



## Economy and rural settlement pattern in early medieval Bengal

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### Abstract

The present article looks into the rural settlement pattern in the sub-region of Varendra, Bengal. It also tries to discern the processes involved.

**Keywords:** rural, economy

### Introduction

There are many land grant charters in Bengal, which start appearing from the fifth century, and go on till thirteenth century. Though, with its share of danger in generalizing too much from occasional references to boundary specifications (*maryada*, or *sima*), they do provide a partial view of the settlement area, ie, *vastu*, which was an integral component of rural settlements made by the trio of *vastu*, *ksetra* and *gochara*. This essay would be thus the study of rural settlement patterns, ecology, flora, fauna, etc. in one of the sub-regions in Bengal, called as the Varendra.

The region of Varendra has about 25 land transfers. The region shows a chronological span of land records, beginning with the Guptas, and going on to include the Palas and Senas. The earliest ones are peculiar property-deeds, and not royal land grants. These earliest ones simply record buying of land at reduced rate with religious motives. One such grant is the 6<sup>th</sup> century Damodarpur inscription of Kumaragupta. Sale was done according to *nividdharma*, in which cultivable, as well as, untilled and unreclaimed land, after being bought at a reduced rate, could be enjoyed rent free, without being sold or transferred to anybody. Kumaragupta's Damodarpur plate records the sale of such land for the performance of Agnihotra sacrifice at the rate of 3 *dinaras* per *kulyavapa*. One noticeable thing about these lands is that most of the land being given is largely uncultivated and fallow land. An exception to the trend is the just mentioned Dhanaidaha plate which deals with the transaction of only one *kulyavapa* of 'cultivated land' [1]. But this changes with time, and by the time the first Pala inscriptions appear in the region, the land now consists of full-fledged villages, along with market places, palm-groves [2], 'lawn and pastures, adorned with groves and all sorts of covetable things, inclusive of mango and honey, water and land, ditch and dry region, additional taxes, fines realised from criminals and taxes levied for prevention of thefts and having all hindrance to peace removed from it' [3]. The Senas also granted lands almost on similar pattern, except the fact that they lay emphasis on land being granted with 'forest, branches, pits, barren tracts, land and water, betel nut, coconut trees with revenues' [4].

The initial grants very specifically mention that not only the

grants were to be composed of fallow land, but should not have been previously settled [5]. This does not remain so in the later period, when land grants saw a tremendous change in terms of the kind of land being donated. Most notably, they began to be mentioned in terms of annual income they yielded [6], which shows the land being referred to be cultivable land.

The early grants have nothing to say on boundary markers of the land being given, only the name of the village and district in which, or with reference to which, the land is notified are mentioned. A few examples include the Damodarpur #1 (444AD) and Damodarpur #2 (448 AD) plates of the time of Kumaragupta I. The former merely mentions the grant of one *Kulyavapa* of land to the Brahmana Karpatika, to the north-west of Donga [7]. The latter, on its part, mentions thus : "...that the land may be granted, and accordingly, land, measuring five *Dronas*, with the right of using canals excavated for watering the field, lying in the west of the village of 'Airavata-Gorajya' was given to the petitioner..." [8] But this changes soon. Within three decades, boundary-markers mentioned in land grant charters become more descriptive. The Damodarpur plate #2 of the time of Budhagupta, and dated to the last quarter of fifth century, not only mentions that the petitioner wants some land in the vicinity of the cultivable area, which had earlier been given by him to gods Visnu and Siva, in Dongagrama, but also the fact that the land concerned was situated "...to east of the tank and to the south of the lake, named after Ribhupala" [9].

The change, however, becomes more prominent only in the ninth century, from the time of the Palas. The Indian Museum plate, and the Khalimpur plate of Dharmapala give quite detailed account of boundary marks, of the granted land. The Indian museum copper plate of Dharmapala records several plots of land in different settlements of Kotivarsa *visaya*. Though corroded, the part describing the plot of land in the village of Antaravanika, situated in the Snanita-mandala of Kotivarsa *visaya*, is quite clear, and gives the boundary marks thus : to the east was a half stream, or *ardha srota* of the river named Cirika ; to the south was the border of the northern side of the pond (*puskarini*) of Rahayyaditya ; to the west was a half-stream of river Pravara ; and to the north was the southern border of a flat land tract of Bhadranga viharika [10]. Similar

is the case with the Khalimpur plate, dated to 32<sup>nd</sup> regnal year of Dharmapala, which mentions the boundary marks of the four villages being granted for 'the worship and maintenance of venerable supreme lord Nanna-narayana' <sup>[11]</sup>. Many of the later grants like the twelfth century Madhainagar, and thirteenth century Tarpandighi plates of Laksmanasena also follow this trend.

