

C h a p t e r VAspects of Social and Economic life of the people of BengalSECTION IEthnological background

Bengal was inhabited in the primitive times by checkered groups of people of diverse racial groups, of different types of culture and a long time passed before they came into contact with the Aryans. In order to have a clear idea about the social condition of the people of Bengal, it is invariably necessary to discuss briefly the ethnological back ground of the people of Bengal.

According to the anthropologists, the original inhabitants of Bengal did not belong to the Aryan stock and they have been represented now by the Primitive tribes like the Kolas, Sabaras, Pulindas Hādi, Dom, Chandāla etc. They have been referred to as the Nishādas in the Vedic literature, though some of the scholars have termed them as Austric or Austro - Asiatic. Subsequently two different groups of people settled in Bengal and their language was Dravidian and Tibeto - Burman. A new group of people subse-

quently conquered the land and dominated over all these early settlers. These new groups of people are the forefathers of the high class Hindus of Bengal. The Nishādas over whom the new group of people dominated 'formed the substratum of the population of Bengal and were submerged by new waves of people with a high culture and civilization, so that ultimately they touched only the outer fringe of of society, while the latter formed the basis and foundation¹. The ethnic composition of this new group of people is a matter of immense importance in the study of the social condition of Bengal.

Prof. Mahalanobis has enquired into the subject with the help of anthropometric data regarding seven castes of Bengal². Though his analysis has some limitation as he could take into account only a limited number of castes of Bengal, yet his discussion throws important light on the racial characteristic of the people of Bengal. One of the important informations is that there is closer similarity between the Brāhmanas and other castes of Bengal than that exists among the Brāhmanas of other states. It proves that the people of Bengal formed a distinct group and never isolated from one another in the State and they did not strictly

observe the rule of interdining and intermarriage which occurred gradually in Bengal. It is evident from the analysis of Prof. Mahalanobis that the upper class people of Bengal formed a homogeneous group quite different from the people of other parts of India. It may be claimed that the high caste Hindus of Bengal formed a distinct racial group which sustained tittle changes in the historic time by contact with the primitive tribes and the immigrants from upper India. According to Late Rama Prasad Chanda, the anthropometric tests prove that the Brāhmanas of Bengal 'are more closely related to their non-Brāhmana neighbours than to the Brāhmanas of Midland' ³.

According to N.K. Dutta, in the pre-historic times three different races had come to settle in Bengal one after another. First came the Mundas and then came the Dravidian. After then came the Aryan. In Europe we know that the Aryans were of two different types - the long headed in Germany, Scandinavia. England and Italy; and the broad headed in France, Spain, Russia and other slāvonic countries. In Asia also, the long headed type is seen in Northern India, while the broad headed is seen in Iran or Persia. It is supposed that while the main branch of the Aryans of the longheaded type

came to India from Central Asia via Afghanistan and developed in Punjab and U.P. what is known as the Vedic Aryans and the other branch of the Aryans came from Iran probably by way of the sea and settled in Maharashtra and Bengal ⁴.

The inference that the Bengalis 'originally came from an ethnic stock that was different from the stock from which the Vedic Aryans originated 'is made from the comparative study of the shape of the skulls. Sri Herbert Risley has pointed out that the round headed elements which preponderate over all ranks of society in Bengal, may be traced its origin to Dravidian and Mongoloid admixture ⁵. The view has not been accepted by the anthropologists and they pointed out his limitations regarding his classification of Indian races, the method of collecting data and arriving conclusion from them ⁶. Rai Bahadur R.P. Chanda was the first to oppose the theory of Risley and pointed out that the people of Bengal originated from the Homo-Alpine type, 'a very brachy - cephalic population of Aryans or Indo-European speech living in the prehistoric time in the Pamirs and Tāklāmākān desert' ⁷. The above theory is not wholly accepted, as the non-mongolic character of the people of Bengal is now generally agreed. Yet Home-Alpinus origin of the Bengalis is not accepted by all. According Dr. B.S. Guha "The presence of Broad headed skulls

in the early strata of Mahenjo-Daro and Harappa would seem however to militate against this supposition. Recent discoveries have definitely shown the existence of brachycephalic types in South Arabia, of which the 'Omani' displayed Armenoid affinities which according to Keith must have come from Persia and Baluchistan. There seems no reason to think that the Indian Brachy - cephal with definite Armenoid affinities resembling the 'Omani' had a different origin"⁸. On the basis of the analysis of anthropometric data collected by H.C. Chakladar, it may be presumed that there were the existence of a predominant Alpine type and an appreciable Mediterranean elements among the Bengalis ⁹.

So far as Bengal is concerned its racial constitution comprises three distinct elements, Proto-Australoid, Dravidian and Alpine ¹⁰. While the Proto - Australoid and Dravidian elements are to be seen in the lower castes of Bengal, the higher castes reveal a predominantly the broad-headed Alpine racial elements. The preponderant element in the higher castes of Bengal is Alpine whereas in Northern India it is Nordic. Thus the Bengalis are racially different from the people of Northern India. Grierson speaks of the language of the 'outer Aryans' which contributed to the making of such vernacular language of modern India as Gujrati, Marathi, Oriya, Bengali and Assamese. These languages stand

distinguished from Hindi, Rajasthani etc. of upper India which are derived from the language of the Vedic Aryans. The former group of languages are found in only those areas of India where Alpine racial element is found. Rai Bahadur Ramaprasad Chanda identified the outer Aryans with the Alpine race. Mr. Chakladar has pointed out that the outer Aryans came first and originated the early Vedic culture represented in the Samhitās. He also adds that the longheaded branch of the Indo-Europeans drove the more civilized roundheads to the South and East and gradually absorbed Vedic culture of the early settlers ¹¹. If the theory of the Alpine origin is agreed, then it follows that the Indo - Aryan element in the language of Bengal is a contribution of the Alpine race. One special feature of the language of Bengal is that Austric and Dravidian words are more commonly used in it than the Indo-Aryan words. Researches of Przyumski, Bloc Levi, Bagchi, Sten Konow and Chatterjee have all brought them out. According to Mañjusrīmūlakalpa, the people of Bengal spoke a language called Asuri. It is curious that one of the languages of the Mundā (that is Austric) fairly is still known as Asura. Not only the vocabulary but also the phonetics, morphology and syntax were also influenced by it. The influences of it on toponomy has also been accepted and place

names ending with 'rah', 'Guri', 'Jur' are all of non-Aryan origin. The influence of the Austric and Drāvidian speaking people on the material culture of Bengal is also great. The Austric speaking people introduced the art of tilling the soil in Bengal and the fundamental implement used in this connection 'laṅgula' is an Austric word. They also introduced the cultivation of rice, the principal food crop of Bengal ¹². The Austric people also cultivated such other crops as banana, brinjal, lime, betel leaf, coconut, turmeric, betelnuts etc. and the vernacular words for them are said to be of all Austric origin ¹³. Not only the Austric influence, but also there are some Dravidian influence over the people of Bengal. The words like 'Ur', 'Pur' and 'Kut' meaning city are all of Dravidian origin.

One of the specific features of the people of Bengal is that fish is one of the most important items of Bengali diet which is a feature of the Drāvidian and Austric speaking people. Herein also we find a distinct feature of the people of Bengal. Northern Indian Aryans were predominantly meat eating people ¹⁴.

It is not possible to discuss the matter in detail and it is not within the purview of our subject as we are to

discuss the socio-economic status of the people of early Bengal. But one thing should be kept in mind in this connection that the Brāhmanas and the high castes of Bengal were not descended from the Aryan invaders¹⁵.

S e c t i o n II

C A S T E S Y S T E M

The pattern of the social system of reveals striking difference between Bengal and the rest of Northern India. While the rest of Northern India suffered itself to be swamped by the culture of the invading Aryans, the people of Bengal, on the otherhand, maintained their cultural independence upto quite a large period of Indian history. It is learnt from the Vedic literature that the cultural conquest of the Aryans stopped after it reached Vedeha. Beyond Vedeha, the land was said to be in possession of the Prāchyas or Eastermers. The Prāchyas as we have seen, were various tribes such as the Aryans, the Vaṅgas, the Pundras etc. The social organisation of those people was naturally based on tribal system. This in other word implies that the social organisation of the Prāchyas was different from the rigid four caste social system of the Aryans and so long as the

Prāchyas were not Aryanised, this form of social organisation prevailed in Bengal ¹⁶.

Multiplicity of Castes in Bengal

An important feature of social system of Bengal after Aryan contact was the existence of many castes and sub-castes. Though there were originally four Varnas, we find the presence of numerous castes in ancient Indian society and the number of castes are multiplying everyday ¹⁷. Anthropologists think that this multiplicity is due to several factors. Firstly, the rise of various functional groups that acquired hereditary characters and followed the laws of endogamy and exogamy. Secondly, the rise of race castes occasioned by the entrance of tribal groups in the Brāhmanical society. Thirdly, the emergence of sectarian castes and the factor of migration and cross breeding etc. added to their number. The Brāhmanical jurists invented the theory of anuloma and pratiloma sons or Jātis to adjust these factors ¹⁸. Yājñavalkya found the presence of three factors; the occupational castes, the tribal castes and the cross-breeds.

The names and number of the castes and sub-castes varied according to time and localities ¹⁹. It has been found

that the names and position of the castes mentioned in the different smritis were largely influenced by the then conditions. So we shall have to depend upon the text which particularly belongs to Bengal in order to have a clear idea about the caste pattern of Bengal. Bṛihad-dharma Purāṇa and the Brahma - Vaivarta Purāṇa may be regarded as such texts, though we cannot deduce information from them without reservation. Bṛihad-dharma Purāṇa represents the peculiar feature of the social system of Bengal. It has divided the non-Brāhmaṇa people of Bengal into thirty-six castes and all of them are described as the Sūdras. This is an important feature of the caste system of Bengal and it reflects striking difference between the society of Bengal and the society of the rest of North India. It has been described in the text that King Vena, completely sweeping away the rules of Varnāśrama, at his own will created a number of mixed castes by compelling the union of males and females of different castes. Herein lies the difference between the enumeration of the Smritis and the statement of the text regarding the origin of the mixed castes. It has been stated that the different castes of Bengal were not derived from the marriage of males and females of different castes but from the indiscriminate union under the compulsion of the King ²⁰.

The castes derived from the indiscriminate unions may be divided into Uttama, madhyama and adhama Saṅkara with the status of Sūdra.

