

A Stone Plaque from *Gangarampur*

Mandira Bhattacharya

Formerly Professor North Bengal University

The story of the flying turtle and the geese is a famous one. Its fame reached almost every corner of the earth. This is a story from *Panchatantra* which had an enormous popular appeal and wide readership. The stories have been classified as fables once preserved in the oral traditions of a people. But their universal appeal knows no borders.

Probably these stories existed in the Indian subcontinent in the early centuries of the Christian era and are still alive in the oral tradition. They were like the stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* recited by the *Kathakas* and spread far and wide all over the country. The stories of Panchatantra were carried beyond India to Persia, Arabia, Syria and translated and retold over and over again. They reached Europe through Greece. Tradition recalls the name of one *Vishnusharman* who is said to have composed them. But they were the stories of deep collective experience and insight a society gathers over hundreds of years. Therefore the name of *Vishnusharman* is but a myth.

These stories have several versions. In its north-western version, some of the stories are found in the *Brihat-Katha Manjari* and *Katha –Sarit-Sagara*. There are two versions from Kashmir, the earliest being the *Tantrakhayaka* and two *Jaina* texts. The third is the southern version from which grew the Nepalese *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesha*.

In this paper the writer intends to project a stone plaque containing the same story of the geese and the turtle discovered from *Gangarampur, Balurghat* in *South Dinajpur*. This is a chance discovery from a region which is extremely rich in archaeological evidence. Here we have *Bangarh*, the earliest site in the present day North Bengal, excavated by the University of Calcutta in 1943. The site has been identified as the ancient city of *Kotivarsha* or *Devikota*.

The excavation had exposed layers or deposits extending back to the days of the *Mauryas* and the *Sungas*. Thus the earliest settlements may be placed in the third century B.C. The habitation continued in the site and was followed by the period of the *Guptas*. Several *Gupta* inscriptions have been unearthed from the old district of Dinajpur and Gangarampur was a part of the same district. The inscriptions were land grants issued in the name of some Gupta rulers for the benefit of learned *Brahmanas*. In some of these inscriptions the name of *Kotivarsha* appears as an administrative centre and the headquarters of some official. This city remained a centre of administration upto the *Pala-Sena* period i.e. upto the 12th century. In addition to its official capacity it also became a religious centre and the name changed to *Devikota*. Such is the antiquity of the site from where the plaque was recovered.



The plaque was discovered from *Gangarampur* and is now preserved in the house of Mr. Asoke Nandi. The state of the plaque is not very good. It measures 24 cm. X 27 cm. It is slightly rectangular in shape with thin edges as borders. The colour of the stone is black. At the bottom there is a large lotus (*padma*) whose lower part is intentionally omitted. The petals are arranged in a uniform style with a straight central petal flanked by four slightly slanted petals on each side. The flower has a bold border at the bottom holding the petals like a cup. The two geese stand face to face on the *padma* with slightly parted beaks. The birds had been drawn in very bold lines giving an illusion of 3D impression. The undulating lines leave us in no doubt about their identity as geese. But the wings and the tails are highly decorated with scrolls and dots. To the uninitiated they look like peacocks' flowery tails. A tiny turtle or tortoise hangs in between the two parted beaks of the birds. Was this turtle called *Kamvugriba* and the geese called *Sankata* and *Vikata*!! Did the stylized *padma*-petals indicate the pond! The twelve

years of drought mentioned in the story is an allusion to the tradition of a *Yuga* according to the *Puranas*. The flowery part of the tail could indicate the clouds floating in the sky. The scene depicted in the plaque is the exact translation of the *Panchatantra* story in stone. The stories are a part of moral teachings (*Niti*) for the people in general.



The plaque, according to the present writer, belongs stylistically to the *Gupta* period of classical art. The grace of the birds' necks and the feathers flowing into unending floral circles recalls the undulating lines present in the paintings of *Ajanta* of the 5th/6th centuries A.D. The *Gupta* evidence is scanty from *Bangarh*. A small pot may be mentioned here – a partially damaged pot etched with fish-design. The texture of the sherd left no doubt in the mind of the excavator (K. G. Goswami) as to its *Gupta* descent. He had compared it with the *Gupta* period pottery from *Ahichchhatra*. Mention may be made here of a similar pot preserved in the *Balurghat College Museum*.

The present-day North Bengal (WB) has very little *Gupta* evidence excepting the evidence of Gupta copper-plate mentioning the city site of *Kotivarsha* as an administrative headquarters (*Kotivarsha Vishaya*). The *Brahmana* settlements around *Hilli-Balurghat* region are vouchsafed from later inscriptions also (*Silimpur* Inscription).

What was the purpose of the plaque besides preaching moral ethics? It certainly was a decorative piece and must have been attached to some architecture, may be in a temple. We have inscriptional evidence (W. Bengal and Bangladesh) of *Vishnu* temples from *Dinajpur*. The names like *Kokamukhaswamin* and *Svetavarahaswamin* and others appear in *Gupta* inscriptions. But no such temple has survived in *North Bengal*. Some of the *Gupta* temples

are still found in the interiors of *Madhyapradesh* which were decorated with terracotta as well as stone plaques. Mention may be made of *Parvati* temple at *Nachna Kuthara*, *Dasavatara* temple, *Bhitargaon* etc. in this regard.

However the *Buddhist* establishments of Bengal –*Viharas* and *Stupas* of later date i.e. from the 7th/8th centuries onwards have no dearth of decorative terracotta plaques. But stylistically they belong to the rich local folk traditions of *Bengal*. Most of these plaques are with bold borders in contrast to our stone plate under discussion. Most of these terracotta plates display everyday life of ancient *Bengal*. The figures in these plates often stretch out of the plates. One plate has been identified by *R.C. Majumdar* as the story of the mongoose and the snake (*History of Bengal, Dacca, 1943. pp.527, pl. 133*) of *Panchatantra*. But this plate could also be any scene where the two sworn enemies are depicted. Stylistically this plate cannot be compared with the sophisticated plate from *Gangarampur*. A full display of the story is expressed in perfection. The present writer has no doubt that this piece belonged to the *Gupta* period and must have decorated some structure or temple now extinct.

Books consulted:

1. *Ryder Arthur W. The Panchatatra*, tr. from *Sanskrit* by , Bombay, 1966.
2. *Majumdar R.C. ed. The History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. III the *Classical Age*, Bombay, 1962.
3. *Majumdar R.C. ed. The History of Bengal*, vol. I , Dacca, 1948

** The writer is grateful to *Sri Ajay Haldar* for the original photograph and to *Sri Manodeep Guha* for the care he has taken to blow-up the print.