

## Chapter - IV

### *Conclusion*

Now we have reached to the last stage of the paper where, as I mentioned, I shall draw certain brave conclusions. But before entering into this territory I must present the problems that I face in drawing inferences. Unlike other parts of *Varendra* this area is unexcavated and even unexplored. In case of (Bangarh) South Dinajpur, Bogra (Mahasthan) and Malda (Jagjivanpur) the mounds have been dug out which made scholarly world to reach at concrete conclusion, to find out the existence and nonexistence of civilization, the nature of culture etc. which provide new light on their history. But this part of *Varendra* (North Dinajpur district) have had no such opportunity and our scope is, therefore, limited.

In spite of these hurdles, I attempted to present some logical conclusions. The district under our purview must have been within the periphery of the Pala empire and even under the Guptas. The huge number of icons mostly made of black stone have distinct characteristic feature of the Pala art. The area is not far away from Bangarh and Mahasthan, the two urban settlements of *Varendra*. No other urban settlements have been identified so far save those two places. But it does not mean the nonexistence of other urban areas. It seems, therefore, that there were more urban or suburban areas in the district. The black stone used for constructing those icons must have been brought from Rajmal hills of Bihar. Its proximity to Rajmahal leaves no room for doubt that these images were brought to or made somewhere in North Dinajpur either in Islampur, or Amavati or Sonapur or Tenahari.

Moreover, discovery of large number of images mostly, Hindu deities seems to suggest that it was an important centre of Brahmenical culture. Finding of non-Vaishnavite images along with Vaishnavite images also point to the coexistence of several sects, pointing to the religious harmony of the people and above all religious tolerance of the ruling authority. The Palas, though Buddhist, were not bigots, but rather tolerant to other religions. They granted aids to the Buddhist *Viharas* (monasteries) and Brahmanical temples. The recent excavation at Jagjivanpur in Malda resulted in the discovery of a new Buddhist monastery.

Now, Prof. B.D. Chattopadhyaya<sup>1</sup> and B.M. Morrison,<sup>2</sup> even earlier, have thoughtfully identified the urban and political centres of Early Bengal. For the region called *Varendra*, the political centres were *Pundranagari*, *Kotivarsa* and *Panchanagari*. The two cities of *Pundranagara* and *Kotivarsa* have been identified with Mahasthan in Bogra district of Bangladesh and Bangarh in the present district of South Dinajpur of West Bengal, while the site of *Panchanagari* has only been tentatively identified. The identification of *Kotivarsa* with Bangarh has been substantiated by the excavation conducted by K.G. Goswami at the site.<sup>3</sup> The other city of *Lakanauti* have been situated with the present day ruins of Gaur at Maldah.<sup>4</sup> D.C. Sircar has already remarked that the city of *Gauda* or Gaur had developed with the rise of the *Pala* kings<sup>5</sup> about the 7th century A.D., while the urban centre of *Kotivarsa* had already developed.

But the region covered by this survey has never before been placed in the archaeological map of ancient Bengal. There were reports of stray finds but these too were extremely scanty. This is the most striking feature of the survey. Another important thing to remember is that most of the finds range between the 9th and the 12th century, except an image of the Sun belonging to the post-Gupta times [The *Surya* image from Kukrakunda] The period between the 9th and the 12th century is covered by the *Pala* and *Sena* rule in Bengal. In the above mentioned perspective, the areas around the Raiganj town, the small town of Islampur and the area around Sonapur (Raiganj P.S.) are of considerable interest. The village of Sonapur is particularly interesting. This village has grown on several *dhams* or mounds. A small rivulet surrounds it. The villagers have excavated the mounds and extracted bricks out of these. They have built their houses with the varying sizes of bricks. The village approximately covers an area of 1 - 2 miles. Almost all the houses were built with the bricks upto a height of eight to ten feet. The most surprising thing is that inspite of this random plundering, there are *dhams* still in existence. The villagers could not dig out the site with a *Sivalinga* in situ. Probably it was the wrath of the god that had prevented them from plundering it. When the present writer had visited the area, one of the many *dhams* were being excavated. Alignments of bricks, small rectangular structures were visible. The nature of the structures, i.e. whether these belonged to any religious or secular building is practically impossible to determine. One antiquity unearthed by the locals was a big image of *Visnu*. As

