during this time, extended support to Mir Qasim in his war against the East India Company in various ways. As a result of Kantanath's influence, Mir Qasim demanded a substantial amount of money from Raja Baidyanath to finance his war against the Company. However, when Raja Baidyanath failed to meet this enormous demand, Mir Qasim grew furious and detained him in the fort of Munger.

During the Mughal and Nawabi periods, Dinajpur was a significant frontier outpost. Due to its geographical location, Dinajpur acted as a protective barrier between the newly conquered Subah of Bengal, Bihar, and Odisha on one side, and regions like Cooch Behar, Koch Hajo, and Assam on the other. With the gradual development of large zamindaris like Dinajpur and Idrakpur, the responsibility for the Subah's defence was shared between the faujdars and the zamindars.



During the Mughal era, Ghughahat gained importance as a divisional headquarters for revenue administration, while Dinajpur, as the capital of the Dinajpur Raj, evolved into a self-sufficient hub. The region saw rapid growth in the first half of the 18th century, with an influx of people from neighbouring areas like Purnia, Cooch Behar, and Cachar. The town of Dinajpur and its surrounding areas developed significantly, with the establishment of forts, palaces, stupas, temples, mosques, dargahs, tanks, and numerous reservoirs, reflecting both the affluence of the elite and the region's importance during this time.

In addition to the major and minor zamindars, the region housed jotedars, taluqdars, their dewans, naibs, gomastas, subordinates, and a significant number of police, paiks, and military personnel, all contributing to the area's development and the welfare of its people. The primary zamindars of Dinajpur thrived under the governance of the subedars and faujdars. Murshid Quli Khan's policy of fostering direct political alliances particularly benefited the local zamindars selected by the nawabs, upon whom they heavily relied. These zamindars gained significant power and recognition, with emperors and successive nawabs conferring titles such as 'Raja' or 'Maharaja' and bestowing honorary robes (khilats) upon them as marks of distinction.

It is also noteworthy that Raja Ramnath of Dinajpur was among those involved in the conspiracy against Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah. This is not surprising, as political and economic conflicts between the government and leading zamindars were commonplace. Ramnath recognised the declining imperial control over the distant Subah and the diminishing authority of the nawab due to the East India Company's influence. Understanding the imprudence of opposing the British, he chose to align with them. This strategic move ultimately strengthened Raja Ramnath's position, allowing him to consolidate his power further.^{xxiii}

Conclusion: The zamindars played a significant role in the political, administrative, and economic structure of Bengal under the Nawabs. The case study of the Dinajpur zamindari demonstrates that the zamindars were not merely revenue collectors but influential regional elites who exercised considerable authority in local administration and regional politics. The rulers of Dinajpur, especially Prananath and Ramnath, strengthened their position through efficient revenue management, military assistance, and close connections with the Nawabi court. The study also highlights that the revenue reforms introduced by Murshid Quli Khan increased the importance of zamindars in Bengal's administration. During periods of political instability, including the Bargi invasions and the decline of Mughal authority, the Dinajpur zamindars continued to support the Nawabi government financially and militarily while expanding their



own influence. However, the grant of the Diwani to the English East India Company in 1765 brought major changes to the zamindari system and marked the beginning of a new phase in Bengal's administrative history.

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