An Archaeological Profile of North Bengal

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Theoretically speaking there is no place called North Bengal. But marking the Ganga as the boundary, the stretch of land comprising the six districts of the northern West Bengal i.e., Malda, South Dinajpur, North Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Bihar is called North Bengal.

The Himalayas start on the northern side. The district of Darjeeling almost lies along its foot hills. The Terai and the Duars lie along these foot hills. Here we have the tea gardens rather estates. Some portion of the district of Jalpaiguri is included in this undulating landscape. The other districts are plain agricultural land. North Bengal is also rich in its forest cover. Most of the forest area is within the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. The other districts were formed mostly by the alluvium brought by the network of rivers. But portions of the district of Malda and parts of South Dinajpur were the earliest formations. The area was a part of an old plateau formation as old as upper Pleistocene to early Holocene. In Malda this region, on the eastern side of the river Mahananda, is still called Barind, echoing an early medieval name Varendra mentioned in inscriptions.

The districts have been peopled by a variety of tribal, semi-tribal and scheduled castes. The Rajvanshi-Koch people are now spread over the districts of Cooch Bihar, Jalpaiguri and both the Dinajpurs. According to old gazetteers they inhabited the eastern side of the river Mahananda. Later D.K. Chakraborty held the similar opinion. Besides the Koch-Mech-Rabha and other tribal people or scheduled castes, the hills of Darjeeling district are dominated by the Nepali speaking people. The Lepchas, the Dhimals etc, the original inhabitants of the hills, are now more or less marginalized and leading a precarious existence. The district of Malda and the adjoining areas were for many years under the direct rule of the Bengal Sultans. And as the region adjoins Purnea in Bihar, many urdu speaking people are present with a variety of cultural heritage in the district. The Bengali speaking people inhabit mostly in the planes of North Bengal.

The Northern districts of West Bengal were rearranged after independence. Cooch Bihar was included as a district of North Bengal in 1950. In pre independence days the district of Dinajpur had quite a considerable area. A portion of this was cut off and the district of West Dinajpur was formed in 1947. This district was further divided into North and South Dinajpur in 1992 with headquarters at Raiganj and Balurghat respectively. Some police stations from Purnea were added into North Dinajpur.

As a result of partition of India the Bengali speaking minorities from East Pakistan started thronging into the border districts of West Bengal. The flow continues till date. The immigrants mainly dependent on agriculture went around in search of land and home in this part of Bengal. Slowly the pressure was felt by the earlier settlers. The migrants called
“Bhatia” by the Rajvanshis came to be viewed as threats to their culture and livelihood. But this does not fall under the purview of the paper. The paper for convenience is divided into two sections. In Section I an outline of the river system of the area has been drawn. In Section II archaeological sites have been depicted.

**Section I**

**The River System of North Bengal**

The Tista, Mahananda and Balason are the main rivers of North Bengal. The river Ganga touches the district of Malda, then divides into Bhagirathi and Padma. Former goes down West Bengal to meet the Bay of Bengal and the latter to the neighbouring Bangladesh. A few rivers rise in the catchment areas of the slopes of the hills and during the rainy seasons transform into considerable water carrying streams. The rivers like Atrai, Punarbhava, Nagor, Chhirimati, Tangan and Kalindi etc. lying to the west of Tista, at some point of their flow merges with the Ganga. These rivers some times intersect each other in the district of North & South Dinajpur and Malda and finally meet the Ganga. The Mahananda and Balason two major rivers of the planes of North Bengal rise in the fountains or falls in the Darjeeling district, swells with the rain and during its travels towards the Ganga, catches smaller rivers along their way. During the winter and the summer months the rivers practically trickle down. It is difficult to conceive and identify by their form during the rainy season. They are fast moving and often overflow the sides. Excepting the rainy season both the rivers remains as dry beds with traces of water here and there. The other rivers follow the same characteristics. The Atrai, Punarbhava, Nagor, Chhirimati, Tangan and Kalindi etc have almost the same ebb and flow throughout the year. It is difficult to imagine their swelled up feature during the rainy season. The rivers lying to the east of the Tista — Jaldhaka or Mansai, Torsa, Raidak and Sankosh also rise from the catchment areas of the Duars and Bhutan and pour off their water into the great Brahmaputra. Tista, rising in the glacier and lakes of the snowclad Himalayas, flows through the State of Sikkim and comes down on the plains of Bengal near Sevoke in the Jalpaiguri district. Karotoya, another river, famous in the early texts, with its precarious existence flows in to the neighbouring country of Bangladesh, merges with Tista. They both meet the Brahmaputra. This river Karotoya is mentioned by the famous Chinese traveller Yuan Chwang who called it Ko-lo-tu. He mentions that he had crossed the river and stepped in to the Kamarupa country. On its bank was the ancient city of Mahasthan from where an inscription belonging to the 3rd century B.C was discovered where the city of Pundranagara is referred to now in the Bogra district of Bangladesh. The Tirthayatra section of the Mahabharata mentions the river as a place of holy pilgrimage. A medieval text called “Karotoya Mahatmya” eulogises the greatness of the river. The other rivers that find mention in the early medieval text of Ramacharita of Sandhyakaramandi are the rivers Apunarbhava which has been identified with the river Punarbhava flowing past the ruins of Bangarh in South Dinajpur district and the river Kalindi flowing into the district of Malda which has also been identified with the river Kalindi; both are mentioned in the text of Ramacharita.
Section II