the present writer went around the village several stone architectural pieces lying here and there were witnessed. Some of these were carefully placed by the villagers under an old banyan tree. It is a pity how ignorance and poverty can destroy the valuable evidence of history. This village also carries an ill-reputation of smuggling of antiquities. Older people of the neighbourhood recall the memory of seeing a large number of images brought out by the villagers on special festive occasions. It has been reported that sometimes silver coins were also unearthed. The people of Sonapur have adopted a very aggressive attitude and resist all sorts of enquiries.

The bricks used in constructing the houses of the villagers vary in sizes. [see the sizes of the bricks on Sonapur]. The sizes of bricks discovered at Jagjivanpur excavation also vary in sizes<sup>6</sup> but they are still within a permissible variation which indicate that the difference probably lays in the moulds used by various suppliers of the bricks, that is several kilns were used to supply to the demand of the monastery. But the variation of sizes is far from permissible at Sonapur. The frequency of sizes 24 x 20.5 - 7cm is the most. This size approximates the brick sizes at Jagjivanpur. The monastery at Jagjivanpur has been placed at the early medieval period, approximately to the 9th century A.D. as King Mahendra Pala has been tentatively fixed to the sametime. The use of bricks with different sizes at Sonapur probably indicate different periods of construction. So the site was probably continuously occupied over the years. The other village of Kukrakunda, is situated on the outskirts of Sonapur. Here three Brahmanical images of *Visnu*, *Ganga* and *Surya* and a Buddhist *Bodhisathva Padmapani* have been unearthed. The owner of the images (Mr. Bhanu Bose) claims that these were found while his predecessors were excavating the pond in his house. Three of the images, (*Visnu*, *Ganga* and *Bodhisttva Padmapani*) may be dated between the 10th and the 11th century art pieces belonging to the *Pala-Sena* school of sculpture. But the image of the Sun, made in grey sand stone has a pronounced post-*Gupta* and Pre *Pala* style of execution.

It is unlikely that all the images were procured from the same pond. But the images were no doubt found from around the same area which is extremely fertile for antiquities. The image of *Ganga* from Kukrakunda has almost a partner in the image of *Yamuna* preserved in the Raiganj P.S. These two images probably adorned some doorway of a temple. But independent worship of the deities is

not unknown. There still exists in the same region a festival to perform the worship of *Ganga* <sup>7</sup> There could be some temple which had the images either installed in them or had adorned the doorways. The large images found in and around the area and the pieces of broken or damaged pillars at Sonapur indicate probably the existence of temples and a settlement area around.

It may be mentioned here that the present temple at Hasua, is the home of a number of images. The biggest is that of *Svaminatha* belonging probably to the 11th / 12th century A.D. There are other smaller images, a dancing *Ganesa*, the snake goddess. *Manasa*, a few small stone *Visnupattas* etc. Along with these there are also smaller metal images. All these may be dated in between the 9th and the 12th centuries A.D. These according to M. Bhattacharya, <sup>8</sup> were probably collected from around and housed in the present temple. In the temple ground there are two *Siva deuls* belonging to the 16th century. The area seems to have a continuous religious tradition. The site of Sonapur is about 12 miles from Hasua. It is but logical to surmise that this region within a radius of 15-20 Km. was occupied by people for whom the images were meant. But the nature of the settlement remains uncertain at the present state of our information. It is extremely unfortunate that the mounds at Sonapur are being continuously and systematically plundered. There will probably be nothing left for the excavators to dig in future. The images discovered within this area are basically Brahmanical. Only one Buddhist image [*Buddhisattva Padmapani* from Kukrakunda] was found in situ. The images of *Visnu* however out number the others. Therefore, it seems that *Vaisavism*, *Saivism* and Buddhism coexisted in the region. Thus, from the evidence, it shows a community of mixed religious faith were living together.

