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Locality within Imperium: Mughals in the Political Imagination of Nadia Raj

Soham Dalui*

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Abstract: *Interplays of local and imperial power relations are multifaceted, even more so if the locality is situated in a frontier zone like Bengal. Power is dispersed across the local, regional and imperial networks of competition and collaboration, which are shaped through constant conflict, negotiation and mediation between different tiers of elites. Local elites like the Nadia Raj not only contended with other local elites while also interacting with regional nobility of provincial centre of power, but also experienced imperial sovereignty from a local perspective. At the margins of empire, the Nadia Raj surrounded itself with complex representations of power and authority shared across the imperial centre to the local court, different symbols of sovereignty being embedded into diverse narratives. Transcending the mainstream study of Mughal Empire, this paper attempts to study Nadia Raj in the margins of the empire to study Mughal state formation from below. From strife between contending chiefs to symbolic courtly performative acts in front of Mughal princes, the Nadia Raj participated in a multifaceted political culture that puts forward a question regarding their marginal status in the Mughal Empire, which this paper will explore.*

Key Words*: Locality, Empire, Hierarchy, Competition, Political Imagination, Little Kings.*

*Ph.D. Scholar, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.
e-mail: dsoham27@gmail.com

Introduction

An analysis of the 'thick description' inherent in the accounts containing glimpses of the multifaceted political relationship between the Mughal Empire and the *malguzari zamindari* of Nadia in Bengal suba reveals a dynamic, two-way process where imperial authority and local power were mutually constituted.[1] The Mughal Empire's political culture was not simply imposed from above but was shaped through continuous negotiation with local elites, who played a crucial role in sustaining imperial sovereignty on the ground. The local *zamindars*, while formally subordinated as agents of the state, actively shaped the terms of their engagement with the empire, leveraging their control over land, resources, and social networks. This relationship was marked by both cooperation and contestation, as local power-holders mediated imperial authority within their domains while simultaneously asserting their own autonomy. The Mughal state's tendency to generalize all rural power-holders under the broad category of *zamindars*, as seen in Abul Fazl's chronicle-gazetteer *Ain-i Akbari*, obscured the complexity of these local elites, who occupied an ambiguous and liminal position between imperial control and autonomy as well as between the empire and its ordinary subjects. While spatial distance from the imperial core limited their direct participation in central political arenas, this very distance enabled them to cultivate forms of localized sovereignty. This paper explores how the local elites of Nadia articulated their relative autonomy, projecting their power through particular forms of cultural representation which were deeply intertwined with their political practices, while simultaneously embedding themselves within the larger framework of Mughal imperial authority.

Locality within Imperium: Nadia Raj and the Mughal Empire

The domain of the *zamindars* of Nadia hardly had a fixed boundary across the early modern period; that is from sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century. The growth of Nadia Raj from a modest local polity to a significant political entity was a gradual process shaped by dynamic interactions with both the Mughal Empire and the local society. This transformation did not merely involve the accumulation of land or resources but reflected a broader political imagination that sought to navigate the intersections of imperial authority and indigenous forms of kingship. An analysis of the available Mughal *sanads* (signed imperial documents) granted to them shows that over time their control had expanded, with more *parganas* (lowest level of Mughal revenue administration in Bengal) being granted to them by the Mughal state under Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb, at the expense of those who could not provide the empire with proper flow of revenue.[2]

In the Sanskrit genealogy of the *zamindars* of Nadia, their most celebrated ancestor Durgadas Ray had already risen to the rank of *qanungo* (land registrar) and earned a new name Bhabananda and the title Majumdar (Persian, Majmu'adar, revenue accountant) prior to the grant of the title of *chaudhuri* (local zamindars co-opted by the Mughals for collecting taxes) of certain *parganas* by the *sanad* granted by emperor Akbar (in Annadamangala it is Jahangir).[3] A local power-holder like the *chaudhuri's* authority over his domain in the formal sense came

from the empire. Co-sharing of sovereignty with different classes of sub-imperial elites was one of the main sources of Mughal power.[4] Yet, on one hand controlling multiple functions of record-keeping, tax-speculation, and revenue-extraction for the empire while on the other hand maintaining private armies, these local elites themselves became the state.[5] They not only acted as Mughal officers but fashioned themselves as *rajas* through indigenous and Persianate idioms of Kingship, even if they did not always receive such titles from the emperors. They also engaged in competition with other local elites for territory, riches, and higher positions in the political hierarchy of the Mughal state.

