

## Chapter 1

# **INTRODUCTION**

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## INTRODUCTION

It is worthwhile to begin by having a brief look back at the history of ancient Bengal and also about the history of North Bengal. Ancient Bengal certainly formed a part of the *Prācyadeśa* or the eastern country. Although it is not at all easy to define the geographical expanse of the region *Prācyā* in terms of the modern demarcations that we are acquainted with, we do have some classified historical data to draw a rough sketch. Ancient literary sources differ with each other over the boundaries of the eastern country constituting sub-regions that could or could not have formed a part of this region. Sources like Boudhyāna's *Dharmasūtra* (Olivelle, 1999) and Manu (Dutt, 1909) concedes *Prayāga* as the western boundary of the *Prācyā*, while the commentary on the *Vātsyāyanasūtra* (Burton & Arbuthnot, 1985) pushes it farther east to the sub-region named *Aṅga*, which roughly corresponds to *Bhāgalpur* in *Bihār* and its adjoining areas. The *Mahābhāgya* and the *Divyābadāna* mention *Kajāṅgala* as the western boundary of the *Prācyā*. (Cowell, & Neil, 1886) The inhabitants of this region were the *Puṇḍras*. The term *Puṇḍra* means both; a cast of ancient Bengal and a place, which was inhabited by the *Puṇḍra* caste. The Greek classical writers mention the people of the *Gangāridae* and *Prāsii* as the *Puṇḍras*. The first literary reference of *Puṇḍra* is found in *Taittirīo-Brāhamaṇa*, (Sastry, 1921) it describes them as the demons living at the extreme east of the *Aryanland*. The *Śhunḥa-śepa* legend describes the *Puṇḍras* as the neighbor and tribe relative to the *Andhras*, *Shabar*, *Pulind* etc.

The region as is well-known formed part of the ancient region called *Puṇḍravardhana*. Even during the life time of the Buddha *Puṇḍradeśa* was known to the people of other regions of India. An ancient Buddhist work named *Bodhisattvāvadānakalpālātā* claims that the Buddha himself had visited *Puṇḍra* as he was invited by *Sumāgadhā*, one of his early female disciples married to a man from *Puṇḍra*. (Vaidya, 1959, p. 93) In the *Mahābhārata* we find mention of king *Bāsudeva* of *Puṇḍra* who sided with the *Kauravas* during the great *Bhārata* war. *Puṇḍra* figures in the *Jātaka* stories, the *Arthaśāstra* of *Kouṭilya*, the *Purānas* and several other

literary sources. As to the question of archaeological sources throwing light on the ancient region, present scholar would humbly mention that the present study itself essentially deals with numerous such sources. The sources ascertain the fact that the region became quite prosperous as early as in the Mauryan period and this had also set in motion the process of urbanization quite early in the region and by the time Mauryan overlords established their hold over Puṇḍravardhana. There were towns of considerable size grown up. Archaeological excavations at Bangarh near the modern town of Gangarampur in South Dinajpur district have unmistakably confirmed the existence of a walled city of a considerable size in the area during the Mauryan period. Present scholar pointed out that Asuragarh near Dalkhola town of North Dinajpur is also an ancient site of the pre Mauryan and Mauryan origin.

