The Illustrated Manuscript of Iskandar Nama: Reminiscence of an Intercultural Dialogue in Medieval Bengal

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ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial India played a very determining role in the economic activities of South and South East Asian archipelago. Geographically being located in between East and West Asia, its vast stretch of littoral have always been used by wayfarers as a business parlour for transshipment of their goods and commodities. In the long run these economic activities helped in building up very close cultural relation between South East Asia and the West Asian countries. The imprints of these cultural relations were felt in the temples of Ankorvat and the Buddhist temples of Borobudur. In the same way Iskandar Nama, the only illustrated manuscript of Sultanate Bengal, commissioned by Nusrat Shah in the year 1531-32AD also bears the imprints of intercultural relations in medieval South East Asia. Thus, the purpose of my paper is to show that how we can use this illustrated manuscript in understanding the cultural relations in medieval South East Asia. Stylistically, the manuscript has both the influence of Persian and Chinese painting. Apart from these stylistic features, the paper that was used, the colours that illuminated the illustrations, all speaks about the technological development and its diffusion in different parts of Indian sub-continent.

Keywords: Iskandar Nama, movement of art, cultural relations

Introduction

Since time immemorial passes of Hindukush have been the gate way to the Indian sub-continent. The coming of the Indo Aryans, the Bactrian Greeks, the Kushanas and even the Arab victory of the Sindh all made their way through the Hindukush and ultimately the arrival of the Europeans on the western coast of India have been very vital in nourishing both India’s economic and cultural prosperity. In respect to the western part of India, eastern part has never been an entre pot of any religious, cultural or political invasion. Thus Bengal, being located in the eastern part of India, was always to receive the peripheral ripples of the wave whose epicenter being the western part of India. In the same way the world conqueror, Macedonian emperor, Alexander the Great touched the western fringes of the Indian sub-continent in 327BCE. On the bank of river Indus he met with Porus or Puru who ruled the area between the Jhelum and Chenab. And the story goes on like this that after being defeated by the army of Alexander, captive Porus was taken before the emperor. On asking what kind of a treatment do he expect from the Great Emperor? He replied “I expect the same treatment as a king does with his counterpart”. Moved by the sense of self respect of Porus, Alexander gave up his plan for invading the main land of India. However, the historical record say that he could not move beyond Beas because of the resistance of his own soldiers, who were eager to go back as they had become weary due to continuous warfare.1 To sum up, Alexander’s invasion did not create any deep political and economic impact on the Indian sub-continent even the archaeological records are very scanty.

1 Singh, Upinder: A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India From Stone Age to the 12th Century, Pearson, New Delhi, 2009, p.274
Interestingly enough the grand narrative of Alexander, created by the literary records became very popular and rather than fading away, the aura of it has been enlivened from generation after generation.

Megasthenes, a near contemporary author of Alexander gives a vivid description of His eastern campaigns in his book called *Indica*. Though the book does not exist as a complete text to refer to but part of it still remains afresh in the writings of other contemporary authors. Arrian’s Anabasis gives a detail account of the Asian campaigns of Alexander and for this he mostly relies on the account left behind by Megasthenes. However, the grand narrative of Alexander which became most popular in medieval India was not the Greek narratives of a great Macedonian emperor but the Persianised Alexander popularly known as *Sikander* or *Iskandar*. This shows how an emperor as a political persona and an empire as a geographical entity are always overpowered by the cultural facets of the same. This is how Alexander no longer remains a political persona but a mythological character decked with super human qualities and in the long run becoming an agent or medium of intercultural dialogue between civilizations and different cultural genres. “As in many Persian texts, including the *Shah Nama* and the *Darab Nama*, the story of Alexander’s birth brings him into the line of Achaemenian kings, and gives him the legitimacy to rule as a king of Persia. In the second aspect, Alexander is identified as *Du’l Qaranayn* (Lord of two Ages), a prophet mentioned in *Quaran.* In the same way *Iskandar Nama*, the only illustrated manuscript of Sultanate Bengal, commissioned by Nusrat Shah in the year 1530-31 also bears the imprints of intercultural relations in medieval South East Asia. Thus, the purpose of my paper is to show that how we can use this illustrated manuscript in understanding the cultural relations in medieval South East Asia. Stylistically, the manuscript has both the influence of Persian and Chinese painting. Apart from these stylistic features, the paper that was used, the colours that illuminated the illustrations, all speaks about the technological development and its diffusion in different parts of Indian sub-continent.

