

Socio-Cultural Activities of Ancient Civilizations in Bengal

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Abstract: *Ancient Bengal had been a 4,000 year old civilization that thrived between the banks of Ganges to Brahmaputra and sustained itself with the riches of Ganges Delta. Remnants of earliest cities in the state dated back to the Vedic Period. The oldest archaeological site in Bangladesh had been Mahasthangarh, which dates back to 700 BCE. And according to wiki sources-the history of Bengal had been intertwined with the history of the broader Indian subcontinent and the surrounding regions of South Asia and Southeast Asia. It included modern-day Bangladesh and the Indian states of West Bengal and Assam's Karimganj district, located in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, at the apex of the Bay of Bengal and dominated by the fertile Ganges delta. The advancement of civilization in Bengal dated back four millennia. The Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers acted as a geographic marker of the region, but also connect the region to the broader Indian subcontinent. Bengal, at times, had played an important role in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Hence it had become tremendously important to study the ancient activities and cultural practices of ancient Bengal. And this paper would try to attempt to provide a brief glimpse of ancient civilizations in Bengal and their commercial activities, religion, medical practice, position of women and their social life.*

Keywords: Ancient, Culture, Religion, Economy, Medical Practice, Women

1.Introduction

Hence from the above facts it became obvious that the history of modern day Bengal had been a 4000 year old civilization. In the epic before which dated back to more than 1000 BC, Bengal's region was mentioned in the epic Mahabharata and other writings of that era. Not only these, even Stone Age remnants been also found in this particular place. And to point out further evidence of existing human civilizations, remnants of Stone Age of more than 20, 000 years had been also found in several parts of Bengal. Such fact only indicated the rich history of modern day Bengal.

From the late twentieth century it had been a very fascinating task for the historians to recollect archeological evidences and inscriptions from the ancient civilizations and to delve deep into such findings to resurrect the history of Bengal. Because it had been very obvious in the context of the Indian history as well as South-east Asia's history, the province of Bengal was very important, be it in terms of trade and commerce, religious affairs, transport, one of the major gateway to India and many more. Bengal being connected with lot of rivers and sea, it became a very important place of transport and became one of the chief gateways to India. Studies of Chandraketugarh civilization also proved the fact that this particular port city had been in touch with the subcontinents of India and other parts of the world also.

Hence the history of Bengal had been a fascinating aspect in several ways. For this reason many archeologist and historians fancy their chances to unearth the ancient history of Bengal. Social historians every now and then had been trying their utmost to recreate the history of Bengal even before the Chandraketugarh civilization. However due to the limited-ness and unavailability of resources this particular paper would limit itself to the study of Bengal from Chandraketugarh civilization up to the Vedic period and beyond. However more focus would

be put upon the Chandraketugarh civilization of Bengal which dated back to 400 BC.

Tracing the history of Bengal had been a very fascinating aspect. Hence this particular paper had been aimed at the periphery of such research or at the outcome of several such researches which looked at the ancient history of Bengal. This article had been nothing but an accumulation of all such research, though in a very brief manner. In this paper, an attempt had been made to collect all such data is available in the web pages and in some particular websites as well from some of the major books that were written by several historians of Bengal. This article's primary intention had been to get the general readers acquainted with the history of Bengal in a very brief but accurate manner. This article had not been made lengthy because it had been primarily intended to make it like a brief paper in Bengal's ancient history which would serve the common readers. In this article an attempt had also been made to strengthen the brief understanding of Bengal's geographical location in the ancient days, ancient culture of Bengal, traditions and practices, their religious beliefs, trade and commerce, their medical practices, furthermore the role and position of women in those particular society.

