

PUNDRANAGARA: AN EMPORIUM OF NORTH BENGAL

By A K M Yaqub Ali*

Pundranagar has its own history and heritage among the urban settlements of ancient Bengal, and has occupied a pivotal position as a historic place and an emporium of North Bengal. There is a wide scope of viewing it from multidimensional aspects. But to avoid mere a narration of events and, at the same time, to attach intrinsic value to the paper, this study is confined to the most important aspect of this human habitation. To study the subject vertically and to a greater depth, it is intended to see the location of Pundranagara and the territorial extent of North Bengal.

North Bengal is a modern connotation. On the eve of the Muslim conquest at the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D., Bengal is said to have been divided into five *Janapadas* or principalities viz. Varendra, Radha, Vanga, Bagdi and Mithila.^{i[1]} Gradually the *Janapada* names sank into oblivion and Vanga emerged as a country denoting a vast tract of land from Teliagarhi in the west to Chittagong in the east and from the Himalaya in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south.^{ii[2]} Equated with ancient Varendra the territorial expanse of North Bengal may be delineated to the Ganges – Mahananda in the west, to the Karatoya in the east, to the Himalayan Tarai in the north and to the Padma in the south. Hence, the greater districts of Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Rangpur and Dinajpur of Bangladesh and the greater districts of Malda, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling of India may be placed under the terminology of North Bengal.

The capital city of Pundra or Varendra seems to have been *pundanagala* equating with Pundranagara mentioned in a fragmentary Mauryan Brahmi inscription palaeographically dated in the third century B.C. discovered at Mahasthan twelve kilometres north of Bogra town.^{iii[3]} Despite the various opinions of the scholars on this point Pundranagara has conclusively been identified with Mahasthan. In arriving at this conclusion certain factors are taken into consideration. Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese traveller, counts the distance of *Pun-na-fa-tan-na* from Kankjol identified with Kajangal now Rajmahal towards east by 600 *li* or about 120 miles.^{iv[4]} The distance of Mahasthan from Rajmahal towards the east is about 120 miles which tally with 600 *li* mentioned by the Chinese traveller. Moreover, the Chinese pilgrim's mention of *po-shi-po*^{v[5]} identified with Vasu Vihar about 20 *li* or 4 miles to the west of *Pun-na-fa-tan-na* testifies to this fact that Mahasthan is the *pundanagala* (= Pundranagara) of the Brahmi inscription and the capital city of the Pundra country. The

description of *po-shi-po* or *po-khi-po* as given by the Chinese pilgrim fits no other place than Vasu Vihara which is 4 miles off to Mahasthan. The Chinese pilgrim crossed a large river *ka-lo-tu* identified with the Karatoya and reached at *ka-mo-lu-po* identified with Kamrupa (Gauhati) after covering a distance of 900 li or 180 miles from *pun-na-fa-tan-na*.^{vi[6]} The distance of Gauhati from Mahasthan is similar to the distance mentioned by Hiuen Tsang. It is not, therefore, unreasonable to presume that the *pundanagala* (Pundranagara) of the Brahmi inscription is no other place but Mahasthan which was the capital city of Pundra country of the time of yore.

