

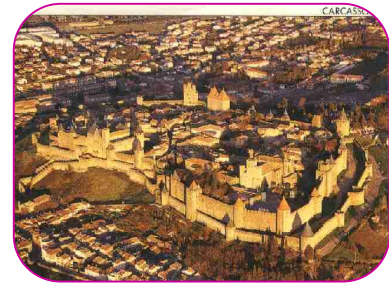


PRE-INDUSTRIAL URBAN SPREAD IN BENGAL**Dr. Priyam Barooah**

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ABSTRACT

However the cultural profile of each area is not homogenous and is quite complex in its character. And over time the pattern of concentration and relationship between these areas also undergo specific changes. There may be various reasons of changes in cultural patterns and traits but what is crucial to the understanding of such shifts are the spatial patterns, which can be invariably considered as essential to the understanding of historical change along with history's spatial specificities and also their linkages across space. The present work aims at illustrating the historical changes within early historical Bengal i.e. during the early Christian centuries, for the purpose of the work.

**KEYWORDS :** *cultural profile , homogenous and is quite complex.***INTRODUCTION :**

A very careful insight and a critical understanding on the early history of Bengal and the various theoretical nuances of pre-industrial urbanization and archaeology is the main purpose of the present article. In the context of early Bengal, the absence adequate literary evidence prompts on hinging upon archaeological evidence to a great extent. However, the process of growth of urban centers in early-medieval Bengal needs examination too. And among the urban sites of early Bengal Mahasthangarh, Bangarh, Chandraketugarh, Tamralipti and Manikot are mention worthy. According to B.D. Chattopadhyaya¹, a settlement is not only to be taken as a habitat, rather it reflects a social organization and also its historically changing character which is a continuous process. Mere size of a settlement can not by itself suggest the urban and non urban character of a site. According to him, an archaeological site, however imposing it is can not be considered as urban if the space within it is not differentiated and heterogeneous. In this connection, he contrasts the imposing site of Nalanda with that of Mathura and Taxila. Here whereas, the former reveals an imposing Vihara, the latter two reveals a truly differentiated space of various kinds e.g. residence, trading centers etc. In case of the Bengal delta, he compares the Vihara of Paharpur with that of the extensive Mainamati sites of south-eastern Bengal and contends that the former represents differentiated space but the latter does not.

¹Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, 'Urbanization in Bengal', *Studying Early India*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003.

Chattopadhyaya further contends that hierarchy of settlements should not be taken as an indicator to reflect hierarchy of function of individual settlements. Hierarchy should not be taken as a dichotomy between two binaries of rural and urban because hierarchy can exist in both rural and urban settlements.

Moreover Chattopadhyaya uses the concept of 'Secondary Urbanization'² in the context of early-Bengal and significantly enough he was the first historian to apply this concept in Indian context. 'Secondary Urbanization' in contrast with 'Primary Urbanization' is that sort of an urbanization, which has developed due to major external causative factors. The question here is whether external elements and contacts played any significant role in the formation of cities in a given spatio-temporal context. The operation of the external factor whether it is city colonization or imperial expansion, may be expected to be subsequent to indigenous development. The concept of Secondary Urbanization has been borrowed from the concept of 'Secondary State' (Morton H. Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology*, New York, 1967, pp. 240-1) to point to the emergence of urban characteristics in initially peripheral areas through processes generated by regular interactions with the epicenter.

The Annotated Archaeological Atlas of West Bengal³ as the very name suggests is an atlas of various pre-historic and proto-historic archaeological sites of Bengal which is quite useful and revealing. It discusses the shifts in spatial pattern and continues on saying that understanding such shifts in spatial pattern is an essential part of understanding historical change and it makes us aware of history's spatial specificities. The work deals with the various physiographic division of West Bengal. It presents a geo-archaeological description of all the BRW find spots with thematic maps, indices and appendices. The ordering of the data in the form of maps is very useful as they lead to the precise understanding of the territorial segments which in turn help in understanding the whole region that is discussed.

In her Presidential Address of IHC, 1986, Amita Ray⁴ proceeds with the occurrence of urban centers in early Bengal. She uses archaeological data as well as textual references e.g. foreign travellers' works etc. and provides an overall picture of the settlement configuration of the sites e.g. Mangalkot, Mahasthan, Tāmralipti, Chandraketurgh and Sapatgram. It is an important work so far as the archaeological information about the sites are concerned. But the work does not take up the issues and nuances of pre-industrial urbanization and its various criteria for being qualified as urban centers. Rather she has an inherent tendency to consider any trade center as an urban site. Her analysis suggests that the main engine of the spurt of urban centers in early-Bengal was trade, both long-distance and short-distance. Here she contends that the centers like Tāmralipti and Chandraketurgh acted as outlets to the various commodities that were procured from northern and eastern India and during the Kuṣāṇa period, a number of redistribution centers grew in the vicinity of these two ports to cater to the needs of the newly 'emergent situation'. She also takes up the case of Sapatgram, on the Saraswati, a tributary of the Bhagirathi. In this connection she asserts that the site turned into an urban one, during the 1st century BC-2nd century AD, as a consequence of maritime trade and commerce. The whole argument of trade as the causative factor denies the importance of the other socio-economic factors like those of an effective rural agricultural base, surplus production, arts and crafts diversification etc. The chrono-cultural levels in the sites of early Bengal have revealed data on the transition from a rural stage to an urban one. And trade, unlike Ray has contended, is a concomitant feature of urbanism and not an antecedent feature. Thus long-distance trade to have acted as a causative factor of urbanization in early Bengal should have predated it. But the archaeological data does not provide any such information as yet. Ray's tendency to label all sites indiscriminately as urban has to be qualified and re-examined in the light of the various criteria of pre-industrial urbanization and the generalities in terms of the mid- Gangetic valley rather than particularities of the region of Bengal per se.

Urban transformation and the antecedent developments.

³B.D.Chattopadhyaya et al., *An Annotated Archaeological Atlas of West Bengal, Pre-History and Proto- History*, vol.1, Kolkata: Manohar publishers, 2005.

⁴AmitaRay, 'Urbanization in Bengal' in *IHC*, 48th session, Goa, 1987

Another assumption of Ray is that the contacts with the Mauryas brought a flow of new material inventory to the region which was urban in dimension. But archaeologically the area which witnessed this socio-historical phenomenon to a certain degree was the northern part of Bengal and the Ganga –Bhāgirathi delta . Thus she perhaps basically tries to imply that there were various pockets which faced this transformation, not the whole of the delta in general.

It is pertinent to mention it here that the approach of Amita Ray is uncritical and casual. In contrast to Ray, B.D. Chattopadhyaya has provided a very critical and analytical approach towards the various concepts relating to pre-industrial urbanization, particularly in relation to early Bengal.

This work deals more with the archaeological findings in the various sites falling within this geographical limit along with the particulars of the cultural sequence and does not attempt a serious reconstruction of the socio-cultural history of the contemporary society.

It is pertinent to mention it here that the first step in such type of studies is the outlining of the general methodological problems and issues that are involved. The indiscriminate consideration of every site as urban is definitely a casualty and same is the case with the perspective of overlooking spatial differences and viewing cultural changes in terms of the schema of unilinearity. In the first problem, it is quite difficult to sort out and re-examine what is urban, as most of these sites are vertically excavated and not horizontally. Moreover right from the BRW phase onwards the ancient settlements in West Bengal formed a locational nucleus which is still used by the modern settlements of the area. This has no doubt led to a situation where it has become difficult to get indications of ancient remains right on the surface .

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