Before delving deep into the discussion about ancient Bengal one would need to remember that the Bengal that we have today or the greater Bengal was not such back in the ancient days. Rather it was a scattered kind of a place with any specific geographical boundaries. However, the study had been centered at Chandraketugarh civilization, and several historians had provided their opinion about the geographical position of Bengal. Chandraketugarh had been an archaeological site located near the Bidyadhari river, about 35 kilometers or twenty two miles in north-east of Kolkata, India, in the district of North 24 Parganas, near the township of Berachampa and the Harua Road railhead. Professor Brotindranath Mukherjee in his book Bengal, Bengali and India opined that Chandraketugarh existed at 22° 41'South and 88° 42'

north. This particular place had been a famous archeological site in Bengal and at the present moment it consists of several villages such as Berachapa, Deoliya, Hadipur, Shanpukur, Jhikura etc.

Deganga River had been just 5 to 6 miles away from this place. Professor Kalyan Rudra, who had been an expert in studying river, showed that Chandrakeutgarh existed in the nearby of Vidyadhari river. This very specific location and being located in a river bank allowed its people to get connected and be connected with several South Asian people and civilization. The Maurya dynasty which dated back to 300 to 200 BC had its trace in this particular place.

Claudius Ptolemy, who was born in Alexandria, Egypt around 100 AD, was a mathematician, astronomer, astrologer, geographer, and music theorist, who wrote about a dozen scientific treatises, three of which were of importance to later Byzantine, Islamic, and Western European science. Ptolemy was one of the first people in the globe who described that Chandrakeutgarh as a probable part of the ancient kingdom Gangaridai. Such a groundbreaking description made the port-city Chandrakeutgarh to be of a high importance in the history of Ancient Civilizations in South-east Asia and from such a description we could also apprehend the importance of this particular place. It also proved that Egypt, a country linking northeast Africa with the Middle East, and dated back to the time of the pharaohs, was aware of the existence of this civilization in Bengal. Thus a particular link of the ancient Bengal with the world had been found time and again in several ancient texts and archeological findings.

At this point it needed to be mentioned that the Chandrakeutgarh was a famous port city in the South-east Asia by the second century. And by the end of the fourth 400 AD, it became a very rich in trade and commerce. Being a port city it accommodated within its cultural corpus a variety of merchants, sailors and travellers across Asia at that time. However as soon as water ways or sea travelling got better by the invention of ships and cargos, the scenario of and cultural activities of this port city of Bengal changed significantly.

How the society formed in ancient Bengal had been very interesting. In the ancient days like every other major civilization, the most of civilizations in ancient Bengal got situated near the banks of the several rivers that flowed within this province. The society in ancient Bengal formed primarily as an agricultural basis, because of situating near the banks of the rivers, hence the lands were very fertile. For that reason agricultural production rate was very high. Very soon the ancient people or societies of Bengal started trading with nearby provinces and continents, which later on took a greater shape. Hence the society formed as an agricultural society to a society becoming expert in trade and commerce. The mixing of several such people in this sort of transactions created a lot of occupation and position in the society. Before the Maurya or Aryan invasion there was no such strong political or administrative hold in totality in Bengal. The kind of buildings and inhabitation had been also of different

kinds. Because of the existence of several races and culture of people, the formation of houses had been also different.¹

Position of women had been also a fascinating thing to notice. It had been observed that the role and position of women changed significantly from the Epic period, respecting women as mother and worshipping female deities, in the Vedic age the same thing continued². Talking about the position of women, Chandrakeutgarh was a patriarchal society. Because in many plucks found at Chandrakeutgarh it had been seen that men were much more erotic and wanted male child rather than a daughter. In such plucks plenty of women had been found wearing jewelry. However it had been surprisingly noticed that in all such plucks women were presented in an erotic manner, by exposing their private parts and even their beauty had been highlighted in such plucks. In many plucks found at Chandrakeutgarh, it had been seen that in such plucks they used to portray sexual positions of various kinds. However interestingly it had observed that there had been found no such pluck where a daughter or a girl child was portrayed.

