

Dhaka's origin myth

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It is essential to understand the politics surrounding Dhaka's origin as a city. The prevailing mythology is that Dhaka is 400 years old. About ten years ago, the 400th anniversary of Dhaka's founding as a Mughal administrative centre of the Bengal *subah* circa 1608 CE (or 1610) was celebrated with much fanfare. In 2011, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh published a book, *400 Years of Capital Dhaka and Beyond*, offering authoritative support to the idea that Dhaka was founded in the early 17th century. The celebration was premised on the idea that pre-Mughal Dhaka was not yet a city.

Acclaimed historian Abdul Karim encapsulates this view: "Dhaka, a place of some importance in the Sultanate period, came to the limelight of history under the Mughals. The Mughals first established a thana (fortified post) at Dhaka to guard the imperial position against the incursions of the independent or semi-independent 'Bhuiya' chiefs...But the city acquired fame and glory only after being capital of the Subah in the reign of Jahangir in 1610 A.D."

The establishment of Dhaka as a provincial Mughal capital seems to have laid the foundation of Dhaka's legend. It was said that during his eastward journey, Islam Khan Chishti (a member of the Fatehpur Sikri Sufi family) was concerned about the geopolitical vulnerability of Rajmahal, the then capital that was prone to enemy attack since it was situated on a riverbank. He endeavoured to transfer the Mughal capital to a strategically safer, central location in Bengal. Having stopped at Ghoraghat briefly during the monsoon he continued on with his journey to East Bengal and eventually chose Dhaka as his future capital.

What factors led Islam Khan to select Dhaka as his capital? Historians offer differing reasons. In *History of Bengal* (1813), Charles Stewart argued that Islam Khan transferred the capital to Dhaka mainly as an imperial defence along the eastern frontier of the empire. For Khan, Dhaka

offered a superior geo-strategic location for the surveillance of lower Bengal—especially the southern coastal belt—that had been ravaged by the Maghs and Portuguese pirates.

Historian Sirajul Islam proposed that Dhaka's emergence as a vibrant city under the Mughal regime was due to two intertwining factors: the centralisation of political power and the Mughal comprehension of Dhaka's commercial prospect. Emphasising the latter, Sirajul Islam wrote: "The Mughals did not develop the place as a premier city of the empire *ex nihilo*. The supreme reason was Dhaka's commercial prospects. If formerly, the capital cities of Gaur, Pandua, Rajmahal, Ghoraghat, Sonargaon and others lost their significance and soon got merged up with a rural regime, it was because those cities were planned and set up for military purposes alone. None of these places had any connection with the commercial lifeline of the country." In other words, Dhaka's exceptionalism derived from the ways the Mughals exploited the city's existing commercial advantage and how such an engagement inspired the city's urban growth.

Whatever the reasons for the Mughal selection of Dhaka as the provincial capital of Bengal, historians of Dhaka city generally appear to be at intellectual ease in identifying the city's birth with the advent of the Mughal governor Islam Khan Chishti. For them, Jahangirnagar—as Dhaka was then renamed after the reigning Mughal emperor—transformed from a rudimentary *janapada* to a city, when the *subahdar* reportedly moved his entire civil and military establishment to the northern bank of the River Buriganga.

The belief that Dhaka emerged as a significant military, administrative, and commercial centre under the Mughals, who understood the strategic value of the city's riverine hydrography, not only bolstered Dhaka's Mughal origin myth but also, ironically, obscured the pre-Mughal periods of Dhaka as a historical subject. Whether the intellectual obfuscation of pre-Mughal histories of the city and its triumphalist identification with a Mughal origin is intertwined with Muslim identity politics or due to the scarcity of archival and archaeological sources or a combination of both remains a historical riddle.

In 1989, the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh held an international symposium on the city of Dhaka—titled *Dhaka Past Present Future*. The namesake book that resulted from this symposium featured Abdul Karim's "Origin and Development of Mughal Dhaka" as its first article. Even though Karim didn't exactly argue that Dhaka was "born" with the Mughal arrival, an "origin myth" has long been established. The book did not have a single authoritative article on pre-Mughal urban histories of Dhaka.

The dearth of research on the pre-Mughal urbanisation of Dhaka is itself curious. Why is there a short supply of world-class peer-reviewed research on the city before the arrival of the Mughals? This should raise many critical questions. Is it merely the absence of enterprising historians who would be willing to undertake arduous archival, archaeological, and epigraphic research on this ignored period? Is it collective intellectual laziness to uncritically accept the dominant post-Mughal historical narrative? Or, is the knowledge gap itself an orchestration of a particular identity? A “void” in historical knowledge can speak volumes about a city, its people and their political worldview.

In histories of the ancient maritime world, Dhaka has been mentioned since the early Christian era. In *Oriental Commerce* (1813), William Milburn states that Roman historian Pliny the Younger observed the “presence of Dhaka’s textiles in the Mediterranean trade as early as 73 A.D.” Dhaka was known within the trading world of the Silk Road, as muslin and fine embroidery were coveted products in European royal courts, as much as they were in Sultani and Mughal durbars before Islam Khan’s arrival in the city.

It is likely that Dhaka developed into a modest commercial hub during the epoch of the Sena rulers. The fact that Ballal Sen built the Dhakeshwari temple in the 12th century on the bank of the Buriganga River suggests the existence of a sizeable religious community. The city was a place of some significance under the independent Sultans of Bengal. It was said that the city was a revenue collection centre during the reign of Sultan Barbak Shah (1459-1474). Man Singh (1550-1614) realised the civil and military leverage of Dhaka and made it a thana (military district). Since the 1450s Dhaka was the eastern outpost of Muslim settlers. One extant mosque built during the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah I (1433-59) reveals building activities in pre-Mughal Dhaka.

Whether these sketchy pieces of “evidence” suffice for pre-Mughal Dhaka to be called a city merits considerable scholarly attention. The obscure view itself provokes broader questions concerning how we address the problem of writing history. For the new generation of historians, this problem is twofold. First, they need to fill knowledge gaps in the history of Dhaka, particularly from ancient times to pre-Mughal periods. Second, they have to write Dhaka’s global history, not falsely isolated “local” history. A global history of Dhaka would show if and how this city flourished across historical eras as a result of migration, trading, movement of religious communities and nomadic tribes, and military invasions, and how these factors intersected with local conditions.

I have been reading a fascinating book: Peter Frankopan's *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (2015). The book's larger theme is that nation-centric histories are false stories. In reality, histories and cultural experiences of different regions—east and west, north and south—are connected by a complex web of historical movements of people, goods, ideas, religions, and many more. Just like London's history is hardly confined to the geographic and political entity called England, Dhaka's history is not constricted to Bengal.

We need a new generation of historians to debunk the myth of false origins and narrate the overlapping of histories that help unpack the complex development of a city.