The names of the different castes and their vocations may be explained as follows : The castes of Uttama Saṅkara are : (1) The Karanas who were good scribes and efficient in office work. They became sat - Sūdras. (2) The Ambasṭhas were to study medicinal sciences and to be physicians. So they were called Vaidyas, (3) The Ugras were to follow the vocation of Kshatriya and practise military arts, (4) The Māgadha was made the courthard and carrier of messages, (5) Tantuvāya - weaver, (6) Gandhavanik dealer in spices, (7) Nāpita-barber, (8) Gopa - writer, (9) Kaṣmakāra-blacksmith, (10) Ḍaulika - dealer in betelnuts, (11) Kumbhakāra potter, (12) Kaṁsakāra - Brazier, (13) Sāṁkhika - Couch - shell worker, (14) Dāsa - Cultivator, (15) Vārajīvi - betel vine growers, (16) Modaka -sweetment maker, (17) Mālākāra - florist, (18) Sūta - (bard or carpenter ?), (19) Rājaputra (Rājputs ?), (20) Tāmbūli - (betal leaf sellers).

2. Madhyama Saṅkara

(21) Takshaṇ (Carpenter), (22) Rajaka (Washerman), (23) Svarṇakāra (goldsmith), (24) Svrṇavanik (trader in bullion)

(25) Ābhīra (cowherd or milkman ?), (26) Tailakāraka (oil man), (27) Dhīvara (fisherman), (28) Śaundika (Vinter), (29) Nata (dancer, acrobat or juggler), (30) Śāvāka, Śāraka (Sarāk ?), (31) Śekhara, (32) Jālika (fisherman).

3. Adhama Saṅkaras

(33) Malegrahi (?) (a branch of Mal caste), (34) Kudava (Korwa boatman ?), (35) Chandāla (Chāṇḍal), (36) Varuḍa (Baroi), (37) Taksha (Carpenter ?), (38) Charmakāra (leather - worker), (39) Ghantajīvi or Ghattajīvi (modern Pātnī caste), (40) Dolāvāhī (Palanquin bearer), (41) Malla (modern Mālo).

In the Brahma - Vaivarta Purāna we come across the classification of different castes and sub-castes. All the castes have been classified into satsūdras and asatsūdras. There is striking similarity between the two purānas regarding the status and the classification of different castes. The castes placed in the Bṛihad dharma Purāna in the list of Uttama Saṅkara have been placed in the list of the satsūdras. The only exceptions are that Māgadha, Gandhavanika, Taulika or Tailika, Dāsa, Bārujīvi and Śūta have been exempted from the list of the Brahmavaivarta Purāna and in lieu of this we find the inclusion of Bhilla, Kūvera and the Vaidyas.

Beside this the Rājaputra of the former work has not been mentioned in the latter. There is close resemblance between the madhyama saṅkara list of the former and the list of the asatsudras. The only difference is that Ābhīra, Naṭa, Sābāka, Sekhara and Jālika of the Brihaddhama purāna have not been given place in the Brahmavaivarta Purāna and we find attālikākāra, Koṭaka, Leta, malla, Charmakāra ^{Paṇḍitaka}, māmsachcheda, Kaivarta, Gaṅgāputra, Yūngi, Āgarī etc. in Asat Sudra group and among them Malla and Charmakāra have been placed in the list of adhama Saṅkara of Brihad dharma purāna. In the Brihaddharma Purāna we find the names of dhivara and Jālika associated with fish trade, but in the Brahmavaivarta Purāna we find the name of one caste Kaivarta who used to maintain fish trade. According to Bhaṭṭa bhavadeva the Kaivartas belonged to adhama saṅkara ²¹.

It appears from the informations furnished by both the Purānas that the workers and the businessmen were not elevated to the rank of Uttama saṅkara. Among them mention may be made of Svarnakāra, Suvarnavanik ^{21 a}, tailakāra, sūtradhara, Suḍi, Takshan, Dhivara - Jālika - Kaivarta, attālikākāra, koṭaka etc. They were all derogated to the rank of madhyama saṅkara. The genesis of this may be sought to the primary dependence of the Bengali society upon

agriculture and cottage industry since 7th - 8th Century A.D. and wage earning labour class was gradually losing the social status and the 'intellectual and agricultural class' were gradually becoming prominent in the Society'²².

Position of the Brāhmanas

The Brāhmanas stood at the top of the social hierarchy. The digests of the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D. contributed to conservation of social pattern²³. These digests and law books give us the impression that the Brāhmanas were the real leaders of the society. Lakṣmīdhara states that the ideal Brāhmaṇa should be devoted to the Vedic studies, chaste, truthful, serene, afraid of sin and he should practise ahimsā, keep burning the sacred fires, scrupulously observe the religion vows, love the cows and be free from greed²⁴. Contemporary literature and inscriptions show that the Brāhmanas had many sub-sections and they were divided in subsections according to their localities. Bengal Brahmins began to be named according to the gāṇis, a practice began in the period between the fifth and seventh centuries A.D. Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva's mother was the daughter of a Vandyaghaṭṭiya Brāhmaṇa. Anituddha, the guru of Vallālasena was a Champāhaṭṭiya Mahāmahopādhyāya and Vateśvara, the recipient of the Manahali grant of Madanpāla also belonged

to Champāhaṭṭī. The names of other gāmis are referred to in the Ādābādi plate and also to be found in the Saduktikarnāmrita²⁵. Hatāyudha refers to the division of the Rādhiya and Vārendra Brāhmanas in his Brāhmanasarvasva.

It is found in different Kulapañjikās that Ādisūra and Ballalasena were associated with the rise of Kulinism in Bengal. But there is no reference of Kulinism in epigraphic records of the Senas. The system of Kulinism, the grades of honour, predominantly affected the Rādīya and Varandra Brāhmaṇa society according to personal qualification. Gradually the system spread in the Vaiḍya and Kāyastha community^{25 a}. We have already seen how the story of Ādisūra was imported into Bengal during the reign of the Senas who appear to have also popularised the system of Kulinism in their Kingdom^{25 b}.

Beside them, there were the Vaidika Brāhmanas. The Kulajis observe that a section of them were descendants of the five Brāhmanas brought from Kanauj by the Varman King Sāmalavarman and another section came from the bank of the Sarasvatī and settled in Koṭālipādā under the patronage of the King Harivarman. Amongst the Vaidika Brāhmanas who came from upper India were known as Pāschātyas and those came from Drāvida and Utkala

were known as Dākshinātyas²⁶. Among other classes of Brāhmanas the Sārasvatās, the Sākadvīpīs, Vyāsa Parāsara, Kaundīn-ya, Saptasatī etc. are referred in the Kulaji texts^{26 a}.

Regarding the power and position of the Brāhmanas Manu observes 'of all the created beings the most excellent are said to be those which are animated ; of the animated, those which subsist by intelligence ; of the intelligence, mankind and of men, the Brāhmana'²⁷. Being sprung from the superior part (mouth) of Brahmā and as he is the first born, and possesses the Vedas, he is by right the lord of this whole creation²⁸. The Brāhmana is a great divinity, just like fire, who is not contaminated even in burial places²⁹. An eminent sociologist holds the view³⁰ that " in the caste system primary emphasis is on status evaluation on ritual plane a Kshatriya Kind may be powerful and Vaisya trader may be rich, but their ritual status will be rated lower than that of the poorest Brāhmana ". This was undoubtedly a vital basis of the Brāhmanas' claim for superiority.

Regarding the occupations of the Brāhmanas the ancient lawgivers point out that they being the friends of all the creatures, their means of subsistence should be fair, not causing pain to others. Accordingly, it is laid down that a Brāhmana may

subsist ^{by} RiĪa (truth) i.e., gleaning of corn ; Amṛita i.e., unasked gift ; Mṛita (death) i.e., begging; Pramṛita (what causes many death) i.e., agriculture or even by Satyāmṛita (a mixture of truth and falsehood) i.e. trade and money lending but never by SvaVṛitti (a dog's mode of life) i.e. service ³¹.

The moral restrictions allowing only lean sources of subsistence were bound to make their practical life very hard, compelling them to deviate from the ideals even in normal times ³². The authors enlisted several means of subsistence to be adopted in distress. As in the past, so during the period under review, the Brāhmanas engaged themselves as soldiers. In Bengal, Govardhana, the father of Bhaṭṭabhavadēva was not only a distinguished scholar but also a warrior ³³

'Having increased (both his) land and learning in battle fields and assemblies of hereties (respectively) by feat of his arms and (display) of oratorical skill he justified his name (Govardhana) in a two fold sense' ³⁴. The earlier dharmasāstras were not unanimous on the propriety of Brāhmanas becoming agriculturist. If a Brāhmaṇa showed kindness to the oxen by neither putting unreasonably heavy load on them nor chastising them, gave them food and water at the proper time he might use them for ploughing and harvesting ³⁵. The practice of tilling was also recognised by other sources.

A Brāhmaṇa was allowed to trade in time of distress. But the ancient law givers like Manu (X 36 - 116) Gautama (VII. 8 - 14) ,

Vaśiṣṭha (II. 31), Nārada and Yājñavalkya give a long list of articles which the Brāhmanas were not allowed to sell ³⁶.

The land grants to Brāhmana seem to be of immense cultural importance. It created a class of Brāhmana land lords in the period under study and gave them immense economic power. It is stated in the Anuśāsana Parva ³⁷ that peace prevails in the Kingdom if the Brāhmanas are pleased by various kinds of gift, respect etc. Vātsyāyana says that blessings of the Brāhmanas were regarded as a means to long life.

It appears from the foregoing discussion that the Brāhmanas were the most respected caste in society. They were the intellectual caste. The extent of their influence over Kings can be easily measured from the fact that even during the fourteenth Century A.D. the digest makers advised the consultation with the Brāhmanas before taking decision. The influence of the Brāhmanas on the Buddhist Pāla Kings may be surmised from the fact that Darbhapāni served four generations of the Pāla rulers, beginning from Dharmapāla to Nārāyanapāla. There could be no greater testimony to the superior authority of the Brāhmana minister Darbhapānithan the fact recorded in the Bādālpillar inscription that he kept the emperor Devapāla waiting at his door. We hear of two Brāhmana royal dynasties in Samatata in

7th Century A.D. The ascendancy of the Brāhmanas increased still further in the time of the Varman and Sena Kings. Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva, Halāyudha and Aniruddha Bhaṭṭa had enormous influence on the Kings of the said dynasties.

Position of Kāyastha

Kāyastha : Among other castes, having prominence in the society, mention should be made of the Kāyastha. Probably the first mention of the word occurs in the Yājñavalkya ^{Smṛiti}.

(1.336). There is a lot of controversy among scholars about the origin of this caste, and some has gone to the extent of seeking their foreign origin. As to their function, sources in Bengal state that they worked as Collectors of Revenue, settlement and survey officers, bench - clerks, accountants and auditors, secretaries to the King, particularly as ministers of peace and war (Sādhivigrahika) and sometimes as Chief administrators of a division. From the inscriptions of Gopachandra, Dharmāditya and of the Prince Vainyagupta in Eastern Bengal and the Khālimpur grant of Dharma-Pāla, it is known that the Kāyasthas formed the majority in the superior cadre of district and divisional officers without whose knowledge and permission no transfer of landed property could take place. One thing should be noted in connection with the power and position of the Kāyasthas in Bengal that

they held more important position in the management of State than the Brāhmanas upto the 7th Century A.D. From the nature of the services rendered by this caste it is easily understandable that the Brāhmanas and the Kāyasthas held sway in the State in the succeeding periods. Some times they played important roles in the society as physician, as we come across the example of one Karana-Kāyastha who was the author of the Sabda - Pradīpa and who served as court physician both of Ramapāla and Govindrachandra the well known Kings of Bengal ³⁸.

