

MING BLUE AND WHITE PORCELAINS FROM GAUR: CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE IN MEDIEVAL BENGAL

Sutapa Sinha

Introduction:

Extensive archaeological explorations of the twin capital cities of Gaur and Pandua, both in the district of Malda, West Bengal initiated in 1992 jointly by the Directorate of Archaeology, West Bengal and Department of Islamic History and Culture, University of Calcutta that continued for next five years till 1997 in order to find out the pattern of urbanisation of the capital cities of medieval Bengal. During the course of this surface survey, hundreds of artefacts have been collected from all over the city of Gaur where urbanisation started to develop sometimes around 1450 CE under the patronage of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah, the founder of the restored Ilyas Shahi dynasty. The city flourished steadily for next one and a quarter century and was ultimately abandoned with the Mughal aggression around 1575-76 because of shifting river course of the Ganges. The city became uninhabitable and the capital shifted further west to Rajmahal in present state of Jharkhand (**Map. 13.1**).

Among those various archaeological artefacts collected from the surface explorations, the present discourse would focus only on blue and white Chinese porcelain, sherds of which found in hundreds along with a small number of white porcelain sherds, olive-green celadon sherds. After preliminary analysis we found that all these ceramic sherds probably belong to late Ming period of China (1368 to 1644 AD), a typical category of vitrified ceramics which were not indigenous and not very commonly found ceramic assemblage from archaeological sites in India. Surprisingly, the earlier capital city of Hazrat Pandua *urf* Firuzabad (1336-1450 CE), situated almost 30 kms north of Gaur in the same district did not yield any such blue and white Chinese porcelain sherds during the course of surface exploration.

Later on, a small number of similar types of blue and white porcelain sherds have been reported from the medieval port town of Satgaon, i.e., present Saptagram in Hooghly district of south Bengal.

All these blue and white porcelain sherds collected from the surface explorations conducted in Gaur are now being preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. As a research scholar (1992-96), basic documentation of each and every piece of porcelain has been done and pottery reconstruction drawing of a number of selected blue and white porcelain sherds was made in order to understand the shapes and size of this ceramic assemblage. The project team could acquire one single intact blue and white porcelain bowl from a local private collector which bears four Chinese characters inscribed under glaze at the outside of ring-foot of the bowl. Professor Haraprasad Ray deciphered this potter's mark which says 'made during the great

Map 13.1 Map of Undivided Bengal showing location of twin capital cities of Medieval Bengal, Pandua and Gaur, Malda district, West Bengal.

Map 13.2: Map after Haraprasad Ray showing the sea route taken by the fleet of Chinese Eunuch Zheng He in early 15th century.

Plate 13.1: Ming porcelain in a private collection of Sadekh Shaikh, Gaur.

Plate 13.2: Sherds of blue and white porcelain.

Plate 13.3: Sherds of blue and white porcelain, preserved in the State Archeology Museum, Kolkata.

Plate 13.4a: Blue & white porcelain sherds.

Plate 13.4b: Blue & white porcelain sherds.

Plate 13.5: Reconstruction drawing of the blue and white porcelain sherds of footed bowls and small cups, Gaur.

Plate 13.6: Blue and white Porcelain bowl with Ming reign mark: State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata.

Plate 13.7: Porcelain sherds inscribed with proto-Bengali script / Tibetan lantsha.

Plate 13.8: Phoenix bird, depicted on porcelain.

Plate 13.9: Self-colour design on porcelain.

Plate 13.10: A small bowl inscribed with similar characters Percival David Collection, The British Museum, London.

Ming'¹ which definitely helped us to compare the date of the other sherds. We have found a number of sherds of blue and white porcelains with such reign marks inscribed in under glaze blue which helped to categorize more effectively.

Ming period in China (1368 -1644 AD) spans for almost three centuries, it was absolutely necessary to figure out which phase of Ming did produce these porcelain sherds which came all the way to Bengal certainly after 1450 and before 1576 CE. The time bracket of flourishing urbanisation in Gaur during Sultanate period falls well within the 'middle Ming' period in China, i.e., around 1450 to 1538 AD.

Different features and motifs generally found on 15th-16th century porcelains those were exported to different countries of south Asia and India:

The usual forms of blue and white porcelain of 15th century comprising plates, dishes and bowls (**Plates 13.1- 13.3**) which outnumbered the second group composed of vases, wine jars and ewers. The plates and dishes are of two types (Medley, 2009: 178). One type has a flattened rim with bracket foliation often with a rather deep well or cavetto. The second type of dish had a flattened rim without foliation but both with ring-foot at the bottom and the decoration was predominantly in blue on white. Gaur yielded both types apart from deep bowls of various sizes and shapes with knife edged rim, everted rim and so on in addition to sherd of small cups and jars which are mostly white in colour with Chinese character in blue at the base (**Plates 13.4-13.7**).

