

CHAPTER - I.

INTRODUCTION

The different areas of early Bengal, covering an area of 80,000 square miles<sup>1</sup> with an immense source of alluvial deposit between the Tipparā hills in the East, the Shillong plateau and Nepalese Terai in the North and the high lands of the Rajmahal and Chhotanagpur in the West, with the Janapadas of Gauḍa - Puṇdra - Varendra - Rādhā - Sumha - Tāmralipti - Samatata - Vaṅga - Vaṅgāla - Harikela watered by the Bhāgīrathī - Karatoyā - Brāhmaputra - Padmā - Meghnā and many other tributories<sup>2</sup>, played a very significant part in moulding the history of ancient India.

On the basis of information it has been possible to locate the principal divisions of early Bengal. Accordingly four political and cultural regions have been identified, each of which had distinct character of its own. The different areas (Janapadas) of early Bengal came to be known after the names of the original inhabitants. For example, the Puṇdras exercises control over the regions lying between the North of the Ganges and the West of the Brahamaputra. The area was known as Puṇḍravardhana. The Sumhas or the Rādhās inhabited the area lying to the western part of the Ganges. It was known

as ancient Rādhā. The vaṅgas inhabited the area lying between the Bhāgīrathī in the West, the Padmā, the lower Brahamaputra and the Meghnā in the east corresponding to the ancient Kingdom of Veṅga, possibly Gangaridai of the classical writers. The poet Kālidāsa places the Vaṅgas amidst the stream of the Ganges. In some Jaina works the region to the west of the Bhāgīrathī such as Tamruk, is included in Vaṅga. But Vaṅga proper was restricted to the Eastern part of the Gangetic delta.

In the east of the Meghnā lie the ancient Kingdom of Samatata corresponding to modern Chittagong divisions. The territory was mentioned the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudra Gupta and others records. The Brihat-Saṁhitā, a work of the 6th Century A.D. distinguishes it from Vaṅga which has been supported by the narrative of Hiuen-Tsang in the next Century where he describes it as a low and moist country on the sea side that lay to the South of Kāmarūpa which has been identified with Badkāmtā in the district of Tippera lying 12 miles west of Comilla.

Later on, another political sub-region called Gauda, lying in the Hooghly-Bhāgīrathī zone and inhabited by a section of people called the Gaudas, came into existence in early Bengal.

The city of Gaudapura has been mentioned by Pānini and Gauda as the name of a country occurred in the Arthasāstra of Kauṭilya and other sanskrit works. In the Brihat-Saṁhitā Gauda territory is distinguished from Pundra (North Bengal) and Tāmralipata as well as from Vaṅga and Samatāṭa.

Human life in the Delta has been deeply influenced by the rivers like the Brahmaputra, the Gaṅgā and the Meghnā had played significant part in the field of the agrarian production of the area. Besides renewing the fields, the rivers carry an immense number of fish which provide a ready source of food for the delta dwellers. The network of tributories also provides a ready made system of interconnecting waterways for easy communication and economical transportation.<sup>4</sup> The rivers have been of strategic importance as is attested by the establishment of principal political centres, beside the rivers commanding access to the different geographic areas of the delta. The area being girdled by numerous unsurmountable rivers made the region inaccessible as well as inadmissible to foreign invaders. Hence a sense of gregariousness was fostered in the nature of the people. Prolonged rainy season and frequent flood made the area impassable and the people indomitable who could successfully resist foreign aggression and whenever opportunity came they rose

in rebellion. Moreover the alluvial soil of the regions resulted in the huge agrarian production. The warmhumid climate, in conjunction with the fertility of the land, made the region an extraordinary productive agricultural land which was capable of supporting a large surplus consuming class. Over and above the gulf region of the South-Eastern part of Bengal and so many navigable rivers with natural ports fostered the trade and commerce of the area. These enriched the economic condition and this economic self-sufficiency gave birth to the spirit of political self-sufficiency of the area.

In the Vedic Age the different areas were not included within the frontier of Aryandom. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa refers to the Pundras as robbers (Dashyus) living beyond the pale of Aryan civilization<sup>5</sup>. In the Aitareya Āraṇyaka, there is the earliest mention of Vaṅga<sup>6</sup>. Baudhāyana in the Dharmasūtra regarded the Pundras and the Vaṅgas as impure. But the areas did not remain outside the Aryan influences for long time. The Rāmāyāna mentions the Vangas as people entering into political relation with the Kshatriya patricians of Ayodhyā (Ramayana 11.10.37). The Mahābhārata describes the campaigns of Karna, Vāsudeva and Bhīma in Bengal. Karna is said to have defeated the Kings of the Pundras, the Vaṅgas and Sumhas

