

A Reappraisal of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh and the Independent Geo-political Entity of Sonargaon

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Abstract

This article proposes a fresh reading of the coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to reappraise the political history of this ruler. In the light of recent numismatic sources the present research challenges all the earlier calculations of the reign period of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh. In doing so this study makes an intervention in the political chronology of Bengal and proposes 205 (1333 to 1538 CE) years of Independent Sultanate Period instead of 200 (1338-1358 CE) years. What was the force behind the rise of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh? What facilitated him to become an independent authority? In attempting to answer these questions this article analyses the multi-dimensional factors - manmade and natural- that acted as catalysts in the making of Sonargaon as the first independent geo-political entity in the trans-Meghna region.

Key words: Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, Sonargaon, Numismatic evidence, Geo-political entity, Geo-morphological setting

Little is known about the early life and the lineage of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh except that he was the *silāhdār* (armour bearer) of Bāhrām Khān, the then governor of *iqlīm* Sonargaon appointed by the Tughlaqs.¹ He is credited for establishing an independent authority in the eastern and southeastern parts of the Bengal Delta. Contemporary Persian chroniclers like Ziāuddin Baranī, Shāms Shirāj Āfif recorded that his popular name was '*Fakhrā*'. Both the authors never visited Bengal but Ibn Baṭṭūṭā visited Bengal during Fakhruddin's reign and he had also introduced the ruler in the same approach.² In the 1960s Sukhamaya Mukhapadhaya published a book titled *Bānglār Itihāser Dusho Bachar: Swādhīn Sultānder Āmal (1338-1358 Khrī)*.³ The beginning of this book is the year when Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh declared independence and cut off all authoritarian (lord-vessel) relations with the imperial authority of Delhi. He writes that after the declaration of independence in 1337-38 CE till the defeat of

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¹ *Silāhdār* is a Persian word which denotes the meaning of the officer, who is in the charge of armory.

² Ibn Battuta called him a *mawālī* of Bengal. Mahdi Husain, the translator of his travelogue identified him as an ally of the House of Sultan Nasiruddin. Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1976), p. 237.

³ Sukhamaya Mukhapadhaya, *Banglar Itihaser Dusho Bachar: Swadhīn Sultānder Āmal (1338-1358 Khrī)* (Kolkata: Bharati Book Stall, 1988, 4th reprint, 1st published in 1960).

Ghiyāsuddin Māhmud in 1538 CE, Bengal enjoyed a continuous independent political existence. These two centuries formed a glorious chapter in the history of Bengal, when the rulers came to be recognised as the best among all the rulers of India by virtue of their competence, power and wealth.⁴ Sukhamaya Mukhapadhaya's proposal of two hundred years (1338 -1538 CE) of independence got accepted in historical narrative. Till the beginning of the present century, no one had challenged the date 1338 CE as the year of his independence or even tried to revisit the relevant sources. Numismatic evidence discovered in the last three decades necessitated a reappraisal of this proposition. Even rereading of an old coin took the debate further ahead. This paper is an attempt to revisit the dates and the political career of this ruler in the light of recent numismatic sources. In doing so this paper has been divided into three sections:

(A) Survey of earlier research; (B) Analysis of textual and numismatic records and (C) Factors that led Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh to declare independence.

(A) Survey of Earlier Research

More than two centuries ago, Charles Stewart first wrote a political history of medieval Bengal and proposed a chronological framework of the Sultans. According to him, Bhiram (Bahram) Khan died in 739 AH/ 1338 CE at Sonergong (Sonargaon). At that time, Muhammad bin Tughlaq had conquered a huge area in Deccan and was very busy with the transfer of his capital to Daulatabad. He wrote:

This occasion presented a favourable opportunity to Fakher Adden [Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh] the armour-bearer of Bhiram Khan, not only to assume the government of Sunergong without permission, but also to declare him an independent monarch, assuming the title of Sultan Sekunder.

.... Fakher Adden ... succeeded in regaining his authority, caused himself to be proclaimed sovereign of Bengal; and ordered the coin to be stamped, and all public papers were issued in his name.... Bengal remained for many years afterwards an independent and distinct Kingdom.⁵

Stewart's inference was further elaborated and glorified by later scholars. Edward Thomas in his book titled *The Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi, Illustrated by Coins, Inscriptions, and other Antiquarian Remains* examined a silver coin of this ruler and stated that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh declared independence in 737 AH.⁶ He deciphered the date portion as:⁷

⁴ Ibid., p. 25 (Translations are mine).

⁵ Charles Stewart, *The History of Bengal* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1813), pp. 81-82.

⁶ Stewart's proposal was further clarified and glorified by later historians. Edward Thomas in *The Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi, Illustrated by Coins, Inscriptions, and other Antiquarian Remains* (London: Trubner And Co., 1871), pp. 262-63.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 265-66.

ضرب هذه السكة بحضرة سناركانو سنة سبع وثلثين و سبعمائة

[Translation: This *sikkāh* was issued from Hadrat Sonargaon Year Seven Hundred Thirty Seven.]

Edward Thomas accepted this silver coin as the earliest dated coin of Fakhruddin. Henry Blochmann also analysed available textual records and numismatic evidences. He suggested correction in the reading of Edward Thomas and commented that in the absence of *nuktah* or the diacritical marks in the Arabic word, the initial *sin* (س) and *tā* (ت) look identical as well as the word *سبع* (*sābā*) and *سبع* (*tisā*). As a result the reading of the date portion will be 739 AH/ 1338 CE. Blochmann proposed that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh ruled for ‘ten years and some months’ and on the basis of coins, he assigned Fakhruddin’s date as 739-750 AH.⁸ It is notable that the main focus of the debate was the reading of the date engraved on the coins of this Sultan.

Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay in his *Bangalar Itihasa* made an attempt to reconstruct the chronology and reign period of the Bengal Sultans. He critically reviewed the Persian chronicles and found many of the dates presented there were inaccurate. The coins of Fakhruddin are more reliable sources. He recognised the reading of 737 AH/ 1336 CE as correct one and uninterrupted rule of Fakhruddin over Sonargaon.⁹ Later historians like Rajanikanta Chakrabarty, R.C. Majumdar have accepted 739AH/1338 CE as the starting point of independent sultanate in Bengal.¹⁰

Another contemporary versatile scholar Nalinikanta Bhattasali projected a new chronological framework of the Independent Sultans of Bengal on the basis of a coin hoard found in Rupganj, Narayanganj.¹¹ Bhattasali noticed that coins of Mubārak Shāh with earlier date of his rule are rare. Finishing and designs are inferior compared to his later dated coins. He rejected the reading of 737 AH and concluded that the earliest date engraved on the coins of Fakhruddin is 739 AH. It is surprising to note that

⁸ Henry Blochmann, *Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal (Muhammodan Period)* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1968), pp. 76; ‘Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal’, 1873, pp. 46; this was reprint and it was originally published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in three subsequent years viz. 1873 (Part 1, No. 3), 1874 (Part 1, No. 3), 1875 (Part 1, No. 3) under the title ‘Contribution to the Geography and History of Bengal’.

⁹ Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, *Bangalar Itihasa*, Vol. 2 (Kolkata: Naba Bharat Publishers, 1376 BS), p. 79.

¹⁰ Rajanikanta Chakraborty, *Gaurer Itihasa* (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 1999, Reprint, 1st print, 1905), p. 196; R.C. Majumder, *History of Mediaval Bengal* (Kolkata: Tulshi Prakashani, 2012, Reprint, 1st published 1973), pp. 18-19

¹¹ Nalinikanta Bhattasali, *Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal* (Cambridge: W. Heffers and Sons, 1922).

Bhattasali expected that further numismatic evidence may bring changes in his proposed dating. He wrote:

If however, the dates on future samples of this class [of coin] turn out undoubtedly to be much earlier than 739 AH; these coins then will have to be taken as witness of Mubarak Shah's attempts at assuming sovereignty earlier in his career by deposing Bahram Khan.¹²

The hope expressed by Bhattasali became a historic reality at the beginning of the twentieth century. New coins of Sultan Fakhruddin have been discovered and published by professional researchers as well as coin-collectors. These new coins and rereading of an old gold coin are the main pillars for the present research, which will be critically analysed in the second part of this article.

Sir Jadunath Sarkar, while editing his *History of Bengal, Vol.2* made critical observations on the sources and methodical issues, which are closely related to the Sultanate period. Sarkar clearly underlines that the contemporary Persian chronicles i.e. *Tārīkh-i-Firūzshāhī* (both by Ziāuddin Barani and Shāms Shirāj Āfif), *Tārīkh-i-Mubārakshāhī* (Ābdul Qādir Badāyuni) or later works like *Tabāqāt-i-Ākbarī* (Nizāmuddin Āhmad), *Riyāz-us-Salātin* (Golām Hussāin Salīm) have errors and sometimes contradict each other. As a result, Sarkar relied on the coins and that makes him more dependable than others. Clipped margins, scarcity of numbers and clumsy sprawling scripts of the coins have created controversy among historians and numismatists. Sarkar put emphasis on the importance of placing side by side all the coins of a Sultan and carefully reading the dates from several specimens.¹³ Till then only Bhattasali had taken such an initiative and his proposals are the best “working hypothesis”. Jadunath Sarkar records that Tatar Khan *alias* Bahram Khan was the Tughlaq governor in the eastern part of Bengal. In 739 AH/1338 CE he died and his servant Fakhruddin ascended the throne of Sonargaon and ‘continued to rule that portion of Bengal till his death in 750 AH.’ Sarkar followed Bhattasali’s conclusion, which is reflected in the inference that Fakhruddin’s power was centred on Sonargaon, situated in the eastern part of Bengal and he never issued any coin from the northern power base of Pandua.¹⁴ All his coins were issued from the Sonārgāwn [Sonargaon] mint and covered every year from 740-750 AH/ 1339-1349 CE.

¹² Ibid., p. 13.

¹³ Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal, Muslim Period, (1200-1757), Vol. II* (Dacca: University of Dacca, 1948), pp. 95-97.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 96.

Abdul Karim accepted Bhattasali's reading of 739 AH/ 1338 CE, but rejected the four types of categorisation of Fakhruddin's coins.¹⁵ Abdul Karim in his later works on the Sultanate period tried to present an up to date political history of Bengal with the help of textual and archaeological sources; specially the epigraphs and the coins. For Fakhruddin's initial date he referred to his Corpus of Coins and concluded that several coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh have been discovered issued in between 739 and 750 AH/1338-1350 CE. The only mint mentioned in his coins was Sonargaon— most of the time prefixed with the adjective '*Hazrāt Jālāl Sonārgāon*'.¹⁶ Abdul Karim also accepted the two hundred years of independence till 1538 CE and all the efforts to subjugate Bengal failed during these two centuries. Two initiatives of Firuz Tughlaq, attacks from Sultan Ibrāhīm Sharqī or Sultan Sikāndār Lodī became unsuccessful. Bengal kept her independent authority in the eastern part of India.¹⁷

Firoz Mahmud published a gold coin issued by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh and preserved in Bangladesh National Museum. It was discovered from Sylhet and later collected by the Museum authority. The gold coin contains the date in the marginal section of the coin in words, which is quite readable, although the upper portion seems cutoff.¹⁸ This gold coin was issued probably to commemorate the declaration of independence by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in 739 AH/ 1338 CE.

Richard M. Eaton¹⁹ also accepted the reign period of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh as proposed by earlier scholars *i.e.* 1338-49 CE. He further remarked that firm control over the eastern part of Bengal by Fakhruddin followed increased supply of silver. But in his *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765* Eaton²⁰ mentioned that the imperial Governor died in 1338 CE and Ilyās Shāh seized power and declared independence. In next four years, he defeated his rivals in other parts of the delta. After that he declared himself Sultan of the whole delta. He ruled Bengal till his death in 1357 CE. Eaton's conclusion cannot be accepted considering two issues: (a) Sonargaon remained as an independent authority till 1350 CE and (b) Ilyās Shāh issued coins from Sonargaon after 1350 CE. A K M Shahnawaz also accepted the reading of the earliest date as 739

¹⁵ Abdul Karim, *Corpus of the Muslim Coins of Bengal (Down to A.D. 1538)* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, reprinted in 2013, first published Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1960), pp. 36-37.

