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PROVINCIAL GOVERNANCE AND IMPERIAL POWER: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF AZIM-US-SHAN'S ADMINISTRATION IN BENGAL (1697–1712)

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ABSTRACT

During the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, Ibrahim Khan failed to control the rebellion, due to which Azim-us-Shan was appointed as Viceroy of Bengal. Azim-us-Shan was assigned to this Bengal province with high expectations to bring stability. However, upon taking responsibility as viceroy, Azim-us-Shan focused primarily on increasing his own wealth. He anticipated a potential succession crisis following Aurangzeb's death. Believed that he would need substantial funds to support his father in the competition for the throne. This research explores the governance style, autocratic tendencies, political rivalries, and administrative career of Azim-us-Shan during his tenure in the Bengal province. The study was based on both primary and secondary sources of literature to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the topic. In 1679, arriving in Rajmahal, neglecting his duties, Azim-us-Shan pursued profit-driven business. He engaged in businesses like *Sauda-i-Kash* and *Sauda-i-Am*. Disturbed by these activities, Aurangzeb appointed Murshid Quli Khan as Diwan, who tightened finances and cut expenses. Upon anger at the new Diwan, viceroy Azim-us-Shan plotted to kill him but failed. In 1703, Diwan Murshid Quli Khan moved to Murshidabad, causing Aurangzeb to transfer Azim-us-Shan from Dhaka to Patna. The Viceroy goes to Patna, continuing his influence through his son, Deputy Viceroy Furukhsiya. Stability lasted until Aurangzeb died in 1707, after which a succession crisis was initiated. Azim-us-Shan gained Bengal for supporting Bahadur Shah I, but succession disputes with his brothers after 1712 led to his death. Azim-us-Shan viceroyalty in Bengal Province, which lasted from 1697 to 1712, coincided with a critical period in the decline of the Mughal Empire. After his death, the

unrestrained time shifted the course of history and eventually led to the establishment of the independent Nawabi period in Bengal.

KEYWORDS: Azim-us-Shan, Aurangzeb, Bengal province, Viceroy, Diwan, Viceroyalty, Murshid Quli Khan, Bengal.

INTRODUCTION

In July 1689, during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, Ibrahim Khan was appointed as the viceroy of Bengal (Sarkar, 1930), who was the son of the well-known Kashmiri viceroy Ali Mardan Khan. At that time, Bengal was one of the most economically and politically powerful provinces of the Mughal Empire. Upon his arrival in Bengal, with the emperor's permission, Ibrahim Khan signed a peace treaty with the English, allowing them to trade freely (Walsh, 1902). This treaty remained in effect until 1695. However, by the end of that year, Captain William Heath violated the treaty by attacking the Hajj pilgrimage (Stewart, 1910). Despite Ibrahim Khan's position as viceroy, the old and weak Ibrahim Khan took no action against the English. He was mild-mannered and primarily focused on reading Persian books. An English trader referred to him as "the most famously just and good nabob," while a Muslim historian noted that "he did not allow even an ant to be oppressed" (Sarkar, 1948). Taking advantage of these circumstances, Shova Singh, a zamindar of Cheto Barda, rebelled. Subsequently, Shova Singh seized control of Bardwan by capturing the property of Rajah Krishana Ram along with his wife and daughter (Sarkar, 1948). Shova Singh then began to plunder and occupy the neighboring regions. Later, Rahim Khan, the leader of Orissa, joined with Shova Singh and strengthened the army's power (Gupta, 1921). Initially, Ibrahim Khan underestimated the severity and strength of the rebellion and remained silent (Ali, 2017). However, by the time Ibrahim Khan grasped the situation, it was too late for him to take control. Meanwhile, Emperor Aurangzeb waged a prolonged struggle against the Marathas in the Deccan province, engaging in battles for over fifteen years. When the Emperor learned about the Bengal rebellion, he was fierce, as it marked the first significant uprising in the Bengal province since Shah Jahan's succession. Due to Ibrahim Khan's constant indulgence in comfort and inability to fulfill his duties in Bengal, the emperor dismissed him (Karim, 1962). The emperor appointed his grandson, Azim-us-Shan, as the new viceroy. In the meantime, Ibrahim Khan's son Zabardast Khan was ordered to take action against the rebels. Awaiting the arrival of the newly appointed viceroy, Zabardast Khan was able to control the rebellions (Tayesh, 1985). Upon the arrival of viceroy Azim-us-Shan, Zabardast Khan was