In the light of these preliminaries, now let us see the importance of Pundranagara i.e. Mahasthan as a historic city and an emporium of inland trade in the history of North Bengal. Pundranagara which is considered as a metropolitan city of North Bengal in ancient and medieval times stands on the western bank of the river Karatoya. This river has now been reduced to an insignificant stream, even in some places it has silted up. But in the thirteenth century A.D., as stated by Minhaj Siraj, it was as wide as three times of the Ganges.^{vii[7]} This river, as it seems, springing from the Himalayan mountain on the furthest north of the Bhutan border passed through the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri, and touching the districts of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Bogra and Pabna it fell in to the Ganges i.e. Padma as shown in the map of Von Den Brooke.^{viii[8]} Passing through the various channels and under the different names, the Karatoya threw her water in the Bay of Bengal and established her connection with the sea port of Chittagong. In the *Karatoya Mahatmya* it is stated that from quite ancient time in the *Push Narayanijug*, the people of Hindu extraction used to come to have bath for the purification of their sins in the bank of Karatoya where now Mahasthan stands.^{ix[9]} In the *Periplus of the Erythraen sea* of about the first century A.D. and the *Geography of Plotemy* of about the second century A.D. there comes a reference to the province of 'Kirada'.^{x[10]} This is possibly the places on either side of the river Karatoya as it is presumed that 'kirada' is a Greek version of the river Karatoya. On the basis of this presumption the river Karatoya can be traced to a long antiquity. In the seventh century A.D. Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim, had to cross a river *ka-lo-tu* i.e. Karatoya while reaching Kampura from Pundravardhana".^{xi[11]} The river Bagmati^{xii[12]} which according to Muslim chronicles was three times larger than the Ganges and has been identified with the Karatoya flew close by the eastern side of Mahasthan. The inscriptional and literary sources, if analysed, bear witness to this fact that the Karatoya had always been a navigable river either carrying the merchandise-ships or the war flotilla.

There is no denying the fact that Mahasthan as the capital city of the Pundravardhana occupied a pivotal position in the social, political and economic history of Bengal, particularly of North Bengal in the ancient period. The excavation of the mounds in the area of Mahasthan for several times unearthed the proposed roots of various human civilization starting from the pre-historic era. The discovery of a fragmentary stone inscription in Brahmi character palaeographically dated to the third century B.C.^{xiii[13]} at least testifies to its importance in the time of the Mauryans. The inscription, as

deciphered, contains a royal order to his rank-official directing him to give as loan coins from the treasury and paddy from the granary to the famine-stricken people of the neighbouring area and for realizing the loans when good days prevail over them.^{xiv[14]} The Vashu Vihar of the Pala period at about seven kilometres to the west and the legendary Lakhindarer Med of the Hindu period at Gukul to the south from Mahasthan remind us of its glorious past among the urban settlements of North Bengal. Even the tale of king Purshuram and the Muslim saint Sultan Mahmud Mahisawar at about the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D.^{xv[15]} carries the importance of this place as the seat of the Government of Hindu tributary ruler. The antiquarian relics, potsherds and brickbats strewn over a large area to the west and south of Mahasthan bear witness to its being a populous city in the time of yore. Pertinently a few words are to be added here regarding the various phases of antiquarian relics of Mahasthangarh.

Mahasthan is the earliest known centre of urban settlements in Bengal. The site of the citadel, oblong in shape covers a large expanse of 5000 ft. long from north to south and 4000 ft. wide from east to west. The area involved is about 185 hectares. The area is surrounded by a good number of early historic and early medieval sites within a radius of approximately 20 km. Of the earlier archaeological units traced in the region are: an early Brahmi stone inscription of the third century B.C., punch-marked and cast coins of silver and copper, a large number of semi-precious stone beads, glass beads, Sunga terracotta plaques, Rouletted ware and impressive structural remains of the ancient and medieval periods.^{xvi[16]} The high terrace about 15 ft. in general elevation above the land level appears to have been originally protected on the east by the Karatoya River and on the other three sides by a continued moat. The moat on the south is now known as the Baranashi *khal*, that on the west as the Gilatala *khal* and that on the north as the Kalidaha *sagar*, the last being a water-flow of an extensive *bil* of that name.^{xvii[17]}

Credit goes to Alexander Cunningham for identifying this place of Mahasthangarh with *pundanagala* of the Brahmi inscription in 1879. From this time onward the scholars and archaeologists paid much their attention to unearthing the hidden treasures of this ruined terrace of Mahasthan. In the continuity of search the first scientific excavation of this place was conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India under the supervision of K N Diskhit in 1928-29, and it was confined to three mounds of the name Bairagir vita, Govinda vita and Munirghon. Though irregularly the excavation continued till 1992 when an agreement was made between Bangladesh and France to stir up the search-work of the area. To give vent to this agreement, Bangladesh-France joint ventures were conducting excavation with much success since 1993, and until recently the joint mission could unearth eighteen construction layers in the course of excavation. The cultural artefacts obtained from the excavation results could be classified under the following period-heads.^{xviii[18]}

