



HAJI MUHAMMAD MOHSIN AND CONTEMPORARY WEALTHY PERSONS IN 18th CENTURY COLONIAL BENGAL : A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT :

18th Century Bengal witnessed the stage from prosperity to decline, as per the statement of prominent historian Sushil Roy. This period saw the socio – economic condition of the people of Bengal under Mughal puppet emperors, next by independent Nawabs and later on by the colonial East India Company and in this socio-economic background the emergence of a great philanthropist Haji Muhammad Mohsin. In this paper the role of all these ruling classes including the role of colonial British East India Company in spreading Education and philanthropy has also been discussed critically. The role of Haji Muhammad Mohsin in this regard is highlighted and a comparative study of the Indigenous and colonial ruling class in case of spreading Education has been discussed. Attempts are also taken to find out the fact whether Haji Muhammad Mohsin was supported by the Colonial ruling class or interrupted by them in case of his continuing philanthropic activities. Apart from this, the role of contemporary wealthy persons and the role played by Haji Muhammad Mohsin's regarding philanthropy has been discussed here. Haji Muhammad Mohsin longed for spreading Anglo – Persian Education. Secular characteristics of Haji Muhammad Mohsin and his contribution regarding the promotion of Education has been highlighted here.

Key words: Philanthropy, promoting education, colonial rule, Nawab rule, later Mughal rulers, Wealthy persons.

INTRODUCTION :

Prior to emphasise the above mentioned subject matter , it is mandatory to explain the term ‘Haji’. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary the word *Haji* or “ *Hajji* is derived from the Arabic *ḥājj*, which is the active participle of the verb *ḥajja* ("to make the pilgrimage"). The alternative form *ḥajjī* is derived from the name of the *Hajj* with the adjectival suffix -ī, and this was the form adopted by non-Arabic languages.”³ As per Collins Dictionary, in British English, the term *Haji* or *Hajji* refers to one who performs *Hajj* or pilgrimage to Mecca. The word *Haji* is often used at present to denote a Muslim who performs *Hajj* to Mecca for religious purposes.⁴ *Haji Muhammad Mohsin* performed *Hajj* to Mecca and gained the title *Haji* since then. Next , we should mention a brief account on Bengal. The region encompasses contemporary Bangladesh, West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam's Karimganj district in India. Situated in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, this area is positioned at the apex of the Bay of Bengal and is primarily characterised by the presence of the fertile delta of Ganges. Throughout the ages, Bengal had been ruled by the rulers of various dynasties like Mauryan, Guptas, Palas, Senas, Iliias Shahis, Hussain Shahis, Delhi Sultans, Mughals and later on by Independent nababs. In the period under discussion i.e. 18th century, Bengal was ruled by Independent Nawabs from 1717 to 1757 and later on by Colonial Government.⁵

Then , the focus should be given on the fact that why 18th Century Bengal is called as Colonial Bengal. The French, The Danish, The Dutch, The Armenian merchants, and other European company after all the British East India Company set up their factories in Hooghly, Cossimbazar, Dacka and other places and continued business on saltpetre, textiles, opium etc. and made a huge fortune of their own. At the same time local merchants of Bengal and European private entrepreneurs also made their fortune in business based on using the port city of Satgaon and later on Hooghly and Chittagong. But The British East India company made a remarkable profit as they got the farman in 1717 from Mughal ruler Farukhshiar. The comprehensive examination of the Farrukhsiyar Farman of 1717, which influenced the approach of the Nawabs' administration towards the English East India Company, is highly warranted. Later on independent Nabab Murshid Quli Khan opposed the company’s policy of buying lands. Besides, Nabab Ali Bardi Khan and other Nababs curtailed their scope. To get back the power of firman the East India Company conspired with Mirjafar and defeated Nabab Siraj – ud – Doula in the battle of Plassey in 1757. Gradually they gained Dewani and entered into the administration in Bengal and later on enjoyed the trade monopoly. As a result other business community’s power declined. So, it is apt to term 18th Century Bengal as Colonial Bengal.⁶

