

Early Medieval Archaeology of a Region: Durgapur-Asansol, West Bengal, India (c. 900 to 1400 CE)

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Abstract:

The work is a result of our preliminary survey of archaeological assemblages mainly in form of sculptural and structural remains from the modern district of Paschim Bardhaman (Durgapur-Asansol) in West Bengal. The investigation also incorporates all the relevant data to evaluate early mediaeval remains from a historical perspective. The synthesized database contributed further in the recognition of spatial units of the region concerned to interpret ideological bearing and the development of socio-political structure in a given cultural framework. The presence of Jain, Buddhist and Brahmanical mode of appreciation associated with our findings is also studied here in order to highlight the changing context of a settlement character.

Key words: *Chhotanagpur Plateau, Bhum, Temple, Saivism, Saktism*

The location of Durgapur and Asansol region, roughly between 23°25' and 23°53'N and 86°48' and 87°32'E in the modern district of Burdwan in West Bengal, has always appeared to me for several reasons crucial to an understanding of the regional history and archaeology of eastern India. On one hand, this rolling track consisting of different geomorphological features, at a micro level, is essentially an extension of Chhotanagpur plateau (situated at the Bihar-Bengal border). At the same time, the territory lies in the middle of the Damodar-Ajay basin which extends eastwards into the fertile plain of the lower Gangetic valley. Interestingly, except towards the east the region is bounded by rivers on all the three other sides: on the west and south the rivers Barakar and Damodar form its boundaries whereas the river Ajay and its tributaries mark the boundary of the north and the north-east. This region has a variety of geophysical characters, like rolling uplands, and a low lying strip of the plain breaking the monotony of the landscape, and also richness of mineral distribution and forest products. It also harbours a sizeable population of varying ethnicity including tribal groups, semi-tribal sub-castes and powerful caste groups. The diversity of socio-economic and cultural life and traditions must have been as significant to the middle Damodar-Ajay valley and the lower Gangetic valley in general throughout history as it is today. In addition, during the course of our field work, it became apparent that in spite of

some major changes over the course of time, important factors of continuity have played a major role in the general pattern of the cultural sequence and economy of the locality.

The other significant factor especially from the historical point of view, is the regional strategic geographical position. Its location makes it a convenient route for the movement of population from different directions. The areas of external connections are: the Ganga valley, particularly the South Bihar plains and North Bengal towards north and north-west; Orissa, Coastal Bengal and neighbouring areas of the Chhotanagpur plateau towards south; the plain of the lower Gangetic delta towards east, besides the adjoining part of the Chhotanagpur region in the west. In a much later context one gathers that the region acted as a pathway for numerous other kinds of population movements. It acted as an important route for procurement of raw materials, trade network and religious pilgrimage. It also connected all the above-mentioned regions. In this context, we may note that in some areas archaeological sites can be traced along these routes.

The social composition of the population of the locality can also help us to trace the local clan history and distribution of local power so far as it relates to its land system. Our field survey and the population² census reports available record that Gop/Gopa, Sadgop/Sadgopa and Mahishya are the powerful landholding groups. Some of the groups claim to be direct descendants of the ruling families of Gopbhum/Gopabhuma³. The Brahmins owning land by virtue of grants made by local ruling chiefs, to a large extent still function as priests. Other dominant communities who also enjoyed local power at village level, as a part of local administrative machinery, are Ugrakshatriya (Panja, Kesh, Hazra, Konar, Jash, etc.), Kayasthas and Kaivarta (Kayot). Local society also consist of groups who provide varieties of services. Such groups are Napit (barber), Dai (nurse), Karmakar/Swarnakar (metal worker), Kumhar (potter), Bauri and Bagdi (agricultural labourers). There is also a sizeable tribal population of Santhals distributed in the forest areas; they continue to maintain a symbiotic relationship with other communities.

From the point of view of an archaeological survey the region presents a very complex situation as its modern physiography has drastically changed due to the rapid expansion in recent years like that of coal mining, mineral exploration/extraction and above all industry. In fact, it is virtually the only mining belt in West Bengal today. All these activities have been causing serious damage to the earlier topography and hence preservation/restoration of earlier cultural relics, prehistoric sites, historic mounds, temples, sculptures of this region have been hampered. Even if a few of the earlier remains are still in existence, these are difficult of access, hence relating them to their original contexts is at

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²For population census of this region, see *West Bengal District Gazetteers: Baradhaman*. Calcutta 1994: 100-147.

