

Literary Culture of Early Medieval Bengal: The Non-literates as Recipients in the Periphery of the World of Literates

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Abstract:

This paper examines how a literary culture flourishes through the writings of early medieval Bengal and a society evolves around that culture. The emergence of a regional literary style from the 6th to 13th century CE through the study of the inscriptions highlights how an overall Sanskrit literary style had emerged in early medieval Bengal and in its wider orbit. This diverse literary style from the sixth to the thirteenth century CE further illuminates a complex society associated with it that evolved through time. Along with the presence of a literati and literate class, this society also witnessed the overwhelming gleanings of the so-called non-literate class in the form of oral recipients of these compositions.

Key Notes: Sanskrit, Literary, Bengal, Non-literate, Recipient.

Introduction:

The literary efflorescence of a regional literary culture in early medieval Bengal is manifested not only in literary texts produced from the 11th-12th centuries but, also in the inscribed words. The inscriptions indicate the flowering, maturity and even brilliant oration in the use of Sanskrit language. They are mostly land charters in prose and verse, but it is in the praśasti section that we come across a burst of literary excellence. On the other hand, however, the details of the land charters in prose also exhibit profound treatment of local practical knowledge at various levels. The expression of the compositions become more ornate as the dynasties take deeper roots and wield authority over larger domains. It may not be wrong to propose that this emergence of the regional literary style is more clearly tractable from the 6th to 13th century CE only through the study of the compositional aspects of the inscriptions which highlight how an overall Sanskrit literary style had emerged in early medieval Bengal and in its wider orbit. This variety of literary styles which spanned from the sixth to the thirteenth century CE was cultivated within a complex society which evolved through time. Within that society also exists the overwhelmingly numerous so-called non-literate class who were on the periphery of the world of literacy but were the recipients of these compositions in an indirect oral form and were impacted by the order created and valorized by these literary creations.

As far as society is concerned, we may first mention Ramesh Chandra Majumdar's edited volume, *The History of Bengal*. This work provides the basic socio-economic and political framework for the early history Bengal.¹ But it is with Nihar Ranjan Ray's *Bāṅgālīr Itihas: Ādi parba*, that we truly enter into an analytic frame of social history. He perceived ancient Bengal society in a new light, moving away from a narrative of facts to analytic examination of frameworks of State, polity and economy. He delved deep into understanding the social structure, social strata, class, language and literature of Bengal.² This general social structure refers to a stratified society and its internal world with diverse social classes and

functional communities. Attention may be drawn to the rich work of Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya who attempted to understand the distribution of early rural settlements in Gupta and post-Gupta Bengal in the light of inscriptions. Besides, he re-examined the concept of a village community, the search for hierarchies among village residents, and the changing nature of relationship between apex political authorities and villages.³ In recent times, Ryosuke Furui has made an in-depth study of the social structure of early medieval Bengal based on the epigraphic records. He wanted to interpret the early medieval rural society of south Asia through the agricultural text *Kṛṣiparāśara* (c.11th century).⁴ He found the rural society of early medieval Bengal to evolve through phases of agrarian relations from 400 CE to 13th century CE, and highlighted the hierarchy in power relations evident in the agrarian structure. He talked about the presence of subordinate rulers, landed magnets, grassroots cultivators and agrarian laborers.⁵ Furui has also thrown deeper light on rural social networks and integrations highlighting the emergence of regional features of varṇa-jāti system in early medieval Bengal.⁶ In the process he has offered important clues to the emergence of the brāhmaṇas as a social group with clear socio-cultural dominance and their emergence into influential landholders, having built genealogical networks and links with both the royal court and local elite clientele, and the wider rural society.⁷ In terms of incorporating the diverse local tradition into the Brahmanical social order, Kunal Chakraborty has shown how in early medieval times Brahmanical culture integrated the local tradition by propagating the ideals of the Bengal purāṇas through dialogic and ritual forms.⁸ Suchandra Ghosh and Sayantani Pal illumined the life of elite and non-elite groups and the people of the lower strata in the varied sub-regions of Bengal up to c. 1300 CE.⁹ These works offered several significant clues, some of which have helped in marking the social orbit of the literary culture which forms one of the major aspects of the present research.

Tracking the evolution of Literary style:

Thematically speaking the contents and tone of the inscriptions present rich historical evidence for the major sociopolitical aspects of history through phases of evolution. For example, some of the inscriptions were completely devoted to recording clauses of land charters like the copperplates of Pradyumnabandhu in Puṇḍra, the copperplates of Dharmāditya, Dvādaśāditya, Gopacandra and Samācāradeva in Vaṅga and the copperplates of Gopacandra in Rāḍha during the 6th century CE where specific and detailed documentation of land sale figures, land measurement units and land evaluation methods can be seen. This kind of documentation illuminates the reorganization of land administration and the economic functions of the burgeoning polities in the initial phase of the early medieval regional history. On the other hand, as a royal praśasti the Nidhanpur copperplate was a symbol of poetic extravagance. Here, an ornate praśasti is composed to glorify the royal majesty. Again, the inscriptions of the Rāta and Nātha rulers were of a different genre in which we observe stakes made to claim a position as local sovereign rulers. A somewhat extended form of the same style is seen in the inscriptions of the Khaḍgas and early Devas. There were some copperplates where a wonderful combination of praśasti and land charter is observed and these were on the increase with the dawn of the Pāla rule. The Khalimpur copperplate of Dharmapāla, for example, the Nalanda copperplate of Devapāla, the Pascimbhag copperplate of Śrīcandra, the Belavo copperplate of Bhojavarman, Naihati copperplate of Vallālasena, Govindapur, Tarpandighi, Anulia and Madhainagar copperplate of Lakṣmaṇasena, etc., bear this trend. The increased influence of the subordinate rulers in Bengal from the time of the Pālas is reflected in some

of the voluminous praśastis written for them. For example, the Badal pillar inscription of Guravamiśra, Bhaturia Rock Inscription of Yasodāsa, the Bhubaneswar Praśasti of Bhaṭṭabhavadeva etc. In this genre also belonged the Kamauli Copperplate of Vaidyadeva, an appointed ruler of Kumārapāla in Kāmarūpa. The only difference is that here Vaidyadeva also granted land charters, reflecting his sovereign authority as a ruler. What stood out from all this was the Deopara Rock Inscription of Vijayasena, which was a royal praśasti and a subtle reflection of rural society.