At the next stage , we should know who *Haji Muhammad Mohsin* was. *Haji Mohammad Mohasin* was born in Hooghly in the year 1732 CE to *Haji Fajjullah* and *Zainab Khanam* in a Persian family. He was a man of noble character who possessed a generous and benevolent heart. During the period of political turnout in 18th Century, the people of Bengal had to face great difficulties to survive themselves because of the exploitation of the ruling classes. 1770s famine was the ultimate result of political oppression when one – third of the total people died of starvation. There were so many wealthy person like *Jagat Seths*, *Omichand*, *Nawab Khan Jehan*

Khan etc. but they were totally indifferent to the difficulties of the people of Bengal. Instead they exploited them whereas Haji Muhammad Mohsin stretched his charitable hand and in 1806 CE, he donated all his property and made a trust for spreading education and charity. A portion of Haji Muhammad Mohsin's fund was used for religious purposes but the large part of his fund helped the distressed people, irrespective of caste and religion. Till now, the people of minority classes are being benefitted with the aid of his fund.

In this paper, the focus is given on a comparative study that has been done on the role of Haji Muhammad Mohsin and the role played by other wealthy persons of the period under discussion. Nawab Khan Jehan Khan of Hooghly had huge property and led a life of luxury while Haji Muhammad Mohsin led a very simple life like a saint and in spite of having a large property he led his life on the earning by copying Holy Quran with his beautiful calligraphy and donated his property by making a trust for the humanitarian services. During the period other wealthy persons of Bengal were Jagat Seths, Omi Chand, Khaja Wajed etc. Their role in this context has also been discussed here.

DEVOTION TO THE HOLY QURAN :

Subsequently, Mohsin undertook the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca and Madina and proceeded to go to other locations throughout the Middle East. Throughout his whole life, he adhered to the principles and doctrines espoused in the Holy Quran, as well as those propagated by the esteemed Prophet Muhammad and subsequent Caliphs. This exceptional guy had the belief that his substantial riches were bestowed upon him by the omnipotent Allah and should be used for the betterment of the wider population. This great person did not enter into the institution of marriage, which therefore spared him from encountering any legal complications in regards to the administration of his substantial assets. As a result of this circumstance, he harboured significant apprehension over the management of his estate posthumously, with the intention of optimising its use for the betterment of others' livelihoods. Hence, in the year 1806 of the Common Era, he executed a *Towleutnamah*, commonly referred to as a deed of trust, wherein he relinquished all of his assets, save for a select number of estates located in Nadia, Murshidabad, 24 parganas, and Burdwan, which he retained for personal purposes. Nevertheless, he allocated the income derived from these properties to diverse philanthropic entities. The primary sources of revenue for this remarkable person were calligraphy and translating the Holy Quran. Despite his notable achievements, he had a modest lifestyle.⁹ His serene demeanour and his good looks are genetic gifts. Haji Muhammad Mohsin, a Sufi saint, devoted his whole life to service to others and engagement with the wider world. The writing was a work of art. He may have copied the Qur'an in as many as 72 distinct handwritings throughout his lifetime. In those days, one would fetch several thousand rupees. And instead of spending it on himself, he gave it to charities that help the underprivileged. He has visited many cities in India and the Middle Eastern cities of Mecca and Medina. Dedicatedly carried out the Hajj rituals. In family history, the prefix "Hajji" has been added to the beginning of his name. Twenty-seven years of his life were spent on the road. He kept on exploring the world even after turning sixty. Mohsin came back after a lengthy trip overseas.¹⁰

LEGACY OF HAJI MUHAMMAD MOHSIN:

