TRADE AND TOWNS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL (c. A.D. 600-1200)

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A study of the trade-urban complex of early medieval India is pertinent from two counts: it can provide insights into the precise role of trade in the development of urban centres during this period and it can help in testing the validity of the Indian feudal model. Recent studies of both trade and towns, have, however, singularly failed to highlight these aspects. In fact, hardly an attempt has been made to comprehend the trade-urban complex as a homogeneous, inter-related and inter-dependent development, with the result that they have been treated as completely segregated historical processes. The common knowledge that towns generally derive their rationale for existence from trade, and that in a feudal society the growth of both trade and towns is inhibited, makes the need for such a study imperative. With this perspective in view, attempts have been made to analyse the trade-urban complex of early medieval Bengal, because this region provides some of the best archaeological evidence regarding the continuation of towns during that period; this evidence is all the more interesting because it is held by many scholars that in other parts of contemporary India urban centres had almost disappeared.

It is now increasingly accepted that in the early medieval period Bengal region could hardly boast of the existence of any substantial amount of trade and commerce. Recently M. R. Tarafdar, while making a comparative study of the different geographical and cultural regions of early medieval Bengal in terms of their economic viability, has, however, suggested a contrasting situation for South-
East Bengal\(^1\)). To him this is a region having all the attributes of a
developed money economy supported by an elaborate currency
system, prosperous urban centres and developed commercial links.
The evidence that he cites in his favour is, however, dubitable. He
refers to 350 coins in all, belonging to Gupta and post-Gupta times,
which have been discovered from the different levels of excavations in
the Mainamati-Lalmai hills. He further suggests that these imitation
coins continued to be issued till the 11th century A.D.\(^2\), and that the
basis of this monetary system was trade with Arabia, import of gold
and silver from southern China, Burma, Pegu and South East Asia
and commercial contacts with China\(^3\). He also refers to the urban
centres of Mainamati-Lalmai regions which were "important" till
the 8th century A.D.\(^4\) and apparently suggests their continuation till
the 11th-12th centuries.

Tarafdar's evidence and arguments are, however, hardly convinc-
ing. To begin with, much cannot be made of just 350 coins (accord-
ing to Tarafdar's chronology) spread over a long period of about 800
years. Apparently he realises this limitation of his numismatic
evidence for he himself adds that the region had "a fluctuating money
economy"\(^5\). But even this statement seems to be completely out of
tune with the cited evidence. On the basis of Tarafdar's own
chronological attribution it can be shown that the region had, on an
average, only 44 coins for every hundred years, a situation which will
hardly be an indication of even "a fluctuating economy". This is not
the only problem with Tarafdar's thesis; even his suggestions regard-
ing the dating of coins are highly hypothetical. Though he disputes
the theory suggesting the issue of Gupta imitation coins in the 6th-7th
century in this region\(^6\), he fails to offer any worthwhile proof for his

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1) 'Trade and Society in Early Medieval Bengal', *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. IV, no. 2, pp. 275-84.