

# THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF BENGAL: TRADING NETWORKS, CULTURAL IDENTITIES<sup>1</sup>

BY

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## *Abstract*

The objective of this paper is to draw on archaeological data from Bengal to address issues relating to the social and cultural milieu of trade from the 5th-4th centuries BC to the 6th-7th centuries AD. Trading activity by its very nature was mobile, cut across political frontiers and as a result created its own networks of communication and information transfer. Within this extensive trading system, diverse communities in Bengal developed distinctive cultural identities as they interacted with their unique environment as well as with the larger Indic cultural sphere. This cultural identity included religious affiliation and it is important to highlight the vibrancy and dynamism of these cultural identities from the pre-historic period to the 8th-9th centuries AD.

L'objectif de cet article est de partir des données archéologiques du Bengale pour en extraire les problématiques en relation avec le milieu social et culturel du monde commercial du 5<sup>ème</sup>-4<sup>ème</sup> s. av. J.-C. au 6<sup>ème</sup>-7<sup>ème</sup> s. de notre ère. L'activité commerciale fut, par sa nature même, mobile, au-delà des frontières politiques et créa en conséquence ses propres réseaux de communication et de transfert de l'information. Dans le cadre de ce système de commerce extensif, diverses communautés au Bengale ont développé des identités culturelles spécifiques en établissant des relations aussi bien avec leur propre environnement qu'avec la sphère culturelle indienne plus générale. Cette identité culturelle inclut les affiliations religieuses et il est important de mettre en valeur la vivacité et le dynamisme de ces identités culturelles de la période préhistorique au 8<sup>ème</sup>-9<sup>ème</sup> siècle de notre ère.

*Keywords:* Inland navigation. Buddhist monasteries. Hindu temples. Rouletted Ware. Terra-cotta temples.

## INTRODUCTION

Nor will it be wondered at, when it is known, that all the salt and a large part of the food consumed by ten millions of people are conveyed by water within the kingdom of Bengal and its dependencies. (Renell 1792: 35).

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Writing in 1792, Rennell was struck by the unique inland navigation network of Bengal and remarked on the brisk trade carried out throughout the region in boats. Salt, fish and rice have been the major resources of the region that have been transported through the inland network and traded in the historical period. To these must be added “the transport of commercial exports and imports, probably to the amount of two millions sterling per annum; the interchange of manufactures and products throughout the whole country” (Deloche 1994: 25). At present, in Bangladesh, the expression country-boat, synonymous with the Bengali term *nouka* “denotes any wooden non-mechanised craft used on inland waters, along the coast or in the Bay of Bengal.” The sea-going boats found in the Chittagong area, ply as far as Myanmar, while a variety of watercraft carry goods and agricultural products to inland ports (Jansen et al., 1989: 72-3).

This fluvial network not only provided a distinctive environment throughout the early history of Bengal, but it also linked Bengal to the larger Ganga and Brahmaputra valley networks, on the one hand and the east coast and Bay of Bengal systems, on the other. I would like to draw attention to another distinguishing feature of the region—the brick temples with terracotta decoration (Mitra 2000-2003). What is particularly relevant for this paper is the depiction of boats on the brick temples, a distinctive feature in the history of temple building in the subcontinent. These boat representations date to the 18th-19th centuries and depict 62 panels showing riverboats and 53 panels with sailing vessels. The former category included houseboats, passenger and pleasure boats as also war boats, while the latter included European vessels (Deloche 1991). How are these boat depictions to be explained? A corresponding development was the enormous popularity of the mythological story of Kamale-Kamini glorifying the power of the goddess Candi. The story appeared in literature in the Candi Mangala Kavyas as early as the 13th century version of the poet Manik Datta and came to be known through several versions from 16th to 18th centuries. Story-tellers recited the Candi Mangala Kavyas at village gatherings and this undoubtedly influenced terracotta artists and *pata* scroll painters. In some Mangala Kavyas there are elaborate references to the wealth and fortune of merchants like Chand Saudagar and Dhanapati. This prosperity is also reflected in representations on temples, especially the temple of Sridharpur, the Lakshmi-Janardan temple at Dubrajpur and at Karkai, where merchants are shown in large boats accompanied by assistants and carrying cargoes, including animals (Haque 1980: 30-1).

There was a spurt in temple construction in Bengal from the 13th century onwards, with a marked concentration in the 18th and 19th centuries. Most of the temples were erected in areas closely linked to riverine trade and relate to

the rise of a new middle class, as the shrines were located in or adjacent to the houses from which landholders governed their estates (Michell 1983: 8). An analysis of inscriptions found on the temples indicate donations made by several local zamindars or landlords, the raja family of Burdwan, Mallas at Bisnupur, queens, merchants and several private individuals. Thus it is evident that the terracotta temples not only provided connectivity between agrarian space and the inland navigation network in Bengal, but also provided cultural and religious identity to the emerging local elite. These temples have been studied for their architectural styles and terracotta decorations (McCutchion 1972; Michell 1983), but not as indicators of cultural identity of the newly emerging elite groups. The assumption is that these were later interventions in the medieval landscape of Bengal and owed their origin to religious movements, such as the Gaudiya Vaisnava movement led by Caitanyadeva (1486-1533). This contention may be debated on basis of archaeological data, which indicates a continuous temple-building tradition in Bengal from 5th-6th centuries to 14th-15th centuries AD as evident from archaeological sources (Sengupta and Chakraborty 2002: 395-413).

Thus the importance of the inland navigation system in the economic and cultural life of the region is undeniable in the 18th century and continued even after the rail links were established with Bengal around 1880s—so are we to assume that this network was an 18th century development? Historians of ancient Bengal scarcely refer to the waterways of the region. Instead the focus has been on agrarian history (Sharma 1965), development of urban centres and emergence of the state (Chattopadhyaya 1994). Social and cultural change is generally attributed to an external agency, be it politics such as the Mauryas or the Guptas or else economic intervention, as in the case of Roman trade based on finds of so-called ‘imported’ pottery such as Rouletted Ware and other material artefacts (Mukherjee 1996: 181-192; Chakrabarti 2001: 155). Even religious and culture change is attributed to movements of brahmanas from north India at the behest of the newly emergent regional states, who were in turn instrumental in evolving a syncretic Puranic religion (Kunal Chakrabarti 2001: 118).

Traditionally, two broad trends have influenced historical studies on ancient India, including Bengal, in the post-Independence period: one is the Marxist school, which supports the Indian Feudalism theory.<sup>2</sup> The paradigm opposing

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<sup>2</sup> This credits the introduction of iron around 1000 BC with expansion of agriculture and production of a ‘surplus’ in the middle Ganga valley. This surplus was then invested in trading ventures, which emerged around the middle of the first millennium BC. Trade with the Roman Empire led to the development of urban centers in the early centuries of the Christian Era, but with the decline of the Roman Empire and consequently its trade with India, these towns and cities were abandoned. A period of agrarian expansion and self-sufficient village

the theory of Indian Feudalism emphasises the centrality of the political structure in initiating change and suggests three discontinuous phases of urbanisation around which other economic activities coalesced. These phases have been defined as the Harappan (3rd-2nd millennium BC), Early Historic (600 BC to 3rd-4th centuries AD) and Early Medieval (6th-7th—12th-13th) periods.<sup>3</sup> Three major historical processes have been postulated for the early medieval period within this framework: expansion of state society; assimilation and acculturation of tribal peoples; and integration of local religious cults and practices within the Brahmanical fold.