Important Archaeological Sites of N. Bengal

_Bangarh_: The earliest site, so far excavated in the present day North Bengal is the site of Bangarh, near Gangarampur in South Dinajpur. The impressive site lies on the river Punarbhava and is surrounded by an equally impressive boundary wall or rather fortification. The site was excavated by K. G. Goswami and the report was published in 19437. The excavation went as far as *Maurya-Sunga* period. The settlement continued through the *Gupta and Pala-Sena* periods and also up to the days of the Bengal *Sultans*. This continuous occupation show the importance of the site throughout the phases of history. Bangarh has been identified with ancient *Kotivarsha* or *Devkot* by scholar as mentioned in the 5 Gupta copper8 plates discovered in the old Dinajpur district. Accordingly it was the seat of an administrative division called *Visaya* under a *Bhukti*. Thus Bangarh or *Kotivarsha* was a *Visaya* under the *Pundravardhana Bhukti* at least during the *Gupta* suzerainty in Bengal. The area around Bangarh is very rich in archaeological artifacts as well as a habitation site. From the time of Buchanon until today the region had been repeatedly visited by various scholars. D.K. Chakraborty in 2001 did an extensive study of the eastern part of Mahananda.9

_Bairhatta_: Another important site in the same district is the area known as Bairhatta. Stapleton had identified it with the fort of Ekdala. He had published a probable map of the area. This important site lies in between the two rivers called Chhiramati and Tangan. A small river called Balia flows through it. That it was probably the same site of Ekdala was endorsed by scholars like Saraswati and D.K.Chakraborty. Gautam Sengupta10 had collected 6 terra-cotta plaques with Brahmanical subjects from here. The entire area is densely populated. The insensible people are digging the mounds and bringing out ancient bricks to reuse them in their houses. Everywhere there are found pedestals of images, pieces of door jam, lintel and brick built walls. Extreme callousness in the people is visible above everything. Nearby lies the grave of Mulla Atauddin and a mosque. These are situated on the bank of the enormous water reservoir called Dhaldighi. A few Persian - Arabic inscriptions adorn the structure. Around this area there is another very impressive mound called Bhairior. This is a totally destroyed stone built temple. The dressed stones lying around indicate a temple of considerable height. A huge *Amalaka* stone lies embedded in a corner. On the lower part of the slope there is a huge pedestal of an image. On the pedestal lies a huge male figure. There is a Dwarf Bhairava showing his fangs. On another corner, there is the part of a female figure from waist above. She holds various objects in her 16 hands. The entire mound is surrounded by a low lying land which is filled by water during the rainy season. The site at the present is utilized as a temple of Kali. Every year a *Kalipuja* is celebrated lavishly with lots of animal sacrifices mainly of goats.

_Sonapur_: S.K.Saraswati had explored both the banks of the river Chhiramati and had pointed out several archaeological occupation sites as well as objects. He specially mentioned the sites of Patiraj in South Dinajpur and Itahar in north Dinajpur as occupational sites. Smarajit Ghosh has extensively explored the North Dinajpur district. He has pointed out
several important archaeological sites. The village of Sonapur, about 16 k.m. from Raiganj on the National Highway to Malda is a site where wanton destruction is taking place everyday. The village is surrounded by a small rivulet called Gamor. There are small and big mounds scattered all round. The ‘Dhams’ are now being extensively dug out to use as building materials by the callous villagers. Architectural stone pieces, partially broken images, makara symbols, mouths of stone built drains are scattered all over. A 5 feet Pala-Sena Visnu in Sampadasthapanaka pose stands in a bamboo roofed room. The people are very aggressively protective about their ancestral property!!

Besides these two districts the other district which is extremely rich and potential is the district of Malda. The buildings and mosques constructed by the Sultans of Bengal stand with majestic grace. People from all around make it a point to visit these structures throughout the year. In Malda we have the oldest State run Museum of North Bengal. The museum is full of Pre-Sultanate period antiquities. Recently a Buddhist Stupa and a monastery has been unearthed from a place called Jaggibanpur under the Police Station of Habibpur. Hundreds of beautifully decorated terra-cotta plaques have been discovered along with other antiquities. In addition a huge and heavy copper plate of a hither to indefinite King called Mahendrapala has also been discovered. But the district is yet to yield any pre-Pala site as such. No systematic excavation has been conducted to discover the pre-Pala occupational level in Malda, yet. But stray explorations in the district had been conducted by several scholars and were impressed by the area in and around Samshi. In Samshi there are 5 mounds called Kandaran, Bangapal, Damanbitha, Kaimer and Madhubana. Along with the mounds there are huge water reservoirs called Kaladighi, Ranidighi, Bauldighi, Laldighi and Ballabhadighi. The surface of the mounds are covered with reddish gritty soil, From here were reported B.S. ware, N.B.P.W., stamped pottery usually belonging to the Kushana-Gupta times. D.K. Chakraborty had identified two tiny terra-cotta heads belonging to the age of the Kushanas. These are preserved in the Malda Museum. Besides several images of Pala-Sena periods were also found from the area.\footnote{14}