The establishment of Delhi Sultanate after the battle of Tarain in 1192AD was not only a mere dynastic or political change. It had a very deep impact upon the socio cultural and economic aspect of Indian society. Though the sub-continent had come in contact with Islam much before the establishment of the Delhi sultanate it could not penetrate deep into the main land. Ultimately the Islam which came to India by the beginning of the thirteenth century was no longer a religion with certain code of conduct. It was a Persianised version of an Islamicate culture which shook the social base of the caste ridden Indian society and injected a new spirit of equality and fraternity which was altogether very new to the Indian mind set. New towns were established, the social composition and morphology of which were very different from those of the early medieval towns of India which were mostly centered around temples. “The caste cities were changed into cosmopolitan urban centers as their gates were thrown open to all irrespective of birth or creed. For example, low caste artisans appear to have built their huts even in the vicinity of the royal palace. Besides the foundation of new cities and towns, the old towns also underwent demographic change on account of the addition of Muslim colonies. These colonies had Mulini emigrants who were highly urbanised and came from different Muslim lands representing diverse cultural tradition.”

At the same time if we look into the pan Asian politics we notice that the entire balance of power was disrupted in central and west Asia due to the Mongol invasion. In search of political stability and to earn their livelihood people from different walks of life started migrating to the newly established urban centres of Delhi, Multan, Lakhnauti and many more to mention. Influx of large number of people not only helped in changing the demography of the Indian sub-continent, at the same time boosted up the economy with new technologies such as Persian wheel, spinning jenny, ironed tipped plough and many more to mention. Advancement of technology helped in the production of superior quality goods and commodities which on the other hand kept the balance of trade in favour of Indian sub-continent. As per the description given by Mohammad Awfi “the bazaars in the metropolitan cities attracted foreign merchants moving in caravans loaded with choice merchandise from different countries. They also brought both male and female slaves, trained in different arts and crafts, from countries as far as the Byzantine Empire in the West and China in the East.”

Though the metropolitan cities were filled in with different kinds of goods and commodities, the nobility and the ruling class were always lured by the luxurious items which were always priced in the market for its extra ordinary quality. Actually, it was the consumption pattern and the quality of the product which determined the social status of the nobility and a slight deviation from that always questioned the legitimacy of their social power. They established their own manufacturing units known as *karkhanas* which was quite different from what we understand as factory in modern context. These *karkhanas* were mostly attached with the household of the nobility with specialised craftsmen working under the masters known as *ustad*. Specialised products of these *karkhanas* were gold brocades known as *zarbaft* in medieval India. “The Miftahu’l Fuzala defines *zarbaft* as woven cloth that is woven with gold brocades known as *zarbaft* in medieval India. “The Miftahu’l Fuzala defines *zarbaft* as woven cloth that is woven with gold brocades known as *zarbaft* in medieval India...”

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3 Siddiqui, Iqtidar Hussain: *Delhi Sultanate Urbanisation and Social Change*, Viva Books, New Delhi, 2012, p.27
4 Ibid p.40
thread and silk yarn, mixed; it is called zarbaft. Barani (1357) puts ‘varieties of zarbaft cloth’ practically at the head of his list of those fabrics with which common people have nothing to do”. 5 Another exclusive product of these kharkhasas was enamelled glassware which had become quite popular in India and Iran by the beginning of the twelfth century. In 1739 Techchand Bahar informs us that mina means a glassware which is made in an exclusive way to resemble precious stones such as ruby and emerald and “were put on the windows of bath houses, and the minakar was the person who specialised in this craft.”6 Even manufacturing of soap by mixing saline earth and animal fat was also practised in these karkhanas. “Already in Firoz Tughluq’s time, soap making (sabun gari) was one of the important professions on which taxes used to be collected but was now (before 1372) remitted.”7

