

Chapter 3

DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY

History, according to conventional wisdom, is not based on theories, but on "a corpus of ascertained facts". A historical fact is not, however, random in the statistical sense, it is always selected by historians with a frame of reference in mind. A historical fact is, therefore, "like a sack—it won't stand up till you 've put something in it" (Carr 1972, p. 9). Despite the express disdain of historians for theories, there are always implicit theoretical constructs in all historical narratives. "The long path of historical research", rightly pointed out North, "is strewn with bones of theories of the state developed by historians and political scientists" (1981, p. 20). Political evolution in Bengal could be better appreciated by making explicit the theories which are implicit in political narratives.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of theories on the origin and role of the state: contractual theories and predatory or exploitation theories. The contractual theories posit that the state is an agency for provision of services such as protection and justice and it has to enlist the support of its constituents in the face of competition of potential rivals (such as rival states and dynasties). The exploitation theories consider the state as an instrument of vested interest groups. Though the contractual theory of state is deeply rooted in South Asia's past, most social scientists and historians are predisposed to exploitation theories. The despotic mega-empire is the recurring theme in the canonical interpretation of South Asian history. The consensus of historians and social scientists on the centralized

despotic states obscured the regional variations in the political landscape of South Asia.

Exploitation paradigms on state in South Asia may be divided into two categories: centralized exploitation and decentralized exploitation theories. The centralized exploitation model was first formulated by Karl Marx (Marx and Engels 1962, Vol. I, pp 343-358). The intellectual origins of this theory can be traced back to classical economists like Adam Smith, James Mill, John Stuart Mill and Richard Jones who emphasized the despotic and centralized nature of Asiatic states. According to Marx, large centralized empires embracing sprawling watersheds were essential for oriental agriculture which was dependent on artificial irrigation. As he puts it, "This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated, in the Orient where civilization was too low and the territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralizing power of Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic Governments the function of providing public works" (Marx and Engels 1962, p. 347). Because of its control over water supply, the state was so powerful that it established its absolute command over all resources by eliminating private property. These characteristics together formed what is known in the Marxist historiography as the Asiatic mode of production.

The recent research has raised several questions about the relevance of Asiatic mode of production to South Asian history. First, the role of the state in irrigation in South Asia has been highly overrated because the bulk of irrigated area was served by small scale irrigation at local level and not by major state-sponsored irrigation works (Rudra 1988, pp. 17-18). Secondly, the power of all-India empires has often been exaggerated. As Srinivas argues, "Pre-British India, in spite of the fact that vast and sophisticated empires flourished in it, was characterized paradoxically by "pedestrian state", the state's duty to maintain law and order being confined to towns and to the few highways which existed. Supplementing this, the dominant castes maintained law and order at the local level" (1987, p. 9). Thirdly, Asiatic mode of production oversimplifies the complex property relations in land in South Asia. Despite Marx's assertion, the absence of private property in land is far from generally accepted view of Indian historians today (Mukhia 1994, p. 125). Fourthly, political

fragmentation in different parts of South Asia including Bengal is inconsistent with the thesis of oriental despotism. Fifthly, Marx assumed the existence of self-sufficient village communities. As Perry Anderson rightly observed, "The self-sufficiency, equality and isolation of the Indian village communities was thus always a myth; both the caste system within them and the State above them precluded either" (1974, p. 489). Finally, climatic and topographic conditions in large empires are not uniform everywhere; they vary from region to region. This is specially true about large empires in South Asia which usually encompassed arid deserts, lofty mountains, wet deltas and deep forests. Artificial irrigation might have been necessary in arid areas in north India, it is superfluous in wet areas like Bengal.

There is, however, a school of historians who maintains that artificial irrigation was extensive in ancient Bengal. According to Wilcox, agriculture in ancient Bengal was dependent on wide-spread networks of artificial irrigation. He characterized this irrigation as "overflow irrigation" which was effected by cuts in the banks of canals during the flood, (Wilcox 1930). There are two major weaknesses in Wilcox's hypothesis. First he assumed that all dead rivers in west and central Bengal were man-made canals. There is no historical evidence on such extensive excavation of canals. It is more likely that these channels were the relics of the old river systems in the moribund delta. Secondly, overflow irrigation could be used only for supplementary irrigation during the rainy season. Supplementary irrigation is needed in case of drought. Obviously canals would not have adequate water for overflow irrigation during a drought. It is, therefore, unlikely that such canals would be excavated for irrigation purposes. Wilcox himself conceded that canals in Bengal were needed not primarily for irrigation but for drainage and navigation. It is also doubtful whether extensive canal networks for drainage and navigation were needed in deltaic areas.

