What is in The Location: A Geo-archaeological Study of the Landscape of the Buddhist Monasteries of Western Bengal

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Abstract: The landscape of eastern India is dotted with several Buddhist Monasteries far and wide. There are four excavated Buddhist establishments in West Bengal. This paper enquires why particular locations are chosen to build the Buddhist establishments in the riparian landscape of western Bengal. The geographical and archaeological study reveals the permissive and restrictive factors of the landscape integral to the architectural setting of the Buddhist Monasteries.

Keywords: Region, landscape, Geomancy, Buddhist establishments, Hydrological dynamics, settlement network

The study of architectural setting of the Buddhist monasteries has been the main focus in archaeological monographs treating its surrounding as a blank space. Pointing out the centrality of the monuments in the research on religious sites of early medieval period, Jason D. Hawkes notes:

The limited ways in which both religious sites and settlements have been excavated impedes a full and connected account of the sites themselves- the contexts and spaces within which past activities and practices took place. At religious sites, an exclusive focus on monuments has denied the investigation of the archaeological realities of the wider sites of which they were a part.¹

Moving beyond the monument centric approach, our present study of the landscape and cultural milieu of the Buddhist monasteries of western Bengal, attempts to understand why particular locations are chosen in the landscape of geographical cultural regions of Varendra and Radha to establish the monasteries between c. 600 CE – 1200 CE. We find that the locations of the monasteries

happen to be in diversified geographical cultural zones of *Varendra* and *Radha*. We endeavour to understand the constraints and conduciveness of the landscape integral to the Buddhist monasteries. We try to understand the material and cultural environment of the Buddhist monasteries in relation with the geographical characteristics of the four zones of the subregions in *Varendra* and *Radha*. The four zones of the locations of the Buddhist establishments are identified in the interflow of the Punarbhava and the Tangan in *Varendra for Nandadirgh Vihara*, the area in between the Bhagirathi on the east and the Dwaraka on the south west in the western part of the Bhagirathi Hooghly basin of northern part of *Radha* for *Raktamrittika Mahavihara*, the older floodplain of the Damodar in the interface between the Chhotanagour plateau and Bhagirathi Hooghly delta plain in Uttar Radha for the stupa of Bharatpur and the floodplain of the Suvarnarekha in the transitional area of Chhotanagpur plateau and coastal plain in *Dakshin Radha* for the monastery of Moghalmari. In this article we shall discuss the observations regarding the cultural traits varying with the diversity of geographical characteristics of the four zones, permissive and restrictive factors of the natural and cultural setting of the landscape of *Varendra* and *Radha*.

We find in the *Mahavagga*² of *Vinaya Pitaka* the ideal location of erecting the *Vihara* neither too close nor too far away from the localities from where the peripatetic monks could be able to collect their daily alms.

Sitting near him the Magadha king Seniya Bimbisara thought: ‘Where may I find a place for the Blessed One to live in, not too far from the town and not too near, suitable for going and coming, easily accessible for all people who want (to see him), by day not too crowded, at night not exposed to much noise and alarm, clean of the smell of people, hidden from men, well fitted for a retired life?’³

Thus came the idea of ideal geomancy consists of pleasure garden, perfume chamber, lotus pond etc. for the Buddhist monks. Before the erection of the *Arama* the monks were prescribed for rain-retreat during the rainy season when it was difficult for them to travel a long distance for collecting alms.⁴

During the Gupta post Gupta period from ⁴th century CE onwards we find several Viharas, permanent residence for the monks all over the Indian subcontinent. In the early medieval period

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³ Ibid. p. 143. (16)
from 7th century CE onwards, we find that several land grants to the Buddhist monasteries. The *Kriyasangraha-Panjika* provides the ideal geomancy and performance of auspicious rituals to sanctify a place before erection of the Vihara. It prescribes the ideal location surrounded by trees, waterbodies at four cardinal directions which are considered sacred. It gives elaborate details of the process of building the Vihara following the auspicious rituals and ceremony if the desirous donor would like to donate land for the building of a Vihara.\(^5\) The inscriptional reference and present day landscape integral to the Buddhist monasteries of western Bengal maybe comparable to the geomancy referred in the *Kriyasangraha-Panjika*.