My research over the last several years presents a different picture. It underscores the role of polity, economic activity and religion as three competing spheres of power and control, whose complex interaction provided vibrancy to the historical process. It thus questions prioritising one sphere over the other, whether it is the state or agricultural development or trade. Secondly, my study underlines the autonomy of religion and stresses the close association between religious centres and the community. The crucial evidence provided by archaeology accentuates the multivocality of religious structures and negotiations between different groups. Thus the archaeological study of religious architecture indicates a diverse landscape and the coexistence of the Hindu temple with Buddhist monastic centres and other local and regional cults. Religious groups functioned at multiple levels and interacted with communities in a variety of ways, rather than simply as agents of political legitimisation (Ray 1986; 1994; 2003; Ray and Sinopoli 2004).

In this paper, I would like to introduce the results of my work as they relate to the cultural and social milieu of Bengal from the 5th-4th centuries BC to the 6th-7th centuries AD. In contrast to the rural/urban dichotomy and early historic/ early medieval disjunction supported by both Sharma and Chattopadhyaya, this paper highlights the centrality of the community in the study of the past and continuity in the settlement pattern as evident from the archaeological record. It is significant that while archaeological data and distribution networks

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economy followed, lasting until 1000 AD when foreign trade revived under the Arabs (Sharma 1965).

<sup>3</sup> The period between the 6th-7th and 12th-13th centuries showed developments vastly different from the society of the earlier period. “State formation was a crucial agent of change in this respect, in the sense that it brought a measure of cohesion among local elements of culture by providing them a focus” (Chattopadhyaya 1994: 35). While urban centers were characterized as centers of political power, surrounded by large agricultural hinterlands and located along trade routes in the Early Historic period, the character of these urban centers changed in the early medieval period into “nodal points in local exchange networks,” (Chattopadhyaya 1994: 181).

of ceramics indicate local, regional and oceanic interaction in Bengal, starting from at least the third-second centuries BC onwards, if not earlier, inscriptions are largely silent about trading activities until well into the 5th-6th centuries AD.

Several communities are in evidence in different parts of the subcontinent and Bengal is no exception, though only a few of these find mention in inscriptions or textual sources. These include fishing and sailing communities, traders, craft persons, religious clergy and ruling groups. There are hierarchies both within the groups as well as cutting across these communities, but it would be naïve to support the claim that the state controlled all economic and religious activities. Trade involved a complex range of transactions, with gifts to those in authority, and prestige commodities required by powerful groups and residents of cities at one end of the scale, while barter and monetary exchanges were the norm at the local and regional level. The state tapped revenues from trade by taxing the sale of commodities at entry points to the city or in designated markets. Merchants and traders in some cases certainly owned ships and watercraft, but they neither manned nor sailed these. More often, however, goods and cargoes were entrusted to the captain of the vessel who was then responsible for their sale and profit. Given the centrality of inland navigation in Bengal it is imperative that any discussion on trade and trading networks should include fishing and sailing communities within its purview.

It is also apparent that these diverse groups owed allegiance to a variety of belief systems, which continued to evolve, change and co-exist, but which were by no means subsumed or integrated within a homogenising Sanskritic culture. The religious background of early Bengal has been studied around two axes, one with reference to Buddhism, often suggesting its close links with trading groups and the second indicating that a number of autonomous and fragmented traditions existed, which centred on the worship of local goddesses. A semblance of homogeneity and transformation to a distinctive Puranic form of worship is said to have appeared in Bengal only when brahmanas established a social order by the early medieval period (Kunal Chakrabarti 2001: 2). Chakrabarti argues that though there is evidence for early temples in Bengal, these were no more than local centres of worship, which eventually decayed due to lack of patronage or were destroyed by Muslim invaders (Kunal Chakrabarti 2001: 306).

In contrast, this paper emphasises the role of religious architecture as a ritual instrument that integrated individuals and communities into a social fabric. It is significant that while the origin myths of most of the temples associate their founding with a royal patron, yet there is little historical evidence for this during most of their existence and instead several communities claim special

relationship with the deity (Meister 2000: 24). In contrast to the conventional linear development from Buddhist caitya to Hindu temple, archaeological data establishes that both the Buddhist caitya and the Hindu temple were contemporaneous in 3rd-1st centuries BC and shared sacred space with a diverse range of domestic, local and regional cults. Clearly there is a need to re-examine entrenched orthodoxy in the writing of ancient Indian history.

This paper focuses on archaeological data from Bengal and re-evaluates it at multiple levels both spatially and chronologically. It starts with a discussion of the archaeological data and highlights continuity of settlement as evident in the record. It then moves on to the unique environment of Bengal, which located the region in at least two spheres of interaction, i.e. that of the Ganga valley and the other of the Bay of Bengal and traces the development of trading patterns in these. The final section draws on archaeological evidence for terracotta figurines, sculptures and religious architecture to underscore the diverse sacred landscape that provided anchorage and means of cultural identity to the communities.

#### THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL INPUTS

The issues that I would like to raise are what is the earliest archaeological evidence of human settlement in Bengal? How are we to understand these archaeological beginnings in the context of the oft repeated disparaging references to Vanga as the land of outcastes and barbarians (*vratyas* and *mlecchas*) in later Vedic literature? Are we to understand that Bengal was an isolated zone until it was brought into a homogenised Brahmanical culture as a result of movement of *brahmanas* from north India in the 4th-5th centuries AD? Clearly this is an untenable position, since in eastern India, Paisra in the Kharagpur range near Munger in Bihar has provided a 7th millennium BC evidence for prehistoric settlement in the region. The earliest human settlement in Bengal is dated roughly from 1700/1600 BC onwards as evident from the distribution of Black-and-Red Ware sites in lower Bengal and elsewhere dating from around 1500 BC (Dutta 2000: 86-91). Rice cultivating, iron using village settlements are largely documented in the region of Radha to the west of the river Bhagirathi. In addition to the characteristic Black-and-Red pottery found at these sites the widespread occurrence of iron slag, copper objects, Neolithic celts and beads of semi-precious stones indicate the involvement of these sites in local and regional trade and exchange networks (Chakrabarti 2001: 105, 122).

The distribution pattern of early sites dated to around the 5th-4th centuries BC indicates that almost all the historical regions in Bengal had been occupied

and interacted not only with each other but also with a large hinterland. A study of beads from Chandraketurgarh shows that the circular disc cylinder and short circular beads in banded agate form a large proportion of the total bead assemblage and that these were carried along the riverine routes. Chandraketurgarh belonged to two different cultural currents, one a pan-Indian bead-making tradition and the other the east coast and Southeast Asian tradition (Chakraborty 1995-96: 40). How is this trading activity to be defined and understood?

