

The Origin and Development of the Pre-Colonial City of Dhaka

Lubna Chowdhury*

Abstract

In the historical context of the world, the emergence of urban civilizations has often been closely tied to the presence of rivers, and Dhaka is no exception. The city of Dhaka has historically been linked to major rivers such as the Buriganga, Turag, Balunodi, and the Tongi canal, with the Shitalakhya River located nearby. This geographical setting naturally facilitated the expansion of trade and the dynamic movement of people via waterways. The presence of these rivers created a favorable environment for the development of Dhaka. Moreover, the proximity of Dhaka to Sonargaon, which was the administrative capital during the Sultanate period and the rule of the Baro-Bhuiyans, further propelled Dhaka towards urbanization. Remarkably, Dhaka is perhaps the only city in the world to have been designated as a capital city four times throughout its history. Despite facing challenges such as changes in religious and political landscapes, these events introduced new religions and cultures that enriched the city's mainstream culture.

Introduction

The urbanization of Dhaka predates the well-known European Second Urbanization Era. However, due to a lack of historical studies and sources of information, this glorious tradition has largely remained obscured. A scientific approach to history necessitates the use of primary sources, which can be accessed through archaeological practices. In the modern era, archaeological research and excavation have begun to illuminate history more clearly. To understand the political, social, and cultural history of pre-colonial Dhaka, it is imperative to grasp the concept of colonialism.

Colonialism is a system in which a foreign power exerts dominance over a region, oppresses its people, and exploits and plunders its resources for the benefit of the colonizers. The British, unlike the Muslim rulers, serve as a notable example of such colonial powers. The Muslim ruling group in Bengal, being primarily Bengali, did not return to their homeland.

Bengal has been a prosperous region since ancient times, with both internal and external trade flourishing throughout this period. Historical texts such as the

* PhD Researcher, Department of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Rigveda, authored by the Aryans, reveal that various groups including the Dravidians, Aryans, Persians, Greeks, Shakas, Huns, Muslims, and Europeans arrived in this region as outsiders from ancient times.

Although these groups arrived with diverse purposes, the convergence of mixed cultures enriched the region's culture, influencing its religion, politics, and society as a whole.

Historical Context

When evaluating the role of cities in world history, historian Rodney W. Jones noted that “traditionally cities have been the centers of civilization and power, the abode of God and men. Cities’ past glory and fame instilled reverence among people and greatly aided the ruler in power. Cities are the vehicles of written history; a center of knowledge and an archive of laws and customs.”¹

Regarding Dhaka, the capital of independent and sovereign Bangladesh, historian Dr. Muntasir Mamoon asserts that Dhaka was a township with a history extending 400 years prior to the Mughal period. The Mughals subsequently elevated Dhaka to the status of a provincial capital, which significantly contributed to its urban development.² However, this view is challenged by historian and archaeologist Dr. A K M Shahnawaz, who argues that Dhaka is not merely over a hundred years older than the historical city of Kolkata but is, in fact, a city with a history spanning a thousand years.

In this context, Dhaka stands as one of the oldest cities in South Asia and among the world's urban centers during the Second Urbanization Era. Its location on a river basin and its proximity to two capitals fostered conditions conducive to urbanization. Modern research confirms that urban life in Dhaka commenced approximately a thousand years ago. The advancement of technology promises to further expand the historical narrative of this city as artifacts become more accessible, indicating the need for continued research on Dhaka's rich history.³

Geographical Identity of Dhaka City

Recent research conducted by geologists has revealed the presence of ‘Pleistocene’ soil in the larger area of present-day Dhaka. Artifacts unearthed from these soil excavations indicate evidence of human habitation, sparking increased interest among researchers to explore the antiquity of Dhaka. According to these studies, Dhaka is primarily a low-lying area with some isolated elevated regions. Land surveys have identified a flat Pleistocene plateau extending from present-day

1. Sharif Uddin Ahmed, *Dhaka Itihash O Nogor Jibon 1840-1921*, Academic Press & Publishers Library, Dhaka, 2001
2. Muntasir Mamoon, *Dhaka: Smriti Bismriti Nagari*, Ananya, 38/2 Banglabazar, Dhaka, 2015, pp. v-vii
3. A K M Shahnawaz, *Dhaka: Itihas O Oitijya*, Novel Publishing House, Dhaka, 2018, pp. 13-15

Lalmatia, the Mirpur Zoo area, Senparaporbota, and southeast to Kathalbagan. This Pleistocene terrain stretches from Madhupur Garh to Konda in the Boliyapur area of Savar, and similar soil has been found in the Lalbagh and Uttarkhan-Dakshinkhan areas.