First period: In this period as the remnants of the pre-Mauryan era a large number of Northern Black Polished Wares (NBPW), Rouletted wares, black and red pottery, black hued polished pots, stone-blocks, mud houses with mud floors, cooking furnace and pillar-pits are reported to have been found in the excavated spots. This was possibly the first human habitation on Pleistocene landscape known as the Barind tract in the pre-Mauryan times.^{xix[19]}

Second period: the artefacts which were found of this age are broken tiles, the brickbats, potsherds, ring stones, bronze-mirrors, bronze lamps, dice-cast coins, terracotta plaques and stone beads representing the characteristics of the Mauriyan period.

Third period: This is the post-Mauriyan age covering the Sunga and Kushana periods. Of the periods the remnants of big and well-protected brick-built structures, the brick-strewn floors, pillar-pits, the terracotta plaques of the Sunga period, the semi-precious stones and beads, the temples' pinnacles and other such artefacts are reported to have been noticed.

Fourth period: In this age are unearthed the antiquarian relics of the Kushan-Gupta periods. A large number of broken clay-pots, artistic terracotta plaques with various figures, the decorated cooking-pots, the dishes and other such items of importance are traced. The architectural remnants of this layer are comparatively less than those of upper and lower layers. Moreover, semi-precious stone and glass beads, dishes and terracotta seals are worth mentioning objects of cultural importance of this age.

Fifth period: This period represents the Gupta and late Gupta phase. The phase yielded remains of a massive brick structure of a temple called Govinda Bhita, located close to the fort-city, belonging to the late Gupta period, as well as other brick structures – houses, floors, streets in the city, and huge antiquities, including terracotta plaques of the characteristic style, seals, beads of terracotta, glass and semi-precious stones, terracotta balls, copper and iron objects and stamped wares.

Sixth period: This period represents the Pala-Sena phase evidenced by architectural remains of several sites scattered throughout the eastern side of the city like Khodar Pathar Bhita, Mankalir Kunda, Parasuram's palace and Bairagir Bhita. This was the most flourishing phase and during this period a large number of Buddhist establishments were erected outside the city.

Seventh period: This period represents the Muslim phase testified by the architectural remains of a fifteen-domed mosque of the Sultanate period, a single domed mosque built by Farrukh Siyar, the Mughal emperor, and other antiquities like Chinese celadon and glazed ware typical of the age. Bairagir Bhita, Khodar Pathar Bhita, Mankalir Kunda Mound, Parsuram's palace mound and Jiat Kunda are some sites inside the city which have yielded archaeological objects of interest.^{xx[20]}

Did Mahasthan continue a historic city and emerge an emporium of trade in later times? To answer this question certain points are to be taken into consideration. It is proved that Mahasthan had been a historic city, but there is no evidence to show that the Pala and Sena kings selected it as their capital city. Possibly for the strategic reasons they

preferred to establish the seat of their government in more suitable place other than Mahasthan which stood in the extreme east of their kingdom.

The Turks with their rich administrative and cultural heritage entered the north-west part of Bengal as conquerors under the leadership of Ikhtiyar ud-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji at the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D.^{xxi[21]} They took positive measures for the welfare of the people of this land and tried to eradicate all sorts of evils that might disturb the peace and tranquillity of the country. For a better administration they adopted the policy of decentralization and divided their conquered territories into several *iqtas* or administrative zones. Agriculture, trade and commerce were encouraged providing all sorts of facilities to the people. In addition to the earlier urban settlements the Muslim rulers of the medieval period built new capital cities and established mint-towns in the various part of North Bengal to provide job opportunities for the people and to facilitate trade and commerce in the country. Under this situation Mahasthan arrested the attention of the rulers for its upkeep and flourishing. The Muslim populace made their habitation in and around Mahasthan. Steps were taken by the ruling authority for the protection of their lives and properties. The Mahasthan inscription of the time of Rukn ud-Din Kaikaus dated A.H. 700/1300 A.D.^{xxii[22]} brings to light the name of Khan Mu'azzam Mukarram Mir Namwar Khan presumed to be *Mir Bahr* or the Admiral of Navy who was posted at the naval headquarters of Mahasthan to keep a vigilant eye on the enemy's war flotilla in the river Karatoya. The relation between the Rais of Kamrupa lying on the eastern side of the river and the rulers of Lakhnawati was unfriendly since the disastrous defeat of Ikhtiyar ud-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in his so-called Tibet expedition at the beginning of the 13th century A.D.^{xxiii[23]}

