

ARCHAEOLOGICAL REMAINS FROM SOME SITES OF WESTERN VARENDRA: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Study Area:

An attempt for analytical study of some sites of western Varendra region has been made to throw light on various archaeological evidences hailed from western part of Dinajpur district of undivided Bengal, presently known as Uttar Dinajpur and some portions of Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda districts of West Bengal. I restricted my research work mainly within two districts i.e., Uttar and some portions of Dakshin Dinajpur which is bounded by the river Mahananda to the west and the river Tangan to the east (**Map 48.1**). The study area extends from 25°15'6.12" north to 25°56'10.10" north and 87°48'15.68" east to 88°27'53.89" east. The geographically distinguishable part of the Bengal basin can be demarcated into two parts; one is the elevated land with old alluvium called Barind, and the second is recent alluvium zone. This is almost flat area sloping towards south as indicated by the flow direction of major rivers. The network of various sluggish rivers like Nagar, Kulik, Chiramati, Gamari, Sui, etc. are the major source of water during wet season while during dry season ponds and natural water bodies are the major water supplier. This geo-cultural unit was formerly the part of the ancient Varendrī *maṇḍala*. The early history of this ancient zone has been lost and hidden in the oblivion. Several ruined structures, heap of old bricks, sculptural vestiges bearing the witness of the glorious past with thick habitation and wealthy economic structure in this historical land.

Brief Review on Previous Research Works:

Since the first half of the nineteenth century CE the colonial researchers had been started to scrutinize the affluence of the archaeological remains of this historical zone in the northern part of West Bengal. During 1806 to 1833 F. Buchanan Hamilton surveyed this area with the other parts of the eastern India which was published in 1833.¹ Probably it was the first publication concerning the archaeological wealth of this area of Bengal and its vicinity. After Hamilton, E. V. Westmacott (1875),² A. Cunningham (1879-80),³ H. E. Stapleton (1932),⁴ S. K. Saraswati (1932-1936)⁵ had been made an extensive attempt to explore this site through riverine tract. Scholars like Dilip Kumar Chakrabarty (1992, 2001), Gautam Sengupta (1995), Sheena Panja (1999, 2018), Malaysankar Bhattacharya (2002), Mandira Bhattacharya (2005), Ranjusri Ghosh (2006-2007, 2008-2009), Sudipa Ray Bandyopadhyay (2007) and the present author (2017) have been made intensive study of this area and some antiquities unearthed from several sites of the concerned region.⁶

These above mentioned published documents evidently brings out sufficient information regarding various old brick structures, mounds, rare pieces of stone sculptures, few terracotta plaques, architectural fragments found from this area and its environs. Still this historically potential region has deserved attentions of the scholars for exploring new isolated sites within this geographical periphery. During this micro level field survey I am trying to reconnaissance the variety of archaeological records from the different village sites of the study area to envisage the socio-cultural ambiance in this region since the sixth century CE till the thirteenth century CE. The published and some unpublished materials collected from this region with their proper documentations have been articulated here in an organized manner to establish my view point.

Investigations of Some Explored Sites:

1. Bairhatta:

The ruins of Bairhatta⁷ (J. L. No. 005, 1. No. G. P.) under Harirampur Block, Dakshin Dinajpur district is located to the east of the river Chiramati. Numerous ruins of old mounds, bricks, terracotta plaques, architectural fragments, sculptural pieces had been reported by the Hamilton, Westmacott, and Saraswati during their visits. After Saraswati and others some terracotta plaques and stone sculptures have been registered by Gautam Sengupta, Mandira Bhattacharya, Sudipa Ray Bandyopadhyay and Sheena Panja during their field survey.⁸

Some mounds and unrecorded pieces of sculptures and architectural fragments from this zone have been documented in this field survey. An exposed mound near about 5' height from the base level, rectangular shaped large size (30 × 24 cm) old bricks, stone slabs, door jamb have been traced out in the house of Girilal Sarkar at Kasba (J. L. No. 108), Bairhatta. One wall of this house was constructed by old bricks. The bricks are clearly exposed. One mound is also noticed at Pirtala, Kasba with the evidence of *Kulungi*.

