

## 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<sup>1</sup>. 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<sup>2</sup> they inhabited the eastern side of the river *Mahananda*. Later *D.K. Chakraborty* held the similar opinion<sup>3</sup>. 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 *Kalindri* 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 plains 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 *Kalindri* 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*.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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*”<sup>6</sup> eulogises the greatness of the river. The other rivers that find mention in the early medieval text of *Ramacharita of Sandhyakaranandi* 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 *Kalindri* 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 1943<sup>7</sup>. 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 copper<sup>8</sup> 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*.<sup>9</sup>

**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 Sengupta*<sup>10</sup> 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 *Bhaior*. 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 around. 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*<sup>13</sup> 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 through out 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 monestary 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*, *Damanbhita*, *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.<sup>14</sup>

**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<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> considered it as a *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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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 from *Kalimpong* 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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