The repeated attacks of Ghiyath ud-Din Iwaz Khalji and Mughith ud-Din Yuzbak bear witness to this fact. Ghiyath ud-Din Iwaz Khalji for the purpose of defence and for leading expeditions to the river girt areas of Bang and Kamrupa created naval bases in all important rivers of his dominion, and the river Karatoya got top priority in this list.^{xxiv[24]} The traditions ascribed to sultan Mahmud Mahi Sawar of Mahasthan, a large number of tombs in this area, the discovery of the lay-out of an early mosque in the *Mankalir Bhita* and the Arabic stone inscription referred to above all point out to its having been a settlement of the Muslims earlier than 1300 A.D.^{xxv[25]} Moreover, the disciples of the famous saint Mahi Sawar made their habitations in Mahasthan and increased their numbers in later times. The mausoleum of Mahi Sawar along with the tombs of his disciples on the top of the Garh area attracted the devotees to pay a visit to this shrine. Gradually during the long span of Muslim rule in this region Mahasthan had been a place of importance not only from a political point of view but also from religious and cultural points. Quite an appreciable number of coins belonging to the reigns of Shams ud-Din Ilyas Shah and Nasir ud-Din Mahmud Shah^{xxvi[26]} procured from the ruins of Mahasthan bear witness to the important position it held during the succeeding periods of the independent Sultanate in this area.

To retain the independence of Bengal the Qaqshals, scions of the Afghans made Mahasthan their main station of activities in the whole of North Bengal and directed all their operations against Mughal imperialism. Mirza Nathan as the Admiral of Navy during the time of Emperor Jahangir made his naval operation against the rebels over the Karatoya River from Ghoraghat to Mahasthan.^{xxvii[27]} A mosque of the time of Farrukh Siyar built in A.H. 1130/A.D. 1718^{xxviii[28]} on the top of the Garh area near the shrine of Mahi Sawar testifies to the fact that the importance of Mahasthan remained unabated even in the first half of the eighteenth century A.D. It was the rendezvous of the Faqir movement under the leadership of Majnu Shah against British rule. Even in the war of liberation of 1971, the freedom fighters took shelter in the Garh area of Mahasthan and hid themselves from the eyes of Pakistani army. Nowadays centering round Mahasthan habitations, shops, markets and educational institutions grew up to make this place a populous urban settlement in North Bengal.

Mahasthan, a metropolitan city and a historic place of North Bengal in ancient and medieval times, is likely to vitalize the environment as an emporium of trade and commerce. The tradable objects of this area seem to have been agricultural products and industrial items. In comparison with other areas the soil of North Bengal was previously very fertile as it is now and produced rice, vegetables and other food-grains in large quantity. It is due to the timely rains and the preservation of rain-water in the rivers and canals that good harvests were ensured. The Ganges, the Karatoya and other numerous rivers and rivulets flowing in between the two rivers over this land fed the soil well and made it cultivable for all kinds of food-grains. Rice was then the staple food of this land as it is now. It has been referred to above that the stone inscription of Brahmi character of about the third century B.C. discovered at Mahasthan discloses the occurrence of famine in Pundranagara i.e. Mahasthan and determines the mode of payment of rice distributed among the subjects during the time of the famine.^{xxix[29]} Hieun Tsang in the early seventh century A.D. while crossing the Pundravardhana territory i.e. portions of North Bengal, spoke of various kinds of food-grains and fruits produced in this region.^{xxx[30]} Moreover, he laid stress on jack-fruits which the people of this land held in high esteem.^{xxxi[31]} It is, therefore, logical to conclude that agriculture was the main occupation of the people of this region. This possibly remained unchanged, and the people of this area in the Muslim period also practiced this mode of earning their livelihood. The construction of an embankment by sultan Ghiyath ud-Din Iwaz Khalji (1212-1227 A.D.) connecting Lakhnawati with Lakhnor on the one hand and with Dewkot on the other^{xxxii[32]} indicates his desire to save the agricultural land from inundation in the rainy season.