³ Sanyal, Hitesranjan. 1984. Literary Sources of Medieval Bengali History: A Study of a few Mangal Kavya Texts. In *Indian Studies: Essays Presented in Memory of Professor Niharranjan Ray*, eds. A. Ray et al., Delhi: 205-215.

times near to impossible. The present report⁴ attempts to survey the available historical remains briefly on the basis of what has been recorded at different times by the present author or by others. It is not an exhaustive report on historical sites, but the intention is to map the concentration of sites and materials by viewing this dimension from a historical perspective.

Before one can start with other details, it would not be unwise to give a brief note on the discovery of the archaeological remains in this region falling in different chrono-cultural phases from prehistory to history as a part of the introduction. Apart from the discovery of Paleolithic artefacts by V. Ball⁵ (1867) from the surface of a coal field area of Raniganj, the region has also yielded a few palaeolithic assemblages found in two geomorphological situations: (i) erosional lateritic stretches of Arrah, Ayodhya-Bankathi, Egaramile-Kanksa forest; (ii) the tracts around the foot hills of Muktaichandi, Jhatipahari/Hasadungri of Dabar, Rupnarayanpur and Chittaranjan area respectively. The first author has elsewhere attempted to give a synthesis of much assemblages⁶. The large scale occurrence of microliths⁷ in the form of clusters has also been noticed on lateritic surfaces and in the hard red sandy soil exposed in rain gullies in more than one region. Like other neighbouring areas, microliths have also been found either in association with palaeoliths or other historical remains such as pottery, iron slag, etc.

The important excavated microlithic site of Birbhanpur, which is one of the best-known sites of eastern India, lies 1 km south of Durgapur railway station along the river Damodar. The excavation by B.B. Lal⁸ resulted in the discovery of microlithic assemblages in different geo-climatic contexts and periods of occurrence. So far as evidence of the earliest village farming community of this region is concerned, the site Bharatpur on the floodplain of Damodar has yielded substantial materials through excavations. It has a thick deposit of habitation remains, ranging from Black and Red Ware, of roughly 1500 BCE., to the medieval period. A few polished stone tools ('neoliths') have been discovered here since the publication of the report of N.G. Majumdar⁹ about the collection of 'neoliths' from the

⁴ The extensive preliminary archaeological survey of this region, particularly in the district of Burdwan, was first carried out by the Archaeology and Museum unit, Department of History, University of Delhi in 1983-84 under the leadership of Professor Dilip K. Chakrabarti. The present author was his associate in this field survey. For more information see Chakrabarti, Dilip K. 1993. *Archaeology of Eastern India: Chhotanagpur Plateau and West Bengal*. Delhi.

⁵ Ball, V. 1867. Note on stone implements found in Bengal. *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 143.

⁶ Chakrabarti, Dilip K. G. Sen Gupta, R.K. Chattopadhyay, and Nayanjot Lahiri. 1993. Black and Red Ware Settlements in West Bengal. *South Asian Studies*: 12: 123-135.

⁷ Chakrabarti, Dilip K. and R.K. Chattopadhyay. 1984. Prehistoric Stratigraphy in West Bengal: The Evidence from Burdwan and Midnapur, *Man and Environment* (ME): 7: 131-141.

⁸ Lal, B.B. 1958. Birbhanpur, A Microlithic Site in the Damodar Valley, West Bengal. *Ancient India*: 14: 4-48.

⁹ Majumdar, N.G. 1939. Prehistoric and Protohistoric Civilization. In *Revealing India's Past*, (ed.) J. Cumming, London: 91-117.

Durgapur area. Besides, the collection of 'neoliths' at the excavated site of Bharatpur some other stray pieces of such categories of tools have been picked up from Nodiha, Kannyapur, Samdih and Pairagpur (near Panagar Bazar). Evidence of the early historic periods in this region is yet to be studied with care. The excavation at Bharatpur encountered deposit of the early historic period at period III. Besides, there are a few other localities from which diagnostic types of early historic antiquities comprising ceramics, terracotta, metal and stone objects have been recorded. The sites of Ranodiha and Siuli Barirdanga near Bharatpur, Pairagpur and Panagarh near Panagarh Bazar, Syamarupargarh (on the bank of Ajay), Ichai ghoser deul, Birbhanpur (near Durgapur), Domohania, Gaurandi and Barabani near Asansol and Dishergarh and Barakar near Barakar town have such evidence.

