

Identifying the Geographical Boundaries of Puṇḍravardhana

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[Editorial Note: In this paper, the author has tried to identify the geographical boundaries of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* based on both epigraphic and archaeological sources. The author claims to identify some of the places mentioned in various copper plate inscriptions pertaining to the early medieval period. Particularly, the mention of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* in various inscriptions has been identified by him with an area of undivided Purnea district and northern parts of present Malda district. However, a more intensive archaeological endeavour and comparative study of mounds, ceramics, artefacts are a desideratum to reach to such a conclusion. D.A.]

Abstract: *The land of Puṇḍravardhana witnessed the emergence of human settlement much early. This area must have obtained an urban status not later than third century BCE and underwent further development till the Pāla-Sena period. This region is fed by several rivers, their tributaries and ultimately pour out their water to the Ganges. Such rivers were the lifeline for the urban centres engaged in trade and commerce and rendered fertile and vast agricultural fields by their silt deposits. Generally, we believe that the land between the river Karatoya in the east and Mahananda in the west was known as the Puṇḍravardhana bhukti. This is almost identical with the Varendra region of the Pāla-Sena inscriptions. The motive of this paper is to frame out the geographical boundaries of Puṇḍravardhana bhukti more precisely on the lights of new archaeological findings and interpretations.*

Keywords: *Puṇḍravardhana, Varendra, Vyāgrataṭī, Koṭivarṣa, Māthraṇḍiyā, Anuliya Copper Plate Inscriptions.*

Boundary of an area or state in a modern sense was not quite known to ancient India. We frequently record that the natural boundaries like river, mountain were used as marks of delimitation and acknowledged by the administration. In some cases, where natural boundaries were not available, as the inscriptions reflect, a date palm tree can be treated as a mark of the limit of a land. (Kielhorn 1897; Maitreya 1319 BS)

In ancient and medieval times, the sub-regions of our study area had different names, now erased from the memory of the common people. Ancient Bengal as a whole, was known to the classical Greek writers as *Gangaridae* and *Prasii*. (Mukharjee 2004: 37) They mentioned the people of the concerned region as the Puṇḍras. In the *Śunahṣepa* legend of the Aitareya-brāhmaṇa, Puṇḍras, who among the hundred sons of Visvāmitra had been cursed by his father to have the lowest caste for their descendants. (Haug 1922: 469-70) In the *Sabhā-parva* of the Mahābhārata (Ch. XXX) mention has been made of Puṇḍras while describing the hill tribes defeated by Bhīma in the battle against Karṇa (the king of Aṅga).

In the Mahābhārata and the Harivaṃśa, (Mahābhārata, *Ādi-parvan*, ch. CIV, vv. 52-5; Harivaṃśa-*parva*, Ch. XXXI. vv. 33-42) the Puṇḍras is claimed to be a descendent of the blind sage Dirghatamas (born of the queen of the demon Bāli) alongside Aṅgas, Vaṅgas, Suhmas and Kalingas. In the epics, the name of the Puṇḍra tribe uttered with many variations, viz., Puṇḍraka, Paṇḍra, Paṇḍraka and Paṇḍrika. The nomenclature of the study area has been changed to Puṇḍravardhana with its capital at Puṇḍranagara during the time of the imperial Mauryas (Bhandarkar 1932). Subsequently, this area became a crucial part of the Gupta dynasty and to be referred to as Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. During the early medieval time, particularly after the fall of Śaśāṅka, the first independent king of Bengal, the northern Bengal region was known as Varendra. Though, epigraphically we find the name 'Varendra' in an inscription from South India, dated 967 CE, where a Brahmin was named as *Varendradīyūtikariṇa* and *Gaurchūramaṇi*. (Roy 1414 BS: 116) The epigraphs of the Sena's write the name of the study area as Varendrī¹.

The historical geography of our study area presents some delicate problems. As per the analysis of the boundaries of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* are concerned, it is believed that the ancient river Mahananda forms the western boundary of the Puṇḍravardhana region which extends to the southward course of the Karatoya to the east, the Ganges forming the southern boundary and the northern boundary of the *bhukti* was formed by the Himalaya. Scholars like N. R. Ray pushed the southern boundary of the *bhukti* to the Bay of Bengal. It includes the Sundarban region (Ray 1414 BS: 85). There is a controversy among the scholars regarding the western boundary. In this paper, the author will try to propose some new observations regarding its boundaries on the basis of archaeological evidence and interpretation.

