

Introduction

Since Independence my parents had migrated to India and roamed the different parts of the newly created West Bengal and ultimately settled in Raiganj, now the district headquarters of North Dinajpur, West Bengal. The town, then a tiny one, is now gradually becoming important as a commercial and political centre. A lot of building activities is taking place in Karnajora and the town is slowly moving towards north.

My interest in this study of the archaeological materials of the district developed with the frequent discovery of antiquities from the town itself and the adjacent areas. Since boyhood days I have heard of discoveries of antiquities by the local people while digging ponds. As a school boy I did have the opportunity or permission to see and visit these icons. While conducting my exploration in recent times I have enquired about these discoveries and found no suitable answer from the authority or local inhabitants from where the images had been found. The disappearance of rich heritage of the district and the negligence of the authority to preserve the antiquities gave me a grave shock. Therefore, later on, as a student of early medieval history of India, I always desired to bring into the notice of the scholarly world the hitherto unnoticed invaluable antiquities from the area, and hereby appeal to both district and state authorities to take necessary action for the preservation of these items.

I was very much impressed by G.S. Sardesai's account. A couple of decades ago he wrote, "...just as Indian politics of the future can no longer remain isolated or confined to each communal unit, so the history of Indian nation of the future is going to be a united whole in which individual units will merge themselves. Such a history has to take note of the strong and weak points, of the services and disservices of every separate community, creed or caste and has to mould them into a solid unity, in which all can take pride and which will supply to all important and useful lesson derived from past experience"¹

My interest in local history developed this way. For the last few years I have been traversing the district from one corner to the other hunting the interior areas hitherto untapped by the historians and sought for archaeological remains.

I have tried to collect as much evidence as possible from the various sites. However, inspite of my best efforts to cover all, I might have missed a few unknowingly.

Throughout my survey, I have limited my search mainly on the early periods of history. The evidence is mainly from surface and chance discoveries of antiquities. It may be mentioned here that no excavation was ever been undertaken in any site of the district. Though the district has a glorious past and is very rich in archaeological remains carry imprints of the past. The places of historical interest are not rare. Mention may be made of Asuragarh, Sonapur, and Amavati etc. Artefacts have been found from different places of the district. Local people having deep interest in history and its culture strove their best in publishing articles in little magazines and local newspapers to draw the attention of the concerned higher authority. Several articles have been published in Uttarbanga Sambad, a leading local newspaper of North Bengal.

The potential of rich archaeological treasures was also never mentioned in any monumental works of the history of Bengal, e.g. The History of Bengal vol.I 1943, Dynastic History of Bengal, by A.M. Chowdhury, Political Centers and cultural Regions of Early Bengal by Morrison or even scholars like D.C. Sircar remained silent in his Pala-Sena Yuger Vamsanucharita. More interesting is that the district of Dinajpur, in pre-independence years has produced enthusiastic scholars like A. K. Maitreya, R. P. Chanda, K. C. Sarkar, R. D. Banerjee — so and so forth, who devoted their whole energy and attention to the region known as *Varendra*.

Varendra, according to early texts like Ramacharita and accounts of Yuan Chwang, was the land bounded by the Ganga in the west and Karotoya in the east. If we translate the description into modern geographic terms, the districts of Malda, the heartland of South and North Dinajpur, parts of Jalpaiguri district in the state of West Bengal and Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra of the present day Bangladesh formed the ancient *Pundravardhana*. Though much archaeological research had been conducted in the above mentioned districts of undivided Bengal, the present area of North Dinajpur, almost was never touched. The district of South Dinajpur however, was more fortunate. The University of Calcutta had

conducted excavation at the site of ancient *Kotivarsa* or *Devikota*. Recently another site of *Varendrabhumi* i.e. the site of Jagjibanpur, Malda has been excavated. Several explorations were conducted in the districts of old Dinajpur and old Malda. But our district remained outside the purview of any serious academic pursuit. Under this circumstances, I have taken up field survey under the careful supervision of my teacher Dr. M. Bhattacharya, Department of History, North Bengal University.

Before taking up the task I have gone through the official survey reports of the region conducted by Buchanan Hamilton, Martin's Eastern India, S. K. Saraswati's Note on two towns in the district of Malda and Dinajpur, Notes on the Archaeology of Malda and West Dinajpur by Dilip Chakraborty and R. K. Chattopadhyay and the Exploration Report conducted by a team of North Bengal University Museum, led by Dr. M. Bhattacharya.