Eight images are preserved in the house of Vijoy Sarkar who is a retired teacher of a primary school and the resident of Prasanjeet more Bairhatta. Mr. Sarkar told us all sculptures are chance finds during stray digging of ponds, ditches and at the time of the reconstruction of houses in the village and adjoining area.

One image of a female deity made of sand stone measuring 4'7" × 1'9" found from the river bed of Chiramati. The two armed goddess stands in *tribhāṅga* pose on a full blown lotus (**Plate 48.1**). The expression of the rubbed face is not very clear but the other symbols are prominent. The whole structure of the body has been cropped deep into the stele which gives it an impression of three dimensions. The right palm of the goddess is placed on a full blown lotus in *varada mudrā*. She holds a lotus stalk by her left hand. Five votive *stupas* are depicted on the upper stele. Two damaged female figures are standing in akimbo posture at the either side of the goddess may be Aśokakāntā Mārīchī and Ekajātā (*Sādhanā* No. 89)⁹ but the symbols of these damaged figures are not clearly visible. Seven *ghatas* are depicted on the *pañcaratha* pedestal.

She wears a flowing skirt which comes down just above her ankles. The feet are adorned with *nūpurās*. A thick *upavita* is clearly visible. The breast is fully developed and covered by a transparent *uttariya*. She bedecked with a short necklace, long *hāra*, bracelets and ornamented waistband. The image resembles that of Khadirvaṇī Tārā as per the description of the *Sādhanā* No. 89 in *Sādhanāmālā*¹⁰ and may be placed in twelve century CE.



Map 48.1: The map of Western Varendra bounded by the river Mahananda and Tangan encompasses the study area on some portion of Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur District West Bengal.



Plate 48.1: Khadirvaṇī Tārā,
Bairhatta, Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.2: Sūrya, Bairhatta,
Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.3: Cāmunḍā, Bairhatta,
Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.4: Brahmā Bairhatta,
Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.5: Śiva-liṅga, Bairhatta,
Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.6: Umā- Maheśvara,
Bairhatta, Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.7: Gourī-paṭṭa with *Pranal* Bairhatta, Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.8: Bust of a male Bairhatta, Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.9: Viṣṇu Kasba, Bairhatta, Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.10: *Loknātha*, Mahendra, Dakshin Dinajpur.

The other image of Sūrya (3'7" × 1'5") is made of sand stone. The god is standing in *samapadasthānaka* pose on the full blown lotus (**Plate 48. 2**). With his two hands he holds full-blossomed lotus stalks while the others symbols are not prominent. The god is flanked by two attendant deities. Dandi is placed in left and the Pingala is in the right side of the deity. Feet of all figures are covered with short boots. The god is crowned by a *kiritamukuta* with flat top and

it is placed in a semi circular halo. The thick *yajñopavita* is falling down from his left shoulder but the Persian *aviyaṅga* is absent. Two *vidyadhara* figures are fixed at the either side of the almost elliptical stele. According to Mr. Sarkar this sculpture has been recovered from Hatidoba, Bairhatta. The pedestal is plain; there is no *saptaratha* with the impression of seven horses. Stylistically this image may be placed tenth century CE.



Plate 48.11: Fragment of pedestal, Kushmandi, Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.12: Jatamukuta Lokeśvara, Buniadpur, Dakshin Dinajpur.



Plate 48.13: Jatamukuta Lokeśvara, Narayanpur village, Kumilla, Bangladesh.



Plate 48.14: Viṣṇu, Kukrakunda, Uttar Dinajpur.



Plate 48.15: Prajñāparamitā, Uttar Dinajpur District Museum, Raiganj.



Plate 48.16: Mārtanda Bhairava, Bindol, Uttar Dinajpur.



Plate 48.17: Viṣṇu, Tenahari, Uttar Dinajpur.



Plate 48.18: Ganesa, Kamalabari, Uttar Dinajpur.