¹⁶ Abdul Karim, *Banglāra Itihāsa: Sulatani Amala* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1977), pp. 165-66.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Firoz Mahmud, 'Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah-er Ekti Swarna Mudra Ebang er Mudratattwik Guruttva', *Itihāsa Samiti Patrika*, 1973, pp. 1-8.

¹⁹ Richard M. Eaton, *Rise of Islam* (California, University of California Press, 1993) p. 324.

²⁰ Richard M. Eaton, *India in the Persianate Age: 1000–1765* (California, University of California Press, 2019), p. 78.

AH/1338 CE.²¹ Habiba Khatun in her research on Sonargaon based on inscriptions and archaeological sites had accepted Abdul Karim's scheme on the chronology of the events.²²

It is interesting to note that an expert numismatist like Abdul Karim did not think that there is a possibility of error in the reading of coins. However, new numismatic evidence may lead us to revisit the issue. Abdul Karim in 1999 wrote that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh ascended the throne of Sonargaon in 1338 CE and issued coins immediately. He placed the date, as he did earlier, in the chronological bracket of 1338-1349 CE.²³

Muazzam Hussain Khan's monograph (*Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah of Sonarganw*) is a classical work on this Sultan. He had rigorously scrutinised earlier researches and found that the reading of 739 AH/ 1338 CE as the earliest date of Fakhruddin's coin was a doubtful issue. But the gold coin published by Firoz Mahmud had brought an end to this confusion.²⁴

Historians cannot make any final conclusion regarding the past. New reading of a coin puts the earlier reading as a misreading. However, the reading of Firoz Mahmud needs a critical review. This article is an humble attempt re-reading of this gold coin and reappraise the date of commencement of independence by Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh in Sonargaon. In doing so, we have to reconsider the primary sources with special attention to the coins discovered in the last three decades.

(B) Analysis of Textual and Numismatic Records

Persian chronicles, written under the patronage of the North Indian rulers, have incidental references to Bengal. Two *Tārikh-i-Firuzshāhī*s (Ziauddin Baranai and Shāms Shirāj Āfif) are the only contemporary texts. Later works like *Tārikh-i-Mubārakshāhī*, *Tabāqāt-i-Ākbarī*, *Tārikh-i-Firishtā* also contain important information on Fakhruddin and the affairs of Bengal. The 18th century historical compilation by Golam Hussāin Salīm (*Riyāz-us-Sālātīn*) also had a separate section on Fakhruddin

²¹ A K M Shahnewaj, *Mudra of Shilalipete Madhyajuger Banglar Somaj-Sangskriti* (Dhaka, Novel Publishing House, 2018, Reprint, 1st edition, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1999), pp. 110-13

²² Habiba Khatun, *Iqlim Sonargaon History Jurisdiction Monuments* (Dhaka: Academic Press & Publishers Library, 2006).

²³ Abdul Karim, *Banglar Itihas Muslim Bijay Theke Sipahi Biplab Parjauta (1200-1857 Khri:)* (Dhaka: Jatiya Shahitya Prakash, 2012, Reprint, first published in 1999), pp. 59

²⁴ Muazzam Hussain Khan, *Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah of Sonarganw* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Society for Oriental Studies, 2005), pp. 38-39, for coinage see pp. 111-16.

Mubarak Shāh. Except the last one, all the other texts were written outside Bengal and none of the above writers ever came here. The imperial lens is the salient feature of these works, which was reflected in their writings on Bengal. They approached the events of Bengal with their imperialist-telescope. As a result, some of the works cited Bengal as a land of traitors, disobedient and troublemakers.²⁵ Incorrect dates, missing links and partial narratives of events mentioned in these texts led historians to depend on the coins issued by the Sultans and their counterparts.

In the last three decades, new coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh have been discovered and published by professional numismatists like Syed Ejaz Hussain,²⁶ Md. Rezaul Karim,²⁷ Sutapa Sinha²⁸ and collectors²⁹ like Noman Nasir and Md. Shariful Islam. Their researches can also be categorised as works by expert numismatists. But the catalogue published by Stan Goron and J.P. Goenka³⁰ on all Indian Sultanate coins is still a groundbreaking compilation. All these researchers had approached the subject and tried to reassess the chronology and history of Bengal with their expertise on coins. It should be accepted here that our aim is not to reject or reevaluate all of their opinions. Rather we would attempt to reconfirm some of their conclusions and place them in the main stream of historical narrative on Bengal.

Stan Goron and G.P. Goenka published seven new coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in their Catalogue titled *The Coins of the Indian Sultanates: Covering the Area of Present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*.³¹ The gold coin kept in Bangladesh National Museum was placed first in their list which was dated in 739 AH/ 1338 CE by historians and numismatists. The second one is a quarter *tankā* made of gold. Stan Goron and G.P. Goenka proposed a new reading of the gold coin (Picture 1). Their reading is given below:

²⁵ Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate Politics, Economy and Coins* (Delhi, Monohar, 2003), p. 36.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 83-85, 346-47.

²⁷ Muhammad Rezaul Karim, "A Critical Study of the Coins of the Independent Sultans of Bengal (From 1205 AD-1538 CE)", unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Dhaka, 2000, pp. 93-96, 305, 346-48.

²⁸ Sutapa Sinha, *Coin Hoards of the Bengal Sultans 1205-1576 A.D. From West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, Assam and Bangladesh* (Gurgaon: Shubhi Publication, 2017).

²⁹ Noman Nasir, 'A Surprising Date of Sultan Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah of Bengal', *Journal of the Oriental Numismatic Society*, Vol. 175, 2003, pp. 17-18.

³⁰ Stan Goron and J.P. Goenka, *The Coins of the Indian Sultanates: Covering the Area of Present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* (New Delhi, Munshiram and Monoharlal, 2001).

³¹ Ibid., pp. 165-66.

