



## TĀMRALIPTI: (23°20' N: 87°55' E): THE ENTREPOT OF THE MID-GANGETIC VALLEY

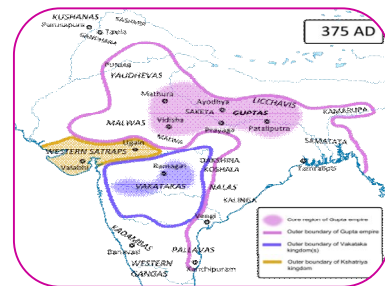
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### ABSTRACT:

*Tamralipti was the foremost important port in Bengal from the late centuries B.C. to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The geographical importance of Tāmralipti can be measured on the basis of the fact that it acted as an outlet for the land locked mid –Gangetic Valley. Certainly it was an important port used both for embarkation and disembarkation.*

**KEYWORDS :** *foremost important port , geographical importance , embarkation and disembarkation*



### INTRODUCTION :

Tāmralipti was probably located in the neighbourhood of the present day Tamluk in the Midnapur district in the lower deltaic area or historically the Suhma or the Dakshina Radha tract. It is located on the right bank of the river Rupnarayan. A cluster of sites that exists not far way from present day Tamluk and which probably constituted the ‘settlement locality’ in Tāmralipti are Bahiri, Tikasi, Tilda, Panna, Amritberia, Natshal, Badur, Nandigram, Latpatia etc. Of these Bahiri, Tikasi and Tilda deserve special mention<sup>1</sup>.

Archaeological fieldwork has not only highlighted its importance but has also established the chrono-cultural sequence of the site. The excavations conducted by the ASI in 1954-55 under M. N. Deshpande suggested that the site was under occupation since the Neolithic period to the modern times<sup>2</sup>.

The archaeological amalgam reveals that the historical phase of Tamluk was implanted on a Neolithic-Chalcolithic substratum i.e. Period 1(c. 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C-6<sup>th</sup> century BC) this is characterized by Neolithic celts, microliths, bone- tools, ill-fired hand made grey ware, BRW sherds and copper objects but without any sequential connection with period II<sup>3</sup>.

Period II started after a break and was coeval with Maurya-Śuṅga period revealing a good deal of NBPW sherds and associated Black-Slipped ware a huge number of Punch-marked coins in the lower level while the upper level reveal cast copper-coins and typical Maurya terracotta figurines and beads<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Gautam Sengupta, ‘Archaeology of Coastal Bengal’, H. P. Ray and J. F. Salles eds. *Archaeology and Tradition*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996, pp. 118.

<sup>2</sup> A. K. Ghosh, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal pub., 1989, pp. 430.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp. 430.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. pp. 430.

But the hiatus between the Neolithic and the historical period calls for more investigation as it is still unresolved. A few pieces of wood objects exhumed in the neighborhood of Bargabhma temple are also assigned to this period<sup>5</sup>.

The beginning of Period III, which is dated to the 1st two centuries of the Christian era, is marked by the introduction of the Rouletted Ware and the Red Polished Ware. Among other significant items are terracotta ring wells, the remains of a burnt floor of rammed brick grit and a number of post-holes which indicate the existence of structural activity. A brick built stepped tank and ring-soaked well has also been found<sup>6</sup>.

Period IV covers Kuṣāṇa and Gupta period and reveals typical Kuṣāṇa terracotta figurines and plaques. The lower part of dancing girl and the arrangement of a transparent drapery is a significant finding<sup>7</sup>.

The overlying deposits are much disturbed and reveal some stray pieces of sculpture attributable to the Pāla-Sena period<sup>8</sup>.

The archaeological character has to be based mostly on antiquities. And obviously the antiquities are diverse in range but two categories: terracotta and beads are singularly abundant. These terracottas were hand-modeled, matrix modeled, mixed processed, softer burns, burned with less oxygen etc. Terracottas are the product of the local potters, who conformed to the contemporary art idiom of north India<sup>9</sup>. Terracottas not necessarily were influenced by the so-called imperial art and mostly present the contemporary popular culture.