The large number of images now preserved in the Raiganj P.S. also speak of diverse religious practices - *Saiva*, *Vaisnava*, *Bauddha* and *Sakta*.

We may turn our attention to the other site of Tenahari, about 8 km. from the Raiganj town. The gigantic images of *Visnu* in situ and the mounds with scattered brickbats indicate probably a temple site which probably served a smaller settlement area. The name of the town of Raiganj often appears in the local news papers for the discovery of antiquities. The town is situated on the banks of the river Kulik. The town has a fame for business and trade. It seems that the temple serving the locality was situated at Tenahari. The construct that

it was a temple site is confirmed by the evidence of the 'octagonal pillar now preserved in the verandah of the present temple. When, M. Bhattacharya, in 1992 had visited the site, she saw five images of the *Visnu*. Two of these were later stolen but one of them was fortunately recovered by the police. It seems that the antique hunters are hyperactive in this district.

The other settlement area with mounds and antiquities was the region around Islampur P.S. Patagora, about 8 km. east to the town has a flat mound spread over a considerable area. The villagers are constantly flattening the mound, throwing away bricks and clearing the area for agriculture. M. Bhattacharya had also visited the site in 1991 and collected some stray bricks measuring 9" x 6½ - 2". She had seen a huge *Visnu* image almost next to the now flattened mound in situ. She failed to persuade the villagers to contribute the image to the University Museum (N.B.U.) However her efforts were partially successful when Mr. Fazlur Rahaman, the Technical Assistant of the Museum visited the place. Two gentlemen contributed 2 bronze images, one *Umalingana Murti* and another, a panel of three *Matrika Murtis* to the Museum. They also donated a tiny grey stone *Avalokitesvara* image<sup>10</sup> But the huge *Visnu* image was in course of time stolen and again the police recovered it. [Now the image lies in the Islampur P.S.].

Besides Patagora, Islampur has another site with a small mound called Durgabari which is about 4 km South West of the town. From here the police had rescued three *Visnu* images. The mound is practically littered with bricks and brickbats. Along with this mound, the town of Islampur is also quite interesting from the point of view of archaeology. The school [Islampur Higher Secondary School for Boys] had collected quite a good number of antiquities from its surroundings. The images include that of *Visnu* and *Manasa*. Along with the images a few terracotta decorative bricks, pottery etc. are preserved in the school.<sup>11</sup> Three other images are preserved in the office of the Sub-Divisional officer, Islampur. Only one grey stone Buddha image, preserved here stands against all the other images of black stone from the area. However stylistically the image (Buddha) may be placed between the 9th and the 10th century A.D. Here also we find an area, approximately 10 km in radius with a people catering to different sectarian faiths.

The other region, very fertile with antiquities is the Karandighi P.S. But

this survey failed to identify any recognizable area to determine early settlement. The region has a folk tradition associated with the *Mahabharata* hero *Karna*. Some silver coins are preserved here by a private individual which belonging to the period of the Bengal Sultans.<sup>12</sup>

The police station of Karandighi and Islampur were within the state of Bihar, as has already been mentioned. These were only incorporated within the present state of West Bengal in 1965. However we must remember that Purnea was itself included within Subah Bangala during the time of the Mughals. The majority of the population of Islampur P.S. practice Islam and many even now speak in Urdu/Hindi. The people of Karandighi are almost equally divided into Hindus and Muslims in regard to their religion. Another interesting feature of this region is the existence of quite a number of *Mazars* of *Pirs* or saintly people belonging mainly to the *Chishtiya Silsila*. One such *mazar* and a mosque is situated at Patagora. The caretaker of the *Mazar* has a miniature decorative *Quran* in his possession. This piece has been dated by M. Bhattacharya in the 16th century A.D.<sup>13</sup> These *Pirs* are highly venerated by the local people irrespective of caste or creed. This attitude, if stretched far down the history, it may not be too illogical to explain the conversion of the people in general to Islam.