Similarly, the construction of a bridge over the canal of Chuttiah Puthiah near Gaur by Ismail Ghazi during the reign of Rukn ud-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1479 A.D.)^{xxxiii[33]} throws light on the protection of cornfields from being submerged under water. All these measures were possibly taken from time to time to enhance the production of various kinds of food grains and vegetations. The land used to yield usually two crops a year.^{xxxiv[34]} There was no need of artificial irrigation and the crops grew richly in the proper season. That rice was the staple food of the people and chief agricultural product of this region is clear from the remark of Abul Fazl, "If a single grain of each kind (of

rice) were collected, they would fill a large vase".^{xxxv[35]} Rice, after meeting the requirements of the people, seemed to have formed an important item of export trade in the neighbouring countries. The other agricultural products are stated to have been millet, sesamum, beans, ginger, mustard, onions, garlic, cucumber, melons and brinjal.

The common fruits were banana, jack-fruit, sour pomegranate and coconut. Sugar-cane, sugar, honey, butter and *ghee* were also much in use.^{xxxvi[36]} Besides these there were many kinds of indigenous fruits in the Sarkar Ghoraghat. *Latkan* was one of this kind.^{xxxvii[37]} Orange was found in abundance in the Sarkar Barbakabad^{xxxviii[38]}, and it was sweeter than Narangi.^{xxxix[39]} The Chinese accounts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. laid much importance on the jack-fruits.^{xl[40]} The terracotta plaque in the form of jack-fruit fixed on the southern wall (in the inner side) of the Jami masjid^{xli[41]} at Bagha in the district of Rajshahi testifies to the abundant produce of this fruit in this region. The surplus might have formed an item, at least of an inland trade. The Barbakabad banana was famous^{xlii[42]} and one of its kinds named *martaban* was given as present to the royal court.^{xliii[43]} Another kind of the plantain named *chini champa* possibly attracted the notice of the Mughal emperor Babar who considered it to be very sweet.^{xliv[44]} Mango was an important fruit which the Chinese envoys praised in their accounts.^{xlv[45]} Betel leaf was another agricultural produce which was used in the royal court.^{xlvi[46]} Betel leaf or *pan* gardens around Mahasthan testify to its abundant availability in this region.^{xlvii[47]} Sugarcane seemed to have grown in large quantity in this region.^{xlviii[48]} The Chinese accounts conform to this view that sugarcane was the product of this land.^{xlix[49]} After meeting the requirements of the people sugar might have been exported to other parts.

As to the raw materials and finished industrial goods, jute and silk seem to have been available in this area. In the Sarkar Ghoraghat silk was produced.^{l[50]} It is stated that the women put on varieties of jute sari (*patta bastra*).^{li[51]} Many of the Bengali works of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. refer to the wearing of jute *saris* by women.^{lii[52]} Bangla literature also refers to the export of jute cloths to the neighbouring countries. The merchant Chand Sawdagar is said to have led a business enterprise to a country with many merchandise including jute *saris* and *dhutis*. He cleverly induced the king of that country to purchase several jute cloths for himself and for his queen.^{liii[53]} The account of Mahuan, the Chinese envoy to the court of Ghiyath ud-Din Azam Shah (1392-1410 A.D.) refers to the existence of silk worms and sericulture in this land.^{liv[54]} The strip of land in between the river Karatoya in the east and the Ganges in the west grew mulberry trees and reared silk worms. It gets corroboration in the statement of *Ain-i-Akbari* that silk was produced in the Sarkar Ghoraghat.^{lv[55]} In later times also enormous quantity of raw silk was produced from the mulberry trees. The raw silk was so cheap that it had a flourishing trade. The upper class people, both men and women, attired themselves with silk cloths.^{lvi[56]} Paper was an important manufactured product and used to be made of the mulberry trees.^{lvii[57]} In an account it is stated that the Bengal paper was white and it used

to be made from the bark of a tree.^{lviii[58]} Possibly both the accounts meant the same mulberry tree which extensively grew in this region.