A second version of centralized exploitation model was presented by Wittfogel. The theory of hydraulic society developed by Wittfogel was obviously influenced by Marxian analysis of the causal link between irrigation and oriental despotism. Wittfogel distinguishes between a farming economy that involves small-scale irrigation (hydroagriculture) and a large-scale government-managed works of irrigation (hydraulic agriculture). The effective management of infrastructure in hydraulic societies involves an organizational web

which covers either the whole or at least the dynamic core of country's population. As a result those who control the network are uniquely prepared to wield political power. Such a government, in his view, is "stronger than the society" (Wittfogel 1957).

Despite the striking similarity of their conclusions, Marx and Wittfogel differed on two essential points. First, in Marx's view, oriental despotism arose to construct and maintain large networks of irrigation. Wittfogel was of the opinion that apart from artificial irrigation, protective installation (such as drainage canals and dykes for flood control, aqueducts for drinking water and navigation canals) and non-hydraulic works (e.g. walls and other structures of defence, highways etc.) also contributed to the formation of centralized states. Secondly, they differed with regard to role of village communities. In Marx's opinion, village communities had been the solid foundation of oriental despotism. Wittfogel was of the opinion that a village in the oriental society was peripheral and merely tolerated because of diminished administrative returns. Wittfogel maintained that oriental despotism was based on a genuine monopoly bureaucracy.

Wittfogel's theory suffers from the limitations of Marxian analysis of Asiatic mode of production enumerated above. Wittfogel believed that "oriental despotism persisted over millennia". This hypothesis is not consistent with the frequent ups and downs in the authority of large empires in the Orient. It is unlikely that a command economy can function indefinitely. As Hicks rightly pointed out, "A pure, or almost pure command economy can hardly exist excepting in an emergency for it is only in the emergency that a wide range of orders from the centre will be accepted" (Hicks 1969, p. 15). Wittfogel assumed that physical infrastructures were the only public goods provided by governments in oriental societies. Internal order and security were equally important public goods. Large empires may arise not only to provide irrigation but also to ensure security of large-scale trade and to resist invasion from outside. Thus the focus of Wittfogel's theory is too narrow to be realistic. Finally, physical conditions in areas like Bengal delta were radically different from arid areas where artificial irrigation was needed. Too much and not too little water is the main problem in the agrarian life of this zone. Wittfogel tried to defend his thesis by suggesting that in Bengal a centralized state was necessary to construct and maintain extensive flood-control works. Wittfogel exaggerated the extent and importance of flood control structures in Bengal. Wittfogel maintained

that by 1900 Bengal had 1298 miles of embankments(1957, p. 24) These embankments were widely scattered and not continuous and are not likely to provide reasonable flood protection to even 5 percent of flooded land in Bengal. No central machinery is needed for such widely dispersed and localized flood mitigation measures. On the contrary, the overwhelming majority of the people in Bengal throughout history lived with floods.

There are two major versions of decentralized exploitation paradigms. First, basing on anthropological research of Southall in Africa, Burton Stein (1994) presented the model of pyramidal segmented type of state in the context of south India. Secondly, Sharma (1985) propounded a model of a feudal system to explain the political system of empires in medieval India. The main strength of these paradigms is that they recognize that empires in India were not all-powerful unitary states. Except in the heydays of Moghul empire, no Indian state ever approximated the despotic centralism of Marx and Wittfogel's paradigm. It is doubtful whether unitary states of exploitation model could have existed prior to industrial revolution which provided the technology and resources for sustaining unitary states. The main features of pyramidally segmented state are as follows:

- i. Proponents of this theory deny the organic entity of the unitary state. They maintain that within mega-empires local units or what they describe as segments retain their essential characteristics as segmental parts of a whole. As a result despite the existence of a central government, there are large number of peripheral units over which the centre exercised only a limited control. The authority of the centre varies from zone to zone, attaining the highest level of control in the central zone, less control in the intermediate zone and minimum control in the peripheral zone. Political control in such empires is not fixed but fluid and indeterminate
- ii. In segmented political system, sovereignty is dual. It consists of actual political sovereignty or control and ritual hegemony or ritual sovereignty. In such states, ritual authority is concentrated in the king whereas the segments may exercise political authority. In Stein's view, political sovereignty corresponded to Indian view of *khastra* which is "a power of territorial character, exercised within a given territory and stopping at the frontier of the realm". On the other hand, ritual sovereignty is

enshrined in the ancient Indian precept of *Rajadharma* which enjoins on the king duties and obligations of a personal character. The ritual sovereignty of the king, in Stein's view, provided the essential unity in Pallava and Chola empires in South India.

