

commander, Mun'im Khan, who advanced rapidly down the Ganges as the Afghans, dispirited and unwilling to resist, fled clear to their capital of Tanda.¹³ This too they yielded without a struggle. In September 1574, when Mun'im Khan triumphantly entered Tanda, the Mughal era in Bengal can be said to have begun. As Abu'l-fazl proudly wrote, "the words of the world-cherishing prince came into operation. The Divine graciousness increased daily."¹⁴

The Early Mughal Experience in Bengal, 1574-1610

But seizing the capital and possessing the land were two different matters. While Mun'im Khan and Raja Todar Mal, Akbar's finance minister, were in Tanda reorganizing the revenue administration of the newly conquered province, thousands of Afghans melted into the forested Bengali hinterland, where for the next forty years they continued to hold out against the new regime. There they attracted a host of dissidents, including Muslim and Hindu *zamindars*, Portuguese renegades, and tribal chieftains, all of whom perceived the Chaghatai Turks from Upper India as foreigners and usurpers.¹⁵

From Abu'l-fazl's imperial perspective, however, the years after 1574 were devoted to clearing the delta of "the weeds and rubbish of opposition" (*khas-o-khāshāk-i mukhālif*).¹⁶ Having seized Tanda, the Mughal victors pursued the Afghans in four directions: north to Ghoraghat, south to Satgaon, east to Sonargaon, and southeast into Fatehabad (present-day Faridpur town).¹⁷ These initial campaigns witnessed several pitched battles of great scope and bloodshed, in particular the battle of Tukaroi in southern Midnapur District (March 3, 1575), in which Todar Mal and Mun'im Khan achieved a stunning victory over Sultan Daud Khan. On this occasion the Mughals resorted to terror tactics, filling eight lofty minarets with the skulls of their slain enemies "as a warning to spectators."¹⁸ Actually, though, the use of such violence was exceptional. With their cavalry bogged down in unfamiliar jungle terrain and their troops close to de-

13. Recognizing that Gaur's unhealthy climate had rendered that ancient city unsuitable for large populations, Sulaiman Karrani had transferred the seat of government to nearby Tanda. Ghulam Hussain Salim, *Rijāzu-s-Salāṭīn*, 152.

14. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 153; text, 3: 109.

15. Soon after the Mughal victory at Tukaroi (March 1575), wrote Abu'l-fazl, "vagabonds of the country" gathered round Jahan Khan Lodi, who was Daud Khan's governor of Orissa and leading confederate. These were probably Bengali landholders who, familiar with the former order of things under the sultans and apprehensive of what might happen to them under Mughal dominion, initially threw in their lot with the Afghans. *Ibid.*, trans., 183; text, 129.

16. *Ibid.*, trans., 143, 169, 376; text, 102, 118, 259.

17. *Ibid.*, trans., 169; text, 118-19.

18. *Ibid.*, trans., 180; text, 127.

serting from lack of interest in fighting so far from home, the Mughals relied more on bribery, cajolery, diplomacy, impressive displays of military power, and sowing the seeds of dissension within enemy ranks than upon the application of brute force.¹⁹

Such a policy was not only expedient. It also accorded with Akbar's theory of imperial sovereignty, which, as in traditional Indian political thought, aimed not at annihilating adversaries but at humbling them into recognizing the single, overarching sovereignty of the victorious monarch. Hence on April 12, 1575, there was great celebration in the Mughal camp when Sultan Daud Khan, finally perceiving the futility of continued resistance, appeared before Mun'im Khan and partook of a formal "banquet of reconciliation." Here was a political rite, a ritual of incorporation, in which symbolism was everything. Displaying warm affection, the Mughal general advanced to the edge of the carpet laid out in a ceremonial tent specially arranged for the occasion. There he greeted the defeated king, Daud ungirded his sword and set it aside. Mun'im Khan then presented the Afghans with a Mughal sword, an embroidered belt, and a cloak. Whether or not the cloak had actually been worn by Akbar, by donning it Daud Khan became ritually "incorporated" into the body of the emperor—a political rite the Bengali ruler would well have understood, since his predecessors on the throne of Gaur had followed the same practice.²⁰ Adorned with Mughal regalia, Daud then turned his face in the direction of Akbar's capital in Fatchpur Sikri and solemnly prostrated himself.²¹ His independence formally ended, Daud and his kingdom were now bound to the emperor.

Several events, however, prevented the new province's smooth integration into the Mughal domain. Soon after returning to northern Bengal from Tukaroi, Mun'im Khan transferred the seat of government from Tanda, capital of Bengal since the time of Sulaiman Karrani (1565), back

DISPATCH
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19. "By the daily-increasing favour of God," wrote Abu'l-fazl concerning Todar Mal's campaign in central Bengal, "the dust of disturbance was laid" ("gubār-i fitna fir-nishast"). In dealing with one group of Afghans, Todar Mal recommended to Mun'im Khan that "the method to restrain the faction was to send money by one who was loyal and smooth-tongued." The author was pleased to observe that this policy had successfully "quieted the slaves to gold." *Ibid.*, trans., 170, 173; text, 120, 121. André Wink has argued that the policy of sowing and then exploiting internal dissensions (*fitna*) among the enemy constituted a key dynamic in the expansion of Mughal power in India. See André Wink, *Land and Sovereignty: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth-Century Maratha Śarājya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

20. When a Portuguese diplomat was presented to the court of Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah in 1521, the sultan, in the words of the foreigner, "turned to me and ordered that I be given a robe that he had worn." *Voyage dans les deltas du Gange*, 333.

21. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 185; text, 3: 130-31.

to the ancient city of Gaur.²² The decision proved catastrophic, for a shift in the main course of the Ganges River had turned the river's formerly swift channels into stagnant backwaters, making them breeding grounds for easily communicable diseases. As a result, in the months after April 1575 a devastating plague carried away thousands of Mughal officers and soldiers, not to mention untold thousands of civilians. "The thought of death took hold of everyone," wrote Abu'l-fazl, as the plague's devastation swiftly cut into the morale of officers and troops. Many of these became altogether disgusted with Bengal and began thinking only of gathering their belongings and leaving.²³ We have no figures on how many died during the plague of 1575, or how many left the country. But coming as it did at the very dawn of the Mughal encounter with Bengal, a critical moment in the formation of Mughal perceptions of the delta, this catastrophe surely contributed to the stereotype, soon accepted throughout the imperial service, that Bengal was a hostile and foreign land—a place in which perhaps to endure temporary duty but certainly not somewhere to reside permanently. In the minds of Mughal officers from North India this view persisted for centuries, adding to the profound sense of alienation from the delta province that subsequent generations of *ashraf* Muslims would nurture down to modern times.²⁴

It was in this melancholy atmosphere, in October 1575, that Mun'im Khan died. The infighting among Mughal officers that followed the governor's death encouraged Daud Khan, the last independent sultan of Bengal, to reconsider his submission to Akbar and regroup his scattered Afghan forces for a second try at dislodging the Mughals from the delta. In these circumstances, Akbar appointed another decorated Mughal commander, Khan Jahan, to take charge of the newly won province. Accompanied by the veteran Raja Todar Mal, the new governor reached the restored capital of Tanda in November, and in the following July met Daud's forces along the banks of the Padma River in central Bengal. Again the Afghans suf-

22. According to Abu'l-fazl the change was made because it put the seat of Mughal power somewhat closer to Ghoraghat, where turbulent Afghans were still active, and because Mun'im Khan admired Gaur's noble fort and magnificent buildings. It is also likely, however, that the new Mughal regime wished to associate itself with a city having much older associations with legitimate authority than the upstart Tanda. Gaur had been associated, not only with centuries of Indo-Turkish rule, but before that, as ancient Lakhnauti, with Sena rule as well. Ibid., trans., 226; text, 160.

23. Ibid., trans., 227–28; text, 160–61. So thorough was the devastation that just sixty-five years later a foreign visitor would describe what had become by then the ruins of a totally abandoned metropolis. Manrique, *Travels* 2: 124–28.

24. See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Bengal Muslims, 1571–1906: A Quest for Identity* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), 8–17, 22–24, 124, 184.

fered a crushing military reversal. Their finest field commander was killed in action, and Daud himself, his horse stuck in the monsoon's muddy quagmire, was taken alive. This time the Mughals were ruthless with their quarry. Having determined that Daud should be "relieved of the burden of his head," Khan Jahan had the ex-king decapitated and his body fixed to a gibbet in Tanda; the head he sent to Akbar as a trophy.²⁵ A smooth transition to imperial domination now seemed more certain than ever.

AKBAR: RAFO RESUS.

This was just the time, however, when a serious rebellion broke out within Akbar's imperial service. A year before the conquest of Bengal, the emperor had required his *mansabdars*—the Mughal corps of military officials—to brand and present for imperial review the precise number of horses, with cavalrymen, that they were paid to maintain. He also centralized the empire's fiscal basis by ordering that land revenues be placed under the direct control of the central government instead of at the disposal of the *mansabdars*.²⁶ Such exertions of central authority naturally provoked resentment among many officials. Worse, the emperor's policy of shipping disaffected *mansabdars* to Bengal had the effect of concentrating potential rebels in a region distant from Delhi and legendary for its tradition of resisting central authority. In 1579, rebellion duly broke out. Led by Baba Khan Qaqshal and Ma'sum Khan Kabuli, a *mansabdar* who had come from Bihar to join the Bengal revolt, the rebels seized and plundered the official fortress in Tanda, executed Akbar's hapless governor, and set up a "revolutionary government" amongst themselves.²⁷ Hindu *zamindars* in both the southeastern and the southwestern delta swiftly threw off their allegiance to the Mughals, while other disaffected *mansabdars* in Bihar joined the movement in Bengal.²⁸ For two years the delta passed completely beyond imperial authority, until 1582–83, when Akbar's application of overwhelming force eventually quashed the revolt.²⁹ Only one high-ranking Mughal officer would remain at large, the unrepentant Ma'sum Khan Kabuli, who led a bitter fight against Mughal authority down to his death seventeen years later.

INNOVATIVE REVOLT

In 1583, when the turmoil within the imperial corps had subsided, the imperialists once again turned their attention to suppressing various indigenous resistance movements. These, however, were no longer concentrated in the northwest, the site of Muslim power since 1204, but in East Bengal generally, the vast region known to the Mughals as "Bhati." Wrote Abu'l-

25. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 252–56; text, 3: 180–83.

