

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Early History of Dinajpur*

The general trend in history so far was to focus on the main events of the state and to compile a recorded history of the nation. Obviously, in such a trend the side events or local or regional events are sometimes ignored, as many learned writers do not find any relevance of those local events with regional happenings. But those neglected events in many cases are very valuable for local and regional history. Therefore a systematic record and study of local history deserves the attention.

There are distinctive geographical zones in Northern West Bengal where peoples of Bengal first set up, settlements. The first one from west of Karotoya to the river Kosi - the land known as *Pundravardhana* and *Mahasthangad* was the principal political centre of the area. The history of Mahasthangad is as old as 3rd century B.C.

The discovery of Mahasthangarh inscription has more or less affirmed the fact that *Pundravardhana* as early as 3rd century B.C. was under the rule of the Mauryas. The area of *Pundravardhana* has been defined both by Yuan Chwang (7th Century) and Sandhyakaranandi (12th Century A.D.). According to these, it was the land between the Ganga on the west and Karotoya on the east. According to the Chinese pilgrim, he had crossed the Karotoya and entered the Kingdom of Kamarupa.<sup>6</sup> The river Karotoya and the Ganga had changed their courses several times in history. Whatever may be the changes, the present district of North Dinajpur, probably formed a part of *Pundravardhana*.

As the political scenario changed from 1205 A.D., *Gauda-Lakhnauti* came into the limelight. The Sultans of Bengal, after securing their position in Gauda-Lakhnauti probably did not pay much attention to the present area. Very little archaeological evidence has been recovered from the present North Dinajpur District. Only some stray information has been gathered e.g. the tomb of Hussain Shah from Mirual about 11 K.M. north of Raiganj. But it formed a part of Mughul Subah of Bengal. Sarkar Tajpur has been placed near by the present area of Bindol. Near here two medieval structures, one at Bindol (locally known as the temple

of *Bhairavi*) and the other at Baliyadighi (discussed in the Baliyadighi section).

The district of Maldah was at the pivot of activities from 1205 A.D. onwards. We have very little information of North Dinajpur at present. However, the presence of Muslim saints, mainly of *chisthia* order and a large number Muslim communities, particularly in Islampur, Chopra divisions show religious activities in full form. How far these were connected with official patronage, we have very little information. However, the grant of *Shah Shuja* to the saint at Baliyadighi<sup>7</sup> and some such stray information is also available from elsewhere.\*

The eastern part of North Bengal i.e., the land between the Tista or Mahananda - Korotoya and Brahmaputra had been under the control of Kamarupa. Therefore, its events are not enlisted in the mainstream of the history of Bengal.

The history of the district of Dinajpur has a long antiquity. During the Vedic period the tract most probably remained outside the pale of Aryan Civilization. According to the *Baudhayana Dharmasuta*, any one visiting Pundra had to go through a purificatory ceremony to expiate their sins after their sojourn in an unorthodox country.<sup>9</sup> It later formed a part of *Varendra* or *Barind*. It was intimately connected from the earliest ages with Mithila, Magadha and Kalinga. One of the political centres of early Bengal was the famous *Pundravardhana*. Ruins of the ancient city of Mahasthan lay near Bogra town of Bangladesh. The region has been well known for its rich finds of *Pala-Sena* evidence and sculptures. The text of Sandhyakar nandi, Ramacharita locates *Pundravardhana* between the rivers Ganges and Karotoya. The author eulogised Varendra as the crest jewel of the earth"<sup>10</sup> According to *Tabaqat - i- Nasiri* by Minhaj-ud-din Siraj, Barind was a wing of *Lakhnauti*<sup>11</sup>.

Besides the literary sources, the archaeological sources also point towards a place called Purdravardhana. It is mentioned in the *Talcher Grant* of *Gayatungadeva*<sup>12</sup>, the *Silimpur inscription*,<sup>13</sup> *Tarpandighi*<sup>14</sup> and *Madhainagar inscriptions*<sup>15</sup>. The archaeological excavation at Bangarh also took its history back to the 3rd Century B.C<sup>16</sup>.

