Lecture 2
History of Ancient and Medieval Bengal

Introduction

1. Borders of modern Bangladesh coincide with the major portion of the ancient and historic region of Bengal. Civilization in the area dates back over four millennia, to the Chalcolithic Age. Bengal's early history featured a series of Indian empires, internal squabbling, and a tussle between Hinduism and Buddhism for dominance. Islam became dominant in the 13th century.

2. Bengal, earlier known as Vanga or Bangalah (Vangala), lost her freedom and sovereignty with the fall of the Nawabs after the Battle of Plassey in 1757.

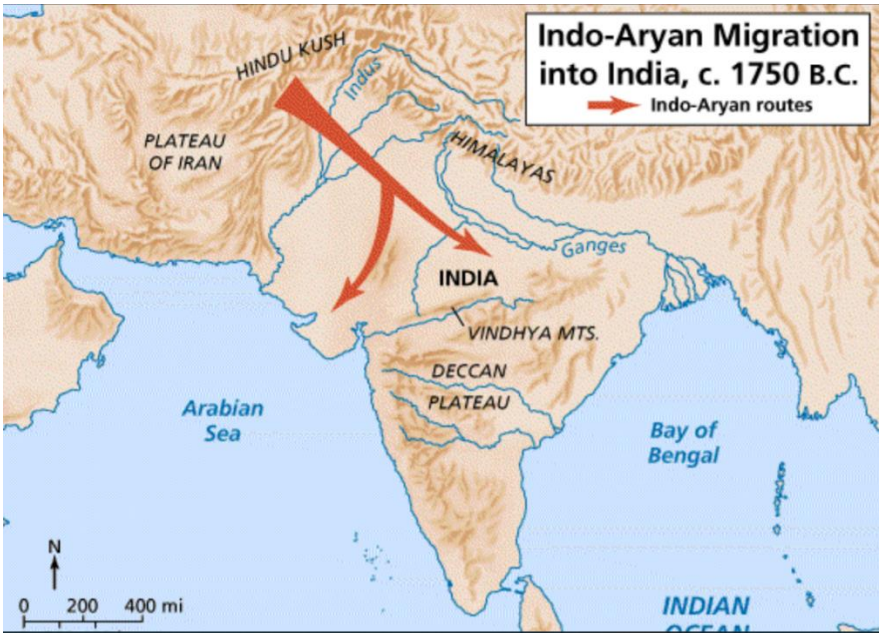
Anthropological Identity

3. Many anthropologists believe that the Bengali nation makes a vastly mixed race and one of the oldest groups of humans inhabiting this region. The anthropologists opine that people from all the four principal races of the world came to Bengal at one time or another and have left behind their marks. These races include: Negroid, Mongoloid, Caucasoid and AUSTRALOIDS.