- iii. Local units were organised pyramidally in relation to the centre. A distinction is made between the pyramidal and hierarchical social structure. In the pyramidal structure, every legitimate kind of political authority and control are exercised at all levels, but these operate within smaller constituency as one moves from the higher level to lower level. In the hierarchical power structure, different levels or segments do not exercise same type of authority and control; the type of control varies from level to level. The pyramidal relationship explains how the smallest unit of political organization is linked to greater units of political organization of an ascending order (i.e. village, locality, supra-locality and kingdom). In South India basic segments of the political system were *nadus* under the leadership of chiefs who were variously known as *udaiyars*, *mummadi* and *muvenda-velar*. *Nadus* in the Chola empire varied in area from ten to three hundred square miles, the average number of village in a *nadu* in Tamil plain was about five. However, in some *nadus*, total number of villages often exceeded forty. Above the *nadus*, there were supra-local assemblies which were styled as *periyanaadu*. The area covered by a supra-local institution varied from region to region. There were frequent references to existence of eighteen *nadus* in supra-local assemblies. There was a specialized administrative staff at the centre, but similar staff on a reduced level was repeated at intermediate and peripheral levels.
- iv. Different levels in segmentary state are united together by their joint recognition of the ritual sovereignty of the highest central office. The flexible relationships in a segmentary state were sanctified by the sacral character of the rulership whether that of chieftainship or kingship.

There are two main attractions of the paradigm of pyramidally segmented state. First, it provides a more realistic assessment of the power of the empire in pre-industrial societies. Available technology did not permit the establishment of despotic centralism as envisaged

in the exploitation theories. Secondly, it provides a satisfactory explanation on how grass-roots institutions were linked to the centre. However, the model is not relevant for polities outside medieval South India. First in his model Stein emphasises the ideological basis of political system. In his opinion, the sacral character of the rulership provides durability to the flexible political arrangements of a pyramidally segmented state. Rulership cannot, however, assume sacral character if the rulers and subjects profess different religions. This model is, therefore, irrelevant for the Muslim empires in India where the kings were Muslims and most subjects were Hindus. Similar situation arose in Bengal when the Buddhist kings ruled for several centuries a population with Hindu majority. Secondly, pyramidal structure as envisaged in this theory is not found in other parts of South Asia specially in Bengal. The eastern and southern area of Bengal lacked corporate villages which were the basic ingredients of pyramidal power structure. It is not, therefore, surprising that Bangladesh region did not experience the emergence of sustainable empires.

Another decentralized model of exploitative system was presented by R.S. Sharma (1985). In his opinion, political system in India during the period 300-1200 A.D. was characterized by feudalism. Feudal system arose from the increasing land grants of the state to religious institutions such as Buddhist vihars, Hindu temples and the Brahmins. This resulted in the subjection of the peasantry to the intermediaries and in the peasant's dependence on them. It coincided with the decline of trade and commerce which in turn promoted self-sufficient rural economy. Sharma cites evidence to show that all components of western feudal order such as serfdom, manor, self-sufficient economic units and the feudalization of crafts and commerce existed in India. He concluded that the Pala empire which ruled in eastern India for more than four hundred years was based on feudal system.

There are several weaknesses of Sharma's model. First exemption from tax for the recipients of land grants did not imply the authority to collect taxes from others. On the contrary, there is evidence to suggest that at least in some cases taxes were collected from recipients of land grants (Chakravarti, 1398 B.S.) Land grants, therefore, did not necessarily result in sub-infeudation. Secondly, Mukhia rightly points out, serfdom in the European sense did not at all exist in India. Because of high fertility of land and low subsistence level of the peasants in South Asia, a large share of agrarian

surplus could be collected by the state from free peasants. On the contrary, owing to shortage of labour, adequate surplus could not be generated in western Europe without serfdom that tied the peasants to the estates. Thirdly, Sharma's model is not relevant for much of Bengal. As Charkavarti suggests, beneficial tenures called *sasanas* and *agraharas* in Bengal, "never covered more than a fraction of the agricultural land, they did not touch the mass of cultivators in the country" (1943, p. 647). Furthermore, in eastern Bengal most of land grants were confined to parcels of land rather than to whole villages. By contrast, a land grant in Bihar often consisted of hundreds of villages. For example, Nalanda vihara alone had ownership over 214 villages. Grant of scattered land in different villages was not at all conducive to the development of a feudal system in Bengal. It is thus obvious that land tenure system in most regions in Bengal was significantly different from the rest of the Pala empire.

The foregoing analysis suggests that exploitation theories do not at all provide satisfactory explanation on origin and role of state in Bengal zone. These theories are new and by-products of western social sciences. By contrast, contractual theories on the state are deeply rooted in Bengal's heritage. It is not correct to presume that the idea of social contract is an innovation of Locke and Rousseau. One of the earliest formulations of this idea can be traced in the doctrine of *Mahasammata* (the great chosen one) in the Buddhist theology. The Buddhists believe that at the earliest stage of civilization, men used to live in a state of bliss where there was no hunger, private property, family or government. As class distinctions arose, men lost their pristine purity. This in turn led to proliferation of crimes. To solve these problems, the people met together and resolved to entrust one of them with the maintenance of order on promise to pay him a share of the produce of their fields. This is why, the king is known as the "Great Chosen One" or the *Mahasammata*. According to the interpretation of Buddhist theologians, the term *raja* (king) was derived from verb *ranjayati* i.e. (he who pleases) and the fundamental task of the king was to please the people (Basham 1959). Another popular political doctrine in ancient India was the *matsanaya* (a condition where the big fish (powerful) swallowed the little fish (weak) or a state of anarchy). According to this doctrine, kingship was instituted to ward off anarchy. This doctrine was invoked in the Khalimpur copper plate of Dharmapala which reports that Gopala, the founder of the Pala dynasty was elevated to