No less confusing is the fact that the land of Puṇḍra also seems to be synonymous with Varendra. This land according to Xuan Zang's account had its capital at Puṇḍravardhana. (Beal 1884: 194) The site of Puṇḍravardhana has been identified with Mahasthangarh on the bank of the river Karatoya² in the district of Bogra (Bangladesh) (O'Donnell 1875; Ahmed 1981). A Mauryan Brahmi inscription³ from Mahasthangarh mentioning a city called *Puṇḍanagala* forms the basis of

¹ The Tarpandighi inscription of Lakshmaṇasena, (Majumdar 1929: 102); The Madhainagar inscription of Lakshmaṇasena (Banerjee, 1913-14: 6-10) mentions *Śrī-Puṇḍravardhana-bhukty-antahpāti-Varendryām*. (II. 39-40)

² Its antiquity has been established by an ancient text the *Karatoyā-mahātma*.

³ This is the earliest inscription of this part of the land so far. After studying this inscription Bhandarkar writes: 'Some ruler of the Mauryan period, whose name is lost, had issued an order to the *Mahāmātra*, stationed at Puṇḍranagara, with a view to relieve the distressed caused apparently by a famine to a people called *Samvamiṅgiyas* who were settled in and about the town. Two measures were adopted to meet this contingency. The first apparently consisted of the advanced of a loan in *gaṇḍaka* coins, and the second of the distribution of *dhānya* or paddy from the district granary. A wish is expressed that the *Samvamiṅgiyas* will thus be able to tide over the calamity. With the restoration of plenty they were asked to return the coins to the Treasury and the corn to the granary.' (Bhandarkar, 1932, p. 123)

this identification. (Bhandarkar 1932: 83-91)

In Gupta land records, Puṇḍravardhana is described as a *bhukti* or province of the Gupta state. This status of *bhukti* was retained till the Sena period with a little variation in the name. We often find Pauṇḍravardhana instead of Puṇḍravardhana in some of the Sena records. The Damodarpur Copper Plate Inscriptions and Dhanaidaha Copper Plate Inscription (henceforth CPI), dating from 143 to 214 of the Gupta era, prove that Puṇḍravardhana was the name of an important and large territorial division in the possession of the Guptas at least from the second quarter of the fifth century to about the middle of the sixth century CE. (Sen 1942: 104) From the time of Dharmapāla it was an important province of the Pālas. The Tarpandighi Grant of Lakṣmansena (Banerji 1914: 6-12), the Madhainagar Grant of Lakṣmansena (Majumdar 1929:106-15) and the Selimpur inscription of the Kamrupa king Joypāla (Basak 1982: 283-95) assign Varendrī within Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. Like the other demarcations of lands of those time, this tract was probably bounded by natural barriers like mountains or large rivers. The north-eastern boundary of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* was the river Karatoya and according to the *Yoginī-Tantra* it was also the western boundary of Prāggyotiṣa (Bhattashali 1935:75). The river Brahmaputra would be taken as the eastern boundary of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. A line drawn straight eastwards from modern Rangpur to meet the Brahmaputra would be an excellent imaginary boundary between this portion of Prāggyotiṣa and Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. The districts of Dacca, Faridpur and Bakarganj were also included in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. (Bhattashali 1935: 73-114)

As per the traditional narration is going, the northern boundary of the *bhukti* was formed by the Himalayas. The word *Himavachchhikhara* of Damodarpur plate 4 of Budhagupta of 214 GE (533-34 CE) hinted this point. The word is repeatedly used in 5th and 10th lines of the grant. Basak translated these lines as ‘...this *śrēshṭhin* Ribhupāla thus “In Ḍōṅgā-grāma in Himavachchhikhara (lit. the summit of the Himalaya) 4 *kulyavāpas* of *aprada* lands were formerly given by me to Kōkāmukha-svāmin and Śvētavarāha-svāmin, in the hope of benefit to myself (and) for the sake of increasing religious merits” and

