

The Delineation of Socio-Cultural Ethos of Early Medieval Bengal with Special Reference to Northern Bengal: Based on Literary Sources

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Abstract:

The ancient and early medieval Bengal was constituted of various geo-cultural and geo-political units of which Pundravardhana, Varendra, Radha, Vanga, Samatata, Vardhamana, Dandabhukti, etc. are of prime importance. The literature of a particular historical period reflects the image of its polity, society, economy, religion, and culture. In the context of early medieval Bengal, the literary sources can be grouped into categories. The first group constitutes the Brahmanical texts, among which mention should be made of the Puranas, namely the 1. Bhaddharmapurana and the 2. Brahmaivaivartapurana. Among the other Puranas, the 3. Mahabagavatapurana and the 4. Devibhagavatapurana are also of particular importance. The other group of texts consists of Sanskrit texts with no clear Brahmanical propagation; rather, these are texts of varied nature, including biographies, agriculture, an anthology of poems, and Sanskrit verses. These essentially consist of 5. Krrissiparasara 6. Subhasitaratnakosa of Vidyakara 7. Saduktikarnarṛta of Sridharadasa 8. Ramacarita of Sandhyakaranandin and 9. Caryagitis.

This paper will attempt to explore the social, economic, cultural, and religious life of Early medieval Bengal in the light of literary sources, also having a broader perspective on the human-nature interaction of the then Bengal. In other words, this paper will also shed light on understanding the secular aspects, environmental issues, socio-cultural elements, and settlement dynamics of the early medieval period through a critical textual analysis.

Keywords: *literary sources, early medieval Bengal, pundravardhana, socio-economic issues, human-nature interface.*

Introduction:

History writing largely depends on a number of sources, and the two broad divisions regarding the early medieval period are literary and epigraphical sources. This paper concentrates on literary sources, which offer substantial insight into the various facets of the period, encompassing societal structures, political developments, economic patterns, religious affiliations, and cultural practices. In undertaking a historical interpretation of any

region, the study of literary sources holds immense value. However, a shared difficulty with regard to ancient and early medieval literary sources, especially in the case of South Asia, is a chronological barrier, as they were written over a considerable period and also include later interpolations. Thus, they present a composite image of a society transforming a broad time frame, rather than a precise depiction of a society at a fixed point in time. Additionally, their content is mostly metaphorical in nature. Before proceeding to discuss the types of texts examined in this paper, it is essential to first clarify the temporal framework under consideration. The time period with which the paper is concerned, i.e., the early medieval period and its attributes, is a significant aspect. In the study of South Asia's past, the "Early" or "Premedieval" period exists as a well-established, but poorly defined and vaguely understood period. The "Early Medieval" is broadly accepted to have extended from about seventh to thirteenth century C.E. The developments that define the beginning of this particular period involves: the emergence of new political structures in both north and south India, a re-orientation of exchange networks and urbanism across the subcontinent, and the crystallization of distinct regional cultures and identities manifested in the appearance of diverse literature and art. Interestingly, these developments did not occur at the same time and in the same way throughout the sub-continent (Hawkes 2014: 53). In ancient times, the term *Itihaasa* (history) was used in Bengal and elsewhere in a more extensive way. It took under its purview a variety of literature like *puranas*, *dharmasatras*, *akhayikas* (anecdotes or stories or an account of divine and human beings), and *udaharanas* (examples of typical stories, biographies, or events). But, gradually, the term *Itihasa* changed its connotation. It, by and large, started to be used as a record of past events or occurrences. By the concept of Romila Thapar, "*Itihasa*" literally means, 'thus indeed it was', and has come to be used now as 'history', but earlier it was not history in any modern sense of the term (Thapar 2013: 55).

This paper aims to examine a range of literary sources related to early medieval Bengal, with a specific focus on the sub-region of Northern Bengal. It further aims to bring out the information embedded within these texts to facilitate a more comprehensive interpretation of the study area. It also seeks to explore the content of these texts to analyse the nature and scope of information that they contain. To ensure an integrated understanding, the study considers a diverse set of texts, encompassing both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical traditions. These sources provide insights into multiple aspects of early medieval development, social, political, economic, religious, and cultural. This study will consider the extent to which the texts under examination specifically pertain to the sub-region of northern Bengal, as opposed to presenting content that reflects a broader regional perspective encompassing Bengal as a whole. Notably, the study anticipates identifying shifts in the content and emphasis of these texts over time, which will contribute to a clearer and more informed understanding of the period.

To attain this objective in the context of early medieval Bengal, the literary sources have been categorised into 1. Brahmanical texts and 2. Sanskrit texts without a clear intention

of Brahmanical propagation (Furui 2020:12-13). The subsequent portion will shed light on the first category, comprising Brahmanical texts, which essentially includes the *Puranas*. For this paper, the *Brhaddharmapurana*, *Brahmavaivartapurana*, *Mahabhagavatapurana*, and *Devibhagavatapurana* have been taken into consideration.

