

## Chapter 4

# Variegated Adaptations: State Formation in Bengal from the Fifth to the Seventh Century\*

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### Introduction

The recent discussions on the pre-modern history of South Asia have focused on the two interconnected processes of state formation and agrarian expansion, which diverse terrains of South Asia experienced at different points of time. In the context of the early medieval period, both processes manifested themselves as secondary state formation which accompanied expansion of sedentary agriculture and agrarian society towards the periphery. What was critical for this process was the adaptation of a particular form of monarchical state system to local contexts by ascending political powers, theorized as the spread of state society or the growth of tribal chiefdom to early kingdom [Chattopadhyaya 1994: 183-222; Kulke 1995]. Such an adaptation presupposes the existence of established state power at the center, which exerted influence over the periphery and provided it a model to be followed. In north India, this role was fulfilled by the Guptas, whose influence reached wider areas from the early fourth to the mid-sixth century. Many peripheral regions witnessed the emergence of local rulers accepting their suzerainty and imitating their administrative apparatuses, as attested by the contemporary inscriptions.<sup>1</sup>

Bengal, a region located in eastern India, also experienced the process of secondary state formation from the fifth century onwards. The influence of the Gupta kings on this process is obvious in the copper plate inscriptions issued in their reign

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<sup>1</sup> For the process of Gupta expansion, see Agrawal 1989: 90-97, 103-132, 161-170. The representative cases of local rulers emerging under the Gupta influence were the Parivrajakas and the kings of Uccakalpa in Central India [Agrawal 1989: 259-262].

and aftermath. Their influence, however, did not reach the sub-regions of Bengal evenly, as the latter had different environmental conditions and attained different levels of agrarian development in this period. The powers ascendant in those sub-regions adapted the Gupta state system to their own localities in diverse forms. In the present study, I would like to discuss those 'variegated adaptations' with which state formation in Bengal proceeded in the period between the fifth and seventh centuries.

Before the main discussion, I will make short remarks on the geographical characteristics of the sub-regions of Bengal and the early phase of historical process unfolded in them.

### **1. Sub-regions of Bengal: Geographical Characteristics and Early Phase of Historical Process**

In geographical terms, Bengal mostly consists of deltas, both active and moribund, and relatively higher old alluviums adjacent to them. The most prominent feature of this region is its river system constituted by the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, and their tributaries and distributaries [Rashid 1991: 9-42; Spate and Learmonth 1984: 572-573]. The sections of Bengal divided by those rivers, with different geographical conditions, constituted the four major historical sub-regions of Puṇḍravardhana, Rāḍha, Vaṅga and Samatāṭa (Fig. 4.1) [Bhattacharyya 1977: 41-71; Morrison 1970: 6-13, 151-154].

Puṇḍravardhana was located to the north. The Ganga with its Padma channel and the Karatoya demarcated it from Rāḍha, Vaṅga and the neighbouring region of Kāmarūpa. Geographically it mainly consisted of a Pleistocene terrace called Barind and flood plains, mostly old ones, of the rivers Padma, Mahananda, Purnabhava, Atrai, Tista and Karatoya [Rashid 1991: 12-20]. Adjacent to the regions of Aṅga and Videha in present Bihar, Puṇḍravardhana received the cultural inflow from the Mid-Ganga heartland earlier than any other sub-regions, as shown by the oldest inscription of Bengal from Mahasthan in Brāhmī script assignable to the third century BC [Sircar 1965: 79-80]. This inscription and the excavated sites of Mahasthangarh and Bangarh attest to the development of sedentary agrarian society and urban settlements in the third century BC or earlier, under the political influence of the Mauryas or the other Magadhan dynasties [Alam and Salles 2002; Goswami 1948].

Rāḍha was located to the west, bordered by the Rajmahal and Chotanagpur hills. The Ganga and Bhagirathi demarcated it from the other sub-regions. The sub-region consisted of lateritic old alluvium flanked by the coalesced fans of the rivers Ajay, Damodar, Rupnarayan and Kasai, and the moribund and mature deltas along the Bhagirathi-Hoogly [Spate and Learmonth 1984: 586-588]. Rāḍha saw the earliest occurrence of proto-historic settlements with evidence of agriculture, as indicated by the archaeological sites scattered all over the area, especially along the Ajay