The site of *Nandadighi Vihara* in Jagjivanpur village is a monocultural site dated back to 9th century CE\(^6\). The site is situated on the Barind upland of *Varendra* subregion. The area was formed by the riparian action dated back to late Pleistocene to early Holocene period\(^7\). The tract of Barind is arid and undulating. Most of the sites are found on dangas or elevated area. The sites are affected by severe rainfall to cause flood but rest of the year there is scarcity of water. Exposing the section of the structural mound, Sheena Panja found:

The first human activity took place when the area was part of a semi-active flood plain. This activity became less probably because people thought it to be not suitable for erecting brick structures. Later this flood plain became less active and was exposed to pedogenesis for some time. This exposed flood plain surface formed the activity area for the Early Medieval monastic population who constructed brick structures on this stable flood plain surface. The excavator observed a thin lense of ash silty clay sandwiched between the habitational debris of the structural mound. It probably represents occasional but very intense flood activity of the Punarbhabha river. Throughout this activity the main channel was probably away and was flowing at a lower level than the present one as we get flood plain deposits very close to the present active sandy channel which continue below it (as reported by the local people). Lateral migratory system and groundwater lowering are responsible for the changes that we observe in archaeological and non-archaeological sediments in the trench.\(^8\).

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The flood prone landscape restricted the past anthropogenic activities of the site. The brick built structure of the monastery was constructed when the flood plain became hydrologically comparatively more stable to conduce the anthropogenic activities. The monocultural site of Jagjivanpur became habitable not before late 8th and early 9th century CE.

The Tulabhita copper plate inscription of Mahendrapaladeva records the donation of land grant to the Buddhists in Pundravardhana bhukti. The reference of waterbodies in the inscription is identifiable with the present day river Tangan and the lake Nandadirghi situated adjacent to the monastery. The inscriptive description of boundary specification by trees, waterbodies suggests the possibility of agrarian expansion in the time of the formation of the geo-political unit of Pundravardhana bhukti in Varendra subregion from the 5th century onwards. The monastic institution played significant role as ideological apparatus of the state in ‘legitimation’ process. It validated the temporal power of the Palas and integrated the newly formed settlement to the geo-political unit of Pundravardhana Bhukti.

While comparing the inscriptive data with the archaeological data of the sites in and around Jagjivanpur, it is found that the settlement pattern is governed by the hydrological dynamics of the region. The settlements are interspersed by natural and manmade waterbodies, changing river courses of the Punarbhava and the Tangan. There is not any well defined nuclear settlement. The main activity area of the monastery is surrounded by mounds or habitation area and waterbodies. The fluctuating river course washes away the temporary habitational area. The relatively elevated area is safe from flood but not suitable for cultivation. The brick built structural habitational mounds are found on the relatively elevated area. Jagjivanpur is an example of semi-compact settlement pattern.

In such a flood prone environment of Jagjivanpur, the local inhabitants took up multiple subsistence strategies of fishing, craft and trade apart from agriculture. Jagjivanpur is situated in

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9 EI, XLII, pp. 6-29.
10 Ibid.
between two urban sites of *Varendra*. The urban centre of Bangarh\textsuperscript{14} on the west and Mahasthangarh\textsuperscript{15} on the east provided boost to trade and craft activities and expansion of settlements. More sites found in the area around Jagjivanpur in the interfluves of the Punarbhava and the Tangan are Lonsa, Sajnadighi, Gomratatala, Kanyakudi.\textsuperscript{16} Jagjivanpur is situated at the node of settlement network. A comparative study of the excavated material of Jagjivanpur, Bangarh, Mahasthangarh is necessary to understand the nature of activity of exchange. The archaeological material of Jagjivanpur betrays long standing notion of rural-urban binary.

The idealized beauty of landscape of *Varendra* is portrayed in royal eulogistic *kavya* genre of literature. The Ramacaritam, written mainly for the courtly elite talks of lush region and beautiful cities. It conveys a sense of permanence and order.\textsuperscript{17} Vidyakara’s *Subhasitaratnakosa* shows rainy season as essential phase of seasonal cycle\textsuperscript{18}. The geographical archaeological study of the site throws light on the severe impact of the fluvial dynamics and the struggle of the local inhabitants to cope with it.

*Karnasuvarna* is a religious cum administrative urban site.\textsuperscript{19} The habitational area of *Karnasuvarna* comprises the villages of Chiruti, Jadupur, Rangamati, Chandpara where we find the religious architectural sites as well as structural and habitational sites. Around the main activity area of *Raktamrittika Mahavihara*, we find a few number of horizontally excavated structural cum habitational sites at Rakshashidanga\textsuperscript{20} and Nilkuthidanga\textsuperscript{21}. Both of the sites of Rajbadidanga\textsuperscript{22} and Nilkuthidanga had cultural antecedents since early historic period. Besides, there are locations of occurrences of sculptures and habitational records/remains reported from several villages located