Brahmanical Texts: *Puranas*

In the older Vedic literatures, the word *Purana* usually occurs in connection with *Itihaasa*, and originally it seems to have meant old narrative, without any special significance as to the character of the narrative (Mehendale 1970: 291-2). There are eighteen *Puranas* in total, which are all claimed to have a divine origin and were narrated by *suta* Lomaharsana and his son *Souti* Ugrasravas. Though the initial existence of *Puranas* can be traced back to the *Suutra* period, in the later period, the Puranic material was extensively revised by braahmanna priests who continued to add matters of religious and social importance to the original core (Chakrabarti 2001: 44-45). These periodic additions and revisions were made essentially to hold relevance with the continuous social change (Hazra 1940: 6). As a result, the texts grew into encyclopaedic works by incorporating chapters not only on religious and social matters, but also on law, politics, poetics, grammar, medicine, music and sculpture (Hazra 1969: 246-7). The major difficulty lies in dating their origin with even an approximate degree of certainty. The *Puranas* in the present form do not only contain early incorporations, rather these texts have undergone continuous revisions and re-editions. This re-editing was done in three different ways: by adding fresh chapters, by substituting older ones with new, and by writing new works bearing old titles. With the passage of time, and political, social and religious changes, this tradition demanded changes as Heesterman puts it, “‘the way society formulates and deals with the basic problems of human existence’, and as these problems are insoluble, they are attacked, formulated and dealt with each time anew under a different aspect. Tradition, therefore, is and has to be bound up with the ever-shifting present. Hence, the irritating flexibility and fluidity of tradition” (Heesterman 1985: 10). Romila Thapar has also emphasized the aspect of ‘contemporary requirements’ as a determinant of tradition and consequently its renewability and the need to view it ‘in its various phases’ (Thapar 1987: 8). Even the eighteen *Puranas* must therefore have proved inadequate for brahmanical requirements at some point in time as a result another group of literature, belonging to the same genre but with a different emphasis, came into being. These were the *Upapuranas*, the formation of which, according to Hazra, should be placed approximately between CE 650 and 800 (Hazra 1958: 15). Following the tradition of the *Mahapuranas* orthodox opinion also tried to limit the number of *Upapuranas* to eighteen, but while in the enumeration of the *Puranas* there is almost complete agreement with regard to the titles, this is by no means the case with the *Upapuranas*. The *Upapuranas* are regionally identifiable, and the additions to the *Mahapuranas* also have a local colour to them (Chakrabarti 2001: 49).

As previously discussed, the major issue with the Bengal *Puranas* under discussion is confirming the date and provenance of these texts. However, after an analysis of its content

and interpolations it can be said that the *Brahmavaivartapurana* was composed somewhere between tenth to sixteenth century (Hazra, 1940, p.166), the *Brhaddharmapurana* (Hazra 1969: 461) can be dated between latter half of the thirteenth century, the *Mahabhagavatapurana* (Hazra 1969: 282) belonged between tenth or eleventh century and not later than twelfth century and the *Devibhagavatapurana* (Hazra 1969: 346-7) can be traced back to eleventh or twelfth century. While the *Brahmavaivartapurana* is considered to be one of the eighteen *Mahapuranas*, the other three fall under the *Upapuranas*.

Brhaddharma Purana: Varnasamkara, Popular deities and Rivers

The major markers of early medieval society were the emergence of landed intermediaries, regional states, the proliferation of *jatis*, the issuance of land grants, and the expansion of settlements. The division of society into the four varnas, namely, Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Sudras, was merely a characteristic of a much earlier phase. With the beginning of the early medieval period, a major change in this scenario was observed with the inclusion of innumerable castes and sub-castes. A number of mixed castes also came into being, and it is also in this very context of the unworkability of theoretical varna order that the concept of *jati* becomes important. As Nayanjyot Lahiri says, “*Jatis* were the professional or occupational groups which may have been encompassed broadly within a theoretical varna scheme but which often worked against what is normally understood as the supposed or required varna duties” (Lahiri 1991: 115). Interestingly, an elaborate list of the castes, sub-castes, and mixed castes of early medieval Bengal has been provided in the *Brhaddharmapurana*. It authorizes the Brahmanas to eat meat and fish and divides the non-Brahman population into thirty-six castes (the conventional number of castes in Bengal even today), all described as Sudras. The special emphasis on the sacredness of the river Ganga and the reference to the rivers Padma and Yamuna (in Bengal) also support the close association of this text with Bengal. The text describes how King Vena, bent upon violating the rules of *varnasrama* (caste and order), deliberately created a number of mixed castes by forcing the union of males and females belonging to different castes, which included not only the original four castes but also the mixed castes resulting from their union (Majumdar 1971: 416-7). Now it must be mentioned that although Vena is represented as an opponent to orthodox Brahmanical cults in epics, *smritis* and *puranas*, no other texts made him responsible for the origin of mixed castes as we find in the *Brhaddharmapurana*. The castes that arose out of these promiscuous unions are classified as *uttama*, *madhyama*, and *adhama sankaras*, all having the status of Sudra (Hazra 1963: 437-440). Under the first category i.e., the *uttama sankaras* there are twenty sub-castes, the Karanas who were the scribes, Ambashthas were the vaidyas or physicians, the Ugras who were followers of kshatriya vocations, Magadha, Tantuvaya or weaver, Gandhika Vanik or dealer in spices, Napita or barber, Gopa or writer, Karmakara or blacksmith, Taulika or dealer in betelnut, Kumbhakara or potter, Kamsakara or copper and brass worker, Samkhika or conch shell worker, Dasa or cultivator, Varajivi or betel vine growers,

Modaka or sweet-maker, Maalaakaara or florist, Suta or bard, Rajaputra, Tambuli or betel leaf sellers. The middle category, i.e., the *Madhyama sankaras*, consisted of twelve sub-castes, namely, Takshan or carpenter, Rajaka or washerman, Svarnakara or goldsmith, Svarna-vanika or trader in bullion, Abhira or cowherd or milk man, Tailakaraka or oilman, Dhivara or fisherman, Saundika or vintner, Nata or dancer, Saavaka, Sekhara or Jalika or fisherman. The last category, which came under the *adhama sankaras* or *antyajas* who belonged outside the pale of caste, included nine sub-castes which were, Malegrahi, Kudava or korwa-boatman, Chaṇḍala, Varuda, Taksha or carpenter, Charmakara or leatherworker, Ghantaivi, Dolavahi or palanquin-bearer, Malla (Hazra 1963: 437-9). The list of sankaras or mixed castes given in the *Brahmavaivartapurana* closely resembles that of the *Brhaddharmapurana*, though there are certain differences in details (Majumdar 1943: 420-1). It can be observed that, as per the *Brhaddharmapurana*, a text specific to the Bengal region, all the thirty-six castes and subcastes were classified under the broader category of *Sudras*. Albeit groups like Ugras, who were followers of kshatriya vocations, Gandhika Vanik, Karmakara, Kamsakara, Svarna-vanika, etc, who were traders and in accordance with the four *varna* categorization belonged to the Vaisya group, Gopa and Karanas, who were writers and scribes and Ambashthas, who were the vaidyas, were all designated as Sudras. But an exception can be seen in the case of the Karanas and Ambashthas. With regard to the status accorded to various castes, the Karanas and the Ambasthas are assigned positions of preeminence. The Ambasthas are identified with the Vaidyas, while the Karanas are regarded as the forerunners of the Kayasthas. The Brahmins styled all the thirty-six castes as Sudras, asked them what professions they would like according to their own capacity, and told them that they would be classified by names in accordance with their respective professions.