In the absence of much archaeological evidence of early village settlements we may presume that the ecology of this rolling upland and forest clad topography was congenial for the population to maintain a life style of hunting, gathering, fishing, pastoralism and a rudimentary state of agriculture for a much longer period than usually assumed, rather than choosing a permanent village forming settled life. Such a change at best can be envisaged with the advent of new groups from neighbouring areas. It is likely that such groups used the indigenous population for procurement of their day-to-day needs. However, in course of time the region witnessed the movement of different groups having their own religious beliefs and practices and political organisation from one area to another. Growth of local ruling families or chieftains and the introduction of Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical practices led to change in this society in a very gradual manner. Therefore, our archaeological data also tends to show its mixed character and the evidence of symbiosis. The present report of historic remains may throw some new light on the beginning of large-scale settlements including their concentration, contexts and the character of variable micro zones.

In order to get a broad idea about this countryside the following general observations in the census record may be useful.

"A hundred years ago the whole of this tract was a wilderness of forest and jungle, dotted at long intervals with tiny clearings and settlements. For centuries it had been a sort of debatable land between the Jharkhand, or great western forest, inhabited by the aboriginal tribes ... and the settled country to the east; and even at the end of the eighteenth century it was the haunt and refuge of bands of broken and outlawed men who, taking advantage of the unsettled state of the land, ravaged and plundered the countryside."¹⁰ An inventory of sites will be found at the end of this paper.

Data Analysis

From the documentation of the sites and their material remains it appears that the region during the period under the present study does not possess many large settlement complexes neither in the form of major centres/settlements or villages associated with the

¹⁰ Census 1951. *West Bengal District Handbook: Burdwan, Calcutta*. By A. Mitra, 1953: Appendix I and Ancient Monuments and Fairs (202-209).

local ruling power, administration, trade and commerce, or religious establishments. However, a considerable number of archaeological remains (see the inventory) have been found at the sites, mainly associated with religious establishments different parts of the region. A brief analysis of available data has been given in the following pages:

Architectural Remains: These include only two temple complexes remaining intact and some dilapidated temple-ruins in the form of basements and plinths, parts of architectural members (stray and all abandoned) and a lone example of the basement of a Buddhist monastery. Here we may note that our structural evidence is predominantly religious architecture. We have hardly any evidence in respect of the development of a secular building complex. Though there are a few ruins of fortifications, rampart walls and a settlement area having a ring well at Aima, Syamrupargarh, Tilokchandrapur areas under the jurisdiction of Kanksa police station and Churulia and Pachera near Asansol. But these undetermined complexes are more confused in terms of chronology and their particular nature. In this context we may state the view of S.K. Sarswati who observed, “In Bengal and in the rest of India there is always a tendency to use more permanent material for religious edifices, and thus the early monuments that have survived or of which we have got vestiges now, almost exclusively belong to religious establishments of one or other denomination”¹¹. Sites listed in the inventory show the general character of the secular structures, habitational remains and other antiquities found at the sites of our study area.

Bharatpur Monastery/Stupa: The excavations at the mound of Bharatpur¹² exposed a brick-built stupa measuring 12.75 mts. X 12.75 mts. at the base. It is square plan of Pancharatha type consisting of 33 courses of burnt-bricks over a compact yellow clayish earth. Two sizes of bricks (30x28x7 cms and 48x21x6 cms) were used in this construction. The façade of the stupa shows the corbelled and moulded courses which bear traces of lime plaster. Above the corbelled course the platform was provided with niches, one on each projection to accommodate an image of Buddha. The basement of the Buddhist monastic complex or stupa encountered at Bharatpur is a Pancharatha type and is supposed to be a part of a large structure (4.16 feet). It is an illustration of the truth that the brick-built stupa complexes in Bengal only their basement preserved. In this connection we may note that such type of remains have also been noticed at Paharpur (Rajshahi, Bangladesh) and the temple complex of Bahulara (in the district of Bankura, West Bengal).

Temple: The Siva temple complexes of Barakar and Ichhai Ghosher Deul may be brought within the preview of our study. The celebrated temple complex of Begunia at Barakar is generally considered as the greatest achievements of the rulers of Sikharbhum at Panchakot;

¹¹Saraswati, S.K. 1933. The Begunia Group of Temples. *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Arts*: 1(2): 124-128.