The district of North Dinajpur was a part of ancient *Varendra* which was probably one of the most old land mass of Bengal. *Varendra* was a highland according to the 11th century text of *Ramacharita*.<sup>14</sup> Earlier the same area was called *Pundra* or *Pundravardhana*. The great Chinese writer *Yuan Chwang* had travelled over the land, crossed the river *Karotoya* and had gone to the country of *Kamarupa*<sup>15</sup>. These writers often mention the richness of the land. Specially *Sandhya karanandi* eulogises the rice, the bamboos and the fruits of the country. The district of undivided Dinajpur was famous for its fine quality of rice called "*Kataribhog* and *Tulaipanji*. In the post partition days (1947), Raiganj has become a centre of *Tulaipanji* market along with Balurghat, the district headquarters of the newly formed South Dinajpur. The land is rich and fertile and thus paddy grows in abundance.

The earliest archaeological record from *Pundravardhana*, is the small *Brahmi* inscription from Mahasthan near Bogra, in the present day Bangladesh. Excavations were conducted at the site over and over again. The site shows a continuous sequence from the 3rd century B.C. - through the Gupta, Pala and

Sena periods of Bengal History. i.e. upto the 13th century. Almost similar cultural sequence has been established by K.G. Goswami from Bangarh. <sup>16</sup> A set of six copper plate inscriptions were discovered from the old Dinajpur, districts. These were Gupta CP inscription or land grants to Brahmanas<sup>17</sup> This area with a large number of *Brahmana* settlements are heard of even in the 10th century South Indian Kollgallu inscription (967 A.D.) and Kudatini inscriptions<sup>18</sup> (971 A.D.) D.C. Sircar has identified the area called *Pahuni Yojana* of earlier inscriptions with the village of *Sravasti* of later dates. He has further identified the same with the present day Hill, Balurghat region of South Dinajpur. <sup>19</sup>

But unfortunately, it is impossible to identify the regions surveyed with any known inscription. Only an excavation may determine the character of the sites. At this stage we may argue that the area of settlement expanded between the 9th to the 12th century A.D. <sup>20</sup> Therefore at least from the 9th century A.D. there developed several settlements along the fertile land beyond the radiating centre of *Kotivarsa*. This probably extended further right into the foothills of the present day Darjeeling district. We may mention here the two images, one of *Visnu* and the other of *Mahisamardini Durga* along with some votive terracotta pieces<sup>21</sup> were discovered from a place called Ghoshpukur about 25 km from the town of Siliguri. Ghoshpukur is roughly about 30 km to the east of Islampur town. However this survey has limited itself to the district of Uttar Dinajpur only. The existence of the mounds at Sonapur, Porsha, Tajpur, Patagora etc. may be excavated to determine the nature of the sites. These sites are quite impressive to look at. We are however most unfortunate that not a single copper plate has been unearthed from this district. It may be remembered here that how the chance discovery of the *Pala* copper plate from Jagjibanpur, Malda, has changed the course of Bengal history. No such inscription was found in this district, though there are several one line inscription on several pedestals of images.

The nature of the *Brahmana* settlements were changing is evident from inscriptions discovered elsewhere. D.C. Sircar has pointed out that the two South Indian inscriptions already mentioned that some of the *Brahmanas* from *Sravasti* region were migrating to the south because of their inauspicious association with a large number of *Karmakaras* living in the vicinity.<sup>22</sup> The *Karmakaras* provided the villagers their tools of agriculture and domestic purposes. This probably indicate a rise in demand for the implements as well as in the number

of people. The evidence from Sonapur clearly show that builders (masons), brick makers, potters, stone cutters, carpenters, sculptors, priests were functioning almost in unison. The fertile area around, with an abundance of rainfall sustained the settlements and probably even supplied the necessary surplus to maintain it. However, it is practically impossible to identify Sonapur as an urban, semi-urban or a religious centre. *Kotivarsa* still remains the only identified point of reference. But the evidence at least clears the fact that the settlements expanded from the 9th to the 12th century A.D.