brahmana ucuh-

sattrimasaj-jatahyah sudra yuyarn bhutas tu sarnkarah/

kah kim karisyate karma sa tad brutam sva-saktitah/

karmanurupa- namano yuyam sarve bhavisyatha// (V.26)

The *Brhaddharmapurana*, which is categorised under *Upapuranas*, gives us a better understanding of early medieval society, religion, and culture. As *Upapuranas* are mainly known for their regional flavours, this text also rightly adheres to a more localised content, which helps us understand early medieval northern Bengal as a region. The form of goddess Kali and the method of her worship with ‘Malasi’ songs is peculiar to Bengal and Assam is described in section I, chapter 23 of *Brhaddharmapurana*, which is indicative of its association with the northern part of Bengal and Assam.

malasi-gana-nirata bhaga lingabhisabdinah /

jitendriya jitahara jita-nidra mahasayah //

puyayeyur mahakalim..... // (V.11-12a)

Significantly, the method of autumnal worship of Durga as given in *Brhaddharma* I. 22 (Shastri 1888-97) is followed in Bengal.

aim ravanasya vadharthaya ramasyanugrahaya ca /

akale tu sive bodhas tava devyah kṛto maya //

bhaga-lingabhidhanais ca srngara-vacanais tatha /

ganam karyam bhojayee ca brahmanams tosayet striyah // (V.I. 22-33)

The text also mentions the *mahaapiṭhas* which are specifically located in Bengal and Assam i.e., the eastern part of the country, Kamarupa in Assam, and Vakresvara in Birbhum district (*Brhaddharma* I.14). We also find the mention of the methods of worshipping major gods like Visnu, Surya, Ganesa, Durga, Laksmi, Sarasvati, Śaṣṭhi, Manasa and others in the waters of Ganga with offerings of different articles and performing certain mudras (*Brhaddharma* II.27). The mention of goddesses Sasthi and Manasa in the *Brhaddharmapurana* further attaches the text with Bengal since these two deities can be specifically seen to be worshipped in Bengal. The variety of mixed castes listed above indicates that such categorization was prevalent in Bengal, as both these texts, the *Brhaddharmapurana* and the *Brahmavaivartapurana*, are generally connected with Bengal in general and its northern part in particular.

Brahmavaivartapurana: The worship of Radha in Bengal

A remarkable feature of modern Vaishnavism, particularly in Bengal, Assam, and Odisha, is the worship of Radha along with Krsna. There are sects outside this area, such as the Visnusvamins and the Nimbarkas, who also worship Radha (Farquhar 1915: 238). But to the Nimbarkas, Radha is the wife of Kṛṣṇa, that is to say, she occupies there the same place as Rukmini. But in Bengal, she is the mistress of Kṛṣṇa; their love is the Parakiyaa-preman, which literally means the love between a man and a woman who is the wife of another person. This phase of the Radha-Kṛṣṇa cult has had a long development and became the accepted dogma of a religious sect only after Caitanya accepted it as part of his creed. All the other earlier texts like the Mahabharata, Harivamsa, Bhagavata, Visnu, Brahma, and the *Brhaddharmapuranas* do not mention the name of Raadhaa, though they deal with the dalliance (*rasakriḍa*) of Kṛṣṇa with the *gopis* on the banks of the Yamuna (Majumdar 1955: 231). It is observed that Radha was described as a gopi or the head of the gopis, even as a lover or premika, and was portrayed in the form of a nayika or female lead. It is only in a few of the later *Puranas* that she acquires the position of a goddess. And in the context of Bengal, the *Brahmavaivartapurana* was meant for the propagation of the Radh cult as it has a dedicated section, i.e., the Prakṛti Khanda, dealing with chapters of the birth of Kṛṣṇa and Radha, worship of Radha and Radha mantra (Chaturvedi 2001). A detailed account of Radha is given in the Sri- Kṛṣṇa -janma-khanda, but a shorter account is given in the Prakṛti-Khanda. It is interesting to note here that it is in chapter XIII, Garga

tells Nārada the mystery of Radha's birth and adds that though they are equal in all respects, she is older than the child Kṛṣṇa. And one of the characteristics of the literature produced in Bengal and also held in popular belief even today is that Radha is much older than Kṛṣṇa, and Radha was previously married (Majumdar 1955: 248-50). The section on Radha mantra in the *Brahmavaivartapurana* does attest to the fact that the status of Radha was upgraded to a goddess in early medieval Bengal. And the Radha cult acted as a driving force of Bengal Vaishnavism. This *Mahapurana* had a great influence on the people of Bengal, which influenced the worship of Radha as a supreme feminine deity. Its connection with northern Bengal is quite evident from the work of A.K. Majumdar. He said, "In Saduktikarnamṛta a verse is ascribed to Abhinanda which describes the dalliance of Kṛṣṇa and Radha in a solitary creeper grove on the banks of the Yamuna due to the dear of Yasoda. He has been identified with Abhinanda, the author of the Ramacarita, and may have flourished in the 9th century" (Majumdar 1955: 234-235).¹