Picture 1: Gold Coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, 734 AH



Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: Bangladesh National Museum)

Obverse: *ālsultān āl āzam fakhr āl-dunyā wā'l din ābul muzāffar mubāarak shāh*

Reverse: *yāmin khalifāt Āllah nāsir āmir āl-muminin*

In the border, the date is read as 734 AH. They also mentioned a silver coin of Mubarak Shah which was not included in the catalogue. The other silver coins listed by them are presented below:

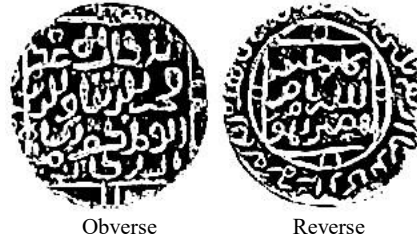
Type	Date (AH)	Mint	Obverse	Reverse
B 132	Not clear	Hadrat- Jālāl-Sonārgāon	<i>ālsultān āl āzam fakhr āl-dunyā wā'l din ābul muzāffar mubāarak shāh</i>	<i>yāmin khalifāt/ Āllah nāsir/ āmir āl-muminin</i>
B 133	737-739	Hadrat- Jālāl-Sonārgāon	as on B 132	on B 132
B 134		Off the flan	as on B 132	on B 132
B 135	740-744	Hadrat- Jālāl-Sonārgāon	as above but in a plain field	on B 132

In 2006 J.P. Goenka published a silver *tankā* (Picture 2) which was minted from Sonargaon. He proposed following reading of the coin:

Obverse: *alsultan al azam/ fakhr al-dunya wa'l din/ abul muzaffar mubarak shah/alsultan*

Reverse: *yamin khalifat/ allah nasir/ amir al-muminin*

Picture 2: Silver Coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, 734 AH



Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: S. M. Iftikharul Alam)

The reverse contains the epithet within a square field bounded by a round circle. An annulet is placed at the centre in between the square and the circle in the every line of the square. The date and the mint name are outside the circle. Usually the mint name Sonargaon in Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah's coin is prefixed with the adjective *jālāl* (greatness). However, this coin is an exception and here it is *shahr* (city or urban center). J. P. Goenka questioned the established narrative that Fakhruddin declared independence in 1338 CE on the basis of this silver coin and the gold coin mentioned earlier. Coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh dated 734 AH/ 1333 CE, 737AH/1336 CE, 738 AH/1337 CE and 739AH/ 1338 CE indicated his authority in the eastern part of Bengal. The absence of Tughlaq coins from Sonargaon added further support to this conclusion. J.P. Goenka accepted Firoz Mahmud's proposal that the gold coin was issued to commemorate Fakhruddin's authority and independence in Sonargaon. He concluded that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh became the first Muslim ruler of independent Sonargaon, who issued coins of at least five types and ruled in the eastern part of Bengal up to 750 AH (1350-51 CE) with a probable short interregnum gap around 735-736 AH/ 1334-1335 CE.³²

Syed Ejaz Hussain, placed Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in 737 AH (1336-37 CE) in Sonargaon after the death of Bahram Khan with a critical analysis of the numismatic, epigraphic and textual sources.³³ He agreed with the reading of Edward Thomas. He found the same type of coins in a private collection in Kolkata.³⁴ He also mentioned that Singapur Coin Auction published a coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh dated 737

³² J. P. Goenka, 'Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah's Independence in Sonargaon : Numismatic Evidence', *Oriental Numismatic Society Journal*, No.186, 2006, pp. 27-28.

³³ Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate*, Delhi, Monohar, 2003, p. 83.

³⁴ He reported another specimen of the same type in a separate private collection, *Ibid*, p. 87.

AH/1336-37 CE.³⁵ All these coins examined by Syed Ejaz Hussain further strengthen the reading of the date portion as 737 AH/1336-37 CE. He accepted the short interregnum of one year and remarked that “we do not find his coins with the year AH 738/ (AD 1337-38), which was probably the year of his exile.”³⁶ Sutapa Sinha analysed several hoards containing Sultanate coins of Bengal, now preserved in various Museums and Collections around the world. She found thirty three coins of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh in Colonel Charles Seton Guthrie Collection, Bode Museum, Berlin. The lot originated from the Kooch Bihar Hoard and travelled all the way to Germany. In this collection the earliest dated coin is 737 AH/ 1336 CE and there is a gap of three years (738-740 AH/ 1337-1339 CE), followed by continuous dates up to 750 AH/1339 CE. Sutapa Sinha accepted the date of 737 AH/1336 as the earliest one.³⁷

A Hoard found from Sylhet district, Bangladesh is known as the Kastabir Mahalla Hoard. It contains coins of Bengal Sultanate issued in the 14th century by the imperial governors of the independent rulers of Bengal. Out of 97 coins, 17 were issued by Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh, dated 741-749 AH, yearly without any gap.³⁸

A classic monograph on the coins of the Independent Sultanate period was produced by Md. Rezaul Karim on the basis of the coins kept in the Bangladesh National Museum. He proposed a chronological outline for the period and put the reign period of Fakhruddin as 737-750 AH. Rezaul Karim read a silver coin preserved in BNM (Acc No. 78.1839) and identified it as type B3 of the 5 types of coins issued by Mubarak Shah. The date and its mint name are recorded in the margin as:

Duribā hāzād dināra fī Haḍrat Jālāl Sonārkanw sānāh sāmān wā sālās īn wā saba miyāh.

(This dinar was struck in Hazrat Jalal Sonargaon in the year thirty-eight and seven hundred).³⁹

This coin clearly proves that Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh was in power in Sonargaon in 738 AH. The same type of coin issued one year earlier (737 AH) has also been found.⁴⁰

³⁵ Taisei-Baldwin-Gillio, “Singapore Coin Auction Catalogue 28”, Singapore, 1999, Catalogue 28, No. 743.

³⁶ Syed Ejaz Hussain, *The Bengal Sultanate*, Delhi, Monohar, 2003, p. 84.

³⁷ Sutapa Sinha, ‘A Note on an Important Coin Collection of the Bengal Sultans in the Bode-Museum, Berlin’, in Gerd J.R. Mevissen and Arundhati Banerji (eds.), *PRAJÑĀDHARA: Essays on Asian Art, History, Epigraphy and Culture in Honour of Gouriswar Bhattacharya* (New Delhi, Kaveri Books, 2009), p. 362.

³⁸ Sutapa Sinha, *Coin Hoards of the Bengal Sultans*, 2017, p. 186.

