

HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHY OF EASTERN INDIA DURING EARLY MEDIEVAL TIMES

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We all know, Eastern India, as the heartland of Buddhism. This region witnessed not only the evolution of Buddhism in the 6th – 5th BCE but also its efflorescence as an institutionalized religion with rise of innumerable viharas during the early medieval times i.e. 5th-12th CE. Consequently, majority (almost 70 percent) of the Buddhist monasteries, are located in this region. Eastern India, comprises of the modern states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, and Assam in India and some parts of modern Bangladesh. According to B.C.Law¹, the Pracya or the eastern country lay to the east of the Madhyadesa, but as the eastern boundary of the Madhyadesa changed from time to time, the western boundary of the Pracya country consequently diminished. According to the *Dharmasūtras* the eastern country lay to the east of Prayaga.

An attempt has been made to focus on the geographical setting of some of the Buddhist sites, so that a general picture of such monastic settlements emerge in a wider context. Perspectives from contemporary literature bearing on the geography of the historico-cultural regions, has been added for a more realistic portrayal of the concerned macro-region.

ASSAM:

To begin with, the modern state of Assam is one of the regions under consideration. The term 'Assam' is relatively speaking, of recent origin, and is generally believed to have been derived from the traditions of the Ahoms who entered the Brahmaputra valley in the Thirteenth century, this region was known as Pragjyotisha and\ or Kāmarūpa in the Epic, Puranic and early historical literature and epigraphic records.

There is not a single site in Assam, where we have archaeological evidences of a Buddhist *mahāvihāra*, as in other states. We have some traces of minor Buddhist *vihāras* and artefacts in the regions like Deoparvat, Dah-Parvatiya, Numaligarh, Kāmarūpa, etc., From our perspective, Kāmarūpa is the most important site in Assam, evincing great socio-econo-religious activities during the early medieval period. It was also called Pragjyotisha.² Hsuan Tsang also termed the region as Kia-mo-lu-po or Kāmarūpa (which is in modern Pragjyotishpur region in Assam). In 1912 three copper plates were discovered at the village of Nidhanapura³ in Pancakhanda pargana in the district of Sylhet. These plates were issued by Bhaskarvarman, king of Kāmarūpa, from the camp at Karnasuvarna.

¹ B.C.Law, *Historical Geography of Ancient India*, pp.16-17.

² *EI*, XXXII,pt.VI, pp.153-154.

³ The Nidhanpur grant of Bhaskarvarman, *A volume of eastern and Indian studies* presented to F.W.Thomas, ed. Katre and Gode,pp.85ff.;I.C.,II, p.153.

Two other sites Nowgong and Tezpur are situated on the south bank of Brahmaputra. Here five copper plates of Vallabhadeva⁴ were discovered

BENGAL:

The first epigraphic mention of Vanga countries is probably made in the Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription⁵. *Vangadesa* is also mentioned in Madanapada plate of Visvarupasena⁶. According to this plate Navya was part of *Vanga* (*Vanga Navye*). Northern Bengal was invaded by an army of a Vangala king in the course of which the Buddhist teacher Karunasrimitra's house at Somapura *Vihāra* (modern Paharpur) was set on fire and he was burnt to death⁷.

To begin with, the monastery at Paharpur is the biggest one that was ever erected in India for the Buddhist monks. It is lying between 25°2'N and 89°3'E in Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. Paharpur⁸ apparently owes its name to the loftiness of its ruins presenting the appearance of a *pahad* or hill mainly of the main sanctuary of the place rising seventy feet above the flat land⁹. According to Hsuan Tsang it is located in Pun-na-fa-tan-na (Pundravardhana modern district of Rajshahi).

Jagaddala *Vihāra* or Mrigasthapana *Vihāra* (or *Mi-li-kia-po-no* by I-tsing) is identified with modern Mrigasthapana in Varendra (North-Bengal) region of Bangladesh.¹⁰ Varendra or Barendra is the ancient name given to the part of Eastern Bengal¹¹, lying between the Mahananda and the Karatoya rivers and corresponding with the old kingdom of Pundra and with western portion of the modern Rajshahi division. The said region still survives in the Barind, an elevated tract on confines of Dinajpur, Malda, Rajshahi and Bogra districts.

