

Arts and Crafts of Early Medieval Bengal: A Cultural Paradigm

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In ancient time river system has split up Bengal into four broad divisions. To the north of the main Ganges and the west of the Brahmaputra lies the vast area known broadly as Varendrabhumi which comprises the Rajshahi division of Bangladesh, the Jalpaiguri division of West Bengal and the peripheral areas in Assam and Bihar. Part of this region also constituted the ancient land Pundravardhana³. The Pundras exercised control over the region lying between the north of the Ganges and the west of the Brahmaputra. In the later Vedic texts⁴ and in the Great Epic the name Pundras have been mentioned. It is stated in the *digvijaya* section of the Mahabharata that the Pundravardhana is situated to the east of Mongyr⁵. The evidence of Gupta epigraphs and the records of the Chinese writer also corroborate this opinion. The capital of Pundradesa became Pundravardhana. It also referred to the city of Pundravardhana. Varendra Mandala was the famous region of north Bengal. In the Ramacharita⁶ of Sandhyakaranandi, it is stated that Varendri Mandala was situated between the Ganges and the Karatoya River. This is supported by Kavyamimamsa of Rajshekhara, who places the Pundra country in the east along with Pragjyotisha and Tamralipta. According to the Divyavadana,⁷ Pundravardhana or the country of the Pundras, was the eastern boundary of the Middle country. The Sumhas or the Radhas inhabited the area lying to the western part of the Ganges. It was known as ancient Radha. The Vangas inhabited the area lying between the Bhagirathi in the west, the Padma, the lower Brahmaputra and the Meghna in the east corresponding to the ancient kingdom of Vanga, possibly Gangaridei of the classical writers. The poet Kalidasa places the Vangas amidst the stream of the Ganges. In some Jaina works, the regions to the west of the Bhagirathi such as Tamruk, is included in Vanga. But Vanga proper was restricted to the Eastern part of the Gangetic delta. In the east of Meghna, was ancient kingdom of Samatata corresponding to modern Chittagong divisions. The territory was mentioned in Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta and other records.

Though agriculture played a predominant part in different areas of Bengal's economy, in ancient time, 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 luxury.⁸

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 which 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 the 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 Rahulabhadra who was a pupil of Haribhadra, a renowned Nalanda scholar and a contemporary of king Dharamapala (770-815 A.D.). The movement of the levellers started by Rahulabhadra 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 aggrandizement. A weak ruler anywhere was a signal for aggressive wars and usurpation. This raised the demand of warlike 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 lower class in the society and thereby upheld the condition of the working class. By complete merger of foreign tribal habits, customs, 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 become unrestrainedly exogamous in disregard of caste injunctions⁹. 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 receiving of foreign culture into the national life and the resulting syncretism greatly served to promote the status and living condition of 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 flourished 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 Arthasastra,¹⁰ it was already a well established industry. Four varieties of the textile commodities produced in early Bengal were Kshauma, dukula, patrona and Karpasika. Kshauma probably denoted linen of coarse quality and its centers of production were Pundravardhana and Benaras. Dukula was the

finer quality of linen and its centers of manufacture were East and North Bengal, both of which were the prominent centers of textile industry from very early time, probably before the beginning of the Christian era. The nature of patronage is not known. It was probably wild silk and the centers of its production were Magadha, Pundra and elsewhere. *Karpasika* was the cotton fabric and those were manufactured in various parts of India.¹¹

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. According 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 plied lucrative trade in cotton goods.¹²

Another important industry that attained importance during the period was sugar. Bengal was probably one of the earliest homes of sugarcane cultivation. It has been pointed out by Susruta that Paundraka canes were noted for the yielding of large quantity of sugar. Marco polo witnessed that sugar was one of the most important commodities of export from Bengal.¹²