¹² Indian Archaeology-A Review 1970-71, p.70; 1971-72, p.50; 1972-73, pp.36-37; 1973-74, pp.32-33, 1974- 75, p. 54.

though the architectural details of these temples need not interest us here. However, a brief note on this temple complex is necessary from the context of historical perspective. The Barakar group which is known as Siddheswar has four temples representing the best-preserved examples of the stone architecture in Bengal. These are entirely built on stone as possibly it is located near the hilly range of Panchet-Maithan area. Therefore, stone required for the construction of these temples had been easily quarried from the nearby hills. Its architectural gesture has received special attraction from the visitors and their writings since 1872-73. J.D. Beglar¹³ who visited the site in 1872-73 described its remains in great detail. However, before S.K. Saraswati all writers missed the importance of this group of temples as a typical example of *rekha* type of architecture in Bengal having the remarkable affinity with the Orissan group. According to the architectural development and the date of construction, Saraswati grouped these temples into two classes. Saraswati suggests an early date for Temple No. IV as an architectonic type earlier than the Siddheswar temple at Bahulara (Bankura, West Bengal). The temple of Barakar (No. 4) consists of a high sanctum, Cella (*garbhagriha*) on a low basement. Its elaboration with tower (*Sikhara*) which is made with 'gradually curving inwards from its beginning and ultimately capped by huge and archaic *amalakasila*' gives it a curvilinear form of architectonic type¹⁴. The arrangement of *rathas*, *pagas* and other architectural details closely corresponds to the earliest group of temple in Orissa. In this context scholars¹⁵ opine that the temple of Paramesvara at Bhubaneswar which has enough affinity with the temple of Barakar dates back to the eighth century CE or only a little later. Krishna Deva¹⁶ also suggests an earlier date (c. 900 CE) of its construction. He states, "this monument is important as the only stone temple of the early Pala period which has survived." Other temples here prove to be the post-Muhammadan in date. From the style of orientation, the Barakar group indicates only a slightly later type of form, and as such the importance of these post-Muhammadan temples in the reconstruction of the last temple types of the pre-Muhammadan architecture of Bengal¹⁷.

The brick temple of Ichhai Ghoser Deul at Gourangpur is also a part of the *rekha-deul* development for which an acceptable date should be c. 1200 to 1300 CE. Its elaboration of the *sikhara* although plain, belongs to Barakar group. Locally available raw materials have been used in the form of bricks. Some lateritic blocks (locally known as *Makra pathar*) and iron clumps and beams can be found in this temple.

¹³ Beglar, Joseph David. 1878/1966. Report of a Tour Through the Bengal Provinces of Patna, Gaya, Mongir, Bhagalpur, the Santal Pargana, Manbhum, Singhbhum, Birbhum, Bankura, Raniganj, Burdwan and Hugli in 1872-73. Report –Archaeological Survey of India. VIII. Varanasi: Indological Book House.

¹⁴ Saraswati, S.K. 1943. Architecture. In *History of Bengal*, vol. I. Dacca, 499

¹⁵ Coomaraswamy, A.K. 1927. *History of India and Indonesian Art*. Boston.

¹⁶ Deva, Krishna. 1991. Styles of Separate Lineage: Vanga Style, Phase I, C. eighth-ninth centuries. In *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture, North India, Period of Early Maturity, c. A.D. 700-900* (eds.) M. Meister and M.A. Dhakay, Delhi: 394-407.

¹⁷ Saraswati 1933, *op.cit.* 128

The temples of Arrah (Radhesvar), Kalyanesvari (Devasthan), Garui (Visnu) and Samdih belong to a much later date but perhaps standing on older foundations. The enshrined Siva *lingas* of these temples also suggest an early date.

The local history provides some information for us to make a general comment about the patronage of such religious establishments under the local ruling dynasties of Shikharbhum (Panchkot) and Gopbhum. Temple-building activity of the region exhibits the influence of the Orissan style. Though historical evidence is not specific, possibility of relationship between the local ruling power and that of Orissa might be one of the major reasons of influence.

Sculptural Remains: Considered from the point of view of sculptural history, it is not desirable to describe the art tradition of any period under a religious appellation though religious art no doubt has always been behind the full efflorescence of the art style that has emerged in this region under local patronage. But the difference lies only in iconographic context and above all the images are the soul evidence of the sculptural art of this period. Compared to the abundant Buddhist, Jain and Brahmanical images from the neighbouring areas of the Gangetic plain towards east and Chhotanagpur towards south and west, rareness of such images is strikingly noticeable. Besides the enshrined temple images mostly Siva *lingas*, the other sculptural remains are either in abraded or in broken forms.