*Varendra* is a country which is identical with *Pundra*. The name *Pundra* occurs in variant forms in ancient India's literature, in *Aitareya Brahmana*<sup>17</sup> *Kautilya's Arthasastra*<sup>18</sup>, the *Ramayana*<sup>19</sup> and *Mahabharata*<sup>20</sup>. *Kotivarsa*, another important city of *Pundravardhana* has been identified with Devikot

near Gangarampur in South Dinajpur. Epigraphical records of the Gupta period proved that it was one of the administrative units of the Gupta Empire. In the 7th century A.D. the celebrated Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang had visited *Pundravardhana*.

Since the Sultantate period the area began to obliterate from view and gradually receded to the background. New lights were shown on new places. In stead of *Pundravardhana* and *Kotivarsa*, *Gauda* came into prominence, which is the neighbouring district of the present North Dinajpur. Though far away from the capital (Delhi) some places of the district carry impression of the Mughul rule. During the British rule Dinajpur, both north and south lost its former glory and popularity and its importance become a thing of the past. Apart from those authentic and recorded history, many old tanks and ruined buildings connected with a remote past stand alone and forlorn.

## *Early Explorations*

The study of early history of Bengal has been presented in the monumental work of the *History of Bengal vol.I* edited by R.C. Majumdar as early as 1943. Since then several scholars like D.C. Sircar's *Pala-Sena Juger Vansanacharita* (in Bengali), A.M. Chowdhury's *Dynastic History of Bengal* and many others have substantiated the said volume. In many respects these later scholars have modified and rewritten the early history of Bengal.

On the other hand some attempts were made to explore the forgotten past of different areas. This area was visited by Francis Buchanan Hamilton in the beginning of the 19th century. On the order of the East India Company, Buchanan had undertaken and executed the survey of the districts of eastern Bengal. In course of his survey he had found and examined some places of archaeological interest. This survey was continued and completed by Montgomery Martin in more details in the 30s of the 19th century. Sir Alexander Cunningham could spare only a flying visit to some of the sites of the districts in the last quarter of the 19th century. In 1930s it was visited by Stapleton (1933) and Saraswati (1933).

The first effort to commence a regular exploration was thus left to *Varendra Research Society* (VRS) of Rajshahi in present day Bangladesh. The society was founded in 1910. It undertook the task of exploration in several sites of archaeological potential in the district of Dinajpur. The VRS discovered more than 50 places. Though one-third of the total area explored by VRS were located in undivided Dinajpur, the present North Dinajpur occupies a very little place in it. Out of the seventeen sites of undivided Dinajpur only three are situated in North Dinajpur. The VRS on the other hand had concentrated its attention just to explore the mounds.

In the last decade of the 20th century (West) Dinajpur again attracted the attention of some eminent scholars. Dr. Dilip Chakravarty and R.K. Chattopadhyay had undertaken a tour of four weeks in 1997 with the help of a grant from the Society for South Asian Studies. Both the scholars found pleasure and interest in the district of Malda and West Dinajpur. In West Dinajpur the places visited by these scholars are mostly situated in the South.

Recently, the Museum of the North Bengal University launched an

exploration programme in different parts of the district. The team comprised of seven students of the Department of History and the Technical assistant, was led by Dr. Mandira Bhattacharya, Department of History, North Bengal University. During its tour of four days in January 1998, the team visited a few well known places of the district.

A broad survey of the reports presented by scholars who had visited the land of North Dinajpur demonstrate that most of them remain virgin to be rediscovered. Consequently, southern parts of Dinajpur which is famous for its chequered antiquity, drew the attention of the scholarly world. No serious attempt was made to pinpoint the sites of northern part of Dinajpur. I, therefore, devoted my attention to North Dinajpur to bring into limelight those places unknown to the readers, but archaeologically very significant.

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