



SUB-REGIONAL AND TRANS-CONTINENTAL CONNECTIVITY OF EARLY-BENGAL

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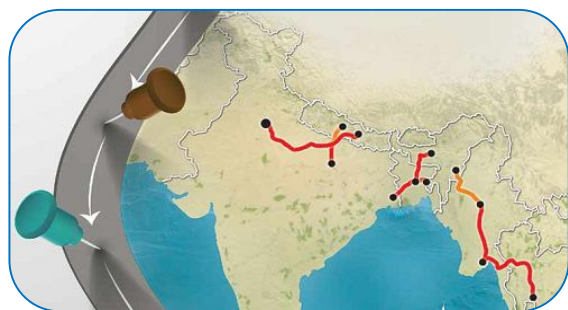
ABSTRACT :

Bengal's strategic location and its physiography make Bengal extremely communicable, overland, riverine and marine. The most significant rivers of the delta are Brahmaputra, Ganga and Meghna-Surma, though there are numerous other rivers and rivulets. These rivers flow towards the south to the sea. The Delta is also marked by the inter-braiding of tributary system of the Ganges and other significant rivers. These rivers carry silt and sediments which have created alluvial table lands.

KEYWORDS : *Bengal's strategic location , , overland, riverine and marine.*

INTRODUCTION

The reconstruction of the early history of Bengal regarding the mode of human life with its associated experiences are the purpose of the present study. Similarly, the reconstruction of the historical geography of Bengal also encounters the same problem of dearth of sources. In this context Abdul Momin Chowdhury contends '...it is true that paucity of source materials, their limited and somewhat peculiar nature make the task of reconstructing the geography of pre-Muslim Bengal very difficult; and an apprehension is always there about the result that one may achieve, which can hardly expected to be complete'.¹ So far as the sources for the reconstruction of the historical geography of the Delta are concerned we can rely on four types of sources, as has been suggested by Amitabh Bhattacharya.² These are: inscriptions, literary documents, religious texts and the travellers' accounts and maps. However A.M. Chowdhury rightly observed the relative significance of the epigraphic sources over the other sources in the



reconstruction of the historical geography of early Bengal and comments, '...it must be emphasized that for the geography of ancient Bengal, epigraphic sources, especially the land grant charters on copper plates, are the main stay. This is even more so because other forms of literary sources do not contain enough, or shall we say adequate, data on which we can rely. For most of the period we do not have contemporary literature, and what we have, they are works of different nature and geography was hardly their primary concern.'³

¹Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Geography of Ancient Bengal-An Approach to its Study', *Bangladesh Historical Studies*, Vol. 2, Dhaka, 1977, p.31.

² Amitabh Bhattacharya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Medieval Bengal*, Calcutta, 1977, p. 9.

³ Abdul Momin Chowdhury, 'Geography of Ancient Bengal-An Approach to its Study', *Bangladesh Historical Studies*, Vol. 2, Dhaka, 1977, p.38.

This chapter will deal with 1) geological settings and geographical location, 2) rivers, 3) climatic conditions and 4) contact with the rest of the subcontinent and overseas connections.

There are enough data that suggest that there existed a maritime trade relation of Vanga with the peninsular and West India, Ceylon and parts of south-east Asia and some degree of indirect trade with China as well.⁴ Goods of this region were also brought to south-India for exporting to the Roman Empire with which Vanga had no direct commercial relation. According to a document on papyrus, datable to 2nd century AD, Gangetic spikenard was despatched for Alexandria (Egypt) from Muziris.⁵ The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (2nd half of the 1st century AD) mentions certain products available in the Ganges country i.e. Vanga. But the author does not provide a list of articles of import into this area, as he does in cases of several other localities of western and southern India.⁶ The *Periplus Maris Erythraei* enlists Gangetic nard (*nalada*), a particular type of fragrant oil and malabathrum (Sanskrit- *tamalapatra*, Bengali-*tejpata*) as available in the Ganges country as items of export from the western coast of south India to the Roman Empire. *Periplus* clearly suggests that these exotic items were in great demand among the rich people in Rome.⁷ But these were products of Himalayan origin, which were imported to Vanga, thus both for local use and export as well.⁸ *Malabathrum* is explicitly mentioned to have been brought from 'from the interiors to the port' in Limurike (Damarika or the Dravida country). The author speaks goods brought to Limurike from the Ganges country. Thus it shows that the articles of trade of the Gangetic country reached the Roman Empire through the ports of south India and Vanga had no direct trade relation with the Roman Empire.