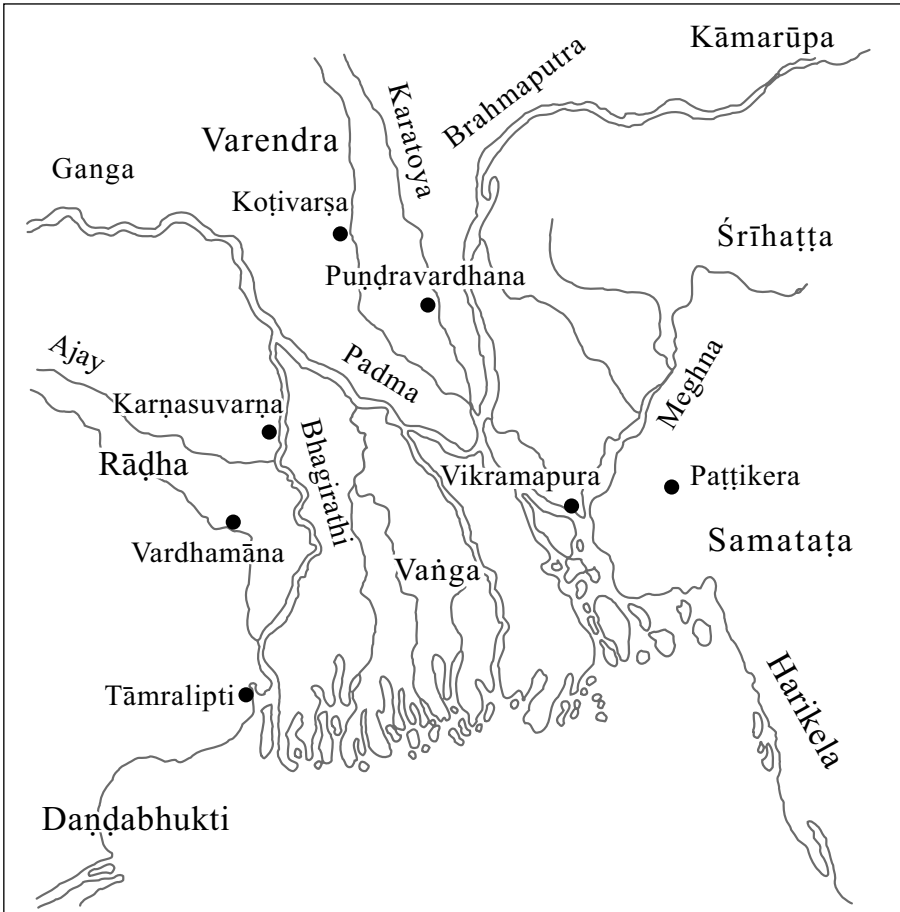


Fig 4.1: Map of Bengal with its sub-regions

and Damodar valleys [Nag 1987]. The growth of sedentary agrarian society and the early political formation in the subsequent period are attested by the Susuniya rock inscription of *mahārāja* Candravarman assignable to the mid-fourth century [Sircar 1965: 351-352]. In the coastal area, the urban settlements with implications of thriving seaborne trade rose up at the estuary of Ganga and its tributaries from the third century BC onwards [Sengupta 1996].

Vaṅga occupied the southern part of Bengal. It was constituted by the Ganga Delta proper, which could be further subdivided into the moribund, mature and active deltas [Spate and Learmonth 1984: 588]. The area surrounded by the rivers Bhagirathi, Padma and Meghna was the main part of the sub-region, while its boundaries oscillated through the ages [Bhattacharyya 1977: 56-62]. The *Baudhāyanadharmasūtra*

(1.2.14), datable to the period from the beginning of the third to the middle of the second centuries BC [Olivelle 2000: 10], mentions Vaṅga together with Puṇḍra as one of the groups of people living outside Āryāvarta, visiting whose lands would incur necessity of purificatory rites [Olivelle 2000: 198]. It indicates a certain level of social organization attained by local population, at which they could be perceived as ethnic groups with some territoriality. The progress in social organization is attested by the description of the conquest of Vaṅga people in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* (4.36) [Devadhar 1985: 65] and the Mehrauli iron pillar inscription [Sircar 1965: 283-285], both assignable to the beginning of the fifth century. The latter mentions the defeat of allied enemies in Vaṅga by a king named Candra [Sircar 1965: 283, l. 1].

Samataṭa was on the eastern fringe of Bengal, flanked by sub-regions of Śrīhaṭṭa and Harikela to its north and south respectively. It was a low land which consisted of a delta and floodplains made by the activities of the rivers Surma and Meghna, and Tippera surface with low hill range of Lalmai at its eastern end [Rashid 1991: 28-29, 36]. Śrīhaṭṭa corresponded to the depression called Haor basin in present Sylhet division and Harikela to the coastal area of present Chittagong district [Rashid 1991: 24-26; Bhattacharyya 1977: 69-70]. The Meghna demarcated Samataṭa from Vaṅga [Bhattacharyya 1977: 67]. The earliest reference to Samataṭa is found in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta, which belong to the period as late as the mid-fourth century. It mentions the king of Samataṭa as one of the peripheral kings (*pratyantarīpati*) who acknowledged suzerainty of the Gupta king [Sircar 1965: 265, l. 22].