Mahabhagavatapurana: Saktism, Dasa Mahavidyas and Akal Bodhon

The Sakti cult can be considered to have its origin in the fertility cult, the concept of a mother goddess, and *yoni* worship. The concept of Sakti occurs in the Vedas and Upanisads. Yet there is little evidence to suggest the Vedic origin of the Sakti cult. But the period of the epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* (400 BCE to 400 CE) is one of transition in the integration of Goddesses into the Brahmanical pantheon (Singh 2015:45-47). It is during the period of the *Puranas* (400 CE) that goddesses as individual deities and the concept of the goddess became prominent in Sanskrit literature. Between 400 BCE and 800 CE, the cult of mother goddesses was popularised in India. With such drastic changes in the society, the Brahmins felt the need to adjust to the prevailing religious tradition of the indigenous population as a result the primitive goddess tradition was gradually assimilated to Saktism (Chatterjee 2013: 5). Kali as a prominent representation of Sakti was found mostly in northern and eastern India, especially in the present West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Odisha. McDaniel opined that three types of Saktism were found mainly in Bengal – folk/ tribal, tantric/yogic, and devotional /bhakti. Their interconnectedness is also traceable in Bengal (Daniel 2004: 4-6). Worshippers of Sakti formed a new religious sect known as the Sakta sect. Many Sakti *pithas* came into existence all over Assam, Odisha, and Bengal, initially established by devotees as a small shrine and then under royal patronage in the form of a stone structure. These Sakti *pithas* attracted the attention of the devotees of the Sakta cult and other followers. The Smṛiti texts like the Dharmasastras are the most important framework of the Sakta tradition (Banerjee 2004: 125-37). The texts of *Devi Mahatmya*, *Devi-Bhagavata purana*, *Sakta Upanisads* (Devi Upanisad) and *Sakta Upapuranas* are significant. For early medieval Bengal, the *Sakta*

¹ It is believed that this Abhinanda was the resident of Gaur. His father Shatananda was also a poet in Sanskrit literature. It is evident from Udayasundari Katha of Shatananda that Abhinanda has been the court poet of Haravarsha of the Pala dynasty. Some scholars believe that this Haravarsha was synonymous with Devapala.

Upapuranas like *Mahabagavatapurana* and *Devibhagavatapurana* are quite relevant. The *Mahabagavatapurana* proved to be a pivotal source for understanding the religious and societal conditions of Bengal, especially the northern and eastern parts, which were adjacent to Kamarupa. The *Mahabagavatapurana* informs us about the origin of Dasa Mahavidyaas, who are considered to be a group of ten Tantric goddesses who are the ten fierce forms of Sati. The initiation of the worship of these deities can be traced back to the sixth century BCE. Bengal plays an active and pivotal role in such practices due to its great involvement in the worship of Sakti. This text (Kumar 1983) mentions in Chapter 8 that Sati's fruitless attempt to persuade Siva to accompany her to Dakṣa's house or to permit her to go there, the consequent rage turned her to transform into the ten Mahavidyas, i.e., Kali, Tara, Chinnamasta, Bhuvanesvari, Bagala, Dhumavati, Tripurasundar, Matangi, Sodasi and Bhairavi V.V. 57-71.

kali tara ca lokesi kamala bhuvanesvari //
chinnamasta sodasi ca sundari vagalamukhi /
dhumavati ca matangi namanya asam imani vai // (V.V. 57-71)

The untimely awakening of the Goddess Durga, also known as “Akali Bodhan”, which forms the origin of the infamous Durga puja of Bengal, also finds mention in this significant text. Interestingly, an elaborate description of the methods of worshipping the goddess is also found. The Devi mentions her own worship in an earthen image during the three days from *Sukla-saptami* to *Sukla-navami* with the performance of *patrika-pravesa*, *sandhi puja*, *pasu bali*, *satru bali*, and the immersion of the image in a current of water on the *Dasami Tithi* with great merriment (Chapter 45, V.V. 26-36). The method and rituals of Devi worshipped as mentioned in this text are quite similar to the way she is still worshipped in Bengal during the Durga Mahotsav. This information compels us to believe that the origin of Bengal's culture and traditions is majorly rooted in the past and, more significantly, in this context, in the early medieval time phase, which proves to be a major divergent point in the history of Bengal. The accounts of the Ganga, Bhagirathi, and the Padma, and the sacredness attached to all three of them in the Chapters 69-70, give us a fair idea of the major river systems of the concerned period.

sambhut tena padmatikruddha jalamayi babhau //
sa tu purva -disam prayad vistirna-salila nadi /
punya vegavati sindhurajenapi susangata // (VV. 56b-57)

When we talk of the Sakti cult and the initiation of tantric goddesses, it becomes imperative to briefly mention the *Kalikapurana*. The *Kalikapurana* is one among the Sakta *Upapuranas*. Written around the 10th – 11th century CE in Sanskrit, the text celebrates the

power of the divine feminine in her various manifestations centred around the goddess Kamakhya or Kalika. R.C. Hazra believes that the text was composed in Kamarupa, i.e., present-day Assam, and the time period of its compilation is during the tenth or not later than the first half of the eleventh century CE (Shastri 1991: 30). Although the *Kalikapurana* has no direct references or bearings of northern Bengal yet, the worship of Kali and the tradition of Malasi songs as mentioned earlier is largely followed in Bengal. A discernible continuity can be observed between the cult of Goddess Kali in Bengal and the worship of Goddess Kamakhya in Assam, the latter being regarded as another manifestation of Kali.