In such local networks of competition and collaboration, one's failure in carrying out the duty delegated by the imperial state became another's opportunity to rise up in the ladder of power, for which the Nadia Raj grew over centuries. However, the combined aspects of constructing a nominal connection with the Mughal Empire and allusions to the brahmanical kingship through sacred rites and worship of deities, emphasized in the existing historiography, possibly obscure the broader, transregional and multifaceted existence of this dynasty of local little kings at the ground level. Earlier, Alok Kumar Chakraborty has analysed the social and political worlds of Nadia Raj, focusing on Krishnachandra and Ratan Dasgupta has focused on economic aspects of his sacrificial rituals.[6] But both perceive the Nadia Raj without any emphasis on its nature as a part of the Mughal Empire. David Curley analysed certain aspects of Nadia Raj in this regard, yet focused more on 'Hindu inclusivism' demonstrated in Nadia Raj.[7] Kumkum Chatterjee, however, had pointed out how intermediate elites like Nadia Raj had palpable idea about their place in the Mughal hierarchy of power and articulated it in the courtly text *Annadamangal*.[8] As Farhat Hasan has noted, the local office-holders acted as brokers of authority who communicated the state to the local society and vice-versa, balancing imperial aspirations with local realities.[9] This balance involved more than symbolic gestures of legitimacy; it required a constant dialogue among the localities within the region of Bengal, then between the localities and the regional centres of power as well as the imperial centre. The political imagination of the Nadia Raj was not simply a product of imperial bestowals or brahmanical traditions but was forged through everyday negotiations, conflicts, and collaborations that defined its place within the larger political landscape of early modern Bengal.

Trying to open up new ways to perceive the history of the locality in relation to the Mughal Empire, this paper takes up a micro-historical focus on the Nadia Raj. It explores how a little kingdom in the Bengal frontier fashioned itself in a broader Mughal system through different rhetorical presentation of power along with retelling and reconstructing its past through vernacular courtly literature and Sanskrit genealogies like *Khitishvamshabalicharitam*. This particular text was written in eighteenth century during the reign of Krishnachandra Ray. Connecting the Raja to his illustrious ancestors and incorporating imageries of associations with Mughal networks of power, this text is a critical source through which the political discourse of projecting the superior authority of the Nadia Raj can be studied. This text is read against the grain in this paper to perceive the intricate language of power embedded in it,

situating the locality in the empire's complex hierarchized political network. Persian chronicles like Ghulam Husain Salim's *Riyaz-us Salatin* is also utilized to trace the reconfiguration of the past in *Khitishvamshabalicharitam*, particularly in relation to the rebellion of Shobha Singh which came to assume a position of importance in the history of power relations in early modern Bengal.

Rebels, Rivals and Regality: Nadia Raja in the Mughal Court

The revolt of Shobha Singh, a *zamindar* of the Chitua Barda *pargana* in Medinipur district broke out in the last decade of seventeenth century. Aided by the Afghan chief Rahim Khan of Orissa, Shobha Singh and his brother Himmat Singh ravaged a huge swath of territory in the province of Bengal. Rahim Khan in particular had taken a leading role in it, until his defeat in the hands of prince Azim-ush-Shan who replaced Ibrahim Khan as the viceroy of the province.[10] However, the aim of this section is to study how the Nadia Raj was involved in this whole episode; and their politics of representation regarding the various actors participating in it in different ways. *Khitishvamshabalicaritam* of the Nadia *rajas* which provide a history of their family from the time of king Ballala Sena to the ascension of Krishnachandra Ray, retells an interesting account of the revolt in which both the houses of Rajas of Bardhaman and Nadia were entangled. Even the prince Azim-ush-Shan figured into the complex narrative that served to present the contemporary *raja* of Nadia Ramakrishna Ray in a heroic leading role against the violent rebels. The description of this episode begins by narrating how the revolt initiated as a consequence of the plundering of Chitua by the Bardhaman Raja Krishnaram, who facing the retaliation of Shobha Singh:

> …caused his son, Crijagadrama (Jagatrama) to put on female apparel, and to seat himself upon a car for women, and sent him, undetected by the hostile army, to the court of Ramakrishna at Krishnanagara. Considering further, that it would be a great disgrace for his retinue to fall into the hands of the enemy, he rather put them to death with his own hand. After this Cobhasimha having arrived with his army and slain Krishnarama as the latter had his retinue, overflowed Vardhamana; but Jagadrama, who had fled, was kept concealed by Ramakrishna in the province of Matiyari.[11]

This description of the revolt from the very beginning represents the Raja of Bardhaman as the one whose actions led to the revolt. The violent revolt of Shobha Singh in this narrative almost becomes an act of punishment; a backlash to the cruelty of Krishnarama. Ghulam Hussain Salim in his *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, however, does not portray Krishnarama as the one who initiated the revolt.[12] Rather, *Riyaz-us-Salatin* connects the revolt with the flux in the political networks across North India in late seventeenth century due to the emperor's Aurangzeb's continued absence as he was engaged in the protracted Deccan conquest. Krishnarama is also mentioned, but as a *zamindar* who advanced with his forces to counter Shobha Singh and was killed in an open confrontation.[13] Unlike the portrayal of *Khitishvamshabalicaritam* that presents Krishnarama as helpless against the attack of Shobha Singh, *Riyaz-us-Salatin* provides an image of a *zamindar* who perished in battle while defending his territories. Similarly, the portrayal of the death of Krishnarama in the Sanskrit text is also striking. The act of *jauhar*

undertaken by the female members of the Bardhaman Raj family is turned into an act of cruelty by Krishnarama to save his own honour. Then the text creates a comparison between the death of the retainers of Krishnarama by his hands and the death of the Raja in the hands of Shobha Singh. Almost like *karmafala*. The narrative of *Khitishvamshabalicaritam* therefore, represents the ruler of Bardhamana in a very negative light, constructing a problematic image of Krishnarama. It cannot be determined with certainty that between *Riyaz-us-Salatin* and *Khitishvamshabalicaritam* which one provides the most accurate account of the event. But given the context of competition among the local elites, it is quite probable that such negative representation of Krishnarama in the genealogy of the Nadia *rajas* was to project a superior image of Ramakrishna, the Raja of Nadia under whom the scion of the Bardhaman Raj took asylum. The fleeing of Jagatrama in 'female apparel' via a 'car for women', perhaps also adds on to the inferiorzing narrative through an indirect questioning of the masculinity of the Bardhaman royal line. Fleeing from the battle is often seen as an act of cowardice. Fleeing in the guise of a woman is even more so. The discourse of otherization present here, therefore is gendered, as it constructs an imagery of submission of an 'effeminate' prince Jagatrama to 'masculine' Ramakrishna. Interestingly, *Riyaz-us-Salatin* also differs from *Khitishvamshabalicaritam* on this point. According to *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, Jagatrama had actually fled to Jahangirnagar (Dhaka).[14] If Jagatrama had actually fled to Dhaka rather than Nadia, the whole narrative structure in *Khitishvamshabalicaritam* therefore becomes a literary ploy to construct a superior image of Ramakrishna as the mighty protector of the inferior and weak Bardhaman *rajas* whose actions supposedly produced the revolt in the first place. This image of Ramakrishna is further outlined through the depiction of conflict between him and Himmat Singh who took the place of Shobha Singh as he was murdered by the daughter of Krishnarama:

> 'In order also to subject Ramakrishna, king of Navadvipa, to his power, he sent out many generals, but Ramakrishna with but a small number of soldiers, who, however, had a powerful protection in the circumstance that their thoughts were directed upon the supreme deity, rooted out the generals of Shobha Singh as if they had been mere tufts of grass.'[15]

These lines present Ramakrishna as a warrior capable of defeating the rebel generals on his own because of his faith in the 'supreme deity', unlike the *rajas* of Bardhaman.*Riyaz-us-Salatin* also mention that Himmat Singh and Rahim Khan had made repeated incursions on the frontiers of Nadia.[16] With the presence of European troops under Ramakrishna provided by the British East India Company from their centre at Calcutta, combined with their own forces, it is quite possible that the Nadia Raj was actually able to defend their territories.[17] The entire narrative concerning this episode, juxtaposes two images. The representation of the Nadia Raj is of just and capable ruler who is blessed by the 'supreme deity', while the image concerning Bardhaman Raj is of weak, submissive, at times even opportunistic and cruel. The local reality of competing little kings was the driving force that stimulated such discourse of political otherization. In the political imagination of Nadia Raj, encapsulated in their genealogy, their position in Bengal's political arena therefore is of substantial importance, not as a marginal