### **Study Area (Map 1)**

The ancient and medieval archaeological sites of northern Bengal are located mainly in three districts, viz. Malda, North Dinajpur and South Dinajpur. So, the present study is based to a great extent on findings from the sites and remains of these three districts of west Bengal. Discussion of our area of study would not be complete without mention of the fact that the districts we have taken up for investigation do not alone constitute the ancient Puṇḍra region. Dinajpur (East), Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna and Rangpur districts of Bangladesh, subdivided into several smaller administrative units in recent times also formed part of the ancient Puṇḍra region. These districts are contiguous to our area of study. In ancient times, they shared the same socio-economic and political environment. The ancient river Mahananda forms the western boundary of the region and extends up to the river Karatoya in the East. This region is almost identical with the Varendra region of the Pāla and Sena inscriptions of early medieval times. This region is washed by several ancient rivers, mostly tributaries of the rivers which ultimately pour out their water to the Ganges forming the southern boundary of Puṇḍravardhana. Such rivers were the lifeline for the urban centers engaged in trade and commerce, and rendered fertile the vast agricultural fields by their silt deposits. So Puṇḍranagara on the Karatoya (Bangladesh), Bangarh on the Punarbhava, Asuragarh on the Mahananda and Gouḍa on the Ganges and several other urban centers owed their life and prosperity to the swift and navigable rivers

connecting them with vast regions in northern, eastern and north-eastern India. The suggestion is that there was continuous maritime link between Puṇḍra and the ancient port of Tāmralipta near the shores of the Bay of Bengal is not at all farfetched since it is the Ganges that flows down to the sea washing the regions like Magadha, Mithilā, Puṇḍravardhana and Rādhā. (Map 2)

## **Scope of Research**

The scope of the study therefore extends of several aspects of the regions; growth in terms of economy, society, politics for a millennium and a half year. If the Maurya, Suṅga and Kuṣāna periods witnessed the dominance of the cities like Puṇḍravardhana, Koṭivarṣa, Kandarana and Asuragarh, the Gupta period saw the rise of Gauḍa on the Ganges. The flow of urban life in Puṇḍravardhana did not come to an end there. Still more cities flourished in the region. Thus, Rāmāvati on the river Mahananda, Madnāvati on the Brahmani, Kandarana on the Mahananda continued to cater to the requirements of the flourishing populace of *Puṇḍra* with their geo-political thrust.

The unique position of *Puṇḍra* provides us with wide scope of study and research. It is a region which is served by network of rivers like the Ganges, Mahananda, Atreya, Puṇarbhava, Karatoya, Kalindi, Tangan, Nagar, Chiramati, Kulik etc. that contributed to the growth of civilization in the fertile delta of Bengal. The works of some eminent scholars as well as the Archaeological Survey of India led to the discovery and identification of some important archaeological sites: 1) Paharpur (Rajshahi), 2) Vasubihar (Bogra), 3) Bangarh (South Dinajpur), 4) Mahasthangarh (Bogra), 5) Nandadirghi, 6) Gauḍa, and 7) Pandua (Malda) etc. within the geographical boundary of ancient Puṇḍra.

Though macro level works on archaeology of this area have been made, micro-studies are still meager in respect of the little known ancient sites of these three districts. Even where such studies have been carried out, little attention has been given to the informal knowledge of history of this area. In view of the above deficiencies, this study has been undertaken. The present work is expected to explore the untold and even neglected history of the area.

## **Objectives of Research**

Objective of the research is to reveal the settlement pattern in the three district of North Bengal (Malda, North and South Dinajpur) in terms of history, geography, society, culture etc. This study, primarily, intends to focus on the central place aspects of Bangarh (Dakshin Dinajpur), Amati (North Dinajpur) and Asuragarh (North Dinajpur), West Bengal. Bangarh, situated 23 km north-west of Balurghat (Head quarter of South Dinajpur District), the excavated ruins from this place put Bengal on the archaeological map of ancient regions of India where civilization flourished quite early. Known variously as *Koṭivarsa*, *Soṇitapura*, *Umāvana* and *Devikoṭa*, this city rose to prominence in the Mauryan period. Amati, situated about 37 km south from Raiganj (Head quarter of North Dinajpur District), seems to be the site of the capital city of Bengal founded by Rāmapāla, the Pāla king in the late eleventh century. The findings from Asuragarh and the morphology of Asuragarh proves that it was a contemporary site of Bangarh and Mahasthangarh (Bangladesh). These settlements are encircled by many minor sites flourished at deferent point of time. In this thesis, the central place theory was applied on these three different archaeological sites to pursue the relevant factors of central place issues in archaeological context.