The delineation made above shows that sedentary agriculture and agrarian society developed earlier in Puṇḍravardhana and Rāḍha, both of which were characterized by old alluvium and mature deltas, than in Vaṅga and Samataṭa with active deltas. The elements which contributed to the early development of the former sub-regions could be the relative ease of reclamation and the proximity to the Mid-Ganga heartland, of which the latter also facilitated the early establishment of administrative apparatus and urban settlements. The basic pattern of agrarian expansion in Bengal inferable from these points is the one which advanced from plains of Puṇḍravardhana and Rāḍha to deltas of Vaṅga and Samataṭa, with encroachment on forest tracts at margins. The state formation with variegated adaptations proceeded in connection with such a pattern of agrarian development in the sub-regions, which had acquired different characters through the early historical process.

## 2. Variegated Adaptations: the Fifth and Sixth Centuries

It is unclear when and how the Guptas started their control over Bengal. What is certain is that they had established the provincial administration of Puṇḍravardhanabhukti by the second quarter of the fifth century and maintained it until the mid-sixth century.

This is attested by so-called land sale grants, which record sales of waste/fallow land plots (*khilakṣetra*) for donations to some religious agents, petitioned by individuals and approved by a local body called *adhikaraṇa* [Yamazaki 1982]. They are a peculiar type of copper-plate inscriptions issued by the *adhikaraṇa*, not by the king or any other rulers. We can detect in these inscriptions a form of state control and local power relations to which the former was adapted.

Puṇḍravardhanabhukti was ruled by a governor called *uparika*, or *uparika-mahārāja* in the later period, appointed by the king.<sup>2</sup> It was sub-divided into several supra-village administrative units called *viṣaya* or *vīthī*, which had diverse administrative arrangements in different localities. While Koṭivarṣaviṣaya was governed by administrators appointed by the *uparika* [Sircar 1965: 291, ll. 3-4; 293, ll. 3-4; 337, l. 3; 347, ll. 2-3], Pañcanagarīviṣaya and Śṛṅgaveravīthī were under the officials nominated by the king.<sup>3</sup> Such local differences were more pronounced in the *adhikaraṇas* constituted at different levels of administration.

*Adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa* was organized at a particular city (*adhiṣṭhāna*) and presided over the cases of land sales in rural settlements in its vicinity. It was constituted by urban influential groups. The *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa* of Koṭivarṣaviṣaya consisted of the fixed members including eminent merchant (*śreṣṭhin*), caravan trader (*sārthavāha*), chief artisan (*prathamakulika*) and chief scribe (*prathamakāyastha*), at least for a hundred years [Sircar 1965: 291, ll. 4-6; 293, ll. 4-5; 337, ll. 3-4; 347-348, ll. 4-5]. *Vīthyadhikaraṇa* was, on the other hand, constituted by the dominant section of peasant householders called *kuṭumbins*, including their upper section called *mahattaras*.<sup>4</sup> The *vīthyadhikaraṇa* of Śṛṅgaveravīthī consisted of large but unfixed number of *mahattaras* and *kuṭumbins* of *vīthī*, which fluctuated from eight *mahattaras* and eighty *kuṭumbins* to four *mahattaras* and twenty-eight *kuṭumbins* in a relatively short period of eight years [Sircar 1965: 353, ll. 4-12; Sircar 1973:

<sup>2</sup> Damodarpur plates, year 124 Gupta Era (hereafter GE) [Sircar 1965: 291, l. 3]; year 128 GE [Sircar 1965: 293, ll. 2-3]; ND, Budhagupta's reign [Sircar 1965: 336, l. 2]; year 224 GE [Sircar 1965: 347, ll. 2-3].

<sup>3</sup> Baigram plate, year 128 GE [Sircar 1965: 356, l. 1] (Pañcanagarīviṣaya); Jagadishpur plate, year 128 GE [Sircar 1973: 61, l. 1] (Śṛṅgaveravīthī).

<sup>4</sup> The connotation of *kuṭumbin* as peasant householder is clear in a passage of the contemporary *Nāradasmṛti* (11.37) that a house and land are two fundamentals of the *kuṭumbins*' existence [Lariviere 1989: 174]. Their engagement in cultivation is attested by references in some land sale grants to their 'own cultivation' which should not be disturbed by plots to be donated [Sircar 1965: 358, ll. 18-19; 362, ll. 19-20; 383, ll. 13-15]. *Mahattaras* constituted a part of *kuṭumbins* as shown by the expression '*kuṭumbins* beginning with *mahattaras*, accompanied by *brāhmaṇas*' in the address of the Paharpur plate [Sircar 1965: 360, l. 3]. Their superiority to the other *kuṭumbins* is indicated by their precedence in the order of reference and smaller number compared with the latter in the Kalaikuri-Sultanpur and Jagadishpur plates [Sircar 1965: 353, ll. 4-12; Sircar 1973: 61, ll. 4-8].