Both the *vihāras* of Somapura and Mrigasthapana fall in the ancient region of Pundravardhamana now comprising modern districts of Rajshahi, Dinajpur, etc, in Bangladesh.¹²

Raktamrittika *Vihāra* or Lo-to-mo-chih (Hsuan Tsang) is identified with Rangamati in Rajbadidanga,¹³ a locality near the Chiruti railway station in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. It is situated in 22°39'N and 92°12'E on the banks of Karnaphuli River. The *vihāra* exactly located on the western coast of the Ganges, is believed to have been the site of Karnsuvarna¹⁴. According to Hsuan Tsang, the name Rangamati is derived from Raktamrittika or Raktabhitti (lo-to-wei-chi) the name of an old monastery, which he found in Karnasuvarna.¹⁵

Pattikera *Vihāra*¹⁶ or Bhavadeva *Vihāra* is identified with Lalmai-Mainmāti range in the Tippera district of Bangladesh. The name Mainamati is probably associated with Mayanamati¹⁷,

⁴ ASI, Reports, Vol.XI; JASB., vol.XLI,

⁵ *CI.*, III, pp.141ff.

⁶ *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol.III, pp.119,133,141.

⁷ *EI.*XXI, p.97-131.

⁸ *IGI*, XXI, p.160

⁹ Pahadpur, *MASI*, vol.55, 1938; K.N.Dixit; *ASR*, pp.138-145.

¹⁰ *IGI*, XXIII, p.189.

¹¹ *Geography of Early Buddhism*, B.C.Law, p.2.

¹² *Historical geography of Ancient India*, B.C.Law, p.248.

¹³ *Rajbadidanga*, S.C.Das, S.R.Das, preface, p.III.

¹⁴ *Archaeological Discoveries from Murshidabad distt.*, p.10

¹⁵ *Si-yu-ki*, Tr.S.Beal, Bk.ii, p.201-203.

¹⁶ Khan, *Mainmati*, 1ff; ABIA, XVI, III, : *Archaeology of Bangladesh*, D.K.Chakravorty, *Ancient Bangladesh*, p.126.

the queen of Manikchandra, a Chandra king of Bengal in the tenth and eleventh c.A.D. A village of the Tippera district, which extends upto the Mainamāti hills, even now retains the name of Patikara or Paitkara. This region corresponds to the ancient region of Samatāta. When Hsuan Tsang visited the country (640c.A.D.)¹⁸ Samatata was an important kingdom.¹⁹

This region is lying on the eastern side of the Meghna River. On the basis of inscriptional evidence in the donation of Bhaskarvarman, the Paschimbhag grant of Srichandra, it would appear that Samatata was the only area in which Buddhism was firmly rooted within the whole delta. Also the land donations involved larger amounts of land, all being extraordinarily large²⁰.

Bhasur *Vihāra* or Po-shih-po (Hsuan tsang) is near Mahasthan in Bogra district in Bangladesh²¹. Mahasthan is an ancient shrine and fort, situated in 24°57'N and 89°21'E,²² on the west bank of Karatoya Rivers, Seven miles north of Bogra town.²³ There are reason for believing that the rivers here mark the site of a group of Buddhist *stūpa* and that Mahasthan was the capital of Pundra or Pundravardhana²⁴, the country of pod (ponds) lying between the Karatoya and Mahananda which was in existence in the third c. B.C. and was still flourishing in the seventh c. A.D.