The other factor that also emerges from the survey is that the religious bias of the people centred round *Visnu*. Out of the many icons, *Visnu* icons were mostly favoured. They are about 27 in number and many are huge in comparison to others. The largest comes from Patharghata, in Patirajpur, Itahar P.S. It has a three hooded snake above its head. Snake hooded *Visnu* images are rare but had ben already reported from Surohor, the old Dinajpur district.<sup>23</sup> The former has 3 hoods while the latter has 7. The other big *Visnu* images come from Hasua, Tenahari, Islampur, Patagora etc. These are probably dated between the 9th and the 12th country A.d. There are *Visnupatta*, various *Avatara* images (*Nrisimha*, *Vamana*, *Varaha*, *Kalki*) and the *Avatara* panel set beautifully around the huge *Visnu* image at Tenahari. A very special pedestal set under the *Vamana Avatara* at Hasua and almost a similar one at Karandighi Police Station may also be mentioned here. If we compare the antiquities preserved in the State Museum of Malda another striking thing is noticed. The number of *Surya* images, about 27 according to the Catalogue,<sup>25</sup> are in contrast to this adjoining region of North Dinajpur. The images of the Sun were collected from all over the district of Malda. Malda on the North eastern side has a common border with North Dinajpur. However in spite of their congruity the images of the Sun were not in demand. *Visnu* images reigned supreme in this district of North Dinajpur.

During the times of the Bengal Sultans and the Mughals, this area was included within the *Sarkar* Tajpur. At present only a few structures remain in a most deplorable condition, one structure belonging to the 15th century at Bindol<sup>26</sup> and the other of Baliadighi<sup>27</sup> belonging to the 17th century. The latter, commonly known as the *Jelkhana* among the common people was probably secular in nature. It has serpentine passage ways, lowlying ceilings and parts of a wooden frame to hold the upper storey The place is also associated with a "*Pir*" whose *mazar*

and a mosque lay attached to it. If there were other structures, they have disappeared because of the dampy atmosphere of the region. There probably was a medieval structure at Kamalabari Hat, Raiganj P.s. The local mosque of *Garibullah Thakapors* has ten domes above it. In side the mosque there are terracotta panels with designs. Some of the the local residents believe that the mosque was built during the time of *Shahjahan* in the 17th century,<sup>28</sup> This survey has also detected a medieval temple site at Karnajora, Raiganj. Several terracotta panels with human figures, birds and animals etc. are now preserved by an individual near the local school. Because of its decorative nature it is logical to assume that these probably decorated some Hindu structure or a temple as Islamic tradition does not usually approve of human figures as decorative motifs. This structure has disappeared totally

A broad survey of the political history of the district offers one interesting similarity : The ruling classes had come into conflict with Muslim divines. "The lead in this move was taken by the Islamic theologians and the vast horde of unruly and ambitlous disciples of the Shaikhs and Muslim monks, whose wealth and power had lately begun to overshadow the civil power."<sup>29</sup>

The story of Tajbaj in Tajpur village (as described in Tajpur Section), the building of a mosque on the ruin of a non-muslim place and the establishment of another mazar in Baliyadighi near Bindol (described in Baiyadighi section) are associated with the story of darbash and his clash with the king Bali refer to struggles between the Pir and the local Kings and the final victory of the Pir. However, the antagonism originally mentioned soon changes into a deep respect to the Pir by the local residents. At present the people of all sects of religion pay homage to these saintly men and gather there on special festive occasions.

Lastly a few lines may be devoted to the styles of making these images. On the whole many of the images show a tendency to emerge out of the stela. The tree-foil design is only sketched like a line on the top of the stela in the beginning. This line becomes deeper in the later images. Soon it takes the shape of a doorway, as in the case of *Vamana* Avatara, at Hasua. The "Trilobati" design as mentioned by S. Huntington,<sup>30</sup> stands almost separated form the image. The effect is astounding. The broad eyed god stands erect below a gateway. The image becomes as if resides in an unique temple witnessed by his associates.