

Spread of Civilization in Eastern India

Signs of Civilization

A region is considered to be civilized if its people know writing, set up a system for collecting taxes, and maintaining order, form social classes and produce specialists for performing priestly, administrative, and production functions. Above all, a civilized society is able to produce enough to sustain not only the actual producers comprising artisans and peasants but also consumers who are not engaged in production. A combination of these elements makes for civilization. They were apparent in a recognizable form very late in a large part of eastern India. Virtually no written records have been found in the greater portions of eastern MP and the adjoining areas of Orissa, West Bengal, Bangladesh, and Assam that relate to a period prior to the mid-fourth century AD.

The period from the fourth to the seventh century is remarkable for the diffusion of an advanced rural economy, formation of state systems, and delineation of social classes in eastern MP, Orissa, eastern Bengal, southeast Bengal, and Assam. This is indicated by the distribution of a substantial number of Sanskrit inscriptions in these areas in Gupta times. Many inscriptions are dated in the Gupta era and appear in the form of land grants made by feudatory princes and others for religious purposes to brahmanas, Vaishnavite temples, and Buddhist monasteries. These beneficiaries played an important role in spreading and strengthening the elements of an advanced culture. The process can be understood by attempting a survey by region.

Orissa, and Eastern and Southern MP

Kalinga, or coastal Orissa south of the Mahanadi, rose to importance under Ashoka, though a strong state had been founded in that area in the first century BC. Its ruler, Kharavela had advanced as far as Magadha. In the first and second centuries AD, the ports of Orissa conducted a brisk trade in pearls, ivory, and muslin. Excavations at Shishupalgarh, the site of Kalinganagari, of Kharavela's capital at a distance of 60 km from Bhubaneswar, yielded several Roman objects indicating trade contacts with the Roman empire. However, the greater part of Orissa, particularly north Orissa, neither experienced state formation nor much commercial activity. In the fourth century Kosala and Mahakantara figured in the list of the regions conquered by Samudragupta, and covered parts of northern and western Orissa. From the second half of the fourth century to the sixth century, several states were formed in Orissa, and at least five of them can be clearly identified. The most important of those was the state of the Matharas, also known as Pitribhaktas, who at the peak of their power dominated the area between the Mahanadi and the Krishna. Their contemporaries and neighbours were the Vasishthas, the Nalas, and the Manas. The Vasishthas ruled on the borders of Andhra in south Kalinga, the Nalas in the forest area of Mahakantara, and the Manas in the coastal area in the north beyond the Mahanadi. Each state developed its system of taxation, administration, and military organization. The Nalas, and probably the Manas, also evolved their system of coinage. Each kingdom favoured the brahmanas with land grants and even invited them from outside, and most kings performed Vedic sacrifices not only for spiritual merit but also for power, prestige, and legitimacy.

During this period elements of advanced culture were not confined to the coastal belt known as Kalinga, but were also apparent in the other parts of Orissa. The find of Nala gold coins in the tribal Bastar area in MP is significant. It presupposes an economic system in which gold money was used in large transactions, and served as a medium of payment to high functionaries. Similarly, the Manas seem to have issued copper coins, which implies the use of metal money even by artisans and peasants. The various states added to their income by forming new fiscal units in rural areas. The Matharas created a district called Mahendrabhoga in the area of the Mahendra mountains, and also ruled over a district called Dantayavagubhoga, which apparently supplied ivory and rice-gruel to its administrators though it had been created in a backward area. The Matharas made endowments called *agraharas*, which consisted of land and income from villages and were meant to support the religious and

educational activities of the brahmanas. Some *agraharas* had to pay taxes although elsewhere in the country they were tax-free. The induction of the brahmanas through land grants in tribal, forest, and red soil areas brought new lands under cultivation and introduced better methods of agriculture, based on a better understanding of weather conditions. Formerly the year was divided into three units, each of four months, and time was reckoned on the basis of three seasons. Under the Matharas, in the mid-fifth century, people began the practise of dividing the year into twelve lunar months. This implied a sound idea of weather conditions which was useful for agricultural operations.

