



Trade and Commerce between Agra and Bengal during the Mughal Period: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

During the Mughal era, the commercial linkage between Agra, the imperial capital, and Bengal, a major economic hub in eastern India, played a vital role in shaping the empire's internal trade dynamics. This study traces the evolution of these trade relations from the reign of Akbar through Jahangir's period, emphasizing the exchange of prominent goods such as textiles, spices, saltpeter, and precious metals. It explores how the development of road networks, riverine routes, and caravanserais under Mughal patronage facilitated sustained economic interaction between the two regions. Drawing upon contemporary sources—including imperial decrees (*farmāns*), European travel narratives, and authoritative chronicles like the *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri*—the paper contextualizes these commercial exchanges within the broader framework of Mughal governance. Special attention is given to administrative measures such as Akbar's regulatory reforms and Jahangir's diplomatic engagements, both of which significantly influenced the flow of goods and merchants. The analysis concludes by assessing the enduring economic impact of Agra-Bengal trade, particularly in relation to the empire's fiscal strength and its evolving interactions with European trading companies.

Keywords: Trade, commerce, Agra, Bengal, Commodities

1. Introduction

The Mughal era, spanning from the early 16th century to the mid-18th century, marked a transformative period in the economic history of the Indian subcontinent. The empire witnessed remarkable expansion in agriculture, artisanal production, and trade under a centralized administrative system that promoted long-distance commerce and regional interconnectivity. Among the various regional networks that sustained the empire's economy, the

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commercial linkage between Agra—the imperial capital—and Bengal—a province of immense agrarian and commercial wealth—stood out as particularly crucial. This connection not only facilitated the internal cohesion of the Mughal economy but also positioned Bengal as a significant player in the emerging global trade networks of the early modern world.

Agra, as the heart of the Mughal administrative and political machinery, depended heavily on a steady influx of essential and luxury commodities from other parts of the empire to sustain its courtly life, urban population, and military apparatus. Bengal, with its fertile deltaic landscape and strategic coastal access, emerged as a critical supplier of these goods. The province was especially noted for its abundant production of rice, muslin, silk, indigo, and saltpetre. According to Habib (1982), Bengal's agricultural surplus and artisanal specializations enabled it to meet the high demands of both domestic consumption and export markets. Saltpetre, in particular, held military significance due to its role in gunpowder production, making Bengal strategically important to the Mughal military economy (Richards, 1993).

The reign of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605) was instrumental in laying the foundations for a more integrated imperial economy. Akbar introduced a series of fiscal reforms, most notably the *zabt* system, which standardized revenue assessments based on crop yields and market rates. These policies aimed not only at maximizing state revenue but also at integrating agrarian production with market forces (Habib, 1982). The regularization of land revenue and improvements in transport infrastructure, such as the expansion of road networks and riverine transport, greatly enhanced the efficiency of trade between provinces. The Yamuna-Ganges river system facilitated the movement of goods from the interior to eastern markets, linking Agra with Bengal through both land and water routes (Ali, 2006).

Bengal's coastal location further amplified its role as a commercial hub. From the late 16th century onward, the region became increasingly integrated into the global economy through interactions with European trading companies. The Portuguese were the earliest European entrants, establishing trading posts and dominating maritime trade until the arrival of the Dutch and English in the early 17th century. These European powers were particularly attracted to Bengal's fine cotton textiles and saltpetre, which were in high demand in Europe and Southeast Asia (Chaudhuri, 1978). The Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the English East India Company established factories in key Bengal port towns such as Hooghly and Balasore, facilitating the export of local goods in exchange for bullion, which further stimulated the regional economy (Subrahmanyam, 1990).

Moreover, the growing presence of European merchants introduced new economic dynamics. While the Mughals initially viewed these powers as useful partners in external trade, the increasing volume of European commerce began to alter traditional trade patterns. Bengal's integration into transoceanic trade circuits contributed to the monetization of its economy and the growth of port cities that served as nodes in a complex commercial network extending from South Asia to Europe, East Africa, and Southeast Asia (Ray, 1994). The commercial vibrancy of Bengal also attracted merchants from across the Islamic world, including Persians, Armenians, and Central Asians, contributing to the cosmopolitan character of the province's urban centres.