Besides we have instances in which Karana - Kāyastha played significant part in the administration of the Kingdom. The assumption of the office of Mahāsāndhivigrahika by Sandyā - Kara-Nandī born in the family of Karana - Kāyastha in the reign of Rāmapāla is an instance in point.

Vaidya Ambashthas

The Vaidya - Ashbashthas like the Kāyastha does not appear to have formed in important caste in Ancient Bengal. They held the profession of Physician. The Ambashthas lived in Western Punjab and are mentioned in the Mahābhārata along with the Śivis and Yaudheyas ³⁹. In the geography of Ptolemy, the

tribe is located the East of the Paropanisadai⁴⁰. Przulski has shown how various Austro - Asiatic tribes lived in this region⁴¹ and it is not unlikely that the Ambasthas also belonged to the same stock. The tribe was gradually coming under the Aryan influence, is proved by the Ambashtha - sutta in which Ambashtha is called a Brāhmanawhile in the Jātakos are also represented as belonging the same caste. Dr. Rai Choudhury points out that "in later times, the Ambashthas are found in South-Eastern India near the Mekala range and also in Bihar and Bengal"⁴².

The Ambashthas have become Kayasthas in Bihar and according to traditions, they have formed in Bengal the communities of the Vaidyas and Māhishyas. It is not known whether the Senas of Bengal were absorbed in the Kāyastha or the Vaidya community and whether they originally belonged to the Ambashtha community of South India. It is possible that some Ambashtha - Vaidyas entered in Bengal in the early medieval period and merged to the class of local physicians and developed Vaidya community.^{42 a}

The Kaivartas

According to Brahma vaivarta Purāṇa, the Kaivarta caste which assumed importance during the Pāla rule, sprang

from the union of Kshatriya male and vaisya female⁴³.
 Manu also mentioned the Kaivarta caste. Bhatta Bhavadeva
 also mentions the Kaivarta as one of the seven antyaaja
 or low castes. The Māhishyas of Eastern Bengal, also known
 as Hālika Dāsa and Parāsara Dāsa are now held to be the
 same as chasi Kaivartas of Midnapore and other districts
 of West Bengal. On the other hand, the Dhīvaras or fishermen
 in East Bengal are known as Kaivarta. The tradition is recor-
 ded in the Vallalacharita that Vallālasena improved the
 status of the Jaivartas and made them clean caste⁴⁴.

Rationale of the proliferation of the number of the Sūdras

It is evident from the study of the caste system
 of Bengal that the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas, as different
 classes as existed in Northern India, were conspicuous by
 their absence in Bengal. Now what are the factors that
 contributed to their absence in Bengal. According to N.K.
 Dutta firstly, it is because, the non-Aryan communities in
 Bengal, like the Pods, Bāgdīs, Chandālas, Kaivarta etc. were
 too numerous and powerful to be thoroughly subdued and
 absorbed by the thinning stream of Aryan warriors from the
 upper Gangetic valley. Secondly, the Rājputs, the Normans of

Medieval India who rose to prominence in almost all parts of Northern and Western India after the Hūna cataclysm of the 6th Century A.D. and who are regarded as their forefathers by most of the Kshatriya ruling class in modern India were shut out from Bengal by the indigenous Pāla Kings for more than four centuries until the sovereignty passed into the hands of the Muslims. Thirdly, Bengal was ever a land of heresy Jainism and Buddhism claimed Bengal as their own. The long rule of the Buddhist Pāla Kings very much loosened the idens of caste and was the principal cause of the abandonment of the Brāhmanical thread by those Kshatriyas and Vaiśyas who were associated with the court ⁴⁵. But the more reasonable explanation is perhaps to be traced to the extended significance given to the term Śūdra in the Purāna where it denotes not only the members of the fourth castes but also those members of the three higher castes who accepted any of the heretical religions or who were influenced by Tāntric rites. The predominance of Buddhism and Tāntric Śaktism in Bengal, as compared with other parts of India, since the 8th Century A.D. perhaps explains why all the notable castes in Bengal were regarded in the Brihad - dharma Purāna and other latter texts as Śūdras and the story of Veṅa and Pr̥thu might be mere echo of a large

scale reconversion of the Buddhist and Tāntric elements of the population into the orthodox Brāhmanical fold.

It would perhaps be wrong to conclude that there were no Kshatriya or Vaisyas in Bengal, though there is no reliable reference to any Kshatriya or Vaisya family. But constant reference to Kshatriyas or Vaisyas are found in the writings of Jīmūtavāhana, Bhabadeva Bhaṭṭa and other writers of sacred laws⁴⁶. Moreover as a result of the decline of Buddhism in Bengal, there started the process of conversion of the Buddhists to Hinduism and the converted section did not get upper strata in the Hindu society and they were all degraded to the status of Sūdras in Bengal. This explains, to a great extent, why all other than the Brāhmanas, were regarded as Sūdras in Bengal.

It may be noted with greater certainty that the position of the Sūdras was not so bad during the early period of the Social history of Bengal as we find during the time of the Varmans and the Senas. The reason of this trend may be sought in the liberal attitude of the Guptas to other religions sects. While the champions of Buddhism continued

to argue against the birth as the basis of Varna, the growth of certain reforming ideologies specially the creed of Vaishnavism, secured a large measure of religious equality for the Sūdras. Vaishnavism reached its high watermark in the Gupta period when we find many epigraphic, numismatic and sculptural records testifying to its unparalleled influence not only in Northern India but even in parts of Southern and Western India ⁴⁷.

Other Social Factors.

In the Pāla - Chandra age there was no difference between the Brāhmanas and the Buddhists in the social structure. The Buddhists also were guided by Manu. It is inferred from the Buddhist account of Tārānath and other Buddhist works of the Tebetans that between Hinduism based on Varnāśrama and Buddhism there was no social difference. Those who adopted Buddhism taking the vow of monkism, there was no restriction of Varna system, but those Buddhists who were householders used to observe the usual Varnāśrama system in household affairs. There are evidences of conflict between the Buddhists and the Brāhmanas regarding religion and social organisation but there is no evidence that the Buddhists developed a separate

social structure. According to Tārānāth and other Buddhists teachers, Mahāyāna school of Buddhism was being influenced by Tāntricism and there appeared new principles and doctrines in the management of religious rites and other type of religious activities. The Brāhmanical religion was deeply influenced and further developed by the impact of Tāntricism and the differences between Hinduism and Buddhism were eliminated in some aspects ⁴⁸.

The caste system of the Brāhmanas was well established during the Pāla - chandra - ^{Kamboja} age and observance of caste system and the preservation of the same were the accepted responsibility of the Buddhist states. The caste system was not so rigid and strict during this age as it was in later time. The main reasons for this are that Bengal did not develop its own doctrines based on smriti ^{is}. Secondly, all the states and the ruling dynasties were reformers of Buddhism which they professed. Though they were the supporters and preservers of Brāhmanical system, the doctrines of smritis coming from North and South India could not meet their absolute support in Bengal. Thirdly, as the Pālas did not belong to upper class ⁴⁹, they were not keen to observe the caste system and social and religious rites based on the smritis

Fourthly, most of the people of Bengal were outside the sphere of caste system at that time and those who came within the sphere of caste system belonged to the class of people of Pre-aryan culture. They were following the Brāhmanical culture under the economic pressure. It was not easy to knit themselves in the structure of Brāhmanical society and there is no evidence that the Pālas and the Chandras did anything active to that direction. During that time, Bengal maintained connections with other countries with the help of Buddhist religion and commerce to some extent. For this, the outlook of the state was never confined to local sphere. The people of villages and towns did not depend solely on fate. It was during the time of the Senas and Varmans, the smritis of middle India and the conservative outlook of the South India were going to deomnate over the outlook and culture of the Society of Bengal gradually. The people of Bengal were gradually becoming dependent upon fate. This dependence on fate and the gloomy outlook of life found support on the contemporary society based on agriculture and land. Moreover the life dependent on agriculture, become conservative and remained self-sufficient within the family, clan and village and the need for broader and variegated outlook of the society was little. It was natural that when

a society which had lost its virility and lapsed into a state of inertia, would give way easily to any foreign invasion.

The Senas and the Varmans settled in Bengal with orthodox Brāhmanical culture of South India. The feature that originated during the time of the Varmans developed during the rule of the Senas. The Brāhmanical Society became resolute for self preservation and self establishment. Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva was not at all respectful to the Buddhists⁵⁰. During the Sena period this attitude became astute. It is evident from epigraphical sources of the varmans and Senas that in the list of land grants there is not a single inscription regarding gift to the Buddhist monastery, though there was trace of Buddhism at that time as evident from Paṭṭikerā inscription of BanavaṅKamalla Harikāla deva (1220 A.D.). There was no sign of any kind of liberalism in the Varmans and Sena rule. The liberal outlook of the Society was no more. On the other hand, the Senas, the Varmans and the Devas developed strict Brāhmanical culture of the Vedic Age completely ignoring the glorious liberal outlook of the Pāla Chandra age⁵¹.

The arts, crafts and professions were not hereditary and the different castes normally followed the normal profession

assigned to them. But there was no absolute rigidity or exclusiveness in actual practice. The relaxation continued in early Bengal which is proved by epigraphic and literary references. Even the Brāhmaṇas became soldiers, rulers, administrations, counsellors and followed other vocations. Evidences prove that a Kaivarta served as high royal official. The Karanas practised medicine and military arts, the vaidyas became ministers and the Dāsas served as officials and court poets ⁵².

The relation between the different castes in early age cannot be clearly defined, but they had not developed into the strictly rigid system as prevailed in the 19th Century A.D. According to classical authors, intercaste marriage was prohibited ⁵³. Hiuen Tsang states that the members of a caste marry within the caste ⁵⁴. These statements no doubt suggest that intercaste marriage was not allowed as is also indicated by the Āpastamba Dharmasūtra, according to which one should marry a girl of the same varṇa. It may however be pointed out that Gautama, Vasiṣṭha, Manu and Yājñavalkya prescribe that a person should by preference marry a girl of his own Varna ⁵⁵.