Harikela *Vihāra* or A-liki-lo (according to I-tsing) comprises the regions falling in Sylhet district and Littoral areas of Chittagong district of Bangladesh²⁵. According to I-tsing Harikela (O-li-ki-lo) was visited by two Chinese priests, by the southern sea routes²⁶. It seems that Harikela was an inland country, which lay wholly on the river Meghna.²⁷

The second part of the region, where Harikela *Vihāra* is exactly located is bounded on the West by the Bay of Bengal, on the northwest by the Dacca region; on the northeast by Sylhet and Tippera hills, on the east by Lushai hills and north Arakan and on the south by Arakan.

Tamralipti *Vihāra* or Bharaha *Vihāra* (Hsuan Tsang) is identified with Tamluk in Midnapur district of West Bengal²⁸. It is about twelve miles from the junction of the Rupanarayan with the Hooghly. It is now situated on the western bank of Rupanarayan formed by the united streams of Silai (Swilavati) and Dalkisor (dvarkesvari) in Midnapur. Fa-hsian

¹⁷ *Distinguished compounds in the place names of Bengal*, BDCRI, 20, pt.1, pp.35363.

¹⁸ *El.XXVII*, p.20, N.K.Bhattachali.

¹⁹ *Si-yu-ki*, Tr.S.Beal, book ii, p.199.

²⁰ *Political centres and cultural regions in early Bengal*, B.M.Morrison, p.153.

²¹ *Buddhist Monument*, D.Mitra; *Ancient Bangladesh*, D.K.Chakrabarti, p.89

²² *Geography of Bangladesh*, Haroun E.Rashid, 1971, p.45.

²³ *IGI*, XVI, p.437. Annual Report, 1930-31, p.128.

²⁴ A.M.Choudhary, *Pundra/Pundravardhana in early Bengal in History and Society*, (Essays in honour of N.R.Ray) ed. D.P.Chattopadhyaya, Cal., 1976, pp.295-310.

²⁵ *Ancient Bangladesh*, D.K.Chakravorty, p.159-161.

²⁶ *Records of the Buddhist Religion*, I-tsing Tr.J.Takakusu, 1896, p.xi.

²⁷ *Historical Geography of Ancient India*, B.C.Law, p.222.

²⁸ J.D.Beglar, 'Report of Archaeology Through the Bengal provision of Gaya, Patna and Midnapur, " 1872, p.xi.

describes Tamralipti as being situated on the seaside, fifty yojanas east from Champa²⁹. In the seventh century A.D. I-tsing resided at Tamralipti in a celebrated monastery called the Baraha.

BIHAR:

The territorial division now known as Bihar acquired its present name in the early medieval period from the Turks, who so named it on account of the large number of *vihāras*, they saw especially in the area around Odantipura- modern Biharsharif in Patna district. The name Bihar as a province is first met with in the *Tabaqat-i- Nasiri* of Minhaj-us-Siraj³⁰.

Vikramaśīla *Vihāra* is located at the confluence of the Ganges and Kosi at a place near Colgong (Kahalgaon in Bhagalpur district)³¹. Vikramashila is identified by a village Silao near Kahalgaon situated in 25°16'N and 87°14'E on the south bank of the Ganges, two hundred forty five miles from Calcutta³². The modern name Sila is a contraction of Vikramashila. There is a rock *vihāra* of peculiar style, which formerly contained several fine specimen of sculpture and the place appears to have been visited by Hsuan Tsang. Since the Vikramashila *vihāra* was founded in the eighth century A.D, about a hundred years after Hsuan Tsang's visit, he never talked of the *vihāra* but has given a vivid geographical description of the region. Cen-po (Champa) is the ancient³³ name of the region where Vikramashila *vihāra* was located.

Odantipura *vihāra* or Nālandā *vihāra* is located at Nālandā, a site at a distance of seven miles from Biharsharif in Bihar³⁴. Archaeological remains of the university and edifice is sixteen hundred feet long from north to south and eight hundred feet long east to west³⁵. Eleven monasteries so far have been excavated on the eastern higher flanks adjacent to the *vihāras*.³⁶ This monastery according to Hsuan Tsang, named as Kukutarama *vihāra* was at Pataliputra and existed to the southeast of the old city of Pataliputra and was built by Asoka.