³⁹ Muhammad Rezaul Karim, “A Critical Study of the Coins of the Independent Sultans of Bengal”, 2000, p. 305.

Fakhruddin's coins dated 740 and 741 AH are rare.⁴¹ Recently a book on the coins of Sultanate period of Bengal has been published by Md. Shariful Islam and Mohammad Abdur Rahim.⁴² This cannot be termed as a coin catalogue. Methods and techniques of deciphering coins as enunciated in this book have attracted special attention of scholars and numismatists. The book contains one or two best specimens of every ruler of Bengal and two-dimensional images of legends engraved. Islam and Rahim agreed with Stan Goron and J.P. Goenka's dating of Fakhruddin's coins. But their book included only one coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, dated 747 AH. The present researcher has followed the aforementioned method and attempted to decipher afresh the only gold coin of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh preserved in Bangladesh National Museum.

Historians agreed that 750 AH is the latest date among Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh's coins. Bengal Sultanate coins are a world of mystery. Noman Nasir published a silver coin of this ruler. On the obverse of the coin, the legend is the usual one: *āl sultān al a'zam fakhr al dunyā wa'l dīn abū'l muẓaffar mubarakshāh al sulṭān*. On the reverse, the epithet is: *yamīn al-khalīfa-nāṣir amīr al mū'minīn*. The margin records the date as: *ḍuriba hathihi sikkah bi[ba] ḥadrat jalāl sunārgānū sanah thalath wa khamṣīn was saba 'miya*. [this *sikkā* was issued from the mint of *Hazrat-Jālāl-Sonārgāon* in the year seven hundred fifty three *i.e.* 1353 CE].⁴³ He concluded with following three explanations:

- (a) Probably Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh was ousted by Gāzi Shāh in 750 AH and recaptured his authority in 753 AH for a short time.
- (b) It was mistake and an old mould of Fakhruddin's coin was used in the obverse.
- (c) The date 753 AH is not correct and the correct date is 743AH. Most likely the die makers of the coin must have made this mistake.⁴⁴

Bangladesh National Museum authority published one gold coin (accession ID 01.01.003.1967.00322) and 36 silver coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh preserved in their store. The Museum authority permitted the present researcher to examine the coin

⁴⁰ Nalinikanta Bhattasali, *Coins and Chronology*, 1922, p. 11; Muhammad Rezaul Karim, "A Critical Study of the Coins of the Independent Sultans of Bengal", 2000, p. 347.

⁴¹ Reported only two specimen with 740 AH is known in *Suppl. Shillong Cabinet* No.8, Pl II and *Suppl Shillong Cabinet*, Pl. 118-119 dated 740 AH. No. 2133, dated 741 no 2 134.

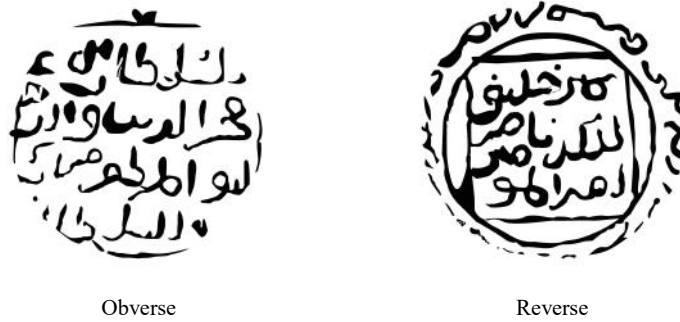
⁴² Md. Shariful Islam and Mohammad Abdur Rahim, *The Sultānate Period Coins of Bengal: Focus on the Epigraphic Study, Calligraphy and History* (Dhaka, Black N Orange, 2020), pp. 79-83.

⁴³ Translations are mine.

⁴⁴ Noman Nasir, 'A Surprising Date of Sultan Fakhr al-DinMubarak Shah of Bengal', 2003, pp. 1-18

personally in the office of the Deputy Keeper, Department of History and Classical Art.⁴⁵ Reading of this specific gold coin is given below:

Picture 3: Two-dimensional Sketch of the Legends, 734 AH Coin

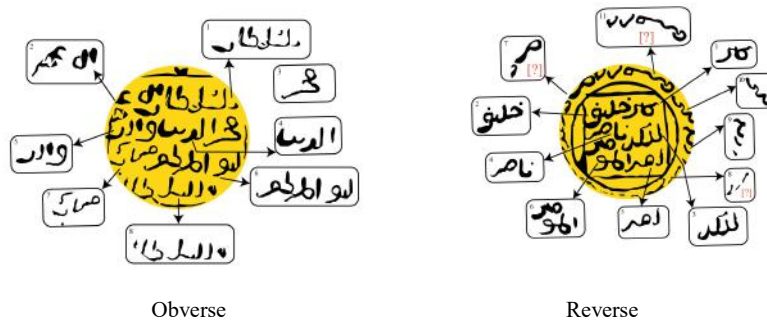


Obverse

Reverse

(Sketch: Md Sazid Arefin)

Picture 4: Two-dimensional Sketch of the Legends, 734 AH Coin



Obverse

Reverse

(Sketch: Md Sazid Arefin)

⁴⁵ A colored photograph has been produced in *Coins of the Bengal Sultans, Bangladesh National Museum Descriptive Catalogue Series Volume: 05/2017 (part-1)* (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2017), p. 139

Table 1: Arabic Script and Typed form of the Legends (Obverse)

No.	Legends	Arabic Script	Roman Script
1	السلطان	السلطان	<i>āl sultān</i>
2	الاعظم	الاعظم	<i>āl āzam</i>
3	فخر	فخر	<i>Fakhr</i>
4	الدنيا	الدنيا	<i>āl dunyā</i>
5	والدين	والدين	<i>wā'l dīn</i>
6	ابوالمظفر	ابوالمظفر	<i>ābu 'l muzāffar</i>
7	مبارك شاه	مبارك شاه	<i>mubārak shāh</i>
8	السلطان	السلطان	<i>āl sultān</i>

(Chart: Sahidul Hasan)

Table 2: Arabic Script and Typed form of the Legends (Reverse)