Thus it shows a thriving condition of trade in the early centuries AD, in which not only the local people but also people from outside region took part. The participation of outsiders may be suggested on the basis of some literary as well as epigraphic sources. The story of a merchant who went from Tamralipti to the island of Ratnakuta in sea in Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* (chapter 36) may suggest connection of wealthy merchant with Tamralipti.⁹ Though it was not a contemporary work and Somadeva flourished in the 11th century AD, but the relevant legends are based on Gunadhyay's *Brhatkatha* of c. 2nd century AD. The Dudhpani Rock Inscription datable to the 7th century AD¹⁰ refer to the acquisition of vast wealth by the merchant Udaymana and his brothers who were said to have come to Tamralipti from Ayodhya for trade thus indicating the participation of outsiders in trade.

The presence of Kharosti-Brahmi inscriptions assignable to the second half of the 1st century AD to the 1st quarter of the 5th century AD in the Bengal delta also indicates the presence of a vibrant cultural and economic exchange between the lower Gangetic-delta region and the mid- Gangetic valley and from there to the north-western part of the subcontinent. This interaction could have started with the eastward extension of the territories of Kaniska I. B. N Mukherjee has put forward the hypothesis about the presence of outside entrepreneurs in the pre-Gupta Vanga primarily on the basis of the Kharosti-Brahmi inscriptions. The language used in these inscriptions North-Western Prakrit, which had been the vernacular language of the Kharosti using zone in the north-west. The presence of Kharosti in these inscriptions, according to B.N. Mukherjee indicates towards the existence of a community or a community of settlers from that particular region to the lower part of West Bengal in the early centuries AD. Their settlements concentrated mainly in Chandraketugarh (presently situated in the 24 Parganas district, north) and Tamralipti, near present Tamluk. Chandraketugarh was in the 24 parganas (North) and on the Yamuna branch of the Ganges (Bhagirathi). Tamralipti was on a channel connected with the Saraswati branch of the Ganges in the Midnapur district.

³ Amitabh Bhattacharya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Medieval Bengal*, Calcutta, 1977, p. 9.

⁴ B. N. Mukherjee, *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2000, p. 61.

⁵ V. Begley and R. D. de Puma, eds. *Rome and India-The Ancient Sea trade*, Delhi: 1992, p.30.

⁶ B. N. Mukherjee, *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2000, p. 53.

⁷ Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Trade and Commerce', retrieved on 20th May, 2010, *WWW.Banglapedia*.

⁸ B. N. Mukherjee, *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2000, p. 61.

⁹ B. N. Mukherjee, *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2000, p. 62.

¹⁰ *EI*, 2, pp. 343-347.

The contacts between the Gangetic delta and the Gangetic valley however continued to exist even after that. And this is quite evident from the itineraries of the Chinese pilgrims Fa-hien who travelled in India during AD 399-AD 414 and Hiuen-Tsang who visited India during AD 629-AD 645. Perhaps Fa-hien travelled from Champa (Bhagalpur) to Tamralipti and then Campa to Pundravardhana through Kajangala respectively. In this Fa-hien perhaps took the route along with Ganga through the Rajmahal hills and then the Bhagirathi.¹¹

The thriving condition of trade between Simhala and Tamralipti in the 5th century AD, further stretching to the islands of the South-east Asia is attested by the account of Fa-hien. Fa-hien embarked on a large merchant vessel at Tamralipti and went to Simhala.¹² After staying there for two years, he took another merchant vessel and reached Java.¹³

The itinerary of Hiuen Tsang, who visited India during AD 629-AD 645 shows the contemporary sub-regional connectivity. He first proceeded from Nalanda to Kajangala, the present Rajmahal and then to Pundravardhana from where he proceeded to Kamarupa in present Assam and went south to Samatata, according to his account edited by Pien-chi.¹⁴ According to the biography of Hiuen Tsang written by Hui-li and Yang-zong, he traveled from Pundravardhana to Karnasuvarna, then to Samatata.¹⁵ According to both the versions from Samatata he traveled to Tamralipti.¹⁶ According to Hui-li after that he reached Karnasuvarna.¹⁷ And after that he reached the Tamil areas from Bengal by undertaking an overland journey through Odra (Orissa), Kongoda and Kalinga¹⁸ and then to the Tamil region from where he further went to Simhala.