One striking piece of a ten armed goddess Cāmuṇḍā with sunken belly is also observed beside the images of Tārā and Sūrya. The sculpture is made of sand stone measuring 3' × 1'8" (**Plate 48.3**). The goddess is seated in *lalitāsana* on the corpse seat (*pretāsana*) with right leg pendent. The bared body of a male corpse is stretched on a full blown lotus. All attributes of the goddess are indistinct but a *trisula* is visible in the grip of her left elbow but the gesture of the damaged hand is not clear. The lower right hand is also badly damaged. According to *the Mālinīvijyattaratantra*, a text of the tenth century, this is one type of gesture of hands of Cāmuṇḍa image is called *damṣṭrāmudrā*. Six indistinct figures are depicted on the broken stele may be other *matrikā* images. Two seated miniature pot - bellied mutilated figures are carved on either side of the goddess. The *pañcaratha* pedestal is again etched by some hazy objects. One vase with unclear object may be the human head is placed on the central *ratha*. The assigned date of this damage piece may be placed in eleventh century CE. Same type of Cāmuṇḍā images from Dinajpur District, Bangladesh are preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka. These images are familiar with the name of Carchikā.

The broken image (1'1" × 9") of a pot-bellied male figure is sitting in *lalitasana* on *padmapīṭha* (**Plate 48.4**). The god has three beard faces adorned with *jatāmukuta*. In his four hands the god holds *aksamala*, *sruva*, *sruk* and *kamandalu* (clock wise from lower right hand). *Haṃsa* & donor figures are portrayed on the *pañcaratha* pedestal. From the iconographic point of view this image is no doubt the image of Brahmā and stylistically belongs to the eleventh century CE.

One sculpted Śiva-liṅga (**Plate 48.5**) with a clear division of square: *Brahmabhāga*; Octagonal: *Viṣṇubhāga*; Cylindrical: *Rudrabhāga* and a Gaurī-paṭṭa (**Plate 48.7**) with *pranāla* are placed in front of the *tulasi mancha* in the courtyard of the house. A small size image (7" × 4") of Umā-Maheśvara (**Plate 48.6**) and a bust of a male figure (**Plate 48.8**) with sublime face and adorned with pyramidal *jatāmukuta* may be the broken image of Avalokiteśvara are also noticed in the verandah of the same house.

The newly found Trīvikrama form of Viṣṇu (**Plate 48.9**) has been kept by the villagers in a under construction room at Harivasar, Kasba, Bairhatta. As per the information of the villagers this image (2' × 1'5") has been recovered from Domnahar tank (Kushmandi P.S.). The four armed image is standing in *samapadasthānaka* pose on the full blown lotus with as usual attributes and ornamentations of god Viṣṇu. The lower right hand is damaged. Unfortunately the pedestal is buried under a concrete floor. The principal deity flanked by four attended deities. In the right the Chāmaradhārinī & Cakrapuruṣa are placed while in the left side Vīnādhārinī and Śankhapuruṣa are standing. This black stone specimen may be placed in twelve century CE.

2. Mahendra:

Mahendra is a large *mauja* under Harirampur Block located to the eastern bank of the river Chiramati. Several mounds, architectural objects and sculptures had been reported by S.K.

Saraswati. Unfortunately in the present time mounds are almost being leveled by the village dwellers to procure bricks for construction. A black stone miniature figure (11" × 10") of Avalokiteśvara (**Plate 48.10**) has been found during the time of the digging of a tank at the village. Now it is preserved in a temple compound in the locality. The whole composition of this badly damaged sculpture is not clear. Two armed seated male figure in *lalitāsana* with left leg pendent. The hand gesture is not clearly visible, may be in *dharmacakramudrā*. This *mudra* is very rare in the form of Avalokiteśvara image. Almost similar representations on a painting of Lokanātha from Nepal have been illustrated in the *Tantrayāna Art* [Plate 234, p.p. LXXXIV]. Two buds of lotus with long stalk have risen up at the either side of the principal figure. Three Tathāgatas are depicted on the upper stele. This image may be placed in tenth century CE.

