

Session 3

Formation of State and Society during the Period of the 5th–14th Centuries

Variegated Adaptations: State Formation in Bengal from the 5th to the 7th Century

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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 early medieval period, both processes manifested themselves as secondary state formation which accompanied the 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, theorised as the spread of state society or the growth of tribal chieftdom to early kingdom (Chattopadhyaya 1994: 183–222; Kulke 1995). Such an adaptation presupposes the existence of established state power at the centre, 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 contemporary inscriptions.

Bengal, a region located to the eastern extreme of North 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 and aftermath. Their influence, however, did not reach the sub-regions of Bengal evenly, as they had different environmental conditions and attained different levels of agrarian development during 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.

According to their geographical characteristics and historical experiences, the region of Bengal can be divided into four sub-regions: Puṇḍravardhana or Varendra to the north, Rāḍha to the west, Vaṅga to the south and Samatāṭa to the east. These are demarcated from each other by the great rivers and their tributaries, which, at the same time, functioned as channels of communication connecting those sub-regions (Bhattacharya 1977; Morrison 1970). Puṇḍravardhana and Rāḍha have relatively higher elevation and mainly consist of paradeltas and elevated grounds. Due to the relative ease of reclamation and the proximity to the Mid-Ganga heartland, they saw the earliest development of sedentary agriculture and agrarian society among all the sub-regions. The agrarian expansion in Bengal basically advanced from the plains of these two sub-regions to active deltas in Vaṅga and



Figure The Baigram Copper Plate Inscription, Year 128 Gupta Era. Photographed by the Author. Courtesy of Indian Museum, Kolkata, India.

forest tracts in both Samataṭa and the western margins of Rāḍha through the ages.

State formation in Bengal proceeded in connection with such patterns of agrarian expansion and development within the region. When Puṇḍravardhana came under Gupta rule in the fifth century, as one of its provinces, it had already seen the establishment of agrarian society based on landholdings of peasant householders and the growth of urban centres resided by mercantile, artisan and scribal groups. State control was imposed on this sub-region by the state adjusting itself to the power relations among the local population, especially by securing cooperation of the dominant section which wielded authority over the others by organising itself into associations. In the same period, Samataṭa, which was categorised as the territory of a peripheral king beyond the direct control of the Guptas, saw the emergence of local kings who nominally accepted Gupta suzerainty and adopted its administrative apparatus as a model. Their power was characterised by the hierarchy of subordinate rulers who acted as administrative functionaries under them. The state formation in Rāḍha and Vaṅga took clear form in the mid-sixth century with the emergence of sovereign rulers who imitated the Guptas in both royal title and administrative apparatus. They also adjusted their rule to the local power relations, in which landed magnates, in alliance with scribal groups, were ascendant (Chattopadhyaya 1990: 18–69). Under their rule, the state and its administrative functionaries tried to extend their control over rural society in opposition to local landed magnates. In this process, a class of subordinate rulers generally called *sāmantas* asserted their presence.

The state formations in each sub-region developed further in the seventh century. Rāḍha saw the emergence of a kingdom strong enough to engage with the other political powers in contemporary North India. The dominance of the state and its agents over rural society was enhanced under its rule. In Samataṭa, several lines of subordinate rulers, who owed their power to the administrative positions conferred by an overlord, asserted their authority by issuing their own copper plate inscriptions with nominal acknowledgement of their dependence. They took the initiative in reclaiming forest tracts by establishing Brahmanical shrines and settling large numbers of *brāhmaṇas* on them. From their ranks, the Khaḍgas emerged as sovereign rulers of eastern Vaṅga and Samataṭa, to be followed by the Devas and then by the Candras, who would extend their rule over the eastern half of Bengal in the tenth century. The political condition of Puṇḍravardhana after the end of Gupta rule in the mid-sixth century is unclear, due to the lack of contemporary sources. It could be surmised from the genealogy of the early Pāla kings and their subordinate rulers, recorded in the copper plate inscriptions of the former, that this sub-region also saw the ascendancy of local landed magnates and the growth of *sāmantas*. The Pālas started their political career as the representatives of those landed magnates and established their dominance over the western half of Bengal and eastern Bihar in the eighth century.

The variegated adaptations in the sub-regions of Bengal delineated above show common tendencies at different paces, namely the emergence of local kingships with a class of subordinate rulers under them, which would culminate in the formation of regional kingdoms represented by the Pālas and the Candras. This process of state formation and integration would constitute one factor in the making of Bengal as a region, the political representation of which was the integration of almost all the sub-regions by the Senas, even though just for a short while.

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Formation of Cities and State of Dvaravati

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Dvaravati refers to the early polities from 6th to 9th centuries in Thailand. The name means “Gate to the port in Sanskrit. Although some Chinese texts, such as *the New History of Tang*” and other histories, and Chinese pilgrims’ documents, refer to the existence of the Dvaravati Kingdom, there was no archaeological evidence to prove its existence until two silver coins, inscribed in Pallava letters with “*sridavaravati svarnapunya*” meaning “the merit of the Lord Dvaravati”, were first found at the Buddhist temple Wat Phra Phrathon in Nakhon Pathom in 1943. This type of coins was distributed in the west Chao Phraya River basin, such as U-Thong, Ban Khu Muang, and Dong Khon (Saraya 1999, 24). This area seems to have been the center of Dvaravati. I have divided Dvaravati into two categories: one composed of port polities and inland cities in a wider sense, and another of port polities along the Gulf of Thailand in a narrower sense.



Figure Massive Stupa Khao Klang Noi near Sri Thep.

In the first century B.C.E., many kinds of regalia and commodities were traded on these networks in the inland and South China Sea. For example, from the 4th century B.C.E, bronze drums were distributed in wider areas in Southeast Asia, from North Vietnam to the Moluccas and the west end of the New Guinea Island. Additionally, double-animal-headed earrings and three-knobbed earrings of the Sa-Huynh culture in Vietnam were distributed along the coastal areas of South China Sea, and nephrite stones as the raw material for these earrings were brought from East Taiwan to Southeast Asia (Iizuka 2010, 61–2). On the east coast of Kra Isthmus of Malay Peninsula, many goods of Chinese and Indian origin were found at the site of Khao Sam Keo (Bellina-Pryce 2006, 281–2), including bronze mirrors, a bronze seal, potsherds, and jade pendants of the West Han Dynasty. Furthermore, stone seals with engraved names in South Indian letters, dating between the first century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., and many kinds of glass beads from India were found. Rouletted wares were also distributed in west Java and the northern coast of Bali. Immigrants from India settled in Southeast Asia and thereafter the technique of making glass beads was introduced.

The maritime trade routes between India and Southeast Asia passed Kra Isthmus. Indian merchants arrived at the east coast of the peninsula, proceeded to the east coast, passing the isthmus by land, and then sailed into the Gulf of Thailand on board. The coastal area of the Gulf of Thailand is the nearest of the Indian merchants’