These accounts distinctly point towards the existence of sub-regional inter-connectivity and traffic. The itinerary of Hiuen-Tsang as provided by various sources though has some discrepancies; these allude to the existence of 4 routes as a whole. These routes ran as follows:

- 1) It ran from Kajangala to Kamarupa through Pundravardhana,
- 2) It ran from Pundravardhana to Tamralipti via Karnasuvarna, probably along the Bhagirathi River.
- 3) It connected Assam with south-east Bengal, probably through the river Brahmaputra.
- 4) It ran between Karnasuvarna and Samatata, probably along the Padma, and
- 5) It ran through coastal Bengal, which connected south-east and south-west Bengal. Perhaps it was the route which connected Samatata and Suhma through lower Vanga.

However these routes not only contained within the Bengal delta but also extended beyond it and connected the deltaic region with the rest of the Sub-continent.

As mentioned above the physiography of Bengal allows convenient communication with the neighbouring regions through the river channels, which are quite navigable, narrow passes cutting across the hill ranges and also the coast lines. Contemporary connections between Bengal and the rest of the subcontinent can better be understood in the light of the following lines of inter-regional connectivity.

¹¹J. Legge, (tr.), *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdom: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-hien of travels in India and Ceylon(AD399-414)in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*, New Delhi:1998(Reprint), p.100.

¹²J. Legge, (tr.), *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdom: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-hien of travels in India and Ceylon(AD399-414)in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*, New Delhi:1998(Reprint), p.100.

¹³ Ibid. pp. 111-113.

¹⁴ S. Beal, S., tr., *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World:Translated from the Chinese Hiuen Tsiang(AD 629)*, Delhi, 1981(Reprint), pt. 2, pp. 194-195. Henceforth it will be referred to as 'Buddhist Records'.

¹⁵ S.Beal, tr. *The Life of Hiuen Tsiang by the Shaman Hwui Li* (2nd ed.) New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1973(Reprint), pp. 131-132. Henceforth it will be referred to as 'the Life of Hiuen Tsiang'.

¹⁶S. Beal, *Buddhist Records*, pt.2, pp. 199-200; *Life of Hiuen Tsiang*, p. 133.

¹⁷S. Beal, *Buddhist Records*, pt. 2, p. 201.

¹⁸S. Beal, *Buddhist Records*, pt. 2, pp. 204-207.

The mid-Gangetic valley was connected with the Gangetic delta through the Rajmahal gap. Fa-hien and Hiuen- tsang are said to have followed this route, when they traveled from Champa (Bhagalpur) to Tamralipti and Champa (Bhagalpur) to Pundravardhana through Kajangala respectively.¹⁹ It is mention worthy here that Champa in eastern Bihar is the easternmost limit of the mid-Gangetic plains. Fa-hien might have taken the route along with the Ganga and then the Bhagirathi. It may indicate the existence of a trade route along the Ganga and its channel through which the Gangetic valley was connected with the sea ports located in the Suhma region or the Dakshina Radha. Interestingly the Dudhpani Rock Inscription belonging to the 8th century mentions the coming of the Udayamana and his brothers to Tamralipti from Ayodhya for some trading purpose²⁰ shows the connection between the two regions. Other than trade purposes this route was also used for the expansion of the territories of the contemporary powers for the eastern powers for a westward expansion e.g. Sasanka and Dharmapala both of them got involved in a struggle centering Kanauj. And for the western powers for an eastward expansion e.g. the later Guptas and Harsavardhana used this route for their expedition to Bengal.

The link between Varendra with that of the mouth of Bhagirathi can be better understood through the Rajmahal-Kankjol sector and thence, either down the Bhagirathi or along its western bank. The antiquities of the eastern bank of the Bhagirathi are still uncertain. Or, there could be a more direct route from the Bhagirathi mouth to the Varendra via Jessore.²¹

Thus the western bank of the Bhagirathi River or the Radha tract was connected with the Varendra region.