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 Irda copper plate of Nayapala of the kamboja dynasty in the tenth century A.D. records the grant of a village in the Dandabhuktimandala of the Vardhamana bhukti 'along with salt' pits (Lavanakarah)¹³. On the other hand, Ramapala copper plate Srichandra of the 11th century A.D.¹⁴ and the Belava plate of Bhojavarman of 12th century A.D.¹⁵ record the grant of the village in Pundravardhana bhukti 'along with salt' (sa-lavanah). But it should be mentioned in this connection that salt is not mentioned in any of the grants of the Pala and Sena kings. It may possibly be because the manufacture of salt though practiced 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 natures 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 karmakaras were, according to the *Brihad-dharma Puran*, included within the Uttama-sankara group. Agriculture being the profession of the majority, the service of the Karmakara was in great demand. Besides, the royal authority waged incessant warfare, where the Karmakara played a vital role. Some arrow heads and

spear heads of iron have been unearthed in Paharpur excavation¹⁶. The high standard of metal casting may be seen in the gold plated image of Manjusri from Balaidhan mound near Mahasthan. It is undoubtedly one of the finest pieces of bronze icons discovered in northern and eastern India.¹⁷ The image has been dated to the artists of later period like that of the Pala-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 Visvarupa-Sena, son of Kesavasena, as it was thought earlier.¹⁸

The pottery making was also an important means of subsistence of a group of people of Bengal. The kumbhakaras also belonged to the Uttamasankara group. Among all the industries pottery was probably the oldest. The earliest of its specimen in Bengal has been excavated in Bangad which represents the Maurya-Sunga period. Terracotta images of this style have been unearthed from the excavation.¹⁹ The excavation at Mahasthan also reveals the same tradition. A number of Gupta style potteries have been discovered in its early level²⁰. The whole series of terracotta plaques have been found at Paharpur. 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 sorrow, happiness and desire in these plaques. A large number of storage jars, lotas, cooking utensils, saucers and dishes of the 8th and 9th century A.D. have been unearthed at paharpur²¹. The making of bricks may also be mentioned here. The inscriptions from the Gupta period onward show that innumerable devakulas were built. As there was large scale building activity during the Pala-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 carpenters who are included within the Madhyama-Sankara group of the Brihad dharma Purana.

Two other categories of craftsmen were the worker's 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 centers of the sculptors' art in the province. Side by side with the stone carving, wood carving and carpentry also appear to have been practiced 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, ships and wheel carriages.

Jewellery also provided occupation to a considerable group of metal workers as it was the fashion of the rich to use gold and silver ornaments made of pearls and many other precious stones. The Deopara inscription of Vijayasena mentions "flowers made of precious stones, necklaces, ear rings, anklets, garlands and golden bracelets "worn by the wives of the servants of kings and the jewellery worn by the temple girls. The Naihati

Copper Plate of Vallalasesna refers to necklaces of pearls worn by ladies of royal blood. The Ramacharita mentions "jeweled anklet-bells", "charming ornaments set with diamonds, lapis-lazuli, pearls, emeralds, rubies and sapphires"²². According to Tabaqat – I – Nasiri "golden and silver dishes" were used in the palaces of Lakshmanasena.²³

Another important industry was ivory making. The Bhatera plate of Govinda – kesava mentions ivory workers (dantakara) by name²⁴, while the Edilpur plate of Visvarupasena refers to palanquins supported by staffs made up of elephant's tusk.²⁵ 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, 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 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 as 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 organisation known as trade and craft guilds which are referred in the early Smriti literature. Reference to the trade and craft guilds in Bengal in the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. has been made in the Damadarapur copper plates of Kumara Gupta and Buddha Gupta of the Later Gupta dynasty. The important position occupied by the nagara Sreshthi (Guild president), Prathama Sarthavaha (chief merchant), Parathama Kulika (the chief artisan) and the Parathama kayastha in the local administration prove the fact that the guilds played an important part in industrial life in Bengal. The nagara sreshthin, 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 sarthavaha, the chief merchant represented the kayasthas as a class or might have been a government official in the capacity of a chief secretary of the present day²⁶. The chief of important guilds commanded great respect and authority in society. The Deopara inscription refers to Sulapani who was the head of artisans of Varendri. He was so well regarded and respected that, by common consent, he became Chudamani (crest Jewel) amongst Varendra's artisans. As he owed his reputation to his perfection as a craft man, the king honoured him by conferring on him the title of Ranaka. In classical literature the word chudamani has been used by renowned poets like Kalidasa, Harsha etc. to describe persons outstanding in their act or profession. B.P. Majumder holds that the ruler of the period conferred on Sulapani the title of *ranaka*.²⁷

Nevertheless the position of the guilds was not as sound in early medieval India, as it had been in the ancient period. There were some factors that worsened the position of the guilds at the 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.

Notes and References

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