No.	Legends	Arabic Script	Roman Script
1	يمين	يمين	<i>yāmīn</i>
2	خليفة	خليفة	<i>āl-khalīfā</i>
3	الله	الله	<i>Āllah</i>
4	ناصر	ناصر	<i>Nāsir</i>
5	امير	امير	<i>Āmīr</i>
6	المؤمنين	المؤمنين	<i>āl mūminīn</i>
7	?	?	?
8	?	?	?
9	اربع	اربع	<i>Ārba'</i>
10	ثلثين	ثلثين	<i>sālāsīn</i>
11	وسبعائة	وسبعائة	<i>wāsābāmīāh</i>

(Chart: Sahidul Hasan)

The present researcher noticed that the last three alphabets *ra* (ر), *ba* (ب) and *ain* (ع) are very clear. In written form of Arabic numeric only the four (أربع) ends with these three alphabets. So it is more likely to be *ārbā* (أربع) i.e. four. So the reading of the date portion is *arba salasin* (34). There are at least three silver coins (Picture 2, 4 and 5) of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh dated 734 AH.

Picture 5: Silver Coin of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh, 734 AH



Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: Muhammad Shamsuddin, Personal Collection)

Picture 6: Silver Coin of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh, 734 AH



Obverse

Reverse

(Photo: Noman Nasir, Personal Collection)

The following dates are found in the 36 silver coins listed in the catalogues include: 737 AH/1336 CE, 738 AH/1337 CE, 741 AH/1340 CE, 742 AH/ 1341 CE, 743/ 1342 CE, 744 AH/ 1343 CE, 745 AH/ 1344 CE, 746 AH/ 1345 CE, 747 AH/ 1346 CE, 748 AH/ 1347 CE, 749 AH/ 1348 CE, 750 AH/ 1349 CE. Among these 36 coins, four (No. 110-113, Picture 4) bear date 744 AH/1343 CE. ⁴⁶ The date and the mint name are given below:

ضرب هذه السكه بحضرة سناركانو سنة اربع و اربعين وسبعمأة

All the legends are similar to the silver coin of 734 as mentioned by J.P. Goenka except two words:

⁴⁶ Ibid, pp. 150-53.

1. *Sālāsīn* (ثلاثين) of 734 AH coin is replaced with *ārbāin* (اربعين) in 744 AH coin.
2. *Shahr* (شهر) of 734 AH is replaced with *jālāl* (جلال) in 744 AH coin.

The following table shows that *ārbā* is identical in his coins.⁴⁷

Table 3: 744 AH Coins of Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh, Bangladesh National Museum



On the basis of the above numismatic evidence, it can be concluded that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh declared independence in Sonargaon in 734 AH/1333 CE and continued to rule till 750 AH/1349 CE. The sixteen years sovereignty was interrupted for a short period. Accepting this chronology, the last section of this article will be a modest endeavour to analyse the circumstantial as well as spatial context that led or rather should we say inspired Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to revolt and declare independence against the mighty Tughlaqs.

(C) Factors that led Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to Declare Independence

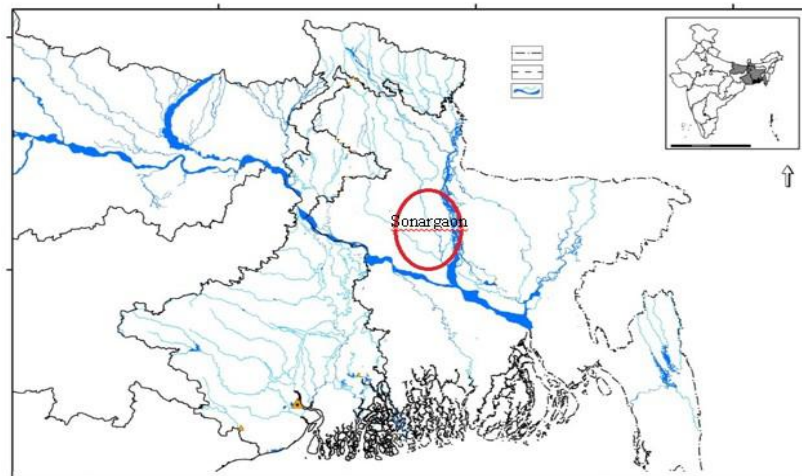
On the basis of textual and numismatic evidence the following statements on Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh will not be unjustified:

- (a) He was an efficient high official under Bāhrām Khān, the Tughlaq governor of Sonargaon. After the demise of Bāhrām Khān he declared independence in the eastern part of Bengal in 1333 CE.
- (b) The Governors appointed by the Tughlaqs in the Eastern India marched towards Sonargaon with their joint force under the leadership of Qadar Khān. The date

⁴⁷ Ibid. These photographs are taken from *Coins of the Bengal Sultans, Bangladesh National Museum Descriptive Catalogue*.

of this collective attack is still a matter of controversy among historians. In the initial phase, Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh was defeated by the joint army led by Qadar Khān. However, Fakhruddin tactfully left his capital Sonargaon for a short time as a part of his war strategy.

