



## A sub-region in early medieval Bengal

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### Abstract

The article tries to delineate the processes through which the sub-regions were emerging in the historically constructed regions of Bengal in the early medieval period. The region which has been talked about here is *Samatata*.

**Keywords:** ecology, habitation pattern, inscriptions, region, sub-region

### Introduction

Land grant charters in Bengal, spread over a large chronological span (of about 800 years) start appearing in the fifth century, and go on till thirteenth century. These could be used to dig deeper into many facets of the region, with a nuanced understanding of things happening in the sub-regions as well. One gets some idea on rural settlement patterns (and not pattern), ecology, kind of crops grown, including flora of the region. On rural habitational pattern, while archaeological data on Gupta and post Gupta period is missing, B.D. Chattopadhyaya's alternative methodology is surely provided by land grant charters<sup>[1]</sup>. 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 Samatata.

This region has near about 17 land transfers, and shows a trend. Starting with the sixth century AD, there is a gradual increase in the number of land transfers, with time. One gets some view, if not a very clear picture of rural settlement patterns, ecology, kind of crops grown, including flora of the region. Starting with the Gunaighar copper plate inscription of Vainyagupta (6<sup>th</sup> century AD) the picture is more or less informative. The grant transfers land in five different plots. The boundary limits of all the plots are enumerated. In the first plot, on the east, the plot touches the boundary of a village (*grama*) named Gunikagrahara, land belonging to carpenter (*vardhaki*) Visnu. On the south, the plot touches land under the jurisdiction of village Miduvilala. On the west, it touches lands of individuals named Suri, Nasi. To the north of it lies the tank in possession of the Doshi community (*doshi-bhoga-puskarini*), and plots of individuals named Vampiaka and Adityabandhu<sup>[2]</sup>. This is more or less the pattern in other plots as well. Individual land-holders, different water bodies like tanks, channels (*jola*), navigable channels (*nau-yoga-khatah*), rivulets (*ganga*), as well as land belonging to the royal monastery occur very frequently as boundary markers. Even the rent free low lands belonging to

the monastery gives a picture, wherein, it becomes clear that the area was a marshy one. This plate is conspicuous with its mention of a large number of individual land-holders like Suri, Nasi, carpenter Visnu, Vampiaka and Adityabandhu in the first plot, Vaidya in the second plot, Jolari and Nagi-jodaka<sup>[3]</sup> in the third plot, Buddhaka, Kalaka, Surya and Mahipala<sup>[4]</sup> in the fourth plot and Manibhadra<sup>[5]</sup> of the fifth plot. Some individuals owning tanks and lakes also occur, like Danda who had a tank to the west of the water logged and rent free land<sup>[6]</sup>, and Ganesvara of Vilala caste who had a lake.

The Tipperah plate of Lokanatha mentions names of two villages, Panga and Vapika, plus the tank of *mahattara* Ranasubha<sup>[7]</sup> (certainly in a settled village) appear as boundary demarcators for the donated grant. The Kailan plate of Sridharana Rata mentions a number of "pseudo-sanskrit"<sup>[8]</sup> words like *billa*, *naudanda*, *nauprithvi*, *nausthiravega*, *nausivabhoga*, etc, which according to D.C.Sircar cannot be explained satisfactorily. What is apparent is their connection with a seemingly marshy region<sup>[9]</sup>. The Nidhanpur plate mentions dry *Kausika*, river *Gangini*, *Jatoli* tree and the pond of an individual named Khasoka (the controlling tradesman)<sup>[10]</sup>. The Devaparvata plate of Bhavadeva mentions no boundary specifications. The Charpatra Mura#1 plate of Ladahacandra grants three plots, and mentions the boundary specifications<sup>[11]</sup> of two of them. To the east of one of the plots lay the posts (*kilaka*) planted in the western extremity of the land belonging to Supakara-*voraka* and Buddhandi-*grama* in the western half of a tank, to the south lay the northern demarcating border (*ali*) of a plot of land belonging to Balesvara-*vardhaki-voraka*, plus the southern bank of Govind-Oncama (meaning not clear). To the west lay the eastern demarcating border of a plot of land belonging to Odagodhanika, the post planted on the demarcating border which is the southern boundary of a plot of land pertaining to the godhani, and the demarcating borders which are the southern and eastern boundaries of a plot of land belonging to Ghantarava. To the north lay the southern demarcating border of Jayalambha-*grama*.

The third plot had boundaries as follows<sup>[12]</sup>: to the east was the river *Buddhigangini* (Budiganga), to the south the northern demarcating border of Karavattivoraka<sup>[13]</sup>, to the west the

western border-road (*dand-ali*) of the land called Vaggurabhoga, and to the north was the southern vaddika of the land under the enjoyment of the deity called Sankara Bhattaraka <sup>[14]</sup>. In the second grant of Ladahacandra <sup>[15]</sup>, one finds the boundaries thus: to the east was the western demarcating border of the *sasana* (rent free holding) in the possession of Lokanatha-Bhattaraka (a deity), to the south was the northern demarcating border of the said *sasana*, to the north the eastern border of the village of Brahmanadevavoraka, and to the north a canal was situated to the south of the village of Kamsarakaddapolaka.