forced to retire and sent back to Deccan with his father from Bardawan (Sarker,1948). The newly appointed viceroy, Azim-us- Shan, took control of the army, but due to the absence of the previous army commander, the army became weakened, and the rebellion became stronger. Viceroy Azim-us-Shan attempted to negotiate with the rebels, but they deceived him. A battle then ensued near Chandrakona, resulting in the beheading of Rahim Khan. Ultimately, the war came to an end. Following this significant victory, the new viceroy of Bengal arrived in Dhaka and started his duties.

Azim-us-Shan upheld his position until his death. Azim-us-Shan's viceroyalty in Bengal reflects a period of ambition, greed, and administrative conflict that ultimately weakened Mughal authority in the province. His pursuit of wealth, disregard for imperial directives, and rivalry with Diwan Murshid Quli Khan undermined centralized control. Following his death during the succession wars, Bengal moved toward semi-independence under Murshid Quli Khan, marking the gradual decline of Mughal dominance and the emergence of new regional powers.

AIM AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study investigates Prince Azim-us-Shan's viceroyalty in Bengal, highlighting his administrative role, political conflicts, and the changes in his exercise of power.

Specific Objectives of this study are,

- To analyze Azim-us-Shan's administrative and governance strategies in Bengal.
- To examine his political rivalries and conflicts with Diwan Murshid Quli Khan.
- To assess Azim-us-Shan's position during the war of succession.

NECESSITY OF THE STUDY

During the Mughal rule, Dhaka was the capital of the Bengal province and was prominent in all economic, social, and political aspects. The Viceroyalty of Azim-us-Shan has been mentioned in various books, articles, and essays; they are fragmentary and in some cases inconsistent and inadequate. In addition, various historians and researchers have presented different opinions and arguments about the viceroyalty of Azim-us-Shan. As Azim-us-Shan's viceroyalty during the transitional period is essentially the most important and critical chapter in the history, which provides the rationale for undertaking this study.

METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

In this research, a method of a multi-faceted subject-based approach has been followed

initially, that is, the historical method. The research is exploratory and includes primary and secondary data.

- As primary data sources, priority has been given to primary sources such as autobiographies written by Mughal rulers, court literature, biographies, accounts and memoirs of tourists and travelers, accounts of merchants and representatives visiting the royal court, letters sent and various narratives written in regional languages.
- As secondary data information obtained from various sources such as books, journals, research works, and websites published in modern times has been used.

THE VICEROYALTY OF AZIM-US-SHAN IN BENGAL DURING AURANGZEB REIGN (1697–1707)

• Appointment of Azim-us-Shan as Viceroy of Bengal Province

Due to Ibrahim Khan's failure to suppress the Shova Singh and Rahim Khan rebellion, Aurangzeb dismissed him and handed army control to his son, Zabardast Khan. Aurangzeb replaced Ibrahim Khan with Prince Azim-us-Shan as Bengal's viceroy in late 1697. As a new task following his appointment, Azim-us-Shan joined the emperor's army in Bardawan, where he remained for one year. In early August 1698, a battle took place near Chandrakona between Azim-us-Shan's army and Rahim Khan's forces. Azim-us-Shan's army emerged victorious, causing Rahim Khan's troops to disband and surrender. After this victory, Azim-us-Shan ruled the Bengal province solo-handed until the appointment of Murshid Quli Khan, who later became a key figure in Bengal province.