Dhaka, located in the center of present-day Bangladesh, was established along the banks of the Buriganga River as a part of its urbanization trajectory. In addition to the Buriganga, the Turag, Balu, and its tributaries, the Dolai River and Tongi Canal, have contributed to the city's efficient river routes. The population of Dhaka saw significant growth during the Mughal period, marking a transformative era in its development into a city. During this time, Dhaka's population reached approximately nine hundred thousand, leading to an expansion of the city's perimeter. The main city stretched about ten miles parallel to the Buriganga River and was two and a half miles wide. As population pressure increased, cities and suburbs further expanded. Dhaka housed various professional communities and businesses, and the need for livelihoods spurred the gradual expansion of the urban landscape.

Gradual Development of Dhaka

Over time, the landscape of Dhaka has undergone numerous changes. Boring excavations conducted in 1993 unearthed ancient pottery, confirming that civil life flourished in the present-day Dhaka region approximately a thousand years ago. In historical terms, the phrase 'Ancient Bengal' denotes the ancient period within the chronological division of time. Urbanization in Dhaka began with the advent of written records. Although Dhaka's journey commenced as a 'Banga' township, its state structure began to develop during the rule of the Buddhist and Hindu dynasties. Notably, Bikrampur, as the capital of the Sena Dynasty, fostered the development of a provincial enclave in Sonargaon (then Suvarnagram), which facilitated the spread of Hindu settlements in what is now Old Dhaka. Furthermore, recent studies have uncovered evidence of Buddhist settlements in the Savar region near Dhaka during the Buddhist period, suggesting the possibility of Buddhist communities in Dhaka during that era.

However, due to the predominance of the Hindu dynasty, Dhaka emerged as a Hindu settlement and trade center from ancient times. The legacy of that era is preserved in names such as Lakshmibazar, Banglabazar, Sutrapur, Banianagar, Tantibazar, Sutanagar, Kumartuli, and Patuatuli, which attest to the presence of various Hindu-controlled professions in the pre-Mughal period.⁴

In his book, Dr. Muntasir Mamoon references a quote from Professor Abdul Karim's book, *The Mughal Capital*, highlighting that during the Mughal period, regions with names ending in Bazar, Gonj, Bagh, Bagicha, Tali, Tuli, Pur, Mandi,

4. A K M Shahnawaz, *op.cit.*, 2018, pp. 13-152; Muntasir Mamoon, *op.cit.*, 2015, pp. v-vii

and Khana were indicative of urban areas. There is considerable evidence suggesting that terms like Bazar, Tali, Tuli, Ganj, and Pur have been in use since the pre-Mughal period.⁵

Another perspective is offered by the author Nazir Hossain in his book, *Kingbadantir Dhaka*. He posits that during the mid-eleventh century, Bikrampur came under the Hindu Sena kingdom, and evidence of settlements in Dhaka during this period exists. Sonargaon (Suvarnagram) was formed as an administrative region under Bikrampur, facilitating the spread of Hindu settlements in what is now Old Dhaka. However, Hossain also suggests that settlements may have existed in Dhaka during the pre-Buddhist Hindu period. In his book, he notes that the first Buddhist capital was established in Bikrampur in ancient times, and civilization spread around this area. Although he does not directly mention Dhaka, it is reasonable to infer that the development of the Buddhist king Vikramaditya's capital extended to Dhaka. Hossain also identifies a city named Sarbeshwar, located twelve hundred years ago in the Savar region on the banks of the Bangsai River, which he believes corresponds to present-day Savar. He speculates that Sambhar, the capital of Harishchandra, the last king of the Pala dynasty, may be the former name of today's Savar. Additionally, Razashan in present-day Savar was home to a large Buddhist monastery, which Hossain considers a catalyst for urban development, as it attracted numerous local and foreign Buddhist scholars. He also suggests that the name Dhamrai near Savar derives from the Dharmarajika established by King Asoka. However, given the lack of documentary evidence for some of Nazir Hossain's claims, there is ample scope for further research on these matters.