Devibhagavatapurana: Religious Sectarianism, Tantricism and the Message of Unity

The other text that has been taken into account is the *Devibhagavatapurana*. It essentially deals with the praise of Devii as the highest deity and the Energy (*sakti*) of all gods and others. It consists of twelve *Skandhas* or books, divided into two halves of six *Skandhas* each. A study of the *Devibhagavatapurana* shows that during the early medieval period, the most prominent deities who were worshipped commonly in Bengal society were Visnu, Siva, Surya, Gaṇesa, and Devi, and their worshippers were divided into different classes following different ideas and practices, viz., Vaisnavas, Pancaratras, Sauras, Gaṇapatyas, Saivas, Paasupatas, Kapalikas, Lingadharins, Trisuladharins, Bhairavas, Vamacaras, Kaulakas, and Vaikhanasas V.V. 71-72, 75 and 95-96.

saivas ca vaisnavas caiva saurah saktas tathaiva ca /
ganapatya agamas ca pranitah samkarena tu // (Dbh. VII.39. 26-30)
ye kuastrabhiyogena/
kamacarah pasupatas tatha vai linga-dhariṇah /
tapta-mudrankita ye ca vaikhanasa-matanugah //
te sarve nirayam yanti veda-marga-bahiskrtah / (Dbh.XI.1. 29-31)

Though almost all these sectaries imbibed Sakta ideas more or less, some of them followed the ideas of the Vedas and Smritis, but the majority were guided by the Agamas, i.e., Tantras (Skandha. XII chapter. 14 V.V. 21-24). Among the followers of Agamas again, some did not recognise the superiority of Sakti, while there were many others, especially the Kapalikas, Kaulakas, Bhairavas, Taptamudrankitas and the widely spread Vamacaras, who had no regard for the Vedas and followed non-vedic and anti-vedic ideas and practices (Skandha.V chapter 19 V.V.24-25). Besides these, there were the Bauddhas (including the Cina-marga-ratas), Jainas (including the Digambaras), and Carvakas (Skandha. XII chapter. 8 V.V. 3-4, chapter. 9 V.V.71-72 and chapter. 9 V.V. 95-96).

drsyante vaiṣṇavah kecid ganapatyas tathapare /

kapalikas cina-marga-rata valkala-dharinah //
digambaras tatha bauddhas carvaka evamadayah /
drsyante bahavo loke veda-sraddha-vivarjitah // (Dbh.XII.8. 3-4)

However, a major marker of Bengal's early medieval socio-religious ethos was a constant dissension between these sectaries (Skandha.VI chapter. 18 V.V. 35-36 and Skandha. XI chapter. 15 V.V. 37-39). All of these sects respected their own deities but decried those of others, which divided the society into a huge number of mutually quarrelling religious groups. This was leading to disunity among the population and resulting in chaos. Hence, the author of the *Devibhagavatapurana* composed the text with an attempt to leave a message of unity in the society by advocating the unity of all gods establishing that Visnu, Krsna, Siva, Surya, Ganesa Durga and others are not different and those who decry these gods and goddesses or differentiate between them go to hell (Skandha. III chapter.6 V.V. 53-56, Skandha VI chapter. 18 V.V. 30-31 and 44-47, Skandha. IX chapter.33 V.V.8-11, Skandha. IX chapter. 34 V.V. 32-33, 37 and 40). A close observation of both the Shakta texts, which have been taken into consideration for understanding the socio-religious conditions of early medieval Bengal, shows a wide influence and spread of Tantricism, which is subsequently proved by the author's constant upholding of the Vedas as the highest authority and to make the members of the Vedic fold immune to Tantric influence.

A few factors need to be kept in mind while using the *Puranas*, both the *Mahapuranas* and the *Upapuranas*, as sources for historical analysis. These texts, primarily religious in nature, were composed over long periods and only began to be consolidated in written form from the Gupta period onward. As a result, their utility in understanding specific regional contexts can often be uncertain. In the present context, references to the worship of Kali, mentions of rivers that can be geographically associated with Bengal, and the concept of *Akal Bodhan* suggest that some of these *Puranas* may have originated in Bengal. Additionally, the emergence of Sakta pithas and certain Shaiva sects can also be traced to Bengal and its surrounding regions. However, such correlations become far more difficult to establish with precision in the case of North Bengal, with only a few exceptions.

There is a fascinating instance of the Paundra region, which translates to northern Bengal, in this text. During a special worship of the Devi, she was needed to be bathed with various articles here we find a mention of '*paundra eksu-rasa*' saying: "One who baths Mahesani with a hundred pitchers full of juice of sugarcane growing in Paundra, is not born again" (Skandha XI chapter.18 V. 7). This verse further confirms the land of Paundra to be a huge scale producer of sugarcane and also attaches the worship of Devī with the existence of Shakta practitioners in the northern portion of Bengal in the early medieval time period. This text also mentions Punndravardhana, Ganga-sagara-sangama, Kamakhya-yoni-mandala, and the river Padmavati under the list of holy places and rivers in the land of

Bengal. It thus testifies to the religious symbolism of northern Bengal as a holy place in the early medieval socio-religious scenario.

Texts with no clear Brahmanical Propagation: Agricultural texts, an anthology of poems, and Biographies

Krisiparasara: Agriculture, Flora and Fauna and the worship of Laksmi

This category of texts is essentially all Sanskrit texts but has a non-Brahmanical essence. The text under purview is *Krisiparasara*, which is an agricultural text belonging to the mid-eleventh century. As an intended agricultural manual, it contains descriptions of the physical environment and the rural society of then Bengal. A few contents of the text confirm its origin in Bengal. The linguistic affinities of the non-Sanskrit terms in the text with those of modern Bengali, similarities with the ecological features, customs, and the seasonal agrarian activities of modern Bengal, as well as the use of the bull alone for agricultural operations, are indicative of its composition in Bengal (Majumdar and Banerji 1960: V.V. 19-21). Early medieval Bengal portrays several characteristic features, and one significant feature is the expansion of agriculture, which is evident from the innumerable land grant charters available from northern Bengal, ranging from the sixth century to the thirteenth century. The land grants inform us about fallow lands granted to individuals and religious institutions to bring them under cultivation and yield produce from them. In this context, agriculture played a pivotal role, as inferable from various literary sources and inscriptions from the northern part of Bengal, the then Pundravardhana was an alluvial plain watered by river systems like Padma, Mahananda, Punarbhava, Atrāi, Tista, and Karatoya. To shed light on the agricultural scenario of this period, *Krisiparasara* proves to be an ideal text since it is the only Sanskrit work solely devoted to different agricultural operations. There remains an uncertainty in regard to its date and authorship; however, in the lack of conclusive evidence, some scholars have placed it between the sixth and eighth centuries CE. According to Lallanji Gopal, the text was composed in the mid-eleventh century (Gopal 1973: 151-168). The exact identity of the author, who seems to be Paarasara, also remains unclear.