Tetrawan *vihāra* is located seven miles southeast of Nālandā in Bihar, the ruins of which may still be observed.³⁷ Though we don't have any archaeological evidence of a *Buddhist Vihāra* during 600-1200c.A.D. in Gaya, it's geography can't be ignored. Gaya is the place of origin of Buddhism and the nerve centre of Buddhist activity in India. According to Hsuan Tsang³⁸ about forty li northeast of Gaya across river Nairanjana (modern Phalgu river) there was a massive Buddhist monastery termed as Silabhadra Sangharama.

ORISSA:

The region now known as Orissa, was known in ancient times under various names, the most prominent of which were Kalinga, Utkala, Odra and Kosala. The names Kalinga, Utkala, Odra and Kosala have found mention in our ancient Sanskrit and Pali literature.

²⁹ Cunningham, *AGI*, ed. S.N.Majumdar, p.732.

³⁰ H.N.Ansari, 'Historical Geography of Bihar on the eve of Turkish Invasion', *JBRs*, 1963, p.49.

³¹ *IGI*, X, p.374-375.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Si-yu-ki*, Tr.S.Beal, Bk.ii, p.193.

³⁴ *MAI*, no.66, pp.1ff, H.Sastri.

³⁵ *Memoirs and Its Epigraphical Material*, H.Satri, p.ix.

³⁶ *Nālandā Past and Present*, C.U.Upasak, p.10

³⁷ *The Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval India*, p.208.

³⁸ *Si-yu-ki*, Tr.S.Beal, Bk.ii, p.138.

Ratnagiri *mahāvihāra*: the site of Ratnagiri (lying between latitude 20°39'N and longitude 86°20'E) is located at a distance of forty two miles from Cuttack on a small stream called Kelua, a branch of Birupa river in Cuttack district of Orissa.³⁹ It is an isolated hill of the Asia range four miles to the north of Gopalpur.

The site of Puspagiri *vihāra* or (Pu-se-po-ki-li of Hsuan Tsang)⁴⁰ has been identified with contiguous hills of Lalitagiri and Udayagiri in the same district of Cuttack. Udayagiri is the eastern most hills, at a distance of five miles from river Kelua, while Lalitagiri is seven miles from river Birupa. Among the excavations the Raninur,⁴¹ which is a two-storeyed monastery with fine sculpture, is the most celebrated. The sites of Ratnagiri, Lalitagiri, Udayagiri, belong to modern Cuttack district.

According to recent geographical survey, the region containing sites of Lalitagiri and Udayagiri is bounded on the north by the Baitarani River and Dhamra estuary; on the east by the Bay of Bengal; on the south by Puri and on the west by Tributary states of Orissa.⁴²

Bhorasila *vihāra*'s site is located at the village Jagadapur at the foot of Biswanath hill of Delanga area in Puri district. Delanga name has been derived from Dignaga, the name of a famous Buddhist scholar.⁴³ In Achutrajpur (sub-division Khurda in Puri district) archaeological remains of a monastery, large number of bronze daggers, Buddhist images etc., have been excavated.

Vihāras and their location:

It is presumable that agriculture would have flourished in riparian land of eastern India (during sixth–twelfth century A.D.), where water was easily available as a gift of nature. In early medieval Eastern India, *mahāvihāras* like all urban centres, based on agricultural economy, flourished in most cases on the banks of rivers, canals, reservoirs, etc. Most of the major *vihāras* in eastern India of the period under consideration were located on or near the banks of rivers. In Bengal: 1. Somapura *vhāra* is situated near Padma or the mainstream of the Ganges River. 2. Jagaddala *vihāra* is located between the Mahanadi and Karatoya River. 3. Raktamrittika *vihāra* is on the banks of Karnaphuli River. 4. Bhasur *vihāra* is on the west bank of Karatoya River. 5. Tamralipti *vihāra* is on the junction of the Rupanarayan and the Hooghly River. In Bihar: 1. Nālandā or Odantipura *vihāra* is located near Panchana River. 2. Kukutarama *vihāra* is located near the Ganges. 3. Vikramaśila *vihāra* is on the confluence of the Ganges and Kosi. Similarly in Orissa: 1. Puspagiri *vihāra* is located between Baitarani River and Dhamra estuary). Ratnagiri *vihāra* situated on a small stream of Kelua, a branch of Birupa River. In Assam all-important Buddhist sites like Kamrup, Tezpur, Nowgong are located on the banks of Brahmaputra River.