kingship by the *Prakritis* (who were probably local leaders or the people) "to put an end to *matsanaya*" (Khan 1989). Similar elective kingship is reported in Assam in the tenth century A.D. (Dutta 1986). Thus a contractual theory of the origin of the state would be wholly consistent with the political traditions in Bengal zone.

Because of their preoccupations with all-India empires, modern social scientists in South Asia have largely ignored the contractual theories of the state which are enshrined in the ancient doctrines of *Mahasammata* and *Matsanaya*. The underlying assumption of ancient contractual theories is that the sustainability of a state is contingent on its benefits and costs. However, implicit economic calculus of contractual theories was not made explicit till the emergence of the public choice literature. In recent literature, two types of contractual theories can be easily discerned: (1) spontaneous order and (2) neo-classical theory of state. The theory of spontaneous order postulates that conventions are established on the basis of common experience of the members of a community. Conventions are not always economically efficient. Nevertheless, conventions became self-perpetuating and they ultimately become norms (Sugden 1989). This paradigm may be appropriate for small polities which are stable over time. However, this model is irrelevant for highly unstable polities in Bengal zone.

The neo-classical theory of the state is based on the following assumptions (North 1981). First, there is an exchange process between the state and the ruled. The state offers a group of services for revenue. While the exploitation theories were preoccupied with physical infrastructure (such as irrigation), the neo-classical theories emphasize the services of social infrastructure such as protection and justice. Individuals will buy the services of the state only when the tax for such services is less than costs individuals will have to incur to provide similar services for himself or if the individual on his own is unable to provide such services. Secondly, the aim of the state is to maximize its wealth by raising as much revenue as possible. However, there are two constraints on state's wealth maximization: (1) competitive constraint, and (2) transaction cost constraint. The first constraint arises from the fact that there always exist potential rivals of a state who could provide similar set of services. The rivals may come from outside; rivals could also arise from inside. Individuals with command over sufficient resources to acquire military capability are always potential rivals. To keep the potential

rivals at bay, the state would either buy them off with special concessions or would like to enlist the support of its constituents by providing the best service at a low cost. Transaction costs arise from the specific terms of governance. These costs relate to monitoring, metering and collection of taxes. Enforcement poses no problem when it is in the interest of the individual to pay taxes. However, individuals always prefer to cheat on taxes. The state has, therefore, to employ agents to collect taxes. Total collection of revenue is, therefore, significantly influenced by transaction costs. Thirdly, the state is a monopolist. It is defined by North as an "organization with a corporative advantage in violence, extending over a geographic area whose boundaries are determined by the power to tax constituents". In pricing its services, the state often acts as a discriminating monopolist with a view to maximizing its revenue. Because of the difference in opportunity costs and bargaining power of different constituents groups, the state strikes different bargains with different groups.

The foregoing assumptions are flexible enough to explain wide variations in structures of the state. From the historical point of view, the following conclusions of the neo-classical model deserve special attention.

1. Order may prevail even in stateless societies. A dense social network with informal social structures acts as the substitute for the state and formal rules. Such societies are characterized by high information costs. Kinship ties, therefore, act as the central insurance, protection and enforcement mechanisms of primitive societies.
2. The size of state is related to type of revenue. States are likely to be larger where revenue collection is easy. Furthermore, in some cases type of revenue itself determines the optimum size of the state. Friedman (1977) argues that if trade is the major revenue source, the state will be large and if rent is the principal source, the state would be small.
3. Status quo in the structure of state may continue as long as there is no change in the opportunity cost of the constituents or in the relative strength of competitive states. This implies that the monopoly of a state remains undisturbed if there is no invasion from outside or insurrection from inside. The existing order may be destabilized by technological innovation, demographic change, and shifts in transaction costs etc. Usually

the coercive power of the state results in apathy and acceptance of the existing rules, even if they are oppressive.

4. The strength of the state is contingent on the efficacy of its substitutes. As North (1981) predicts, "The closer the substitutes, the fewer degrees of freedom the ruler possesses, and the greater the percentage of incremental income that will be retained by its constituents" (p. 27). The internal substitutes may come from the ruler's own agents who may attract supporters from among the constituents by offering a more acceptable division of the existing rents or from wealthy individuals who acquire military power. The costs of maintenance of status quo are inversely related to perception of legitimacy of the existing system. If the system is perceived to be fair, the enforcement costs are reduced.