Before I move to a discussion of the nature of trade and trading activity, I would like to briefly draw attention to at least three major sites, which show continued settlement over a long period of time. Though eleven major riverine sites have been identified along the original flow of the Ganga from Boral to Mandirtala (Chakrabarti 2001: 152), the site of Chandraketurgarh, 38 kilometres north-east of Kolkata is the largest site in the area. It is situated on the moribund delta of the Ganga-Brahmaputra river system adjacent to the almost dried up course of the river Vidhyadhari, once a large tributary of the Bhagirathi. The site includes a series of mounds within an area of 3-5 square kilometres scattered in the villages of Devalaya, Hadipur, Berachampa, Shanpukur, Jhikra, etc. encircled by a huge earthen rampart wall. The sacred complex at the site was unearthed at the northern mound known as Khana Mihirer Dhipi and comprised of a massive brick temple. It is suggested that as compared to Harinarayanpur located further south, Chandraketurgarh grew into the largest site of the area on account of better access to freshwater resources and control of waterways (Chakraborty 2002: 154). The site continued to be occupied from the 5th-4th centuries BC to the 10th century AD.

Another region that continued to play a crucial role in the early history of Bengal was Pundravardhana with Mahasthangarh as a major centre until the 13th century when the political focus shifted somewhat south to the Gaur-Pandua area. In the 12th-13th centuries at least three of the Pala kings adopted the title of Gaudesvara or lord of Gaur. This area formed a part of a larger trading network with routes traversing through the Brahmaputra valley of Assam to Tibet, upper Burma and China. In addition, it was linked via the lower Bengal coast to the Bay of Bengal coastal system, viz. Arakan and the Irrawaddy valley on the east and the Andhra, Tamil and Sri Lankan coasts to the south (*The Periplus Maris Erythraei*, sections 60-66). Its strategic location at one end of the Ganga river system provided Pundravardhana access to the ancient historical network of the Ganga plains.

Archaeological excavations conducted at Mahasthangarh for the last one decade have placed the site in a firmer chronological framework. The site of Mahasthangarh was settled on a slightly elevated spot on the western bank of the Karatoya, a major artery of communication, in an un-flooded area at the

limit between the Barind to the West and the lower terraces of the Jamuna basin to the East. This was a prosperous environment for rich and diversified agriculture. The 11 deep layers of excavations from the foundation of the site to the late 2nd century AD have been grouped into three cultural phases: The “Early settlement,” late 4th/early 3rd century-early 2nd century BC (levels 1 to 4), the “Capital City,” early 2nd century BC-mid-1st century BC (levels 5 to 8), and the “Pause,” mid-1st century BC-2nd century AD (levels 9 to 11). This third phase in the evolution of the settlement extended from the mid-1st century BC (end of the Capital City) to the last quarter of the 2nd century AD. The inhabitants of Mahasthangarh were still skilfully active and were rather wealthy if one assesses their constructions. On the contrary, the cultural remains of the same period are rather poor and indeterminate—at least in comparison to similar and contemporary cultural data from other centres in the Ganga valley (Salles 2004: 201). It is significant that the ‘lean’ period from 1st century BC to 2nd century AD at Mahasthangarh corresponds to a ‘rich’ period further south at Chandraketugarh as evident from the larger numbers of finds of Rouletted Ware shards as will be argued later. It is also evident that the earliest settlement at Mahasthangarh was a small and obscure village and as yet there is little justification for the traditional assumption that from its very beginning, Mahasthangarh was founded by the Mauryas as their eastern capital. Another significant result of the excavations was the change in the nature of settlement around early 2nd century BC that coincided with the occurrence of moulded terracotta plaques (Salles 2002: 536). I will discuss both the dating of the Rouletted Ware and the cultural significance of the terracotta moulded plaques again somewhat later, here I would like to summarise briefly the results from another archaeological site.

The site of Mangalkot is located on the right bank of the river Kunur in Burdwan district and dates from 1200 BC to the 17th century AD, the earliest settlement dating from 1200 to 600 BC provided evidence for the use of iron, both wild and domesticated animals and consumption of rice. Period IV dating from the 1st century BC to AD 400 was the most prosperous at the site and in addition to large scale structural remains yielded a large number of inscribed and un-inscribed seals, sealings and coins. Faunal analysis from the site is particularly significant for this paper as it shows that one of the major items of food right from the beginning of the settlement consisted of fish, carp and tortoise (Ray and Mukherjee 1992: 107-34).

Thus to reiterate, the distribution pattern of early sites dated to around the 5th-4th centuries BC indicates that almost all historical regions in Bengal had been occupied and interacted not only with each other, but also with a large hinterland. There is a continuity of settlement at major sites such as Chandraketugarh until the 10th century AD, and Mahasthangarh until the 12th century AD. In



spite of this wealth of archaeological data, certain glaring omissions stand out. With the exception of Mangalkot, there is an almost total absence of data on ancient flora and fauna, especially fish remains from archaeological explorations and excavations in the region and hence it is difficult to probe further issues related to man-land and man-water-system relationships.

Fishing has been the traditional occupation of coastal and riverine populations in South Asia from the prehistoric period onwards, though fishing communities are seldom represented in literary sources and their presence in the archaeological record has only recently been noticed. Perhaps the earliest evidence of fishing communities in South Asia comes from Sri Lanka. Mantai has provided evidence for exploitation of marine resources such as various molluscs, fish, sea turtles, dolphin and so on in the prehistoric Mesolithic phase dating to the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC (Prickett-Fernando 1990: 115). Comparable dates are available from late prehistoric sites in western India. Thus the role of fishing in wide-spectrum resource use starting from the prehistoric period onwards is gradually being recognised, but remains to be studied in the context of Bengal.

Another much neglected aspect of man-land relationship relates to rice cultivation, which in historical literature is said to result from the use of iron in the middle Ganga valley in the first millennium BC and to have expanded from there eastward. It is seldom recognised that Asian rice is typically grown in two contrasting situations, viz. in intensively cultivated lowland fields and secondly in upland areas as a part of a shifting agricultural regime (Glover and Higham 1996: 413-4). Archaeological excavations in the last few decades have established the presence of “well-established village cultures based on the cultivation of two crops a year by rotation method” in the Ganga basin as early as 2000 BC in Bihar. Rice cultivation is attested to at sites such as Pandu Rajar Dhibi dated from 1100 to 700 BC in the Ajay valley and Mahishdal in Birbhum district (Singh 2002: 146).

It is accepted by archaeologists that the shift from animal diet to plant food resulted in a demand for salt, which was no longer available through intake of meat. Salt also formed a crucial component in ancient medical prescriptions and had several practical applications such as the curing of hides. Rennell’s account does mention transportation of salt through the waterways and at present salt is produced in Cox’s Bazar area in Bangladesh (Jansen et al., 1989). In the historical period, seawater was an important source for obtaining this essential commodity, yet so little data is available on it in Bengal.

Another important marine resource that occurs in the historical period is the cowrie or the shell of the gastropod *Cypraea moneta* gathered in the shallow

waters of the Maldivian islands. Some other species are native to East Asia and hence the issue of source of cowries found extensively in South and Southeast Asia remains problematic. In the 2nd millennium BC, these occur as far apart as Harappan sites in north-west India and prehistoric sites in north China (Wicks 1992: 308-310). Cowries were widely used in the historical period and continued in circulation in different parts of the Indian Ocean well into the 20th century. In the middle Ganga valley, excavations at Masaon (Ghazipur district) brought to light a hoard of 3,000 cowries in a pot in levels dated between 600 and 200 BC. Cowries were also recovered from the Iron Age horizon at the site of Khajuri (Allahabad district). The Mahasthan inscription from eastern India of the 3rd-2nd centuries BC refers to aid in the form of *kakanis* and *gandakas*, i.e. low denomination coins and perhaps cowries respectively.

