CHAPTER II

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING OF THE DISTRICT OF MURSHIDABAD

The present district of Murshidabad, West Bengal, the northern most district of Presidency division, lies between 23˚43' and 24˚52' north latitude and 87˚ 49' and 88˚ 44' east longitude. It has an area of 5316.11 square kms and is the fourth largest district of West Bengal (O’MALLEY 1997: 1). The district is bounded along the north and north eastern parts by the district of Malda (West Bengal) and Rajshahi district of Bangladesh, on the south and south-east bounded by the districts of Bardhaman and Nadia respectively and on the west and north-west by the districts of Birbhum of and Pakur and Sahibgunj districts of the modern state of Jharkhand. The river Bhagirathi flowing from north to south divides the district almost into two equal parts. The area to the west of the river is known as Rāḍha and that lying to its east is known as Bāgdī or Bāgrī.

The geographical area of Rāḍha is a continuation of the Chhotanagpur plateau and the older alluvium plain of the lower Gangetic valley. This part is high and slightly undulating and it has greatest elevation along the western boundary of the district of Birbhum. So far as the ancient geography of the district is concerned it was a part of the geo-cultural unit of Rāḍha and later on it was more specifically known as Uttara Rāḍha maṇḍala and during the rule of Laksmaṇasena it was an integral part of Kaṅkagrāma bhukti, whereas the eastern parts roughly belonged to Vyāghrataṭī maṇḍala (?). Some scholars opined that, the western side of the district was a part of Kajaṅgala (Rajmahal). The Bāgdī/Bāgrī or the area east of Bhagirathi is an extension of the ordinary alluvial plain of West
Bengal. It is bounded by the rivers Ganga, Bhagirathi and Jalangi. The whole area is low and exposed to inundation. The river system of the district is composed of the Ganges and its tributaries and distributaries. The two fold physiographic division of the district has left its mark on the culture, religion, landscape and demography. Geographically, the present district has a strategic location, as it is between the north and south Bengal and is well connected through the Ganga/Padma/ Bhagirathi river systems.

**Murshidabad District: Origin, Boundaries and Present Administrative divisions**

The name ‘Murshidabad’ has been derived from the name Makhsusabad a medieval capital of the Bengal *subah* of Murshid Quli Khan. In the year 1701, Murshid Quli Khan was appointed as *diwan* of Bengal. After the promulgation of an Act the name was changed from Makhsusabad to Murshidabad in the year 1705 (O’MALLEY 1997: 31). The district is very famous for his/her historical significance of the medieval and late medieval periods. It is true that the Islamic period in Murshidabad is generally highlighted and on the other hand the reconstruction of its early medieval phenomenon lies neglected. The present district has five sub-divisions and twenty six blocks.

According to the Brahmānda section of the Bhavisya Purāna the name of the district was Morasudabad. The Riyazu-s-Salatin says that the place was called Makhsusabad after a merchant named Makhsus Khan who built a sarai there (BHATTACHARYA 1979:1). Todormall, the revenue minister of Akbar had divided Bengal into 19 *circars* or *sarkars*. The district was a unit of such fine *Sarkar* namely Sarkar Tanda or Audumbara comprising the northern Rāḍha and Bāgdī. Part of Bāgdī and Sothern
Rāḍha were the part of Muhmudabad and Satgaon Sarkar respectively. Sarifabad Sarkar was composed of Fatehsing parganas (presently Mahalandi, Nabagram, Khargram) and Barbakabad was composed of present areas of Beldanga, Naoda, Domkal, Raninagar etc, (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 3).

The boundaries of the district altered from time to time. The villages and blocks of the border area of the district have been exchanged with the neighboring districts, states and countries. According to Revenue Survey by Col. Gastrell during 1852-55, the district has nineteen police station namely Shumshergunj, Sooty, Palsa, Mirzapoor, Khamra (now Raghunathgunj), Dewan Surai (now Lalgola), Ranee Talas, Goas (now Raninagar), Jellinghee, Nawada, Burwa, Haripara (now Hureepara), Dowlatbazar, Northern City Thanas (now Kandi) Southern City Thanas (now Beldanga), Chyeendanga (Amritkundu) Kuleeunganj, Budrehat (now Sagardighi), Gowkurn, Khurgaon and Bhurutpur (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 6).

The present shape of the district has remained more or less constant since 1879. The only change in the jurisdiction made since 1879 appears to be the transfer of four villages from Rajshahi of Bangladesh to the district. Internally, there have been adjustments of Thanas and sub-divisions, even as late as 1931. There was some confusion between India and Bangladesh regarding the ownership of the river island of the river of Padma. This confusion has been solved after the appointment of Bagge Tribunal of 1949 (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 7).
At present the district of Murshidabad has five sub divisions. The following table shows the development blocks.