• Administration and Economy under Azim-us-Shan before Murshid Quli Khan

Azim-us-Shan's primary responsibility was to control and suppress the rebellion. However, instead of taking decisive action, he opted to negotiate with the rebellion, Rahim Khan (Galdwin, 1788). When Azim-us-Shan arrived in Bardawan as viceroy, the local zamindars came to show their loyalty to him (Tayesh, 1985). The British also came to Azim-us-Shan with a substantial amount of gifts, requesting permission to acquire some land around Kolkata. During the rebellion led by Shobha Singh and Rahim Khan, many English companies were attacked, and numerous valuables were stolen. After the rebellion was suppressed, the English sought to recover the stolen items, but Zabardash Khan, the acting viceroy, refused to return them. However, the new viceroy, Azim-us-Shan, later agreed to return the items in exchange for a sum of money (Karim, 1999). These actions clearly indicate Azim-us-Shan's intention in coming to the Bengal province. On the other hand, at this time,

there was a conflict between the new and old English companies. Azim-us-Shan gave a promise that provided benefits to both parties in exchange for money, and assured to provide many benefits to the new company in exchange for 14,000 Rupees (Birt, 1884). Without the Emperor's consent, Azim-us-Shan allowed the English to buy land, making them the owners of Kolkata. In mid-July 1698, the English paid Rs 16000 to the prince and received letter patents that granted them the rights to rent (Karim, 1962). This agreement was also made without the emperor's knowledge or consent. Consequently, the English acquired full rental authority over the three villages of Sutanuti, Kolkata, and Govindpur. As a result, Kolkata became completely secure, being centrally positioned between Sutanuti to the north and Govindpur to the south. During this time, the English started to set up their housing, and their business started to flourish more than ever before. The Hindus from the surrounding areas started to build their houses near Kolkata. Essentially, Azim-us-Shan came to the Bengal province, which was then a wealthy region, to make money (Chatterjee, 1967). To achieve this, he aimed to maintain good relations with the British, as evidenced by some of his subsequent actions. The English factory began to earn significant profits each year through trade. Observing this substantial income, Viceroy Azim-us-Shan became greedy. A sudden idea came to him; he decided to engage in trading all foreign goods imported to Bengal and sought to establish a business. Essentially, he bought each imported product at a fixed price and sold it for a profit. This venture became known as Sauda-i-Khas (private trade) (Zaidpuri, 1788). Consequently, he also started another Business named Sudai-i-Am (general trade). When Emperor Aurangzeb learned about this business, he wrote a letter stating that it was "not a business but madness" and immediately ordered to stop this business. Abdul Karim, in his History of Bengal, translated the letter sent by Emperor Aurangzeb to Azim-us-Shan and mentioned; My grandson Azim, like me, is forgetful of God the Karim (gracious)! It is not well to oppress the people who have been entrusted to us by the Creator, particularly, it is a very wicked act on the part of the sons of kings. Ever bear in your mind the Prophet's precepts on Truth,- 'Death is an eternal verity (Haqq), so is Resurrection, so is the bridge across hell, so is the reckoning for your secret acts,' Consider yourself every hours as one destined to pass away, so that... the blossoms of your desire may not be withered by the sighs of the oppressed. Whence have you learnt this Sauda-i-Khash (private trade), which is only another name for pure insanity? Not certainly from your grandfather, nor from your father. Better turn your thoughts away from it (Karim, 1995).