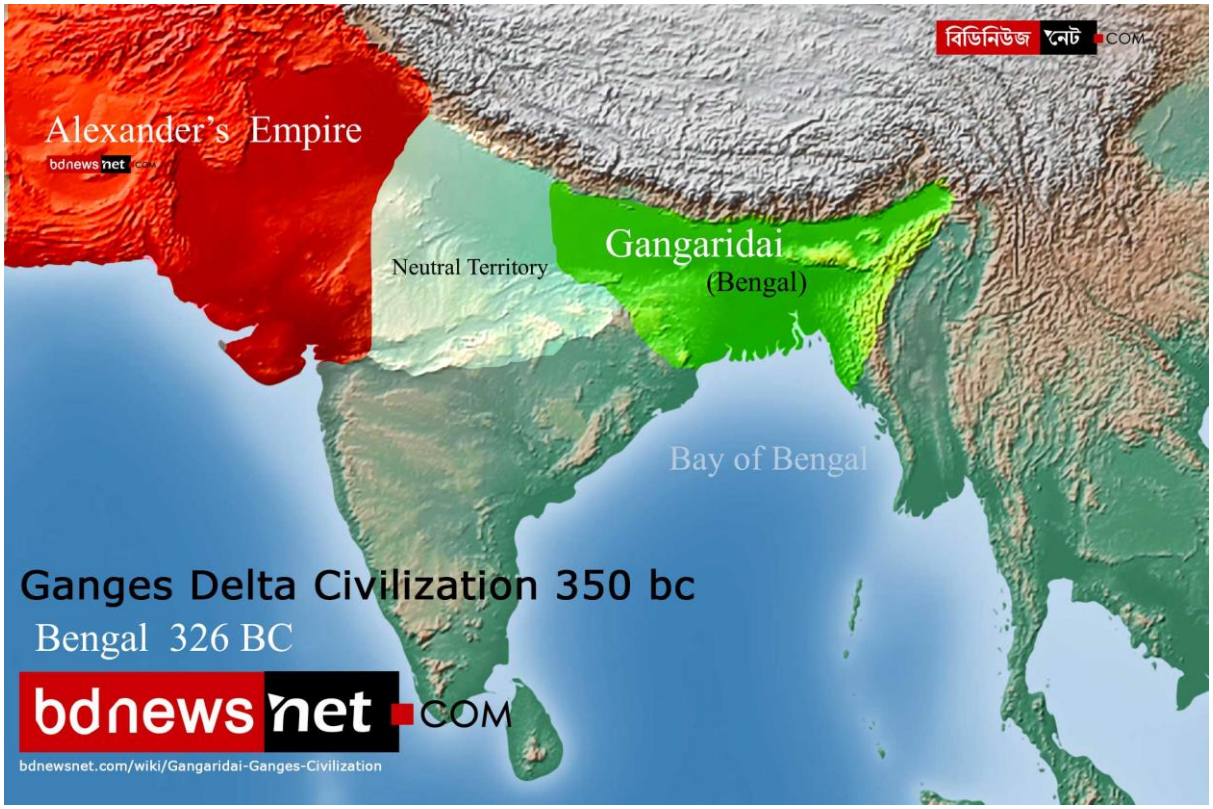
4. It is assumed that among the ancient inhabitants of Bangladesh, the speakers of AUSTRIC language were the majority. The ethnic groups of SANTALS, Banshforh, RAJBANGSHI in Bangladesh are related to the Proto-Australoids.

History of Ancient Bengal

5. Although, the Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent sometimes around 1750 B.C., they entered Bengal after a long time they had come to India.

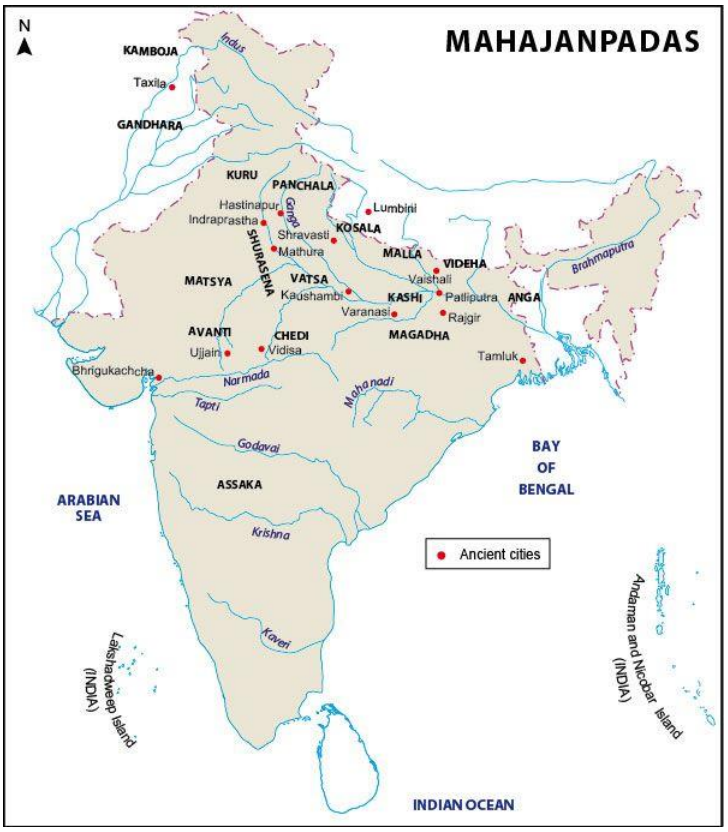


People used to live in the area from the pre-historic time which later came to be known as Bengal. The region was known to the ancient Greeks and Romans as Gangaridai. Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers act as a geographic marker of the region.