61, ll. 4-8].<sup>5</sup> *Aṣṭakulādhikaraṇa* or *grāmāṣṭakulādhikaraṇa*, ‘*adhikaraṇa* of eight families of village’, was located in a particular village and functioned at the supra-village level. It was constituted by *kuṭumbins* including *mahattaras*.<sup>6</sup> While the first *adhikaraṇa* was a regular organization, the last two seem to have been occasional assemblies of influential residents.

Despite their difference in location, membership and regularity, all the *adhikaraṇas* fulfilled the same duty of receiving petitions of land purchase and deciding on the cases. They also wielded the authority to confer status of perpetual endowment on the donated tract, which was usually a royal monopoly. The procedure recorded in land sale grants gives us a clue to the basis of their authority. In the procedure, the *adhikaraṇa* referred the case for verification to record keepers (*pustapālas*), who seem to have been local clerical functionaries.<sup>7</sup> What they verified was conformity of the case, especially price of the land, to a particular local custom (*maryādā*) of village (*grāma*) [Sircar 1965: 333, l. 5], *vīthī* [Sircar 1965: 353, ll. 12-13; 354, ll. 18-19; Sircar 1973: 61-62, ll. 12-13], *viṣaya* [Sircar 1965: 356-357, ll. 4-6; 357, ll. 11-12; 382-383, ll. 5-6; 383, ll. 8-9; 348, ll. 6-7] or the city office [Sircar 1965: 360, ll. 4-5; 361, ll. 11-12]. In some cases, record keepers also confirmed that the donation would incur no loss of profit but acquisition of merit for the king [Sircar 1965: 362, ll. 16-17; 383, ll. 10-11; 333, l. 7; 349, ll. 12-13]. Those two bases of verification suggest that the authority of *adhikaraṇas* was based on their position to mediate interests of both rural society and state, embodied in local custom and royal benefit respectively. As the right over landholding was at issue, what the *adhikaraṇa* and its members represented were assumed to be the remnant of communal land right, which was half invalidated by growing individual landholdings but still exercised over waste/fallow land, on the one hand and the emerging state claim over territorial land on the other hand, as representatives of local residents and participants in state machinery simultaneously.

Diverse administrative settings and characters of *adhikaraṇas* discussed above indicate dependence of state control on local influential groups. When Puṇḍravardhana came under the Gupta rule, rural society mainly consisting of peasant householders and urban society constituted by mercantile, artisanal and scribal groups had firmly been established. Their dominant sections wielded authority over rural society by organising themselves in diverse forms of associations. The Gupta provincial administration adjusted itself to the existing local power relations by incorporating

<sup>5</sup> The number of *mahattaras* and *kuṭumbins* is counted by myself.

<sup>6</sup> Dhanaidaha plate, year 113 GE [Sircar 1965: 288, ll. 3-6]; Damodarpur plate, year 163 GE [Sircar 1965: 333, ll. 2-3].

<sup>7</sup> Their proximity to rural society is shown by their appearance as co-petitioners for land purchase with a *kulika* and *kāyasthas* of the *vīthī* in the Kalaikuri-Sultanpur plate [Sircar 1965: 352-353, ll. 3-4].

those influential groups and their associations as agents of state control. The dominant social groups on their turn tried to enhance their authority in rural society and extend their local interest through the involvement with state power. The most prominent case was that of a mercantile member of the *adhiṣṭhānādihikaraṇa* of Koṭivarṣaviṣaya establishing his own local interest through the land purchase and donation to the shrines established by himself or his ancestor [Furui 2013a: 400].