Among the enshrined Siva *lingas*, the specimen of Arrah (1 m 40 cm X 1 m 10 cm X 1 m 10 cm) temple deserves special mention. The nandi or bull lying in the Barakar temple complex belong to Saivism. The classic specimen of Nataraj (75 X 40 cm) made of grey sandstone, dancing on a bull with eight hands from Arrah possibly belong to Orissan group of sculpture. Besides the sculpture of Visnu Lokeshvara from Garui¹⁸, now in the Indian Museum collection, there are three other Visnu images recorded from the site of Sasthitala and Sivasthan at Pachera. Among these two-specimen identified at Visnu Lokeshvara, the other one belongs to the *sthanaka* variety of Visnu of Puranic tradition. The local chlorite/schist variety of stones has been used for these sculptures. The Visnu Lokeshvara images (1 m x 75 cm x 10 cm; 83 cm x 45 cm x 4 cm) are lying in abraded form, whereas other Visnu images in *Sthanaka* posture (77 cm x 48 cm x 12 cm) are also noticeable in damaged state of condition. We have more information regarding the discovery of a few other broken pieces of Visnu images found at Bhiringi and Jamgara which are located in the township of Durgapur. The images of Ganesa (1 m 35 cm x 90 cm) from Barakar, Surya (1 m 10 cm x 60 cm) from Birbhanpur and a few others broken unidentified male and female images from Punchra/Pachhra are the noted examples among the collection of Brahmanical sculptural specimen recorded in this region.

¹⁸ Bandyopadhyaya R.D. 1933/1980 (reprinted) *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture*, Varanasi. (First Published as *NIS*, Archaeological Survey of India, NO. XLVII. Delhi.

The remains of sculpture affiliated to Jainism are found from **Punchra/Pachhra**¹⁹. Incidentally the village itself and its neighbouring areas has a sizeable population of Jaina (Sarak). There are two identified Tirthankaras measuring 90 cm x 40 cm x 11 cm; 85 cm x 35 cm x 10 cm lying at the site in abraded condition. The local their movement from Manbhum-Singhbhum area for metal-working activities. The occurrence of large-scale evidence of metal-works at Punchra/Pachhra and the distribution of Jaina population in Asansol-Barabani area suggest a large-scale penetration of such groups into this area.

There are a few seated Buddhist icons in *bhumisparsa* mudra, made of stone, collected from the site of Bharatpur. A stone image of Tara has also been recovered from Shilampur. In all probability the later specimen belonged to the Buddhist complex at Bharatpur. Stylistically all these images have been placed in the ninth-tenth century CE.

Apart from the above, there are a few specimens in the form of image-fragments and architectural members carved with the figure of gods and goddesses reported from Durgapur-Kanksa area and five memorial stones (Virasthambha) at the sites of Kalyannesvari and Garui which have some common features noticeable in the collection of such memorial stones found in the districts of Bankura-Purulia region. The specimens from Garui have close affinities with those noticeable at the sites of Chatna and Parasnath in the district of Bankura. Altogether three pieces have been recorded here. The specimen at the temple site, measuring 1.15 m x 50 cm x 16 cm depicts a male figure holding a bow and arrow. The other two carved stones are noticeable inside the village. One stand in front of Aditya Mukherjee's house and the other lies in front of a Durga temple of Banerjee Para. The former (1 m x 40 cm x 15 cm) is carved and shows a female holding Chatra and the later (1.05 m x 53 cm x 12 cm) is dressed with a lion capital. All these are datable roughly between c. 1200 CE and c. 1400 CE having historical significance and their relation with different ruling families of the 'Bhum' territories of Sikharbhum and Manbhum.

The abundance of ceramics identifiable as belonging to historical period comprising different colours and shapes is clear enough from the site-survey. These ceramics could have been formed in a separate part of study. However, the continuation of some earlier elements, pottery used in ritual, storage and other household purposes and the large-scale utilization of disc type of objects are among a few of the basic features of these ceramics noticeable in this region. Though these are always found in mixed up form, there are some other potsherds found in large quantities sharing all features that have been noticeable in the excavated ceramic collection of Black and Red Ware and early historic sites of West Bengal.

The period IV encountered at Bharatpur has yielded early medieval pot sherds including a coarse and gritty black and red ware and other common types of potteries like red and grey ware.

The miscellaneous objects which comprise a large collection of terracotta, bone, metals (copper and iron), stones, ivory and semi-precious stone objects are often found during site-survey. The objects noticeable in large quantity include terracotta balls (pallets),

¹⁹ Gupta, C. 2002Bengal Art and Bengal Inscriptions: An Approach towards Co-Relation- A Case Study with Punchra, A Village in the Vardhaman District, West Bengal', *Journal of Bengal Art*, 7: 83-100.

net-sinker, crucible, pieces of the nozzle of tuyere and beads of semi-precious stone besides the remains of animal cut bones and bones of fish. The presence of terracotta ball signifies the bird-hunting tradition with pallet bow or slings (*gulti* in local dialect) which still survive in this region. Whereas, netsinker is the indicator of common use of such objects by fishermen for fishing by net which also is still an essential object for such activities.