Paddy was the most commonly grown crop in this land is evident from its at-length discussion in the text (v.4 to v.7). Some atmospheric inference can also be made as the clouds over Bengal were categorised into Avarta, Samvarta, Puskara and Drona (v.25). The types of agricultural implements produced in early medieval Bengal finds mention here, the most important being the plough the eight accessories of it are the hala(plough) and madika(ladder), isa(pole), yuga(yoke), sthanu, niryola(rod), pasika(rope), aḍḍacalla (pin of yoke), saula and paaccani. Apart from the plough and its accessories, there is also mention of phala (plough-share), viddhaka (harrow), yotra (cord), and rajju (rope). The most interesting information found is these particular implements needed to adhere to a specific prescribed shape and measurement, the failure of which could lead to hindrance in agricultural performance (v.v. 114-122). The then Bengal rural society was primarily

agriculture-based based which created agrarian settlements with centres of exchange like hattas where these agrarian products, along with other commodities, were traded. Since the soil and its produce were the mainstay of the agrarian economy, the best and worst seasons to sow seeds, the types of soil best suited to do the same, and even a particular time to start ploughing are prescribed in the text. It has been suggested that Vaissaakha (April/May) is the best month to sow seeds, whereas Jyaistha (May-June) is still acceptable, but Asadha (June- July) is bad and Sravana (July-August) worst (v.v. 159-177). The soil condition remains the most suitable in the month of Magha (January), and is compared with the richness of gold, it loses a little efficacy in the month of Phalguna (February), so has been defined as silver and in Caitra (March), the soil has been termed as copper since it no longer holds the former richness. The dewy season, which is hemanta, is the best season for cultivation as per the text, whereas with the advent of rains, the result of cultivation is not good, which leads to poverty. Bengal agricultural seasons and soil type surprisingly correspond to what has been prescribed in this text even now.

A glimpse of the flora and fauna of Bengal can be traced. The text mentions a variety of bulls, including the black bulls, black and red bulls, and all-white bulls. In a separate section dedicated to draught animals, the writer lays down rules for their sustenance and usage for agricultural works (v.v.84-87). Cows were held in such high regard that a festival of cows was prescribed to be organized in the lunar mansion called *Laguda-pratipat* (v.v-99). The cow dung and urine were considered auspicious since the text talks about worshipping the cow dung heap (v 99). In a section which talks about the *adhaka*, which is a measuring vessel for the grain, several trees whose woods are used to make this *adhaka* are mentioned, like Slesmantaka (*Cordia mixta*), Mango (*Mangifera Indica*), and Punnaga (*Calophyllum inophyllum*) make the best *adhakas*, whereas poverty spreads with the use of Parkaṭi (*Ficus infectoria*) and Neem (*Melia indica*) (v. 240). During the procedure of planting of medhi, which is a pillar or post, especially in the middle of a threshing floor to which oxen are bound, the medhi must be made of some specific trees, namely, *Nyagrodha* (*Ficus Indica*), *Saptaparṇa* (*Alstonia scholaris*) commonly known as Chatim in Bengal, *Gambhari* (*Gmelina arborea*), *Salmali* (*Salmalia malabarica*) commonly known as Simul and *Udumbara* commonly known as Dumur (v. 216). Whereas a medhi should never be made of *Kapittha* (*Feronia elephantum*), commonly known as kyad bel in modern Bengali, *Bilva* (*Aegle marmelos*), *Bamboo* (*Bambusa tulda*), and *Trnaraja*, this may mean coconut tree or bamboo or sugarcane (v. 220). This indicates that the above-mentioned trees were present in the Bengal landscape and their yields were put to use in day-to-day life by the people of early medieval Bengal.

Significantly, the text *Krisiparasara* speaks of Alakṣmī, who is considered a Goddess of evil fortune and is in constant feud with Lakṣmi, Goddess of good fortune (v.2). This can be interestingly associated with the ‘Alakshmi bidey’ or getting rid of Alakshmi during the Dipanwita Lakshmi puja, which takes place on the day of Kali puja. Many Bengalis from West Bengal perform the Lakshmi puja on the day of Kali puja, when both the deities are

greeted with a series of oil lamps. However, it is believed that Alakshmi came out of the ocean before Lakshmi; hence, she is the elder sister of Lakshmi, so must be worshipped first, and then removed (as she symbolises unhappiness) before preparing the seat for Lakshmi (Shastri 1951: 618-626).

By and large, it can be understood that in early medieval Bengal single crop system was prevalent, which was largely dependent on monsoon and cattle manure, and the significance of various festivals associated with different agricultural operations was an occasion of great exhilaration for the villagers. The diverse methods for predicting rainfall and cattle rearing as an 'annexure' to agriculture have also been mentioned. Though the text does not furnish any information on the class structure of social hierarchy, the verses do indicate the inferior status of women (Alex 2022: 30-39).