Thus from the above survey of archaeological sites in Bengal it is evident that marine and riverine resources were utilised at least from the 3rd-2nd centuries BC onwards. How was this system organised? While textual data on the organisation of trading activity in Bengal is limited, 4th-5th century copper plate charters refer to the association of several occupational groups such as the chief artisan (*prathama kulika*), chief scribe (*prathama kayastha*), the caravaner (*sarthavaha*) and the chief merchant (*nagara sresthi*) in the administrative procedures. Nor are these mere stereotypes, as several land grants record specific names of officials involved. For example, the first four Damodarapur copper plates of the time of Kumaragupta I (444 AD) refer to the *nagara sresthi* Dhrtipala, *sarthavaha* Bandhumitra, *prathama kulika* Dhrtimitra and *prathama kayastha* Sambapala, while a different set of names is given in plate 5 (Basak 1919-20: 113-45).

## THE LANDSCAPE AND TRADE PATTERNS

In support of my hypothesis that rivers have always played a major role in the cultural life of Bengal, let me start by drawing attention to the earliest copper plate charters dating from the 4th-5th centuries onwards. These have often been used for the study of expansion of agrarian settlements in Bengal (Morrison 1970), but what is relevant for this paper are the frequent references to rivers, rivulets, channels, tanks and reservoirs as boundary markers. These not only provide details of the network of rivers and canals, but also include details such as posts to fasten boats (*Naudandaka-sima*, Faridpur copper plate inscription of Dharmaditya, Mukherji and Maity 1967: 82).

Another example of this is the Gunaighar copper plate inscription of Vainyagupta dated to AD 507. It defines the markers for the lands belonging to the monastery as follows: the channel between the two landing places of boats at

Chudamani and Nagarasri to the east; to the west the land belonging to the temple of Pradyumnesvara; to the north the channel leading to the landing places of boats at Pradamara and to the south, the channel open to boats connected to the tank of Ganesvara villala (Mukherji and Maity 1967: 65-70). Similarly the Faridpur copper plate of Dharmaditya refers to '*trighattika*' or three landing places for watercraft (Sircar 1965/1993: 344). An eighth century AD inscription of Bhavadeva states that his palace was located high on a hill, the base of which was washed by a river where elephants bathed and boats passed to and fro (Sircar 1951: 87).

By the sixth century Bengal is described as a region bordering the eastern sea (*praksamudra*) in the Faridpur copper plates of Dharmaditya and by the eighth century Dharmapala Deva announces his control of the oceans 'forming the encircling ditches of the earth'. The Khalimpur charters of the king were issued from Pataliputra 'where a variety of boats had formed a bridge on the Bhagirathi' (*Nanavidha-nauvataka-sampadita-setubandha* Kielhorn 1896-7: 243-54). By the tenth century AD the Bay of Bengal had acquired a territorial identity as indicated by the use of the term Vangasagara in the Madanpur copper plate charter of Srichandra (Sircar 1949: 337-9). From this profusion of varied imagery it is evident that the rivers formed a part of the cultural landscape of the communities in Bengal from at least the 4th-5th centuries AD, if not earlier and there was a vibrant transportation network along the rivers.

I should also draw attention to the overlapping frontiers between Bengal and the kingdom of Arakan lying on its eastern edge, which saw cultural and religious interaction between Arakan and Bengal on the one hand and Burma and mainland Southeast Asia on the other. It is significant that stone and copper plate inscriptions of the Candra dynasty that ruled Arakan from circa 454 to 600 AD were found from the ruins of stupas and indicate that at this time Arakan was looking to Bengal for models of kingship and administration. In addition to adopting the format of the copper plate grants as prevalent in Bengal, Bhuticandra's inscription (496-520) also incorporates several words known from Bengal such as *jola* (channel) and *khalla* (canal) (Sircar 1957: 109; Sircar 1967: 61-6). In contrast to the copper plate charters of the Candras their coinage struck in silver was closely related to that of Southeast Asia (Wicks 1992: 86).

Historically Bengal has been divided into four subdivisions, i.e. Pundravardhana (north Bengal including Rajshahi, Bugura, Dinajpur areas), Radha (areas to the west of the present Bhagirathi), Vanga or central deltaic region and Samatata (areas to the east of the Meghna). It may be underlined that the coast is by no means a homogenous landscape and may be divided into four different sections, viz. the lower course of the Hooghly, the Sundarban coast, the mouths of the Padma and the Brahmaputra and finally the Cattagrama coast. A

striking aspect of this region is the penetration of tides far upstream enabling a close contact between maritime navigation and an inland water transport system, as well as fluctuating and shifting channels and estuaries (Deloche 1994: 116-126). The Karatoya, which is no more than a nullah at present was part of the larger Tista system, which drained the region north to south and is represented as a major river on 18th century maps including that by James Rennell. It declined rapidly after the 18th century and within a hundred years stopped being navigable (Alam and Salles 2001: 37). Similarly the river, which now flows past Kolkata and joins the sea near Sagar island “is a comparatively recent channel, increasing in significance only after the fifteenth-sixteenth century” (Chakrabarti 2001: 127).

How has this location of Bengal impacted its links within early trading systems? In the writing of ancient Indian history, ceramics have been used most frequently to demarcate trade networks and often to establish the identity of the groups involved in trade. While the former objective may be well founded the validity of information on identity of trading groups based on pottery types needs to be questioned. Wheeler identified so-called ‘foreign pottery,’ such as Rouletted Ware and amphorae, during his excavations at the site of Arikamedu on the east-coast of India and dated the former to the end of first century BC-beginning of first century AD (Wheeler et al. 1946: 45). He used these ceramic finds to endorse not only the nature of trade, i.e., Roman, but also the ethnicity of the users and hence suggested an Indo-Roman trading station at the site (Wheeler et al. 1946). More significantly, he unwittingly started a trend for the study and interpretation of ceramics that has proved surprisingly tenacious. Indeed a recent publication titled, *A Sourcebook of Indian Civilization* refers to the existence of foreign settlements on the east coast of India, especially those of Roman sailors and merchants at Arikamedu. The evidence for these settlements according to the editor is based on finds of pottery fragments of Rouletted Ware from the site, which “arrived in India around c. 2nd century BC” (Chattopadhyaya 2000: 610).