It is a fact that by him were given in Himavachchhikhara eleven *kulyavāpas* of *aprada* lands to Kōkāmukha-svāmin and Śvētavarāha-svāmin; and so application has been properly made (by him) for *vastu*-land to be given to him in the neighbourhood of those cultivated lands for the purpose of building temples and store rooms. (According to) the prevailing custom of sale of one *kulyavāpa* of land for 3 *dināras*... (Basak 1920: 140)

The plot Ḍōṅgā is placed by the scholars in the Himalayan region of Nepal and identified with Vārāhaketra on the confluence of the river Kokā and Kauśikī. (Sinha 1977: 43)

In this case, it would be quite amusing to mention that the applicant of the plate #4 was Ribhupāla, Guild President (*nagara-śrēshṭhin*) of Koṭivarṣa. Then the question may arise, why should he buy any plot to build two temples in such a distance from his jurisdiction? In the plate #5, five *kulyavāpas* of land was allotted for the repairing work of these two

temples. What was the legitimate reason for such type of grants? Whereas we find several villages in the vicinity of Bangarh having names like Dānga, Dāngi, Dongi etc. with ancient relics. In all probabilities the word *Himavachhikhare*, during that time, might be used as an allegory for a high mound of the area. As we know, the area of Koṭivarṣa was a fully flourished urban centre much before the time of the Mauryas. So, there was many possibilities of the presence of high mounds in this area. For better understanding we must take the example of Somapura monastery of Naogaon, Bangladesh. (Dikshit 1938) The people of this region often called the un-excavated Somapura monastery as Pahar (hillock). The most important point to note here that the rate for these lands is 3 *dināras*, which was the standard rate for only Koṭivarṣa *viṣaya*. In spite of such debate, one conclusion can be made, in the matter of Ḍōṅgā, that it was an important urban area of Koṭivarṣa *viṣaya* with an immense religious value. Thus, we have no fair reason to put the northern boundary of this *bhukti* to extend up to the Himalaya.

Previous scholars extended the southern boundary of the *bhukti* to the sea of the Bay of Bengal on the basis of unjust identification of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* with the Sundarban region. *Vyāghra* is a Sanskrit word, means tiger. So as the name suggests Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* was a land of tigers. We come to know about this piece of land from two Pāla and one Sena inscriptions. Roy gives an etymological description of the word ‘Vyāgrataṭī’ and allude the Sundarban region (India and Bangladesh) as the present location of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* with *Bāgḍi* as the center point. (Roy 1414 BS: 85) However R. C. Majumdar has some doubt regarding the identification of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala*. The theory that equates the Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* with *Bāgḍi* is not based upon any convincing evidence. (Majumdar 1943: 24) According to the previous researches, all the toponyms mentioned in the Khalimpur CPI (Kielhorn 1897: 243-54) are identified with the places of northern part of Bengal. But only Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* is placed in the far south at *Bāgḍi*. We find another mention of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* in the Nālandā CPI (Shastri 1924: 310-27) of Dēvapāla. Here we also find the mention of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* and its ruler Balavarmana, who acted as *dūtaka* on behalf of Magadhan king. Generally, a *dūtaka* of an inscription has to be a *yuvarāja*. The *dūtaka* of Khalimpur CPI is *yuvarāja* Tribhuvanapāla; (Kielhorn 1897: 245) the *dūtaka* of the Mungir plate is *yuvarāja* Rājyapāla. (Kielhorn 1892a: 253-8) The Nalanda plate refers the importance of the ruler of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* in its v. 22 and v.23. (Shastri 1924: 310-27) In the reign of Dēvapāladēva, Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* was governed by a district ruler called Balavarmana. The way he is praised in the Nalanda plate, as the right arm of the Emperor, would show that he had a higher rank even though he was one of the feudatories of Dēvapāladēva. (Kielhorn 1897: 243-54) He was so important personality that he had his importance not only to his own territory, but to his neighbour’s territories also. He also acted as a *dutaka* in the Rajauna image inscription of Śūrāpāla. (Sircar 1942: 139)