The neo-classical theory of the state suggests that small marginal changes may ultimately lead to restructuring of the polity. The structure of the same state may change over time. An analysis of the available evidence also indicates that the structure of the state in Bengal zone was not static. The polity in pre-Muslim Bengal differed significantly from the polity during the Muslim rule.

There are three distinct features of the polity in ancient Bengal. First, ancient Bengal did not produce any all-India empire. This stands in striking contrast to the experience of other areas of South Asia which were the centres of large empires. Secondly, within Bengal zone itself there were perceptible regional variations in the strength and power of political organizations. The sphere of influence of neighbouring mega-empires often extended to parts of western and central Bengal. On the contrary, eastern and southern Bengal experienced endemic political fragmentation. Thirdly, because of the absence of a strong central government throughout history, political instability was rife in the Bengal delta. Small principalities bloomed and withered like wild flowers in this region.

Political fragmentation as a distinct feature of Bengal's history is ignored in the traditional literature which assumed that the course of history in this zone was indistinguishable from the mainstream in South Asia. According to nationalist historians, who sought to glorify the achievements of their ancestors, polities in Bengal zone were dominated by large empires for more than two thousand years from the Gangaridai empire in the 4th century B.C. to Mughal empire in

the 18th century A.D. (Majumder, 1981). Some of these empires originated in north India and extended their sway to Bengal; most of these empires are believed to have sprung from the soil of Bengal itself. This empire-centric interpretation of Bengal which is clearly contradicted by epigraphic evidence precluded a true appreciation of political institutions in this zone.

The legendary Gangaridai empire is usually cited as the earliest achievement of the political genius of the people of Bengal. Gangaridai is described by the classical writers as the "greatest of all nations" in South Asia. Even Alexander the Great was reportedly deterred by the might of the Gangaridai empire. Classical writers also attest to the existence of a contemporary empire in eastern India which is known as Prasioi. It is not clear whether Prasioi and Gangaridai were parts of the same empire or independent empires. Curtis, for example, refers to Gangaridai and Prasioi as two nations under one king. If Gangaridai was an independent state, it would lie to the east of Prasioi which extended as far as the Ganges. A kingdom containing the areas to the east of the Ganges in the Bengal delta is not likely to be very large. Subsequently, parts of Bengal were occupied by the Maurya empire (321-185 B.C.) and the Gupta empire (331-600 A.D.) The base of both Maurya and Gupta empires lay in Bihar. Epigraphic evidence suggests that the spheres of influence of these empires were confined to the western and central Bengal. Moreover, historical evidence refers to existence of independent kingdoms in eastern and southern Bengal (e.g. Kotalipara inscription in Faridpur). The Gupta empire in eastern India was succeeded by the empire of Sasanka (600-637 A.D.). Historical evidence clearly indicates that the Bhadra dynasty and not emperor Sasanka ruled in eastern Bengal. The authority of Sasanka was confined to western and central Bengal. Finally, it is asserted that the Pala empire (750-1162 A.D.) which lasted for more than four hundred years was an empire of the Bengalis. It is true that the Pala empire occasionally embraced parts of north Bengal. Nevertheless it was primarily a Bihar-based empire. All the inscriptions of the early Pala rulers were issued from Bihar and at least during first two hundred years of Pala rule not a single inscription has been found to refer to the Pala occupation of south-eastern Bengal. On the contrary, epigraphic evidence attests to the existence of the independent kingdom of the Bhadras in eastern Bengal. Except for a short spell (between 1043-1075 A.D.), eastern and southern Bengal eluded the grasp of

the Pala overlords (Chowdhury 1967). Furthermore, the last Pala king ruled in Bihar and not in Bengal. The Pala rulers had no fixed capital. Sharma identified the following nine seats of royal authority: (1) Patliputra (2) Madagiri (3) Ramavati (in Maldah district) (4) Bata Parvataka (Bhagalpur district) (5) Bilaspur (6) Hardam (7) Shahsasha-Ganda (8) Kanchanpur and (9) Kapilvasak (Sharma 1985). None of these places was located in eastern and southern Bengal and only one lay in central Bengal. These facts clearly suggest that the political base of Pala empire lay in Bihar.

Parts of central and western Bengal were adjacent to Bihar. Consequently, the Bihar-based all-India empires occasionally incorporated the neighboring areas in western and central Bengal. However, these areas became independent whenever the central authority was weak. The sphere of influence of these Bihar-based empires rarely extended to southern and eastern Bengal. The political landscape of eastern and southern Bengal was dotted with small kingdoms. The following eleven dynasties have so far been identified to have ruled in Bangladesh region from the fifth to twelfth century AD: (1) kingdom of Vainayagupta (6th century), (2) Faridpur kings (6th century), (3) Bhadra dynasty (circa 600-650 AD), (4) Khadaga dynasty (circa 650-700 AD), (5) Natha dynasty (circa 700 AD), (6) Rata dynasty (circa 700 AD), (7) Deva Dynasty (circa 750-800 AD), (8) the rulers of Harikela (circa 800-900 AD), (9) Chandra dynasty (circa 900-1045 AD), (10) Varman dynasty (circa 1080-1150 AD), and (11) Pattikera dynasty (circa 1000-1100 AD). An analysis of historical evidence suggests that these kingdoms, though small, were sovereign and not tributaries of all-India empires. Historical evidence, therefore, indicates that the influence of all-India empires which originated outside Bengal gradually decreased from the west to the east.