The motifs employed on the Ming porcelains were purely Chinese. The Chinese motifs are numerous, those among plant forms are peony, chrysanthemum, camellia, gardenia, lotus, etc. and sherds found from Gaur represent almost all of those. Among birds, there are the phoenixes, heron, peacock while the animals depicted include deer, fabulous beasts like kylin and dragon, an absurd looking lion appears very occasionally. Except phoenix, none of the other animal or bird motifs has been found on any of the sherds under study (**Plate 13.8**).

In addition to these, symbolic elements and auspicious emblems of Buddhism and Taoism appear along with border designs including free flow wave patterns, narrow floral scrolls, classic scrolls, key fret pattern, diamond diaper and segmented waves. So far, porcelains from Gaur are completely devoid of any such symbolic elements and auspicious emblems but all kind border designs are very commonly found along with a typical cloud collar design. The main production kiln was Ching te-Chen / Jingdejen in south China for blue and white porcelain and Longchuan or Longquan for celadon wares through-out the period under review.

Another notable feature of these porcelains from Gaur is a few sherds inscribed with characters which are neither Chinese nor Arabic and Persian. Somewhere it has been identified as Indian Sanskrit. B.N. Mukherjee identified them as Proto-Bengali script of 15th-16th century in his article published in 1994 (**Plate 13.9**). The present researcher compared those pieces with similar script on a bowl preserved in British Museum and Victoria and Albert Museum, London (**Plate 13.10**) which have been identified as Tibetan Lantsa script.

Technical information in brief:

The raw material for manufacturing above mentioned Chinese porcelains is called Kaolin clay and petuntse rock which is available in some parts of China and the technique of manufacturing porcelain in very high temperature kiln was the trade secret of China from time immemorial. All these blue and white porcelain sherds have under glaze painting or decoration on both inside and outside of a pot in cobalt blue. This cobalt blue had been imported to China during Tang period from the mines near Kashan in Persia and the pigment was transported by the sea route from Persian Gulf through Aceh in Sumatra and was known as *sulimani*. It was

used in a lead glaze as a glaze colourant.² The ore from which the colourant was obtained is called arsenide. It was thereby almost inevitable for China to cater that Near Eastern market in the first instance with blue and white porcelains rather than of China itself. We are not going into further technical details in the present discourse except the fact that producing good to very high-quality exclusive porcelain was monopoly of China during the period under review.

Contextualising Ming porcelain presence in Gaur:

Now, I should mention that in spite of frequent occurrence of so many blue and white porcelain sherds from Gaur, the second capital of Sultanate Bengal; it was a problem for us to contextualize or to situate these blue and white porcelain sherds happened to occur in the late 15th and early 16th century Gaur, the capital of medieval Bengal which actually flourished as an urban centre during this period.

We have Chinese literary reference of Sino-Bengal trade relation that took place in early 15th century up to 1430 AD during the reign of Ming emperor Yung-lo from the biography of eunuch Cheng Ho, who was the leader of the expeditions in which Ma-Huan, Fei Hsin and Kung Chen took part. It is mentioned in the History of the Ming Dynasty³ edited by W.W. Rockhill that Cheng Ho was sent on seven missions to Indo-China and beyond in 1405, 1408, 1412, 1417, 1421, 1424 and 1430 CE. All years are stated with year of corresponding return journey except the last one. A list of thirty-six countries is given where he visited officially, in which Pang-kola, i.e., Bengal is mentioned in tail order of 32 in *Hsingch'a Sheng Lan*. It also mentions that the country has a sea-port on a bay called Ch'a-ti-chiang which can be identified with Chatigram or present Chattagram where certain duties were collected. He has further mentioned that after going sixteen stages upward, they reached So-na-erh-chiang (Sonargaon /Suvarnagrama) and going for twenty more stages, they came to Pan-tu-wa (Pandua / Firuzabad) which is the residential place of the ruler.

At the end of this note on Bengal, it is mentioned that the goods used by the Chinese in trading here are gold, silver, satins, silks, blue and white porcelain, copper, iron, musk, vermillion, quick silver and grass mats. Therefore, it can be stated that in the early fifteenth century, Pandua, saw imported blue and white porcelain brought by the Chinese emissaries / envoys. But in reality, as we mentioned earlier that during the course of our surface exploration in and around the Palace area of Pandua or in any part of the then capital city, not a single sherd of blue and white Chinese Ming porcelain has been reported yet.

