

# A Profile of Archaeology-I

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Bhasu Bihar near Mahasthan District Bogra Terracotta plaque : Composite being with ending in ornamental scrolls

**BANGLADESH LIES IN THE** eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, roughly between the latitudes 20°-30° and 27° North and longitudes 88° and 93° East. One of the youngest among sovereign states of the world, it is nevertheless an ancient country with its roots going far deep. How deep we still do not know; the story has just begun to unfold itself. Already there are traces of Upper Palaeolithic man in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and the Noakhali district, the highland margins on the south-east; and now we have unmistakable evidence of Neolithic settlements in the same hilly regions of Chittagong and Comilla. But for the subsequent period our archaeological record is almost a total blank. It is indeed not before the 4th century A.D. that we are able to trace the missing link again.

In the sphere, as in most others, the geography of Bengal had an important part to play; here nature had a larger share in anticipating and controlling the activities of man.

This land, physically still in the process of formation, is overwhelmingly dominated by a single feature, the rivers. They flush it with their rich red silt-water and make it a new land every year by their amazing system of overflow irrigation and work their will upon the plastic mud to fashion its features with an ease and freedom rarely met with elsewhere in the world. The rivers were, and still are, the high-

ways of the land; and in proximity to them stood the principal towns of ancient times as of today. And life in this region has always been based rice, a crop which must have been growing wildly in the Ganges delta long before the appearance of man. Rice is dependent on three main factors: rivers, monsoons and annual floods. No wonder that our thickest settlements, both ancient and modern, are located in the lowlying areas frequently harassed by shifting rivers, monsoon freaks and heavy floods. The native genius of the people has apparently turned these difficulties into positive advantages by adopting semi-aquatic and amphibian habits. But the archaeologist is very much odds with these very factors and has not yet found a way to overcome them. He often finds the deltaic rivers with their frequent shiftings and enormous silt deposits constantly changing, modifying and at times totally obliterating the known features of the land-surface, making it almost impossible to reconstruct the ancient topography. And the heavy rains, sweeping floods and rank vegetation have played no lesser havoc.

Archaeology is essentially a study of man in his environment. This is more so in the case of Bangladesh. Here man and nature combined to create a distinct and, in some respects, unique entity our ancient called 'Vanga', which gradually grew and developed into 'Vangala', and is now taking

final shape in Bangladesh. Its vast level plain with its high-land fringes and lowland depressions, its rivers, floods and monsoons, and the abundance of water and aquatic life, the variety, colour and profusion of the flora and fauna—all these and such other features have left some mark in almost every sphere of life and activities of its people: in arts and crafts, architecture and sculpture, literature and people: in arts and crafts, architecture and sculpture, literature and music. Since the 13th century, when Islam largely replaced its decadent Buddhism and tainted Brahmanism, the aspects of the country received a more drastic transformation, but the basic factors, both physical and cultural, remained substantially the same. Some understanding of this essential background, in which the creative intelligence of the people found expression, is necessary for an understanding of this distant land of Islam—for an understanding of any or all the elements that have gone into the making of what we broadly call "Bengal" culture.

## PREHISTORY

It is no longer correct to say that Bangladesh has no prehistory, though we still do not know much about it. A chance discovery of a stone celt from Karamati in the Chittagong Hill Tracts and an evolved Upper Palaeolithic hand axe from the hilly Chhagalnaiya in the eastern fringe of Noakhali near the border of Bangladesh, are the only known Old Stone Age material. The oldest evidence, however, comes not from the highlands of Bangladesh but, surprisingly, from the deltaic flats of West Bengal across the border. These crude implements of quartzite found at Deulpara near Diamond Harbour in the 24 Parganas district are estimated to be 100,000 to 300,000 years old. We have no other information regarding the makers of these tools and we cannot fit them at present into any coherent story of human developments in the area.