One very interesting feature is that in almost all the elaborate grants which contain descriptions on boundary markers, water bodies appear very frequently. The afore-mentioned Damodarpur inscription of the time of Budha Gupta had the grant to the east of the tank (*puskarini*), and to the south of the lake, named after Ribhupala. Three out of four boundary markers of the plot of land in Antaravanika village of Snanitama- mandala, in the Indian Museum plate are water bodies. Two are half streams of two rivers, and one is the border of the northern side of the pond (*puskarini*) of Rahayyaditya <sup>[12]</sup>.

The Khalimpur plate, on its part, grants four villages (*gramas*) to god 'Nanna-Narayana', namely, Krauncasvabhra, Madhasalmali, Palitaka and Gopipalli <sup>[13]</sup>. The first three of these villages have boundary specifications formed by water bodies, like *Ganginika* (small river), *ali* (perhaps *al*, or, embankment) and *Konthiya srotah* (channel). Even when not translated satisfactorily, expressions like *Vilvardha-strotika* and *Jambuyanika* are also taken as meaning some form of water courses <sup>[14]</sup>. The fourth village Gopipalli, in the Amrasandika-mandala has boundary specifications like *Jolakah*, which perhaps means marshy land, and a *Khatika*, or ditch, named Vesanika.

Such boundary specifications are to be found in the later grants also, like those of the Senas. The Tarpandighi plate of Laksmanasena grants a plot of land within the jurisdiction of Velahisthi, in Varendri, and the boundary specifications given, further make it clear that the area was a marshy and watery one. To the east lay the eastern boundary dyke of the rent free land of the Buddhist monastery; to the south lay the *Nicadahara* tank, to the west the *Nandiharipakundi* (though not translated, but also seems to be a water body), and to the north a ditch called *Mollana* <sup>[15]</sup>.

This over-view of boundary specifications in the Varendra region not only re-iterates B.D. Chattopadhyaya's contention that '...colonization of new areas and creation of large scale settlements in them would be planned keeping in view their proximity to natural water courses.' <sup>[16]</sup>, but also the textual image of the region. Sandhyakara Nandi's *Ramacaritam*, which simultaneously tells the story of Raghupati Rama, and Pala monarch Ramapala, draws a very vivid picture of Varendra (also Varendri, the Pala fatherland). Though the narration is about how the Palas re-established their authority in Varendri, through supplanting of the rebels (the *Kaivarttas*), the poet gives picturesque images of its prosperity, topography, flora, fauna etc.

His exquisite representation dwells on almost everything associated with Varendri, including its inhabitant Brahmanas <sup>[17]</sup> (*parama-rsibhi*), great monastery at Jagaddala (*Jagaddala-mahavihara*) <sup>[18]</sup>, its two towns of Skanda Nagara and Sonitapura <sup>[19]</sup>, its four rivers, namely, Ganga, Karatoya, Balabhi and Kali, its Asoka groves and Nagaranga trees, its beautiful cities with rows of white palaces having golden pitchers (*kanaka-kalasa*) at the top, etc. Notwithstanding, the

process of stereotypicisation, and the author's conscious (or, unconscious) efforts at creating a certain image of royalty and its associates, that usually creeps into such literary works, one can surely take some cue on matters relating to economy and society.

Coming to things that concern us, as said, the author talks about Varendri's topography, flora, fauna etc. One has already noticed his description of four of its river, making the country *nadimatrka* (riverine). The region also got good amount of rainfall from 'large and swiftly moving clouds' (*ati-kada-prakandajaghanama*), thus making it *devamatrka*, or rain fed <sup>[20]</sup>. Reference to large water tanks are also there in the text (*prthutara puskarini*) <sup>[21]</sup>, which supplied water during times of scarcity. As for trees and crops, the text refers to both Varendri's large marshy lands <sup>[22]</sup> and the varieties of paddy that grew well on that soil <sup>[23]</sup>. This goes very well with inscriptional data on boundary specifications, a large number of which (like half streams, ditches, small rivers, ponds, rivers) were water bodies, delineating the marshy and swampy nature of Varendri's landscape.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Varendra, or north Bengal was indeed an area wherein different varieties of water sources were a regular feature. On the constituents of villages, some inscriptions do talk about *ksetra* <sup>[24]</sup> (land), *khilaksetra* <sup>[25]</sup> (fallow land), *vastu*, <sup>[26]</sup> *gocara*, etc. though *gocara* appears for the first time in the plates of Gopala II in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. So information on the whole is very limited, and one can only get a very partial picture.