I went around the villages covered by each police station. In the first chapter I have presented the physical and geographical condition of the district. Therefore, while conducting the survey I have taken much care about its topography and geography. The second chapter deals with the history of the region from early times upto the end of the Mughal period. However, the evidence of pre-Sultanate Bengal is more in number. Barring one or two early examples, most of the evidence is from the post-*Gupta* periods and the *Pala-Sena* period. A few mosques and structures remain within the Sultanate and Mughul periods of history. In the third chapter, which is the main thrust of my research, I have arranged the villages according to their *Thana* affiliation. This is the starting point of my survey. This chapter constitutes the biggest of all the chapters. I have taken much effort to record the objects and sites and photographs were taken of these objects. I have tried to portray their pictures and the photographs would bear the testimony of my long journey. I have discovered about 25 sites with important antiques and 11 villages as sites with mounds and mound like higher land. Most of these are published for the first time with as much details as possible.

In the last or final chapter I have tried to put up some brave points as conclusion of my thesis. The region that was covered by the study shows centres

with pronounced Brahmanical religious affiliation. However, an excavation in the sites shall prove whether these mounds were of Brahmanical or Buddhist origin. But a list of the evidence indicates a Brahmanical affiliation. Buddhist images are few in number. The other thing that has been mentioned is the area of each site or mound. Here we may remember that the huge mounds at Paharpur and Maynamati, display lavish patronage from probably the rulers. The recently excavated site of Jagjivanpur in Malda is comparatively small. The city site of Mahasthangarh, near Bogra, Bangladesh has an impressive mound which was probably because of its long and continuous occupation, practically from the 3rd century B.C. the city remained occupied upto the end of the *Pala-Sena* rule. The Buddhist stupas or *Viharas* no doubt attracted the preference of royal grants whereas the Brahmanical centres thrived on the local patronage until the arrival of the *Senas*. The *Senas* did not remain in power for more than few years and their attention was never diverted to build lofty temples. The Sena inscriptions, except the Deopara inscription of Vijayasena, hardly express any pompous claims for building gigantic Brahmanical settlements.

The religious centres of Siva, Visnu or Sakti never attained the same status of a Buddhist monastery in terms of area especially in Bengal. Therefore, the sites with rich Brahmanical heritage do not cover an area with an impressive mound barring one or two sites. The same is applicable in the present situation. The mound at Sonapur had been systematically vandalised by the local residents. The entire village has procured bricks from the *dhams* (mounds) as the local people call it. The evidence collected from the region points to a centre with Brahmanical bias. The village as a whole can not be compared with either the mounds at Maynamati or Paharpur. At best it may be compared with Khana Mihirer Dhipi at Berachampa in the South Bengal. The other sites like that of Porsa and Patagara, Asuragarh, Kamalabari etc. give us similar impression. I have tried to put up the material together and recorded my observation in the last chapter of my thesis.

Finally, I must say that the Bibliography of my thesis is comparatively short. My work was basically on the primary exploration data. As this area had not attracted the attention of many scholars, I could not gather my sources from

reports or even Gazetteers. Only a few had mentioned the region. I have added an archaeological map to show the rich cultural heritage mainly of the early medieval period. Only a few remains of the medieval period exist in the region. Unfortunately these are also in a ruinous condition.

Lastly, in course of my survey I have tried to bring into the notice of the scholarly world the rich material preserved in the region which in a way shows the extent of the zone of cultural influence during the early medieval period.

Antiquities in the Police Stations

It is a strange coincidence that almost all the police stations of the district preserve the finest iconographic specimens. These were either collected by the police or rescued from illegal antique dealers. Four police stations top the list, the Raiganj, the Itahar, the Karandighi and Islampur. The haul is highest at the district headquarters, at Raiganj. Other police stations also contain a few antiquities. The areas around the above mentioned four police stations are the basic hinterland for the illegal traders. As the store houses of these stations were not meant for this sort of objects, they are particularly dumped in inadequate space. It is extremely difficult to see and observe the images. The space provided for the store rooms is not sufficient. In some of the stations, the religious feelings of the administration is reflected in the setting of temples for the ancient pieces. In these places these antiquities are being worshipped.

As the police department comes under the state authority, the Department of Archaeology, Government of West Bengal is only authorised to transfer or take charge of these objects. So far, the department has not shown any interest in these areas. The district of Malda and South Dinajpur have somehow emerged afresh in the map of archaeology. Private collectors, interested individuals have set up some abodes for these antiquities e.g. the Balurghat College Museum.

the small collection at Islampur High School. But the antiquities lie neglected and ignored among the various other stolen articles. The Customs Department, a part of the Central government has managed to move the Archaeological Survey of India. The Survey officials have taken interest in the antiquities from the store houses of the Customs Departments. The Archaeological Survey of India is planning to set up a museum at their acquired Cooch Bihar Raj Palace for these recovered articles. But as these are taken away from the place of their origin, the scholars in future shall find it extremely difficult to place them according to their historical chronology.