However after the end of the Vedic period and start of the Aryan invasion, things started to change for women of ancient Bengal. Patriarchal society became the norm, hence women's freedom, rights and educational activities as well as their role in the society became so minimal, all of a sudden they were not part of decision making process of a particular family, child marriage, polygamy, and sati became the norm. Historians had been very curious to know about the existence of religion in Bengal. Bengal had been one of the various places in India, which had been now-a-days known as having a rich culture and a

¹It is thus evident that in ancient Bengal the area of each village was clearly demarcated by various sorts of boundary marks as noted above. In this respect, the boundary-marks of a present day Bengali village are hardly different from those prevailing in the past. Thus, with tanks, rivers, lakes, reservoirs, temples, mathas, gardens, embankments, etc.

²The early period is one in which the tribe owns property in common and social relationships have largely kinship overtones. At this stage women play a crucial role in society as the mother, the only identifiable parent in a group-polyandry or pairing-system of marriage. There is a direct division of labor between man and woman. The role which women play in the realm of the household is on par with that which the man plays outside it. In this stage of primitive agriculture or cattle breeding, until the advent of the plough, women participate effectively in the work in the field as well. These factors assure for women a position of importance and respect in society. It is in this context that Engels pointed out that, peoples whose womenfolk have to work much harder than the Europeans consider proper, often have far more real respect for women than the Europeans have for theirs. "—see for details, Status of Women in India: A Historical Perspective, Sophie M. Tharakan and Michael Tharakan, Social Scientist, Vol.4, No.4/5, Special Number on Women (Nov.-Dec., 1975), p.116.

place for religious devotion. However, things were not such, because in the ancient period, of even during the time of Chandraketurgarh civilization, the religion of Bengal was in a very scattered place of things. In those days religion did not form in such a wide spread manner and the spectrum of religion was volatile. But, in the Chandrakeutgarh civilization many kinds of deities were found. It was Aryans who had been thought as the carrier of Hindu religion in early Bengal. Since then a lot of Hindu kinds ruled the land and the Hindu religion became a prominent religion by the end of the 600 AD. People of Chandrakeutgarh used to worship deities to wash away their sins and achieve a place of sanctity and equilibrium. Not only the ancient inhabitants of Chandrakeutgarh but also the previous civilizations used to worship deities to keep themselves safe from disasters, diseases, difficulties and natural calamities also. In a pluck found at the Hadipur village area, archeologist found mention of Dhanyoji, a deity for paddy crops. In Chandrakeutgarh archeologist had also found Jirambi Devi, Kubera, Lord Indra, and Vishnu. Other than that people of Chandrakeutgarh used to worship Tridev. However, interestingly, in Chandrakeutgarh an idol of Sun god had also been found, and from its existence one could easily apprehend that the inhabitants of Chandrakeutgarh civilization used to worship the Sun god.

As boundary marks as well as constituent parts of the village, each village in ancient Bengal was a composite unit. The origins and development of the Bengali culture have been all throughout basically village oriented. From the above mentioned facts undoubtedly one can get a picture of the landscape highlighting forests, rivers, agricultural land, products, flora and fauna, artisans, crafts, etc.; of the village in ancient Bengal. This picture of rural settlements reveals that villages of ancient Bengal had all the physical and natural requisites necessary for subsistence and also for leading a self-contained life-pattern. See for details Some Aspects of the Village in Ancient Bengal: Size and Periphery, Annapurna Chattopadhyay, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress Vol.55 (1994), p.113.

Although worshipping an idol of Sun god had not been a commonality in Indian religion, rather it was the Greeks or other foreign and barbaric religions that used to worship such deities. Hence, one could find people practicing all kinds of religion. Religion in ancient Bengal was also somehow connected with the treatment and cure of people. Although such exact facts and data's had not been yet discovered about the medical practices of Chandrakeutgarh civilization or of ancient Bengal before the Vedic period. However it had been anticipated that people of Chandrakeutgarh, who were much more ancient than the later generation people, used herbs and tree roots, barks of trees and numerous kinds of jungle leaves to cure minor diseases such as cuts, fever, liver pain, headache, pox and other kinds of skin diseases. Interestingly a couple of centuries later, historians and theologians had discovered the existence of Shitala or goddess Haritri, who were worshipped to keep humans aloof from several kinds of diseases. People in that era believed that goddess Haritri or Shitala cured all diseases, and ancient Bengal

holds a greater importance in terms of medical practices. From the Vedic period it had been observed that the practice of Ayurveda was there for curing diseases³. This particular fact would alone prove the existence of medical practices and its history in India. People in early Bengal used lot of herbal product to cure several kinds of diseases. And people in this part of the world also believed in lot of superstitions also. Hence even in the modern day we could very easily identify such ancient practices of Ayurveda treatment which had been going on for several generations.