Recent excavations at Mahasthangarh indicate that in levels 5, 6 and 7, the most important pottery category remains the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), which represents a major share of the finds (80% in levels 5 and 6). Some fragments of Rouletted Ware were also found in the NBPW fabric. This supports a new and important argument to push the emergence of the Rouletted Ware back to the 3rd or 2nd century BC and Mahasthangarh would thus appear as one of the earliest centres of production of the Rouletted Ware. Was this ceramic type produced in one region and then distributed across the Bay of Bengal or were there several centres of production? It is difficult to answer this question, as the sample size that has been subjected to scientific analysis is still

small. V.D. Gogte has attempted to address the question by comparing the mineral content obtained from XRD analysis of Rouletted Ware from several sites with clays from the Tamil coast, lower Bengal and Vietnam. He supports the theory that RW evolved from NBPW and that it was produced at several centres with the epicentre in the Tamluk-Chandraketugarh area (Gogte 1997: 69-85). This theory is further supported by the results from the recent excavations at Mahasthangarh. Anjan Kumar Das and others however dispute these results on the basis of 'scientific analyses' of the ceramic (Das et al., 2002: 425-450).

In the 1950s only a few sites were known to have yielded Rouletted Ware a fine textured pottery with rouletted decoration on the base and these included the sites of Chandravalli and Brahmagiri in Karnataka and Amaravati in Andhra (Wheeler 1946: 48). Since then the number of sites yielding Rouletted Ware shards has increased and the distribution map of the Ware now extends from Mahasthangarh and Chandraketurgarh in Bengal to Tissamaharama (Weisshaar et al., 2001: 199) in Sri Lanka. Across the Bay of Bengal Rouletted Ware shards have been found at Buni culture sites in north Java, Sembiran on the north coast of Bali and at sites in Vietnam. Thus the dispersal of the Rouletted Ware is primarily along the Bay of Bengal littoral in South Asia and across the sea at sites in island and mainland Southeast Asia. There are several variations within the Rouletted Ware fabric. What is significant is that though it does occur at some interior sites in peninsular India, its distribution has a clear Bay of Bengal focus, though one of the forms of the Rouletted Ware has been found in the excavations at Berenike on the east coast of the Red Sea. Here the ceramic occurs together with other Indian pottery types and shards with legends in Tamil-Brahmi (Begley and Tomber 1999: 161-4). Given this concentration along the Bay of Bengal littoral, it is time to delink the Rouletted Ware from the Romans and to analyse its distribution within the regional maritime networks along with several other indicators, such as inscribed shards, seals and sealings, especially those marked with a ship symbol.

This leads me to another important issue, i.e. the extent of the literate, trading world as evident in the finds of inscribed shards, seals and sealings in Bengal. Writing facilitated storing of information, cumulative knowledge promoted new genre of cultural and artistic expression and aided ordering of information under numeric and alphabetic heads and the use of maps (Goody 2001: 144). These networks may be identified in the archaeological record by specimens of writing on pottery, seals and sealings and by inscriptions on stone and copper plates. This paper will primarily focus on patterns of use and distribution of the written records in an attempt to highlight both temporal and spatial variations. The larger issue is to define the changing frontiers of trade and the

complex ways in which writing aided the construction of a literate culture.

With the exception of the Mahasthan inscription often dated to the Mauryan period, the other evidence of writing is provided by a Northern Black Polished Ware shard with three Brahmi letters of 2nd-1st century BC found in Chandraketugarh period II (Basu 2002: 34). In addition a large corpus of Kharoshti inscriptions ranging from the second half of the first century AD to the early 5th century AD have been found in lower Bengal, particularly the Chandraketugarh area and parts of Southeast Asia (Mukherjee 1990: 10-1). It is important to note that the Brahmi script was adopted for inscribing names in more than one language on pottery in the Indian Ocean world, viz. Tamil, Prakrit, Sanskrit and Old Sinhala. This clearly indicates the presence of at least three language groups involved in trading activity in the Indian Ocean region—those using Tamil, Prakrit/Sanskrit and Sinhala, with several overlaps between these networks.

The occurrence of inscribed shards at major coastal sites in the subcontinent is of relevance to this paper as it helps define the nature of maritime networks. 214 inscribed shards were recovered from the archaeological excavations at Vaddamanu located 10 kilometres south-east of Amaravati in Andhra. The largest concentration of 109 shards was in Period II dated between 100 BC and AD 200, though the overall chronological span ranges from 200 BC to the 4th century AD (Sastri et al., 1992: 116-140). The monastic complex at Salihundam or ancient Kattaharama yielded eighty inscribed shards and the few complete readings from the site would suggest that these were on platters or pots donated to the monastery (Subrahmanyam 1964: 119-122). Another important find of inscribed pottery is from Arikamedu where at least 17 of the 66 inscriptions on pottery are known to be in Tamil. A majority of the inscribed shards date to the 1st-2nd centuries AD, though the earliest find at the site was from the Megalithic levels dated to the 3rd century BC (Mahadevan 1996: 295-6).

These inscribed shards are in addition to the large numbers of seals and sealings found at archaeological sites in the Indian subcontinent (Thaplyal 1972). Seals were used for marking merchandise (*Arthashastra* II.21.2-3); they were stamped on wet clay laid over fastenings on the mouths of pots containing valuables (*Khadirangara Jataka*, no. 40). They were also used for securing documents and for identification. An early Buddhist text, the *Milindapanha*, refers to the custodian of seals. These seals occur in a variety of materials such as stone, ivory, copper and the ubiquitous terracotta at a range of archaeological sites. Particularly relevant to our discussion are the carnelian seals and intaglios with inscriptions found at sites in Sri Lanka and at least at four major coastal centres in Southeast Asia, viz. Khuan Lukpad, Kuala Selinsing, Chaiya and Oc-Eo.

The earliest specimen of carnelian seals with Brahmi legends from Khuan Lukpad dates to the 1st century AD, though these continued in use until the 6th-7th centuries AD as indicated by later finds (Ray 1994: chapter 4). This corpus is supplemented by finds of seals with legends in Kharosthi, e.g. a seal from U. Thong now displayed in the Lopburi Museum. Kharosthi characters have also been identified on a seal matrix of tin from Oc-Eo, while the male head on another tin seal resembles the head of Kusana ruler Miao on his coins (Mukherjee 1990: 3).

A symbol widely distributed in the Indian Ocean region is the ship symbol, which occurs around the 1st-2nd centuries AD on punch-marked, cast copper and Satavahana coins, terracotta sealings and as graffiti from deltaic Bengal and the Andhra coast (Ray 1994: 52). Other examples of the use of the ship-symbol on pottery and coins are known from Sri Lanka (Weisshaar et al. 2001: 15-6) and south Thailand. A stone seal from Nakhorn Pathom depicts a two-masted ship identified as a Southeast Asian vessel with outrigger.

Two issues are evident from the above discussion. One is the participation of Bengal in the Bay of Bengal network and there is evidence for its continuity until well into the 10th century AD as evident from the uninterrupted settlement both at Chandraketugarh and Mahasthangarh. The second is the literate nature of this system as established by finds of inscribed shards, seals and sealings. The nature of the written record changes around the 4th-5th centuries AD with copper plates and stone being used for inscribing and recording in the subcontinent. It is also around this time that stone inscriptions in Sanskrit often containing Buddhist formulae are found at several sites in mainland and island Southeast Asia. The script used for these stone and copper plates found at centres in Southeast Asia continues to be Brahmi and the language Sanskrit. As in the case of the Indian subcontinent, these inscriptions record genealogies of the rulers and donations made to brahmanas (Ray 2003: chapter VI).