Although marriage among the members of the same caste was the ordinary rule, intermarriage between a male of a higher

and the female of a lower caste was regarded as valid down to the last days of the Hindu period ⁵⁶. It has been supported by the Tippera copper plate of Lokanātha who was called a Karana. In the said inscription the grandfather of Lokanātha's father is described as sprung from the family of the sage Bharadvāja and the great grandfather and grandfather of his mother are in verse 6 called respectively dvija-varah and dvija-sattamah, but his mother's father in the same verse is described as a parāśava. So we see that, although the first few ancestors (both paternal and maternal) of Lokanāth were Brāhmanas, his maternal grandfather had not a pure Brāhmana origin, since it may be inferred that his Brāhmana father married a Śūdra wife and he (the issue) was therefore known as parāśava ⁵⁷. The facts that Keśava was placed in charge of the army, that he was in touch with the King, and that he was held in high esteem. The fact proves that marriage of a Brāhmana male and Śūdra female was not always even condemned and the issue of the marriage did not occupy a low status. It is not quite certain whether Loknātha was degraded on account of his mother. That such a marriage between a Brāhmana and a Śūdra continued down to the end of the Hindu period, is proved by the writings of Bhavadeva and Jīmūtavāhana. Jīmūtavā^{hana} : says in the Dāyabhāga that though marriage with a Śūdra woman involves degradation and loss of caste, illicit

union with her is reckoned as trivial offence. All these definitely prove the existence of intercaste marriage though they show a growing desire to stop the marriage of a Brāhmaṇa with a Śūdra girl. But there is no doubt that such marriage was regarded as valid and did actually take place. This is also evident from the statement of Bhavadeva in his Prāyaścitta-Prakarana ⁵⁸ about the "accomplished Śūdra wife of a Brāhmaṇa". It appears from the rule of inheritance laid down by Jīmūtavāhana about the Śūdra wife of Brāhmaṇa 'that a woman may be espoused, but may not be ranked as wife as this rank belongs to one who is competent to assist in the performance of religious rites'.

As regards food Bhavadeva quotes older authorities prescribing penance for a Brāhmaṇa eating food touched by a Chāṇḍāla or cooked by antyajas, Chāṇḍālas, Pukkaśas, Kāpālikas and a number of specified low castes such as Nāta, Nartaka, Takshana, Charmakāra suvarṇakāra, śaundīka, Rajaka, Kaivarta and Brāhmaṇas following forbidden vocation ⁵⁹.

Thus from the careful observation of the social position of that time in Bengal, it appears that the restrictions of intermarriage and interdining was confined to only the

Brāhmanas and their relations with other castes, but gradually it was extended not only among other castes but also various branches of the same caste as it was the marked signs of aristocracy. Subsequently marriage was absolutely confined within the narrow fold of one of the numerous subcastes, branches or clans into which a caste was subdivided and inter-dining was similarly restricted. But it was far from being marked by the end of the 12th Century A-D. ⁶⁰.

S E C T I O N - III

T h e p o s i t i o n o f w o m e n .

Ancient literature of our country both general legal, lack unanimity of views, regarding the question of the status of women in Society. So it is rather difficult to draw up an accurate picture of their position in ancient Indian Society. Their status in life has been a subject of amelioration and modification ⁶¹. There have been ups and downs in their social status, but these ups and downs helped very little to bring about a radical change in their status. Reforms from age to age have tried to assign them a definite position of life, but in spite of their honest efforts, it remained a baffling problem to adjust theories with practice.

Manu, one of our chief authorities on the subject, is also a glaring example of inconsistency in the matter. But despite wavering attitude, Manu is very firm about one thing; he could never cherish the idea of women enjoying an independent status in life. According to him a woman has to lead a life of dependence throughout her life, seeking protection of either her father, husband or son ⁶². But this hard attitude towards women cannot wholly be ascribed to Manu, because generations of writers before as well as contemporaneous to him, have expressed the same views. It is stated in the Mahābhārata that a woman should never be independent. She should be protected in childhood by her father, in her youth she should live under the protection of her husband and in her old age her son should look after her ⁶³. Thus it is said that never in this world women acquire independence ⁶⁴ and it is the wish of the Lord Prajāpati that women should never be independent ⁶⁵. Early Dharmasūtra writers, Baudhāyana and Vasīshṭha harp on the same notion. Baudhayāna says that a woman is never fit for independence ⁶⁶. Vasīshṭha, like his predecessors, enjoins complete dependence of women and according to him "a woman is not independent, the males are her masters" ⁶⁷. The highest fulfilment of women's life consists in her being an ideal member of a joint family, in doing the household work and in

keeping the home in order ⁶⁸.

Inspite of such strict injunctions, there are instances which show that women often enjoyed considerable freedom. Women in ancient India not only had freedom of movement, but they carried on their activities both inside and outside the country. Though from contemporary literature it becomes clear that women enjoyed some independence in different spheres of life, yet her world rotated round the domestic sphere. It has been enjoined that she should regulate the expenditure of the family, should be careful in keeping the house and hearth clean and be economical in habits. She must cheerfully and cleverly manage her family affairs. The ancient lawgivers put every emphasis on the fact that women should be honoured and properly treated. Manu says "where women are honoured, there the Gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields any rewards"⁶⁹. Manu further says that where the female relations live in grief, that family wholly perishes, but where they are not unhappy that family ever prospers ⁷⁰. It is interesting to note here that quoting Bandhāyana and Gautama, Laksmīdhara recommends that a son should abandon the father who kills the King, who teaches the Śūdra, who accepts money from Śūdra, for performing his

own sacrifices or sacrifices on behalf of Śūdras, who is guilty of killing embryos, who lives with the lowest classes or who cohabits with a female of low caste, but he should never abandon the mother when she is excommunicated ⁷¹.

Side by side these admonitions, we sometimes find a curiously contradictory attitude. The very birth of a female child in the family was viewed with displeasure and concern. Our ancient writers are not in the habit of setting great value on the standard of female morality. They are considered fickle in their nature and frail in their habits. Manu expressly states that it is the nature of women to lead men astray and for that reason wisemen should never remain unguarded in the company of women. ⁷² He makes special provisions so that women may be guarded against their evil inclinations. He advises a man to carefully guard his wife in order to preserve the purity and integrity of his family, otherwise she will bring sorrow to two families (her father and her husband) Shahanara Hussain has pointed out certain inert contradictions in the thinking of our Pandit and law-makers. It is no gainsaying the truth that 'women on the one hand were regarded by the Śāstras and tantras as the forms of the mother Goddess, but on the other, were prohibited from performing sacramental rites with sacred texts. A wife could

do no religious acts independantly of her husband or without his consent,^{72 a}. Even a social reformer like Buddha had great distaste for women's liberty. Though Buddhism aimed at a casteless society, Prof. Hussain observers that the fate of women was no better. Even after women got permission to enter the order, the rules of their order made the nuns rank lower than the monks ^{72 b}. The Buddhists assigned a distinctly inferior position to the Bhikkhunis because Buddha was of the opinion that their admission to the Buddhist saṅgha was bound to destroy its integrity and purity ⁷³.

The position of women in ancient India has attracted the attention of scholars for a long time. Almost all of them are of the opinion that the position of women deteriorated successively through different times in history ⁷⁴. The reasons for the decline of the position of women in ancient India from the period from 1000 B.C. to 500 A.D. have been clearly sorted out by A.S. Altekar. The reasons are - (1) the imposition of Brāhmanical austerities on society, (2) foreign invasions of India affecting women's status adversely, (3) the introduction of the non-Aryan wife into the Aryān household, (4) discontinuance of upanayana of girls, (5) Lack of educational facilities for women, (6) the role of the caste system, joint

family system ⁷⁵. Sukumari Bhattacharyya has sorted out some other reasons. Firstly, with the growth of personal ownership of wealth after dissolution of the group ownership there grew a sort of surplus wealth of the individual which he wanted to enjoy himself. But his life was limited. He desired that his descendants should inherit his property. To be ensured that his own descendants should inherit his property, he maintained strict vigilance over his wife. He observe strict surveillance over his wife, secl^uded her who must be very chaste in sex morality and uncontaminated by the touch of other men, Wife must bear his own child only. Secondly, Men in many cases, were interested in Plurality of enjoyment of women and doubted the chastity of women probably ⁷⁶ in the light of their own characteristic traits of nature. So restrictions were imposed on free movement of women.

It is known from the Kāmasūtra of Vātsyāyana that the women of Gauda were soft, timid, sweet speaking and graceful ⁷⁷. The position of women, to some extent, improved in Bengal in early time. The genesis of the improved condition of women in Bengal has been clearly analysed by Bharati Roy. "The dominant mother is a deeply ingrained clutural concept of Bengal, deriving its source, if not from an early matri-

lineal tradition, certainly from the indigenous Pre-Aryan mother Goddess cult. A woman is 'Śakti' (source of power), but it is not women as an epitome of beauty (like the Greek Venus), not as a sex symbol (as in the linga or male sex worship), but only as a mother that a woman is put on a pedestal". "The presiding Bengali diety, Kālī, the mother Goddess, standing on the Prostrate figure of Śiva, her husband symbolises as clearly as any such symbolism can ever do, the domination of Female principle over the male principle. Perhaps historically this is related to the attempt to preserve the India of the mother Goddess against the Aryan consequence with their father Gods and their semi cultural logic. In the struggle for hegemony, the mother Goddess had managed to retain her primacy, at least in Bengal. A mother, therefore, connotes a position of supremacy in the Bengali Hindu Psyche as well as family life" ⁷⁸.

It appears from the description of Dhoyī that the women of Vijayapura, the capital city of Lukshmanasena that the Pardā system was not much in vogue ⁷⁹. But Vātsyāyana's statement somewhat contradicts the above view when he speaks that the women of the royal harem of Vaṅga were not accustomed to move out freely and used to speak with the outsiders from behind a curtain ⁸⁰. In spite of serious handicap many women

used to take education Higher education was not so common among them, as Vātsyāyana himself says that women did not ordinarily get any education in the Śāstras but daughters of Kings and nobles as also the Ganikās were highly educated. In vātsyāyana's opinion, a knowledge of the Kāmasūtra with its subsidiary sciences would be useful to all women, both high and low, rich and poor. A poor woman who on account of the absence of her husband finds herself in great distress and difficulty, might earn a decent living even in a foreign country by means of knowledge of these sciences ⁸¹. Dhoyī in his Pavanadūtam also refers to such a practice ⁸².

Another instance of the improvement of women's position during the Sena - Varman age was the inclusion of the queen in the land grant charted. It indicates certainly an improved position of women in Bengal of that time ⁸³. In the Sena - Varman period we find the elevations of the status. of Rājñī who held important positions alongwith the other dignatories as it is known from inscriptions. It is perhaps due to the status enjoyed by the women of South India where from the Senas were hailing. In South India the matriarchal system, was in vogue among the different ruling families from an early age. In the inscriptions of the period under survey we find the ideal conjugal love amongst divine couples was held up before the people.

