

## Book Review-1

**Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh, *The English East India and The Economy of North Bengal: A Case Study of Malda Factory (1757-1833)*, (Abhijeet Publications, March 2023), Pages. 254, Rs. 1,450**

The economic history of India has long been dominated, if not plagued, by a certain kind of Grand narrative which fails to acknowledge the regional differences across the subcontinent. The suppression and marginalisation of the voices from the periphery illustrate the power of an established mainstream. Colonial historians attempted to inflate the benefits of British rule by emphasising just the Gangetic Doab region and claiming that India saw unparalleled economic progress during this period. As a result, the conditions primarily of the Gangetic Doab region formed the basis of a monolith. On the contrary, Nationalist writers like Dadabhai Naoroji and R.C. Dutt sharply criticised the British grand narrative. They argued that colonialism was the primary barrier to India's economic progress. However, they failed to recognise regional diversity as well and portrayed the story as a monolith based primarily on the experiences of the Gangetic-Doab region. They may have had political reasons, and there may have been difficulties in recognising the heterogeneity of the Indian condition during the anti-colonial freedom movement, but we must admit that they were also trapped by another type of monolith while dealing with the economic situation of such a vast country full of diversities.

Hence, historians have to consider the heterogeneous nature and varied developments of different regions to get a more nuanced understanding of the economic condition under the colonial regime. As far as the economic history of colonial Bengal is concerned, most of the historians have focused on the south-western part or eastern part of Bengal; and for a long period, North Bengal rarely gets the importance it deserves in cliventure. Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh's seminal thesis on the economic history of North Bengal with special reference to the Malda Factory in the early colonial era, namely 'The English East India Company and the Economy of North Bengal: A Case Study of Malda Factory (1757-1833)', merits our attention in this sphere as a pioneering endeavour. It is worth mentioning that although initially ignored, since the 1980s, North Bengal as a 'virgin and untouched field' came to ignite the imagination of several scholars. In 1984, Omkar Goswami in his article 'Agriculture in Slump: The Peasant Economy of East and North Bengal in the 1930s' attempted to examine the impact of the Great Depression on the jute-growing regions. One year later, Virginius

Xaxa in an article named 'Colonial Capitalism and Underdevelopment in North Bengal' maintained that as one of the first regions of Bengal to be affected by the foreign capital investment in the plantation sector in the mid-19th century, North Bengal's economy suffered a 'structural underdevelopment'. In 1992, Ranajit Das Gupta focused on the socio-economic and political condition of late colonial Jalpaiguri.

Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh himself supervised two brilliant PhD theses, one by Sujit Ghosh on the industrial and commercial economy of North Bengal during the period between 1833 to 1933, and the other by Kartick Saha on the demographic profile of Colonial and Post Colonial North Bengal. In 2019, along with his student Supam Biswas, Dr. Ghosh in an article named 'Colonial Economic Venture: A Study on the Tea Industry of North Bengal (1850-1947)' studied the entry of Indian entrepreneurs into the tea plantation economy of North Bengal in the late colonial era, and discussed how such intervention gave a severe jolt to the European tea companies. These works clearly show the ever-increasing interest among scholars regarding various aspects of North Bengal. However, when Dr. Ghosh did his Ph.D., the scenario was not so great. Rather, Dr. Ghosh himself lamented that the previous works gave little importance to the economic history of North Bengal and focused merely on the condition of South Bengal. Thus, Dr. Ghosh's thesis had a pioneering effect on the historiography of North Bengal. Dr. Ghosh has recently published his much-celebrated Ph.D. thesis in March 2023. Apart from the introduction, this book consists of 8 main chapters. Dealing with the commercial activities and organizational structure of the East India Company's Factory at Malda, Dr. Ghosh attempted to understand the extent and characteristics of commercial endeavours of various European factories in the early colonial era.

Since Malda was the first location in North Bengal where several European firms built their outposts, the author attempted to chronicle Malda's origins, development, and decline as a major hub for trade. Using a wide range of materials, including memoirs, foreign travelogues, and Rennel's maps, the author discusses specific geographical and commercial aspects that aided in the development of the Malda town in his first chapter. Malda flourished as a hub for trade and manufacture, particularly the production of silk and cotton, thanks to its advantageous position and royal sponsorship. The topic of why the English chose Malda as the location for their factory's establishment in 1680 opens chapter two. In response, the author emphasises the proximity of the river and mint. Chapter three deals with the production pattern in the Malda factory by focusing on the purchasing system, the role of the Governor General-in-Council and Board of Trade in this matter, role of intermediaries like Gomasthas, Dellols, and Pycars. The author also takes into consideration the prime obstacles that the Company's investors had to face like natural calamities like famine, droughts, high prices of cocoon, currency problems, and resistance of the primary producers, particularly the weavers. The author next addresses the

trade pattern in the Malda industry after discussing the production pattern. Dr. Ghosh contends that the Court of Directors of the Company intended to eliminate the right of residents to engage in private trade in raw silk, upholding the residents' unethical private trade practices. The administrative framework and organisational structure of the factory are the main topics of Chapter Five. The Company was frustrated when the Agency system was introduced in 1753, but when it was reintroduced in 1787 under Cornwallis, significant changes were brought about, such as the outlawing of the banyan ship. It became imperative for the factory to develop an effective military establishment to maintain law and order by suppressing the dacoits. In addition, it illuminates the misconduct of the factory's indigenous officials and the abuse of those officials by the residents; this suggests a hierarchy of exploitation in which the native officials of the factory oppressed the primary producers, who themselves were oppressed by the residents. The relationships that the residents had with local collectors and other administrative officials, such as the zamindars, and with other European firms, such as the French, Dutch, and Armenian, were the focus of chapters six and seven. The author charts Malda's collapse during the 19th century in the last chapter, contrasting it with Calcutta's ascent.

This groundbreaking work does, however, have certain shortcomings. The author acknowledges that a substantial portion of his story comes from English sources. No other European company's records have been reviewed. Furthermore, the author mentions in passing in the introduction that the period under discussion was significant for certain global events like the Industrial Revolution, French Revolution, and the Revolutionary Wars, which had an indirect impact on the East India Company's trade and commercial policy, he does not elaborate it further. It would have been wonderful to have this relationship to comprehend how the crucial global political and economic conditions impacted the local economy of a colonised nation.

To sum up, it may be stated that some books achieve the status of 'magnum opus', while some other works are to be remembered for having a wider influence on academia by instilling enthusiasm among young scholars to dangle their feet into the stormy water of cliventure in order to unearth newer possibilities. As a student-lover professor and a Bonafide scholar, Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh has certainly succeeded in attaining both these feats, and here lies the fundamental significance of this monograph.

**Partha Mukherjee**

Assistant Professor of History  
Egra S.S.B. College, Egra, Midnapore (East)