3. Kushmandi:

There are many stone pieces, preserved in the store room of the Kushmandi police station. Among them one fragment of a pedestal (4" × 9" inch) with the impression of four feet is very interesting (**Plate 48.11**). Three animals- dog, swan and pig (?) are carved on it. The vehicles of the deities are placed beneath the three feet horizontally. The fragmented portion of sculpture cannot be properly identified. It perhaps the pedestal of a Yogini(?) sculpture.

4. Buniadpur:

Some newly found architectural fragments and one black stone image of a male deity are preserved in the store room of the SDO Office Buniadpur, Dakshin Dinajpur. Exact provenances of them are unknown. A sand stone fragment of a door jamb is carved with geometric designs and a piece of lintel made of sand stone with floral motifs has been noticed. A large size piece of *kirtimukha* may be the part of a door jamb with terrible face, the whole range of his exposed teeth is also observed.

Two armed god under a five hooded snake canopy is seated in *lalitāsana* on a *padmapīṭha* with right leg pendent and resting on a separate lotus (**Plate 48.12**). His right hand is broken at the elbow while the left hand is placed over the left thigh and holding a vessel. Face is slightly damaged. The upper part of the body is fully uncovered while the lower part is covering with the folded *dhuti*. The god is adorned with a *jatamukuta*, a necklace made of beads and a short necklace. A *yajñopavita* is shown across his left shoulder. Two female figures with fly-whisks are standing in akimbo posture and placed at the either side of the pedestal. The semicircular stele is carved with two vertical pillars with horizontal lintel and a circular halo is placed at the middle of the lintel. According to its iconographic representations this unpublished sculpture may be identified as Jatamukuta Lokeśvara (?) and may be placed in eleventh century CE. It's a very rare representation in the field of the sculptural art of north Bengal. The four armed seated figure with similar iconic symbols has been recovered from the Narayanpur village, Comilla, Bangladesh (**Plate 48.13**). Now it is preserved in the Mainamati Museum, Bangladesh.¹¹

5. Kukrakunda:

This place is near about 18 Km. from Raiganj town under Itahar block along the N.H. 34 on the way to Malda. There are various stone images are preserved in the house of the Bhanu Bose at Kukrakunda. Previously Mandira Bhattacharya has reported four images during the exploration in North Bengal, 1998. One inscribed image of Viṣṇu has been kept in the house of Mr. Bose. It is not mentioned by Bhattacharya. The image is made of grayish stone measuring 3' × 1'4". The Trīvikrama form of the four armed deity of Viṣṇu is standing in *Samapadasthānaka* pose on the *visvapadma* with his typical attributes and ornamentations (Plate 48.14). The lower left hand is damaged. The face of the *Vīnādhārinī* in the left side is mutilated while the *Chāmaradhārinī* in right side is intact. *Cakrapuruṣa* and *Śankhapuruṣa* are also noticed here. One line inscription is depicted on the central *ratha*. Unfortunately the alphabets of *siddhamatrika* script are badly damaged.

6. Raiganj:

The bust of a lady (lower part is lost) with gracious face is preserved in the Uttar Dinajpur District Museum, Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur (Plate 48.15). The exact find spot is unknown. The black stone specimen is recorded as a dancing lady by the museum authority. The goddess is adorned with a high *jatāmukuta* and precious jewellery. She has four hands; the upper right hand is lost. The main pair is in *dharmacakra* or *vyakhyāna mudrā* while the upper left is holding a script. Flames around the head have been carved on the broken stele. Flying *gandharvas* and a part of a floral motif is carved on the stele. Nine *sāadhanās* (No. 151-59) in the *sāadhanāmālā* exhibits the description of the goddess as *Prajñāparamitā*. The oval shaped face, bold structure of hands covered by overwhelming jewellery and the full developed breasts of this bust figure are pointed out the features of sculptural art of Varendra region in twelve century CE.

7. Bindol:

Bindol is a small village under Raiganj block, located to the west of the river Kulik. The village is situated near about 35 km from block town. There is one badly damaged image of Mārtanda Bhairava in the ruined medieval terracotta temple at Bindol. This image is locally popular as the image of Bhairavī. Mandira Bhattacharya identified the image as a rare type of Sun god. But as per my observation this twelve armed (?) bare bodied male god with terrible face and matted hair can be identified as Mārtanda Bhairava (Plate 48.16).