### Emerging Patterns

Varendra is one of those regions where one of the earliest inscriptions appear, and which contains a total of 20 inscriptions, transferring land in this region. Though containing the largest number of land charters, they decrease gradually with each passing century. Total number of names of village settlements is 72. There are two instances in which no name is mentioned (the 5<sup>th</sup> century Dhanaidaha inscription of Kumaragupta, and Madanapala's 12<sup>th</sup> century Manahali plate), thus making total number of settlements to be 72 in number.

### Fifth Century Inscriptions and Settlements Mentioned

1. Dhanaidaha plate of Kumaragupta- 5 dronas in a settlement in the Khatapara *visaya*.
2. Sultanpur plate of Kumaragupta – Hastisirsavibhitaki, Dhanyapatalika, Samgohalikagrama, Gulmagandhikagrama, Adyapatha, Tapasapottaka, Dayitapottaka, Citravatangara.
3. Damodarpur plate # 1 of Kumaragupta – Donga.
4. Damodarpur plate #2 of Kumaragupta- Airavata Gorajya, plus the village with canals excavated.
5. Baigram plate of Kumaragupta – Trivrtta and Srigohali.
6. Paharpur plate of Budhagupta- Nitvagohali, Vatagohali, Prishthimapottaka and Gosatapunja.
7. Damodarpur plate #1 of Budhagupta – Candagrama.
8. Damodarpur plate #2 of Budhagupta – Dondagrama.
9. Nandapur plate of Budhagupta – Ambila and Jangoyika.

### Sixth Century Inscriptions

1. Damodarpur plate of Budhagupta/Upagupta <sup>[27]</sup> -

Svacchandapataka, Lavangasika, Satuvanasramaka and Paraspatika.

#### **Seventh Century Inscriptions:** Nil

**Eighth Century Inscriptions:-** Nil

#### **Ninth Century Inscriptions:-**

1. The Indian Museum Plate of Dharmapala –Antaravanika, Mahadrsthika.
2. The Indian Museum Plate of Dharmapala Khalimpur plate of Dharmapala – Cranncasvabhra, Nalacaramata, Namundikayika, Khandamundamukha, Rohitabati, Pindarabiti, Yotika, Vyaktavayota, Devika Simabiti Dharmayojavika, Gramavilva, Madhasalmali, Kalikasvabhra, Srifalabhisug, Palitaka, Jenandayika and Goppipali.
3. Gopala II #1-Suvarnakarika danda.
4. Gopala II #2-Same as 3.
5. Mohipur plate of Gopala II- Kankavasaka, in Sthalikatta visaya.

#### **Tenth Century Inscriptions**

1. Jajilpara plate of Gopala III – Siha, Muktavastu, Kasthagrha and Maharaja – pallis of Anandapura grama. [28]
2. Belwa plate of Mahipala I – Osinna-Kaivarttavrtti, Nandisvamini and Ganesvara.
3. Bangarh plate of Mahipala I – Hastipada, Cavati and Kuratapallika.
4. Biyala plate of Mahipala I- Palasvrinda.

#### **Eleventh Century Inscriptions**

1. Belwa plate of Vighrapala III – Vellavagrama, Lovanikama, Tinnidi and Vehada.
2. Amgachhi plate [29] of Vighrapala III – Visamapura, Dandatrahesvara, Chattragrama, Matsyavasa, Krodanci.
3. Ramganj plate of Isvaraghosa – Digghasodika.

#### **Twelfth Century Inscriptions**

1. Manahali plate of Madanapala – Kasthagiri, Campahitti.
2. Tarpandighi plate of Laksmanasena – Velahisthi.

#### **Thirteenth Century Inscriptions**

Madhainagar plate of Laksmanasena - Dapaniyapataka, Cadaspasapataka, Gayanagara, Gundisthirapataka and Gundidapaniya.

#### **References**

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3. ibid, 176
4. ibid, The Naihati Plate of Vallalasena, 269.
5. ibid, The Damodarpur Plate of Budha Gupta #1, 60.
6. ibid, The Madhainagar Plate of Laksmanasena, 286.
7. Mukherji R, Maity SK. *Corpus...*, ibid, The Damodarpur Plate of Kumaragupta I #1, 46.
8. ibid, The Damodarpur Plate of Kumaragupta I #2, 48-49.
9. ibid, The Damodarpur Plate of Budhagupta #2, 64.
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16. Chattopadhyaya BD. *Aspects...*, ibid, 32.
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18. ibid.
19. ibid, 63.
20. ibid, 70.
21. ibid.
22. ibid, 64.
23. “*bahu dhanyam raja samhati sambhabitakamya-rupaya laksmya*”. This phrase compares the beauty in the excellent growth of different paddy varieties with that of Laksmi.
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25. ibid, Baigram Plate of Kumaragupta, 51-52.
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