Varendra's communication with the Bihar plain can be understood in the line which ran through Purnea where the fragmentary Asokan pillar at Sikligarh in the outskirts of Banmankhi and the presumably associated extensive site with mud fortification clearly mark the route between Pataliputra and Mahasthangarh. In the Mahananda plain this route touched both Kandan and Bangarh before moving in the direction of Hili and Panchbibi to reach Mahasthangarh.²²

Thus The Radha tract was also connected to the Bihar plain through the Varendra region.

There was another route which passed through the Chottanagpur and the Hazaribagh plateau. This route originated in the Bhagirathi valley or in the Tamluk sector and cut through this area from the south-east to the north-west. This route passed through Bangarh and cut across the Chottanagpur plateau through Raghunathpur, Hazaribagh, Chatra, Huntergunj etc. to emerge somewhere near Itkhor, from where the access to Gaya and beyond was open.²³

This route perhaps had some other variants as well. For instance from Tamluk, one could move through Dihar near Bishnupur to Satna and Raniganj and cross the Ajay there to travel across Birbhum to catch the main route to the Rajmahal sector and beyond or from Raniganj, one could move towards route going in the direction of Gaya. This route was taken by I-ching on his way from Tamralipti to Rajagriha and then his way back from Nalanda to Tamralipti.²⁴ On his way he joined a huge group of merchants and around 20 residential monks of Nalanda which is indicative to the fact that this route was frequented by the merchants for trade purposes and also it facilitated the links between the mid-Gangetic valley and the Radha

¹⁹ Legge, J., (tr.), *A Record of Buddhist Kingdom: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of Travels in India and Ceylon(AD199-414) in search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*, New Delhi: 1998(Reprint), pp.100 ; Beal, *Buddhist Records*, pt.2, pp.191-194.

²⁰ F. Kielhorn, 'Dudhpani Rock Inscription of Udayamana', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. II, 2, pp. 343-347.

²¹ Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: the lower and the middle Ganga*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, p. 269.

²² Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: the lower and the middle Ganga*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, p. 269.

²³ Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: the lower and the middle Ganga*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001, p. 272.

²⁴ I-ching, L. Lahiri, (tr.), *Chinese Monks in India: Biography of eminent Monks who Went to the Western world in Search of the law During the Great T'ang Dynasty*, Delhi, 1986, pp.79-80.

region for the Buddhist monks. Another incident also points towards the existence of a brisk trading activity in this route i.e. I-ching's narration of his encounter with some brigands on this way and again he was looted by some robbers.²⁵ Perhaps the brisk trade provided the incentive for the robbers to choose that area. Otherwise it can also be assumed that the road was less frequented, therefore less protected and hence not free from robbery.

So far as the north-eastern region of India is concerned, both the areas must have been connected by the route passed over the river Karatoya and connected the two cities of Pundravardhana and Pragjyotishpur. Hiuen-tsang in all probability took this route while going to Pragjyotishpur. Moreover Bhaskaravarman might have also taken this route when he went Harsavardhana's camp at Kajangala.²⁶ According to Minhas-uj-Siraj, Bakhtiyar Khalji went through this route in his expedition to Tibet from Lakhnauti and through Kamarud (i.e. Kamrup)²⁷ He also mentions about the horse that are sold in Lakhnauti imported through the mountainous passes of Kamrupa and Tirhut.²⁸ However there existed other routes which connected Kamrupa with Samatata but that shall be beyond the scope of the present work.

Bengal was connected with Orissa through the pass along with the coastline of the present day Baleshwar district. It was a land route that followed the right bank of the river Bhagirathi in Murshidabad, crossing the Ajay at Mangalkot and then moving in the direction of the Garh Mandaran area in Hooghly across Burdwan, and finally taking a western turn from Garh Mandaran to travel from Chandrakona, in the direction of Tamluk or to push on to Midnapur to reach the Orissan coast.²⁹

According to the Ganjam Copper Plate Inscription of Sailodbhava king Madhavaraja, the political influence of Sasanka extended to the Kongoda region in Southern Orissa. Further this Copper Plate Inscription also accepted the suzerainty of Sasanka. It thus indicates that the influence of Sasanka extended as far as the Ganjam region in southern Orissa, where the local Sailodbhava king accepted Sasanka's suzerainty. This route might have facilitated the extension of the political power of Sasanka to this region. Even Hiuen tsang took this route to travel from Tamralipti to Odra, then further to Kongoda and Kalinga. There could perhaps have been some other variants also of this route i.e. without striking for the Garh Mardan sector from the Burdwan area and crossing the Damodar at the Pokhanna crossing and then move in the direction of Tamluk via Dihar. Even while coming from the direction of Murshidabad, one could follow the Mayurakshi into Birbhum and then move southwards from there.³⁰

The clear line of communication between the Gangetic delta and the rest of India can be gleaned from all these sources. That these routes were used as lines of movements from the Chalcolithic period onwards can be understood from the specific distribution of the BRW sites along these routes. These perhaps came into sharp focus in the early historic period. And it is clearly discernible here that all the early historic sites of early Bengal were located on these routes.