The god is seated in *lalitāsana* on the corpse seat resting his broken right hand on the right knee. The body of corpse is stretched on a full blown lotus depicted on *saptaratha* pedestal. It is impossible to identify the all gestures and attributes of the broken hands. Flames around the head and the *kirtimukha* motif have been noticed on the broken stele. All *saura* affiliations like seven horses, Aruna, Mahāśvetā, female arrow shooter are depicted on the *saptaratha* pedestal. This image may be placed in twelve century CE.

8. Tenahari:

The village is located to the east side of the river Kulik under Raiganj block. A big mound is traced out in the western part of a tank. Brick structures and potsherd are exposed. A massive black stone image (5'11" × 4'5") of Trīvikrama form of Viṣṇu (**Plate 48.17**) and a Gourī-paṭṭa with *pranāla* are placed in a temple which is constructed on the western part of the mound by the land owner. The crowned head of Viṣṇu is placed on a semicircular halo. The god flanked by four attended deities: Chāmaradhārīnī & Cakrapuruṣa in the right while the Vīnādhārīnī & Śankhapuruṣa in the left. The most exceptional feature of this image is the depiction of Dasāvātāra forms of Viṣṇu on the two side of the elliptical stele. It may be placed in eleventh century CE. Another large elevated area has been noticed in this village. It is very near to the river Kulik locally known as Sanyashi Bhitā. The land is covered with dense jungle. Some myths are associated with this land as informed by the villagers.

9. Kamalabari:

One miniature pot bellied figure of elephant headed god Ganesa has been discovered from Kamalabari. This village is located to the east of Kulik river near about six km from Raiganj block town. The miniature figure (5.5" × 4") of lord Ganesa is carved on a lintel in *mahārājātilasana* pose (**Plate 48.18**). He holds different attributes by his four hands. The lower right hand is placed on his raised right knee in *varadamudra*. He holds a *paraśu* in his upper right hand while a stalk of the lotus bud gripped by the upper left hand. The lower left is not visible. The *vāhana* is absent. This fragment may be placed in twelve century CE.

Observations:

After this preliminary survey, emphasizing on some selected sites under Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur districts, following observations have been established.

In this study we may try to analyze total number of eighteen images with their origin. Most of the images were probably not published earlier. Some new mounds have been noticed during this field survey. Elevated land within the dense jungle called Sanyasir Bhitā at Tenahari, the mound at the house of Girilal Sarkar and the mound located to south of Kākādighi at Bairhatta all are the potential site and required to excavate in a proper way. All documented antiquities in this essay may be bracketed within tenth to twelve century CE. Pre-Pāla remains are very much scanty in number. The antiquities reflect the rich artistic activities in Varendra region during the early medieval time. Existence of several mounds, old brick structures and architectural fragments are corroborated to a thick habitation with huge monuments and shrines. We have also obtained information about the description of luxuriant Varendra in the *Ramacaritam* by Sandhyākaranandin.

Almost all ancient artifacts are made of black stone. Metal pieces are very rare. Sand stone is rarely used by the artists to compose the images. As per my observation, the sand stone was

not an accessible material, while the black stones were easily transported through river from the Rajmahal hill which is very much close to this zone. Popularity of the black stone images was much more than the image of sand stone for the inadequacy of the material. Miniature sculptures are scanty in number. Almost all the images are large size. Images in 5' to 7' height have been frequently discovered and might be placed in the temple.

Most of the documented sculptures and architectural fragments of the study area are the major component of a rich early medieval Brahmanical settlement. An urban growth was started since post -Gupta period within this periphery of Varendra region, might be under the *Kotivarṣa Visaya*. Scarcity of epigraphical records in this particular field is the main problem to establish the fact. If properly explored and excavated the whole tract and the recognized ruined mounds in this study are expected to produce an exciting result of history in this part of Varendra as well as early history of North Bengal.

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