In the year 1806 CE, Mohsin formed a Waqf with the intention of supporting humanitarian and educational initiatives. This act included the generous donation of substantial ancestral property. Now, let us examine the means by which Haji Mohsin successfully accumulated a sufficient amount of money to acquire a substantial parcel of real property. Zainab Khanam, the mother of the Mohsin, was previously married to Aga Motahar, a prominent figure with a jagir held in high regard by Emperor Aurangzeb. In addition to accumulating fortune via taxes, Aga Motahar had considerable success in the salt trade, ultimately attaining significant affluence in the region of Hooghly. Munnoojan Khanam was born to Aga Motahar and Zainab. Following the demise of Aga Motahar, Zainab entered into matrimony with Haji Faijullah, a wealthy and accomplished entrepreneur. Collectively, they procreated a male offspring, who is now recognised as the esteemed Haji Mohsin. Munnoojan inherited the whole of Aga Motahar's wealth as a testamentary gift from her paternal figure. In pursuit of expanding their commercial endeavours, his ancestors went to India during the 17th century, originating from Persia, now recognised as Iran. The paternal ancestor of this person, Aga Fazloollah, was from the region known as Persia. Initially, he established his residence at Murshidabad, a city that served as the capital of Bengal during that particular era and was under the governance of the Nawab. They engaged in such actions with the intention of broadening their commercial pursuits. Subsequently, with the intention of advancing his commercial endeavours, he opted to establish his permanent residence in Hooghly, a renowned city situated along the river port in Bengal. Consequently, Haji Faijullah, the offspring of Haji Fazloollah and the progenitor of Haji Mohsin, matured into a prosperous entrepreneur in Hooghly.¹¹ After the death of his father Haji Faijullah, Haji Mohsin became the owner of this property.

INHERITENCE OF WEALTH FROM MUNNOOJAN:

Due to the substantial demand for commercial raw materials in European marketplaces during the industrial revolution, Persian merchants made the strategic decision to allocate their surplus funds towards the acquisition of cultivated land. Following the death of Haji Faijullah, Haji Mohsin became the recipient of a considerable estate. In contrast, Nawab Mirjafar delegated the responsibility of overseeing the Syedpur estate to Mirza Salah ud-din, who was united in matrimony with Munnojan, the paternal half-sibling of Haji Mohsin. At this juncture, Mirza Salah ud-din assumed the position of Deputy Military Governor of Hooghly. As a result, Munnojan received a substantial inheritance from both her father, Aga Motahar, and her husband, Salah-ud-din. Munnojan and Salah-ud-din could not conceive any offspring. Consequently, at Munnojan's demise in the year 1803 C.E., Haji Mohammad Mohsin became the sole inheritor of her whole wealth. Consequently, Haji Mohammad Mohsin acquired ownership of a substantial tract of land.

TOWLEEUTNAMAH : DEED OF TRUST:

Hence, in the year 1806 of the Common Era, Mohsin executed a Towleeutnamah, commonly referred to as a deed of trust, wherein he relinquished all of his assets, save for a select number of estates located in Nadia,

Murshidabad, 24 parganas, and Burdwan, which he retained for personal purposes. Nevertheless, he allocated the income derived from these properties to diverse philanthropic entities. The primary sources of revenue for this remarkable individual were calligraphy and translating the Holy Quran. Despite his notable achievements, he had a modest lifestyle. As per the Towleutnamah, a document formulated in 1806 C.E., it was stipulated that one-third of the contributed assets were to be allocated for educational and religious purposes, while four-ninths of the land were designated for the provision of pensions to those who were either incapacitated or elderly. The provision of pensions and healthcare services for the elderly and disabled individuals within society.¹²

CHARITABLE ACTIVITIES OF HAJI MUHAMMAD MOHSIN:

In the midst of the famine that occurred in the year 1770 C.E., his benevolence and empathy for the afflicted populace were prominently shown. He undertook the construction of a substantial quantity of kitchens and provided sustenance to the populace residing in Bengal who were experiencing the adverse effects of the famine. Besides, Haji Mohsin established educational institutions, centre for free treatment for the distressed, pensions for the old and disabled and other charitable activities. It is worth mentioning that, many educational institutions like Hooghly Mohsin College, Mohsin College of Chittagong, Dacca Madrasha, Rajshahi Madrashah, Imambara Hospitals etc. have been established from his trust property after his demise and till now his fund is being used for humanitarian services.