It is clearly evident that approval from Emperor Aurangzeb was not taken before this

business. After the emperor stopped this business, the viceroy of Bengal began to focus on alternative ways to earn money. Then he started collecting taxes from various businesses. In Bengal, the Hindu zamindars were quite wealthy, and viceroy Azim-us-Shan managed to collect a substantial amount of money from them. The Viceroy aimed to win their favor by participating in their religious events and donning their traditional attire. However, when the emperor discovered these activities involving other religions, he scolded Azim-us-Shan and ordered him to stop all such practices immediately. In the events described above, it is evident that Azim-us-Shan exercised significant supremacy and autocracy as a provincial viceroy without any contest or challenges. However, with little focus on controlling the administration, he took a keen interest in financial matters, which were primarily the responsibility of the Diwan. Knowing the viceroy's interest and in response to his actions, the emperor decided to appoint a strong and active Diwan in the Bengal province. The emperor appointed Murshid Quli Khan to control Azim-us-Shan's supreme power.

- **Azim-us-Shan's Political Contests and the Conflict with New Diwan**

Emperor Aurangzeb implemented a unique strategy for governing Bengal by dividing the military and revenue departments. The military was led by a viceroy (Subadar/ Governor/ administrator), while the revenue department was managed by a Diwan (the revenue officer). The primary responsibility of the viceroy was to protect the province from external threats and maintain internal peace and order. In contrast, the Diwan was tasked with collecting the province's revenue and managing other financial transactions (Ascoli, 1917). In 1701, Emperor Aurangzeb appointed a new Diwan, Murshid Quli Khan, in Bengal to limit the viceroy Azim-us-Shan's supremacy and autocracy. Murshid Quli Khan was the last Diwan of Bengal appointed by Emperor Aurangzeb (Mukharjee, 2009). Upon Murshid Quli Khan's arrival, he took full responsibility of the Diwani duty. Diwan, Murshid Quli Khan, observed that during Shaista Khan's reign, a significant amount of revenue was collected from the Bengal province. However, under Ibrahim Khan's reign, negligence led to a substantial decrease in revenue. This decline continued further during Azim- us-Shan's tenure. As soon as Murshid Quli Khan took charge, he decided to free the Diwani department from the control of the viceroy. Although Diwani's activities in the Mughal regime were generally free from the viceroy's influence. But, previously, it was required to seek permission from the viceroy for all tasks and expenses. After gaining full authority from the Emperor, Murshid Quli Khan successfully separated the Diwani. Even though the Emperor's own grandson was serving as the viceroy at that time. Murshid Quli Khan was obliged to make this change

because Emperor Aurangzeb had complete confidence in him. Murshid Quli Khan shone as a revenue administrator during the reign of Aurangzeb (Banu, 1992). However, the viceroy was not pleased with this separation, as it cut off many of his revenue streams. Even the viceroy's royal guard and other governmental functions had to seek money from the Diwan. Besides, the Diwan reduced the royal cavalry and the guard of the viceroy to reduce expenses. Azim-us-Shan took the matter seriously, seeking to accumulate wealth in Dhaka for the expected succession war after Aurangzeb's death. But the plan to come to Dhaka failed, and he was sure that he would not be able to achieve it until Diwan Murshid Quli Khan was in power. This led to a silent war between the Diwan and the viceroy. Although they openly respected each other, one person was secretly angry with the other. Additionally, due to the Diwan's loyalty to the Emperor, the viceroy was involved in several plots to assassinate the Diwan (Faruqui, 2012). In 1702, in this situation, the Viceroy Azim-us-Shan tried to kill the Diwan under the cover of the rebellion of the Nagdi army (Taylor, 1840, 97). But the brainy Diwan was already aware of this intention of the viceroy. So Diwan was always ready. When the rebel Nagdi troops summoned him and pressed him for salary allowance, without giving them a chance to say anything, he asked them to meet him in his office and paid their salaries (Haque, 2024). He directly blamed the viceroy for his assassination attempt. But the Viceroy denied it and tried to prove his innocence. The Diwan invited him to fight face- to-face and did leave the Viceroy's court, saying that he would see him if anything like this happened later. At the same time, the Diwan informed the emperor in detail through a letter and sought permission to transfer the Diwani service to the previously chosen Murshidabad city. Later, before permission was received, in 1702, Murshid Quli Khan moved from Dhaka to Murshidabad with his Diwani establishment (Khan, 1788). Then, Dhaka lost its Diwani power to Murshidabad. Soon, the reply to the Diwan's letter reached Dhaka, and the Emperor furiously ordered Azim-us- Shan to leave Dhaka. His blood relation with the Emperor could not prevent him from this punishment. After receiving the letter from the Emperor, he left for Bihar without delay. After staying in Bihar for some time, he went to Patna and, with the permission of the Emperor, he renamed Patna as Azimabad. He remained in Patna until the death of Emperor Aurangzeb and continued his duty as a viceroy of Bengal province, far from Dhaka. However, on the other hand, before leaving Dhaka, Azim-us-Shan made his own son, Farrukh Siyar, as deputy viceroy of Dhaka. Farrukh Siyar's presence in Dhaka did not impact his position because it was merely a private arrangement made by the viceroy without any official imperial approval. The conflict between the Diwan and the viceroy significantly changed the course of history for Dhaka and the Bengal province.