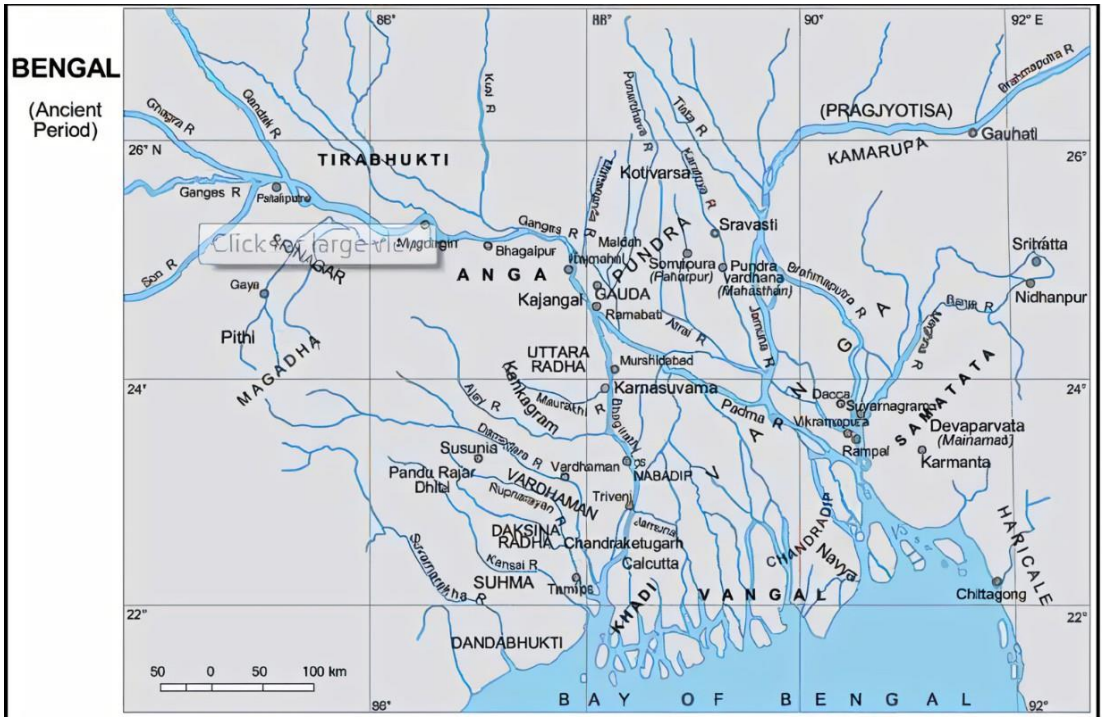


6. Several JANAPADAS in the form of small kingdoms existed in ancient Bengal from 1500 BC to 600 BC. Powerful Janapadas turned into Mahajanapadas or Great

States and sixteen such Mahajanapadas emerged in 600 BCE. The Eastern part of ancient India, covering much of current days Bangladesh was part of one of such mahajanapadas, the ancient kingdom of Anga.



7. Some of the erstwhile Janapadas in Bengal area were Pundra, Gaur, Rarh, Banga, Barendra, Harikela, Samatata.



a. **Pundra**. Pundra was one of the important janapadas comprised north-western part of present Bangladesh. Her capital was Pundranagar or Pundrabardhan.

b. **Gaur and Rarh**. Gaur and Rarh are mainly parts of present West Bengal.

c. **Banga or Vanga**. Banga or Vanga denotes the large portion of present Bangladesh. It was situated in the East and SouthEast portion of Bangladesh; its name was originated from the name of a race called Banga.

d. **Barendra**. A large portion of Bogra district and Rajshahi district was included in the Barendra janapada.

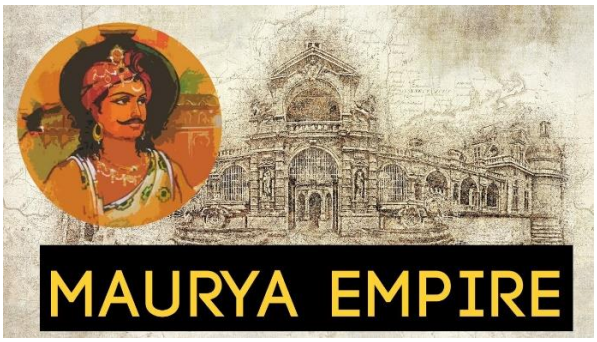
e. **Samatata**. Samatata existed as a neighboring janapada of Banga in the East and South-East of Bengal.