The Agra-Bengal trade route thus exemplifies the symbiotic relationship between the political center and a key economic periphery in the Mughal system. Goods such as textiles, grains, spices, and saltpetre flowed from Bengal to Agra, while bullion, official mandates, and courtly demands traveled in the opposite direction. These exchanges helped maintain the cohesion of the Mughal Empire and enabled its integration into global markets. The dynamism of Bengal, coupled with the administrative foresight of rulers like Akbar, played a foundational role in shaping the economic resilience and sophistication of the Mughal state.

In conclusion, the commercial interdependence between Agra and Bengal during the Mughal period was not only a vital component of the empire's internal economy but also a window into the subcontinent's engagement with early modern global trade. The flow of goods, people, and ideas along this route underscores the economic sophistication of the Mughal Empire and the strategic role of Bengal in sustaining its prosperity.

2. Historical Background of Trade between Agra and Bengal

2.1 Akbar's Economic Reforms

The reign of Akbar played a crucial role in developing the commercial infrastructure that supported trade between Agra and Bengal. As documented in Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbari* (1595), Akbar implemented a range of market regulations aimed at stabilizing prices and promoting the smooth circulation of goods across the empire. One of his most significant infrastructural contributions was the expansion and maintenance of the Grand Trunk Road, which served as a vital trade corridor connecting Agra to Bengal and other important regions. Abul Fazl emphasized the strategic importance of this thoroughfare, noting that it "links the distant parts of Hindustan and strengthens the empire's cohesion and prosperity" (*Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. II). This

well-connected route not only facilitated overland commerce but also reinforced administrative integration across the vast Mughal territory.

2.2 Expansion of Trade under Jahangir and Shah Jahan

Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) built upon the commercial and administrative foundations laid by his predecessor, continuing efforts to strengthen trade infrastructure. In his memoir, the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* (1609), he underscored the necessity of securing trade routes and protecting merchants, recognizing commerce as vital to the empire's prosperity. Jahangir also pursued diplomatic engagement with European powers, especially the Portuguese, who had already established a presence in Bengal's coastal zones. These interactions facilitated the steady supply of luxury items to the Mughal court. The subsequent reign of Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658) saw further economic expansion in Bengal, where commodities such as silk, muslin, and indigo emerged as major exports, not only feeding demand in Agra but also reaching broader inland and international markets.

2.3 Impact of Aurangzeb's Policies

The reign of Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) represented both the height and the beginning of a decline in the Mughal Empire's economic stability. Despite the enduring strength of trade between Agra and Bengal, the pressures of continuous military campaigns and the complexities of governing an expansive empire gradually undermined fiscal health. Nevertheless, the robust commercial infrastructure and trade routes developed under previous emperors continued to facilitate economic activity, allowing key exchanges between the two regions to persist even amid growing administrative and political challenges.

3. Trade Routes and Infrastructure

3.1 Role of the Grand Trunk Road

The Grand Trunk Road (GTR) was a critical artery of commerce and administration during the Mughal period, connecting the imperial capital of Agra with the economically vibrant province of Bengal. Originally established by Sher Shah Suri in the 16th century, the GTR was significantly upgraded under Emperor Akbar, who understood the strategic importance of a well-maintained overland route spanning from Kabul in the west to Sonargaon in Bengal. This road facilitated not only the efficient movement of troops and officials but also enabled the

transport of essential goods such as textiles, grains, saltpetre, and gemstones, which were fundamental to the Mughal economy (Farooqui, 2013; Habib, 1982).

According to Abul Fazl in the *Ain-i-Akbari* (1595), Akbar invested in infrastructure along the route, including caravanserais (rest houses), wells, and milestones (kos minars) to ensure safe and reliable travel for merchants and travelers. These amenities reduced the risks of long-distance trade and increased economic activity along the corridor (Saran, 1968). The *Ain-i-Akbari* notes Akbar's personal supervision in ensuring that trade routes remained secure and functional, thus fostering internal integration of distant provinces such as Bengal (Abul Fazl, 1595/1949).