According to the archaeological evidence, from the 3rd century BC onwards there arose urban settlements in the coastal area of the sub-region, more specifically at the estuary of Ganga and its distributaries i.e. Tamralipti and Chandrakhetugarh, characterized by a thriving seaborne trade. These two sites also need some historical attention in this connection. And the period between the 2nd century B.C. and the 2nd century AD can be said to have been the most active phase of these settlements from economic and commercial point of view.³¹ The Mahaniddesa (2nd century AD) refers to maritime routes touching Vanga and

²⁵ L. Lahiri, (tr.), *I-ching, Chinese Monks in India: Biography of eminent Monks who Went to the Western world in Search of the law During the Great T'ang Dynasty*, Delhi, 1986, pp.82-83

²⁶ S. Beal, *Life of Hiuen tsiang*, p. 172.

²⁷ H. G. Raverty, ed. & trns., *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri of Minhaj-uddin*, Calcutta, 1881, pp. 584-86.

²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 567-68.

²⁹ Dilip K. Chakrabarti, *Archaeological Geography of the Ganga Plain: the lower and the middle Ganga*, Delhi: 2001, p. 272.

³⁰ *Ibid*. p. 272.

³¹ Gautam Sengupta, 'Archaeology of Coastal Bengal' in H.P. Ray and J.F. Salles eds, *Archaeology and Tradition*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1996. p.120.

several other regions.³² Both these evidences imply the existence of littorals in the vicinity of Vanga and also the presence of sea-port within Vanga and also in all probability the existence of a vibrant trans-oceanic trade through the Bay of Bengal to the East and the South-East Asia.

Perhaps Tamralipti was the port that was alluded in both *Milindapanha*³³ and *Mahaniddesa*³⁴ as Tamali. The *Milindapanha*, assignable to the c. 1st century AD, refers to an efficient sailors visit to Vanga, Takkola (north-western coast of Malay Peninsula), China, Sovira (lower Indus territory to the east of the river), Surattha (Saurashtra, including at least South Kathiawad), Alasunda (Alexandria), Kolapattana (Kalipoles of Ptolemy placed on the sea-shore of the north-east Malay or Jambukola of Simhala, as mentioned in the Mahavamsa), Suvannabhūmi (south-east Asia) etc. However it does not speak about any direct relation between Vanga and all these ports.

Though *Mahavamsa* belongs to the early 4th century AD, it contains many reliable data relating to the early periods. According to it Asoka caused branch of the Bodhi tree to be brought to a ship on the Ganga at Pataliputra, which itself was on the river and then sent it along with his daughter Sanghamitra and others on the ship to Tamalitti situated near an Ocean. Tamalitti is identifiable with Tamralipti. The king himself traveled from the capital by a land route and on crossed apart of the Vinjha or Vindhya mountain en route and reached Tamalitti within a week. From here the Bodhi was sent to Tamraparṇi or Sri Lanka on a ship.³⁵

It shows the inter-regional connectivity during that time. It also means that by Asoka's time it already came into existence as a major port for embarkation and disembarkation.

According to the Digvijaya section of Sabhaparva of the *Mahabharata* (which mentions Tamralipti in relation to Bhima's Digvijaya) Tamralipti is not only distinguished from the territories known to have been situated within northern, eastern and central Bengal, but also from Suhma³⁶. According to Dandin's *Dasakumara-charita*, Tamralipti formed a part of Vanga³⁷.

It is Ptolemy, in whose records we find the earliest datable data on about Tamralipti. He refers to it as Tamalites.³⁸ During his time (middle of the 2nd century AD), it was a rich and a flourishing town and a royal residence. He further surprisingly associates the place with Palimbotra (Pataliputra)³⁹. Pliny referred to it as Taluktae.⁴⁰ P. C. Dasgupta almost finds 15 textual literary references to Tamralipti in ancient literary texts.⁴¹ Tamralipti in early literature is noted as a *velakula* meaning a port⁴².