\textsuperscript{17} R. C. Majumdar, R. G. Basak and N. G. Banerji, eds., *Ramacharitam*, Rajshahi, 1939.
\textsuperscript{18} H. H. Daniel Ingalls, An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry Vidyakara’s *Subhasitaratnakosa* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 359.
\textsuperscript{19} B. D. Chattopadhyaya, Studying Early India Archaeology, Texts, and Historical Issues, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003, pp. 88-90.
\textsuperscript{20} IAR 2009-10, pp. 165-168.
along the bank of the Bhagirathi.\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Karnasuvarna} was the node of settlement network of the region. The habitational settlements are interspersed by waterbodies, religious structure and arable land. The semi compact pattern of settlement around the structural complexes is governed by the need of water and the shift of the meandering river course of the Bhagirathi. The hydrological dynamics of \textit{Radha} was not sole determinant for choice of location but it played important role in the process of development and the decay of settlements around the monastery. The river, which seasonally became a threat to life of local inhabitants connected the localities of northern part of \textit{Radha} with the regional administrative units of \textit{Varendra} and southern part of \textit{Radha} via water route. The peripatetic practice of the monks helped in travel of ideas. The \textit{Raktamrittika Mahavihara} did not stand in isolation. The Buddhist monastery was surrounded by a number of brahmanical land grant settlements.\textsuperscript{24} B. M. Morrison observed the difference in the characteristics of the socio-religious composition of the subregions. He found that small land grants to individual Brahmanas were concentrated in the area along the Bhagirathi river on the western side of the delta throughout the 850 year period, while donations of large tracts of land were being made to the Buddhist monasteries in the eastern part of the delta during the earlier centuries.\textsuperscript{25} Sporadic occurrences of specimens of sculptures affiliated to the brahmanical sects further support his view. The political authority of the \textit{Radha} region had little control over the personal religious life of people. Even the discovery of the structural remains affiliated to particular sect is not sufficient to demarcate the space in terms of sectarian division of the society. There was not any standardized religion practised by the people of a particular area. Therefore, it is obvious to find religious diversity around the monastery situated in the region, where its local inhabitants are engaged in different economic activities. Being located on the relatively elevated Barind upland surrounded by a number of temporary habitational sites in the flood prone landscape, \textit{Raktamrittika Mahavihara} conveys a sense of power and permanence.

The location of the stupa base of Bharatpur (c. 9\textsuperscript{th} century CE) at the meeting point of Chhotanagpur plateau and the Ganga Brahmaputra delta might have important strategic significance. Chhotanagpur plateau region has immense contribution to the process of development of agricultural

\textsuperscript{23} S. R. Das, \textit{Archaeological Discoveries From Murshidabad District (West Bengal)} (The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1971); The district Murshidabad is extensively explored by Bijan Mondal, \textit{2016. ‘The Early Medieval Archaeology of The District of Murshidabad, West Bengal’}, unpublished Ph.D Dissertation, University of Calcutta (Kolkata, 2016).


activities and urbanization of the delta. It is the homeland of the autochthonous tribal population living on the forest resources of the plateau. It is also the source of semiprecious stones, minerals, metal ore necessary for the survival of the people of the delta. The Damodar river originating deep inside the heart of Chhotanagpur plateau meets with the Bhagirathi-Hugli channel. The mighty river is prone to flood in the lower reaches because the channel is narrow. The river is navigable from downstream till Barakar and even beyond. The Damodar river valley is the possible route of contact between the resource bearing Chhotanagpur plateau and the consumer sites of the delta. Dudhpani Rock Inscription dated to the 8\textsuperscript{th} century, found at Hazaribagh area records that three merchant brothers Udayamana, Sridhautamana and Ajitamana enjoyed considerable success in trade at Tamralipti from where they wished to return to Ayodhya.\textsuperscript{26} It gives the hints of trade routes running through the tribal territory connecting the plateau, the northern Radha and southern part of Radha in coastal region. The network of settlements along the Damodar river valley is important to understand the nature of interaction between the quarry sites, manufacturing sites and consumer sites. The field survey of Sharmi Chakraborty in 2002 highlights on the nature and pattern of exchange in the sites between the upland and the delta since the protohistoric period. She pointed out that the material culture of this region needs to be understood keeping in mind the role of landscape in shaping the subsistence strategy, the human context and the cultural tradition of the region.\textsuperscript{27}

The area also experienced the development of administrative structure of \textit{Vardhamana bhukti} since the later half of the 6\textsuperscript{th} century CE.\textsuperscript{28} Archaeological evidences found from the interflow of the Ajay and Damodar also tend to support the growth of rural settlements in this area. The sites along the Damodar flood plain has cultural antecedent phase of genesis since the protohistoric period. The sites situated on the western and south western part of the Damodar flood plain and across the forest area show later development of medieval period. The settlements in the proper Damodar basin area witnessed concentration of village settlements from the post Gupta period onwards.\textsuperscript{29} The role of Buddhism in the cultural communication between the plateau and the delta is apparent. We must keep in mind the distribution of the Buddhist monasteries in Bihar and Bengal lying to the west and east of Chhotanagpur plateau to understand the strategic significance of the location of the stupa of Bharatpur.