The karkhanas or the workshops attached with the household of the nobility were mainly run by the slaves, the possession of which was a symbol of royalty. It would be worth mentioning that the concept of slave in medieval India was totally different from that of medieval Europe. The slaves here were mostly skilled craftsmen working in the exclusive royal karkhanas and there by entering into a relation of production that was totally in opposition to the concept of slavery. “Sultan Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316) had as many as 50000 slaves in his establishments; the number reached 180000 under Sultan Firuz Tughluq (1351-88). Firuz Tughluq’s slave included 12000 artisans at the court. Nobles too, had their large retinues of slaves.”8 Along with all these things sultans of Delhi, being upholders and great patronisers of Persian court culture, undoubtedly had their own libraries attached to their household as books, especially the illustrated ones, were considered as luxurious item.

Unfortunately we do not have any information whether the sultans of Delhi or their ruling class maintained an atelier like that of the Mughals. As mentioned above we come across the name of different types of artisans busy with various craft production but there is no mention of an artist or a painter. The only reference of painting we come across from sultante period is during the reign of Firuz Shah Tughluq. It is stated that he ordered “all paintings with human figures erased from his palace and forbade the use of gold and silver vessels for dinner.”9 Though we do not have much reference of artist or painter being commissioned by sultans of Delhi, the regional sultans undoubtedly commissioned them. Moreover, we can also say that the Persian illustrated manuscripts were definitely in circulation.

With the fall of the Delhi Sultanate and the devastation of the city by Timur in 1398AD, Mandu Gujarat and Bengal emerged as important centers of cultural and economic activities. Thus commissioning of illustrated manuscripts especially of Persian origin such as Shah Nama, Hamza Nama became common and in due course gave birth to a new style of painting which can be termed as Indo Persian style of painting. One such example is an illustrated copy of Firdausi’s Shahnameh commissioned at Malwa in 1425-50AD fig.1. The manuscript may have been commissioned by a local ruler or sultan who was well versed in Persian and at the same time maintained a library full of Persian illustrated manuscript which helped in providing artistic models to the indigenous painter. “The specific treatment of armoured soldiers with their caparisoned horses draws directly on Iranian models, as does the depiction of rocky landscape, sky cloud boundaries, and specific icon such as the mythical bird Simurgh. For example routine pictorial building blocks, artist reverted to the tradition in which he was trained, as examples show in the stylization of trees and water and use of the Hindu Jain convention of a red ground, which makes no provision of spatial needs.”10Nimat Nama commissioned at Mandu in 1500-10AD is another example of one such manuscript. Though Persian features are very clear in the illustrations its Indian origin can never be neglected. “The Nimat Nama paintings thus are much more obviously by Indian Painters with Turkman training or under Turkman influence.”11

By the end of the fifteenth century taking advantage of the political turmoil in the province of Bengal Alauddin Hussain Shah led to the establishment of the Hussain Shahi dynasty. “Most of the accounts agree in calling him a born Arab, who, with his father, Sayyid Ashraf, had recently settled in Bengal.”12 There has been a lot of controversy among the contemporary authors and later historians regarding the early life of Hussain Shah and the events which actually helped him in establishing a new dynasty. The establishment of the Hussain Shahi dynasty undoubtedly ushered a period of pluralistic culture in the history of medieval Bengal. Bengali as a language received great impetus from the sultans of Hussain Shahi dynasty. Maladhar Basu was given the title of Gunaraj Khan for his Sri Krishna Vijaya, even Krittibas the author of Bengali Ramayana also belonged to this period. Even in the