As mentioned earlier, three inscriptions were recovered from the ruins of the Buddhist monastic complex at Vesali in Arakan and are dated to the 6th-7th centuries AD. Written in corrupt Sanskrit one of the records begins with the Buddhist formula '*ye dharma hetu prabhava*' and all three epigraphs record royal donations made to the Buddhist monastic complex at the site (Sircar 1957: 109). The first line of the copper plate charter is damaged, but after that the grant lists seven ancestors who are all referred to as worshippers of Siva. The record states that Kimmajuvdevi donated a village called Dengutta in favour of a vihara built by herself and that the income from the village was to be utilised for the repair of the monastery as well as for meeting other necessities of the monks (Sircar 1967: 61-6).

A cluster of fifth century inscriptions of unequivocal Buddhist affiliation has

been found in Kedah on the west coast of the Malay peninsula. This includes engraving of the Buddhist formula ‘*ajnanac-ciyate karmma*’ on stone—a feature that does not occur among contemporary records from the Indian subcontinent, though the formula is found on terracotta sealings. Three of these inscriptions are made of local stone and bear similar illustrations of Buddhist stupas. Texts very similar to these inscriptions have been found on the island of Borneo and on the coast of Brunei (Christie 1995: 256). The most interesting of these inscriptions in Sanskrit is that of Buddhagupta, which refers to the setting up of the stone by the mariner Buddhagupta, resident of Raktamrttika, identified with Rajbadidanga in Bengal, on the successful completion of his voyage (Chhabra 1965: 23-4).

Another issue that may be brought into the discussion at this stage relates to the evidence from coins found in Bengal. On the one hand, these indicate local series of punch-marked coins dated around 3rd century BC, while on the other, imports from a wide area of north and northwest of the Indian subcontinent are also evident. These include finds of Mauryan punch-marked coins, issues of the Seleucids, such as a silver drachm of Seleucos I (312-280 BC) found in a village near Dhaka, as well as coins of the Parthians and the Indo-Greeks. Along with Kushana gold coins, local imitations bearing legends in Greek are also known in Bangladesh, though imitation copper coins are somewhat scarce. The connection with Sri Lanka is evident from a 3rd century AD Sri Lankan copper “goddess plaque” in a private collection in Dhaka, while two similar pieces were recovered from the river bed at Karur in south India. Dating from a slightly later period, three early medieval Sri Lankan coins were found during archaeological excavations at Paharpur (Mitchiner, 2000: 27).

Based on the trace gold content of Arakanese silver coins, Mitchiner argues that the Candras of Arakan traded with the Mon to their south and with Harikela and Samatata in Bengal to their north. Analyses of the composition of Candra silver coins makes it clear that the Candras handled both Brahmaputra traded silver and also Irrawaddy traded silver (Mitchiner, 2000: 45).

Unlike Gujarat, what is however lacking are details of revenue collected from trade and information regarding customary laws that applied to trading groups. The religious landscape influenced the trading system in several ways from moulding cultural preferences and choices to active participation. Religious shrines were both consumers of a variety of commodities used in ritual, as well as important locales for trading activity as indicated by shops and markets within or in the vicinity of temple premises from the 10th century onwards in regions such as Gujarat. The building of new temples stimulated economic growth thereby transforming both the geographic and social landscapes of the region (Talbot, 2001: 87). At the same time there are several instances of a



differential tax on commodities required for religious purposes. Let us then move on from this trading network of Bengal to focus on the diverse religious milieu of its early history. As with other parts of the Indian subcontinent, the religious shrine was a prominent part of the landscape and inscriptions invariably either refer to donations made to religious establishments or record rules for managing the property of the shrines and temples.

#### THE DIVERSE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

Kosambi had argued for continuity of Indian culture and its survival in present peasant communities. He proposed that the long survival of observances that have no sanction in the official 'Brahmin' works can only have originated in the most primitive stages of human society and this has been the prevailing orthodoxy in Indian history writing (Kosambi 1956: 20). It is often argued that the cult of the mother goddess was Dravidian in origin and that religious customs of the tribes and low-caste groups can provide insights into archaic practices that were later incorporated into Brahmanical religion. Thus it is suggested that terracotta figurines found at archaeological sites formed a part of the folk tradition, which was later integrated into the Brahmanical fold. Perhaps it is time to re-examine the finds of terracotta images and the extent to which these may be termed 'local' or folk goddesses. Terracotta images may be classified into handmade and mould-made based on the technique adopted in their production. The moulds could be of stone, terracotta or wood and the use of a single mould resulted in the production of a plaque, whereas a double-mould produced a figure in the round. Terracotta plaques and shards with auspicious symbols were integral to Ganga valley religious traditions from the 4th-3rd century BC onwards and the repertoire included a range of Hindu deities. Atranjikhera, for example, has yielded a *gaja-laksmi* plaque in terracotta dated to 200-100 BC and another 1st-2nd century AD specimen, depicting *mahisas-uramardini* comes from Mathura.

I would argue that already by the 2nd century BC Bengal formed a part of the Ganga valley religious milieu as evident from the widespread distribution of certain types of moulded female terracotta plaques. At Tamluk representations of Buddha, Bodhisattva and other deities are known in terracotta, while only one Buddha figure has so far been reported from Chandraketugarh (Mandal 1987: 25-7). Other representations include corpulent yaksa images and plaques with female Naga figurines and several specimens found at Chandraketugarh are now in the Kanoria collection (Roy Chowdhury 1995-6: 69). An analysis of the terracottas from Chandraketugarh shows that the group comprising of plaques with female figurines with the distinctive five hair-ornaments or *panca-cuda*,

divine and semi-divine beings, yakshas and winged figures belonging to the Ganga valley cultural milieu is by far the most numerous at the site (Roy Chowdhury 1995-6: 61). It is no doubt also evident that along with the *panca-cuda* figurines, those with ten hair ornaments are also found and these form a class by themselves. The use of a mould, as opposed to the earlier practice of hand modelling, itself indicates production for a larger consumer base on a wider scale. The dates for these figurines correspond with those from sites further west.

At Mahasthangarh, for example, the earliest occurrence of moulded female terracotta plaques with hairpins is dated around early 2nd century BC (Salles et al 2002: 536). In addition are the stamped ceramics with auspicious signs such as *triratna*, *cakra*, *srivatsa*, a couple of fish, which were found in the 1997-8 excavations and have been dated from 1st century BC to 2nd century AD (Gill 2002: 46). Both these are noticeable in the archaeological record from Sonkh near Mathura further west in the Ganga valley. Moulded terracotta plaques were found at Sonkh in levels 29 and 30 in association with die-struck copper coins and mud brick structures. A single calibrated radiocarbon date of 221 BC was obtained from level 28 assigned to Period III, though the excavator termed it too early (Haertel 1993: 85). Similarly in addition to the data from several other sites in the Ganga valley, the use of auspicious symbols on pottery dates to around second-first century at Sonkh (Haertel 1989: 181-192).