In contemporary Samataṭa, a different form of political power had emerged. This is evident from a new copper plate inscription of Vainyagupta dated year 184 in Gupta Era (AD 502-503) [Furui forthcoming]. This royal grant approves donations to the *saṃgha* of the Ājīvikas made by a previous king and contains his grant claimed to have been copied ‘character by character’ [Furui forthcoming: l. 5]. According to the earlier grant dated year 91 in Gupta Era (AD 409-410), *mahārājamahēśvara* Nāthacandra donated large tracts consisting of twenty-nine land plots, mostly purchased from individual landholders, and nineteen kinds of movables to the Ājīvika *saṃgha* residing in the shrine of *yakṣa* Maṇibhadra [Furui forthcoming: ll. 10-17]. This grant attests to the presence of local kingship acknowledging Gupta suzerainty in the early fifth century, which may have succeeded a peripheral king mentioned in the Allahabad pillar inscription. The titles of *mahāsāndhivigrahika* and *kumārāmātya* held by Mādhavadatta, an official whose approval was given to the engraver of grant [Furui forthcoming: ll. 46-47], alludes to an attempt of the early Samataṭa kings to introduce a bureaucratic apparatus modelled on the Gupta one, for both *sāndhivigrahika* and *kumārāmātya* were the titles held by Hariṣeṇa, the eulogist of Samudragupta [Sircar 1965: 268, l. 32]. They also introduced administrative divisions consisting of *maṇḍalas* of four cardinal directions, as inferred from Pūrva- and Dakṣiṇamaṇḍala in the grant of year 184 [Furui forthcoming: ll. 3, 15, 43] and Uttaramaṇḍala in the Gunaighar plate of Vainyagupta dated year 188 [Sircar 1965: 342, l. 7].

The grant of Vainyagupta dated year 184 shows continuance of monarchy in Samataṭa in the early sixth century, though nothing can be known about the interval of 93 years between the reigns of Nāthacandra and Vainyagupta. The latter’s status as a subordinate ruler under an overlord, who must be the Gupta king in view of the use of Gupta Era, is clear from the phrase ‘accepted by his majesty the supreme lord’ (*paramabhaṭṭārakapādānudhyāta*) attached to him [Furui forthcoming: l. 1].<sup>8</sup> The titles of *pañcādihikaraṇoparika*, *mahāpratihāra* and *mahārāja* wielded by Vainyagupta also match his subordinate status [Furui forthcoming: l. 1].

The Gunaighar plate of the same king, dated year 188 in Gupta Era (AD 507), attests to his growth to semi-independence in four years. The expressions indicating his subordinate status has disappeared except the title *mahārāja* and dating in the Gupta

<sup>8</sup> For the meaning of this phrase indicating acceptance by father or an overlord, see [Ferrier and Törzsök 2008].

Era. His enhanced power is shown by the presence of subordinate rulers with the title of *mahārāja* under him. The applicant for donation was *mahārāja* Rudradatta, who was called ‘servant of our feet’ (*asmatpādādāsa*), while the messenger of royal order (*dūtaka*) was *mahārājamahāsāmanta* Vijayasena [Sircar 1965: 342, l. 3; 343, ll. 15-16]. Suggestively, the titles earlier held by the king were wielded by the latter whose titles include *mahāpratīhāra*, *mahāpīlupati*, *pañcādhikaraṇoparika*, *pātyuparika*, *purapāloparika*, *mahārāja* and *mahāsāmanta* [Sircar 1965: 343, ll. 15-16].

What was witnessed in Samatāta was the formation of monarchy modelled on the Gupta kingship of which it nominally acknowledged suzerainty. Its emergence in the power relation different from that of Puṇḍravardhana is obvious in a different form of land grants, in which the agency of rural society is absent. It may be due to the late development of sedentary agriculture and agrarian society. In spite of development inferable from land plots scattered around many villages along the river donated by Nāthacandra and from the description of border landmarks in the Gunaighar plate [Furui forthcoming: ll. 15-43; Sircar 1965: 343-345, ll. 18-31], the sub-region did not see the establishment of dominant groups of rural society whose cooperation should be sought for state control. What loomed large was the emergence of subordinate rulers under the king, which would have critical implication in the following period.

We have no concrete evidence on whether and how the Guptas ruled Vaṅga and Rāḍha. What was certain was the rise of local sovereign rulers who reigned over both sub-regions in the sixth century. They were Dvādaśāditya, Dharmāditya, Gopacandra and Samācāradeva, whose control of the area called Navyāvakaśikā in Vaṅga is confirmed by a series of land sale grants pertaining to the same locality, issued by the *adhikaraṇa* of Vārakamaṇḍalaviṣaya [Furui 2013b; Sircar 1965: 363-367, 367-369, 370-372; Bhattasali 1925-1926]. Inclusion of Vardhamānabhukti and Daṇḍabhukti of Rāḍha in Gopacandra’s territory is attested by the other land sale grants from Mallasarul and Jayarampur [Sircar 1965: 372-377; Tripathy 1997: 174-179]. Their adaptation of the Gupta model is exhibited by the title *mahārājādhirāja*, initiated by the Guptas, and the name ending with -āditya of the first two kings obviously taken from epithets of the Gupta kings [Furui 2013b: 90, ll. 1-2; Sircar 1965: 363-364, ll. 1-2; 367, ll. 1-2; 373, ll. 2-3; 370, ll. 1-2; Bhattasali 1925-1926: 76, ll. 1-2].