In coastal Orissa, writing had certainly been known since the third century BC, and inscriptions up to the mid-fourth century AD were written in Prakrit, but from about AD 350 onwards Sanskrit began to be used. What is more significant, charters in this language appear outside the coastal belt beyond the Mahanadi in the north. Thus, the art of writing and the use of the Sanskrit language spread over a substantial part of Orissa, and some of the finest Sanskrit verses have been found in the epigraphs of the period. Sanskrit served as the vehicle not only of brahmanical religion and culture but also of property laws and social regulations in the new area. Verses from the Puranas and Dharmashastras are quoted in Sanskrit charters, and kings claim to be the preservers of the varna system. The affiliation of the people to the culture of the Gangetic basin is emphasized. A dip in the Ganges at Prayag at the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna was considered holy, and victorious kings visited it.

Bengal

As regards Bengal, parts of north Bengal, now in Bogra district, provide evidence of the prevalence of writing during Ashoka's reign. An inscription indicates several settlements maintaining a storehouse filled with coins and food grains for the upkeep of Buddhist monks. Clearly, the local peasants could spare a part of their produce to pay taxes and make gifts. Also, people of this area knew Prakrit and professed Buddhism. Similarly, an inscription found in the coastal district of Noakhali in south-east Bengal indicates that the people of the area knew Prakrit and the Brahmi script in the second century BC. However, for the greater part of Bengal we do not hear anything until up to the fourth century AD. In about the middle of the fourth century, a king with the title 'maharaja' ruled in Pokharna on the Damodara in Bankura district. He knew Sanskrit and was a devotee of Vishnu, for whose worship he possibly granted a village.

The area situated between the Ganges and the Brahmaputra now covering Bangladesh emerged as a settled and fairly Sanskrit-educated region in the fifth and sixth centuries. The Gupta governors, who seem to have become independent after about AD 550, occupied north Bengal; some part of it may also have been seized by the rulers of Kamarupa. Local vassal princes called *samanta* maharajas had created their own administrative apparatus and built their military organization consisting of horses, elephants, foot soldiers, and boats to fight the local peasantry. By AD 600 the area came to be known as Gauda and functioned as an independent state ruled by Shashanka, Harsha's adversary.

For a century from AD 432–3 we notice a series of land sale documents recorded on copperplates in Pundravardhanabhukti, which covered almost the whole of north Bengal, now mostly in Bangladesh. Most of the land transactions indicate that land was purchased with gold coins called *dinara*. However, once land was given for religious purposes, the donees did not have to pay any tax. The land transactions show the involvement of leading scribes, merchants, artisans, landed classes, and the like in local administration, which was manned by governors appointed by the Gupta emperors. The land sale documents not only indicate the existence of different social groups and local functionaries but also shed valuable light on the expansion of agriculture. Generally, land purchased for religious endowments is described as fallow, uncultivated and, therefore, untaxed. Without doubt, the effect of the grants was to bring such plots of land within the purview of cultivation and settlement.

The deltaic portion of Bengal formed by the Brahmaputra and called Samatata, which was made to acknowledge the authority of Samudragupta in the fourth century, covered south-east Bengal. A part of this territory may have been populated and important enough to attract the attention of the Gupta conqueror. However, possibly it was not ruled by brahmanized princes, and consequently it neither used Sanskrit nor adopted the varna system as was the case in north Bengal. From about AD 525 onwards, the area developed a fairly organized state covering Samatata and a portion of Vanga which lay on the western boundary of Samatata. It is called the kingdom of Samatata or Vanga whose rulers, including Sama Haradeva, issued a substantial number of gold coins in the second half of the sixth century.

In addition to this state, in the seventh century, there existed the state of the Khadgas, literally swordsmen, in the Dhaka area. There was also the kingdom of a brahmana feudatory called Lokanatha and that of the Ratas, both in the Comilla area. All these princes of south-east and central Bengal issued land grants in the sixth and seventh centuries. Like the Orissa kings, they too created

agraharas. The land charters show the cultivation of Sanskrit, in which some sophisticated metres were used in the second half of the seventh century. At the same time, they attest to the expansion of cultivation and rural settlements. A fiscal and administrative unit called *Dandabhukti* was formed in the border areas between Bengal and Orissa. *Danda* means punishment, and *bhukti* enjoyment. The unit was apparently to pacify and suppress the tribal inhabitants of that region and may have promoted Sanskrit and other elements of culture in the tribal areas. This was also true of Vardhamanabhukti (Burdwan) of which we hear in the sixth century. In south-east Bengal in the Faridpur area, five plots of land granted to a Buddhist monastery were declared waste and water-logged and they paid no tax to the state. Similarly, 200 brahmanas were given a large area in Comilla district within a forest region full of deer, boars, buffaloes, tigers, serpents, and the like. All such instances are sufficient proof of the progress of colonization and civilization in new areas.