zamindar. The narrative furthermore, consists of another layer. After glorifying Ramakrishna for his victories against Himmat Singh, *Khitishvamshabalicaritam* goes on to describe how the prince Azim-us-Shan came to Bengal, and delivered the ultimate blow against Himmat Singh. Then it depicts a meeting between Ramakrishna and the Mughal prince in a courtly setting in which other little kings were present, which bolsters the superior image of the Nadia Raj in multiple ways through multifaceted literary devices:

> While the others, not daring to show their wealth, left their trains at home and appeared only with a few followers, Ramakrishna came surrounded by a stately retinue. At sight of these princes with their small trains the grandson of the Sultan of Delhi said with a disdainful gesture to his followers: "these are no princes, but offsprings of low families; else they would not have such retinues. But prince Ramakrishna is the offspring of a great family, for he alone has a stately retinue comparable to my own; he himself too appears like a second Kandarpa and shines before one like the sun, and is like Vrihospoti in his speech; he is surrounded by numerous soldiers, waited upon by hosts of minsters, who themselves are honored by retinues in splendid carriages. Thus he is a man gladdening the eyes of such persons as I am, and certainly the first among the princes of Gauda and these other countries." Then, Ramakrishna having according to custom offered his salutation and paid his respect, the grandson of the Sultan of Delhi addressed to him many obliging words.[18]

Before analysing this episode, let us first consider whether or not this meeting actually took place. According to *Riyaz-us-Salatin*, while Azim-us-Shan was pursuing the rebels, *Amils*, *faujdars*, *zamindars* had indeed presented themselves before the Mughal prince with gifts and tributes as well as appropriate contingencies drawn from their respective *mahals*.[19] While it was before the subjugation of the rebels, another fact that the prince halted at Bardhaman is also corroborated by *Riyaz-us-Salatin*.[20] The visits of the *zamindars*, chiefs, and local *rajas* to the Mughal emperors, princes and other nobles of higher ranks were integral part of the Mughal courtly culture. The courts, as ceremonial and performative spaces, were not static and fixed in palaces and forts of imperial and sub-imperial nobility. Rather, the Mughal 'court' and courtly culture was very much peripatetic in nature.[21] In frontiers, the mobile 'sublime' camps of the Mughals were considered as courts, bridging the local elites and the imperial power-holders as Jos Gommans has argued.[22] *Riyaz-us-Salatin* also mentions the camp of the Mughal prince as 'Royal Darbar' at least once.[23]

The aforementioned passage actually describes such a court setting in the frontier of Bengal. A ceremonial meeting between Ramakrishna and Azim-us-Shan, therefore, was entirely possible. Such narrative in a way reflects that the ritualistic setting of Mughal court was perceived and recognized by the local *rajas* as a space where power is performed, demonstrated and institutionalized, linking the local with the Empire. The meeting between Ramakrishna and Azim-us-Shan in a Mughal courtly space therefore serves manifold purposes, the most important of them being the subtle projection of the superiority of the Nadia Raj among its competitors in the local networks of power. The speech of the Mughal prince in the text is very crucial in this respect. While it is almost a certainty that a meeting between Azim-us-Shan and Ramakrishna indeed occurred, the same cannot be said for the words of praise attributed to the

Mughal prince for the Raja. The passage from the very beginning distinguishes Ramakrishna from the other local elites who came to the court of the Mughal prince because of his distinct presentation of wealth and stately revenue. According to *Khitishvamshabalicaritam*, Azim-us-Shan recognizes this difference and praises the Raja as an 'offspring of a great family' whose retinue is comparable to his own, and among the princes of this region the Raja is the first and foremost while the others are 'offsprings of low families'. This dialogue actually projects the claims of superiority of Ramakrishna made earlier in comparison to Krishnarama, but now the magnitude of the claim is far more heightened as it is imagined as being delivered through the imperial prince in an imperial court setting where the local elites of the region have gathered. In the rhetorical ceremonial space constructed in the genealogy, the hierarchy of Mughal politico-administrative structure is re-imagined; with the Nadia Raj being second only to the imperial prince rather than a marginal Mughal officer at the lower rungs of power. It is hard to determine whether or not Azim-us-Shan actually had spoken such words, in all probability these were *prasasti*-like eulogies used in the genealogy with the prince as the mouth-piece. But the way this particular *prasasti* functioned, makes it quite clear how in the political imagination of the local power-holders of Nadia not only reproduced a Mughal courtly space in the local setting linking the local and the imperial, but also used the Mughal imperial presence to justify its own claims of superiority among all the other little kings. The competition between these local elites was the driving force of such multifaceted political culture, and it would continue even in the next century when initially the Nawabi and then the British East India Company had begun to emerge as the dominant power in Bengal.