AZIM-US-SHAN'S FOLLOWING AURANGZEB'S DEATH (1707-1712)

• Azim-us-Shan during the Succession Crisis

Emperor Aurangzeb died in the Deccan camp in 1707. Following his death, all three of his sons, along with their own sons, began a war of succession. This marked the beginning of the decline of the Mughal Empire. The conflict created a chaotic and lawless situation, and the administration was divided into three factions. The situation led to a battle on June 20, 1707, between Mughal eldest son Prince Muazzam and Prince Azam Shah, the second son of Aurangzeb, who claimed the throne and swiftly marched to seize Agra along with the imperial treasury. Prince Muazzam (Shah Alam) advanced from Kabul with a strong army, sending Azim-us-Shan with 80,000 troops and 11 crore rupees collected from Bengal (Irvine, 2022). The two forces clashed in one of the bloodiest battles for succession in Mughal history. In this war, fortune favored the eldest surviving son of Aurangzeb, Prince Muhammad Muazzam, who emerged victorious over his two brothers and ascended to the throne, taking the title of Shah Alam Bahadur Shah (Haque, 2023). Bahadur Shah's reign started positively. He successfully defeated challenging princes, and many of the prominent nobles and officers from Aurangzeb's period joined his service. There was little change in Aurangzeb's policies concerning the appointments and promotions of officials. However, signs of power shift within the court were already visible, with nobles assembling around one or another of the royal princes. During the succession crisis following Aurangzeb's death, Azim-us-Shan served as the viceroy of Bengal. Though on Bahadur Shah's first day as ruler, he appointed his second son, Azim-us-Shan, as viceroy of Bengal and Bihar with the power to appoint deputies. Prince Azim-us-Shan's influence grew significantly after his father ascended to the throne (Haque, 2023). This was largely due to his support during the War of Succession, where he provided substantial military and financial assistance. At that time, he was serving as the viceroy of Bengal. However, during the succession conflict, Diwan Murshid Quli Khan demonstrated an inability to assist Azim-us-Shan. Murshid Quli Khan remained neutral during the war, stating that he would support whoever emerged from the Timurid dynasty in the Delhi palace. After the war, initially, Diwan Murshid Quli Khan's position remained unchanged. In January 1708, the province of Orissa was added to Azim-us-Shan's viceroyalty. Azim-us-Shan began to exert influence over his father, which allowed him to secure the appointment of his chosen candidates in both of his provinces (Haque, 2023). In October 1707, Azim-us-Shan appointed Diya Allah Khan as the Diwan of Bengal and the Faujdar of Murshidabad, while Shamshir Khan was appointed as the Diwan of Bihar. In March 1708, Azim-us-Shan appointed Sarbuland Khan as the Faujdar of Burdwan and Akbarnagar. During

this time, Azim-us-Shan removed Murshid Quli Khan from all his positions in Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Murshid Quli Khan had been appointed as the Diwan as far away as the Deccan in January 1708. In January 1710, Diya Allah Khan was assassinated on the streets of Murshidabad by Nagdi troopers (Sarker, 1948). Following this event, Azim-us-Shan was able to persuade the return of the experienced Murshid Quli Khan. That same year, Murshid Quli Khan was reappointed as the diwan of Bengal, owing to his talent and administrative skills. Although Azim-us-Shan was often absent, he effectively managed the administration of Bengal through his representative.