Our information regarding the Neolithic phase is no better. Previously we had very vague and sketchy information regarding the stray finds of only five specimens of faceted and shouldered tools made of fossil wood, chert and limes-

tone from Sitakund in the Chittagong district. These are described as belonging to the Assam group within the South-East Asian culture complex. Recently, however, we have more than a dozen ground and polished, narrow-butted, hand-axes and chisels, mainly of fossil wood and quartzite, together with some unfinished and half-finished pieces and raw materials from the 8th-9th century levels of the Maina-mati excavations. They show clear affinity with the Neolithic industries of West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. That group happens that red rose even would is roughly dated to the 2nd 1st century B.C. on the basis of solitary finds from the Bangarhi and Tamruk excavations in West Bengal. The fallacy of such dating has come out quite dramatically in the discovery of Sarai Khola, a Neolithic site at Taxila which now fairly dates Sir John Marshall's Neolithic celts excavated from historic Taxila to the 3rd millennium B.C. and earlier. Here in Mainamati, the thinly forested lateritic low hills, fertile valleys and springs with an abundance of fruits, roots and wild life provide an ideal environment for Neolithic settlements. And these Stone Age specimens recovered from occupation levels of the excavation must have originally come from there. In any case there is no earthly reason why the highly civilized Buddhists would like to go back to the Stone Age; these Neolithic finds do not fit in that Buddhist context. In the general time scale of Stone Age India, the Neolithic phase of eastern India is admittedly later than that of western or northern India; but how late it is cannot be determined with any degree of certainty before such tools are discovered in their proper context.

## EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD

The earliest mention of Bengal is found in the religious literature of the Aryans and the geographical writings of the Greeks. No record of that distant past is known, but evidence of Maurya rule in the 3rd century B.C. is provided by the fragmentary Mahasthan stone plaque inscription which

records the earliest known Bengal famine and the excellent measures taken to meet it by the governor of Pundranagar, now identified with the ruins of Mahastha and its environs in the Bogra district of North Bengal. No material remains of this or of the subsequent period, with the exception of a few terracotta figurines showing 'Sunga' (2nd cent. B.C.) characteristics, some punch-marked coins and the so-called NBP pottery, is on record till we come to the Gupta times (4th cent. A.D.). Even for this period there is an utter scarcity of archaeological material.

## GUPTA PERIOD

Samudragupta (335-375 A.D.), the great Gupta emperor, conquered nearly the whole of India including Bengal in the middle of the 4th century A.D. Only Samatata, the trans Meghna territories of Comilla-Noakhali, still maintained a semblance of independence as a "frontier kingdom" (as mentioned in his Allahabad Pillar inscription). It was probably absorbed during the time of his son, Chandragupta II (376-415 A.D.). Significantly, gold coins of these two emperors have been recovered from the Mainamati excavations. More significantly, the only known Gupta record from South-East Bengal, a lengthy copper-plate grant of Varnagupta (507 A.D.), the last Gupta emperor, was discovered in this very area. It gives an unusually detailed description and archaeologically valuable information regarding the geography and topography of the locality recorded in the grant. Gunikagrahara of this record has been identified with Gunaighar village, the finds not about 12 miles north of Mainamati. The village itself rests in an extensive Gupta period ruins including those of a fine Gupta temple concealed in the debris of a higher mound. It is a pity that the villager now have almost totally removed the temple, brick by brick, during the last few years, but the lower remains are still intact. The Gunighar grant was issued from Kriouara, a Gupta centre believed to be somewhere in the Comilla district.

Only two other monuments, both at Mahasthan and generally assigned to the end of this period, are known.

The most ancient remains of historic Bengal lies at Mahasthan near Bogra in North Bengal. The imposing old fort with its palaces, temples and shrines, and the innumerable mounds and monuments dotted outside for about four miles all around except the east, where flows the historic Karatoya, represent Pundranagar, the ancient city and its suburbs. It was the provincial capital of the Mauryas in the 3rd century B.C.; and so it remained under the imperial Guptas from the 4th to 6th cent. A.D. Its most glorious period, however, was under the Buddhist Pala rulers of North Bengal and Bihar, from the 8th to 11th centuries A.D. and to this period belong most of the visible remains of Mahasthan including the oblong fort, some 5000 feet by 4000 feet and 15 feet high, surrounded by a 11-feet thick brick defence wall. Excavation has revealed its rectangular plan and also exposed number of structures inside including two large temples on Bairag Bhita. More important structures, however, remain hidden below the modern 'Mazar' (tomb) which occupies the highest mound. Recently, a stone inscription and large life-size stone sculptures of interesting types have been recovered from this area.