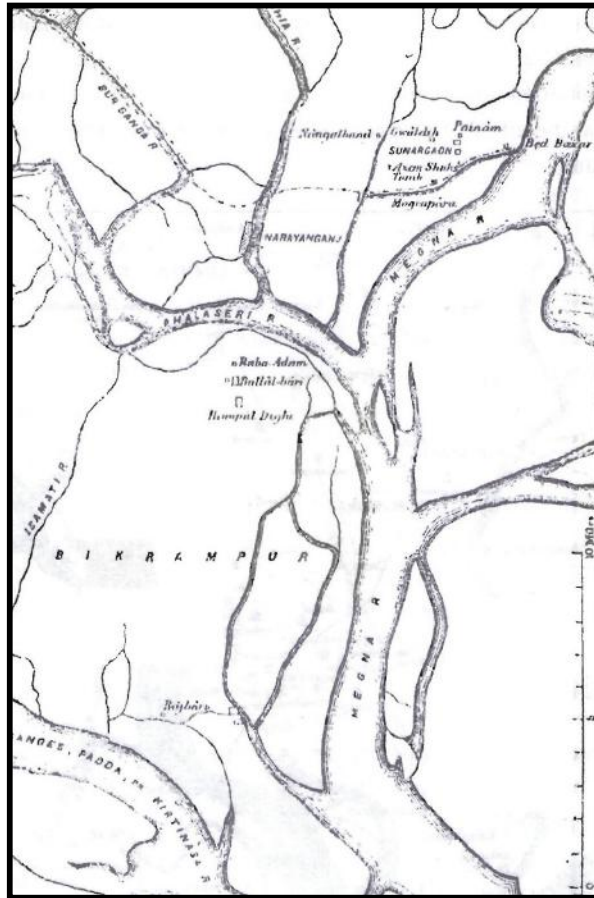
- (c) During the stay of the imperial soldiers of Qadar Khan in Sonargaon resentment occurred among them. It was in the middle of monsoonic heavy rain. Taking the advantage of rainy condition and the chaotic situation of the resentment, Fakhruddin reestablished possession of his capital *Hazrāt-Jālāl Sonārgāon*.
- (d) Fakhruddin ruled till 750 AH. It has been mentioned earlier that after 740 AH his coins were issued every year. Specimens of earlier dates are found less in number.
- (e) A brief discussion on the topographical features of Sonargaon and its surrounding areas will help us to understand the issue. At present, Sonargaon is an upazila under the Narayanganj district, about 27 miles northeast of Dhaka and covers an area of 24 square miles. It is accepted that the modern name bears the historical memory of the toponym. The 14th century's *Shahr/Iqlim/Hazrāt-Jālāl* was located somewhere around modern Sonargaon.⁴⁸



Map 1: Major Rivers of Bengal, focus on Narayanganj, Bangladesh
(Map modified by Sahidul Hasan, not to scale from the map of Monalisa Rakshit.)

⁴⁸ Sahidul Hasan, “The Making and Remaking of Geo-political and Cultural Units in Bengal (13th to 18th Centuries)”, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Dhaka, 2024, pp. 203-04.

The Dhaka-Chittagong four-lane expressway runs through the area.⁴⁹ Shāmsuddin Firūz was the first Sultan who issued coins from the Sonargaon mint dated 705 AH/1305 CE.⁵⁰ The area is located in the middle of the delta. The ancient capital of



Vikramapura was not far away from Sonargaon. Major rivers and their tributaries played a dynamic role in the rise and development of Sonargaon as a capital city. The Brahmaputra (old course) created a defence line on the northern side of Sonargaon. The River Sitalakhya flows through the west. The Meghna passes over the east and south of the area (Map 1). The northern boundary of Sonargaon was less definite but three rivers— Sitalkhya, Dhaleshwari and Meghna— created a natural defence in the southern part of Sonargaon.⁵¹ Menikhal, a

Map 2: Major Rivers of Narayanganj, Bangladesh

(Alexander Cunningham, *A Tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879-80: From Patna to Sonargaon*, *Archaeological Reports*, Vol. 15, Calcutta: Archaeological Survey of India, 1882.)

⁴⁹ Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Sonargaon', in Abdul Momin Chowdhury (eds.), *History of Bangladesh Sultanate and Mughal Period (c. 1200-1800 CE)* (Dhaka, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2020), p. 541; Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Sites and Surroundings', in A.B.M. Husain (ed.), *Sonargaon-Panam* (Dhaka, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1997), pp. 1-32.

⁵⁰ Abdul Corpus of the Muslim Coins, 2013, p. 158.

⁵¹ Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Sonargaon', 2020, pp. 541-542; Md. Rezaul Karim and Saikat Asgar (eds.), *Sonargaoner Itihas: Utsaa o Upadan* (Dhaka, Rahman Group of Industries, 1993), pp. 33-34.

watercourse that runs in between the Sitalakhya and Meghna, had created another defence line. The river network around Sonargaon (Map 2) facilitated the formation of a political entity as well as its economic prosperity. It was connected with the Bay of Bengal through the southern river networks of the Delta.

The geomorphology and spatial context created an opportunity for Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to declare and retain his independent political authority. Location, topography and environs of eastern part of the Delta were suitable for naval warfare. Moonsonic heavy rain acted as a natural barrier against the invading imperial army during the rainy season. Rivers around Sonargaon not only provided natural security but also facilitated quick movement of the fleet and the army. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh was well acquainted with this area. One may raise question that what is the basis of such conclusion? Is there any particular written text on Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh's war strategies? – the answer is negative. However, analysis of Ibn Baṭṭūṭāh's travelogue and *Tārīkh-i-Mubārakshāhī* support the conjecture. Yahyā bin Āhmad Sarhindī wrote that there was resentment among the soldiers of Qadar Khan in Sonargaon. At that time Fakhruddin was hiding in a safe place opposite of the river. Name of this river is not mentioned by Sarhindī. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh succeeded in establishing a rapport with the recalcitrant soldiers of the imperial army. At one stage, Qadar Khan was killed by his own soldiers. After that Fakhruddin marched towards his capital to recapture it. He distributed the wealth of the *khāzānā* (treasury) to the soldiers according to his promise made for gaining their friendship.⁵²

The above narrative of Yahyā bin Āhmad Sarhindī indicates that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh was hiding on the other side of a river which was flowing at that time near the capital Sonargaon. He was waiting for a suitable moment to reclaim position of his capital Sonargaon. Jadunath Sarkar also explained the situation in the same tone. The excessive rain resulted in dampness. The soldiers of Qadar Khān were not habituated to such a climate.⁵³ Jadunath Sarkar depicted the political scenario of Sonargaon in a very romantic way: 'like the ever-shifting course of the rivers the political current in the eastern capital took bewildering spins.'⁵⁴ The geo-morphological setting, river network and heavy moonsonic rain prompted defeat of the imperial army within a very short time.

⁵² Yahya bin Ahmad Sirhindi, *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi*, English translation by K. K. Bose (Karachi: Karim Sons, 1977), pp. 106; Abdul Qadir Badaoni, *Muntakhab-ut-Tawarikh*, English translation by George S. A. Ranking, Vol. 1 (Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 1986, pp. 106-07.