and <sup>constituted</sup> Vaṅga and Aṅga into <sup>one</sup> Vishaya<sup>7</sup>. In the Vānaparva section of the Mahābhārata, the river Karatoya flowing by the Pundravardhana is regarded as a holy river. This reference to Bengal in the epics shows its inclusion within the folds of the Aryan India. The Āchāraṅga-Sutta describes the Rādhās and the Vaṅgas as the Aryans<sup>8</sup>, The Buddhist canonical work Saṃyuttanikāya as well as the introduction of Talapatta Jātaka speaks of the Buddha's visit to a locality called Dasaka or Saketa in the Sumha country in the South west of Bengal<sup>9</sup> which is equivalent to Rādhā. Classical historians like Curtius, Plutarch, Solonius and Diodorus took notice of the people living in the eastern India as the people of Gangaridai who had apparently mobilised their military strength in anticipation of a possible invasion of Alexander<sup>10</sup>.

In the Delta during the third century B.C, the Mauryas exercised political control over parts of Bengal is evidenced by the discovery of the Mahāsthān inscription in Pundravardhana. From the archaeological excavations at Mahāsthān, many Mauryan coin (Punch-marked) and other artifacts in the 4th or 3rd centuries B.C. have been discovered. The outline of the ancient city of Pundranagar can now be traced with certain degree of accuracy. The discovery of another early epigraph from the deltaic region of Bengal (cf Siluā in the Noākhāli district of Bangladesh of the Second Century B.C.) may be mentioned

It has rightly been suggested that Aryanism spread in Vaṅga through the territory of the Pundras. It appears that the northern & later on Southern areas of Bengal became stronghold of Aryan culture<sup>10b</sup>.

After the decline of the Maurya Empire, a number of smaller and shorter lived empires exercised control in the central Ganges valley and might have dominated parts of the Delta. The remains of the Śuṅgas and the Kushānas have been recovered from the Delta. It has not been possible to find out the nature of political control over the area and, if so, for how long.

The political history of Bengal from the close of the third Century A.D. to the beginning of the fourth century A.D. presents an interesting picture of the gradual expansion of the Gupta empire in the province right from Śrī Gupta who built the Mṛīgāsthāpana stūpa at Varendra. The process of the extension of the authority of the Guptas was further aggravated during the reigns of Samudragupta, Chandragupta and Skandagupta. The Damodarpur copper plate of Budha Gupta indicates that Northern Bengal formed an integral part of his empire. From a border territory (Pratyanta) under Samudragupta, Samatata came under the direct rule of the

Guptas in 607-03 A.D. under Vaieys Gupta, a scion of the imperial Gupta family.

The fall of the Gupta empire was marked by the rise of petty independent states in several parts of North India. The feudal rulers of Bengal also took the advantage of the political situation to shake off the foreign yoke and the powerful independent Kingdoms viz ; Vaṅga and Gauda came into existence in the 6th Century A.D. From the 6th to the 9th Century A.D. several other independent minor dynasties came into existence. Here we are inclined to confine ourselves to the study of the minor dynasties and not directly with the well known rulers like Gaudādhīpa Śaśāṅka, and those of the pālas and the Sena dynasties. From the available epigraphic and numismatic sources it appears that during the period from the 6th Century A.D. to the 9th Century A.D. Samāchāradeva, Gopachandra and Dharmāditya,<sup>11</sup> the Rātas,<sup>12</sup> the Nāthas<sup>13</sup>, the Khadgas<sup>14</sup> and the Devas<sup>15</sup> came into existence in Vaṅga-Samatata and the dynasty of Jayanāga in Gauda.

The emergence of the Pālas in 750 A.D. curbed the powers of the minor independent dynasties and a sort of obstacle was set in force in the field of the rising of minor dynasties. During the time of the decline of the Pālas in the reigns of Gopālā II and his son Vighrahapāla II there emerged a number

of petty independent Kingdoms. From the 10th Century A.D. to 12th Century A.D. the dynasties of the Chandras<sup>16</sup> and the Varmans<sup>17</sup> came into prominence in Vaṅga Samatata in the Iālmāi Maināmati Cultural regions. The Kambojas<sup>18</sup>, a hill tribe of the North had earlier captured the Northern and Western Bengal. During the disintegrating phase of the Pāla Empire under Mahīpāla II there took place a rebellion of the feudatories under Divya, a leader of the Kaivarta class and carved out an independent territory in Varendra in the last part of the 11th Century A.D. In the Rādha subregions, the dynasty of Śūras came into existence at the same period which assumed prominence over Dakṣhin Rādha<sup>19</sup>. In the Rādha region sometime the 12th Century A.D., a section of Gopa or Kāyastha feudal chiefs known as the Ghoshas<sup>20</sup> emerged into the limelight of history.