26. Ibid., trans., 95; text, 69.

27. Ibid., trans., 442–51; text, 299–305.

28. Ibid., trans., 469, 475; text, 320, 324.

29. Ibid., trans., 567, 589–93; text, 384, 398–401.

fazl, "The tract of country on the east called Bhati is reckoned a part of this province."³⁰ Yet in another passage he treated "Bangala" and "Bhati" as mutually exclusive regions, the distinctive feature of the latter being its topography: the word *bhāṭī* simply means "downstream direction." "Bhati," wrote Abu'l-fazl, "is a low country and has received this name because Bengal is higher. It is nearly 400 kos in length from east to west and about 300 kos from north to south. East of this country are the ocean and the country of Habsha. West is the hill country where are the houses of the Kahin tribe. South is Tanda. North also the ocean and the terminations of the hill country of Tibet."³¹ As used by the Mughals in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, "Bhati" included the entire delta east of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly corridor. In fact, since its western boundary extended from Tanda down to present-day southwestern Khulna District,³² the frontier between Mughal "Bhati" and "Bangala" approximated the present frontier between Bangladesh and West Bengal. Hence the modern distinction between East and West Bengal dates at least from early Mughal times.

Anti-Mughal resistance now coalesced around a remarkable Bengali Muslim chieftain, 'Isa Khan, whose seat of government lay deep within the delta's eastern riverine tracts in the town of Katrabo near the ancient city of Sonargaon. In 1586 Ralph Fitch, a merchant then exploring the possibilities of opening up trade between England and India, traveled

30. More precisely, Bhati was called a *wilāyat* ("region"), and Bengal a *mulk* ("kingdom"). "Āfrah bar āyad wilāyatist Bhāṭī nām, az in mulk shumāra kunand." Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Ā'in-i Akbarī* (Lucknow ed.), 2: 73; trans., 2: 130.

31. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 645-47; text, 3: 432. Here Abu'l-fazl mistakenly reckons Bengal's cardinal directions 90 degrees clockwise; if one rotates his cardinal directions 90 degrees counterclockwise, all the reference points fall into proper place: the Bay of Bengal and the "Habsha" country would border Bhati to the south, Tanda would lie to the west, the hill country to the north, and the termination of the Himalayan range to the east. This correction of Abu'l-fazl's geography is suggested by Irfan Habib in his *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 104.

32. A problem arises with identifying Abu'l-fazl's "Habsha," a place name that means Ethiopia and is therefore quite impossible. However, although both the Calcutta and the Lucknow editions of the text give this place as "Habsha," at least one manuscript—India Office Library, Persian MS. 236—renders it "jasor," which in the sixteenth century referred, not to modern Jessore town, but to a settlement further south, identified with present-day Iswaripur in southwestern Khulna District. See Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 646, n. 2; Habib, *Atlas*, 104 and 45. James Westland observes that the name Jessore was applied to successive seats of the Jessore *zamindārī*, and that in the sixteenth century the seat was located in southwestern Khulna. See Westland, *Report on the District of Jessore* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat, 1871), 24; *List of Ancient Monuments in Bengal* (Calcutta: Government of Bengal, 1896), 148.

through Bengal's eastern districts and wrote, "They be all hereabout Rebels against the King Zebaldin Echebar [Jalal al-Din Akbar]; for here are so many Rivers and Ilands, that they flee from one to another, whereby his Horsemen cannot prevaile against them. . . . The chiefe King of all these Countries is called Isacan ['Isa Khan], and he is chiefe of all the other Kings, and is a great friend to all Christians."³³ Fitch's "other Kings" were the "twelve chieftains" (Beng., *bāri bhūyān*) recorded in other European accounts and celebrated in Bengali lore. In December 1600 the annual letter of the Jesuit Mission in Goa, commenting on the Mughal drive against Bengal's former Afghan rulers, stated:

Twelve princes, however, called Boyones [*bhūyān*] who governed twelve provinces in the late King's name, escaped from this massacre. These united against the Mongols [*sic*], and hitherto, thanks to their alliance, each maintains himself in his dominions. Very rich and disposing of strong forces, they bear themselves as Kings, chiefly he of Siripur [Siripur], also called Cadary [Kedar Rai], and he of Chandecan [Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore], but most of all the Mansondolin ['Masnad-i 'Alī,' title of 'Isa Khan]. The Patanes [Afghans], being scattered above, are subject to the Boyones.³⁴

All twelve chieftains, now subordinate to 'Isa Khan, had been former governors of the Bengal sultanate.³⁵

In September 1584, 'Isa Khan delivered a crushing naval defeat to the Mughal governor,³⁶ and for the next fifteen years, though always careful to accord Akbar his theoretical overlordship whenever it seemed prudent

33. Federici, "Extracts," 184.

34. Hosten, "Jesuit Letters," 53-54. The date of this report, December 1, 1600, indicates a lag in communications between Jesuit missions in Bengal and Goa; for 'Isa Khan, who appears to have been alive when this report was written, had already died in September 1599.

35. The Jesuit mission report did not, however, specify the identity of the twelve chieftains, beyond noting that three were Hindus—i.e., those of Bakla (Bakarganj), Siripur (southeastern Dhaka), and Chandecan (Jessore)—and the rest Muslims. Some years ago N. K. Bhattacharya attempted to identify the "twelve chieftains" and the territories they controlled, among them: Uthman Khan, of Bokainagar (Mymensingh town); Ma'sum Khan Kabuli of Chalmohar in Pabna; Madhu Ray, of Khalai, near Jafarganj in western Dhaka; Raja Ray, of Shahzadpur, in eastern Pabna; Nabud (or "Madan") Ray, of Chandpratap in Manikganj subdivision of Dhaka; Bahadur Ghazi, Sona Ghazi, and Anwar Ghazi of Bhowal, Dhaka; Pahlawan of Matang in southwestern Sylhet; Ram Chandra, of Bakla in southeastern Bakarganj; and Majlis Kutab, of Fatehabad, modern Faridpur. 'Isa Khan himself controlled present-day Comilla, half of Dhaka, western Mymensingh, and perhaps portions of Rangpur, Bogra, and Pabna. See N. K. Bhattacharya, "Bengal Chiefs' Struggle for Independence in the Reigns of Akbar and Jahangir," *Bengal Past and Present* 35 (January-June 1928): 30-36.

36. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 659; text, 3: 439.

to do so, this "little king" ruled the eastern delta virtually unchecked.³⁷ His prudence was dictated by the Mughals' gradual mastery of the sort of naval tactics long used by chieftains of the eastern delta. In February 1586, in fact, imperial commanders pushed all the way through the jungle and riverine tracts to the port of Chittagong, on which occasion the city's Arakanese ruler sent gifts of elephants to the Mughals. 'Isa Khan also acted in a conciliatory manner.³⁸ Yet strikes such as this were essentially raids; throughout this period the Mughals, forced to acknowledge 'Isa Khan's status as tributary "*zamindār* of Bhati,"³⁹ were quite unable to consolidate the east under anything like regular administration.

To remedy this situation, Akbar in early 1594 dispatched as governor of Bengal one of his most illustrious generals, the Rajput chieftain Raja Man Singh. After founding Rajmahal as his provincial capital in the delta's northwestern corner, the new governor led a vast army into Bhati in late 1595.⁴⁰ Powerful Hindu chieftains like Kedar Rai, *zamindār* of Bhusna in Faridpur District, and Patkunwar Narain, the cousin of the raja of Kuch Bihar, chose refuge with 'Isa Khan rather than submit to the Mughals.⁴¹ In August 1597, 'Isa Khan joined forces with Ma'sum Khan Kabuli, the die-hard Mughal turncoat, and together they engaged Mughal naval forces with their own Bengali war boats in a battle that resulted in another Mughal defeat, in which Raja Man Singh's own son was killed.⁴² But this was the high tide of 'Isa Khan's fortunes; two years later he died, apparently of natural causes.⁴³ Sporadic resistance to Mughal authority nonetheless continued as 'Isa Khan's Afghan followers flocked to one of his sons,

37. In 1585 'Isa Khan even promised the Mughals that he would dispatch Ma'sum Khan Kabuli, the renegade Mughal, on a compulsory pilgrimage to Mecca—a typical form of political banishment in Indo-Muslim history—and although he did not carry out the promise, he did manage to restrain the rebel. *Ibid.*, trans., 696–97; text, 461.

38. *Ibid.*, trans., 721–22; text, 479.

39. *Ibid.*, trans., 1031; text, 672.

40. *Ibid.*, trans., 1042–43; text, 696.

41. *Ibid.*, trans., 1059, 1068; text, 711, 716.

42. *Ibid.*, trans., 1093; text, 733.

43. 'Isa Khan's career has been variously interpreted. Observing that he was neither a tribal head nor the descendant of any ancient family, the historian Jadunath Sarkar dismissed him as a "bloated *zamindār*" and a "standing menace to the peace of the province." But such an assessment capitulates to the Mughal imperial perspective and adopts the Mughal definition of "peace." In fact, by Sarkar's standards, any great king of humble origins—for example, Sher Shah or 'Ala al-Din Husain Shah—should have to be similarly dismissed. Even the contemporary observer Abu'l-fazl would have disagreed with Sarkar's judgment. In calling 'Isa Khan "a great landholder" and in declaring that with his death "the thornbush of commotion was extirpated," the official Mughal chronicler was paying a backhanded com-

Daud, while Kedar Rai joined with bands of maritime Arakanese, known as Maghs, who had been plundering Bengali communities far up the Meghna estuary.

In 1602, with a view to thwarting the rebellious ambitions of all these elements, Raja Man Singh established Dhaka as the center of his military operations in the east.⁴⁴ Soon it would be Bengal's premier city. To be sure, the Mughals did not create the city ex nihilo. Since at least the mid-fifteenth century, it had been an outpost of Muslim settlers,⁴⁵ and one Mughal officer remarked that Dhaka, together with Gaur, Rajmahal, and Chorghat, had been among Bengal's "ancient forts."⁴⁶ Hence it was probably for strategic reasons that, shortly after Mun'im Khan took charge of the province in 1574, Dhaka was made the headquarters of a *thāna* (Beng., *thānā*), or military district, on the Mughals' far eastern frontier. Yet imperial authority there was still precarious, for in 1584 Dhaka's *thānādār*, or military administrator, had been captured and imprisoned by 'Isa Khan.⁴⁷

By the time Raja Man Singh established himself in Dhaka, however, the balance of power had tipped in the Mughals' favor. From his new headquarters the governor, exploiting the disarray that followed 'Isa Khan's death in 1599, mounted a vigorous campaign against the remaining "twelve chieftains." First, he worked on the Afghans loyal to 'Isa Khan's son Daud, and then, in 1603, on Kedar Rai and the Arakanese. In all these campaigns the governor met with consummate success: he pushed back Daud to Sonargaon, defeated and killed Kedar Rai, expelled the Arakanese from the lower delta, and drove 'Uthman Khan, the most powerful of the remaining Afghans, into the jungles of Mymensingh. Alluding to the ascendancy of Mughal power in eastern Bengal between 1599 and 1603,

pliment to this stalwart adversary of imperial expansion, acknowledging his de facto authority in eastern Bengal. This suggests that 'Isa Khan was perceived even in his own day in rather the same light in which subsequent folklore came to see him: as a symbol of native Bengali resistance to Mughal power. See Jadunath Sarkar, ed., *History of Bengal*, 213, 226. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 1140; text, 3: 763. Dinesh Chandra Sen, ed. and trans., *Eastern Bengal Ballads, Mymensingh* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1923–28), 2: 301–75.

44. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 1214–15; text, 3: 809.

45. In 1456–57, during the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah I (1433–59), a certain "Musannat Bakht Binat, daughter of Marhamat" patronized the construction of a mosque in what is now the city's oldest quarter. Several years later, in 1459, the sultan himself renovated a gate, possibly to another mosque. Although nothing now remains of this gate, the statement that it was repaired in 1459 points to the sultanate's presence in Dhaka before that date. Shamsud-Din Ahmed, ed. and trans., *Inscriptions*, 4: 57–58, 62–63.

46. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 19b; trans., 1: 57.

47. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 659; text, 3: 439.

Abu'l-fazl wrote that "the Rajah's mind being now at ease and having committed the *thana*s to the charge of able men, he went to Dhaka."⁴⁸ But the governor would not remain in the city for long; in early 1605, he left for Agra to attend to the ailing emperor, whose death was approaching. In that same year, Akbar died and was succeeded by his son, Jahangir.

It was in Jahangir's reign (1605-27) that the Mughal enterprise in Bengal passed from an ad hoc pursuit of rebels to the establishment of a regular administration. Initially, the new emperor's efforts to subdue Afghan chieftains proved ineffectual, especially with respect to the redoubtable 'Uthman Khan, who remained firmly entrenched in Bengal's easternmost districts. But in May 1608, aiming to crush such elements once and for all, Jahangir appointed as governor 'Ala al-Din Islam Khan, an extraordinarily able and determined commander.⁴⁹ A man about thirty-seven years of age at this time, Islam Khan enjoyed close ties with the emperor—the two had grown up together since childhood as foster-brothers—and possessed remarkable powers of self-discipline.⁵⁰ Taking leave of the emperor, he moved down the Gangetic Plain at the head of an immense army of cavalry, artillery, and elephants, and a huge flotilla of war boats. After entering Bengal and pausing in Rajmahal, the army made its way through the jungles of the central delta, subdued rebellious chieftains on both sides of the Ganges-Padma river system, and finally reached Dhaka in 1610.

The Consolidation of Mughal Authority, 1610-1704

With Islam Khan's arrival, the Mughal era of Bengal's history effectively began. Upon reaching the delta, the new governor first moved the imperial provincial capital from Rajmahal, in the far northwest, where all previous Muslim capitals had been located, to Dhaka, deep in the Bengal hinterland. In this way, regions that had hitherto remained beyond the reach of North Indian rulers, and had been only lightly touched by the sultans of Gaur, were directly exposed to the epicenter of Mughal culture and authority. From 1610 to 1715, the Mughals would use Dhaka as a base for integrating diverse peoples into their social and bureaucratic system and for transforming into arable land the vast stretches of forest that still covered most of "Bhati," or the eastern delta. Moreover, as Dhaka was connected to the Padma-Ganges river system at a point midway between the Bay of Bengal

and older seats of Muslim power in the Gaur-Tanda region, the city would serve as an ideal entrepôt for riverine trade between East and West Bengal, between Bengal and Upper India, and between Bengal and the wider world beyond the bay. Since the overland ascendancy of Mughal influence in Bengal's eastern hinterland occurred just as Portuguese, Dutch, and English commercial interests entered the region from overseas, this formerly isolated backwater was now simultaneously integrated into two cosmopolitan and expanding political economies, the Mughal and the European.

Islam Khan could not have foreseen the long-term implications of his planting the provincial capital in the heart of East Bengal. His immediate concern, after all, was to subdue refractory elements that had long eluded imperial authority. An iron-willed man, who demanded of his subordinates an unquestioning submission both to himself and to the Mughal cause, with which he fiercely identified,⁵¹ Islam Khan governed only briefly, dying in office in 1613. Yet it was he who, in a bloody battle in the hills of Sylhet in 1612, defeated and killed 'Uthman Khan, thereby extirpating the last credible remnant of Afghan resistance to Mughal power in the delta. And it was he, too, who established the political ties that would bind local potentates to the Mughal cause. Three factors helped the Mughals consolidate their power in the delta: their more effective use of military force, the diplomacy of Islam Khan, and the financial backing of Hindu merchant-bankers.

Some historians have argued that gunpowder technology played a decisive role in the expansion and consolidation, not only of the Mughal empire, but of those of their Safavid and Ottoman contemporaries, and have even labeled these three polities "gunpowder empires."⁵² But how critical was the use of gunpowder in the Mughal conquest of Bengal? Mirza Nathan, a junior Mughal officer who accompanied numerous campaigns dur-

51. He ordered, for example, that no one should enter or leave Bengal without his personal permission. His vigor in enforcing regulations of this type is seen in an incident involving a certain Shaikh Husain, who was in Rajmahal and wished to proceed directly to Delhi. The shaikh, who had grown up with the governor from childhood "in close intimacy and brotherly love," became extremely irritated when informed that the governor intended to apply this regulation even to him. In order to elicit obedience from the shaikh, the governor on the occasion of their interview in Dhaka instructed his aides with the words, "When the Shaikh would proceed to embrace me, you force him to bend his neck and throw him down on my feet."

Islam Khan then grabbed the man's beard and, forcefully pulling him to his feet, gave him severe blows to his shoulder. In perhaps the most humiliating gesture of all, the governor ordered his men to place the shaikh's beard under his feet; in this fashion he was beaten again. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 53a-b; trans., 1:132-33.

52. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 3: 17-18. William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 95-98.