All the places mentioned in the Nalanda plate are identified with some villages of the district of Nalanda, Rajgrha and Gaya districts of Bihar. It would appear from this plate

that the Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala*, not a big area of itself, was an important piece of land from a political point of view and probably lay on the frontier. The Khālimpur CPI records, the king Dharmapāladēva, at the request of his *Mahāsāmantādhipati* Nārāyaṇavarmana, granted four villages to a temple of the God Nunna-Nārāyaṇa, which had been founded by Nārāyaṇavarmana at Śubhasthalī. This inscription of Dharmapāladēva mentions Mahantāprakāśa *viṣaya* as being included within Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala*. (V.31.) *śri-Puṇḍravardhanabhukty-antaḥpāti- Vyāgrataṭī Maṇḍal-samva(mba)ddha-Mahantāprakāśa viśa(sha)yē Krauñchaśvabhra-nāma-grāmō*. Trans: In the Mahantāprakāśa district (*viṣaya*), which belongs to the Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* within the prosperous Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*, is the village named Krauñchaśvabhra. (Kielhorn 1897: 253). Here a *viṣaya* (Mahantāprakāśa) is placed within a *maṇḍala* (Vyāgrataṭī), (Maitreya 1319 BS: 28), which is not familiar in the Pāla administration. Chakravarty identifies many toponyms of this plate in north-eastern part of Malda district, WB. (Chakravarty 1982: 138-41) He locates the Krauñchaśvabhra at the Kauch village of Chanchal, Malda. (Chakravarti 1982: 139) The Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* might be placed on the frontier of Mahantāprakāśa *viṣaya*. After studying these two Pāla inscriptions, it can be concluded that Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* was placed on the east of Nālandā *viṣaya* and on the west of Mahantāprakāśa *viṣaya*. The head quarter of this *maṇḍala* was probably laid in the undivided Purnea district. The district of Purnea also fulfils the reason of the name of the *maṇḍala*, i.e. Vyāgrataṭī. If we go through the district gazetteer of Purnea, we can find that even before few centuries ago this part of land was full of tigers and other animals. (Hamilton 1928) Depredation⁴ of tigers was so severe that the authority had declared prize money to kill those tigers. (Hunter 1976) In all probability, the Kosi must have served the principal water source in Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala*. The Kosi river changes her course frequently with the time and left huge fertile river beds for crops and high grass, which is ideal for an extensive settlement and for tiger also.

The Anulia CPI of Lakṣmanasena is another important source of information for the study area. The toponyms of the plate are not located yet. Though the plate was found from Anulia, but it has close proximities with the inscriptions of Northern Bengal. The Tarpandighi grant is almost similar to Anulia CPI. (Banerji 1914: 6-10). The present author presumes that in some cases of north Bengal, the findspots and the actual places where the inscriptions actually belong are different. Here we can take the example of the Nandapur CPI of Gupta time. This plate was rescued from a village called Nandapur, near Surajgarha in the district of Monghyr. It was fixed on the wall of Burhanath Mahadeva temple. (Majumdar 1940: 53) Majumdar's observation is that the inscription was drafted, engraved,

⁴ Death, caused by wild beasts from 1863 to 1875 are turned by collector as follows: - 12 in 1863, 39 in 1864, 8 in 1865, 13 in 1866, 9 in 1867, 30 in 1868, 7 in 1869, 11 in 1870, 13 in 1871, 23 in 1872, 10 in 1873, 15 in 1874 and 28 in 1875. Total for the thirteen years, 184, or an annual average of 14. (Hunter, 1976: 37)

and issued from northern Bengal, evident not only from the nature of the script but also close agreement of its phraseology with that of Baigrama and other plates of this century discovered in northern Bengal. (Majumdar 1940: 54) Griffiths reported two newly discovered inscriptions of which the Kuddālakhāta CPI of 159 GE is found from a scrap metal shop in Dhaka but it was actually found from Bogra, Bangladesh (Griffiths 2015: 16) and the second one i.e., the Mastakaśvabhra grant of Pradyumnabandhu from Hong Kong in the collection of François Mandeville, who purchased it from a dealer in Milan, Italy. (Griffiths 2015: 27)