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5 Habib, Irfan: Technology In Medieval India c. 650-1750, Aligarh Historian’s Society, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2008, p.46
6 Ibid p. 66
7 Ibid p. 70
9 Chandra, Satish: Medieval India From Sultanat to the Mughals, Delhi Sultanat (1206-1526), Har Anand Publications, New Delhi, 2011, p. 125
10Chandra, Pramod: The Tuti Nama of the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Origins of Mughal Painting, Austria, 1976, p. 47
12 Sarkar, Jadunath ed.: The History of Bengal Muslim Period 1200AD-1757AD, Volume II, Delhi, p. 142
field of architecture, the credit of commissioning some the finest brick structure in the history of medieval Bengal goes to the rulers of this dynasty. The architectural edifices of this period are known mainly for its simplicity and symmetry of its construction. Alauddin Hussain Shah was succeeded by his eldest son Nushrat Shah in the year 1519AD. Though Bengal had to face certain territorial loss during his reign, the cultural activities continued to flourish both in Persian and vernacular. It was also “the period when the spirit of Sufism had permeated through the masses and in spite of Chaitanya movement, the mystic religion had overwhelmed various groups of people in Bengal.”

Though the rulers of Hussain Shahi dynasty patronised both Bengali language and literature and the indigenous culture, Persian culture and language always remained the role model in matters of court etiquette and for maintaining the administrative hierarchy. “A Portuguese mission sent to Nasir al-Din’s court in 1521- the earliest known European mission to Bengal- vividly describes the projection of royal power during his trip to the capital. Ushered into the Sultan’s court, the writer passed by three hundred bare chested soldiers bearing swords and round shields, and the same number of archers, on whose shields were painted golden lions with black claws…the roof adorned with gilded carvings of birds and heavenly bodies, and the ceremonial etiquette before the sultan- all clearly indicate the survival of Persian political symbols at the sultanate’s ritual centre.”

Thus from the above observation we can definitely say that the rulers of Hussain Shahi dynasty commissioned illustrated manuscripts and also maintained a library as it was an integral part of the Persian court culture. Unfortunately, we have only one illustrated manuscript belonging to the Hussain Shahi period i.e. IskandarNama, commissioned by Nushrat Shah in 1531-32AD. In fact, it is the only illustrated manuscript belonging to the entire period of Bengal sultanate. Maintenance of a royal library by the Hussain Shahi rulers can be proved by that fact that in the year 1507-08 a Persian illustrated manuscript was purchased by Alauddin Hussain Shah. According to M R Tarafdar the manuscript was of Yusuf-wa-Zulekha illustrated in 1505. These manuscripts purchased by the rulers for their libraries may have helped in providing artistic model for the indigenous artists. Before delving deep into the stylistic features of the manuscript, it would be better if we try to find out who was or were the artists associated with this royal project.

Ma Huan, the Chinese traveller, who visited Bengal in the fifteenth century mentions that a large number of professional artists were living in the cities of Bengal at that time, especially at Gaur. Unfortunately, we do not have a single specimen of art left behind by them. As M R Tarafdar says, “during the period in question Bengal’s contribution to art, other than literature and architecture, were quite significant.” At the same time we have textual reference of popular artists in the vernacular literature. Under the influence of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his gaudiya vaishnavism, illustrating of proto Bengali and Sanskrit manuscript became very popular in the country sides of Bengal. We are told that “Sri Chaitanya on his way from Ramkeli to Brindawan, found at the village of Kanainatshala, a good number of paintings which had Krishna lila as there theme.” Apart from this Kavikankan in his Chandi Mangal Kavya mentions:

Pot Loiya Phira Nogore Nogore,
Tirkor Hoiya Keho Niramoy Sore.

Thus from these textual references we can understand that popular artists were there in contemporary Bengal and were active in both towns and country side. But the problem is that, from an exclusive royal manuscript like IskandarNama, apart from local artists the presence of a master painter, trained in Persian technique, was very essential. In this case there are two probabilities i.e. artists may have migrated from the Sharqi Court of Jaunpur or else artists may have directly come from Persia.