On the other hand, we find hundreds of sherds of blue and white porcelain, of celadon ware and also of glazed ware from the second capital city of Bengal, i.e., Gaur, which started to grow after 1445/50 CE. Frequent occurrence of so many blue and white porcelain sherds reported from all quarters of Gaur, not only from the royal centre or Citadel area but also from the peripheral zones of this medieval city led us to probe into the fact behind this historical phenomenon which

has never been addressed yet. The quality of these sherds of blue and white porcelain varies from very fine thin sectioned one to moderately thick sectioned. The craftsmanship of drawing motifs is not uniformly of high quality rather in some cases, it is quite crude.

In 2016, I made a trip to UK⁴ and have consulted four experts on Chinese Porcelain namely John Guy, Jessica Harrison Hall, Stacey Pierson and Yu Ping Luk. I showed the digital photographs of the blue and white porcelain sherds we collected from Gaur to these experts. They have unanimously identified these sherds as “classic trade ceramics”, belong to two specific period of Ming dynasty, one is of Emperor Hung-Chih period (1487 – 1505 CE) and the other is of Emperor Cheng-te period (1505 – 1521 CE). This is for the first time I found this periodization which proved to be absolutely picture-perfect so far as urban history of Gaur is concerned.

Gaur saw the beginning of its hey days during seven years of rule by the Abyssinians (1487-1493 CE) which reached its culmination during the next phase of Husain Shahi period i.e., from 1493 to 1538 CE. The experts also opined that none of the sherds belong to royal table ware category; rather, these are all classic trade ceramics of Ming period produced mostly from the kilns of Jingdejen in south China. If all of these sherds belong to classic trade ceramics category then it is to be assumed that in the last decade of 15th century, the Sultans of Bengal must have patronized private trade of imported Chinese ceramics only for their subjects and not for the royal or noble household. Question arises regarding feasibility of this proposition.

As Chinese porcelain was in high demand throughout Persia and Central Asia, ruling class and their nobles were the core connoisseur of those blue and white Chinese porcelain especially because of its aesthetic built. In order to make it more affordable, they started to make Iznik pottery which is a pretty close imitation of this blue and white Chinese porcelain and became quite popular. Therefore, we wonder why Sultans of Bengal did not indulge the luxury of using these world famous Chinese blue and white porcelains as royal their own table ware instead they patronized the trading classic Chinese ceramics for the use of their subjects.

History of trade during 15th and 16th century:

Due to absence of textual reference of royal Chinese envoys sailed towards Bengal during late 15th early 16th century, we may assume that Chinese porcelain found from different sites in Gaur must have come through private trade. Ashin Dasgupta⁵ mentioned that at the turn of the fifteenth century, in the east, Chinese vessels excluded all others between southern China and Malaya. Chinese private merchants tried to insulate China from the sea and however, persisted in the face of imperial edicts forbidding maritime trade but the Chinese junk traffic was confined to the sea-lanes in the case of Malacca.

Haraprasad Ray stated that it was mentioned in one of the edicts of Emperor Yongle (13 January, 1421) that private trade was also allowed for items in which China had the monopoly like, musks, ceramics and silks of different qualities.⁶ In another edict dated 25 May, 1430, it is stated that trade in silk was controlled by the State while free trade was allowed in some other items like porcelain, etc. (Ray, 1993:113). It was about 1426-35 AD, the imperial style of porcelains reached its first peak while the second peak was attained in the Cheng-Hua period, 1465-1487 AD. In between these thirty years, production of porcelain on both government and imperial order was cut back and some modifications were also made in the kilns too.

Tansen Sen in his essay specifically mentioned that ‘when the restored Ilyas Shahis ruled over Bengal, new networks were introduced in both the east and west’⁷ and Bengal sent embassies to China as many of that were sent to the court of Shah Rukh in Herat in Central Asia (Mukherjee, 2011: 83).⁸ Sen further noted that during the Ming period there was much trade and travel between Bengal and Ming China and compilation of Bengali-Chinese lexicon in China points to the robustness of the contacts. He also adds ‘the maritime network linking the coastal regions of China and Bengal was distinct and as vibrant as the maritime channels that connected the Chinese port to the Malabar and Coromandel Coasts in southern India’.