Discussion

We shall now put forward a few tentative observations on the nature and distribution of the sites and their antiquity by relating them to general historical processes. While considering the distributional features of the sites, a number of points were noted:

1. Considering the flood plain of the river Damodar, Bharatpur under Kanksa police station seems to emerge as the central or the nodal point. Located on the north bank of Damodar, it shows a continuous sequence of occupation from BRW onwards. Its proximity with Mallasarul which has yielded a copper plate inscription of about the close of the sixth century CE appears significant in this context. The copper plate inscription mentions a cluster of village settlements under the control of Maharaja or Maharaja Mahasamanta Vijayasena²⁰. The area possibly came to be incorporated into Gupta provincial power. The settlements in and around Bharatpur might have been the nucleus of a long-settled, hierarchised agrarian community with a complex social organization. The nucleus may have triggered off rural expansion in the neighbouring areas of Ranodiha, Pairagpur, Kanksa, Panagarh, Birudiha etc. and it may have also effectively interacted with important centres lying on the opposite bank of the river. Such centres are Pakhana (Pushkarna), Dihar (Vishnupur), Antra, Narayanpur and others in the district of Bankura. Pakhana, Dihar and Antra have similar settlement history as that of Bharatpur.
2. The sites of Kanksa forest area along the river Ajay may have represented development of a somewhat later phase, particularly with the emergence of a local ruling stratum in the Gopbhum area. Although located close to early village farming settlement sites of Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Baneshvar Danga and Mangalkot in the same district and Ghurisha, Mandira (Jaidev Kanduli) etc. in the district of Birbhum near Durgapur suggest somehow similar development that have been taking place at other sites in the Ajay-Damodar basin such as Kuldiha, Malandighi, Arrah, Birbhanpur, Rajbandh etc. It is to be noted that the distribution of sites in and around the floodplain of the river and low lying areas exhibit the larger concentration of village settlements that has been continuing since the post-Gupta period. Basing ourselves on local tradition it may be suggested that the spread of large tanks in this locality was largely a result of the patronage of the local ruling power under Sena supremacy. However, the sites like Syamarupar garh, Ichai Ghosher Deul, Ayodha-Bankathi,

²⁰ Majumdar, N.G. 1940. Mallasarul Copper-Plate of Vijayasena, *Epigraphi Indiac*, 23: 155-61; Mukherjee, S.C. 1958. Some Observations on the Malasarul Copper-plate, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Letters* 24: 31-38.

- Laugram indicate the emergence of settlements along the river Ajay in the forested areas of Gopbhum.
3. The settlement history in and around Raniganj-Asansol coal mining area is difficult to ascertain satisfactorily. However, our archaeological data suggest at least five clusters of settlements, each with a leading centre of either commercial or religious importance: (a) Raniganj was possibly the nucleus of the neighbouring sites of Andal, Ukhra, Sarpi, Hijalgara, Chakdola, Badalpur and Poraskol. (b) Domahania, Pachera, Gaurandi, Samdih and Churulia are the major settlements of a cluster along the river Ajay near Asansol-Barabani area. Our investigation of this area still remains incomplete; the suggestion regarding this particular settlement cluster needs confirmation.
 4. The sites of Barakar, Garui and Dishergarh are along the major settlements on the western part of our locality, most probably associated with the development of Sikharbhum, Samantbhum, Barabhum, Manbhum, Singhbhum areas of Chhotanagpur. Though our sites are mainly represented by religious structures, our data derived from local history and tradition suggest that religious structures symbolize historical developments in the form of the Shikharbhum state at Panchakot. On political ground one may infer that the foundation of the kingdom of Panchakot and the establishment of religious centres at Telkupi, Chhara and other centres of old Manbhum area and Katrasgarh and Paundra in Dhanbad area might have influenced the bordering region of Barakar-Asansol region. The presence of hero stones at the sites of Kalyaneswari and Garui may suggest significant association of tribal elements in the organisation of the local polity of Manbhum, Singhbhum and Mallabhum.
 5. In view of the location of the sites or large villages along the major routes in this region, it would not be out of place to argue that during the period under study formation of clusters or concentration of settlements owed its origin to old routes. In this connection, the location of Bharatpur on the Damodar ferryghat – Panagarh road; Malandighi and Arrah on the Ajay ferryghat – Durgapur (Muchipara) road; Raniganj and Ukhra and others on Pandavesvar-Bhimgarh between Ajay ferryghat and Majhia ferryghat on the Damodar; Barakar along the routes of South Bihar plains and Chhotanagpur region of Hazaribagh area; Dishergarh on Manbhum (Purulia) – Singhbhum route deserve special mention. Different ferryghats or fording points along the rivers Damodar and Ajay of this region might have played an important role for the communication with settlements of the Gangetic valley towards the east and north and with the Chhotanagpur region towards the south and west.
 6. Clusters of sites representing Asura²¹ cultural material found at the sites of Raniganj-Gourandi area suggest the involvement of tribal groups engaged in traditional iron