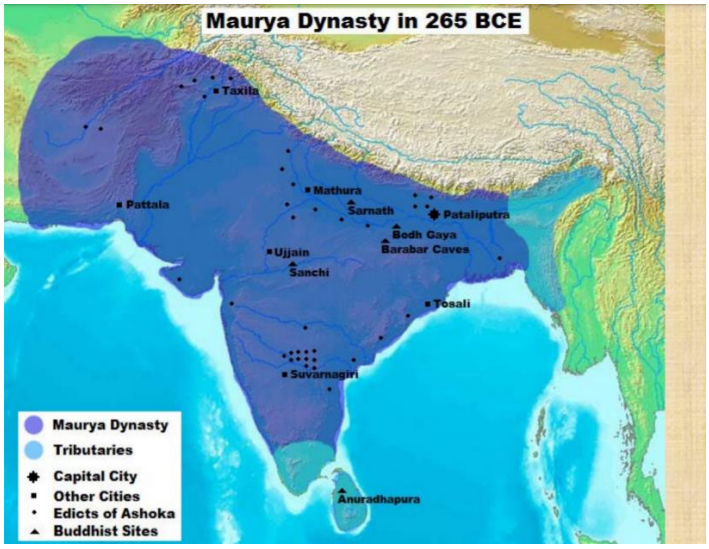
f. **Harikela**. It is supposed that the present day Sylhet and some part of Chattogram were Harikela janapada. Though some think that Harikela was not a separate janapada, rather included in Banga janapada.

8. **Dynasties in Bengal**.

a. **Maurya Dynasty (321- 185 B.C.)**. The Mauryan rule was established in North Bengal area during the reign of Emperor Asoka (269- 232 B.C.). Its capital was Pataliputra at first, but later moved to Pundranagar. The Mauryan empire was an efficient and highly organized autocracy with a standing army and civil service. The Empire's people mainly followed Buddhist religion but also supported Brahmanism and Jainism. It dissolved in 185 B.C. with the rise of the Sunga Dynasty in Magadha. Sunga Dynasty was succeeded by Kanva Dynasty (75-30 B.C.).







b. **Gupta Dynasty (320- 550 A.D.)**. The founder of the Gupta Dynasty was Maharaja Sri Gupta (240- 280 A.D.), but the empire was markedly founded by Chandragupta I (320-335 A.D.). Like the Mauryans, the capital of Bengal under the Guptas was Pundranagar of Mahasthangarh. Gupta rulers spread Hinduism in their empire through the building of temples and the promotion of Hindu writings and rituals. Gupta Emperors followed a model of decentralized administration. Gupta Period witnessed the pinnacle of creativity in architecture. The most important mathematical achievement during the Gupta Era was the invention of the decimal system with zero as a placeholder.