\textsuperscript{26} F. Kielhorn, ‘Dudhpani Rock Inscription of Udayamana’, Epigraphia Indica, Vol. 2 (Delhi, 1894), pp. 343-346.
\textsuperscript{28} EI, XXIII, pp. 155-161.
in the context of spread of Buddhism in the subregion of Radha. The massive structure of the Buddhist stupa situating on the older flood plain above the younger flood plain of the mighty river Damodar in the interface between the plateau and the plain could have been a landmark. Extensive survey of the specimens is necessary to understand the route of travel of Buddhism and its associated lithic as well as metal and stucco art and craft activities in Bengal.

The monastery of Moghalmari on the flood plain of the Subarnarekha is situated at the meeting point of easternmost remnant of Chhotanagpur plateau and the coastal plain contiguous to Orissa. The alluvial upland on which Moghalmari and its adjoining area of Dantan is located is identified as the easternmost extension of the Sijua formation formed by the fluvial action between the late Pleistocene and early Holocene periods. Along the coastal line cluster of settlements in and around Tamluk are situated. The region of West Medinipur has sharp cultural antecedent phases from prehistoric period. R. K. Chattopadhyay (2018) found that the BRW associated early village farming settlements and the subsequent early historic chrono-cultural developments at Moghalmari and its adjoining area of Dantan shared similar settlement experiences with Bahiri, Tamluk and the part of coastal Orissa between the Suvarnarekha and the Baitarani. Along the Suvarnarekha, a cluster of sites overlooking the coastal line at Tokinagar Gram, Ektiarpur, Barabaghira, Angua, Nekurseni, Kakrajit, Satdeula, Raybaruttar, Manoharpur, Erenda, Bahiri, confirms existence of cultural antecedents of BRW associated Early Village Farming settlements. The cluster of villages in and around Bahiri and Tamluk does not fall within the Sijua formation on which Moghalmari is situated. The sites in and around Bahiri are in Panskura formation. The proximity of the two different geomorphological setting played important role not only in floral and faunal diversity but also in the rise and growth of human settlements, as manifested in their common behavioural patterns, and formed a common cultural matrix.

For that matter the explored database from Kankrajit, Ektiarpur, Tokinagar, Satdeula/Satdeulia, Uttarraybar, Krishnapur, Bhavanipur, Chaulia, Joypura, Sarasankha, Manoharpur. And other locations in West Medinipur district generally betrays a common cultural heritage.

The area of Dantan experienced the development of administrative structure of Dandabhuhti

mandala under the rule of Sasanka. One of two Midnapore copper plate inscription of Sasanka mentions Dandabhukti along with Utkaladesa.\textsuperscript{33} According to the Irda copper plate\textsuperscript{34} dated 10\textsuperscript{th} century CE, Dandabhukti mandala was part of Vardhamana bhukti. The Tirumalai inscription\textsuperscript{35} refers to the division of Uttara Radha and Dakshin Radha. Dandabhukti was within Dakshin Radha. However, the territorial extent of Dandabhukti is not clear. It is noteworthy that during the reign of Sasanka we find two Buddhist monasteries in Murshidabad and West Medinipur.

Proximity with the coastal area and port of Tamralipti might have encouraged the expansion of agriculture in this hinterland area along the coastal line of West and East Medinipur district. The rural economy was consolidated in Gupta and post Gupta period. The excavated and explored sites at Moghalmari, Kakrajit, Hirapani, Tokinagar Gram, Uttar Raybar, Tildah, Tamluk, Erenda yielded habitational deposits of early medieval period. Absence of diagnostic type of habitational records does not help us understand the growth of settlements and material culture.