²¹ For the details about Asura cultural sites of Chhotanagpur region, see Roy, S.C. 1920. Distribution and Nature of Asur sites in Chhotanagpur. *Journal of Bihar Orissa Research Society*: 393-433; Chakrabarti, Dilip K. and

- smelting process and production. These sites may provide evidence for tracing the stages through which tribal groups appear to have moved from their original homeland to the interior Chhotanagpur region. Possibly such migrations may be attributed to the arrival of groups like Sarak (traditional metal workers now engaged in agriculture) and other pastoralist-agriculturist castes (Gop-Sadgop) into this region. In this connection we may note that we have also encountered an extensive Bhumij burial ground at the site of Kelejora near Asansol.
7. The large occurrence of iron slag, metal-smelting furnace and other associated apparatus on the extensive lateritic tracts of Gaurandi, Lalgunj etc. in Asansol area, Mangolpur near Raniganj and the Kanksa – Durgapur area, the presence of iron-clamps and beams in the temple sites (modern or old) may suggest local procurement of iron. Here we may underline the need to understand the significance of tribal metallurgical traditions in the entire sub-continent and not simply in the area under investigation. Our data are indeed fascinating but unfortunately we have very little knowledge about the chronology of the finds. However, the tribal method of iron metallurgy of this area was an integral part of other developments throughout its history.
 8. The architectural and sculptural remains of this region suggest the presence of Brahmanism, Jainism and Buddhism, though not in equal measure. The Saiva elements appear to be the most noticeable. Possibly the major patrons of temples enshrining deities, were the local rulers, mostly of Saiva faith. The spread of Jainism is attested by some evidence in the north of Asansol, with a possible nucleation at Pachera. The lone site of Bharatpur represents its association with Buddhism. Though evidence for Saktism is very meagre, local tradition and its association with Saivism may suggest the prevalence of sakta faith in that region. It may be thoroughly misleading if we ignore other kinds of ethnoarchaeological data bearing on religious beliefs and practices in this area. The distribution of cult-spots in Asansol area (e.g. Ghagarburi, Muktaichandi, Kalyaneswari, etc.) and the sites of grama-devatas (village deities), Dharmaraja/Dharmathakur and Mangalchandi in Durgapur-Kanksa area of old Gopbhum are commonly found and suggest the survival of animism, nature worship and worship of mother goddess. The Dharmaraja cult intermingled with orthodox religious order, is generally found among the subaltern groups in the rural areas. In this context, medieval Bengali texts in the form of Mangala Kavyas (Dharma, Manasa and Candi) also provide significant evidence for the prevalence of such religious traditions. On one hand, hunting, pastoral and agricultural groups of Gopbhum have been worshipping either Dharmaraja as Siva/Rudrasiva/Bhairav or mother goddess like Syamarupa, Candi, Sankhesvari etc. These religious practices received full support of the local ruling

Nayanjot Lahiri. 1988. A Preliminary Report on the Archaeology of the Ranchi District with a note on the Asura Sites, *Man and Environment*: 12: 29-53.