A long time after, during the 13th Century, a few small independent states also came into existence in some parts of early Bengal. The dynasty of the Devas<sup>21</sup> became prominent in Tippera, Noakhali and Chittagong regions during the decadent stages of the Senas. The Maināmati copper plate of Raṇavaṅkamalla Harikāladeva<sup>22</sup> unveils history of a new dynasty of Paṭṭikera. Thus from the available epigraphic and other sources of information

it is not altogether impossible to sort out some detailed account of the history of the minor dynasties of Bengal stretching from the 6th Century A.D. to the 13th Century A.D. A number of scholars while writing the History of Bengal made stray reference to the minor dynasties as addendum. Among them mention may be made of the works of such eminent historians like R.C.Majumder, History of Bengal, Vol. I; N.R.Roy, Bāngālīr Itihās, Ādīparva (Bengali), D.C.Sircar, Pāl-Sen-yuger Vaṁśānucharit, Pālpūrva-Yuger Vaṁśānucharit, Śilālekh O Tāmrāsāsanādir Prasaṅga (Bengali), H.C.Roy, Dynastic History of North India, Vol. I, R. P. Chanda, Gandarājāmalā (Bengali), A. K. Maitreya, Gandalekhamālā (Bengali), Fall of the Pāla Empire, N. N. Vasu, Vaṅger Jātiya Itihās, N. G. Majumdar, Inscriptions of Bengal, Vol. III, R. G. Basak, A History of North Eastern India, A. M. Choudhury, Dynastic History of Bengal, Sahanara Hussain, Everyday Life of the Pālas and many other books and Journals have thrown immense light on the subject. But no serious attempt has so far been made to work out a comprehensive history of the Minor dynasties and their role in the making of the composite history of Bengal in the early centuries. As a result of the emergence of Śaśāṅka and the prominent dynasties of the Pālas and the Senas, the role of the minor dynasties has been overshadowed.

Hence we intend to make up the lacuna in the historical study of the region with the help of available sources.

Besides coins and monuments which are lying scattered in the different parts of the regions with which we are concerned, a large number of inscriptions came to our great assistance. The inscriptions are noticed and recorded by many scholars like A. K. Maitreya, N. G. Majumder, D. C. Sircar and A. H. Dani. Recently R. R. Mukherjee and S. K. Maiti have compiled the inscriptions of Bengal. But more recent discoveries in mid-Bengal and the deltaic region of Bengal (Bangladesh) awaits fresh interpretation. These materials undoubtedly are to be taken into consideration.

The literary sources, however, shed welcome light to the various Socio-religious problems of the regions, particularly in the context of the social tension that we visualise in the outbreak of the Kaivarta rebellion, are mostly available from the 11th and 12th Century A.D. onwards. Among these we may mention Brihadharmapurāna, Brahma-Vaivartapurāna, Rāmacharit, Dāyabhāga of Jīmūtavāhana, Chhāndoga Karmānushtān-paddhati of Bhaṭṭabhavadeva, Mīmāṃsāsarvasva of Halāyūdhā etc.

For the convenience of study we have divided the work into several chapters in addition to the present one where we have attempted to outline the historical geography, and the

background of the rise of independent Kingdoms in early Bengal.

In the next chapter followed a discussion on the minor independent dynasties that flourished during the period from the 6th Century A.D. to the 9th Century A.D. These include the rules of Vaṅga Kings like Gopachandra, Dharmāditya and Samāchāradeva who emerged in the political scene in post-Gupta epoch. The rise of the Rātas, the Nāthas, the Khadgas, and the Devas in Samatāṭa and the Nāga dynasty in Gauḍa have also been taken into consideration in this Chapter.

In the Third we are mainly concerned with the dynasties flourished during the 10th to 11th Century A.D. We have discussed in details the history of the emergence of the rule of the Kambojas and the Kaivartas in Varendra and the Chandras in Vaṅga-Samatāṭa. The historical background of the dynasties their political activities, conquest of territories and other factors have been treated with special emphasis.

In the Fourth we have dealt with the emergence of minor dynasties which flourished from the 12th to 13th Century A.D. This includes the study of the dynasties like the Varman, the Devas and Raṇavaṅkamalla in Vaṅga-Samatāṭa and

the Ghoshas in Rādhā. The factors facilitating their emergence and other relevant matters have been discussed here.

In the Fifth we deal with the Socio-Economic position of the people of that time. The Socio-economic interactions among different rulers, their economic resources, condition of agriculture, industry, trade and commerce, medium of exchange, presence of gold coins in the delta and its impact have been dealt with.

In the last Chapter we intend to study the religious condition of that time. The position of Buddhism, the influence of Brāhmanical Hinduism, Tāntricism and the subsequent decline of Buddhism have been narrated here in some detail.

A discussion on the problem of currency during the period of our study has also been incorporated in the appendix. A map and a few relevant plates have also been appended at the end.

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