The later inscriptions become more elaborate and lengthy. A case in point is the 13<sup>th</sup> century Mehar copper plate inscription of Damodaradeva, which gives plots to about twenty Brahmanas distributed in various parts of the *Samatata* mandala. But no information is provided on boundary specifications. In the Damodaradeva Chittagong plate <sup>[16]</sup>, the king gave away 5 *dronas* of land. The boundary markers are as follows: three *dronas* lay in Dambaradama, Kamanapindiya village, to the east of the grant lay the public road, to the south bounded by the edifice attached to Lavanotsavasrama, to the west was the land Navrapalya, and to the north of the grant was Mritachhada. This consisted of both homestead (*vastu*) and arable plots <sup>[17]</sup>. The other parts of the grant, measuring 1 *dronas* each, were in the village of Ketangapala. <sup>[18]</sup> The boundaries of the first plot were: *Lambasasana* on the east, Navrapalya on the south, cattle track (*gopatha*) on the west, and Mritaccada on the north. Another one *drona* was spread to the south, west and north of Baghpokhira. <sup>[19]</sup>

The 13<sup>th</sup> century Bhatara copper plate inscription of Govinda Kesavadeva, is also a lengthy one, registering 40 land transfers. Rivers, forests, neighbouring villages, all appear as boundary markers. A very interesting feature that one comes across in this region is the appearance of rivers as the sole marker to mark a grant of land. Frequent reference to water sources as boundary markers for land is not new, and as we shall see, is equally found in all the sub-regions. But such reference to water sources as the only marker is rare. For example, the grant talks of allotting ‘5 *halas* and 3 houses (lying) to the south of river Sarama’ <sup>[20]</sup>, ‘35 *halas* and 12 houses (lying) to the north of that river’ <sup>[21]</sup>, ‘9 *halas* lying north and south of the river Kaliyani’ <sup>[22]</sup> and ‘6 *halas* and 10 houses (lying) south of the river Vamayi’ <sup>[23]</sup>. Also, one plot has been mentioned to be lying to the north of *Govata* <sup>[24]</sup>, literally meaning a pasture ground. It lay to the south of Kadadiya, to the east of Gosuya and to the north of river Varuni. <sup>[25]</sup> Another plot in Karagrama, lay to the east of Gosuyakhata, to the north of *Gopatha* (literal meaning a track for cattle to pass) <sup>[26]</sup>, to the south of Jadigang (a river) and to the west of Vanangajotti.

The initial grants gave uncultivated land <sup>[27]</sup>, like the Gunaighar plate of Vainyagupta. The Tipperah plate also talks of donating land in the forest region (*atavi-bhukhanda*) <sup>[28]</sup>, where no distinction of “natural and artificial existed” <sup>[29]</sup>, with a thick network of bush and creepers, and wild animals like deer, buffaloes, boars, tigers, serpents <sup>[30]</sup> etc. Thus the land granted was surely an uncultivated one in a sparsely populated area. Later inscriptions like Devaparvata plate of Bhavadeva granted lands in different villages. Same is the

case with other plates like Ladahacandra, Shobharampur Damodaradeva, Nasirabad Damodaradeva, and Govinda Kesavadeva plates etc, which were no doubt concerned with the donation of cultivable land.

On the privileges that the donee enjoyed, the initial inscriptions usually do not have much to say, except the purpose that the grant was to serve. For example, the Gunaighar plate gives the grant to provide for “perfume, flower, light, incense, etc. for (the worship of) Lord Buddha thrice a day may be provided perpetually in the monastery of the Buddhist monks of the Vaivarttika sect of Mahayana school. <sup>[31]</sup> The Tipperah grant of Lokanatha also falls in the same category, and similarly mentions the perpetual maintenance of *ashtapushpika*, *bali*, *charu*, *satra* to ‘Bhagavan Ananta Narayana’ <sup>[32]</sup> as the aim of the grant. It was only in the Shobharampur plate of Damodaradeva that one finds the enjoinder that the donee had the right to use ‘barren lands, water and fields’ <sup>[33]</sup>. The Devaparvata plate of Bhavadeva is the first inscription of the region which mentions the fiscal privileges of the donee. Lines 59-60 say that the request was to make the granted land an *udranga*, and that the land was given together with *udranga* <sup>[34]</sup>. The two *udrangas*, according to D.C.Sircar are different, first one (*udrangikrtya*) probably means a tax on permanent tenants, or may even mean ‘by setting the land apart.’ The second *udranga* (*so-dranga*) was probably a qualifying epithet of the gift land <sup>[35]</sup>. The Nasirabad plate of Damodaradeva also has nothing to say on privileges. The Govinda Kesavadeva plate merely mentions that ‘the Lord of Srihatta, gave to that Siva different kinds of attendants belonging to (subject) races’ <sup>[36]</sup>, without mentioning about the fiscal privileges.

### Emerging Patterns

Though it is difficult to draw a very accurate picture of settlement and population distribution, a few trends could be discerned. Inscriptions start appearing from the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Gunaighar copper plate inscription of Vainyagupta, dated to c.507 being the first one. The total number of village settlements and localities mentioned in the 17 land transfer deeds number around 74, counting at least one locality where names of specific localities are not given. There is definite evidence of spatial diffusion of settlements and thus a favourable demographic trend in the form of more number of plates that appeared during the thirteenth century. The number of settlement-names mentioned also show an equivalence with this trend, and the 13<sup>th</sup> century Bhatara plate of Govinda Kesavadeva mentions 48 place names, wherein, as high as 40 plots of land were granted in favour of god Siva. Interestingly, place names also include names of rivers, which in addition to forming boundary markers, sometimes form sole reference points according to which plots were demarcated (‘5 *halas* and 3 houses to the south of *Sarama* river’) <sup>[37]</sup>.

The constituents of the settlements include *ksetra* (land), *vastu* (homestead land) and *gocara*. The last one occurs from the time of Ladahacandra plates. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Damodaradeva plate of Chittagong uses the word *gopatha* (cattle path) instead of *gocara* <sup>[38]</sup> In addition to all these, some inscriptions like the Bhaskaravarmans Nidhanpur plates mention a few other things like the potter’s pit. <sup>[39]</sup>

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