Subhasitaratnakosa: Jativrajya, Rural Bengal and Plight of Pamaras

In the early collection of literature, poems form a useful source for understanding the socio-economic history of early medieval Bengal. Two works of literary value are *Subhasitaratnakosa* of *Vidyakara* and *Saduktikarnamrta* of *Sridharadasa*. *Subhasitaratnakosa* is an anthology of Sanskrit verses compiled by a Buddhist scholar named Vidyakara who lived in Bengal from the latter half of the eleventh century CE to the early twelfth century. Vidyakara was a monk residing at the Jagaddala Monastery in Varendra (north Bengal). In compiling his anthology, he appears to have drawn upon manuscripts preserved in the monastery's library. Several of the verses cited by Vidyakara contain references that seem to correspond to the actual shelf marks of the Jagaddala Vihara library. The *Subhasitaratnakosa* has 50 *vrajyas* or sections. The text quotes verses of classical authors like Kalidasa, Rajasekhara, and Bhavabhuti; the author shows an inclination toward Bengali poets and their verses (Kosambi, Gokhale 1957: 32-33). This proves that the content of the poems largely adheres to Bengal. The anthology opens with praising the Buddha (section 1) and is followed by the verses on the Bodhisattva Lokeshvara and the Bodhisattva Manjusri (sections 2-3). The anthology also contains verses on Hindu gods (sections 4-7). With the coming of the Palas, Buddhism gained a stable footing in the land of Bengal. The next section deals with verses on different seasons (sections 8-13). Now, the most interesting sections give information about the life of the people in villages, agricultural fields, the day-to-day life of *pamaras* or agricultural labourers, and to some extent, rural festivities and practices (sections, 12,13,35). A description of the *jativrajya* depicts vignettes of the everyday life of the people. In yet another (v.1148), the Bengali poet vividly describes consuming a large quantity of pond fish, heavily spiced and fried in oil, without even bothering to wash up afterwards. This depiction serves as a testament to the fish consumption in the everyday life of Bengal. The characteristic of villages is often talked about, and these comparisons are presented in a poetic form by evaluating life's sufferings with the elements of nature. For instance, (v.1175) depicts the merciless

oppression of villages whose consequent desolation is emphasized by the cooing of doves in the orchard. The anthology, while portraying rural life, depicts the poverty of *pamaras* who were agricultural labourers and peasant householders. The grim scenery of their everyday struggle surfaces as a poetic revelation. The poet very seamlessly blends both reality and poetic imagination. For example, there is no land; a single ox (v.1317) may be the only source of income for a family that is terrified and helpless when the decrepit beast is too exhausted to get up. The entire family lives in just one room (v. 1310), which combines all the functions of the kitchen and dining room, living room, nursery, bedroom, and lying-in chamber. These anthologies present a poetically vivid yet starkly dismal portrayal of rural early medieval Bengal. Another interesting information that we get from this text is the presence of water, tanks and rivers in the human life of this region.

***Ramacharitam*: Varendrii through the lens of Sandhyakaranandi**

In the period, subsequent to the seventh century CE, the more relevant segments of the *itihasa-purana* tradition were not discontinued but given new forms, being incorporated into new genres of texts. Here, a new genre of texts came into existence, which were the ‘*caritas*’ or biographies. The term *carita*, literally ‘moving’, ‘doing’, or ‘going’”, refers to the activities of a person. The protagonists were kings and occasionally ministers. Biography finds expression in literature in the form of the *carita*, and occasionally also in summary form in inscriptions, both of which are relatively new genres but significant as later versions of the *itihasa-purana* tradition (Thapar 2013: 472- 474). However, a certain amount of caution needs to be maintained since the author is writing on his patron, and some biases could be a part of his writings. However, what permits such a biography to be included as an articulation of historical consciousness is not merely that several such works relate to the activities of those in authority, but that the structure within which the biography is composed hinges on the historical tradition which is used to legitimize the subject (Momigliano 1993: 153-84). Moreover, unlike other literary sources, biographies have a specific time period within which they were written, and hence, it does provide a certain date to which they belong, and as a result, they can be relied on.

The *Ramacharitam*, a Sanskrit *kavya* composed by Sandhyakaranandi, stands out as the only known text from Bengal authored by a poet of Varendri that narrates a contemporary historical event. It is centered on the life of Ramapala of the Pala dynasty, and the text is a significant source for understanding the political history of Northern Bengal. However, its detailed references to environmental features, which are often overlooked, also deserve scholarly attention. The narrative recounts the successful uprising in northern Bengal that led to the death of Mahipala and the eventual restoration of the ancestral kingdom by Ramapala, his youngest brother. Notably, the work is composed in the rare literary style of *sleṣa* (double entendre), simultaneously conveying two narratives: the epic tale of Rama and Sita, and the political events surrounding Ramapala and the loss of Varendri to the Kaivarta leader Divya. In the *kaviprasasti* (epilogue), Sandhyakaranandi identifies himself as a native of Pundravardhana (North Bengal), belonging to the Nandin family. His father,

Prajapatinandi, held the prestigious post of *sandhivigrahika* (Minister of Peace and War). (Majumdar 1939: 7).

Apart from the political episodes, the text reflects the poet's intense love for his native land, Varendri. The 27 verses describing Varendri and 12 verses describing the city of Ramavati make one of the finest accounts of northern Bengal's physical features, like the flora, fauna, rivers, and ecological landscapes. Along with this, a glimpse of its religious scenario can also be grasped from this very text. It becomes imperative to discuss in detail the content of the first 27 verses of the third canto entitled '*The Return of Rama*'. The poet mentions elephants of the Mandra type which were imported into its forests, the existence of Buddhist monastery Jagaddala, and the veneration of the image of Bodhisattva and Tara (the Buddhist goddess) (V.7). Varendri was inhabited by brahmana families and most significantly we get to know that the city of Sonitapura which is also known as Bangarh, situated in Varendri itself. Here follows a brief description of the city of Sonitapura, which was, as mentioned in the text, crowded by the images of gods installed in the temples with lotuses of very large sizes (V.9). It is further mentioned that two streams, namely the Ganga and Karatoya, ran down on either side of Varendri. It also constituted the great place of pilgrimage called Apunarbhava (V.10). North Bengal possessed a fluviially active terrain is largely supported by the presence of marshy lands and numerous streams, including large streams as mentioned above and weak streams like Balabhi and Kali (V.11). The presence of many well-known trees and Asoka groves is also mentioned (V.11).