The existence of a vibrant trade between Tamralipti and Simhala and also extending to the South-east Asia in the 5th century AD can be presumed from the account of Fa-hien⁴³ as mentioned already in this work. He embarked on a large merchant vessel at Tamralipti and went to Simhala.⁴⁴ It indicates a direct

³² Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, ed, *Mahaniddessa*, (*Khuddakanikaya*, vol. IV, pt. 1), Nalanda, 1960, p.357. Henceforth it will be referred to as *Mahaniddesa*.

³³ V. Trenckner, ed. *Milindapanha*, London: P.T.S., 1962, tr. I.B. Horner as *Questions of King Milinda*, 2 vols., London: Luzac, 1964, VI, 21, p. 360.

³⁴ *Mahaniddesa*, I, 15, p. 174.

³⁵ W. Geiger, ed. and trns, *Mahavamsa*, London, 1912 XVII, 1f; XIX, pp. 1-23.

³⁶ R. C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, Calcutta, 1971, p. 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 14.

³⁸ E. L. Stevenson, ed. & trns., Ptolemy, *Geographike Huphegesis*, New York, 1932, VII, p.1.

³⁹ S.N. Majumdar Sastri, ed. & trns., McCrindle, *Ancient India*, 1927, pp. 169-70.

⁴⁰ Pliny, *Naturalis Historia*, Book VII.

⁴¹ Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, New Delhi 2002. p. 130.

⁴² Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Trade and Commerce', retrieved on 20th May, 2010, *WWW.Banglapedia*.

⁴³ J. Legge, (tr.), *A Record of Buddhist Kingdom: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-hien of travels in India and Ceylon(AD399-414) in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*, New Delhi:1998(Reprint), p. 100.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.100.

commercial relation between Tamralipti and the places as Kolapattana or Jambukola was situated in Simhala⁴⁵ After staying there for two years; he reached Java on another merchant-vessel.⁴⁶

The thriving trade activity at the site of Tamralipti can be gleaned from the record of the Chinese monk Hiuen Tsang who visited it⁴⁷ and praised the port for the availability of precious items. Tamralipti was in its most active phase from the 1st century AD to the 8th century AD. This port was connected with the mid-Gangetic region through the river Ganga and the channel of Bhagirathi and as mentioned already, perhaps the Bhagirathi formed the main channel of the Ganga.

The trade route between Bengal and Simhala continued to exist even in the 7th century AD as can be gleaned from its reference in the biography of Hiuen Tsang.⁴⁸ This can further be corroborated by the itinerary of Ta-ch'eng-teng, who was a Chinese monk and whose biography is included in the biographies of Chinese monks compiled by I-ching.⁴⁹ In the estuary nearby the port he encountered with the pirates, whose very existence is a pointer to the fact that a thriving trade was on and the money earned there from attracted the pirates to be active in that particular area.

Another important sea route connected Tamralipti with South-East Asia. It linked Tamralipti via Andaman and Nicobar islands with the port city of Kedah, facing Malacca strait on the side of the Sumatra Island. I-ching disembarked at this port from the Malay Peninsula⁵⁰ and travelled by this route.⁵¹ The trade network with South-East Asia and Southern China is thus attested by the accounts of journeys of Chinese Buddhist monks.

Thus the Bay of Bengal facilitated sea borne trade between Bengal and other far-flung areas. Bay of Bengal not only connected Bengal with coastal Orissa and Burma through the littoral routes but also Bengal was connected with the vast trade network which covered ports on the coasts of South India, Simhala and East Asia.