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<th>Sl no</th>
<th>Jangipur Sub-division</th>
<th>Baharampur Sub-division</th>
<th>Kandi Sub-division</th>
<th>Lalbagh Sub-division</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Farakka</td>
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<td>Kandi</td>
<td>Bhagabangola I</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Suti I</td>
<td>Beldanga</td>
<td>Khargram</td>
<td>Bhagabangola II</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Suti II</td>
<td>Rejinagar</td>
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<td>Jiagunj</td>
<td>Raninagar I</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Samsergunj</td>
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<td>Bharatpur I</td>
<td>Murshidabad</td>
<td>Raninagar II</td>
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<td>Sagardighi</td>
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<td>Bharatpur II</td>
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<td>Raghunathganj I</td>
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**Rāḍha**

The western tract, or Rāḍha, is a continuation of the sub-Vindhyan region of laterite clay and nodular limestone. The land is, as already stated, high and slightly undulating, but is interspersed with numerous swamps and beds of old rivers. It has the greatest elevation along the western boundary of the district towards Birbhum, but there are places where the eastern limits of this clayey tract are marked by banks or bluffs, fifteen and twenty feet high. The cliff at Rāṅgāmāṭi on the Bhagirathi, six miles south
of Baharampur, is forty or fifty feet above the ordinary level of the river. The soil is greyish or reddish, mixed with lime and oxide of iron; and beds of nodular limestone (kañkar) are scattered here and there. The rivers in this part, having their sources in hill torrents, are liable to sudden freshets, but they never lay the country under for any long space of time. The fields, therefore, do not possess the extraordinary fertility of a deltaic country. The chief crop in the central and more elevated portions of the Rāḍha is the winter rice, which is not dependent upon early rain for a successful harvest, but requires a steady downfall between July and October (O’MALLEY 1997: 2).

There are so many literary sources of the geo-cultural unit of Rāḍha of historical and early medieval period. The earliest references of this geo-cultural unit are found in the Jaina texts like Āyaraṅga sutta, and Buddhist texts like Dīpavamśa and Mahāvamśa. The Khajuraho inscription of Dhaṅga refers to the term Rāḍha in the context of the queens of the kingdoms defeated by Dhaṅga and one of them was from Rāḍha (HULTZSCH 1983: 138). The Naihati copper plate of Vallālasena also used the term Rāḍha as an administrative unit (BANERJI 1982). Rāḍha was waterless and an arid region as mentioned in the Bhubaneswar Praśasti of Bhaṭṭabhavadeva (KIELHORN 1981). The terms Dakšiṇa Rāḍha and Uttara Rāḍha have been found in Gaonri inscription of Vākpatiṇḍu (DIKSHIT 1984), the Tirumalai Inscription of Rājendra Cola (HUTZSCAH 1981), Indian Museum Plates of Gaṅga king Devendravarman (CHHABRA 1984), Belava copper-plate of Bhojavarman (BASAK 1982) and Naihati Copper-plate of Vallālasena (BANERJI 1982).

**Bāgḍī/ Bāgrī**
The Bāgḍī or eastern tract differs in no material respects from the ordinary alluvial plains of Bengal. It lies almost entirely between the Ganges, Bhagirathi and Jalangi rivers, and is permeated by several other offshoots of the great river. The whole area lies low, and exposed to annual inundations, which occasionally cause widespread suffering, but usually do no more than deposit over the land a top dressing of almost inexhaustible fertility. In variety of crops, this portion of the district is not surpassed by any part of Bengal. The *aus* or early rice crop is very largely cultivated and forms the bulk of the food supply of the inhabitants; and this harvest is supplemented by the *chaitali*, a name given to the whole series of cold weather crops from the fact of them being harvested in *Chaitra* or March. They are cultivated after the *aus* is cut and on the same fields, as well as on the higher lands where rice will not grow (O’MALLEY 1997: 3-4).

Geographically, the present area of Bāgḍī can be divided into five tracts, namely, the municipal areas, the riverine tract of the Bhagirathi, the central tract between the Bhandardaha and Bhairab, the eastern tract between the Bhairab and Jalangi and the Kalantar. The riverine tract of the Bhagirathi is the belt of five to ten miles from the present channel of the river. Towards the north a lot of bamboo is grown, while the south contains extensive cultivation of mulberry. The central tract is slightly higher than that on either side. As a result this is never re-fertilized by the silt from the rivers. Part of its soil is inferior, not at all suitable for cultivation. There is little jungle here. Towards the south it merges gradually in to the fertile Kalantar. The eastern tract consists of Hurshi (Raninagar) and Domkal thanas. It is low, specially in the south, where, there are many bils. Indigo cultivations and silk industry flourished here in the past. There are good paddy lands in this part. In the north the cultivation of sugarcane has been started with success; towards the south, there is one of the finest pepper
growing areas in Bengal. The Kalantar is a very low region lying along the
south of the district. It has an area of about 50 square mile in the district
and there is a fringe area along its edges almost as large. It spreads also for
some distance into Nadia. The Kalantar goes under water during the rains,
although at present it is gradually drying up and it grows excellent aman
paddy. The crops here are occasionally damaged by locusts and grass
hoppers. The soil is black clay, very tenacious when wet and extremely
hard when dry (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 10-11).