Chaulhati: The district of Jalpaiguri lay mostly on the eastern side of the river Tista. On the western side, close to the Bangladesh border on a small stream called Talma, there is a fort called Prithurajar Garh. Major portion of the fort lies in Bangladesh only a corner lies in the Indian territory. The village of Chaulhati is close to the fort. At a distance of about 1-2 KM. to the east from a brick mound has been discovered the image of a unique human figure\footnote{15} almost in the round. His hands are clasped in Anjali mudra with a lotus within. At the back of his clear shaven head there is a distinct Shikha (bunch of hair). The present writer has identified it with an unknown deceased King, sculpted after the Chola artists who erected images of their Kings and placed them even in temples. The image stands on a Visva Padma and is devoid of any Stela. The influence from south India pushed into Bengal quite strongly with the arrival of the Sena Kings. This could be an example of such influence. A few other such discoveries might strengthen the above idea. There is also preserved 10 Octoalloy images from one and half inches to 5 inches of Pala-Sena school of art. It is a mixed bag i.e. both brahmanical and Buddhist images lies in the small hut of a local peasant belonging to the Rajvanshi scheduled caste.
The famous temple of Jalpesh, was erected during the heyday of the Koch Kingdom. This is off the town of Maynaguri. Around this temple, within a radius of 4/5 KM. there are about 3/4 ruined temple structure. Of these the most impressive is the temple of Bateswar. The temple was built with huge dressed stones which lie in an impressive heap on a mound. The temple shows various phases of construction, the earliest evidence is probably a Gupta door-jam. Then subsequently there was probably a Pala-Sena building activity. Several Pala-Sena images were discovered scattered from here. The last phase was done up by the Koch Kings. There are several bases of brick built structures in and around Maynaguri. One of them probably was a temple of a big Pala-Sena Chamunda image called Pet Kati Mao by the locals. A few kilometers off the NH 34, near by the river Jaldhaka, there is the best specimen of a stone built, square temple, the top is only missing. This temple of Purva Dahar is situated near a huge water reservoir from where two Vishnupattas were recovered. Close to the temple, there is a brick built structure betraying its Sultanate origin. It is a rectangular structure whose roof (dome?) has disappeared. The temple stands on a huge flat mound.\textsuperscript{16}

The most impressive archaeological site of North Bengal is the Mendabari ruins bordering on the district of Koch Bihar, in the deep Chilapata forest. There lies a Gupta period forest fortress. The first excavator, P. C. Dasgupta\textsuperscript{17} considered it as an Aranya Durga, as mentioned in the Arthasastra of Kautilya as Vana Durga (Artha Adhyaya III 29 Prakarana). The evidence discovered from the earliest phase indicate a pronounced Gupta time bracket. Later excavation was conducted at the site which recalled a Pala temple and lastly there was evidence of Koch reconstruction. The site is close to the river Torsa. A small rivulet Bania comes and surrounds the ruin. So it is also called Bania ruins in the local area.

The river Jaldhaka is called Manshai in its journey down. By the side of this river there is the huge tumulus mound, called the Rajpat. The Archaeological Survey of India had conducted excavation for a few seasons.\textsuperscript{18} It was surrounded by boundary walls, not one but many. The mound was occupied from the 9th to the 15th century. The few images that were unearthed did not belong to the Pala-Sena style of art. The material is a kind of spotted whitish stone.\textsuperscript{19}

The eastern part of the river Tista was the arena of the Koch-Kings from the fifteenth century onward. Their construction spree included both the sides of the river Tista. The Gupta site at Chilapata might indicate its close proximity to the Brahmaputra valley. The evidence of Daha Parbatiya door jam, one of the best samples of Gupta art, at a place near Tejpur, is no doubt a pointer.\textsuperscript{20} The Koch King Naranarayan, constructed the Kamal Ali road and the King challenged the Ahom Kings. He constructed a temple at the sacred site of Kamakhya and struck coins like his father.

The district of Darjeeling mainly lies on the mountaneous terrain. Innumerable Neolithic stone tools have been discovered fromKalimpong since 1924. A.H. Dani had classified the tools preserved in the British museum. Later the Department of Archaeology had conducted field surveys. The date is yet to be determined. No evidence of early ancient history has yet been discovered from this district.
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References:


   "The Mahananda marks the western limit of the Barind tract and the distribution of the Rajbanshi population of North Bengal". The Mahananda plains, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2001, p.58.


9. The list is a long one :
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15. Now preserved in the Museum of the University of North Bengal.

17. Dasgupta, P.C., 'Aranya Chhaya Durge' (in Bengali), State Archaeology Department, West Bengal, 1961.