Throughout its history, political instability was rife in ancient Bengal. During the period 500-1150 A.D., a ruling dynasty in eastern and southern Bengal on an average lasted less than 80 years. Political evolution in Bangladesh region stands in striking contrast to that of neighbouring Bihar and other regions in South Asia. Bihar in the ancient period witnessed the emergence of large empires like the Nandas, the Mauryas, Guptas and Palas. In Assam the militarist Ahom rulers succeeded in building a strong empire which lasted for about six hundred years (13th to 19th century A.D.). Similarly other regions of South Asia also experienced the rise of large empires (e.g.

the Pallavas and Cholas in South India) in different phases of their history. By contrast, political entities in Bengal zone particularly in eastern and southern areas were always small and short-lived.

The sustainability of a large empire is contingent on the capacity to generate resources for the upkeep of a big army. Resources for ancient empires are usually extracted from trade and agriculture. There is a strong symbiotic relationship between trade and large empires. However, the direction of causality may run both ways. Large empires need traders for revenue. On the other hand, traders need a strong state for protection of property and contract. In case of overland trade, the state has to ensure security for the movement of merchandise. Large states are essential for prosperity of overland trade. In Bengal, much of the trade was maritime. The deltaic areas in Bengal were easily accessible to the sea through the network of inland waterways. Consequently, traders in Bengal did not require the umbrella of a large empire.

Traditional historical literature refers to flourishing foreign trade in ancient Bengal (Islam, 1984). A scrutiny of the historical sources, however, indicates that the extent of trade in ancient Bengal has been exaggerated. First, large scale trading activities would have contributed to significant monetization of the economy. Historical sources clearly suggest that the monetization of the economy was shallow for more than one thousand years—from the fourth to the fifteenth century. Fa-hien, the Chinese traveller, reported that cowrie (shell) was the principal medium of exchange in the fourth century Bengal. The records of the Sena rulers in the 12th century indicate that kings used to make gifts in cowries. Minhajuddin, the Turkish historian mentioned that in thirteenth century Bengal, all economic transactions were made in cowries. Ibn Batuta, the Moorish traveller, who visited Bengal in the fourteenth century, noted that the cowries were the principal medium of exchange in Bengal. Ma huan, a fifteenth century traveller also records the preponderance of cowries in economic transactions in Bengal. Local traders had very limited role in foreign trade of Bengal which was monopolized by traders from abroad. The benefit of trade in Bengal was likely to be limited. Secondly, historians note a significant decline of trading in South Asia since the fall of the Roman empire in the fifth century. The sharp fall in foreign trade in Bengal is particularly evident during five hundred years from the eighth to thirteenth century (Roy 1400 B.S.). This secular decline in trade is attributed to the disruption of

the Mediterranean trade in the wake of the Arab dominance of South Asia's foreign trade. The foregoing analysis suggests that role of trade in determining the size of the polity in Bengal delta was likely to be minimal.

The standard assumption of neo-classical theory is that there are economies of scale in the expansion of a state (North 1981, p. 23). It is argued that a larger state can provide security and protection to a wider territory at a cheaper cost. Historical experience of Bangladesh region suggests diseconomies of scale in the expansion of a polity. There are four factors which set apart the experience of Bangladesh region from other regions of South Asia. First the enforcement cost of a political system in Bangladesh region is high. Since corporate villages were conspicuously absent in Bangladesh, there was no grass-roots organization for the enforcement of law and order or the collection of land revenue. There was no headman in the villages of Bangladesh. Furthermore, village officials in the traditional sense were unknown. In much of South Asia, village headman and village officials ran the administration at the grass-roots level. The villages in the rest of South Asia were linked to the central government through intermediate organizations such as *nadu* and *periyannadu*. As Dube points out, "The administrative system was organized on the basis of grouping of villages, each having its recognized leader" (Dube 1955, p. 2). Neither village governments nor groupings of villages existed in deltaic Bengal. Secondly, information costs of administration in deltaic Bengal were high. The rural settlements in this region were dispersed whereas the villages in much of South Asia were nucleated. Information could be easily collected in nucleated settlements. However, collection of information on cultivation in dispersed settlements entails additional time and search. Thirdly, because of the abundance of uncultivated land and low cost of bringing such land under cultivation in Bengal delta, it was easy to migrate from one area to another area. Too much exploitation is likely to be counterproductive in this environment. Finally, the manoeuvrability of the armed forces was limited because of the peculiarities of the deltaic terrain. Much of Bengal delta was a wetland criss-crossed by innumerable rivers, streams and creeks. The mode of transportation varies with water level. Bangladesh, it has been rightly pointed out, "is a small country of long distances" (Novak 1993, p. 38). Bengal delta is a difficult place to travel. The costs of defending a large state in such terrain increase with its size.