In Anuliya CPI of Lakshmaṇasena we also find mentions about Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* and its other toponyms, viz., *Māthraṇḍiyā*, *Mālāmancha-vāṭī*, *Jalapilla* and *Sāntigōpī-śāsana*. The identification of these places will not be possible until proper identification of Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala*. However, the present author has made an effort in this paper to identify these places. This grant mentions,

(Line 34-46): “Be it approved by you that a plot of land (of the village of) Māthraṇḍiyā within Vyāgrataṭī, which is situated in the Puṇḍavardhana *bhukti*, having for its four boundaries of follows, viz., the banyan tree as its boundary on the east, Jalapilla as its boundary on the south, Sāntigōpī-śāsana as its boundary on the west of and Mālāmancha-vāṭī on the north.” (Majumdar 1929: 81-91)

Mālāmancha-vāṭī

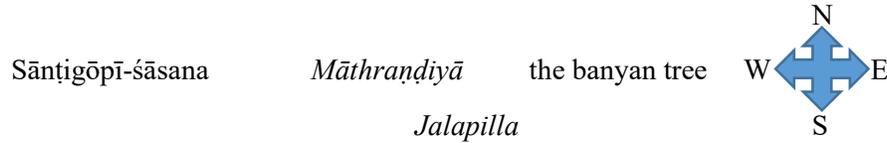


Diagram 1: Plot donated through Anulia CPI

After several visits in Gajol subdivision of Malda district, present author seeks readers' attention to some of its village-names and artefacts. First in this list is village Methrani, which yielded many artefacts of the early medieval period. There is a pond, now called by the villagers as *Pirpukur* have pucca bathing *ghats*, facing four directions, (picture 1) with a temple like structure on the east. On the southeast of Methrani, a village namely Jajilpara is situated, which also have huge antiquities of that time. The Jajilpara CPI of Gopāla II has been found from this place (Misra and Majumdar 1951: 137-44). This Jajilpara village might be the Jalapilla village of the inscription. On the north of Methrani, two villages, viz., Malanipur, Manchampur are situated, which altogether could be the Mālāmancha-vāṭī of the inscription. The place of Sāntigōpī-śāsana in the west has not yet been found. If such identification is substantiated with further evidence, we can justify the reason behind placing the Mahantāprakāsa *viṣaya* under Vyāgrataṭī *maṇḍala* in Khalimpur CPI. Sarkar identifies another site of Khalimpur CPI i.e., Āmrasandika with Amshol of northern Malda. (Sarkar 2015: 88-109) The distance between the Amshol (erstwhile Āmrasaṇḍikā) and Methrani is 10.10 km. The donated village Māthraṇḍiyā can be identified with the Mēthraṇī

village of Gajol subdivision of Malda district of West Bengal on the basis of archaeological remains and corrupted names of its and its surrounding villages. It can easily be assumed that the word *Mēthrāni* is a corrupted form of *Māthraṇḍiyā*. So from the discussion it can be assumed that the Khāri *viṣaya* or *maṇḍala* and the Vyāghrataṭi *maṇḍala* were separate geographical entities in early medieval Bengal. Otherwise, their names would not be figured separately in the inscriptions. Therefore, the tiger infested eastern part of the district of Purnea, lying between the two great ancient rivers, the Kosi and the Mahananda, was in all probabilities known as the Vyāghrataṭi *maṇḍala*. From this discussion this study proposed the southern boundary of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* was not extended up to the Sea, but the Ganges.

However, the problem is yet to resolved with regard to the western boundary. The Tīra *bhukti* and Śrīnagara *bhukti* were placed on the western side of the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. Thus, the problem is to find out the boundary between the Tīra *bhukti* and Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* on the north of the river Ganges. (Bhattashali 1935: 75-6) If we accept the probability of the Vyāgrataṭi *maṇḍala* being included in Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*, lying in the district of Purnea, then the Kosi is to be regarded as the boundary between Tīra *bhukti* and Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. We have much archaeological evidence that the entire course of the River Bhagirathi formed the boundary between Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* and Vardhamāna *bhukti*. So, the land between the river Karatoya, Brahmaputra, Ganges, Bhagirathi, Kosi and Himalaya would be identified with the area of Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*.



Northern *ghat* of Pirpukur, Methrani, Gajol, Malda (Photo collected by the author)

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