⁵³ Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, 1948, p. 98.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

North Indian political scenarios need to be mentioned for logical explanation of the declaration of independence by Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh in Sonargaon. It is mentioned earlier that the governors appointed by the Tughlaq rulers posted in eastern part of India marched against Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh. No textual references noted that any military support came from north India i.e. from capital Delhi. What were the reasons behind such attitude of the central authority? Was it negligence from Muhammad bin Tughlaq? The answer is hidden in the contemporary north Indian politics. It is a known fact that Muhammad bin Tughlaq was a famous ruler for his mega projects. In 1327 CE, he started shifting his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, Deccan. This particular initiative caused him a great loss of wealth and human life. In 1334 CE a revolt took place in Mewar. Muhammad bin Tughlaq himself became very ill due to a bubonic plaque. The Karachil expedition in 1333 CE was also a disastrous project for him in terms of money and human resources. More than one lac soldiers were killed in Karachil expedition and the imperial army had to retreat. His mega projects and a possibility of Mongol attack in the north-western frontier kept him fully occupied. He was not in a situation to concentrate on the state of affairs in Bengal. The north Indian political scenarios hosted a perfect stage for Mubarak Shah. Located on the easternmost border of the empire Sonargaon became an independent political authority under his leadership.

Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan globe trotter of the 14th century, started his return journey from the river port *Sunārkaḡwān* i.e. Sonargaon. He came to this port city from Sylhet after travelling for 15 days through the river *Nahar-ul-āzraq*, identified as the River Meghna. He noted that there was a constant war between Lakhnauti and Sonargaon. He wrote: “During the winter and the midst of mud caused by the rains Fakhruddin raided Lakhnauti by water on which he was strong. But when the dry season came, ‘Ali Shah invaded Bengal by land since he was strong on land.”⁵⁵ The statement indicates that Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh had taken full advantage of the river-network and monsoonic weather for his war against the Tughlaq army.

The topographic importance of Sonargaon is also found in the writing of F. B. Bradley-Birt. He described that the area was bounded by the big rivers of Bengal which makes it a very suitable land mass in terms of defence. The centre of attraction was the southern area, where the Meghna joins with an old course of the Brahmaputra.⁵⁶ Mirzā Nāthān, a Mughal naval officer, vividly described the importance of *nāwārā* and river-

⁵⁵ Ma Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla*, 1976, p. 237.

⁵⁶ F. B. Bradley-Birt, *The Romance of an Eastern Capital*, p. 72.

based war strategy of Bengal.⁵⁷ Islām Khān's war tactics showed that his prime concern was to control the major river routes of this area, especially the Sitalakhay, the Meghna and its tributaries. Considering the above geo-morphological settings it can be inferred that like the Mughal Subahdar Islām Khān Chistī Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh may have taken full advantage of his location and topography to keep his sovereignty intact over the trans-Meghna region.

The above discussion shows that being aware of political condition of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh took advantage of his geographic settings and declared independence in Sonargaon. His reign period was sixteen years (734-750AH/1333-1350 CE) with a short interregnum. These sixteen years of rule established an independent political structure in the 14th century. Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh's authority included the eastern and southeastern areas of the Bengal delta. He attacked Lakhnauti and Satgaon, but his success was limited. Shihābuddin Tālīsh, author of *Fathīya-i-Ibriyyā*, recorded that Fakhruddin conquered Chittagong.⁵⁸ Historians credited Fakhruddin for establishing an independent Sultanate in Bengal.

In 1340 CE, Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh proceeded through Sylhet to the north, Tippera and Noakhali. He defeated the Tippera king and the modern districts of Comilla and Noakhali were annexed to his own kingdom. Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh's domination over Comilla, Noakhali, Sylhet and Chittagong threatened the Tippera and Arakan kings. His political authority was spread over the eastern and southeastern part of present day Bangladesh. It was separated from the other entities by the Jamuna on the western side and by the Padma on the north.

Conclusion

The scarcity of information in textual sources led historians to depend on numismatic evidences to reconstruct the history of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh. Creepy legends and sometimes cut off parts on the edges of coins resulted confusion about the chronology of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh's rule. In the initial phase, the debate was centred on 737 AH/1336 CE and 739 AH/1338 CE. Recent reading of the only gold coin and silver coins shows that 734 AH/1333 CE is the date of independence of Fakhruddin Mubārak Shāh. My reading also reconfirms that 734 AH/1333 CE is the earliest date of this Sultan, which took the beginning of his reign five years earlier. As a result, the year of

⁵⁷ Abdul Karim, *History of Bengal Mughal Period*, Vol. 1, (Rajshahi: Institute of Bangladesh Studies, 1999), pp. 217-86.

⁵⁸ Jadunath Sarkar (ed.), *The History of Bengal* (1948), p. 98; Muazzam Hussain Khan, *Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah* (2005), pp. 72-83.

Independent Sultanate should be reconsidered as 734 AH/1333 CE and count as 205 years instead of 200 years. This new dating on the basis of coins is the main finding of this research. The political crisis faced by Muhāmmād bin Tughlaq and the geographical advantages prepared a perfect stage for Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh to establish his sovereign political authority in Sonargaon in 1334 CE.

In the pre-13th century phase, the Deva, the Chandra and the Harikela rulers created a separate political authority centred round the trans-Meghna region. Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh's kingdom was the first attempt in the 14th century phase to establish such an entity. The mint named *Hazrat-Jālāl* or *Sahr* Sonargaon repeated the same history. Bisected by the Padma and the Jamuna, Sonargaon and its surrounding areas were under Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh. In course of time, his territorial jurisdiction extended towards the east and southeast. Control over Chittagong was one of the prime successes of this ruler. It should be noted here that the coins of Fakhruddin dated after 740 AH/ 1339 CE are available and comparatively large in number. It was needed as a result of flourishing trading activities through *Sadkawan*, a port that was situated somewhere in the coast of modern Chittagong. His construction activities, the coins issued by him or the text of Sarhindhi lead us to conclude that in the sixteen years (734-750AH/ 1333-49 CE) of independence, Sonargaon grew as a geo-political entity, which had a flourishing trading centre under its jurisdiction. As a result of trading activities through the Bay of Bengal, Fakhruddin Mubarak Shāh had to issue more coins. These coins bear the testimony of his sovereign authority in the trans-Meghna region. In the third decade of the 14th century Sonargaon stood as the first independent geo-political entity in the eastern and southeastern parts of Bengal.