The Rāmapāla upper plate states that Queen ŚrīKāñchana was to King Trailokychandra was Śachī was to Indra, Gaurī to Hara and Śrī to Hari ⁸⁴. Similarly, the Naihati copper plate of Vallālasena comparing Vilāsdevī, queen of Vijaya-sena, with Lakṣmī and Gourī ⁸⁵.

From the archaeological evidence and ancient literature it appears that women used to wear Śādī something like those worn by modern women. But they did not make upper garments by using a portion of Śādī. From archaeological evidence it appears that it was a general custom to expose the upper portion of body of women. They used to wear a kind of dresses something like Kuchbanda or bodice. They also used cloth like that of blouse. Women sometimes used to wear scarfs also. Dancing girls used to wear long tight Pājāmā upto heels. They also used to hang long scarf over shoulders. Both men and women used to wear ornaments. Ancient Bengali women used oil in hair dressing. They used to wear tip of Kājal(Collyrium) on foreheads and eyes. Married women used mark of vermilion on forehead ^{85 a}.

Women enjoyed some privileges and loyal rights in Bengal and had to rely mostly upon the natural instinct of

love, affection and sense of duty possessed by their husbands, sons and other relatives. Polygamy was prevalent in various parts among the wealthy. The kings generally considered it a privilege to have crowded hārem. Princes, high officials and the rich also married more than one. Vātsyāyana says that the wealthy people had generally a plurality of spouses, who outwardly no doubt, appeared to enjoy many objects of pleasure; but in reality; their conditions was miserable indeed as the husband was but one and the claimants to his affection were many.

Ancient lawgivers have pointed out that an ideal woman should be an ideal housewife, but in Bengal during the period there are instances of the married women going outside to earn money by means of spinning, weaving and some other mechanical arts ⁸⁶. Sometimes the employers offered bribes to the wives of labourers in order to induce them to send their husbands or some other members to work ⁸⁷. This shown that the wives of the Vaisyas and the Śūdras took active part in the business of their husbands. But women were considered unfit for all responsible works. It was believed that they were incapable of performing the difficult duties of administration ⁸⁸.

Manu is strongly against divorce. He says that

neither by sale nor by repudiation a wife can be released from her husband ⁸⁹. According to Medhātithi, a wife sold or repudiated cannot become the legitimate wife of another man ⁹⁰. Manu in another place says that the desertion of a guiltless wife is a crime for which a large amount has to be paid as fine ⁹¹. Only in cases where the wife yields herself to gross adultery and unfaithfulness, the husband is authorised to abandon her ⁹². Manu also holds the same view. According to Kantilya, if a man apprehending danger from his wife, desires divorce, he shall return to her whatever she has been given on the occasion of marriage ⁹³. A man and wife are bound to observe mutual fidelity. They are the part of the united whole. The marriage vow is most sacred, transgression from which was is to be meted out with severe punishment. This is the high ideal preached by ancient lawgivers ⁹⁴. Most of these prescribe heavy punishment and penances for wives who prove unfaithful to their husbands and are of questionable conducts ⁹⁵.

In Bengal, after the death of their husbands the the wives had to live in complete chastity and to avoid all kinds of luxury and exciting food such as meat, fish etc ⁹⁶. The position of the widows in society was not at all enviable.

They were looked upon as inauspicious and were hardly allowed to take part in different rites and ceremonies. They seem to have been encouraged by the people to immolate themselves in the funeral pyre of their husband. The Dāyabhāga law which permitted even the childless widow to become an heir, was not an unmixed blessing to the weak minded section of the women in Bengal. Social leaders took undue advantage of this grief stricken condition of the widow and stood to gain by her elimination⁹⁷. The Brihaddharmapurāna also agrees to the above fact⁹⁸. So it is apparent that the custom of Satī came into vogue in Bengal from fairly early time.

Regarding the right of the widow to inherit property the opinion of the scholars differs in ancient time. During the period from 400 - 1000 A.D. the jurists were divided into two schools, the orthodox one embodied by Nārada, Kātyāyana and King Bhoja of Malava not accepted the right of the widow to inherit and the reformist one which was bent upon agitating for the popularisation of its now reforms.

The school of reformers was not prepared to accept any compromise. It insisted that widow's right to inherit the full share should be recognised. It based its case on logic.

Bṛihaspati pointed out that the Vedas, the Smritis and sages of ancient time have unanimously declared that the husband and the wife are the joint owner of family property and together constitute one legal personality. A man, therefore, cannot be said to be completely dead as long as his wife is alive. How then can property pass on to another in the life time of the widow?⁹⁹ Bṛihadharma purāna points out that the widow can offer funeral oblation to her husband and so she should be allowed to inherit property. Prajāpati lays down that the widow has a natural right to inherit all her husband's property including moveables, immovables, bullion ornament, stores etc. Her right is not the least affected ever if her elderly relations male or female are alive. She will of course, show them proper reverence, but hold property in her own possession. If any male relation obstructs her peaceful enjoyment of the estate, it is the bounden duty of the King to punish him as a thief¹⁰⁰. These verses have been attributed to Bṛihaspati in the Dāyabhāga¹⁰¹. It is perhaps Jīmūtavāhana who argues the widow's case in the most masterly fashion. There is no authority to hold that the ownership in the husband's property, which the wife acquires at marriage, terminates with the husband's death. How can it be argued that the wife's right is destroyed at the moment she is widowed? Nor can it be

maintained that she is to utilise just as much of the income as may be necessary for her bare maintenance. Vishnu says that the property of a person dying without sons will first devolve upon the widow and then upon the daughter, parents etc. Now it is admitted that in the above text term property denotes the whole income of the estate, when construed with all other heirs like the daughter, the brother, parents etc. How then can it have a restricted meaning when it is construed with the widow?¹⁰² The new school maintained that the widow's right of inheritance was inherent. The only circumstance that could defeat it was unchastity¹⁰³.

The society of Bengal at that time lost its vigour, to a great extent as a result of the seximmorality and the evils of t̄antric influence. The picture was to some extent different in villages where the people led a simple and balanced life which is evident from the description of Rāmacharita. But the picture was altogether different in the sphere of town culture. The wealth, luxury and extravagance of town are hardly compatible with strict moral sences¹⁰⁴. The sources of inscriptions and literature prove the immorality and excesses of sensuality in the early Bengal. Kāmasūtra¹⁰⁵ clearly elaborates the clear picture of the laxity in moral codes of

the fashionable young men and women of Gauda. Dhoyī the author the Pavana-dūta has gone to the extent that "those were not merely tolerated but regarded as part of normal social life"¹⁰⁶. This may be confirmed by the fact that the Brāhmanas could have established illicit relations with the Śūdra women and very little penalty was imposed upon the Brāhmanas for this offence. One of the striking feature of the society of Bengal was the practice of hiring courtesans by the wealthy persons. The amorous intrigues of members of the royal harem in Gauda and Vaṅga with the Brāhmanas, slaves and servants have been clearly enumerated in the Kāmasūtra¹⁰⁷ which testify to the fact that the people of outside Bengal had a very low idea of the moral standard of the people of Bengal.

The low moral standard of the people of Bengal is also proved by existence of the system of Devadāsī. The institution of Devadāsī now looked down upon, was widely prevalent in Bengal. It is stated in the Deopārā inscription that King Vijayasena provided a hundred lovely female (attendants)" whose bodily charms were heightened by ornaments" for the Pradyūmneśvara Śiva. Dhoyī, the author of Pavana-dūta also in a verse mentions the Devadāsī or temple girls of Śiva. The custom of dedicating Devadāsī to shrines is only seen now

a dass in the district Southern Mālābar and the regions thereabout ¹⁰⁸. The natural inference from the fact is that most probably the Sena Varman Kings brought this institution from the Southern India. Reference in Rājatarāginī of a dancing girl Kamalā in a temple at Pundravardhana in 8th Century A.D. infers that the system was in vogue in different parts of Bengal. These dancing girls, though dedicated to the temples, were no better than common courtesan. The low standard of morality is further proved by the practice of keeping female slaves referred by Jīmūtāvāhana and these women were kept for enjoyment ¹⁰⁹. So the women were no better than commodities of enjoyment.

The prominence given to the voluptuous practices in the festivals of the period under consideration was not an isolated phenomenon ¹¹⁰. It was a symptom of the decadent society in which religious practices were vitiated by a frank and unabashed addiction to sex. The Tāntrika form of worship became much popular both among the Hindus and the Buddhists in the period. Some of the Hindu tantras prescribe sexual connection as a part of religious ceremony. It is no wonder that by practising this kind of religion the whole of Eastern India lost all vigour and the whole population became corrupted.

Two serious evils which ruined the whole generation of people of Bengal at that time originated from the degraded religions system ; the disintegrating and pernicious caste system and the low standard of morality. All these are the main causes of the total failure of them to resist foreign invasion ¹¹¹.

Section IV

A g r i c u l t u r e

As in ancient times, agriculture in early Medieval Bengal was regarded as the most honourable occupation of Bengal. In fact the economic system in Bengal has always been based on land tenure ¹¹². It was always the chief occupation of the bulk of the people. For the masses, land was the sole means of subsistence. It was no longer the vocation exclusively assigned to the Vaisyas and Sūdras and for-bidden to Brāhmana and Kshatriya. Now all the castes and classes adopted it as a noble and even profitable vacation and enterprise.

Information about the agrarian condition of Bengal in ancient time is scanty. If the Kingdoms of Gangaridei Prasiol were within the territory of Bengal as has been stated by the early classical writers - 'The people who live in the furthest off part are the Gaugarides whose King possesses

1000 horses, 700 elephants and 60000 foot in apparatus of war', and the prosperity of the country was probably due to the flourishing condition of agriculture ¹¹³. The Mahāsthān Brāhmī inscription of the ^{Mauya} age mentions Dhānya or paddy, seasamum and mustard seeds ¹¹⁴.

Regarding the ownership of land there are divergences of opinion among different sources. According to one school of thought, represented by Jaimini, Śābara and others, the King or the state was not the owner of all land, but was merely entitled to levy taxes from the holders of land ¹¹⁵. This school stresses on the idea that the King collects taxes in lieu of protection that is offered by him to his subjects. The second school of thought emphasises on the idea that the King is the lord of the soil (bhūmer = adhipatiḥ - hisah) ¹¹⁶. But the real nature of the ownership of land by King has been correctly brought out by some scholars, ^{cc} the rights of the King are a theory, an abstraction ; poetically and politically speaking, he is the lord, the master, the protector of the earth (Prithivīpati, bhūmīśvara, bhūmīpa) just as the lord the master, the protector of the people but he is no more the actual proprietor of the soil than of his subjects ; they need not have his permission to buy or sell it or

to give it away"¹¹⁷. This has been the nature of the ownership and authority of the King over land.