It is striking that already by the 2nd-1st centuries BC these terracotta images were housed in a variety of structures and worshipped. Two of the open-air shrines have been identified on terracotta objects from Chandraketurgarh dated to the first-second centuries AD and show enclosures marked by railings. One of the legends can be read and refers to *dha(r) magras(r)ala* or 'chief enclosure of religion' (Mukherjee 2000: 41-2). Terracotta plaques depicting a female figurine enshrined in a pillared *mandapa* accompanied by attendants with fans and umbrellas and devotees with bowls or even with a halo around the head have been found in lower Bengal. Another representation shows the female figurine standing on a pot or *ghata* containing coins and she is shown showering money on a worshipper (Bautze 1995: plates 12-3).

Here again the data from Bengal is in consonance with that from other sites in north India. For example, a first century BC Kharosthi inscription found in the Gandhara region records the construction of a tank for the worship of the Nagas. The practice of donating *puskarinis* or lotus tanks and the setting up of images of Nagas is evident from other inscriptions from Mathura as well (Lueders 1961: no. 137). But perhaps indisputable evidence for worship at a shrine comes from a record on a pillar base at Jamalpur mound, which refers to a gift of Devila described as *devakulika* or priest of Dandhikarna Naga

(Lueders 1961: no. 63). In addition to Mathura another early centre known for the worship of the Naga cult is Rajgir. In addition to the inscriptions, an apsidal structure dedicated to the Naga cult was excavated at the site of Sonkh in Mathura district.

In addition to the terracotta figures several stone images have been found at sites in Bengal. These include a stone image of a 2nd century AD Yaksi now in the Dhaka Museum, a 2nd century AD four-armed Visnu from Narhatta in Bogra district now in the Rajshahi museum, as well as two representations of Surya on coarse grained hard sandstone from sites in north Bengal and a Visnu image from Hankrail in Malda district in buff-coloured sandstone. The material used for these images is different from the mottled red sandstone used at Mathura and this led S.K. Saraswati to suggest that these were produced in Bengal rather than being imports from further west (Alam 1985: 48-53). Surya continued to be worshipped in later periods as well as indicated by finds of Surya images from Deora in Bogra district and the Kashipur stone image (Alam 1985: 61). A red stone torso now in the Asutosh museum was discovered during test excavations in 1934 though detailed results are not known. Another significant find from the site was that of a sandstone column carved with several scenes in high relief one of these showing a four-armed deity (Alam 1985: 67-9).

In addition, fifth century AD inscriptions refer to several examples of temples built by a diverse cross section of people. The Damodarpur copper plate of Buddhagupta (476-495 AD) records a request from Ribhupala for land to establish the linga form and to construct two temples or *devalayas* and two store-rooms for Siva and Visnu (Mukherji and Maity 1967: 61-4). The Baigram copper plate inscription (448 AD) refers to a request from the householders or *kutumbins* Bhoiyala and Bhaskara for a grant for repairs to a Visnu temple established by their father and for a regular supply of perfumes, incense, lamps and flowers for worship (Basak 1931-2: 78-81). Excavations carried out in 1934-5 at a mound at Baigram revealed a temple with a square sanctum and a covered circumambulatory passage (Chakrabarti 1992: 119).

The performance of daily worship was by no means limited to the Hindu temple as evident from the Gunaighar copper plate inscription (AD 507), which records grant of land to acarya Santideva, the Buddhist monk for the performance of worship thrice a day with perfume, flower, light, incense, etc. at the vihara of Avalokitesvara, as well as for maintenance of the complex (Mukherji and Maity 1967: 68). Hinduism and Buddhism coexisted with Jainism as indicated by the Paharpur copper plate inscription, which refers to donations for worship and construction of a resting place at a Jaina vihara inhabited by the monk Guhanandin and his disciples from Varanasi (Dikshit 1929-30: 59-64).

There are few references to brahmanas involved in worship, though an elaborate ritual had developed both in the Hindu temple and the Buddhist shrine. In contrast there is mention of brahmanas granted land to enable them to perform the agnihotra rites and the five daily sacrifices (Mukherji and Maity 1967: 47-9). Similarly a brahmana of Kaundinyagotra and affiliated to the Vahrca sakha of the Vedas was granted land so that he could perform the five sacrifices enjoined upon by the brahmana householder (Mukherji and Maity 1967: 87-95).

It is evident from this discussion that the presence of the religious shrine in Bengal is indicated from at least the 2nd-1st centuries BC and onwards and images of varied religious affiliations were housed in these. Nor can any linkages be established between certain forms of economic activity such as trade and Buddhism or agrarian expansion and efflorescence of Hinduism as often suggested by historians.

The presence of Buddhism in Bengal is based on two second to early first century BC inscriptions from the main stupa at Sanchi in central India, which record donations made by two residents, Dhamadata and Isinadana of Punyavardhana identified with Pundravardhana in Bengal (Marshall 1940: nos 278 and 594). A somewhat later Nagarjunakonda inscription refers to Vanga as one of the regions where Buddhist missions went for spreading the word of the Buddha. Archaeological excavations at Paharpur, the ancient Buddhist Somapura *mahavihara* founded by Dharmapāla (c. 770-810) in Bangladesh have confirmed the longevity of Buddhism in the region and its coexistence with the Hindu temple.

Archaeological excavations conducted at several mounds located in the vicinity of Mahasthangarh have provided information on a diverse religious landscape with several Hindu temples coexisting with Buddhist monastic complexes. A shrine and three seated images of the Buddha was found at Khoda Pathar mound, while Mankalir Dhap close by yielded bronze figures of Ganesa and Garuda and ornamented bricks reminiscent of the brick temples at Bhitargaon. The zone to the northwest of the site has been identified as a thriving zone of Buddhist activity. The excavations at Basu Bihar show that in the 8th to 12th centuries, two substantial monasteries and a shrine were constructed, the latter decorated with terracotta plaques. Within the walls of the site also there are reports of religious structures dating to this period. In 1961, a temple of the 8th century was excavated near the gateway on the southwest interior corner of the fortifications, while a pair of temples of the 8th and 11th centuries were recovered from the site of Bairagi Bhita, located in the northeastern portion of the site (Alam and Salles, 2001).

But perhaps interesting evidence comes from the mound of Mangalkot located a kilometre west of the mound at Mahasthangarh. Small excavations

conducted here yielded large numbers of female terracotta figurines with snakehoods behind their heads from the foundation trenches of a ruined temple dated between 2nd and 5th centuries AD (Chakrabarti 1992: 89-110).

Exploration between the villages of Palashbari and Bamunpura about a kilometre west of the site of Mahasthangarh have yielded large numbers of terracotta plaques depicting stories from the *Ramayana* with short labels in 6th-7th century Brahmi. Clearly the archaeological evidence emphasises the long duration of settlement at Mahasthangarh and also the multi-religious affiliation of its inhabitants. The area around Mahasthangarh continued as a major centre for the location of religious shrines well into the 12th century. Both at Mahasthangarh and at Chandraketugarh the Hindu temple coexisted with Buddhist monastic complexes, as evident from the excavations of a brick temple at Khana Mihirer Dhupi at Chandraketugarh dated to the 8th to 12th centuries AD.