- groups as they themselves both originated basically from local communities and operated among them. At the same time, though with the affiliation of local deities with Brahmanical deities like Siva and Parvati they integrated themselves into the upper section of the elites. The cult-spots of Asansol represent the concept of mother goddesses as givers of life which encompasses the notion that they had the power of protecting their devotees against diseases, particularly those which threatened children.
9. Popular literature²² also shows that local rulers were perceived as patrons of temples and local deities (grama devatas/village deities, Dharma cult, Candi, etc.). From the point of view of art history, an examination of local architectural styles indicates absorption of styles derived from Orissa. Sculptural art may have been influenced by elements deriving from the Gangetic plains.
 10. The emergence of large scale village settlement in some parts of this territory centering Bharatpur along the flood plain of the Damodar can be understood by relating it to similar developments in its neighbouring areas of Mallasarul. The subsequent history of this region can be traced through the formation of the new geopolitical unit under the name of Gopbhum in Kanksa-Durgapur area and the emergence of local ruling lineages of diverse origins like Gop-Sadgop chiefs (Som Ghosh, Ichhai Ghosh, Lau Sen, Chitra Sen Raj etc.) believed to be the successors of the Sena dynasty. However, the period and the status of such rulers and their state are uncertain as the fact is purely based on strong local traditions and the medieval literatures like Mangala Kavya/Mangal Kavya (Dharma Mangal). Here we may assume that following the decline of bigger powers like Pala-Sena, it was possible that the regional chieftains were able to establish independent power bases and ensure their autonomous identity. Even during the early period of the rule of the Sultan in Bengal made little impact towards this forest clad uneven land which retained its earlier identity. Therefore, the local ruling class legitimized them with the practice of granting land to brahmanas and patronizing temples and deities. Here our material can be contextualized in terms of social transformation, ensuring from the process of dialogue and interaction between local phenomena and historical and cultural traits transcending local and regional boundaries. B.D. Chattopadhyaya's critical analysis of different historical elements involved in the process of political and other forms of integration between c. 700-1200 CE in different parts of the country can be applied to our own local situation as well. Most probably, like the new royal lineages in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, the area under present study also witnessed the gradual rise, in a number of cases, of new ruling classes sometime between c. 1100-1300 CE. However, it may as well be admitted that our evidence is very much limited in scope. Though the formation of Gopbhum may be traced back to the period when the major powers of the Palas and

²² Bhattacharyya, A. 1978. *Folklore of Bengal*. National Book Trust, New Delhi.

the Senas of Bengal collapsed, the development of Gopbhum in its full form might have been from c. 1400 CE onwards²³. The proliferation of local ruling families and their power has been reflected in the Mangalkavyas, a major genre of medieval Bengali literature. The story of Gopbhum rulers and their association with Dharma cult can be traced in the text *Dharma Mangal*, written possibly under their patronage. Similarly, the rise of Sikharbhum at Panchkot and patronage to religious centres by them can be seen in terms of legitimization of their power. Looked at from this perspective, the religious centres of Barakar area too deserve special study.

In understanding the broad processes of historical change in the area under study, the following quote may provide an useful perspective:

“The rapid growth in the number and the networks of temple centres, whose origins certainly date to pre-Gupta times, become understandable when we begin to appreciate how closely they were linked, as were gifts and land grants to Brahmins (*brahmadeyas* and *agraharas*) with the formation of sub-regional and regional kingdoms and their legitimation, consolidation of their resource bases, and the forging of linkages for social integration across communities”²⁴.

There are thus many major issues relating to the archaeology and regional history of early medieval/medieval period of this plateau region that remain to be solved. For instance, one has not been able to address properly the question of formation of new geopolitical units which came to have ‘Bhuma’/‘Bhum’ (land) as a suffix. The ‘Bhums’ encompassed a large territory of Chhotanagpur plateau and the adjoining areas of Orissa, Bihar and Bengal. There are at least 18 such ‘Bhum’²⁵ territories so far identified here. The regional chiefs of these units played a key role in initiating major transformations in the tribal way of life and society of this region. They acted as patrons of temples and deities (higher order or folk) and accelerated the process of the formation of large settlements on this plateau territory. In turn, such developments may have promoted integration of the components of society, culture and economy of plateau/forest area within a broader socio-cultural framework. A study of textual and archaeological records would lead to a more detailed picture of the settlement history of the region. Meanwhile, the present preliminary documentation of the historical sites should at least indicate the variety and range of archaeological remains on the basis of which, an outline of early medieval-medieval character of the society of Asansol-Durgapur area can be offered, perhaps for the first time.

²³ Chattopadhyaya, B.D. 1990. *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early medieval India*. Calcutta.

²⁴ Chattopadhyaya, B.D. 1993. Historiography, History and Religious Centers: Early Medieval North India, Circa A.D. 700-1200. In *Gods, Guardians and Lovers: Temple Sculpture from North India, A.D. 700-1200*, ed. Vishakha N. Desai and Darielle Mason. The Asia Society Galleries, New York: 33-47.

²⁵ Acharya, P. 1945. Note on the ‘Bhum’ countries in Eastern India. *Indian Culture*, XIII: 37-46.