Conclusion

The Mughal Empire has been noted to be a 'dynamic and continuously evolving entity'.[24] The complexities analysed in this paper, reflecting the representation of the Nadia Raj in the imperial orbit of power and processes of legitimization via creating a sort of Mughal lineage through its textual production, perhaps demonstrates how the growth of little kingdoms with the diffusion of sovereignty through Mughal politico-administrative system was connected to the dynamism and evolution of the empire at ground level. The Nadia Raj and its assertions of being an integral part of the imperial polity points to the Mughal state formation process from below. In the process of consolidation and integration, the Mughal state had to negotiate with local factors and political processes, adjusting to the interests of various local groups and co-sharing its sovereignty with them which made imperial expansion an accommodative and participatory phenomenon; even the Mughal political ideology developed through a constant dialogue between Timurid-Persianate forms of sovereignty and indigenous myths, traditions and lived experiences of the subject.[25] On the flip side, the local elites like Nadia Raj too were willing to integrate in the empire, and began taking up motifs of power and idioms of sovereignty associated with the Mughals and higher Rajput nobility. In The meanings of such symbols and rhetoric were reconfigured, depending on the temporal and spatial contexts; different groups of little kings across the empire defining what it meant to be a part of the Mughal empire in their own ways and fashioned themselves according to such aspirations. In the Mughals' view,

reflected through the *dastur al-amal* (administrative manuals), the *zamindars* were officials mostly entitled with the fiscal-administrative rights of managing the empire at the root level.[26] Yet, the Nadia Raj presented itself and acted as rulers legitimized by both indigenous symbols of sovereignty as well as the Mughal trappings of power aspiring to become nobles; if not in reality then through political imagination. The positioning of the little kingdom in the imperial context of power, as the textual sources studied in this paper has revealed, had two dimensions. First, the Mughal presence was reproduced at the level of locality; with the projection of association of the *rajas* of Nadia with emperors, linkages with the Mughal court, titles granted by them and such being a crucial element that served as politico-cultural capital in the shifting networks of competition and collaboration between different local elites in the Bengal frontier. Second, the Nadia Raj simultaneously tried to frame its supra-local political identity as an essential ally of the Mughal emperors and governors of the Bengal *suba* reconstructing the past in a specific manner and utilizing various symbols of sovereignty, which conveyed connotations of subservience to the Mughals in a political language that was known across the empire.

Despite of the changing nature of political networks in Bengal between late seventeenth and late eighteenth century with shifting centres of political power, as discussed while analysing the dynamic indigenous political society, the Mughal system and its imperial ideology were very much active in the self-fashioning of the local elites. The praises and approval of Mughal princes and emperors were valuable cultural capital against the competing local elites, for which they were textually reproduced as evident from the account of courtly meeting between Prince Azim-us-Shan and Raja Ramakrishna in the Sanskrit genealogy *Khitishvamsavalicharitam*, which presented the latter as the greatest of all *zamindars* in Bengal, while indirectly slandering their competitor Bardhaman Raj through myriad negative representations. Even when the Murshidabad Nawabs and subsequently the British East India Company emerged as the new foci of power in early eighteenth century with new groups of political elites to which Rajballav and NabaKrishna Deb belonged respectively, the political networks of Bengal that connected different local and regional elites were still very much defined in Mughal political language; nascent power-holding groups seeking recognition from Mughal emperor just like their competitor Nadia *rajas* who had emerged with the Mughal invasion of Bengal altered the power relations in Bengal in early seventeenth century. However, along with the demand of connecting with hegemonic Mughal systems of legitimacy, indigenous idioms of power like contest for control over sacred idols were also continued to be used by the Mughal *zamindars*.

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