## **Time Limit**

The time limit of the thesis is from c. 300 BCE to c. 1200 CE. The entire ancient time, particularly the Hindu period, has been taken as time limit of the dissertation. The study starts with the finding of the Mauryan Brāhmī inscription of Mahasthangarh to the end of Sena power. Further, the time span of the proposal is bigger one, because of its archaeological leaning. Extant remains of archaeology always, it is seen, take longer span of time for indicating any changes in the form and nature.

## **Previous Study**

The colonial masters as part of their official duties brought the archaeological remains of the study area under discussion in the first half of the nineteenth century. The study in the colonial period was started in the 1780s with Charles Wilkins, who

published translation of *Bhagavat-geeta* or 'Dialogue of Kreeshna and Arjoon'. In the subject of archaeology, the colonial administrators were interested in translating of ancient epigraphs not in field archaeology. Wilkins first read the inscriptions of the Pāla period found from Bengal and Bihar. He was followed by Broadly, Beglar, Kittoe, Cunningham, Anderson, Bloch, Buchanan, Addinson, Westmacott, Blochman, Kielhorn, Marshman, Strong, Creton, Monahan, Dalton, Edwards, O'Malley, Stapleton and so on. Some scholars of Indian origin, R. Chanda, A. K. Maitra, R. Chakravarti, R. D. Banerjee, K. N. Dikshit, R. C. Majumdar, K. G. Goswami and so on, also made valuable contributions in the study. In the post colonial period systematic studies were carried out by D. C. Sircar, N. R. Roy, B. C. Law, P. Niyogi, S. Hossain, D. K. Chakravarti, D. C. Sen, M. S. Bhattacharjya, M. Bhattacharya, G. Sengupta, S. Panja and so on. Little but valuable efforts have been made by the regional historians like H. Sarkar, A. Roy, A. Basak, D. Roy and many more.

## **Methodology**

The present study is designed to bring to light hitherto neglected archaeological sites of the ancient and early medieval period of the three districts of North Bengal (Malda, North and South Dinajpur). For the purpose of this research work, many materials and sources are collected through field survey and from the government museums, private collections and printed materials. For this, present scholar visited some archaeological sites, Indian Museum, National Museum, State Museums, collection of the private collectors. Oral traditions of the inhabitants of the sites have also collected through interview. The secondary sources for the study have been collected through bibliography.

In the present work, an attempt is made to study

1. How archaeological exploration can help us to locate the Jagaddala Mahāvihāra with more accuracy, keeping in mind the earlier hypothetical observations of some scholars.
2. What were catering factors to the genesis and development of urban sites as evident from the archaeological sites?

3. How the changes in the river courses and water flows brought changes in the morphology of the urban settlement pattern of the region?
4. The history of North Bengal has not yet been framed in chronological manner, particularly after the Suṅga period. Why North Bengal lost its importance during this time?
5. What were the linkages between different settlements? (both waterways and land routes)
6. Why the political epicenters of Puṅḍravardhana had been changed with the span of time?
7. How and when the archaeological sites as mentioned above turned from a vibrant to a moribund state in this part of Bengal?

## **Scheme of Chapters**

The thesis consists of six chapters including the introduction and conclusion. The chapters are

### **I Introduction**

### **II Historical Geography of Ancient Lower Northern Bengal.**

### **III The Wheel of Urbanization and Geopolitics.**

### **IV Political Scenario and Power Structure in Puṅḍra-Varendra.**

### **V The Remains of Cities and Monastic Establishments.**

### **VI Conclusion**

The introductory chapter explains the limit of the study area, aims and objectives of the study, time frame, limitations of the previous study and the need of this thesis.