48. *Ibid.*, trans., 1215, 1235-36; text, 809, 824.

49. Jahangir, *Tuzuk*, 1: 142-43, 208.

50. "Islam Khan," wrote the emperor in his memoirs, "is a brave and well-dispositioned youth, and is distinguished in every way above his family. Till now he has never drunk intoxicating drinks, and his sincerity towards me is such that I have honoured him with the title of son." *Ibid.*, 32.

Abu'l-fazl wrote that "the Rajah's mind being now at ease and having committed the *thanahs* to the charge of able men, he went to Dhaka."⁴⁸ But the governor would not remain in the city for long; in early 1605, he left for Agra to attend to the ailing emperor, whose death was approaching. In that same year, Akbar died and was succeeded by his son, Jahangir.

It was in Jahangir's reign (1605–27) that the Mughal enterprise in Bengal passed from an ad hoc pursuit of rebels to the establishment of a regular administration. Initially, the new emperor's efforts to subdue Afghan chieftains proved ineffectual, especially with respect to the redoubtable 'Uthman Khan, who remained firmly entrenched in Bengal's easternmost districts. But in May 1608, aiming to crush such elements once and for all, Jahangir appointed as governor 'Ala al-Din Islam Khan, an extraordinarily able and determined commander.⁴⁹ A man about thirty-seven years of age at this time, Islam Khan enjoyed close ties with the emperor—the two had grown up together since childhood as foster-brothers—and possessed remarkable powers of self-discipline.⁵⁰ Taking leave of the emperor, he moved down the Gangetic Plain at the head of an immense army of cavalry, artillery, and elephants, and a huge flotilla of war boats. After entering Bengal and pausing in Rajmahal, the army made its way through the jungles of the central delta, subdued rebellious chieftains on both sides of the Ganges-Padma river system, and finally reached Dhaka in 1610.

The Consolidation of Mughal Authority, 1610–1704

With Islam Khan's arrival, the Mughal era of Bengal's history effectively began. Upon reaching the delta, the new governor first moved the imperial provincial capital from Rajmahal, in the far northwest, where all previous Muslim capitals had been located, to Dhaka, deep in the Bengal hinterland. In this way, regions that had hitherto remained beyond the reach of North Indian rulers, and had been only lightly touched by the sultans of Gaur, were directly exposed to the epicenter of Mughal culture and authority. From 1610 to 1715, the Mughals would use Dhaka as a base for integrating diverse peoples into their social and bureaucratic system and for transforming into arable land the vast stretches of forest that still covered most of "Bhati," or the eastern delta. Moreover, as Dhaka was connected to the Padma-Ganges river system at a point midway between the Bay of Bengal

and older seats of Muslim power in the Gaur-Tanda region, the city would serve as an ideal entrepôt for riverine trade between East and West Bengal, between Bengal and Upper India, and between Bengal and the wider world beyond the bay. Since the overland ascendancy of Mughal influence in Bengal's eastern hinterland occurred just as Portuguese, Dutch, and English commercial interests entered the region from overseas, this formerly isolated backwater was now simultaneously integrated into two cosmopolitan and expanding political economies, the Mughal and the European.

Islam Khan could not have foreseen the long-term implications of his planting the provincial capital in the heart of East Bengal. His immediate concern, after all, was to subdue refractory elements that had long eluded imperial authority. An iron-willed man, who demanded of his subordinates an unquestioning submission both to himself and to the Mughal cause, with which he fiercely identified,⁵¹ Islam Khan governed only briefly, dying in office in 1613. Yet it was he who, in a bloody battle in the hills of Sylhet in 1612, defeated and killed 'Uthman Khan, thereby extinguishing the last credible remnant of Afghan resistance to Mughal power in the delta. And it was he, too, who established the political ties that would bind local potentates to the Mughal cause. Three factors helped the Mughals consolidate their power in the delta: their more effective use of military force, the diplomacy of Islam Khan, and the financial backing of Hindu merchant-bankers.

Some historians have argued that gunpowder technology played a decisive role in the expansion and consolidation, not only of the Mughal empire, but of those of their Safavid and Ottoman contemporaries, and have even labeled these three polities "gunpowder empires."⁵² But how critical was the use of gunpowder in the Mughal conquest of Bengal? Mirza Nathan, a junior Mughal officer who accompanied numerous campaigns dur-

51. He ordered, for example, that no one should enter or leave Bengal without his personal permission. His vigor in enforcing regulations of this type is seen in an incident involving a certain Shaikh Husain, who was in Rajmahal and wished to proceed directly to Delhi. The shaikh, who had grown up with the governor from childhood "in close intimacy and brotherly love," became extremely irritated when informed that the governor intended to apply this regulation even to him. In order to elicit obedience from the shaikh, the governor on the occasion of their interview in Dhaka instructed his aides with the words, "When the Shaykh would proceed to embrace me, you force him to bend his neck and throw him down on my feet." Islam Khan then grabbed the man's beard and, forcefully pulling him to his feet, gave him severe blows to his shoulder. In perhaps the most humiliating gesture of all, the governor ordered his men to place the shaikh's beard under his feet; in this fashion he was beaten again. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 53a–b; trans. 1: 132–33.

52. Hodgson, *Venture of Islam*, 3: 17–18. William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force, and Society since A.D. 1000* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 95–98.

48. *Ibid.*, trans., 1215, 1235–36; text, 809, 824.

49. Jahangir, *Tūzūk*, 1: 142–43, 208.

50. "Islam Khan," wrote the emperor in his memoirs, "is a brave and well-dispositioned youth, and is distinguished in every way above his family. Till now he has never drunk intoxicating drinks, and his sincerity towards me is such that I have honoured him with the title of son." *Ibid.*, 32.