The sculptural and architectural specimens found from in and around Dantan show influence of Orissan art. The influence of the Buddhist monasteries of Ratnagiri in Orissa and Nalanda of Bihar in Moghalmari is still now speculative. More evidences are required to substantiate the view of transmission of the tradition of Buddhism in terms of aesthetics and religious practice from Orissa and Bihar. Some votive tablets with true replicas of the Nagara style with amalaka on the top and inscribed Buddhist creeds of Moghalmari are assumed to be locally made and were meant for local use by Peter Skilling.\textsuperscript{36} The stucco artistic specimens of Moghalmari is comparable with the contemporary Buddhist monasteries of Nalanda, Paharpur etc. of India and Bangladesh.\textsuperscript{37} More comparative study of the excavated material of bricks, potteries of Moghalmari and its contemporary monasteries of Bihar, Orissa and Bangladesh is required to understand the flow of idea with its human agency of monks and craftsman and the possibility of mobility during 6\textsuperscript{th} to 12\textsuperscript{th} century CE.

The rivers Suvarnarekha, Kangsavati, Dwarakeswar, Baitarani, Tarafeni flow through a great length from the upland of Chhotanagpur plateau rich in metal and mineral resources to the low-lying alluvial tract of Medinipur almost touching upon the littoral area of Bay of Bengal. The growth of

\textsuperscript{33} D. C. Sircar, Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization From 6\textsuperscript{th} -18\textsuperscript{th} century AD, Vol. 2, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1983, pp. 24-27.
\textsuperscript{34} EI, XXII, pp. 150-159.
\textsuperscript{35} EI, IX, pp. 229-233.
\textsuperscript{36} CASTEI Newsletter, (Kolkata, 2012), p. 18.
\textsuperscript{37} CASTEI Newsletter, (Kolkata, 2012), p. 19.
settlements along the course of the river overlooking the coastal line is influenced by the procurement of raw material of Chhotanagpur plateau. The availability of the metal and mineral resources, acceleration of agricultural activities along the contiguous low-lying area of Medinipur nurtured agricultural and nonagricultural subsistence strategies of the hinterland of Medinipur.

The Tirumalai inscription refers to the region of Dakshin Radha as the area where rain wind never stops. The region of Medinipur near the coastal area is often hit by the disastrous storm, rise of sea level and flood. The region of Radha is arid and waterless. The Bhuvaneswar Prasasti of Bhattabhavadeva refers to the hydrological characteristics of Radha. The waterbodies, lakes and tanks of Radha are the catchment of rainwater used for irrigation, fishing etc. The preliminary archaeological investigations around the large waterbodies of Sarasankha Vidyadhar, Kundapukur, Dharmapukur near which the relics of past were found from the exposed section are important to understand the settlement system of Radha. The significance of the location of the Buddhist monastery of Moghalmari needs to understand against the background of the history of the hydrological and coastal dynamics inseparable from the history of its farming and nonfarming subsistence strategies of the hinterland.

The material culture of the region of Radha in the interflow between Damodar and Suvarnarekha and the Bhagirathi Hooghly basin owes to Chhotanagpur plateau and the overland and riparian route of travel that join the quarry sites, manufacturing sites, and the hinterland of Radha with the port of Tamralipta. The Dudhpani Rock Inscription and the travelogue of Hsuan tsang throws light on the route of travel cutting across the boundary of Varendra and Radha.

The epigraphic and archaeological material help us situate the Buddhist monasteries within the network of settlements in the geo-political units of Pundravardhana bhukti, Kankagrame bhukti, Vardhaman bhukti and Dandabhukti in the context of formation of the subregions of Varendra, Uttara and Dakshina Radha. The proximity of river and overland route of travel cutting across the subregional boundaries exposed the monasteries to the continuous flow of ideas. The geographical and archaeological study of the four zones of Varendra, northern and southern part of Radha

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38 EI, IX, pp. 229-233.
39 N. G. Majumdar, Inscriptions of Bengal, Rajshahi: 1929, p. 35.
suggests the reflection of pragmatic consciousness in choice of location of the Buddhist monasteries of western Bengal. There is not any sole determinant for the choice of locations of the monasteries. The interplay of multiple factors such as availability of resources, possibility of mobilizing the resources, allegiance of local people to support the Buddhist monasteries, supra-local network of patronage, craft activities, possibility of mobility of craftsman, proximity of river, its positive and negative effects in the form of flood, communication network etc. made the landscape conducive to establish the monasteries. Geography plays important role in the settlement formation and cultural pattern. The hydrological dynamics added nuances to the ‘landscape’ of Varendra and Radha. The pattern of cultural association of the monasteries varies with the diversified geographical and cultural characteristics of the landscape. The Buddhist monasteries stand as locus of reciprocation and node of culture against the background of the hydrological and settlement dynamics of the landscape of Varendra and Radha.

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