The second chapter explains the historical geography of the study area. In this chapter, an attempt is made to discuss the changes in territorial divisions,

nomenclature, administration and their impact on the social life of the people of the study area. The study area was anciently known by different names in the changing scenario of time. Puṇḍravardhana, Matsya, Gauḍa and Varendra were the old name of our study area. Right from the time of the Vedas, this part of land was an important centre of human activities, till today. In respect of the ancient geography of our study area that even in medieval times a part of the area was known as Matsyadeśa. We ought to throw lights on this interesting issue as there are different claims about the identification of *Matsya*, regarded as a Mahājanapada.

In the third chapter, the process of urbanization and geopolitics of the study area have been discussed. Here the central place theory is applied to identify the urban patterns of the archaeological sites. The process of urbanization, as the archaeological sources suggests, was started right from the time of the period of second urbanization of India. The archaeological data identified that the study area was a part and parcel of the ancient Gangetic valley urbanization of North India. In this chapter, the process of Aryanization has been examined as a tool of urbanization. This area was full of rivers. Among them, some rivers are already lost (like river Kanchan) and some are going to be dead (like river Chiramati). But in ancient time this area was well connected with rest of the subcontinent. Ecology of the Himalayan region has been of great importance in such changes in the natural system. The relation between river and civilization is going to be scanned in this research work.

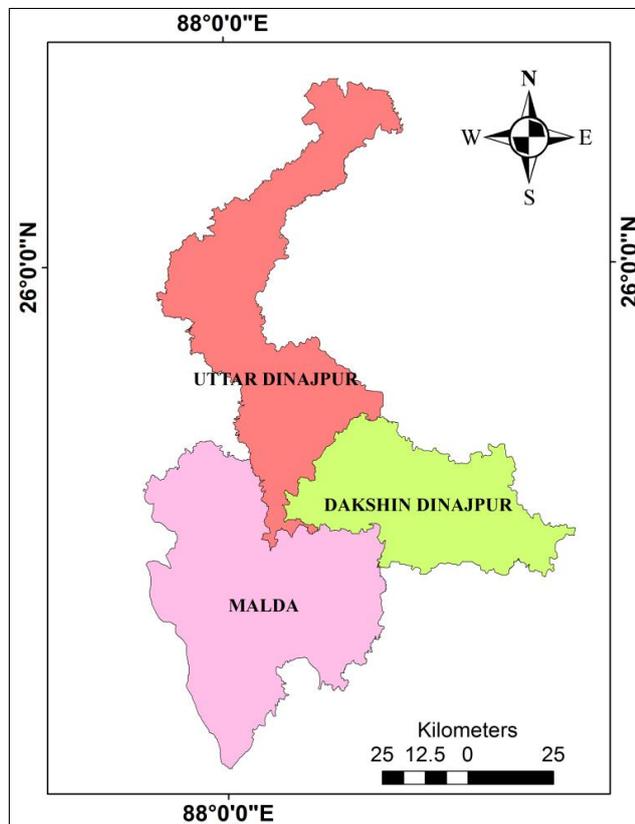
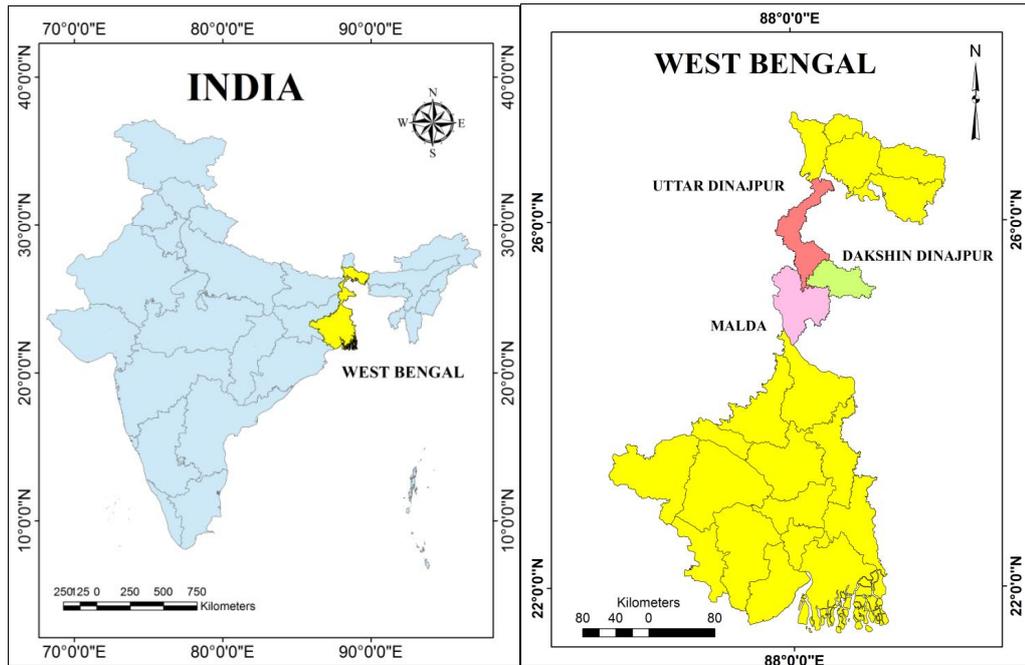
The fourth chapter deals with the political scenario and power structure of the study area. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to fill up the gaps of the obscure sides of the political history of North Bengal. The study area, at least from the beginning of the Vedic age, was an important political centre in the pan-Indian concept. This region had shown many political upheavals and sifting of political centre with the span of time. In the Mauryan period, we found Kōṭivarṣa and Mahāsthāngarh as important settlements. But after Śuṅga period this place were abandoned for quite some time. In the sixth–seventh century CE, under the stewardship of Śaśānka city like Pichlī took the place of political gravity in respect of its counterparts. In the twelve century CE after the Kaivartya revolt under Divyok, the political epicenter was changed from Gauḍa to Rāmāvātī, a newly set up city by emperor Rāmapāla. The reason, for this type of changing political scenario clearly