By the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century Jaunpur had developed as a center of cultural activities under the Sharqi rulers. The Aranyakaparwa (1516AD) one of the earliest dated manuscript of the Chuarapanchasika group of painting was illustrated in the region between Agra and Jaunpur. On the other hand if we look into the political history of the period then we see that Hussain Shah the last Sharqi ruler was completely defeated by Sikandar Lodi in 1494AD and was forced to take shelter in Bengal under Alauddin Hussain Shah. “Hussain Shah used to pay proper attention to the Sharqi ruler’s comfort and happiness until the latter died in complete obscurity at his residence at Kahalgaon in Bhagalpur.” Thus we can say that there may

13 Karim, Abdul: Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (Down to AD 1538), The Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca, 1959, p. 33
15 Ray, Aniruddha: Madhysayuger Bangla Anumanik 1205-1760, Kolkata, 2014
17 Ibid p.295
18 Sen, Sukumar ed.: Kavikankan Mukunda Birchita Chandimangal, Sahityam, Kolkata, 2017, p. 78
have been a possibility of artists migrating from the court of Jaunpur as the situation there was no longer conducive for them to earn their livelihood.

If we take the other presumption into consideration then we have to look into the trading relations of the period. Barbosa found that the coastal region of Bengal was overwhelmingly dominated by Muslim population and most of them were associated with trade and commerce. “Attracted by the largeness, wealth and climate of the city of Bengala; large number of Arab, Persian and Abyssinian and Indian merchants arrived there.” Varthema refers to the “richest merchants of the city of ‘Banghella’ together with its cotton and silk stuffs which used to go through all Turkey, through Syria, through Persia, through Arabia…and through all of India.”

One of the prominent features of the economic life of Bengal was trade in Eunuchs and slaves, which actually eluded all these motifs of floral scroll may have derived from China. As Asok Kumar Srivastava says, “Chinese painting left permanent traces on Persian painting. The flame has had clearly gone a metamorphosis, as can be seen in the Shiraz style clouded sky, which is shot through with bright Indian colours.”

Coming to the stylistic feature we can definitely say that the illustrations were influenced by the paintings of contemporary Persian style. The manuscript was copied by Ahmad known as Hamid Khan for Nushrat Shah but nothing is known particularly about the artist. The scribe while dedicating the manuscript to the sultan writes This has been copied by the order of His Majesty, the Sultan who is the protector of both the universe and the religion, Sultan Abul Mujafar Nushrat Shah, son of Alauddin Hussain Shah. May Lord/Allah protect his empire and give him the power to rule for ever and ever. May all his descendants live a healthy life. These words of prayer are being written by Mohammad’s son Ahmad, whose name is Hamid Khan, sultan’s most unworthy servant. Dated 938AH or 1531-32AD. “The basic style is that of mid-fifteenth century Shiraz, with certain elements such as rock formations are suggestive of fourteenth century Iranian painting.” The type of horses, round faces of women with long hanging braids are not very similar to the contemporary paintings of Persia. The most unique features of these paintings are the long pointed caps wrapped in turban clothes are much close to the Safavids baton turbans. As John Guy says, “here Iranian paintings convention had clearly gone a metamorphosis, as can be seen in the Shiraz style clouded sky, which is shot through with bright Indian colours.”

**Fig.3 Rawshank daughter of Daryush is brought before Iskandar.** Though the influence of Persian painting, especially Shiraz style, is very clear at the same time certain indigenous elements are quite prominent. The major portion of the painting is dominated by an architectural edifice, under which Iskandar himself is placed in a peculiar posture which is neither common in indigenous painting nor in Persian painting. Costumes are totally influenced by the Persian style on the other hand the rounded faces of the women are not at par with the Persian conventions. The movement is controlled and the facial expression of Rawshanak is quite clear. It seems she is blushed with shame and love on being brought before Iskandar. The cusped arch of the architectural edifice with two floral motifs reminds us of the sultanate architecture of Bengal. The chala styled eave supported by brackets and the designs of the chala are totally influenced by the huts of Bengal, the structure and designs of which are even followed to this day. The carpet like design on top of the architectural edifice is a direct influence of the Persian painting. Probably these motifs of floral scroll may have migrated from China. As Asok Kumar Srivastava says, “Chinese painting left permanent traces on Persian painting. The flame halo, fantastic dragons, other animal and bird forms of an imaginative character, Tai or cloud form etc. observable in Persian painting are derived from China.”