It would seem that Skandher Dhap or mound of Skanda near Mahasthangarh was the site of a Karttikeya temple as evident from the reference in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini* completed in 1149-50 AD. Kalhana presents a long and detailed narrative of the reign of king Jayāpīda (751-782 AD) grandson of Lalitaditya. Soon after his accession to the throne, Jayapīda set out to conquer the world. Though gradually deserted by his troops, the king travelled down the Ganga and from Varanasi moved to Paundravardhana, where he went to the temple of Karttikeya to enjoy the dancing and singing being performed in accordance with the precepts of Bharata (Stein 1961: 93, 160, IV.421-3).

This data is further corroborated by recent archaeological work at the temple cluster of Begunia (Sengupta and Chakraborty 2002: 395-413) located at the tri-junction of the rivers Damodar, Barakar and Kudia. Temple-building activity continued here from 8th-9th centuries to 14th-15th centuries AD. Thus to label these temple sites as local centres of no consequence is not validated by the wealth of data provided by sculptures and excavations of early temple sites and the detailed mention of these in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*.

To conclude, in this paper I have highlighted the archaeological data for the presence of villages in Bengal as early as 1800/1600 BC and the continuity of settlement at major sites well into the 9th-10th centuries AD. The unique environment of the region and its strategic location astride both the riverine and maritime networks is reflected in the archaeological record, but find no mention in literature or inscriptions on which historians base the study of the past. It is not surprising then that available histories of the region largely emphasise the spread of Sanskrit culture that evolved in the middle Ganga valley to Bengal around 4th-5th centuries AD and are silent about regional cultural and religious developments.

The shared culture that extended across not only South Asia, but also the Indian Ocean was part of a literate tradition, which was by no means controlled by the ruler or the brahmana, but included Buddhist and Jaina monks, navigators and trading and crafts groups. It is important to appreciate that this shared culture was far from homogenous and instead incorporated affiliation to a diversity of faiths and belief systems. Rather than being subsumed under the hegemonic Sanskritic tradition propagated by the brahmanas, these religious traditions continued to co-exist. The larger issue that this paper endorses is an active involvement between Archaeology and History, rather than a continuation of existing trends of viewing archaeology as filling in details of material culture to support socio-economic formulations of Ancient Indian History. Religious centres and shrines catered not only to kings and rulers in their quest for power, but existed on account of their ability to forge links with a variety of communities. These religious shrines drew from developments in philosophical thought, but also created space for interaction with their diverse human environment. Archaeological studies of sacred landscapes help locate these wider networks over time and contribute in resolving issues related to structures of society and the means through which communities in the past constructed cultural identities.

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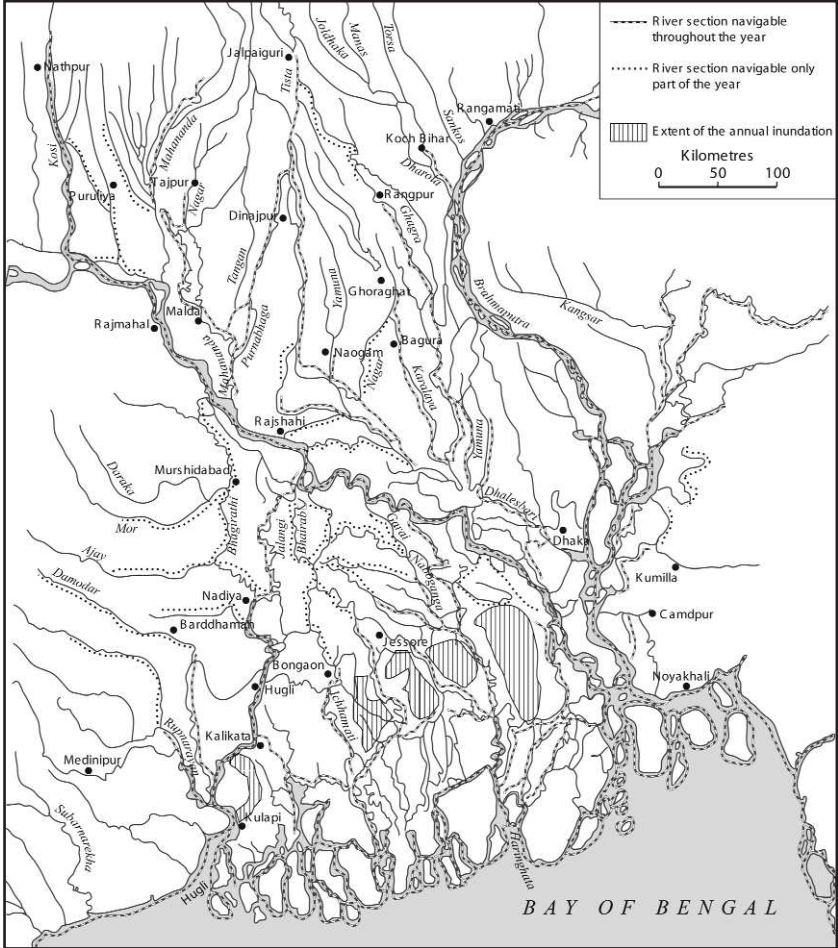
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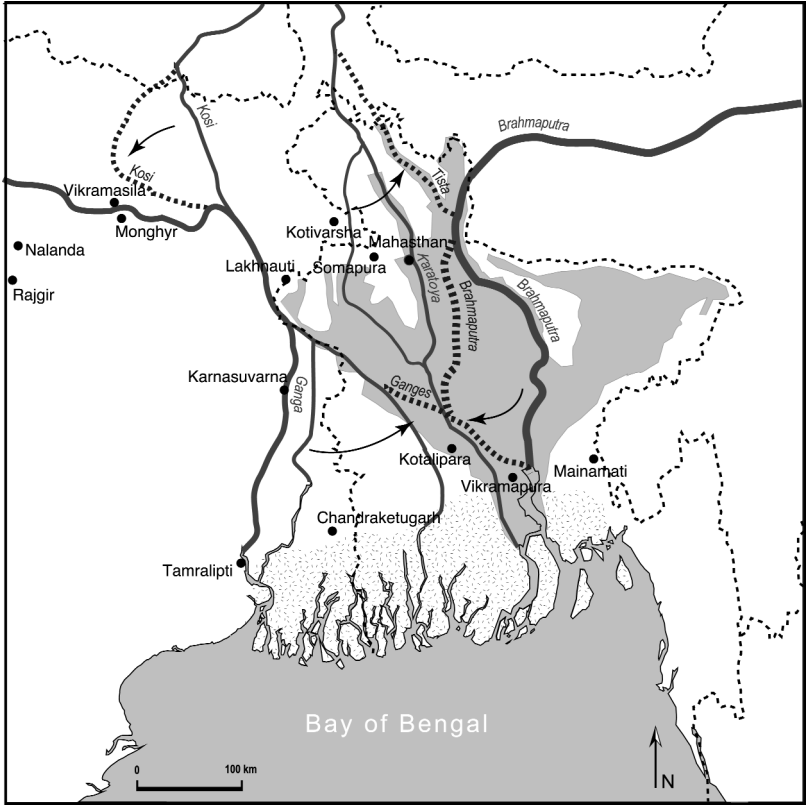
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Map 1



- Ancient courses
- ..... Modern courses
- Direction of channel shift
- Zone of coastline variation
- Floodplain

Map 2



Rouletted Ware from Mahasthan (Salles 2004)