In the medieval period the agricultural and industrial products of North Bengal even after meeting the local needs were considered sufficient for export to the neighbouring as well as to the remote countries. Chittagong and Satgaon grew as sea-ports^{lix[59]} for sending merchandise in the countries of the east and west. The surplus of the agricultural and industrial products locally collected were brought to the river ports and emporiums of trade and commerce. From these centres these products were ultimately sent to the seaports as export goods. Of all the river ports and land ports of North Bengal, Mahasthan is considered an important emporium of trade and commerce in the medieval period. It has been stated earlier that Mahasthan stands on the west bank of the river Karatoya which was three times larger than the Ganges.^{lx[60]} This river originated from the Himalayan Mountain and splitting into three streams passed through the districts of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri to the south.

As noticed in the map of Von Den Brooke, the three streams flowed concurrent to the south from Jalpaiguri, the most easterly course of which was called the Karatoya, the middle one Atrai and the westerly course the Punarbhava or Purnabhava.^{lxi[61]} It is shown in Von Den Brooke's maps as falling in the Ganges i.e. the Padma. This seems to have been the course of the river even in the seventeenth century A.D. as depicted in the *Baharistan-i-ghaybi* by Mirza Nathan.^{lxii[62]} It is, therefore, reasonable to presume that the river Karatoya having a large bed of waters could carry the big merchandise-ships towards the sea port of Chittagong. Besides the capital cities of Dewkot, Gaur and Pandua a great number of river ports^{lxiii[63]} and mint towns^{lxiv[64]} sprang up within the territorial limits of North Bengal in the medieval period. Except the river Karatoya all the rivers and rivulets were not navigable for inland and foreign trade. Hence, the agricultural and industrial products procured from the various parts of North Bengal were brought to Mahasthan for shipment to the sea port of Chittagong. The river Karatoya being a main navigable stream of the districts of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Dinajpur, Malda, Rangpur and Bogra flew by the east side of Mahasthan. Therefore, as an ancient historic city it could attract the attention of the traders, merchants and consumers whose corporate ventures made Mahasthan an emporium of trade and commerce in the medieval period. At present, though the Karatoya silted up, the high way running close by the east side of Mahasthan furthers its importance as an urban settlement providing all facilities of modern life. In view of this observation we may come to this proposition that Mahasthan as a historic city and an emporium of trade and commerce has retained its past glory among all the archaeological sites^{lxv[65]} of North Bengal.

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- * Professor Emeritus, Department of Islamic History and Culture, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh
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- xxxvii[37] *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. 11, p. 136; Latkan is a type of indigenous fruit which has the size of a walnut with the taste of a pomegranate, and it contains three seeds.
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lii[52] A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History*, Vol. 1, p. 387.
liii[53] Vijaya Gupta, *Manasamangala*, p. 153.
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lvi[56] *Visva Bharati Annals*, 1945, pp. 127 & 132.
lvii[57] *Ibid.*, p. 126.
lviii[58] *Ibid.*, p. 120.
lix[59] cf. *ASCV*, pp. 207 ff.
lx[60] *TN*, Vol. 1 (Kabul edition), p. 127.
lxi[61] N.R. Roy, *op.cit.*, pp. 109-110.
lxii[62] Mirza Nathan, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
lxiii[63] Ghoraghat, Sultanganj, Bardhankot, Gobindaganj, Mahisantush, etc.
lxiv[64] Barbakabad, Shahr Naw, Nusratabad, etc.
lxv[65] Paharpur, Dewkot, Mahisantush, Deotala, Ghoraghat, etc.

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