Those kings also adapted the same principle of local administration applied by the Guptas in the Puṇḍravardhanabhukti, namely, securing collaboration of local influential groups. The continued practice of land sale grants attests to it. The *adhikaraṇa* and people around it still wielded authority to decide on the cases. Power relation surrounding this organization was, however, different. *Kuṭumbins* and urban mercantile and artisanal elites, who were constituents of *adhikaraṇas* in Puṇḍravardhana, were conspicuous by their absence. The *adhikaraṇa* of Vārakamaṇḍalaviṣaya was constituted by scribal groups including elder scribe (*jyeṣṭhakāyastha*) and *adhikaraṇika*, and *mahattaras* of *viṣaya* and the other landed



magnates worked with the organization [Furui 2013b: 90-91, ll. 3-11; Sircar 1965: 364, ll. 4-6; 368, ll. 7-8; 370-371, ll. 6-9; Bhattasali 1925-1926: 76, ll. 5-9]. There was also a tendency towards more limited participation [Furui 2013b: 95-96]. What transpires from these cases is ascendancy of landed magnates through their collaboration with scribal groups, in exclusion of the others. In case of Vakkattakavīthī of Vardhamānabhukti and Śvetavālikāvīthī of Daṇḍabhukti, *mahattaras* and other kinds of landed magnates are mentioned with village names, indicating their position to represent each settlement [Sircar 1965: 373-374, ll. 5-8; Tripathy 1997: 176, ll. 25-28]. Thus the adaptation was made in a new context of the ascendancy of landed magnates [Chattopadhyaya 1990: 49-50]. With their dominance established in rural society, they confronted and negotiated with state and other political powers, which were enhancing their presence.

The administrative apparatus, in a form similar to that of Puṇḍravardhana, also made adaptation in a new context. Navyāvakaśikā was ruled by a governor appointed by the king, while Vārakamaṇḍalaviṣaya under it was managed by an official appointed by the governor [Furui 2013b: 90, ll. 2-3; Sircar 1965: 364, ll. 2-4; 367-368, ll. 3-5; 370, ll. 2-5; Bhattasali 1925-1926: 76, ll. 3-5]. This was also the case with Daṇḍabhukti and Śvetavālikāvīthī [Tripathy 1997: 176, ll. 23-24]. The same hierarchical relation was present between Vardhamānabhukti and Vakkattakavīthī, though the administrators of those units are not mentioned [Sircar 1965: 373, ll. 3, 5]. What the administrative apparatus of those cases differed from that of Puṇḍravardhana was the employment of subordinate rulers as administrators. Governors of Navyāvakaśikā held titles of *mahāsāmanta*, *mahārāja*, *mahāpratihāra*, *uparika* and so on, while administrators of Vārakamaṇḍala were *rājānaka*, *viṣayapati* and *vinīyuktaka* [Furui 2013b: 90, ll. 2-3; Sircar 1965: 364, ll. 2-4; 367-368, ll. 3-5; 370, ll. 2-5; Bhattasali 1925-1926: 76, ll. 3-5]. Daṇḍabhukti and Śvetavālikāvīthī were also governed by *mahāsāmantamahārāja* and *kumārāmātyarājānaka* respectively [Tripathy 1997: 176, ll. 23-24]. On the other hand, the growing power of subordinate rulers and its encroachment upon the authority of local landed magnates are detectable in the Mallasarul plate. *Mahārāja* Vijayasena, an applicant for land purchase who seems to have been the subordinate ruler of Vardhamānabhukti, practically executed preparation and issue of the land sale grant with despatch of a messenger, usual practice of royal grant, and his own seal attached to the plate, while keeping formality in both procedure and documental format [Sircar 1965: 372, 377, ll. 24-25].

The political formations found in the copper-plate inscriptions discussed above show variegated adaptations of the Gupta state model in the different sub-regions of Bengal, required by different social contexts and power relations. On the other hand, one common tendency, namely rise of subordinate rulers, emerged in some of them. It would show further development in the seventh century.

### 3. Further Development: The Seventh Century

From the end of the sixth century to the early seventh century, Rāḍha saw the emergence of a kingdom strong enough to engage with the other political powers in contemporary north India. Kings Śaśāṅka and Jayanāga ruled there with Gauḍa, its northern part, as their main territory and Karṇasuvarṇa as their capital. The former interfered with political struggle around Kānyakubja [Devahuti 1998: 45-46], while extending his influence to the south, as far as southern Orissa [Devahuti 1998: 49-51].