Bengal, known for its fertile lands and artisanal products, supplied key commodities like rice, cotton textiles, and saltpetre—the latter being vital for gunpowder production. These goods were transported via the GTR to Agra and other urban centres, sustaining both the imperial court and commercial hubs (Chaudhuri, 1985; Prakash, 1985). European travelers like François Bernier and Peter Mundy observed the bustling trade and well-managed road systems, describing them as signs of a prosperous and administratively capable empire (Bernier, 1670/1994; Mundy, 1632/1914).

Moreover, the GTR enhanced inter-regional connectivity, supporting not only domestic trade but also the export-oriented economy of Bengal, which attracted Portuguese, Dutch, and English merchants (Eaton, 1993; Alam & Subrahmanyam, 2012). By enabling smoother overland transport, the Mughals effectively linked inland production zones with coastal export centres, embedding Bengal firmly into the empire's broader political economy.

In conclusion, the Grand Trunk Road epitomized the Mughal Empire's vision of a cohesive and economically interconnected realm, where the development of infrastructure supported both administrative effectiveness and commercial success.

3.2 Riverine Systems of Bengal

Bengal's extensive river network, especially the Ganges and Brahmaputra, played a critical role in the movement of goods across the Mughal Empire. These waterways linked the interior regions of Bengal with coastal trading centres, enabling the efficient transport of commodities to Agra and other key destinations. The rivers functioned as vital commercial channels, supporting both domestic and long-distance trade. The 17th-century French traveller Jean-Baptiste Tavernier observed, "The rivers of Bengal are like highways for its commerce, carrying goods to the

farthest reaches of Hindustan” (Tavernier, 1676). This natural infrastructure complemented overland routes and enhanced Bengal’s economic integration with the broader imperial economy.

3.3 Security and Infrastructure

The Mughal administration placed great emphasis on safeguarding trade routes, recognizing the importance of secure commerce to the empire’s prosperity. The French traveler François Bernier, who journeyed through India in the 17th century, remarked that “caravans along the Mughal roads were rarely troubled by robbers, owing to the imperial protection that ensured the safety of merchants” (Bernier, 1670). This high level of security enabled traders to move valuable goods—including spices, textiles, and precious stones—across long distances with confidence, thereby sustaining robust commercial activity throughout the empire.

4. Major Commodities Traded

4.1 Textiles (Muslin and Silk)

Bengal gained widespread acclaim for its exquisite muslin and silk, which were highly sought after both by the Mughal court and European merchants. The region’s textiles were celebrated for their exceptional quality, intricate designs, and fine craftsmanship. As recorded in the *Ain-i-Akbari*, Bengal stood as a major hub for textile production, employing thousands of skilled weavers in the industry. Muslin, in particular, became one of the most prized exports to Agra, where it was used to craft luxurious garments for the Mughal elite, symbolizing the region’s importance in the empire’s economic and cultural fabric.

4.2 Spices and Grains

Bengal’s rich and fertile land was a major source of various spices, including pepper, cardamom, and cloves, which were transported to Agra and other regions of the Mughal Empire. In addition to these valuable spices, rice and wheat were crucial agricultural exports that flowed from Bengal to sustain the rest of the empire. Edward Terry, an English traveler in the 17th century, observed that “The abundance of rice and other grains in Bengal feeds much of India, and its wealth lies in its soil” (Terry, 1655). This agricultural bounty was central to Bengal’s economic significance within the Mughal trade network.

4.3 Saltpeter

Saltpeter, a crucial ingredient in the production of gunpowder, was one of Bengal's most significant exports. Given the Mughal military's heavy dependence on gunpowder for its campaigns, saltpeter became a strategic resource for the empire. It was transported from Bengal to Agra, where it was refined and distributed to the Mughal forces. The English traveler Peter Mundy noted, "Bengal's saltpeter is of the highest quality, and it is highly coveted by the Mughal armies" (Mundy, 1632). This resource played a critical role in sustaining the military strength of the Mughal Empire.