The most valuable account of the flora and fauna comes from the description of the garden of Varendri. Here, the poet draws a beautiful lyrical sketch of the garden, which possessed trees like Lakucha, Sripkala, Nagarauga, Amalaki and Karana (V. 12, 13, 16). The water was enclosed by Priyala plants. In addition to the foliage, the presence of birds and bees is also found, which very delightfully enhanced the beauty of the garden (V.13). Paddy was one of the major crops of Bengal is once again proven in this text. Varendri was esteemed as the sparkling crest jewel of the earth because here resided Lakṣmi in the form of paddy plants of various kinds. Along with paddy, bamboo, and sugarcane plants also grew here (V.17). It is said that the people of Varendri had juicy mouths since its soil was ideal for coconut trees, areca-nut trees, and Asana trees. The terrain was said to be filled with crops and water (V.19). It had elevated land bearing a variety of excellent flowers, namely, Malati, Nagakesara and Kesara (Vakula), which created a mesmerizing fragrance diffused by Madhu (Asoka), Parijata trees and Lavanga creepers (V.20). The land of Varendri is described as highly conducive to the growth of various flowers, including water lotuses. The abundance of water sources contributed to a pleasant climate, marked by heavy monsoons that supported the region's rich vegetation. The text also references large tanks and rapidly moving clouds that brought ample rainfall to the area. (V.26).

The cities of Varendri were adorned with symmetrical rows of white palaces and on the palace -tops groups of golden pitchers were placed (V.23). The poet describes the magnificence of Varendri at length in his unique poetic style by addressing how Varendri

with its beauty obscured the fame of the other neighbouring states like the countries of Kuntala, Lata, Anga, Karnata and Madhya-desa (V.24). The legacy of Durga puja in Bengal roots back to the early medieval times is understood by the worship of Goddess Uma yet another name of goddess Durga which finds mention in the text in the context of the various festivities celebrated in northern Bengal (V.25). It is said that initially the people of Varendri were oppressed due to heavy taxation, but later mild taxation was adopted, a large number of lands were brought under cultivation and the land flourished like never before (V.27).

Conclusion:

A critical examination of the literary texts considered in this study, aimed at exploring the social, religious, economic, and environmental dimensions of early medieval Bengal, with a particular focus on its northern region, reveals a broader and more composite image of Bengal as a whole. While these texts do touch upon the intricacies of the aforementioned aspects, they typically address Bengal in its entirety, with literary works containing sub-regional content being relatively limited.

The *Karatoya Mahatmya* holds immense significance in understanding the historical and cultural landscape of northern Bengal. This is particularly because the text is based on the river Karatoya, which flows right through northern Bengal. The *Karatoya Mahatmya* is a regional *tirtha-mahatmya* text which was written by Parasurama on the news of Sutasana in the Uttara Paundrakhand. It delineates the sacred geography associated with the river Karatoya, once a major fluvial system of ancient Varendra (northern Bengal). The text serves as both a religious narrative and a geographical document, reflecting the intersection of ecology, culture, and regional identity in early medieval Bengal. Besides glorifying the Karatoya river as a sacred and purifying body and equating it with the river Ganga it also provides valuable insights into the historical and cultural landscape of north Bengal. It refers to the region's temples, *tirthas*, and settlements, indicating the prominence of the Karatoya as both a geographical and spiritual centre in early medieval Bengal. The text speaks of the geographical location of Ganga, which was towards the west of Karatoya, whereas, towards the east of Karatoya flowed the thin stream Janhavi (v.25). It also mentions that the soil on the western bank of Karatoya is red (v.26). Most significantly it compares Karatoya with other rivers of the region and mentions various other river systems which was an essential part of the physical landscape. It compares the Karatoya River to other renowned rivers like the Ganga, Yamuna, and Sarasvati, asserting its superiority in terms of spiritual benefits (v.80-83). It also mentions the names of numerous rivers like Krsnaveni, Tamraparni, Sarayu, Gandaki, Visnupadodbhava, Punya, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Kaveri, Kausiki, Candrabhaga, Ciravallabhi, Svarna Campa, Vetravati, Atreyi, Punarbhava, Vipapa, Vipasa, Citra, Citrotapala, and Gotami (v.80-83). The text gives references to other sacred sites like Varanasi, Kuruksetra, and Dvaravati, emphasising the

unique blessings of Paundraksetra (v.35 and 39). Ecologically, the river once served as a major hydrological artery of the Varendra region, contributing to the fertility of its alluvial plains and sustaining dense settlement networks (Acharya et.al 2025: 284-296).

However, it is important to note that the sub-regions of Bengal were not viewed as autonomous or mutually exclusive entities; rather, they collectively constituted the larger geographical and cultural landscape of Bengal. In this context, the northern region formed an integral part of early medieval Bengal. Nevertheless, the interpretation of such texts requires scrutiny, especially in the context of their indefinite chronology, prolonged periods of composition, and the presence of later interpolations and additions.

The texts that have been taken into purview are diverse in nature. Among them, some, such as the *Puranas*, reflect Brahmanical perspectives, while others, like agricultural manuals, poetic anthologies, and biographical works, are non-religious in orientation. The first group of texts primarily offers socio-religious insights, detailing social groups, occupational hierarchies, forms of deity worship, and the involvement of religious communities. In contrast, the second group emphasises environmental aspects, including river systems, flora and fauna, climatic and agricultural conditions, the human–nature relationship, and the rural landscape, particularly the hardships faced by villagers. This combination of varied sources contributes to a nuanced and multifaceted understanding of early medieval Bengal, with particular reference to the sub-region of Pundravardhana.

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