Another very important port situated in this sub-region is Chandraketugarh which could also have been the center of the ancient kingdom of Gangaridai which according to the Classical sources, was in the east of the kingdom of Prasi, generally identified with Magadha or Southern Bihar. The exact location of the chief town of Gangaridai is not known, but an overview of the textual and archaeological data suggests that the site of Chandraketugarh, 23 miles north east of Calcutta can be identified with it. However the main significance of the town of Gange lay in its importance as an inland port. According to Diodorus (1st century B.C.) based on Alexandrian or a post-Alexandrian source, Gangeridai existed at the eastern limits of India and formed a confederacy Prasioi under a capable king called Xandrames, presumably a member of the Nanda family of Magadha. These people were known to have organized a formidable power in this region, possessing thousands of horses, infantry, cavalry and elephants.⁵² He locates Gangaridai as having the Ganga or one of its main channels in its easternmost boundary and its several channels flowing into the Ocean. Thus in about the time of Alexander's invasion of India in the 8th decade of the 4th century BC the country of the Gangaridai must have included part of the area of the lower West Bengal.⁵³ Pliny (AD74) observed that the country of the 'Gangarid people' was located in the final course of the Ganges and located

⁴⁵ *Mahavamsa*, XIX, p. 23.

⁴⁶ J. Legge, (tr.), *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdom: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-hien of travels in India and Ceylon (AD399-414) in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*, New Delhi:1998(Reprint), pp. 111-113.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* p. 124.

⁴⁸ S. Beal, *Life of Hiuen Tsiang*, p., 133.

⁴⁹ L. Lahiri, ed. & trns., *I-ching, Chinese Monks in India: Biography of eminent Monks who Went to the Western world in Search of the law During the Great T'ang Dynasty*, Delhi, 1986, p.41.

⁵⁰ L. Lahiri, ed. & trns., *I-ching, Chinese Monks in India: Biography of eminent Monks who Went to the Western world in Search of the law During the Great T'ang Dynasty*, Delhi, 1986, p.130.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

⁵² Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliothekes Historikes*, XVII, 93.

⁵³ B. N. Mukherjee, *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal*, Calcutta, 2000, p. 38.

the capital of the Prasioi (i.e. the people of *prachya*) at Palibothra identifiable with Pataliputra.⁵⁴ According to the Periplus, Gangaridae was at the heart of the Ganga, adjacent to the course of Dosarne (present Orissa).⁵⁵ Ptolemy extended the region further towards the coast of Bangladesh and observed that 'all the country's about the mouths of the Ganges is occupied by the Gangaridae'.⁵⁶ Perhaps the region of Ganga had expanded its territory beyond its original boundaries and by the 1st century AD, it included the entire coastland of Bengal, bordering Orissa on one side and part of Bangladesh, on the other side.⁵⁷ Thus the port called Ganges at the estuary of the river Ganga, which is identified with the port of Chandraketurgh was well embedded in the contemporary trade network which connected the Roman Empire with South Asia.⁵⁸

According to B. N. Mukherjee⁵⁹ the *Ch'ien Han-shu* (a Chinese text of the 1st century AD) mentions a coastal kingdom called Haung-chi which has maritime trade connection with a part of China in the 1st century BC or rather the 1st century AD. According to the text, Wang-Mong then a regent of the boy emperor Ping-ti sent rich gifts to the ruler of Huang-chih expecting a living rhinoceros in return. The name Huang-chi which is considered to have been pronounced as Gwang-Tsie or g'jie alludes to the name Ganga. The same name is attributed to coastal Bengal or atleast south-western Bengal by the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*.⁶⁰ The Chinese text of *Wei-Lueh*, assignable to the 3rd century AD indicates the identification of Ganga country with that of Vanga, which initially included at least south-western Bengal and also probably coastal Bangladesh up to the mouth of the Padma.⁶¹

Thus there is ample of historical evidence regarding the geography of Bengal which was alluded in various indigenous and non-indigenous work. The enumeration of this historical-geographical setting should serve the purpose of laying stress on the immense socio-cultural complexity of various geo-social units in a particular spatio-temporal context.

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⁵⁴ Pliny, *Natural History*, VI, 21, 65.

⁵⁵ Lionel Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Princeton, 1989, sec.63.

⁵⁶ Ptolemy, *Geographike Huphegesis*, VII, 1,81

⁵⁷ AmitaRay, 'Urbanization in Bengal' in *PIHC*, 1987, p 15.

⁵⁸ A. Bhattacharyya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal*, pp. 36-40.

⁵⁹ B.N. Mukherjee, Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi Inscriptions in West Bengal (India), *Indian Museum Bulletin*, Calcutta: 1990, pp. 17-18.

⁶⁰ Lionel Casson, *Periplus Maris Erythraei*, Princeton, 1989, sec.63.

⁶¹ B. N. Mukherjee, *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 2000, p. 42.

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