The ancient civilizations in Bengal and the social and administrative structure also went through a drastic and rapid change due to the several invasions and attacks from the outer world. One such invasion was the Aryan invasion which reformed the early Bengal civilizations and brought several social structure in Bengal, among them patriarchy happened to be the prominent one. After the Aryan invasion a lot of dynasties fought for the possession of Bengal and several dynasties ruled this part of the nation of India. With the changing of dynasties, the social structure, culture and administrative methods also changed significantly. Not only that several inscriptions from the ancient days had also put forwarded several such information regarding the different strata of societies⁴.

³"The Indian medicine is traditionally known to have potentially motivated man to develop knowledge (Veda) about how to prolong life (ayus), that is, the Ayurveda in historical perspectives. Obviously the motivation was oriented to develop the sense of overcoming injury, sickness and pain. 'But as years rolled on, magico-religious healing arts (daiva-vyapasraya bhesaja) gradually lagged behind; the art of healing changed and rational healing arts (Yukti-Vyapasraya bhesaja) began to be used for the application of medicine by the physicians professionally called vaidyas because they possessed such knowledge (Vidya). In this branch of knowledge theoretical developments are known from both the Brahmanical literature like the Atharvaveda (BC 1000 to BC 500) onwards and the Buddhist literature like the Vinaya pitaka (c.3rd cent. BC)" .-see for details, Religion, Medicine and Miracle Cures in Ancient India, Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Vol.61, Part One: Millennium (2000-2001), p.183.

⁴"Our inscriptions also talk about various sections of society, forming different strata, and part of the larger picture as found in the textual sources. In the Varendra region inscriptions up to the sixth century talk about different groups like Mahattaras (prominent persons), Kulikas (artisans), Kayasthas (clerk-writers), Pustapalas (record-keepers), Nagara-sresthis (chief-merchants) and Sarthavahas (chief caravan traders). The term Karana occurs very late in this region, from the Indian Museum Copper Plate inscription of Dharmapala onwards, as addressees in the grant along with Visayavya-harins Even then, Karana does not appear regularly after that. Administrative groups like the Kayastha and the Karana may have had the status of castes. The earliest evidence of the use of the term has been found in the Yajnavalkya Smṛiti and the literary and epigraphic records of the Gupta period. Kayastha occurs for the first time in the Kalaikuri

Hence, it had also been a widely acknowledged fact that, because of the several existing kingdoms several strata of life got formed and deformed as the age went on. And in every coming period, not only the geographical location but the cultural practices of ancient Bengal changed drastically in medieval period and even so in the modern period. But it needed to be mentioned that there was not a mention of a particular ruler or king. Hence the society was not under any kind of a solitary rule; rather it was a kind of a capitalist society where the rich people dominated the poor.

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Sultanpur plate" (c.440) in Varendra, making it one of the earliest references to the group probably in Bengal as well. This term appears in all the inscriptions of the time of Kumaragupta I, except the Baigram plate which mentions only the record keepers (the Pustapalas). "This happens till Damodarpur #1 plate of Budhagupta (c.482). Then again the term appears from the Damodarpur # 2 of Budhagupta. Karana and Kayastha both stop appearing completely from the time of Gopala II (who ruled from c952-969 AD). "- see for details Agrarian Society in Early Medieval Bengal, Suchitra Majumdar, Social Scientist, Vol.43, No.5/6 (May-June 2015), p.13"