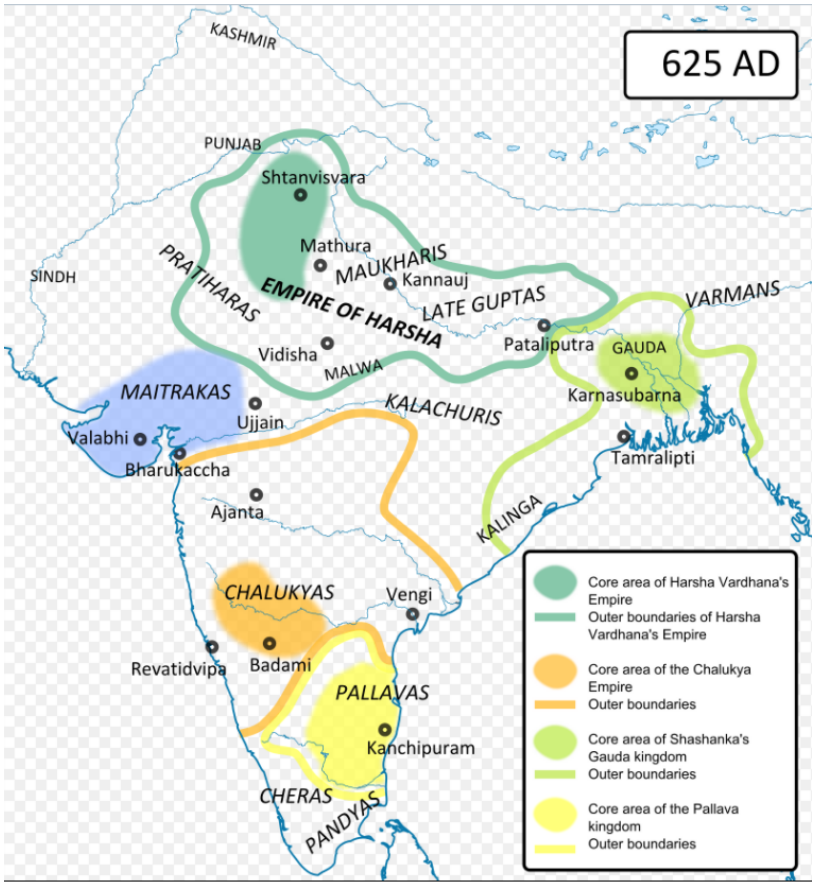




An 8 gm gold coin featuring Chandragupta Vikramaditya



c. **Bengal in Post Gupta Period**. The Gupta Empire fell to pieces as a result of the attacks of a fierce mountainous tribe, the Huns. Taking this opportunity many small kingdoms rose throughout the whole of North India. Two independent kingdoms came into existence – the kingdom of Banga (Southern region of South-East and West Bengal) and the kingdom of Gaur (Western and Northern region of Bengal).



With the passage of time unrest started in Bengal and continued for one hundred years. This unrest came to an end with the rise of the Pala Dynasty, in the middle of eighth century.

d. **The Pala Dynasty (750- 1160 A.D.)**. The founder of the Pala Dynasty was Gopala who was selected as the emperor of Gaur in 750. Its first capital was in Vikrampura in present day Munshiganj. Later it was moved to Pataliputra, and then to Gaur. The proto-Bengali language developed under Pala rule as they laid the basis for the Bengali language, including its first literary work, the Charyapada. Pala kings were Buddhists but they were tolerant to Hinduism. The administration was divided into two parts, the Central and Provincial. Appointment of Prime Minister by the Pala kings was an innovation since no Indian king had appointed Prime Minister before.



e. **<u>The Independent Kingdom of South-East Bengal</u>**. The South-East Bengal was independent most of the time during the time of the Palas. This region was in the “Banga” janapada of the ancient time. From the middle of the eighth century A.D. many dynasties ruled in this region. Amongst them were The Kharga Dynasty, The Deva Dynasty, The Kingdom of Kanti Deva, The Chandra Dynasty and the The Varmaraja Dynasty.

f. **<u>Sena Dynasty (1070-1230 A.D.)</u>**. The Sena Empire was a Hindu dynasty that ruled from Bengal. The founder of Sena Dynasty was Samanta Sena, who came to Bengal in his old age, making his settlement in the Rahr region on the bank of the river Ganges. As he did not establish a kingdom, the honour of being a king was given to his son Hemanta Sena. Their rule in Bengal continued up to 1206 AD.