Rila Mukherjee mentioned in her essay that ‘even after this celebrated Ming withdrawal from the Indian Ocean, private Chinese trade continued to flourish along the South-east Asian coasts.’ She added that those private Chinese ships continued to come to the eastern seaboard of South Asia, they came to Coromandel but not to Bengal (Mukherjee, 2011: 85).

So far as 16th century is concerned, a series of studies have been done and to name a few, are the works of Joaquim Campos, Tapan Raychaudhuri, Sushil Chaudhuri and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. They have taken note of certain commercial aspects. All these authors are more or less unanimous in one respect that the Portuguese, on account of their superior military force, succeeded in the first forty years of the sixteenth century in effectively replacing most of the Asian long-distance trade and shipping from Bengal.⁹ It has been inferred from their detail study that in the early years of sixteenth century, the major part of overseas trade from Bengal passed through two ports, to the west Satgaon (Saptagram) on the river Saraswati, upriver from modern Kolkata and to the east Chittagong (Chatgaon) at the mouth of the river Karnafuli, in modern Bangladesh. Both were closely linked with the city of Gaur during the Sultanate period. In early sixteenth century accounts, focus is on long-distance commerce and there was existence of at least three different sets of routes. The first set were the eastward routes, dominated by the trade to the great entrepot of Melaka- supplied from Bengal with textiles, rice, sugar and conserves and import into Bengal from Melaka included Borneo camphor, pepper, Moluccan spices, sandalwood, Chinese porcelain and silk, as well as metals, both non-precious and precious (Subrahmanyam, 1987: 268). One can find direct link to the Red Sea from Bengal via Gujarat but trade connection with the Persian Gulf is however, still ambiguous.

As has been noted by L.F.F.R. Thomaz, the capture of Melaka in 1511 and using Melaka as their base, Portuguese officially set out to explore the Far East, as well as the Bay of Bengal in the second decade of sixteenth century. It has further been suggested by Armando Cortesao that this fleet inaugurate the regular carrier to Bengal and after 1518, there followed almost annually the voyages of ships to Bengal. But it was only in 1536-37, the Portuguese established themselves there. The Bengal voyages seem to have less of commercial character and we have a reference that such a fleet came to Bengal in 1521 carrying ambassadors to Gaur and in the absence of a permanent Portuguese factor, the captain of the fleet himself took the responsibility to issue *cartazes* as well. According to Subrahmanyam, by the mid-1530s then, Bengal had become quite a hotbed of Portuguese activity. But with the decline of Gaur close to 1540s with which Chittagong had been closely connected, attention of Portuguese trade shifted considerably to western Bengal and Orissa (Subrahmanyam, 1987: 274).

To conclude this discourse, we must keep in mind that Bengal had trade connection with China for supply of silver through Tibet and Burma since 13th – 14th century.¹⁰ John S Deyell has categorically mentioned in his essay¹¹ (Deyell, 1998: 112-136) that between 1493 and 1533, Bengal had a steadily increasing inflow of silver on a very regular basis. We badly need to identify the land and water routes which connected south-western China with the frontier areas of Bengal. However, in support of finding huge amount of Chinese classical trade ceramic sherds through surface exploration of Gaur, the Sultanate capital of Bengal flourished during 15th-16th centuries; it appears that there is a misconception that Chinese navigation in the Indian Ocean ceased after Ming withdrawal from 1430s. Chinese ships continued to circulate in both the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, albeit in lessened magnitude at least until 17th century.

Notes and References:

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2. Medley, Margaret, 1989. *The Chinese Potter*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2006 (reprint), pp. 176-78.
3. W W Rockhill, 'Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean during the Fourteenth Century' Part II, in Edward Chavannes (ed.) *Toung Pao*, vol. XVI, pp. 440-444.
4. I made this trip with the financial help from Nehru Trust of India for collections in Victoria Albert Museum and Royal Numismatic Society, London. Later on in 2018, I made another trip to London for further study of those Chinese ceramics which was funded by University Grants Commission, India for a project under UGC UPEII Look East scheme sanctioned in 2017 entitled "Movement of Motifs in Chinese Ceramics, Illustrated Books and Paintings through Medieval Trade Routes of Asia (13th – 17th Century): An Intercultural Dialogue" where my colleague Dr Swati Biswas is Principal Investigator and myself is co-Investigator.
5. Ashin Dasgupta 'Indian Merchants and the trade in the Indian Ocean', in Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. 1, pp. 407-433, 409.

6. Ray, 1993:112.
7. Tansen Sen, 'The formation of Chinese Maritime Networks to Southern Asia', pp. 441-3.
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11. Deyell, John S, 'The China Connection' reprinted in Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.), *Money and the Market in India 1100-1700*.

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