States in Bengal delta in the ancient period were not only small but also unstable. Small states are not necessarily unstable. They are likely to survive so long as they do not face any emergency. The major threat of small states in the Bengal delta came from foreign invasions. Small states in Bengal delta were surrounded by large and strong states. Invaders came not only from the west (e.g. the Maurya, Guptas, Palas, Rashtrakutas, Cholas etc.) but also from the north (e.g. the Varmans and the Palas in Assam) as well as the east (Arakan and Tripura). Another major weakness of a small state is the ease of rebellion from within. Whenever the constituents of a small state are dissatisfied, they can easily organize resistance. Small states in Bengal delta were not well equipped to face the emergencies of invasions from outside or rebellion from inside. Both competitive constraint and transaction cost constraint impeded small state's ability to generate resources for overcoming emergencies. The mortality rate of small states was, therefore, high.

The size of polity in Bengal delta expanded significantly since the establishment of the Muslim rule in the thirteenth century. The Muslim rulers succeeded in unifying most of the areas in Bengal. This new trend in the political life in Bengal zone may be attributed to two factors. First, the policing capability of all India-empires was vastly enhanced by the introduction of new military technology. The army prior to the establishment of the Muslim rule in India was pedestrian. Locally bred horses were not abundant and suitable for cavalry. As a result, horses had to be imported at a great cost from Persia and Arabia. The military superiority of the early Muslim rulers was based on swift cavalry. However, the competitive edge of the cavalry was lost as the rivals of Delhi-based empires started using cavalry. The Mughals who came to South Asia at a later stage had to introduce a more powerful technology to maintain their hegemony. This new technology was the field artillery which was very costly (Rothermund 1988). Because of its dependence on the new type of artillery, Mughal empire is very often styled as "the gun-powder empire". This transition from pedestrian army to swift cavalry and field artillery considerably enhanced central government's striking power. This made possible prolonged sway over far-flung areas like Bengal. Secondly, the establishment of the Muslim rule in South Asia coincided with a remarkable expansion of both inland and foreign trade. By restoring law and order, the Delhi-based all-India empires stimulated inland trade. Foreign trade in the Indian ocean

picked up with the revival of international trade in Europe. The expansion of trade increased remarkably the revenue potentials of the rulers in Bengal. Apart from revenue, traders also provided easy access to credit. As Eaton points out: "In fact, the Marwaris and Mughals collaborated in the conquest of Bengal. Where the Mughals provided the Marwaris with the political security essential for transacting business, the latter provided the Mughals with financial capital obtained through their network of fellow caste members residing all over northern India" (Eaton 1994, p. 156).

The gradual elimination of small polities by a centralized state in Bengal zone since the thirteenth century was a significant departure from her political tradition. This marked the transition from contractual polities to a predatory or exploitative polity. There are two obviously exploitative features of the new political order. First, throughout history, Bengal zone had experienced plunder of resources by foreign invaders. However, the incursions of pedestrian armies were sporadic and short-lived. As a result resources raised by small kingdoms in the Bengal delta remained in these kingdoms. Equipped with a superior military technology, the overlords in Delhi since the thirteenth century established a system of continuous drain of resources from Bengal zone. There were two types of rulers in medieval Bengal: appointed governors of Delhi-based all India empires or independent kings. Unlike the independent kings in ancient Bengal, the rulers in medieval Bengal could not be oblivious to political realities in north India. They would not survive so long as a strong central government existed in Delhi. They were, therefore, deeply enmeshed in north Indian politics. They had to deploy all their resources and energies in an unequal competition with the mighty military machine in the north. They, therefore, had an insatiable demand for revenue. The governors of the Muslim empires in the north were also under continuous pressure for remittance of ever-increasing resources. The dilemma of the Delhi-based empires was succinctly summarized by Bayly in the following manner: "The rulers required a constant expansion of revenue by conquest or agricultural growth to satisfy aspirations of the nobility and official classes. If they could not provide office, honour and land grants, then its own servants began to lose the will to play the Delhi-game" (1993, p. 11). The system depended on the ability of the state to extract in cash as much as 40 percent of the value of total agricultural product. Economic exploitation was, therefore, intensified in medieval Bengal.

According to an estimate, revenue/GDP ratio was about 43.8 percent in the hey days of the Moghul rule in Bengal (Khan 1992).