Gunpowder Empire

ing the governorship of Islam Khan and his successors, remarked that "cannon, cross-bows, rockets and other fire-arms of this type... are the aggressive firearms of India."⁵³ This officer evidently associated gunpowder weapons with "India," that is, Mughal Hindustan, as opposed to Bengal's extreme northeastern frontier (in which context the remark was made), whose peoples lacked such firepower. These weapons included not only the type of heavy cannon that the Mughals brought with them to Bengal as early as Mun'im Khan's invasion of 1574,⁵⁴ but smoothbore muskets and, by the early 1600s, lightweight cannon that could be transported on the shoulders of foot soldiers and fired by cannoners from horseback.⁵⁵

There are problems, however, with characterizing the Mughal state as a "gunpowder empire." First, the Mughals did not introduce cannon or the musket to India; both had been found in North India and the Deccan since the second half of the fifteenth century, nearly a century before the Mughal age.⁵⁶ Second, the Mughals' use of firepower did not immediately spell the end of mounted archers. Used in combination with musketeers and artillery, archers continued to play a decisive role in Mughal warfare.⁵⁷ In the ten major imperial campaigns waged between 1608 and 1618—the most important decade for the consolidation of Mughal power in the delta—the Mughals always deployed a mixed force structure, averaging for each campaign 4,000 musketeers, 2,100 mounted archers, and 300 war boats.⁵⁸ On the other hand, the Bengal rulers, like the sultans of Delhi, relied on war elephants as the principal arm of their military.⁵⁹ A European visitor once noted that Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah maintained a stable of 914 war elephants "trained to fight with swords fixed to their tusks and to throw javelins from their trunks; they can kill and wound many

53. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 230a; trans., 2: 508; "az 'adāwat-i ātishbāzi-yi Hindūstān ast."
54. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 97; text, 3: 70.
55. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 216b; trans., 2: 468.
56. Iqtidar Alam Khan, "Early Use of Cannon and Musket in India: A.D. 1442–1526," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 24, no. 2 (1981): 146–64.
57. The seventeenth-century French traveler François Bernier noted that Mughal mounted archers could deliver six arrows before a musketeer could fire twice. See Douglas Stroussand, *The Formation of the Mughal Empire* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 53.
58. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fols. 20b, 40b, 49b, 53a, 64a, 162b, 163b, 192b, 231a; trans., 1: 60, 97, 121, 131, 163, 316, 319, 405; 2: 310.
59. Simon Digby has argued that the key to the Delhi sultanate's power lay in its monopoly of reliable supplies of elephants and war-horses. The elephants comprised the key arm of the military, with the size of the state reflected in that of its elephant stables. Digby, *War Horse and Elephant in the Delhi Sultanate* (Oxford: Oxford University Monographs, 1971), 23–82.

people in this way."⁶⁰ At the battle of Tukaroi (1575), during the Mughals' first serious drive into the Bengal hinterland, Sultan Daud's elephants did indeed produce havoc among the imperial cavalry.⁶¹ But the imperial armies eventually won that battle, and they owed their triumph not to gunpowder but to their superior use of mounted archers.

Moreover, whatever advantage the Mughals may have enjoyed with their superior firepower was at least partially neutralized by the diffusion of gunpowder technology among their adversaries. In 1584 'Isa Khan deployed artillery and muskets in naval battles with the Mughals, and 'Uthman Khan regularly used artillery (*tūp o tufang*) in naval and land battles.⁶² When Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore capitulated to Islam Khan in 1609, he agreed to surrender twenty thousand infantry, five hundred war boats, and a thousand "maunds" (41 tons) of gunpowder.⁶³ Possession of supplies in such quantities implies a rather thorough integration of gunpowder technology in armies opposing the Mughals.⁶⁴ By contrast, tribal or semi-tribal peoples living along the fringes of the delta, especially in the extreme north, seem initially to have lacked gunpowder technology. Warriors of Kamrup were described simply as archers, while those of Kuch Bihar used poisoned arrows.⁶⁵ Yet by about 1612 even these outlying peoples were reported firing cannon and crossbows (*tūp o sandūq o tīr-hāyi takhsh*) from stockades in rebellions against Mughal rule.⁶⁶

Perhaps of greater significance for consolidating Mughal rule were Islam Khan's adroit policies vis-à-vis the "twelve chieftains" and other locally entrenched *zamīndārs*. For in many engagements the actual use of guns, as opposed to their ostentatious display, was obviated by a diplomacy carefully calculated to win over local leaders. Typical was Islam Khan's policy toward Raja Satrajit, the raja of Bhusna, located about twenty miles southwest of Faridpur on the border of modern Jessore. Mirza Nathan

60. *Voyage dans les deltas du Gange*, 326.
61. Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 176; text, 3: 123.
62. *Ibid.*, trans., 3: 659, 1214; text, 438, 809. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fols. 67a, 72b; trans., 1: 174, 189.
63. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 99; trans., 1: 28.
64. 'Isa Khan and his allies sometimes plundered Mughal supplies for firearms, or employed Portuguese mercenaries, who hired out their services to Mughal and anti-Mughal forces alike. In 1583 some three thousand artillerymen, apparently renegade Portuguese, were in the employ of anti-Mughal forces in East Bengal. See Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, *Akbar-nāma*, trans., 3: 228, 620; text, 3: 161, 417; Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 280b; trans., 2: 656. See also Maria Augusta Lima Cruz, "Exiles and Renegades in Early-Sixteenth-Century Portuguese India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 23, no. 3 (July 1986), 259.
65. Nathan, *Bahārīstān*, text, fol. 152a, 163a; trans., 1: 289, 317.
66. *Ibid.*, text, fol. 177a; trans., 1: 359.