Most importantly, we find, that in case of most of the Buddhist *vihāras*, either they developed in important urban centres, or were very close to such urban centres. As all urban centres, without any exception, were located near the banks of rivers, the *vihāras* too assumed riverine character. It must be mentioned that urban centres along with Buddhist *vihāras* in various regions of eastern India (during the early medieval period) were not similar in character. We find that Nālandā, Ratnagiri and Paharpur settlements were definitely superior both in terms

³⁹ JASB, 1870, vol. xxxi, pt. i, pp. 158-71.

⁴⁰ Ratnagiri, D. Mitra, ASI, Delhi, 1982.

⁴¹ 'The Geographical Dictionary of Ancient and Medieval India,' N.N. Dey, p. 208.

⁴² IGI, XI, p. 85-96.

⁴³ Archaeological Treasures in Orissa, Orissa Past and Present, (ed.) P. Pareja, Cuttack, 1962.

of their magnitude and quality, as compared to all the other sites in eastern India. Paharpur site has the largest monastic establishment in the region and the archaeological evidences here reflect a urban or semi-urban type of settlement. Similarly Ratnagiri and Nālandā maha vihāras had a very advanced settlement in comparison to other sites. Probably for easy communication, these urban centres were established on riverbanks or on the confluence of rivers

In the Gunaighar grant of Vainyagupta, dated 188 Gupta era, which records gift of land to a Buddhist monastery, reference is made to the ports of ships at Cudamani, Nagarasi and Pradamara. The channel between the two ports was the eastern boundary line of lowlands belonging to the *vihāra*. To the south, the channel open to ships connected to the large marshy ponds at Gunesvara, was the boundary line and to the north the channel leading to the port of Pradamara.⁴⁴

TRADE ROUTES:

The account left by Hsuan Tsang furnishes us with some interesting details regarding the routes connecting different parts of eastern India in the seventh century A.D. From Ka-chu-wu-khi-lo the Chinese pilgrim travelled east, crossed the Ganges and reached the Pun-na-fa-tan-na country. From Pun-na-fa tan-na, the pilgrim travelled east and crossed over a mighty river to Kia-mo-lu-po. From Kia-mo-lu-po he went to San-mo-tato and thence to Tan-mo-lih-ti. From Tan-mo-lih-ti the pilgrim reached Kie-lo-na-su-fa-la-na. From Kie-lo-na-su-fa-la-na going south westwards over seven hundred li one could reach the country of Wu-cha.⁴⁵

Ka-chu-wu-khi-lo has been identified with Kajangala near Rajmahal.⁴⁶ And Pun-na-fa-tan-na with Pundravardhana, which is represented by the ruins at Mahasthan in the Bogra district.⁴⁷ The 'mighty river' is the Karatoya and Kia-mo-lu-po is the Chinese corruption of Kāmarūpa.⁴⁸ San-mo-ta-to i.e. Samatata is territorially equivalent to Tippera-Noakhali region.⁴⁹ Kie-lo-na-su-fa-la-na is probably Karnasuvarna which may be identified with the Chiruti region of the Murshidabad district.⁵⁰

The above identification of the places mentioned by Hsuan Tsang would indicate that a route ran from Kajangala to Kāmarūpa through Pundravardhana. Another route connected Assam with southeast Bengal, while a third route through coastal Bengal was a link between southeast and southwest Bengal.

I-tsing who reached Tamralipti in 673c.A.D. referred to a road running westward from the seaport. This route is alluded to in certain Buddhist texts.