There is also differences of opinion among the different early Indian authorities about the percentage of King's share from the amount of agrarian products. According to Megāsthenes, the King demanded one-fourth of the produce, but according to other early Indian authorities, it was one-sixth of the produce ¹¹⁸ and this theory has been supported by the fact that the King received one-sixth of the merit for creating rent free holding in favour of Gods and Brāhmanas out of State land sold to a party. The fact has a striking support in the Mallasarul plate ¹¹⁹.

Land, being the main instrument of Bengal economy, was the main source of wealth and the chief support of life. Our knowledge about the system of land tenure is incomplete and not clear at all. Most of the copper plates during the Gupta and post Gupta period refer to the sale or gift of waste land for pious purpose. The eagerness of the state to get the uncultivated lands cultivated and to keep fields under cultivation in its own interest is easily intelligible. It was not possible for the state to undertake direct cultivation of all fresh acquired or reclaimed land. On the other hand, on the death

of the tenant it was quite natural his son and grandson to get a lease of the same land successively for lifelong. On the basis of the same enthusiasm, the state allowed a tenant to enjoy a piece of uncultivated land, without paying any taxes, because he had brought it first under cultivation ¹²⁰. It may be presumed that the authority of tax free enjoyment of land in cases was not illogical because the state did not spend any amount for bringing the plot of land under cultivation.

Moreover the state was expected to receive taxes on the death of the first tenant and at the time of appearance of the question of re-alloting the plot to his heir ¹²¹. It may be inferred from the records of the copper plate grant that land was gifted away as a revenue free holding according to the principle of

bhūmichhidra-nyāya (the maximum of the waste land). This should

be taken to mean the cultivation of waste land'. The copper

plates of the Gupta and Post Gupta age record the sale of

extensive plot of state land in Bengal in favour of the learned pious Brāhmanas or religious institutions as rent free estates.

The land was mostly Khila (fallow land which had never been

previously cultivated) and aprahata (waste land that had never

been previously cultivated) categories. The main consideration

was in the arranging for cultivation of the fields and develop-

ment of the area by founding habitations, markets etc. The

neighbouring area was sure to develop and it was anticipated

that in the event of the death of the landlord without an heir or when he would commit a crime like rebellion against the state, the whole estate would come to possession of the State ¹²². The copper plate grants of the Gupta period prove that these holding were governed by the principle of nīvi-dharma, akshaya-nīvi-dharma or aprada-dharma. It was a peculiar kind of tenure by which the purchaser, or the person of Institution on whose behalf the land was transferred after purchase, had the right of perpetual enjoyment, but not of further alienation by sale or mortgage.

The clauses of Rāmganj copper plate grant of IswaraGhosha of the Ghosha dynasty of sometime about the 12th Century A.D. include that 'the land is to be exempted from all burdens', that 'is not to be entered by the irregular and regular troops', that 'it is to exempted from all taxes' and that 'it is to last as long as the Sun and the Moon etc. shall endure' in the Traditional manner as the practice we generally come across in the earlier land grants of the Pālas. The cultivators of the land were ordered to pay to the donee the customary Kara or tax and all other revenues ¹²³. The Rāmpāl copper plate of Śrīchandra ¹²⁴ and the Belāva copper plate of Bhojavarman ¹²⁵ mention all the same clauses enjoyed by the donee.

Thus the religious grants of the Pālas and their contemporaries contained more or less the same provision. They were perpetual and hereditary and were not only revenue free, but also carried with them the assignment of royal revenue from the villages. Again the heads of the revenue and other charges imposed upon the villages would seem to have been the same as in earlier times.

During the early period of the history of Bengal agriculture, which was held to be the mainstay of the people of Bengal, was conducted following the courses of great river system which acted as vital fertilising agent of the soil. But there took place a steady increase in the cultivation area with the growth of population due partly to an increase birth rate and partly to immigration. One can easily visualise the extension of the cultivable land in Bengal in the copper plates of the 5th, 6th and 7th Centuries A.D. A careful analysis of the character of the land donated proves the fact that land donated, in most cases were 'aprada', 'aprahata' and 'khila' (unsettled, uncultivated and fallow). Tippera copper plate of Lokonātha records the grant of a land in a place where deer, buffaloes, boars, tigers, serpents etc. enjoy, according to their will, all pleasure of home life" ¹²⁶. These examples show clearly the steady extension of cultivation and rural

settlement. "The pressure of a growing population, the growing desire of priests for material prosperity and the religious Zeal of the Kings - all served in various ways to organise a widespread attack on some of the 'negative' lands of the province, where settlement and agriculture had at first avoided"¹²⁷.

The Brāhmanas contributed substantially to the development of agriculture by imparting a deep knowledge of the science to other farmers. Some early medieval beliefs and rituals sponsored by the priests, strangely enough, contributed much to progressive farming. They held that the killing of a cow was as heinous as homicide and this belief served to preserve cattle wealth in the country which was the mainstay of farm operation. Some Brāhmanas wellversed in astrology taught the farmers not only the use of plough and manure but imparted to them valuable knowledge of the science of agriculture as well as of such related disciplines as soil chemistry and mechanics, hydrology and meteorology and the impact of planet movement. Prognostication about seasons and rains based entirely on astrological and astronomical calculations contributed a good deal to the systematisation and development of the agrarian economy and the prosperity of the period ¹²⁸.

It may be presumed that the two factors accelerated

the agrarian development of at that time. One was the decline of industry and trade after the 7th Century A.D. Due to the loss of valuable markets, the production of principal commodities and the trade and commerce' in them declined and the bulk of those, engaged in trade and commerce and industry were thrown out of jobs. All were forced to fall back to agriculture, but the theory of decline of trade and commerce in Bengal has been differently interpreted by P.K. Bhattacheryya ¹²⁸ a. As a result of urban decay the occupation of artisans were ruralised and they were granted land for their maintenance. The Paschimbhāg copper plate of Śrīchandra records the gift of land to dancer, two couch-shell blowers, two drum-beaters, five big drum-beaters and eight Kettledrum beaters and groups of servicing classes comprising four florists, two oilmen, two potters, two carpenters, two masons, two blacksmiths, eight sweepers ¹²⁹. This obviously proves that as a result of decline of trade and industry the artisans had to rush to the rural areas for subsistence ¹³⁰. The second factor that aggravated agricultural production was the new democratic legislation, aiming at the establishment of an egalitarian social system without distinctions of caste and colour, also contributed to that end ¹³¹.

The revenue collected from the agricultural land

through the heads of territorial units such as Uparika, Vishayapati, Dasagrāmika and Grāmapati. The revenue collected are referred to in general terms as Bhāga, bhoga, Kara, Hiranya Uparikara etc. in the land grants ¹³². It seems that bhāga was the usual land revenue paid in kind. During the entire Pāla rule this Bhāga formed the main basis of Pāla economy. Bhaga means " the periodic supplies of fruits, firewood, flowers and the like which the villagers had to furnish to the King". Kara means tax in general. Hiranya means, as held by U.N.Ghosal, King's share of certain crops paid in cash ¹³³.

Cattle rearing was also emphasised alongwith agriculture. The expression "trina-puti-go-chara-parvanta" mentioned in most of the land grants of the time, suggests that good pasture grounds, which were provided for the cattle, produced various kinds of grass and was located in a corner of the village boundaries.

The cultivation of the land mainly depended on rain water which is evident from the description of Rāmacharita ¹³⁴. A number of embankments were built by the minor rulers of that time. BhattaBhavadeva, the minister of Harivarman caused the excavation of a tank before the temple of Viṣṇu in

Rādha. The Bhuvanēśwar inscription claims that "the waterless boundary lands abutting on a village situated in an arid region, has been made by him a reservoir of water which gladdens the soul and mind of the company of tourists sunk in fatigues and whose beds of lotuses have become devoid of bees as they are fascinated by the reflections of its surface of the lotus-faces of beautiful demsels engaged in bath"¹³⁵. Besides canals, lakes, tanks and wells, the practice of accumulating water in reservoirs for purposes of irrigation was also in vogue. The Irdā copper plate of Nayapāladeva refers such a reservoir of water for the purpose of flourish of agriculture.

Regarding the measure of land before the Pregelupta age, we have very little information. The inscriptions of the Post-Gupta age throw some light about the measurement of land. These were the Pātakas or Āhupātakas which were equal to forty dronas. Excepting pātaka and drona, other terms used in the later records are ādhaka, unmāna Kāla possibly stood for uncertain equation¹³⁶. The Gupta records generally mention two technical terms, Kulyavāpa and Dronavāp-a regarding the measurement of land. But the exact equivalent of those in modern time cannot be determined¹³⁷. The actual work of measurement throughout the whole period of the history of Bengal was done by

means nalas or rods varying in length from region to region.

It is not possible to draw up a conclusive picture about the agricultural practice. It appears from the study of the inscriptions that the paddy (dhānya) was cultivated in Bengal from early period. There is the reference to a granary of rice and other grains at Pudaṅgala in the Mahāsthān Brāhmī inscription. The Raghuvamśa describing Raghu's conquest of the Vaṅgas, remarks that Raghu uprooted and replanted the Kings like rice plants. The Rāmcharita holds a poetic description about the various products. "(Varandri) which was (esteemed as) the sparkling crest jewel of the earth because of (the presence of) Lakshmi (beauty) whose lovely form was beheld in the paddy fields of various kinds, which was further spread over by fire bamboo clumps and which had (as additional charm) the sugarcane plant that was flourishing excellantly there" ¹³⁸.

It has been referred in the Sadukti Karnāmrita of Śrīdhara that paddy and barley fields lay at the outskirts of the village ¹³⁹. In another verse of the same work there are references to some food grains and vegetables ¹⁴⁰. Some inscriptions from Pundravardhana mention (Sāmra-madhūka) ¹⁴¹. Some other mention Sāmrapanasa. The mango, the madhūka and the

jackfruit or Panasa were common products. Yuan Chwang refers to the abundant growth of jackfruit in Pundravardhana ¹⁴².

Guava and coconut (Sa-guvāka-nārikela) were other important agricultural products as mentioned in early inscriptions ¹⁴³.

Pavanadūtā refers that the ladies planted betel trees in the courtyards and watered themselves.

Besides the above, the contemporary records mention a variety of other crops grown in different parts of Bengal. These include malabathrum and spikenard mentioned in the "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea" among the exports of this province ¹⁴⁴. These were of an excellent quality and were grown on an extensive scale in the Eastern Himalayas. Another important crop cultivated in Bengal was mustard. The Vappaghoshavāṭa grant of Jayanāga mentions the existence of mustard channel in Karnasuvarna ¹⁴⁵. The Ashraṭṭpur grant of Devakhadga specifically states that the donee should enjoy the donated land by the cultivation of betel-nuts, palms and coconuts ¹⁴⁶.