The two centuries from about the middle of the fifth appear to have been very momentous in the history of Bengal. They saw the progress of Brahmanism and the coming of Buddhism. The statues of the Buddha are virtually non-existent in early centuries, after which they are found in Bodh-Gaya, Sanchi, Mathura, and Gandhara. In the fifth century, however, statues were set up at several places in Bengal. In early medieval times, monasteries were established not only in Bihar but also in north Bengal. The fifth to seventh centuries also saw the formation of about half a dozen states, some large and others small; some independent and others feudatory. However, each had its victory or military camp where it maintained its infantry, cavalry, elephants, and boats. Each had its fiscal and administrative districts with its machinery for tax collection and maintenance of order. Each practised expansion through war and through land grants to Buddhists and brahmanas. The number of endowments had increased to such a degree that eventually an officer called *agraharika* had to be appointed to look after them. Land gifts led to rural expansion and created new rights in land. Generally, land was owned by individual families, but its sale and purchase were subject to the overall control of the local communities dominated by leading artisans, merchants, landowners, and scribes, who assisted the local agents of the king. However, ordinary cultivators were also consulted about the sale of land in the village. It seems that originally land could not be alienated without the consent of the tribe or the community. Therefore, even when individuals owned their land and made gifts for religious purposes, the community exercised its say in the matter. Probably, at an earlier stage, the community donated land to the priests for religious services and paid taxes to the princes for military and

political services. Later the king received from the community a substantial part of the land and arrogated to himself much more, which enabled him to make land grants. The king was entitled to taxes and also enjoyed rights over waste and fallow land. The administrative functionaries of each state knew Sanskrit, the official language. They were also familiar with the teachings of the Puranas and the Dharmashastras. The period is therefore very significant because it witnessed the development of civilization in this area.

Assam

Kamarupa, coterminous with the Brahmaputra basin running from east to west, shot into prominence in the seventh century. Excavations, however, show settlements in Ambari near Guwahati from the fourth century of the Christian era. In the same century Samudragupta received tributes from Davaka and Kamarupa. Davaka possibly accounted for a portion of Nowgong district, and Kamarupa covered the Brahmaputra basin. The rulers who submitted to Samudragupta may have been chiefs living on the tributes collected from the tribal peasantry.

The Ambari excavations near Guwahati show that settlements were fairly developed in the sixth and seventh centuries, and this is supported by inscriptions. By the beginning of the sixth century, the use of Sanskrit and the art of writing are clearly in evidence. The Kamarupa kings adopted the title *varman*, which obtained not only in northern, central, and western India but also in Bengal, Orissa, Andhra, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. This title, which means armour and symbolizes a warrior, was given to the kshatriyas by Manu. The kshatriyas strengthened their position through land grants to the brahmanas. In the seventh century Bhaskaravarman emerged as the head of a state which controlled a substantial part of the Brahmaputra basin and some areas beyond it. Buddhism also acquired a foothold, and the Chinese traveller Hsuan Tsang (Hieun Tsang) visited this state.