An inscription from Java⁵¹ describes one *mahānāvika* the champion sailor Buddhagupta as an inhabitant of Raktamrittika. Identification of this Raktamrittika is not beyond doubt.⁵² Krom

⁴⁴ *IHQ*, VI, p.59.

⁴⁵ Watters, *Op.Cit.*, Vol.II, pp.184-93..

⁴⁶ Cunningham, *Op.Cit.*, p.478-79..

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p.482.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.500.

⁴⁹ S.B.Chaudhuri, *Op.Cit.*, p.176.

⁵⁰ Cunningham, *Op.Cit.*, p.505; S.R.Das, *Rajbadidanga*, preface, III.

⁵¹ R.C.Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far east*, II, p.82.

⁵² Kia-tan's Account (*BEFEO*), IV, P.231,n.

long ago suggested that it should be sought for in India.⁵³ Hsuan Tsang refers to a monastery called Lo-to-wei-chi near Karnasuvarna. Lo-to-wei-chi⁵⁴ may be the Chinese corruption of Raktamrittika. We have already referred to the recent discovery of a seal from Chiruti in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal referring to the Raktamrittika *vihāra*, which demands that the monastery was situated in that locality. It is significant that the Chiruti region is adjacent to the Bhagirathi, which could have served as the main channel of maritime trade between Bengal and the far East.⁵⁵

Concludingly, we started our work with an exercise in historical geography, and tried to focus on the ecological background of the monastic centers. We have concentrated on the geographical setting of some of the major sites like Somapura, Ratnagiri, Nālandā, etc., so that a general picture of such settlements emerges in a wider context. In these exercises perspectives from contemporary literature bearing on the geography of the historico-cultural regions has helped in giving a more realistic portrayal of the concerned macro-region. Especially the accounts given by the Chinese travellers Hsuan Tsang and I-tsing have come out to be quite beneficial for the purpose. Although, our focal point is *vihāra*-settlements, for the sake of convenience in analysis, we have made a state-wise geographical survey of these monastic sites, which are arranged in alphabetical sequence, starting from Assam and ending with Orissa. Our area involves the modern states of Assam, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in India and few districts of Bangladesh. The climate, soil-types, fauna, flora and various types of natural resources like, minerals, water, forest, etc of these regions have been highlighted. From a combined use of the sources one gets a fair idea about early medieval geography of eastern India, which facilitated the growth of several monastic establishments in these regions. Though we find some regional variations in this regard, the climate of eastern India in general, appears to be hot and humid, where alluvial soil mostly covered with tropical forests were infested with almost common creatures. Some regions like Kurkihar in Gaya district of Bihar, Achutrajpur in Khurda sub-division of Orissa and Jhewari in Chittagong district of Bangladesh, bear proximity to those regions, which were rich in mineral resources. However, eastern India as a single macro region exhibits riparian character. Most of the major *vihāras* were located on or near the banks of rivers. Therefore it is presumable that agriculture would have flourished in riparian land, where water was easily available as a gift of nature. Rice and pulses appears to be the staple diet here. A characteristic feature of eastern India is its river-system, as it is bounded on the north by the Himalayas and by the hilly lands on the east and west, while the southern end, abounding in creeks and estuaries, is washed by the waves of the Bay of Bengal. Such a geographical position presupposes that from the earliest times different corners of eastern India internally were accessible to each other both by land and riverine courses. While externally eastern India as a region, was itself connected with the rest of India and extra-Indian territories by land and over-seas routes. In the absence of other natural barriers rivers separated the geographical divisions of eastern Indian regions from one another. Thus, it was these rivers whose banks witnessed the growth of various monastic establishments, which were really remarkable in the context of early medieval period.

⁵³ Krom, *Gaschiedenis*, p.73.

⁵⁴ L.Gopal, *Economic Life of Northern India*, p.139.

⁵⁵ R.C.Majumdar, *Ancient Indian colonies in the Far east*, II, pp.82-83.