JAGAT SETHS AND HAJI MUHAMMAD MOHSIN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

In 18th Century Bengal, Jagat Seth was a leading bankers and traders. The various companies of Europe were consequently compelled all of their bullion and coins to be sold to Jagat Seths' house, and they had no choice. They had to but receive the amount offered by the bankers. The control and influence of the Jagat Seths over Bengal's money market were so extensive that all parties accepted the house's exchange rates. Fatechand was able to persuade the ruler to enact this provision and agree with such systems of currency exchange – rate that would benefit the house by virtue of his considerable influence over the Bengal administration, which he had acquired by providing consistent financial support to the nawab. The company's documents provide many instances. The *batta* that was obtained from recoinage was an important revenue-source for Jagat Seths' house. As per the calculation by Luke Scrafton's, the Seths minted Rs. 50 lacs per year in 1757, and the profit came out of Rs. 3.5 lacs. The *batta* on various foreign currencies and coins from the provinces of India was also an important income-source for the Seths. The Seths' House was the government's revenue collector and treasurer. It collected land tax payments from zamindars and amils.¹³ Jagat Seth had a large property. There is a brief account in Sushil Choudhury's "*Merchants, Companies and Rulers.*"

"As to the wealth of the house of Jagat Seths, it is extremely difficult to form a correct estimate. Gholam Hossein writes: 'Their wealth was such that there is no mentioning it without seeming to exaggerate and to deal in extravagant fables'. 'As Ganges pours its water into the sea by a hundred mouths,' wrote a Bengali

poet, 'so wealth flowed into the treasury of the Seths'. In the early sixties of the eighteenth century William Bolts estimated that the house possessed a capital of 7 krons [70 million] of rupees, as his countrymen calculate".¹⁴

Jagat Seths were the Indigenous merchants who were so powerful and wealthy that European Companies were dependent on them and they played the role of the king maker at that time. They could have built many institutions and charitable organizations for the wellbeing of the people and future generations but they did not proceed in that direction. Haji Muhammad Mohsins had also a large property but in comparison to their property, it was microscopic. But what Haji Muhammad Mohsin had done is seen in open eyes.

Haji Muhammad Mohsin established *Wakf* estate in 1806 A.D, and subsequent charity was made by the board, like the establishment of Hooghly Imambara and other educational institutions under his patronage for spreading light of thought and Islamic knowledge and culture. In 1836 CE Colonial government took the lead of wakf estate and built Mohsin College at Hooghly. In that time, yearly revenue of the specified entity exceeded Rs 55,000. This figure surpassed the annual budget allocated for educational purposes by the colonial Administration under the East India Company, which amounted to one lakh rupees for the whole of British India. With a substantial amount of funding, exceeding more than half of the educational allocation of the colonial government. Under his patronage, With the wakf fund made by him the people in present Bengal are also being benefitted. Imambara School, ¹⁵Hooghly Madrashah, Hooghly Mohsin College, Hooghly Branch School, Hooghly Collegiate School, etc. are examples of his significant contributions to the dissemination of Anglo-Persian education in Bengal. Let us examine Haji Mohsin's other philanthropic endeavours besides the dissemination of education. The Immambarah Hospital was built because of Muhammad Mohsin's zeal, compassion, and benevolence. When natural disasters such as floods, epidemics, or droughts occurred, medical professionals were dispatched to the afflicted areas, sometimes carrying with them sophisticated mobile hospitals stocked with essential medical equipment. Haji Mohammad Mohsin, the emperor of charity, did not stop highlighting his accomplishments in education, healthcare, and religious ceremonies. Ibn Imam (1916–18) asserts that the Mohsin Fund helped finance the Hooghly water project, which benefitted the city.¹⁶