Secondly, the medieval rulers in Bengal established a new system for collection of revenue. Outwardly it resembles a bureaucratic system because the collectors would be easily changed by the rulers. In fact, it was a system of agency for collection of revenue without the rights of feudal lords. The Muslim rulers in Bengal bifurcated the military and fiscal functions. The army was run by the immigrant Muslim warlords. The fiscal functions were assigned to Hindu landlords who were known as Chowdhurys, Majumdars and Zamindars. The Hindu landlords in medieval Bengal were not feudatories or sub-infeudatories in the European sense, they were merely intermediaries who established a link between the immigrant rulers and local population. The Muslim rulers in Bengal preferred the Hindus specially the Kyasthas for collection of revenue for two reasons. First, local Hindu zamindars had detailed information on revenue in their areas. In the absence of well-defined village organizations, these local intermediaries were essential for collection of revenue from dispersed settlements. Secondly, the Hindu zamindars were politically powerless and were easily manipulated by their overlords. According to Salimullah, Murshid Quli Khan, an eighteenth century ruler "appointed none but Bengali Hindus in the collection of revenue because they were most easily compelled by threats or punishments to disclose their malpractices and their confederates, and their pusillanimity secured from insurrection or combination against the state" (Quoted in Rahim 1967, Vol. II p. 163). The preference for the Kayasthas may be attributed to the fact that they had been the dominant landholding caste prior to Muslim conquest and had absorbed the descendants of Bengal's old ruling dynasties.

The main attraction of the intermediary system for Muslim rulers in Bengal was that the intermediaries could be changed easily. On the other hand, the insecurity of their assignment forced the intermediaries to focus exclusively on their short term gains. They, therefore, tried to exact as much rent as possible in the shortest possible time. They were apprehensive that they might be replaced at any time by their competitors in the neighbouring areas. They constantly tried to eliminate potential rivals so that they could remain indispensable in their areas. The rent-seeking intermediaries, therefore, actively promoted factionalism (*daladali*) which became an art in rural Bengal. As a nineteenth century British administrator observed "social ambition

fired rival claimants for the leadership of their little circles, and in every village there were generally faction feuds raging" (Carstairs 1912, p. 26).

Despite the shift from contractual polity to predatory polity, political instability continued in medieval Bengal. Lack of corporate institutions at grass-roots level perpetuated political instability in the ancient period. The problems were compounded by the medieval rulers. They did not remove the administrative vacuum in the rural areas which existed before the establishment of the Muslim rule. On the contrary, they exacerbated the problem by generating relentless factionalism in the rural areas by appointing the Kyasthas as intermediaries for the collection of revenue. The continuous drain of resources further undermined the polity in Bengal zone.

In the first century of Muslim rule, the average reign of a ruler was about 5.5 years, during the period 1342-1575 A.D., it was about 9 years. In the fifteenth century, the Abyssinian palace guards murdered four kings in less than a decade. Rampant political instability illustrates the apathy of the common people to the fate of their political masters. As emperor Babur noted in the sixteenth century, "it is a singular custom in Bengal that there is little of hereditary descent in succession to the sovereignty. Whoever kills the king and succeeds in placing himself on that throne is immediately acknowledged as king; all the amirs, soldiers and peasants instantly obey and submit to him, and consider him as being as much as their sovereign as they did their former prince, and obey his orders implicitly. The people of Bengal say, "we are faithful to the throne; whoever fills the throne we are obedient and true to it" (Quoted in Rahim 1963, Vol. I, p.244). Abul Fadl, the Moghul court historian, described Bengal as *Bulghakkhana*—the "house of turbulence". He attributed the endemic dissension to corrupting influence of the climate on the inhabitants. In the same vein, Shah Niamat Ullah Firuzpuri, wrote in the seventeenth century:

*"Bengal is a ruined and doleful land
Go offer the prayers to the dead, do not delay
Neither on land nor water is there rest
It is either the tiger's jaws or the crocodile's gullet"*

(Translated by Eaton, 1994, p. 169)

The Portuguese traveller Tom Piores who came to Bengal in the sixteenth century noted that the people in the Far East believed that

the Bengalees were treacherous (Mukhapadhaya 1980). The same impression was conveyed by Macaulay in the nineteenth century with a rhetorical flourish: "What the horns are to the buffalo, what the sting is to the bee, what beauty according to the Greek song is to woman, deceit is to the Bengalee. Large promises, smooth excuses, elaborate tissues of circumstantial falsehood, chicanery, perjury, forgery are the weapons, offensive and defensive of the people of the Lower Ganges" (Quoted in Chaudhuri, 1987, p. 382).

An analysis of political evolution in Bengal indicates that earliest forms of polity in the ancient period are likely to be contractual. The predatory form of state was superimposed at a later stage in the medieval period. Nevertheless the forces which promoted contractual structure of polity could not be altogether eliminated or suppressed. As a result political instability in Bengal continued despite the crystallization of predatory structure of the state.