The foregoing discussion based on literary and epigraphic evidences makes it clear that our survey period (5th Century A.D. to 13th Century A.D.) witnessed so many ups and downs in agricultural development. Owing to some disturbances and regional wars, the economy of the country was rudely

disturbed. The decline in industry and the introduction of the new conceptions leading to the establishment of an egalitarian society, though it shattered the traditional caste-based occupations and associated prejudices, yet it promoted the growth of agriculture. Due to the fertility of the land and the hard labour farmers put in, food grain production rose unimaguably. The economic condition of the farmers again deteriorated in the 11th and 12th Centuries A.D. which was regarded as the heyday of Indian feudalism, because of excessive taxes imposed on the farmers.

Section - V

I n d u s t r y

Though agriculture played a predominant part in Bengal's economy, a number of crafts and industries developed at a very early age and played an important part in the life of the people of Bengal. It is evident both from the literary and epigraphic sources that whereas the rural population was mainly dependent on the soil and its produce, the towns, although not probably divorced from agrarian activity, tended to do variety of functions, commercial, industrial, political, judicial and military. It has been described in contemporary

sources that the most distinctive feature of the towns was the comparative richness and luxury¹⁴⁷.

However, it has been assumed by some scholars that Industry was extensively on the decline between the 8th and 12th Centuries A.D. due to some inconveniences. But some industries were reportedly functioning normally and contributed much to the economic growth of Bengal. Sources of the period testify to the technical superiority, manual experience and scientific acumen of the artisans and craftsmen of this period which were all much more advanced in comparison to the ancient Indian epoch. The genesis of the development of industries may be improved condition of the labour class. Since the Gupta period there developed a broad and liberal outlook in the society about the status of working class. The legislators of the period under review realised the dignity of labour. There are some factors that contributed to the improvement of the condition of the labour class. First and foremost among them was the emergence of a new religious movement in northern and eastern India for levelling the social distinctions that set apart the high and low classes since the end of the 8th Century A.D. The movement was led by a Buddhist monk Rāhulabhadra who was a pupil of Haribhadra, a renowned Nālandā scholar and a contemporary of King Dharmapāla (770 - 815 A.D). This movement

of the levellers started by Rāhulabhadra appealed to the common people. It represented a revolution in the fundamental pattern of thought and culture. It was a great blow to religious tradition. The lower classes of people welcomed the revolting movement as it held out promises in the social and economic spheres of life. The demand for labour during the period under discussion when wars were a passion with the King, increased considerably and served to promote the status of the working class. The feudal lords were ever on the lookout for chances of the extension of their territory and of self aggrandisement. A weak ruler anywhere was a signal for aggressive wars and usurpation. This raised the demand of war-like instrument and subsequently heightened the status of the labours. The assimilation of the foreigners in the Hindu society also lowered the gap between the higher and the lower class in the society and thereby upheld the condition of the working class. By complete merger of foreign tribal habits, custom, manners, beliefs and tradition, the age old tradition of us was shattered beyond repair. The egalitarian ideology had so undermined the basic concept of Caste that the people of all tribes became unrestrainedly exogamous in disregard of caste injunctions ¹⁴⁸. As a result of this tribal amalgamation and injection of mixed blood in the veins of high and low, the very concept of a caste based society disappeared. The reception of foreign culture into the

national life and the resulting syncretism greatly served to promote the status and living condition of the working class. The improvement of the condition of the working class greatly influenced the position of the industry and paved the way for the economic growth of the country.

Among the industries that furnished in Bengal during the period of our study textile industry took the prominent part. Bengal achieved great fame for her textile industry in remote past. During the time of Arthasāstra¹⁴⁹, it was already a well-established industry. Four varieties of the textile commodities produced in early Bengal were Kshauma, dukūla, Patrona and Kārpāsika. Kshauma probably denoted linen of coarse quality and its centres of production were Pundravardhana and Benaras. Dukūla was the finer quality of linen and its centres of manufacture were East and North Bengal, both of which were the prominent centres of textile industry from very early times probably before the beginning of the Christian era. The nature of Patrona is not known. It was probably wild silk and the centres of its production were Magadha, Pundra and elsewhere. Kārpāsika was the cotton fabric and those were manufactured in various parts of India¹⁵⁰.

It is apparent from the early sources that Bengal attained great eminence in textile industry as early as the time

of Kautilya. Subsequent evidences show that she retained eminence in this field down almost to the beginning of the 19th Century. 'The periplus of the Erythraean sea' written by a Greek sailor in the first Century A.D. refers to the Maslin of the finest sort' exported from Bengal. The reputation of Bengal in the field of textile industry is also testified to by the Arab writers. Accordingly to the Arab merchant Sulaiman in the 9th Century A.D. there was 'a stuff made in this country (Ruhmi probably located in Bengal) which is not to be found elsewhere; so fine and delicate is this material that dress made of it may be passed through a signet-ring' ; Marco Polo, who visited India in the 13th Century A.D. states that in his time Bengal still plied a lucrative trade in cotton goods .¹⁵¹

Another important industry that attained importance during the period was sugar. Bengal was probably one of the earliest homes of sugercane cultivation. It has been pointed out by Susruta that Paundra-kacanes were noted for the yielding of large quantity of suger. Marco Polo witnessed that suger was one of the most important commodities of export from Bengal ¹⁵².

Another important industry was the making of salt by means of evaporation either from the infiltrated sea water or from sub-soil brine practised in certain areas. The Irdā copper

plate of Nayapāla of the Kāamboja dynasty in the tenth century A.D. records the grant of a village in the Dandabhuktimandala of the Vardhamāna bhukti along with salt pits (lavanākaraḥ)¹⁵³. on the other hand the Kāmapāla copper plate Śrīchandra of the 11th Century A.D.¹⁵⁴ and the Belāva plate of Bhojavarman of 12th Century A.D.¹⁵⁵ records the grant of village in Pundravardhana bhukti 'alongwith salt' (Sa-lavanah). But it should be mentioned in this connection that salt is not mentioned in any of the grants of the Pāla and Sena Kings. It may possibly because that the manufacture of salt though practised in some parts of Bengal from the 10th Century onwards, yet it had not developed into any considerable industry. The large amount of fresh water flowing in the sea from different rivers and the dampness of climate prevented the growth of this industry in Bengal.

The metal work of various kinds must have been known from very early times. The most important function of the blacksmith was the making and the repair of the agricultural implements. The Karmakāra was, according to the Bṛihad-dharma Purāna, included within the Uttama-saṅkara group. Agriculture being the profession of the majority, the services of the Karmakāra were in great demand. Besides, the royal authority waged incessant warfare, where the Karmakāra played a vital role. Some arrow

heads and spear heads of iron have been unearthed in Pāhārpur excavation ¹⁵⁶. The high standard of metal casting may be seen in the gold plated image of Mañjusrī from Balaidhan mound near Mahāsthān. It is undoubtedly one of the finest pieces of bronze icons discovered in Northern and Eastern India ¹⁵⁷. The image has been dated to the Gupta period. The tradition thus was fairly old and was followed by the artists of later period like that of the Pāla-Sena bronzes. The smiths also were making various utensils of metal. They even made water vessels of iron, as mentioned in the Edilpur grant of Viśvarūpa-Sena not of Keśavasena as it was thought earlier ¹⁵⁸.

The pottery making was also an important means of subsistence of a group of people of Bengal. The Kumbhakāras also belonged to the Uttamasāṅkara group. Among all the industries pottery was probably the oldest. The earliest of its specimen in Bengal has been excavated in Bāngad which represent the Maurya-Suṅga period. Terracotta images of this style have been unearthed from the excavation ¹⁵⁹. The excavation at Mahāsthān also reveals the same tradition. A number of Gupta style pottery has been discovered in its early level ¹⁶⁰. A whole series of terracotta plogues have been found at Pāhārpur. These terracotta plaques made Bengal potters unique in Indian history. According to Niharranjan Ray, every conceivable subject

of ordinary human life finds its place on these plaques. The ordinary people expressed their sorrows, happiness and desire in these plaques. A large number of storage Jars, lotās, cooking utensils, saucers and dishes of the 8th and 9th Century A.D. have been unearthed at Pāhārpur ¹⁶¹. The making of bricks may also be mentioned here. The inscriptions from the Gupta period onwards show that innumerable Devakulas were built. As there was large scale building activity during the Pāla-Sena period, so quite a good number of people were engaged in brick making and the work of a mason was urgently needed. Some people assumed the profession of Taksan or carpenters who were included within the Madhyama - Saṅkara group of the Bṛihad dharma Purāṇa.

Two other categories of craftsmen were the workers in stone and wood. The numerous stone images of the Hindu period of Bengal and the beautifully engraved inscriptions on stone slabs bear eloquent testimony both to the volume and skill of the stone-carvers' profession. The black chloride stone, out of which most of these images were carved, was probably obtained from the Rajmahal Hills and carried in boats to the different centres of the sculpor's art in the Province. Side by side with the stone-carving, wood carving and carpentry also appear to have been practised on an extensive scale. A few evidences of

wood carving are available to us and most of them perished because of the perishable nature of wood. The carpenters seem to have built houses and temples and made household furniture, boats, ship and wheeled carriages.

Jewellery also provided occupation to considerable group of metal workers as it was the fashion of the rich to use gold and silver ornaments made of pearls and precious stones. The Deopārā inscription of Vijayasena mentions "flowers made of precious stones necklaces, ear rings, anklets, garlands and golden bracelets" worn by the wives of the King's servants and the jewellery worn by the temple girls. The Naihati copper plate of Vallālasena refers to necklaces of pearls worn by ladies of royal blood. The Rāmacharita mentions "Jewelled anklet-bells" "charming ornaments set with diamonds, lapis-lazuli, pearls, emeralds, rubies and sapphires" ¹⁶². According to Tabaqāt-i-Nāsirī "golden and silver dishes" were used in the palace of Lakshmana. ^{sena 163.}

Another important industry was ivory making. The Bhāterā plate of Govinda-Kesava mentions ivory workers (dantakāra) by name ¹⁶⁴, while the Edilpur plate of Viśvarūpasena refers to palanquins supported by staffs made of elephant's tusk ¹⁶⁵.

Reference may be made to the growth of many minor arts, crafts

and professions and mention may be made in this connection of the florists, garland makers, carpenters, mason, painters, braziers, goldsmith, blacksmiths, potters, weavers, oilmen, barbers, cobblers, butchers, distillers of wine etc.