Based on the insights of esteemed historians, it can be concluded that Sonargaon served as the capital during the Muslim Sultanate period. The proximity of Sonargaon to Dhaka facilitated the rapid development of civic life in the Dhaka area, alongside the expansion of commercial activities. The route to Dhaka's urbanization from the capital Sonargaon was expanded through the river network.

Two Inscriptions Found in Dhaka

Two inscriptions discovered in the city of Dhaka, dating back to the reign of Sultan Nasir Uddin (1435–1459), provide insight into its historical significance. One of these inscriptions explicitly mentions that Dhaka was the capital of 'Iklim Mubarakbad', a region encompassing Dhaka, Faridpur, and Bikrampur. Consequently, from the inception of the Sultanate period, civil life began to develop in parts of present-day Dhaka, establishing it as the border region and administrative center of Iklim Mubarakbad.

A vivid depiction of Dhaka during the reign of the Baro-Bhuiyans is detailed in *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi* by Mirza Nathan, a significant work on the Mughal history

5. Nazir Hossain, *Kingbadontir Dhaka*, Afsar Brother, Dhaka, 2023, p. 52

of Bengal. During Emperor Akbar's reign, Dhaka was under the control of Isha Khan. Subsequently, during Emperor Jahangir's rule, Mughal Subadar Islam Khan sought to conquer Dhaka, which was under the rule of Musa Khan, who governed both Sonargaon and Dhaka.

Civil life had already been established in Dhaka during the pre-Mughal period, prompting Islam Khan to occupy Dhaka due to its strategic significance for naval attacks against the Baro-Bhuiyans. The area's suitability for a large Mughal fleet necessitated the prioritization of locations with civil facilities for setting up camps. After successfully defeating Musa Khan, Dhaka was brought under Mughal rule. In 1610, following the Mughal conquest, Dhaka was designated as Subah-Bangla, or the provincial capital. Subadar Islam Khan renamed Dhaka as Jahangir Nagar in honor of Emperor Jahangir, although it continued to be referred to as Dhaka by the local population. After a long period of disconnection, when communication between Delhi and Dhaka was restored, Indian and Persian cultures began to exert significant influence over Bengal, particularly in Dhaka.

Prior to Mughal rule, Dhaka stretched from Sutrapur to Babubazar (formerly Pakurtali). With its new status as the provincial capital, the city's boundaries naturally expanded. As a capital city, Dhaka created numerous business and employment opportunities, attracting people from various regions seeking livelihoods. Consequently, the population of Dhaka increased. Administrative offices were established across the city, and a cantonment was set up for security purposes. This period saw the construction of many secular and religious structures, marking a new era in the architectural history of Dhaka.

During this period, Dhaka emerged as one of the most stable and prosperous cities among the provincial and regional capitals of Mughal India. Merchants from across the country, especially Iranians, were drawn to its vibrant trade scene. While initially visiting for business purposes, these merchants played an integral role in the administration and commerce of Dhaka, adapting to the evolving circumstances. The growth of traditional muslin cloth production and trade in the capital brought a new wave of religious and cultural influence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dhaka's rich history is evident, having been recognized as a capital city four times. Through the examination of primary historical sources, several documents have uncovered the city's ancient roots dating back to the Pleistocene epoch. Archaeological evidence found around Dhaka indicates the presence of Stone Age settlements, with the agricultural revolution paving the way for urban development. The proximity of Bikrampur and Sonargaon to Dhaka, along with the recently discovered ancient trading city of Wari-Bateshwar in Narsingdi, has directly influenced Dhaka's development.

The Ganges (Padma) and Brahmaputra rivers, along with their tributaries and canals, have revolutionized trade expansion by waterways, connecting Dhaka to the east. Iranian, Persian, Afghan, Portuguese, Armenian, Mughal, and British merchants flocked to this region in pursuit of its vast wealth, particularly drawn by the renowned muslin trade and later motivated by the desire for empire expansion. As a result, the pace of urban development accelerated as Dhaka's culture intertwined with foreign influences. This transformation led Dhaka to evolve from a Bengal township to Iklim Mubarakbad, a provincial capital, and ultimately the capital of a sovereign nation. The natural environment and surrounding conditions have played a pivotal role in shaping Dhaka into the vibrant urban center it is today.