OMICHAND AND HAJI MUHAMMAD MOHSIN : A COMPERATIVE STUDY

Another wealthy merchant, the renowned Omichand, played a vital role in Bengal's trade and commerce in 18th century. When he moved to Bengal in the decade of 1720s, he launched his commercial operations in Calcutta under the auspices of Bishnu Das Seth, a *dadni* merchant and the agent of the East India Company. By the early 1730s, he had established himself as a prominent merchant. His primary focus was on the economy of Bihar, situated in Patna, and the regions around Calcutta, where the company's investments, commercial enterprises, and rural trade were located.¹⁷ Omichand had had a huge property but after his death his property was used for charity in England. One of the litigants later assessed the value of the property that Amirchand bequeathed to Sree Govind Nanakji in his will to be 42 lakhs. Some of the witnesses used the

terms Govind Nanak and Govind Nanak Govind interchangeably. The impersonal nature of Sikh guruship is widely recognised. It was a peculiar Sikh belief that the gurus were identical. The dispute between Diachand and Huzuri Mai and Bulaki Singh and Hira Singh contributed to the destruction of this extremely valuable "trust property" of Amirchand. His contributions to the Magdalene and Foundling charities in 1762 best demonstrate Huzuri Mai's subservience to the English. In the case of John Doe on the death of Hira Singh vs. Bulaki Singh, Williamson provided the following testimony:

“There is a slight inaccuracy in the evidence of Williamson, but it is not surprising because he was giving his evidence in 1793, more than thirty years after the incident. The verbal offer of Huzuri Mai must have been made on March 31, 1762, because the letter was dated April 1, 1762. He expressed his intention to pay from Amirchand’s estate 37,500 current rupees into the company’s cash, half to the Foundling and half to the Magdalen hospital. I have read the Will of Amirchand as thoroughly as possible, and nowhere do I find any provision for the two charities in England. Huzuri Mai made this unauthorised payment of a very considerable sum of money out of Amirchand’s estate only to please the governor and his friends.”¹⁸

The ultimate truth is revealed here that Haji Muhammad Mohsin was of Persian origin and he made his charitable activities in Bengal, but Omichand’s property was used for the charity in England in stead of motherland India.

KHAJA WAJID AND HAJI MUHAMMAD MOHSIN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Another prominent traders in the 18th century Bengal was Khwaja Wajid and he was closely associated with the Nawab – family . If he utilized a negligible portion of his assets for the charitable activities, the people of Bengal would have gained a lot but it was unfortunate that he did not follow this track. To know detailed about his popularity as a traders following lines are enough to quote :

“The tremendous influence Khwaja Wazid exerted in the Murshidabad court, next only to that wielded by the Jagat Seths, is reflected in the fact that he often acted in the role of an intermediary between the Calcutta Council and the nawab, and this indicated the growing importance of the merchant princes in the Bengal politics. There is little doubt that Wazid was closely connected to the Murshidabad darbar. In the course of the Calcutta Council's debate whether the saltpetre contract should be made with Coja Wazid, the owner of the commodity, or Omichand, Wazid's close link with the government came out clearly. Most of the Council members referred to him either as a darbar official or closely connected with it¹⁰⁰). Orme described Wazid as ‘ the prin- cipal merchant of the Province while Watts and Collet of the Kasimbazar factory noted in 1756: Coja Wazeed the greatest merchant in Bengal...resides in Hughley and has great influence with the Nabob...10)’ Jan Kerseboom the chief of the Dutch factory wrote in 1755 that Khoja Wazid was lately given the title of ‘Faqqur Tousjaar [Fakhr-ut-tujar]’ meaning ‘supporter of the treasure’. He mentioned that Wazid was truly the maintainer of the riches of the rulers in the court of Nawab Alivardi Khan. He gave the nawab”.¹⁹

Haji Muhammad Mohsin had no ruling power like the Nawabs or the colonial governor – Generalship. He had neither wealth like Jagat Seths, Omichand or other traders. Yet he had had a good fortune of gaining a large property, though microscopic in comparison to the formers. It should be known how did he get this property.