The persons following the same trade or industry grouped themselves into associations which amongst its wider social and religious functions, regulated the economic life of their members and dealt with the people at large on behalf of its members. These associations, which secured social and legal recognition of their status, rights and activities and possessed a true corporate identity, may conveniently and appropriately be termed guilds. The so-called "thirty six" castes of Bengal which must have evolved before the end of the Hindu period, are living testimonies to the industrial and professional organisations known as trade and craft guilds which are referred in the early smṛiti literature. Reference, to the trade and craft guilds in Bengal in the 5th and 6th Centuries A.D. have been made in the Dāmadarapur copper plates of Kumāra Gupta and Budha Gupta of the Later Gupta dynasty. The important position occupied by the nagara Śreṣṭhī (Guild president) , Prathama Sārthavaṇa (Chief merchant), Prathama Kulika (the chief artisan) and the Prathama Kāyastha in the local administration prove the fact that the guilds played an important part in

industrial life of Bengal. The nagara śreshtin, the most wealthy man of the town, represented perhaps, the rich Urban population and held the position of the president of the town guild of bankers. The Prathama sārthavāba, the chief merchant represented, perhaps, the merchant class or the various trade guilds. The Prathama Kulika, the Chief artisan, represented perhaps, the various artisan classes. The Prathama-Kāyastha, the chief scribe whomight either has represented the Kāyasthas as a class or have been a Government official in the capacity of a Chief Secretary of the present day¹⁶⁶. The Chief of important guilds commanded great respect and authority in Society. The Deopārā inscription refers to Sūlapāni who was the head of artisans of Varendri. He was so well regarded and respected that by common consent he became Chūdāmaṇi (crest jewel) amongst varendra's artisans. As he owed his reputation to his perfection as a craftsman, the King honoured him by conferring on him the title of rānaka. In classical literature, the word of Chūdāmaṇi has been used by renowned poets like Kālidās, Harsha etc. to describe persons outstanding in their act or profession. B.P. Majumdar holds that the ruler of the period conferred on Sūlapāni the title of rānaka¹⁶⁷.

Nevertheless the position of the guilds was not as sound in early medieval India as it had been in the ancient period.

There are some factors that worsened the position of the guilds at that time. Under the unstable political, economic and social condition of that time, it was hardly possible for the corporate bodies to carry on their trade, business and manufacturing work at one place. The prosperity and development of guilds were generally based on trade. But in the period under survey, during the 11th and 12th Centuries in particular, disturbed political condition caused the volume of trade to diminish. The destruction of important markets must have affected output and production in industries involving the principal commodities. The bulk of people, who previously, earned their livelihood through trade and commerce, had to fall back on agriculture, In short, because of internal and external wars and because of a crisis of public confidence in the guilds, the country was under the throes of an economic depression ¹⁶⁸.

Section - VI

Trade and Commerce

Trade and commerce formed an important part of the economic life of Bengal since remote past. It has a source of prosperity of Bengal which is attested by the accounts of various ancient sources. Human life in the Delta has been deeply influenced by the rivers and the variations of monsoonal climate. ¹⁶⁹

The great rivers of Bengal had played a significant part in the

agrarian production of the area. Besides renewing fields, the rivers carried an immense number of fish which provided a readymade source of food to the Delta dwellers. Moreover the alluvial soil of the region resulted in the huge agrarian production. The warm humid climate, in conjunction with the fertility of land, made the region an extra ordinary productive agricultural land capable of supporting a large surplus consuming class. The surplus production caused by the above factors fostered the trade and commerce of the region. Over and above the gulf region of the South-eastern part of Bengal and so also many navigable rivers with natural ports aggravated the trade and commerce facilities of the region. The network of rivers provided a readymade system of interconnecting waterways for easy communications and economical transportation¹⁷⁰. Similarly the qualitative and quantitative development of Bengal's production accelerated the process of the trade and commerce of the region.

We have dearth of information regarding our inland commerce in the remote past. The inscriptional sources shed little light in that respect. On the other hand the writings of the foreign travellers and historians do not come to our much assistance because the Chief interests of the foreign travellers lay in the foreign trade of the province. The development of foreign trade of which our sources of information

are plenty, asserts the existence of certain amount of internal trade of the region ¹⁷¹. There are references to officials for collecting tolls (Saulkika) and supervisors of marts and markets (hattapati) and officer incharge of markets, customs, tolls and ferries which indirectly testifies to the existence of brisk nature of internal trade and proves that the state derived from it a considerable revenue. The centres of inland trade were the towns. It has been gleaned from the inscriptional sources of Gopachandra, Dharmāditya and Samāchāradeva ¹⁷² that Navyāvakaśikā was the centre of merchants and businessmen. The inscriptions of Budha Gupta and Kumāragupta also give the similar information about the status of city of Koṭivarṣha ¹⁷³. We have references to ships and the dockyards and to custom officers called 'vyāpāra-Kāraṇḍaya' or Vyāpārāṇḍya in the two grants of the time of Dharmāditya and Vyāpārāya-viniyukta in the grant of Gopachandra. They were obviously officials in charge of the duty of looking after trade and commerce. The rivers of the province and proximity of the Orissa and Chittagong coasts afforded great facilities for riverine and coastal trade. There can be no doubt that a large number of people were engaged in shipping and the province must have carried on brisk trade and such a department of commerce must have been an important source of revenue. Its duties would have been to levy custom dues on foreign trade and octroi on internal trade. It must have been, as Pargiter has pointed out,

a most lucrative office ¹⁷⁴. It is known from the Kathā-saritasāgara that Pundravardhana had a great market place and its streets were lined with shops. Villages were also often centres of trade and business. There are references to hatta or market in the Damadarapur copper plate of Kumāragupta ¹⁷⁵ and Hattika in the Khālimpur plate of Dharamapala ¹⁷⁶. The grant of villages with its market place (sa-hatta) ¹⁷⁷, shops (hattiya-griha) and big markets (hatta-vara) ¹⁷⁸ speaks of the existence of lucrative trade in village in ancient and early medieval Bengal. Though the rivers and canals of Bengal were the chief routes of internal trade there were land routes also connecting different parts of the province. These are referred to by foreign travellers like Fa-hien and Hsuen-Tsang and the mention is made of 'rāja-patha' or public highway passing by a village in the Chittagong copper plate of Dāmodaradeva ¹⁷⁹.

We have got much more information about the trade of Bengal. The reason is probably that the oversea trade of a large part of North India passed through Bengal and its well known ports were at the mouths of the Ganges. Strabo, the Greek geographer and historian, who wrote his famous 'Geography' between A.D. 17 and 23, refers to the "Ascent of vessels from the sea by the Ganges to Palibothra" ¹⁸⁰. We

further come to know from the Jātaka stories ¹⁸¹ that the merchant took ships at Benāras or lower down at Champā (modern Bhagalpur) and then either made coasting voyage to Ceylon or crossed the Bay of Bengal to Suvarnaabhūmi. We also learn from the "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea" that Bengal maintained an active oversea trade with South India and Ceylon in the first Century A.D. Articles like malabathrum, Gangetic spikenard, pearls and Muslins of the finest sorts were exported. "These were all shipped from a market town called Gange (Probably the same as Tāmralipta)". According to ^{Milinda} Pāṇḍya, the trade was carried on from Vaṅga across the sea to many countries ¹⁸². Among the important ports of ancient Bengal, mention should invariably be made of Tāmralipta. It is hardly necessary to stress the fact that in all periods the city which controlled the mouth of the Ganges was commercially the most important in Eastern India, just as the city which controlled the gates of the Euxine was commercially the most important in Hellas ¹⁸³.

Now, there is a controversy among the scholars about the position of trade and commerce in the post-Gupta period. According to the prominent historian R.S. Sharma India, after exhibited the characteristics of feudalism involving

payment of services in land instead of coins which developed in an economy marked by the dearth of coins and the absence of trade and commerce¹⁸⁴. But D.C. Sircar holds that the above theory is incorrect. According to him, there is no evidence of any real dearth of coins in Indian markets during the early and medieval period¹⁸⁵. Perhaps a standard currency was no longer needed for measuring the prices of commodities in terms of money, for trade by barter or through cowries became usual practice in the country where foreign trade was either non-existent or negligible.

South-East Bengal had altogether a different feature. The regional rulers felt the necessity of maintaining metallic currency obviously for the purpose of catering to the economic needs of the country. The Gupta gold coins discovered along with "Imitation type" clearly point to the adequate political and commercial importance of the Maiāmatī - Lālmāi urban centres upto the 8th Century A.D. although no indigenous coins have come to light representing the period between 11th and 12 Centuries A.D. The traces of minted metallic coins in the regions show not only the brisk commercial transaction, but also the continuous supply of gold and silver from abroad. As the Chittagong-Tipperā region did not have deposits of gold-silver bearing ore, we are to locate the

sources of the precious metals in Southern China, Burma, Pegu and South-East Asia¹⁸⁶. The precious metals could come to South-East Bengal if the region was in a position to export commodities needed by the neighbouring countries. It is highly probable that South - East Bengal got gold and silver from Southern China, Pegu and South-East Asia in exchange of textile goods, earthen wares and also perhaps of rice.

In the pre-muslim period Harikela, Samatata and Vanga formed an economic unit. They maintained communication with different regions of their hinterland along the course of Kshirodā river which used to encircle Maināmatī in the form of a moat¹⁸⁸. It is reasonable to hold that Devaparvata and other cultural centres of Maināmatī-Lālmāi region were connected with Chittagong and Ramu near Cox's bazar on the Arakan road by a land route. Chittagong and Ramu whose antiquity is attested by archaeological and literary evidence¹⁸⁹, served in that case as the sea-ports of South-East Bengal. Vikamapura, an administrative capital from the 10th Century to 12th Century A.D.¹⁹⁰, had perhaps some commercial importance indicated by the location on the Dhalesvari in Samatata mandala is clear from its location near the Kshirodā and the Gomatī.

The indication of trade that we get from the literary and numismatic sources are not reflected in the epigraphic records of the Devas, the Chandras and the Varmans and it is impossible to determine how far the society was commercialised. The inscriptions do not mention the existence of merchants and skilled artisans whom we frequently noticed in the Gupta land grants. It indicates the importance of land at that time and the feudalistic character of the society. But the feudal economy as indicated by the land grants could hardly preclude the possibility of trade and urban centres supported by a standard currency.

Regarding the trade routes, we have got some information from several sources we are here going to highlight only the main routes. The oversea trade of Bengal from Tāmralipta followed different courses. The first course was along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal right upto Malay Peninsula and then through the Malay straits to South-East Asia as far as China. The second was the coastal voyage to Palaura near modern Chicacole and then right across the Bay of Bengal to the opposite coast. The third route was along the eastern coast of India to Ceylon and then turning north along the western coast to the mouth of the Indus and then

upto the ports of Arabia and Eastern Africa ¹⁹¹.

Regarding the land routes which connected the north-eastern, northern and western India with this region we have got some information. One of them connected Bengal with Kāmarūpa and China. Hiuen-Tsang travelled through this route in the 7th Century A.D ¹⁹². This route was continued upto the 9th Century A.D. Another route following the ganges joined the network of highways which converged at Benaras. Merchants travelled from different areas of Bengal to Ayodhyā, Pātaliputra etc. through this road. Another important land route passed through the Himalayas across Nepal, Sikkim and Chumbi valley to Tibet and China. Another important land route followed the coast of Kalinga and ran upto South Indian peninsula.

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Chapter - V

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