Their abundance in the area possibly point towards the degree of urban taste and preference of the area specific. Most of these terracottas are sophisticated, elegantly fashioned and not shy of rendering secular and warmly sensuous themes. Possibly they were not trading items, unless some of them were transported up the river to north India<sup>10</sup>.

Urban aspects in Tāmralipti were thus amply revealed by a number of antiquities e.g. terracotta plaques and figurines, coins and other finds like beads of semi-precious stones etc.

It was the foremost important port in Bengal from the late centuries B.C. to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD was Tāmralipti. The geographical importance of Tāmralipti can be measured on the basis of the fact that it acted as an outlet for the land locked mid-Gangetic Valley. Certainly it was an important port used both for embarkation and disembarkation.

But as a matter of fact in contrast to the land routes the littorals have received lesser importance and overland trade has always been given more importance than riverine and overseas trade in history. Though marine resources have been exploited since proto historic times, the beginnings of a coastal network do not predate the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC.

By c. 1<sup>st</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries BC, the entire eastern coast of India and the northern coast of Sri Lanka formed the greater trade network as is evident from the unearthing of the Rouletted Ware sherds from Chandraketurgh in the Bengal delta to Kantarodai in Sri Lankan coast. Though the Rouletted Ware continues up to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, the contemporaneity of the east coast sites can not be established without further archaeological excavations. Rouletted Ware along with amphorae like objects have been reported from the stratified context at Tāmralipti and Chandraketurgh. Rouletted Ware has also been reported along with amphora like objects from various sites in coastal West Bengal e.g. Atghara, Boral, Harinarayanpur, and Bahiri. The finest piece (measuring 66 cms. and a double handled amphora) is

<sup>5</sup> Gautam Sengupta, 'Archaeology of Coastal Bengal', H. P. Ray and J. F. Salles eds. *Archaeology and Tradition*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996, pp. 119.

<sup>6</sup> A. K. Ghosh, ed. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Archaeology*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal pub., 1989, pp. 430.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 430.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp. 430.

<sup>9</sup> Dilip, K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: the lower and the middle Ganga*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, pp. 273.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 273.

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reportedly recovered from the village of Karanji, which is not far from the historic site of Jayrampur, situated on the West Bengal-Orissa border<sup>11</sup>.

Apart from these, carnelian intaglios with non-Indian motifs from Tamluk and a small quantity of terracotta figurines depicting non-indigenous features like tunics, trouser like apparel, high-boots, sandals, conical cap, diadem and tiara. But we find no reference to direct contact between Bengal and the Roman Empire. Further the coast of the lower Gangetic delta also has not yielded even a single Roman coin. Begley's date of Arikamedu Rouletted Ware is now placed between B.C.200-AD 300 by Begley<sup>12</sup> which implies that Indo-Roman trade contact is not crucial to their occurrence. Similarly the discovery of Rouletted Ware along with amphora or amphora like objects in the coast of west Bengal can be explained in terms of its contact with the southern part of the eastern coastline of the subcontinent from where the occurrence of Rouletted Ware has been reported e.g. Arikamedu, Kaveripattnam, Kanchipuram, Amaravati, Salihundam and Sisupalgarh etc.

According to the textual references, Tāmralipti became commercially active during the Mauryan period but archaeological sources hardly substantiate such a postulation. Apart from the occurrence of NBPW, punch-marked coins there are not much of a material evidence of Mauryan affiliation. So far as the terracotta figurines are concerned, they are also quite meager<sup>13</sup>. Apart from various arguments and counter arguments, in all probability Bengal witnessed an urbanization of secondary nature, which is reasonably due to its connection with Magadha.

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<sup>11</sup> Gautam Sengupta, 'Archaeology of Coastal Bengal' in H.P. Ray and J. F. Salles (eds.) *Archaeology and Tradition*, 1996, pp. 120.

<sup>12</sup> V. Begley, 'Arikamedu Reconsidered', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 87, 1983, pp. 461-81.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. pp.120.