NAWAB KHAN JEHAN KHAN AND HAJI MUHAMMAD MOHSIN:

Another prominent figure during the period under consideration must be discussed and this person is Nawab Khan Jehan Khan. No name is more well-known or esteemed in this region of Bengal than Nawab Khan Jehan Khan. Indeed, it has become common parlance and is held in the highest regard. Khan Jehan Khan was an Iranian Mughal who, as expected, adhered to the Shia faith. He was the son of Teheran's Shuja Kali Khan and arrived in India during the first half of the 18th century. He immediately enlisted in the service of the Mughals. As a man of substance and diligence, he ascended swiftly in the position until he was entrusted with the rule of a district. In succession to Omar Beg Khan, he was sent to Hooghly as Fouzdar around the time the East India Company was entrusted with the Dewani of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. He proved to be an effective monarch, and the populace enjoyed his leadership²⁰.

Both Haji Muhammad Mohsin and Nawab Khan Jehan Khan lived in Hooghly at the same time but the former was inspired by the lesson from Holy Quran and left the life of luxury though he was a prosperous Zamindar and led a celibate life having donated all his property for humanitarian services, the later led a luxurious life.

“While in authority, the Nawab lived in a princely manner. His residence was the grandest and most luxurious in the entire city, and his herd of horses and elephants was enormous”²¹

Haji Muhammad Mohsin led a celibate life like a saint and before his death he had no issue. Actually all the people of Bengal are his issue and he remains memorable in thousands who are benefitted by his charity but Khan Jehan Khan has lost his identity in due course of time.

“In accordance with the carnal nature of the majority of Mussalman nobles, the Nawab maintained a large number of mistresses, also known as Begums. Indeed, his Zenana was brimming with attractive women. But when fortune turned against him, he was compelled to abandon his retinue and settle for a single princess.²² At last, his affairs wore a very bad look, and he was obliged to have recourse to the Insolvent Court. The last days of his life were spent in misery, and he died head and shoulders in debt on February 23, 1891. His widow, who was thus left without means, was allowed a pension of Rs. 100 a month, which she enjoyed till her death, which took place many years later”²³

Towards the end of his life, Khan Jehan Khan was in debt because of his lifestyle and longed for marrying a wealthy widow Munoojan Khanam who was also the half – sister of Haji Muhammad Mohsin. But Munoojan Khanam disdained this proposal. The large property of Munoojan was inherited to Haji Muhammad Mohsin

and Haji made the wakf estate with this property and continued his philanthropic activities. If Munoojan married Nawab Khan Jehan Khan the history would have turned to another direction.

*“The late Fouzdar, longing to have his hand in the rich lady’s pie, made her a proposal of marriage, though he had his own wife living; but Mannu Jan Khanum, for that was the name of the lady who was so sought after, so far from accepting the proposal, with a boldness not very common to her sex, replied that she should be the last person to unite herself in holy wedlock with one who wanted to marry, not for love but for lucre, pure and simple. This bold reply at once silenced the broken old man, and he gave up all idea of setting up a rival to his old wife”.*²⁴

CONCLUSION :

Haji Muhammad Mohsin had no ruling power like the Nawabs or the colonial governor – Generals. He had neither wealth like Jagat Seths, Omichand or other traders. Yet he had had a good fortune of gaining a large property, though microscopic in comparison to the formers. Yet whatever he has done is seen in open eyes till now , but the contribution of Jagat Seths, omi Chand , Nawab Khan Jehan Khan is now beyond our discussion in the history of philanthropy. Haji Muhammad Mohsin was born in a transitional ;period in 18th century Bengal, when people of Bengal are in deplorable condition due to changing of the ruling classes and also by the colonial policy of exploitation. Haji Muhammad Mohsin scattered the light of hope to the distressed people with his trusted property. No such other wealthy person is found, in that period, so kind and generous like him who could donated all his property for humanitarian services. It is apt to regard him as the greatest philanthropist in 18th Century Colonial Bengal prior to Raja Ram Mohan Roy or Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar. His contribution is even alive till now in his institutions and various services fed by his trusted property. The future generation should study him well to be inspired for humanitarian services for the distressed.

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