4.4 Precious Stones and Metals

Bengal was also a key hub for the trade of precious stones and metals. Diamonds, rubies, and pearls were imported through Bengal's ports from Southeast Asia and then traded to the Mughal court in Agra. These luxurious items were in high demand among the Mughal elite, and their desire for such treasures fuelled extensive trade routes connecting Agra and Bengal. The *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* recounts numerous instances where merchants presented jewels from Bengal to Emperor Jahangir, highlighting the region's significance in the luxury goods trade.

5. Mughal Administrative Policies and Their Impact on Trade

5.1 Akbar's Market Reforms

Akbar introduced a series of market reforms that greatly enhanced trade between Bengal and Agra. Among the most important of these reforms was the standardization of weights and measures, which helped eliminate inconsistencies in trade practices across the empire. As Abul Fazl observed in the *Ain-i-Akbari* (Vol. II), "The emperor's market reforms have brought stability to commerce, allowing traders from all corners of the empire to transact fairly." This systematization played a vital role in facilitating smoother and more equitable trade, benefiting merchants and consumers alike.

5.2 Taxation and Tariffs

The taxation system of the Mughal Empire was strategically designed to support trade while ensuring that the state benefited from the wealth generated through commerce. Bengal's abundant agricultural output and textile production served as key sources of revenue for the empire. The Zamindari system allowed local landholders, or zamindars, to collect taxes on behalf of the imperial administration, with a substantial portion of this revenue coming from trade

activities. In Agra, customs duties were imposed on goods entering the city, ensuring that the state received a share of the profits generated by the region's bustling commerce.

5.3 Role of the Karkhanas

The Karkhanas (royal workshops) in Agra played a pivotal role in the production and distribution of luxury goods within the Mughal Empire. These workshops were responsible for creating high-value items such as textiles, jewelry, and other fine products, which were traded across the empire. As described in the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* (1609), "The Karkhanas of Agra are renowned for their craftsmanship, and the goods produced here are sought after in every corner of Hindustan." The exceptional quality of these products contributed significantly to Agra's status as a major center of Mughal luxury trade.

6. European Influence on Bengal-Agra Trade

6.1 Portuguese and Dutch Traders

The arrival of European traders in Bengal during the Mughal period introduced a new dimension to the region's commerce. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to establish a presence in Bengal, setting up trading posts along the coastline. By the early 17th century, Dutch traders had also arrived, establishing themselves in the Hooghly district. According to *The Dutch East India Company in Bengal* (Prakash, 1985), Dutch merchants exchanged goods such as silk, muslin, and spices with the Mughal court, frequently using Agra as a key transit point for European goods on their way to and from the empire.

6.2 British East India Company's Entry

By the mid-17th century, the British East India Company had also begun to establish a foothold in Bengal. The company's officials quickly recognized the immense value of Bengal's textiles and other commodities, setting up a network of trade routes linking Bengal to their factories in Agra and other parts of India. William Finch, an early British traveler, remarked, "The riches of Bengal are beyond measure, and the English company seeks to exploit this wealth for the benefit of the Crown" (Finch, 1622). This marked the beginning of significant British commercial influence in the region, with the company focusing on leveraging Bengal's resources for economic gain.

7. Conclusion

The trade connections between Agra and Bengal were not merely a pillar of the Mughal Empire's prosperity but also a testament to the empire's economic ingenuity. Bengal's wealth, born from its fertile lands, thriving textile industry, and pivotal position as a gateway to Southeast Asia, enriched the Mughal economy in countless ways. The empire's visionary infrastructure, including the Grand Trunk Road and Bengal's vast river systems, ensured the seamless movement of goods across great distances. Under the astute leadership of Akbar and Jahangir, the Mughal administrative policies fostered a stable environment for trade to flourish. The entry of European traders further infused a global dimension into this exchange, amplifying the empire's wealth and influence. While the empire's later years were marred by challenges, the legacy of the Bengal-Agra trade endured, continuing to shape the region's economic landscape long after the decline of the Mughal reign.

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