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20 Ibid p.140  
21 Varthema; *The Travels of Ludovica Di Varthema*, p. 212  
24 Ratanabali, Chatterjee: *Madhyayug Bangali Shilpi in Madhyayug Bharat Nirman O Pathobhed*, Paschim Banga Itihas Samsad, Kolkata, 2020, p. 78  
26 Guy, John and Jorrit Britschgi ed., *Wonders of the Age Master Painters of India 1100-1900*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2011, p. 34  
reminisce of which is found in the book cover illustrations of the later period Fig. 4. The most interesting part of the painting is the sky with floating clouds which is again a direct influence of the Chinese painting upon the Persian style.

**Fig.5 Iskandar with the Russian king.** In this folio we see Iskandar sitting on an elevated platform with the Russian King on his left hand side. The figures of both the royal persona are larger than life and costume of all the characters present in the painting are influenced by the Persian painting of contemporary Shiraz style except the head dress. The matter has been delineated totally from a bird eyed view point with no use of perspective. Coming to the natural environment, tree in the background is indigenous in nature whereas the pink palette dotted with small shrubs or flowers are of Persian origin. The posture of the Russian king and the men with musical instruments are similar to that of Persian painting while that of Iskandar is quite different.

The similarities and dissimilarities of the *Iskandar Nama* illustrations with the contemporary Persian paintings will become much clear if we can do a comparative study of the Sultanate manuscript with a Persian illustrated manuscript of *Iskandar Nama* (1525AD) now preserved in the museum of Royal Asiatic Society, London. The style of RAS manuscript has slight Shirazi appearance. The paintings are elaborate and have a painstaking detail. **Fig.6** is a folio from that manuscript where we see Iskandar being entertained by Khaqan. Khaqan himself dominates the picture space with Iskandar on his left hand side. The painting depicts the interior of a palace with a gardener attempting to come inside. The picture space is divided into various compartments and no attempt has been made for perspective. Quite interestingly enough, the head dress of Khaqan is exactly similar to that of Iskandar and the Russian king of Fig.5. The backgrounds of the illustrations of the Sultanate manuscript are much similar to the garden outside the palatial complex, whereas the tree is quite different.

**Fig.7 Iskandar sitting with Naushaba.** In this painting again we see Iskandar seated on an elevated platform with Naushaba on his left hand side on a lowered platform. The picture space is compartmentalised and both of them are placed under two separate cusped arches. Blue medallions with floral motifs are reminiscence of contemporary Persian manuscripts. On the other hand blue and white floral scrolls on the cusped arches and blue and white geometric designs on the bottom of the picture space are quite similar to that of blue and white porcelains of Ming China. The terracotta brick wall on the right hand side of Iskandar is the direct influence of the brick structures of Gaur and Pandua. An attempt have been made by the artist to give spatial depth to the painting by placing two horse riders behind a rock but the purpose is not solved as the matter is delineated from a bird eyed view point.

The entire discussion on this illustrated manuscript remains incomplete unless we probe into the supply line of the materials that are used for this artistic production. The foremost ingredient needed for copying a manuscript is paper. With the establishment of Delhi sultanate the technique of paper manufacture was imported from Iran and by thirteenth century it had become common in the regions of Delhi. Amir Khusrau, in1289AD, mentions paper-making as a contemporary craft. 28 Coming to Bengal Ma Huan, the Chinese traveller, in 1432AD noticed a ‘kind of white paper’, which was made ‘from tree bark’ and was ‘glossy and smooth, like deer skin.’ 29 Again J P Losty mentions, “The centres of excellence of paper manufacture were by the sixteenth century producing beautiful papers of thick and durable quality capable of being highly burnished and decorated.” 30 Though Losty does not mention the name of Bengal as a centre of paper manufacture, Mukunda in his Chandimangala, a sixteenth century vernacular text, mentions about a class called kagoji:

*Kagoj Kutiya Naam Bolay Kagoti, Kolondor Hoiya Keho Phire Dibarati.* 31

Thus we can say that if paper making was so popular in rural Bengal by sixteenth century then the capital city of Bengal undoubtedly was a center of paper manufacture. Even if the paper was produced locally, the colours which enlivened the illustrations were probably imported. The Persian blue, pink and mauve were probably brought from Persia as the manuscript was exclusively a royal collection. The unavailability of these colours in the local markets can easily be inferred from its absence in the book cover illustrations of sixteenth and seventeenth century Bengal.

**Conclusion**

An illustrated journey of Alexander/Iskandar or Sikander commissioned by Nushrat Shah in 1531-32AD thus proves how artistic cultures move irrespective of geographical boundary and political relations. The sultan of Bengal, an Arab by origin, was trying to claim legitimacy of his power from the world conqueror, the Macedonian emperor, Alexander the Great. But the Alexander from whom he was claiming his legitimacy was a Persianised version of the Macedonian emperor. In this way Alexander as a personality keeps on moving from generation after generation and keeps on inspiring the imagination of poets, artists and political

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28 Habib, Irfan: *Technology In Medieval India c. 650-1750*, Aligarh Historian’s Society, Tulika Books, New Delhi, 2008, p. 64
31 Sen, Sukumar ed.: *Kavikankan Mukunda Birchita Chandimangal*, Sahityam, Kolkata, 2017, p. 79
persons, in the long run giving birth to many Alexanders or Iskandars. These Iskandars or Alexanders actually proves how art and culture moves or influences geographical entities whose boundaries are never fixed. This illustrated manuscript also proves that the trading activities are not only concerned with the exchange of goods and commodities but also with trans-cultural relations.

Manuscript of this kind actually questions the methodology the parameters through which trading activities are analysed. The illustrations of Iskandar Nama show how a cultural relation was established between the sultans of Bengal and the countries associated with the Indian Ocean trade. Firstly, we can say along with many goods and commodities Persian illustrated manuscripts were brought to the markets of Bengal which provided artistic model to the artists or scribes. Secondly it also proves that the artists were constantly in motion in search of better patron. Thirdly, it informs us about certain commodities which were available in the markets of contemporary Bengal. One such commodity is blue and white porcelain of Ming China. Though the floating clouds in the illustrations were definitely influenced by the Persian paintings, the blue and white scrolls of floral motifs were probably influenced by Chinese porcelain. This can also be corroborated by few porcelain shreds found during the archaeological excavation of Gaur. Last but not the least we can say that this manuscript can be used as a new source in understanding the inter-cultural dialogue and the trading relations of Sultanate Bengal in the Indian Ocean archipelago during the medieval period.

Figures:

Fig.1: Siyavash faces Afrasiyab across the Jihun River, Shahnama manuscript, Malwa, 1425-50, Museum Reitberg, Zurich

Fig.2: Map trade routes of Sultanate Bengal
Fig. 3: Rawshanak, daughter of Daryush, is brought before Iskandar, Iskandarnama, Bengal, probably Gaur, 1531-1532, British Library, London, MS Or. 13836
Fig. 4: Book cover illustration probably of a Ramayana manuscript, early 17th century. Yogesh Chandra Purakirti Bhawan, Bishnupur, P.C. Satyaki Dutta, EFLU, Hyderabad

Fig. 5: Iskandar with the Russian king, Iskandar Nama, Bengal, probably Gaur, 1531-1532, British Library, London
Fig. 6: Iskandar entertained by Khaqan, Nizami: Iskandar Nama, 1525, Royal Asiatic Society, London, P.C. Swati Biswas, Assistant Professor, IHC, CU
Fig. 7: Iskandar sitting with Naushaba, Iskandar Nama, Bengal, probably Gaur, 1531-1532, British Library, London