• **Power Shifting and the Death of Azim-Us-Shan**

Azim-us-Shan died in 1712 during the war of succession that followed the passing of Emperor Bahadur Shah I (father of Azim-us-Shan). After his father's death, Azim-us-Shan, along with his brothers, became involved in a fierce struggle for the Mughal throne. This conflict pitted him against his elder brother, Jahandar Shah, and his younger brothers, Rafi-us-Shan and Jahan Shah. During this war of succession, Diwan Murshid Quli sided with Azim Us Shan and issued sermons and coins in Azim Us Shan's name (Karim, 1962). In this conflict, Azim-us-Shan died, and Jahandar Shah was crowned as the ruler of Delhi (Khan & Hai, 1780). The exact circumstances surrounding Azim-us-Shan's death are not entirely clear; however, historical accounts suggest he was killed in battle near Agra. Some sources indicate that he drowned while trying to cross the Ravi River during the conflict, while others claim he was defeated in combat by Jahandar Shah's forces. The death of Azim-us-Shan had significant consequences for the political landscape of both Bengal and the broader Mughal Empire. His death removed a key contender for the imperial throne and contributed to the further weakening of Mughal authority in Bengal. This power vacuum allowed local rulers and European trading companies to assert greater influence in the region. In the aftermath of Azim-us-Shan's death, his son, Farrukhsiyar, continued to play a role in Mughal politics. Farrukhsiyar would later become emperor with the support of the Sayyid brothers, powerful nobles who held considerable sway in the Mughal court. After Azim-us-Shan's death, Bengal saw the decline of Mughal control and the rise of semi-independent rulers like Murshid Quli Khan.

CONCLUSION

The viceroyalty of Prince Azim-us-Shan in Bengal, which lasted from 1697 to 1712, holds a unique position in the late political history of the Mughal Empire. His reign unfolded against

the backdrop of falling authority of the Mughal court, rising tensions among regional powers, and a succession crisis. The appointment of Azim-us-Shan as viceroy of Bengal transcended a routine administrative designation and represented a calculated political strategy by Emperor Aurangzeb. By entrusting his grandson with governance of Bengal, Aurangzeb sought simultaneously to reward familial loyalty and consolidate imperial authority over a strategically vital province. While Bengal's considerable wealth rendered the post highly attractive to Azim-us-Shan, it also entailed substantial administrative and political responsibilities. When Azim-us-Shan started to establish his authority over the Mughal bureaucracy and aristocracy in Bengal Province, it created rival factions within the provincial administration. Administratively, Azim-us-Shan's policies reflected an attempt to consolidate imperial control while simultaneously creating a space for his own authority. Azim-us-Shan's period not only portrays the ambitions and strategies of a Mughal prince but also provides insight into the changing dynamics of Bengal. A province that was to emerge as one of the most important centers of political, economic, and cultural transformation in the Mughal period. One of the most notable parts of his reign was his conflict with the influential Murshid Quli Khan, who served as Diwan of Bengal. Murshid Quli Khan's insistence on transferring the revenue office from Dhaka to Murshidabad and his strict fiscal policies clashed with Azim-us-Shan's authority, resulting in a bitter rivalry. This conflict was exemplary of the greater fragmentation of power in the late Mughal period. Although Azim-us-Shan attempted to emphasize his dominance, his inability to neutralize Murshid Quli Khan ultimately predicted his later rise as the ruler of Bengal and the founder of the Nawabi era.

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