The Formative Phase

Although different parts of eastern India acquired prominence at different times, the formative phase ranged from the fourth to the seventh century. During this period, writing, Sanskrit learning, Vedic rituals, brahmanical social classes, and state systems spread and developed in eastern MP, north Orissa, West Bengal,

parts of Bangladesh, and Assam. Cultural contacts with the Gupta empire stimulated the spread of civilization in the eastern zone. North Bengal and north-west Orissa came under Gupta rule; in other areas of these regions, the Gupta influence can be inferred from the use of the Gupta era dates in inscriptions. In Bengal new states were formed by feudatories, who maintained a substantial number of elephants, horses, boats, etc., in their military camps. They obviously collected regular taxes from the rural communities to maintain these professional armies. For the first time, the fifth and sixth centuries clearly show large-scale writing, use of Sanskrit, formation of a varna society, and the growth of Buddhism and Brahmanism in the form of Shaivism and Vaishnavism in this area. Though, the remnants of communal authority over land continued, there is evidence of private property in land, and the use of gold coins with which it could be purchased. All this presupposes an advanced food producing economy. It was apparently based on iron ploughshare agriculture, wet paddy cultivation, and knowledge of a variety of crafts. Kalidasa refers to the transplantation of paddy seedling in Vanga; but we do not know whether the practice was indigenous or came from Magadha. North Bengal produced high quality sugarcane. All this made for sufficient agricultural production to sustain both people and government, and fostered widespread rural settlements in such areas as were either sparsely inhabited or unoccupied. A connected narrative of the princes and dynasties and their feudatories, all revolving around a central power cannot be written, but there is no doubt about cultural evolution and the development of civilization in the outlying provinces in the eastern zone.

The decline and fall of the Gupta empire therefore coincided with considerable progress in the outlying regions. Many obscure areas, which were possibly ruled by tribal chiefs and were thinly settled, came into limelight. This applied to the red soil areas of West Bengal, north Orissa, and the adjoining areas of MP, which formed part of Jharkhand and were difficult to cultivate and settle. It applied even more to the jungle areas with alluvial soil and heavy rainfall in Bangladesh and to the Brahmaputra basin.

Chronology

(BC)

3 C

Writing known in Orissa.

2 C

In south-east Bengal people knew Prakrit and the Brahmi script.

- 1 C In Kalinga, south of the Mahanadi, a strong state was founded by Kharavela who advanced up to Magadha.
- (AD)
- 1–2 C Orissa conducted a brisk trade in pearls, ivory, and muslin.
- 4 C Settlements in Ambari near Guwahati. Samatata, the deltaic portion of Bengal, acknowledged the authority of Samudragupta who conquered Kosala and Mahakantara. No written records exist for the study of the life of the people in eastern MP and the adjoining areas of Orissa, West Bengal, Bangladesh, and Assam till the middle of this century though Prakrit inscriptions figure in coastal Orissa.
- 350 Around this date, a maharaja ruled in Pokharna on the Damodara in Bankura district. He knew Sanskrit. From this time onwards, Sanskrit began to be used.
- 4–6 C Several states formed in Orissa, and five of them can be identified.
- 4–7 C Diffusion of an advanced rural economy, state formation, and delineation of social classes in eastern MP, Orissa, Bengal, and Assam. A formative phase in writing, Sanskrit learning, Vedic rituals, etc.
- 432–3 Land sale documents recorded on copperplates in Pundravardhanabhukti.
- 5 C From about the middle of this century, half a dozen states were formed. People began the practice of dividing the year into twelve lunar months.
- 5–6 C Use of Sanskrit, formation of a varna society, and progress of Buddhism and Brahmanism. The area between the Ganges and the Brahmaputra (Bangladesh) emerged as a settled and fairly Sanskrit-educated area.
- 525 A fairly organized state in Samatata and a part of Vanga on the western boundary of Samatata.
- 6 C In the second half of this century, the rulers of Samatata issued a substantial number of gold coins. A fiscal and administrative unit, called Vardhamanabhukti (Burdwan), was created to pacify and suppress the

tribal inhabitants of that region.

- 550 The Gupta governors, probably independent after this date, occupied north Bengal.
- 600 The area covered by Bangladesh came to be known as Gauda, and became an independent state ruled by Shashanka.
- 7 C Kamarupa, coterminous with the Brahmaputra basin from east to west, rose to prominence. Bhaskaravarman emerged as the head of a state that controlled the Brahmaputra basin and some other areas. The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang visited Bhaskarvarman's state. The state of Khadgas was formed in the Dhaka area. The kingdom of a brahmana feudatory called Lokanatha and that of the Ratas were formed in the Comilla area. These princes created *agraharas*. Land charters evidence the cultivation of Sanskrit with some sophisticated metres.