This variety of literary styles which spanned from the sixth to the thirteenth century CE was cultivated within a complex society which evolved through time. From a literary perspective, we can assume the society in early medieval Bengal to have comprised of a class of literati, who were the composers of this rich literature whether in text or in the inscribed words and also were the intellectuals and erudite scholars. Besides, there was a literate class who also participated in these compositional programs as well as being the primary consumers of these creations, whether of the more literary forms or of the more practical informative literature. Finally, there was the overwhelmingly numerous non-literate class who were on the periphery of this world of literacy but who were the recipients of these compositions in an indirect oral form and were impacted by the order created and valorized by these literary creations.

The peripheries of literate society: Medas, andhrakas and caṇḍālas

Meera Visvanathan has pointed to the existence of ‘different communities of response to interpreting the same text in different ways.’¹⁰ It is in this context that the mention of certain social classes in the inscriptions gives us the possibility to assume a non-literate class in Bengal during the early medieval period. The copperplates of early medieval Bengal, in the Pāla period, have been addressed to rural residents of whom brāhmaṇas were foremost, headed by mahattamas and kuṭumbins reaching to some lowest strata of the society like medas, andhrakas and caṇḍālas. In Varendra and Magadha, medas, andhrakas, and caṇḍālas denoted social groups during the Pāla period. They were placed at the bottom of society and were kept out of the village.¹¹

In the Candra grants, general cultivators (‘kṣetrakara’) were included in the list of the addressee. The Mainamati copperplate of Laḍahacandra referred to Rural residents like supakāra (cook), vardhaki (carpenter) and kaṃsāra (brazier) in Samataṭa during the 11th century CE.¹² In the 10th century, during the rule of the Kāmbojas in Daṇḍabhukti, Rāḍha, the rural residents, for example, the vyavahārins accompanied by karaṇas and cultivators accompanied by residents have been referred as addressee.¹³ Landholders like kārada and bhārada have been mentioned in the metal vase inscription of rājādhirāja Attākaradeva pertaining to Harikela.¹⁴ The Varman and Sena grants also mentioned addresses like janapadas, kṣetrakaras as rural residents. There are some social classes among which the chances of literacy were very low like the kṣetrakaras, medas, andhras, caṇḍālas and various other artisanal classes. They have been mentioned as a category of the addressee in the inscriptions. In this case, we can rely on the information provided by Ryosuke Furui to shed light on the needs of these lower-class people in society. According to Furui, in Varendra, in the field of agrarian expansion, they served the need of agrarian laborers during the reign of the Pālas.¹⁵ In Samataṭa-Śrīhaṭṭa area also, kṣetrakaras served the

need of agrarian laborers during the reign of the Candras. This scenario was the same during the Varman and Sena times. So, it can be said that they were quite aware of the nature of the land. Whoever drew up these copperplates or land grant documents also needed to be aware of the same. Perhaps they would have learned about this through the aforementioned agricultural laborers who belonged to the so-called marginal section of the society. But the question here is, how are they addressed and if so, how could they be aware of the content of the inscriptions in terms of their limited literacy? In this context, we can cite a verse from Vijayasena's Deopara inscription where women of urban descent used to identify village women with various precious gems with their familiar objects. Like pearls with seeds of cotton, emeralds with leaves of śākhā, silver coins with bottle gourd flowers, gold with the blooming flowers of the creepers of pumpkin-gourd etc. ('muktāḥ karpāsavījairmarkataśakalaṁ śākapatralālvū puṣpai rūpyāṇi ratnaṁ pariṇatibhiduraiḥ kuṣibhirdāḍimānām kuṣmāṇḍivallarīnām bikasitakusumaiḥ kāñcanaṁ nāgarībhiḥ śikṣyante jatprasādāvahuvibhavajuṣāṁ joṣitoḥ śrotrijāṇām').¹⁶ Kunal Chakrabarti suggests that various professional narrators retold the puranic myths and legends in vernacular so that the native people can understand them whereas they were written by brāhmaṇa authors in incomprehensible Sanskrit language and were intended for the local clientele.¹⁷ In an all-India context, Meera Visvanathan showed in the light of early historical evidence during 300 BCE- 250 CE, how in a time of limited literacy, the common man was made aware of a written culture through an oral propagation.¹⁸ To take an example from a context historically widely different but culturally resonating with the process we are discussing here, we may refer to an observation made with regard to a similar phenomenon from the late Roman empire (CE 337 to CE 425). Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey's work in this historical context brings out the seminal significance of oral communication as a mode of dissemination of literary culture, creating a bridge between the literate and the non-literate.¹⁹

It may be surmised that in the early medieval period there was a similar tendency in Bengal. Here, too, the locals became aware of this literary culture in the vernacular or through oral dissemination or visual display. As stated in the inscriptions, the designation of the messenger ('dūtaka') had a special significance in this case. The presence of this term in inscriptions proves that professionals were hired to transmit its content.

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