indicates the typical anti-incumbency tendency of the people of the region. Anti-incumbency force perhaps was a common factor in the history of all ages.

Chapter fifth is the backbone of this thesis. This chapter is the result of the scholar's years long field survey reports. A site-to-site survey has been made to examine the local legends, topography, lithopedo character, spatial effects, treasures of antiquities and many more. In this chapter scholar tried to focus on the new findings only, which have not yet been discussed. In eastern India, especially in Bengal we find several villages with similar name like *Jagadala*, *Jagaddal*, *Jaggadal*, and *Jagaddalla*. In the vicinity of Rāmavati, the last Pāla capital, we have three villages namely *Jagaddal*, *Jagadala*, and *Jagaddalla*. In the present work an attempt would be made to identify the location of the *Jagaddal Mahāvihāra* of twelve century CE. The said area had many urban centers. Some sites like Bangarh, Mahasthangarh, and Paharpur are already in focus. But some sites like Raniganj, Kandarān, Nandadirghi, Madnabati, Daharol, Kachra, Eshnail, Aminpur, Katashan, Dehabandh, Patiraj, Adhyakhanda, Ganeshvita, Mahatur, Jagdalla, Mahendra, Surohor, Harirampur, Tapan, Itahar, Bhadrashila, Bankur, Sonapur, Tamasari Mathbari, Yogipara, Baigungaon, Shadea, Dhulohar, Dwiprajar Dighi, Bindol, Barogram, Tapan Dighi, Bhaior, Mahipal dighi, Asuragarh, Bairhatta and Karan Dighi, Ketrabari are still either unexplored or little explored. It seems that, these sites with their system of communication were linked through net work of road and waterways.

The sixth chapter is the conclusion of the thesis, which summarizes the important findings of the study area. It also discusses the value of the study and also the weaknesses.

# Map 1: Study Area



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