15th
of
16th
centuries

notes that the governor sent one of his generals to negotiate with this powerful chieftain, instructing him that "if luckily Satrajit submitted, then he should be given the hope of the grant of his territory as jagir and should be brought before Islam Khan in accordance with this covenant; otherwise he should have only himself to thank for the consequences of his acts, and his country should be left as a prey to the horse of the imperial Karoris (revenue-collectors)." 67

Here was a judicious combination of carrot and stick. From the raja's perspective, the inducement to submit was his integration into a far wider field of activity than the territory of Bhusna could ever offer, even while he retained his former domains in the form of a *jāgīr*, or revenue assignment. As an imperial *jāgīrdār* ("holder of a *jāgīr*"), he would continue to collect land revenues from his former subjects, except that those revenues would now be used to maintain troops available for state service, and in numbers fixed by imperial officers in Dhaka. *Vis-à-vis* his former subjects, the imperial *jāgīrdār* would still preside over the ritual ceremonies befitting a raja, though he would have to present himself and his troops to the governor at any time the latter wished. If the raja agreed to this new political role, the "covenant" between him and the government would be solemnly ratified by his personal appearance before the governor. But if he resisted and were defeated, imperial revenue officers would assess and collect the land revenue in his territory while he himself, if he survived the conflict, would face imprisonment. 68

In general, the more important the chieftain, and the sooner he capitulated, the more inducements Islam Khan was prepared to offer in exchange for submission to Mughal rule. This is well illustrated in the governor's dealings with Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore, one of the most powerful of Bengal's "twelve chieftains." "Islam Khan," wrote Mirza Nathan, "for the sake of drawing the attention of other Zamindars, and also in consideration of the high position held by the aforesaid Raja among the Zamindars of Bengal, bestowed honours upon him beyond measure, and consoled and encouraged him." 69 Aware that lesser chiefs were looking to bigger chiefs such as Pratapaditya for leadership, or at least for direction, the governor promised this chieftain not only his own former possessions as *jāgīr* but other lands far to the east. To seal the covenant, the governor conferred on

67. *Ibid.*, text, fol. 6a; trans., 1: 18.

68. After initially resisting Mughal pressure, Raja Satrajit made peace with Islam Khan and joined numerous Mughal expeditions against other chieftains of eastern Bengal.

69. *Ibid.*, text, fol. 9a; trans., 1: 27.

him a stunning array of Mughal regalia: a sword, a bejeweled swordbelt, a camphor-stand, five high-bred horses, three elephants, and an imperial ket-tledrum. 70

On the other hand, the Mughal regime tolerated no sign of perfidy on the part of a newly created *jāgīrdār*. Despite his formal submission, Pratapaditya failed to provide Islam Khan with his armies as promised, and to punish him, the governor sent a substantial army and navy into Jessore. After defeating Pratapaditya's forces, the governor imprisoned the raja and annexed his territories. 71 The province's chief fiscal officer was then sent to the raja's former domains in order "to make due assessment of revenue of Jessore and to bring the rent-roll (*nuskha*) to the government record-office" in Dhaka. 72 Clearly, by resisting imperial rule the raja forfeited his chance of keeping his former domains as *jāgīr*, while the fields of his former subjects were reassessed by Mughal revenue officers. 73 Had Pratapaditya not resisted, he would have continued levying and collecting taxes through his own agents.

An even bigger prize was the submission of Musa Khan, a son of 'Isa Khan. Known by the regal title of Masnad-i 'Alī, "Exalted Throne," Musa Khan had inherited his father's position as the principal ruler of Bhati. Although the Bengali ruler possessed a huge fleet of 700 war boats, many of them armed with cannon, the Mughals met him with their own fleet of 295 war boats, manned by twelve thousand sailors, and compelled him to submit. 74 When Musa Khan rebelled and was again forced to submit, the governor placed him under detention in Dhaka. 75 In 1613, however, when Qasim Khan succeeded to the governorship, the Bengali chieftain was granted his freedom and allowed to participate in major expeditions along the northern and eastern frontiers. 76 Against the raja of Tippera, in fact, he was entrusted with the co-command of an army of five thousand mus-

70. *Ibid.*, text, fol. 9a; trans., 1: 28.

71. *Ibid.*, text, fols. 49b, 54b, 57b; trans., 1: 121, 134-38, 143.

72. *Ibid.*, text, fol. 57b; trans., 1: 144.

73. "Khawaja Muhammad Tahir, who was sent to Jessore to assess its revenues," wrote Mirza Nathan, "returned to Islam Khan with the register of revenues of that territory which was prepared to the satisfaction of the ryots [i.e., cultivators] and to the advantage of the imperial treasury. It was presented to Islam Khan with the signatures of the Chowdhurries and Qanungus [i.e., intermediate landholders and their clerks]; it was then handed over to the accountants of [the province's chief financial officer] Mu'taqid Khan in order to enforce these regulations on the ryots and the jagirdars." *Ibid.*, text, fol. 61b; trans., 1: 156. Emphasis mine.

74. *Ibid.*, text, fols. 5a, 19b, 21a; trans., 1: 156.

75. *Ibid.*, text, fol. 41b; trans., 1: 100.

76. *Ibid.*, text, fols. 228b-229a; trans., 2: 503-4.