

European Trade and Colonial Conquest (vol. 1)

Biplab Dasgupta

London: Anthem Press, 2005. 398 pages.

European Trade and Colonial Conquest is authored by Biplab Dasgupta, a renowned political and social activist from Calcutta who taught economics at Calcutta University and was a member of the Parliament of India for several years. He has authored many books on various aspects of India's socioeconomic and political life in the post-independence era, such as the oil industry, the Naxalite movements, trends in Indian politics, labor issues and globalization, agrarian change and technology, rural change, urbanization, and migration. The present book primarily focuses on the evolution of Bengal's economy and society over the precolonial period, beginning from prehistoric days. Even though there are writings on Bengal's colonial history, we know very little about its precolonial past except for the names of kings, the chronology of dynasties, and scattered references to urban settlements.

Dasgupta shows a specific interest in highlighting the socioeconomic history of the last two and half centuries, from Vasco de Gama's journey to India in 1498 to the battle of Palashi in 1757. The author asserts that he explores in detail the socioeconomic and political context of Bengal that facilitated the transfer of power to European hands, because historians generally ignore this rather quite long and critical period. He, therefore, comments that this is "less a book on pre-colonial Bengal" and more a book on European trade and colonial conquest (p. vii). The book explains how European commercial enterprise in Bengal gathered political power through its control over trade and gradually transformed itself into a colonial power. Although the Mughals held political power during this period, the economic power and control of the Indian Ocean trade routes were gradually slipping into European hands.

It is believed that Clive's victory at the battle of Palashi led to the colonial conquest of Bengal. However, focusing on Bengal's socioeconomic

condition in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the author argues that the battle was hardly fought. Moreover, he writes, “had there been a real battle, Clive would have [had] no chance of winning against a fully armed and much larger army” of the Nawab of Bengal (p. 1). The European traders’ monopoly over the Indian Ocean trade routes provided them with exclusive and direct access to the European markets. Therefore, in spite of the Indian merchants’ ability to produce quality textile products, they could not market their products in European markets without these traders. The two and a half centuries of European commercial enterprise before the battle of Palashi created many loyal local intermediaries, a situation that internally subverted Bengal. Dasgupta claims that the prosperity that came from associating with European traders encouraged Bengal’s army generals, landlords, and merchants to prefer the Europeans over the Nawab at Palashi.

Dasgupta explains that he uses “historical materialism,” the classical Marxist view of history, to examine pre-colonial Bengal’s socioeconomic and political history. Historical materialism regards economic organization as the “basis” and society’s political, legal, and cultural organization and social consciousness as its “superstructure.” Therefore, according to him, economic factors constitute the dominant category for any historical analysis. It signifies that “more than kings and dynasties, the people, their conditions of life, their attitudes and aspirations are the determining factors in history” (p. 5). There is no doubt that these methodological considerations have very much shaped this book’s contents.

Apart from the Introduction, the book is divided into three more or less equally long parts. In the Introduction, the author presents a brief outline of Bengal’s political history until the beginning of the Turko-Afghan rule in the early thirteenth century. The first part, which contains three chapters, describes Bengal’s formation, the emergence of its class system, and the evolution of its urban settlements, language, and religion until 1204. In the next four chapters, which constitute the book’s second part, Dasgupta deals with various aspects of Bengali society under the Turko-Afghans (1204-1576) and the Mughals (1576-1704). He also discusses the main features of land ownership, agriculture, slavery, feudalism, peasant differentiation, and the textile trade during this period. Trading activities in Bengal significantly increased under Turko-Afghan rule, a development that ultimately brought a new set of port towns to the fore. Mughal power ended Bengal’s isolation and fully integrated it into the rest of India. In this part of the book, Dasgupta also sheds light on the religious, linguistic, and other cultural developments of medieval Bengali society.

In the third part, which contains five chapters, the author develops the book's main theme: how the European merchants gathered political power through their corporate trading activities and transformed themselves into Bengal's colonial rulers. Two hundred years of experience with the Renaissance brought Vasco da Gama and many European companies to India's coastal trading centers through Indian Ocean routes. The author sharply contrasts the European trade with the precolonial trade in Bengal and remarks that the European merchants drastically revolutionized the global trading scenario and how trade and the economy had been conducted before their arrival: "Their scale of trade was bigger, the origin and destination were more directly linked, and ownership was collective, based on joint stock Further, these European trading companies were strongly backed by their own patron states, both militarily and diplomatically" (p. 220). Moreover, they used violence and terror to wrest absolute control of Indian Ocean trade routes from Arab merchants. The author also argues that territorial ambitions were integral to European trading in India from the beginning.

The book is a useful resource for those interested in the area studies of the Indian Ocean, precolonial trade, and the socioeconomic history of precolonial Bengal. Even though other books deal with precolonial Bengal's political history, we do not know much about the role played by the European trading companies during the colonial conquest. Dasgupta tries to fill this void, by making available a valuable resource for those concerned with the economic basis of the European colonial conquest of India.

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