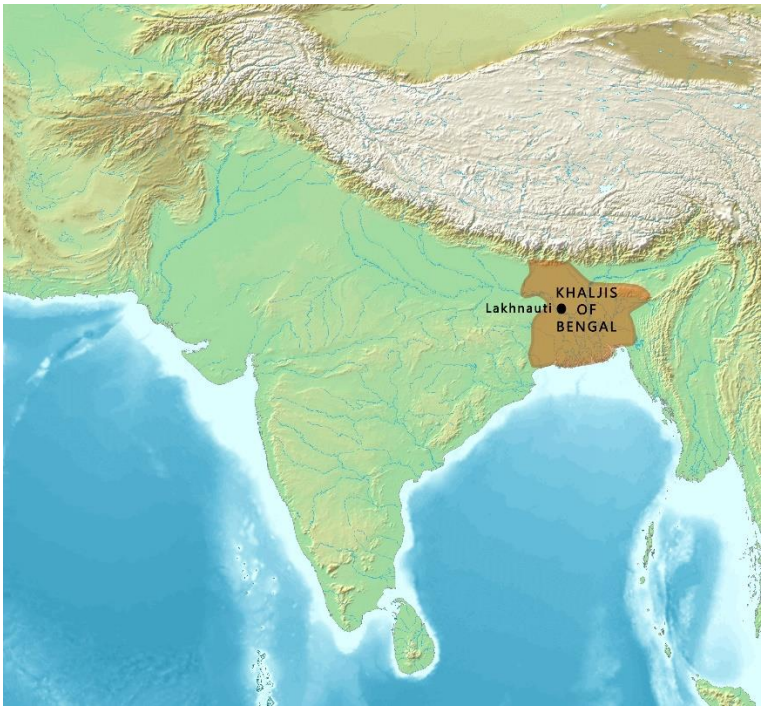
Coins of Sena Dynasty



Medieval Age – Time Period 1204 - 1757

8. The Medieval Age in Bengal coincided with Muslim rule. Out of about 550 years of Muslim rule, Bengal was only ruled by Delhi-based All-India empires for almost 200 years. Rest about 350 years, Bengal remained virtually independent. The Muslim rule of Bengal is usually divided into three phases.

9. **First phase: The Turkish Rule (1204-1338 A.D.)**. In 1203 A.D. the Turkish hero Bakhtiar Khalji conquered Bihar and in 1205 A.D. he took hold of the famous capital of Sena Dynasty, Lakhsmanabati and renamed it as Lakhnauti. The main feature of this age is the end of the Hindu and Buddhist rule and the establishment of the Muslim rule in Bengal.



10. **The Second Phase: The Independent Sultanate (1338-1538 A.D.)**

a. **Ilyas Shahi Dynasty**. Haji Ilias, (Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah) established an independent Dynasty in Bengal in 1342. Iliyas Shah and his descendants ruled Bengal up to 1487 with an interruption of 23 years (1412-1435 AD) when Raja Ganesh and his descendants held power.

d. **The Habshi Rule (1487-1493 A.D.)**. **T**his period was filled with lawlessness, injustice, conspiracy, rebellion and despair. All the four Habshi Sultans were killed during this period.

e. **Hussain Shahi Dynasty (1493-1538 A.D.)**. Alauddin Hussain Shah established the dynasty in 1493. Two hundred years of the independent rule of Bengal ended 1538 with the death of Giasuddin Mahmud Shah.

11. **The third phase**. It continued from 1539 to 1757, witnessed the emergence of a centralized administration in Bengal within the framework of the Mughal empire.

a. **The Afghan Rule (1538-1576 A.D.)**. Sher Khan was the Governor of Bihar under Mughal Emperor Babur. When Babur's son Humayun was busy elsewhere he occupied Bengal in 1538. He occupied the throne of Delhi in 1540 by defeating Humayun. The whole Bengal up to Chittagong and Sylhet came under the domain of Sher Shah. During his rule the term rūpee came to be used

as the name for a silver coin of a standard weight of 178 grains. Sher Shah Suri introduced horse dak system in 1541. Sher Shah was responsible for greatly rebuilding and modernizing the Grand Trunk Road, a major artery which runs all the way from modern day Bangladesh to Afghanistan. Another two dynasties namely Muhammad Shah dynasty and Karrani dynasty ruled Bengal up to 1576. The Mughals annexed the region as a province in 1576 defeating Karrani dynasty.

b. **The History of Barabhuiyas**. Emperor Akbar could not establish authority over the whole of Bengal. The big Zamindars of Bengal known as Barabhuyinas did not accept the subordination of the Mughals. Barabhuyinas were subdued completely during the reign of Jahangir. The claimant of the success was Subadar Islam Khan (1608-1613 A.D.). Islam Khan entered Dhaka in 1610 A.D. From this time Dhaka became the capital of Bengal and was named Jahangirnagar after the Emperor.

c. **The Mughal Rule in Bengal**. The rule of the Mughals in Bengal was divided into two periods.

(1) **Rule of the Subadars**. The Mughal provinces were known as 'Subas'. Bengal became a Suba after the defeat of the Barabhuyinas and continued up to 1727. After Aurangzeb, the Mughal rule in Bengal became weak in the hands of his weak successors. Taking advantage of this, the Subadars of Bengal were ruling independently.

(2) **Rule of the Nawabs.** The independent rule of the Subadars is known as the rule of the Nawabs. This continued up to 1757 A.D and ended with Siraj-ud-Doula the grandson of Nawab Alivardi Khan.

d. **The Battle of Plassey**. A battle between the Nawabs and the English was inevitable. Thus, in 1757, the famous Battle of Plassey took place. Siraj-ud-Doula suffered miserable defeat due to internal conspiracy. Thus, Bengal lost her independence through the Battle of Plassey, which worked as the foundation of the two hundred years long European Colonization in the Indian subcontinent.