The practice of land sale grant and involvement of local landed magnates in the process continued in this period with differentiation among themselves, representation of each settlement and collaboration with scribal groups, as attested by the Panchrol plate of the time of Śaśāṅka [Furui 2011b]. However, the other plates show growing power of the king and his subordinate rulers in relation to rural society and its dominant section. A tilt of power balance to the former is discernible in the two Antla plates dated years 8 and 19 in Śaśāṅka's regnal era.<sup>9</sup> In the first grant, the *adhikaraṇa* of Tāvira with *brāhmaṇas* and *pradhānas*, a category of landed magnates, still issued the grant and *mahāpratihāra* Śubhakīrti, who governed Daṇḍabhukti, purchased the land from them [Sircar 1983: 25, ll. 5-9]. In the second grant, however, Prakīrṇadāsa, a minister (*amātya*) of *sāmantamahārāja* Somadatta who governed the same *bhukti*, unilaterally conveyed the latter's message on his donation of the village to the same *adhikaraṇa* [Sircar 1983: 27, ll. 7-14]. The almost contemporary Maliadanga plate of Jayanāga is a full-fledged royal grant, though it is said to have been decorated with the seal of *viṣaya* [Barnett 1925-1926: 63, ll. 6-7].<sup>10</sup> It contains a decree of *mahārājādhirāja* Jayanāga transmitted by *sāmanta* Nārāyaṇabhadra, who ruled Audumvarīkaviṣaya, to *vyavahārimahāpratihāra* Sūryasena, who managed the same *viṣaya* [Barnett 1925-1926: 63, ll. 1-4]. The political power described in this plate was a well-defined hierarchy of a king and subordinate rulers, which would become a standard form from this period onwards.

Samataṭa had already seen the emergence of political power consisting of a king and his subordinate rulers in the early sixth century. In the seventh century, this form of political power developed with complexity and inner tensions, due to the agency of subordinate rulers especially in the peripheral areas. Lokanātha and Śrīdhāraṇarāta, known from their own copper-plate inscriptions,<sup>11</sup> were subordinate rulers controlling parts of Samataṭa under the same king of uncertain identity. Their status as such is indicated by the military service rendered by the former and the

<sup>9</sup> For the actual provenance of those plates more widely known as the Midnapore plates, see [Sanyal 2010: 123-124].

<sup>10</sup> For its actual provenance and the possible location of recorded event, see [Sanyal 2010: 115-116].

<sup>11</sup> Tippera plate of Lokanātha [Sircar 1983: 28-35]; Kailan plate of Śrīdhāraṇarāta [Sircar 1983: 36-40].

title *prāptapañcamahāśabda* held by the latter [Sircar 1983: 30, ll. 12-14; 37, l. 14].<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, they practically acted as independent rulers by issuing copper plate inscriptions without acknowledging the reign of their overlord. They were even rebellious and fought each other [Sircar 1983: 30-31, ll. 13-15]. However, they still need authority of the king. The conflict between Lokanātha and Jivadhāraṇarāta, father of Śrīdhāraṇarāta, was halted by the intervention of their overlord who issued an auspicious document (*śrīpaṭṭa*) to the former guaranteeing his possession of the *viśaya* held by the latter [Sircar 1983: 31, l. 16]. Thus they still need authorization of their rule by the king, even while they fought each other defying his authority [Furui 2014: 103-104]. The format of their grants also shows their dependence. While it conveys their order, the document was issued by *kumārāmātyas* and their office (*adhikaraṇa*) [Sircar 1983: 29, l. 1; 37, ll. 3-4]. The seal is also that of *kumārāmātyādhikaraṇa*, on which these rulers additionally stamped their own [Sircar 1983: 29, 36]. They still had to keep a certain formality for land grant and it shows necessity of the royal authority embodied in the administrative apparatus for them. While growing to semi-independence, local rulers were yet to consolidate their power, which needed to be authorized through their association with the king [Furui 2013c: 104].

The relation between those local rulers and subordinate rulers under them was also replete with tension. In their grants, both Lokanātha and Śrīdhāraṇarāta made donations to religious institutions as petitioned by their subordinate rulers, *mahāsāmanta* Pradoṣaśarman and *mahāsāndhivigrahādhikṛta* Jayanātha respectively [Sircar 1983: 31, ll. 17-21; 38, l. 18]. Pradoṣaśarman asked for land donation to the shrine of Anantanārāyaṇa established by himself in a forest and large number of *brāhmaṇas*, while Jayanātha to a Buddhist *vihāra* and *brāhmaṇas* [Sircar 1983: 31, ll. 21-26; 38, ll. 18-24]. In the latter case, the donor (*bhikṣada*) also acquired land plots [Sircar 1983: 40, ll. 45-46]. Through the petition, these subordinate rulers may have extended their influence and even resource basis in the donated tracts. The local rulers still had to entertain such a petition as long as it kept the required format, for their own power and authority also depended on the adherence to such a formality in relation to their overlord. What was observable here was a stratified power relation fraught with tension in which a precarious balance was maintained between the king, his subordinate local rulers and the latter's subordinate rulers [Furui 2013c: 104-105]. It should be noted that the last group took initiative in reclamation of forest tracts in this stalemate, as was the case with the Pradoṣaśarman's establishment of a Brahmanical shrine in the forest and following petition for land donation [Furui 2013c: 98-100].