Close outside the fort near the rest house, a large and massive Vishnu temple on Govinda Bhita is ascribed to late-Gupta period on insufficient grounds. Its partial excavation yielded ornamental bricks and sculptured terracotta panels of the characteristic Bengal type but no clear evidence of Gupta age.

The most remarkable monument of Mahasthan, however, lies at Gokul, a village situated about a mile to the south of the fort. It is a cellular construction of rectangular compartment packed solidly with earth as the base of a tall, massive podium for crowning a stupa or temple. This type of construction was found especially suitable for river-



Salban Vihara, Mainamati, Dist. Comilla Terracotta plaque Warrior with sword and shield A fine pose with graceful movement almost like floating in the air like a Vidyadhara

rine Bengal to raise the levels of her sacred buildings on the flat, monsoon-ridden plains. This massive 28 feet high cruciform brick mound at Gokul still retains on top an octagonal base, probably for a circular Buddhist stupa, replaced later during the Sena period (12th cent. A.D.) by a square-shape Siva temple. A number of terracottas ascribed to Gupta period were recovered from the excavation, but no chronology was established.

On the outskirts of the old city, three to four miles to the north-west of the fort, lies a concentration of Buddhist ruins. It is with one of the outlying mounds, the extensive Buddhist ruins at Bhasu Bihar that we are engaged at present. We will come back to it shortly.

## POST-GUPTA PERIOD

Gopalganj in the Faridpur district today is one of the most illcommunicated lowlying areas in Bangladesh. Surprisingly, it is this backward water that Kotlipara or Chandravmanakota, the unexplored metropolis of the earliest known independent kingdom of Bengal, is situated. From a number of inscriptions and coins we learn that three sovereign kings: Gopachandra Dharmaditya and Samacharadeva were ruling in Bengal in the 6th century A.D. Five of their seven copper-plate grants and 8 post-Gupta gold coins were recovered from this

place. Kotlipara with its visible ruins and mysterious past is a tantalizing challenge to the archaeologist.

## BUDDHIST PERIOD

That leads us to the Buddhist period of Bangladesh, the last great phase of that remarkable civilization which, though virtually extinct in the land of its birth, flourished in Bangladesh from the 7th to 11th centuries A.D.

The earliest known Buddhist rulers in Bangladesh are the Khadgas of Samatata, known from a number of their inscriptions, coins and sculptures, and from the accounts of the Chinese travellers. Their capital, Karmanta Vusaka, has been identified by N. K. Bhattacharya with Badamta in the Comilla district. We reject this on sound archaeological basis, as we also do his identification of Chandri Mura mound with the Samatata capital of Devavarata on similar grounds. As our field investigations now reveal, there is no visible trace of ancient remains at Budkamta. Its small mound is modern and its name cannot be significant as there are at least a dozen villages in the district with the name of Kamta or Javakanta, all with comparable finds of antiquities. Similarly, the isolated mound of Chandri Mura is too small to conceal the remains of a capital city; the surface indications suggest the existence of a large temple here. For the lost capital we must look elsewhere, probably towards Queen Mainamati's Palace mound on the Gumti river at the northern extremity of the Mainamati hills.

## THE KHADGAS, 7TH CENT.

No Khadga monument is known except the damaged Deulbari temple, now totally gone. However, our recent explorations in the area have revealed interesting facts. About 14 miles South of Comilla and not very far from Deulbari lie the remains of two stupas, one still remarkably well-preserved, at Noapara village on the west side of the Comilla-Chittagong highway. More interesting are the ruins of a very extensive settlement site called Vardhan Mura on the other side of the road. A large modern village on its top has been built almost entirely with the ancient bricks, and the ruins extend far outside. These mounds and monuments almost certainly belong to the Khadga period as indicated by the surface finds.