<sup>12</sup> *pañcamahāśabda* refers to the privilege of enjoying the sounds of five musical instruments and *prāptapañcamahāśabda* is the title wielded by a subordinate upon whom the king conferred this privilege [Sircar 1966: 230-231, 256-257].

In more developed areas of Samataṭa, a different power equation was observed among the constituents of the hierarchy. The Khaḍga kings established their position as sovereign rulers in the second half of the seventh century. In the Ashrafpur plates of Devakhaḍga, a subordinate ruler with the title of *sāmanta* appeared as one of the enjoyers of products from a particular plot side by side with members of the royal household and others [Sircar 1983: 42, l. 5]. The incorporation of subordinate rulers into the stratified land relation topped by the king was prominent: the latter wielded overarching authority in transferring land right for donation. It indicates somehow established authority and control of the Khaḍga kings over their subordinate rulers. This is also confirmed by the issue of full-fledged royal grants with own seals by them [Laskar 1904: 85]. Such an established state of the Khaḍga rule seems to have emanated from agrarian development in the core area of their territory, which provided them a stable resource basis [Furui 2013c: 101-103]. The power of the king was further enhanced under the Devas who ruled Samataṭa in the eighth century following the Khaḍgas. They not only issued the full-fledged royal grants but also wielded the high-sounding titles of *parameśvaraparamabhaṭṭārakamahārājādhirāja* [Sircar 1983: 93, ll. 42-43]. The growth of royal power would lead to the integration of whole eastern Bengal, including both Vaṅga and Samataṭa, as a regional kingdom under the Candras in the tenth and eleventh centuries [Chowdhury 1967: 154-189].

The political condition of Puṇḍravardhana after the mid-sixth century is unclear, due to the lack of contemporary sources. It can be surmised retrospectively from inscriptions of the ninth century that this sub-region also experienced some tendencies witnessed in the other sub-regions. The address of the early Pāla grants includes a category of local residents called *viṣayavyavahārins*, differentiated from cultivators (*karṣaka*). It includes *jyeṣṭhakāyastha*, *mahāmahattara*, *mahattara* and *dāśagrāmika*, and is accompanied by *karāṇas*, which is the abbreviation of *adhikaraṇas* [Sircar 1983: 68, ll. 47-48].<sup>13</sup> This category seems to denote local influential people including both scribal elites and landed magnates, who also have *adhikaraṇa* organization. It attests to the growth of landed magnates in alliance with scribal elites, as was the case in Vaṅga and Rāḍha in the sixth and seventh centuries.

The presence of subordinate rulers is also a characteristic of the early Pāla grants pertaining to Puṇḍravardhana. They established local rule under the Pāla suzerainty and negotiated with the king through construction of religious institutions and application for endowment on them [Furui 2011a: 150-151]. Their genealogy included in some grants tells us how those originating from diverse social groups including landed magnates, merchants and scribal elites got their position through military service to the kings [Furui 2011a: 150; Furui 2008: 71]. Gopāla, the first Pāla king claimed to have been chosen as a king by ‘people’ (*prakṛti*) [Sircar 1983:

<sup>13</sup> For synonymous use of *adhikaraṇa* and *karāṇa*, see the case of Tāvīrakaṇa/Tāvīrādhi-kaṇa in the Antla plates [Sircar 1983: 25-27].

65, ll. 6-7], seems to have started his career as a representative of landed magnates and subordinate rulers. The Pālas established a regional kingdom incorporating the western half of Bengal and eastern Bihar by consolidating their power over both rural society and subordinate rulers.<sup>14</sup>

### **Conclusion: From Variegated Adaptations to Regional Formation**

The different social contexts and power relations in the sub-regions of Bengal, generated by geographical conditions and historical experiences, required ascending local powers to make variegated adaptations of a certain state model, namely that of the Guptas. Their development in each sub-region, however, exhibited at different paces a common tendency, that is, the emergence of local kingships reigning over a class of subordinate rulers. The concentration of their power and the integration of localities by them culminated in the formation of regional kingdoms of the Pālas and the Candras. This process of state formation and integration constituted one factor of the regional formation of Bengal, at least in its political aspect. The integration of almost all the sub-regions by the Senas, even though just for a short while, could be interpreted as its manifestation.

<sup>14</sup> For the latest political history of the Pālas incorporating new evidences, see [Sanyal 2014: 171-193].

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