North Hijal

The northern part comprising the Suti and Samsergunj areas is
known as Hijal. This is a strip of low lying land, having an area of about
380 square kms. During the rainy season it forms a vast lake and the
villages are appearing like an island. This is one of the most fertile areas of
the district. The area is a good producer of early rice and cold weather
crops like wheat, gram, oil seeds, peas, etc. The construction of the
Farakka barrage has changed the landscape of the Hijal area.

South Hijal

The tract called the Hijal, situated in the south-west of the district
near the confluence of the Mor and the Dwaraka, and about 50 square miles
in area, offers a different landscape. It has large stretches of grass land
covering an almost treeless plain. During the rains the Hijal is inundated
with water, which varies in depth from twenty feet to three feet. The whole
of this tract becomes dry during the cold weather, and a large portion of it,
which is yearly increasing in extent, is cultivated with cold weather crops,
such as, wheat, gram, mustard and linseed. It also affords a considerable
area of pasturage and grassland, and is known for its toughness and
durability (O’MALLEY 1997: 3).
Hills:

There are no hill ranges in the district. The entire district to the west of the Bhagirathi is of an appreciable elevation and the land in the extreme west slopes gently upwards towards Birbhum and the Rajmahal Hill, which rise a few miles beyond the north-western boundary. Here there are some hillocks, of which the best known is called Dhulki Pahari, covered with small Sal and Mahua trees and surrounded at the base by stony jungle land (O’MALLEY 1997: 4).

Drainage System

The river system consists of the Ganga, and its distributaries, of which the most important are the Bhagirathi, Jalangi and Bhairab. Formerly there was large number of active rivers, now merely spill channels of the great river, which during the rains carry off a portion of its flood water, but for the remaining period have very sluggish water. The streams are incapable of carrying the large quantity of silt they receive, so that shoals are formed wider navigation. The rivers in the east of the district are fed to a certain extent during the dry season by the Ganga. Where that river is broad, and large islands of chars are thrown up, the volume of its discharge is affected by the portion of the stream which thus passes away through the sand.

Ganga or Padma

The Ganga or Padma, as it is called in this part of its course which first touches Murshidabad at its extreme northern point, and then flows about due south-east, forming the eastern boundary of the district, and dividing it from Malda and Rajshahi. During the rainy season, the heavy current rapidly cuts off the banks composed of loose soil. Large islands continually rise in the channel, some of them many miles in length. In the
next year, perhaps, they became covered with grass and tamarind jungle (O’MALLEY 1997: 6).

**Bhagirathi**

The Bhagirathi at present branches off from the Ganga at Nurpur about 25 miles below Farakka and runs almost parallel to it for about two miles as far as Biswanathpur near Suti with a long narrow strip of Char land between the two rivers. After leaving Biswanathpur near Suti, its course, which is very winding, is almost due south; and it finally leaves the district below the village Bidhupara, just north of the historic battle field of Plassey, part of which it has swept away. A little above Jangipur it receives from the west the united waters of the Bansloi and Pagla rivers; and near Saktipur, the Chora Dekra, a great portion of Dwarka river, flows into it, also from the west.

The banks of the Bhagirathi are gently sloping on one side, and abruptly rising on the other. These changes of slope are due to the varying volume of current, and occur on the same bank by regular alterations from reach to reach. The stream shift from side to side, sandbanks and other obstructions are constantly formed and the bed has largely silted up. It is a fine river for about four months of the year, when it is full, but for the remaining eight months, several streams wander through a wide expanse of sand. During the rainy seasons, freshets from the Ganga come down the Bhagirathi, but their influence is obliterated by the large deposit of silt which they bring with them. In addition to this, it is important to recollect that the general line of drainage is not from north to south along the channel of the Bhagirathi; but from north-west to south east. The result is that the main waters of the Ganga display a greater inclination to proceed in their present channel than to turn into the Bhagirathi; and the floods of the
Bhagirathi have always a tendency to over flow its left or eastern bank, and wander over the country in the old river beds towards the Jalangi rivers (O’MALLEY 1997: 7-8). To overcome this problem a heavy embankment has been constructed.

**Jalangi**

The place of branching off of the Jalangi from the Ganga has now been silted up. However, geographically it starts its course in Jalangi police-station of Murshidabad district. Another river known as Hangordobah or Mathabhanga also rises close to the mouth of Jalangi on the Padma and runs parallel with Jalangi. Gradually, the Jalangi shifts eastward and flows along the border of the two countries for some distance. Further south it flows along the districts of Nadia and Murshidabad. Sialmari and Jalangi branches of Padma meet with Jalangi and flow in a zigzag pattern and enter the district of Nadia and finally meet the Bhagirathi. The Jalangi river has a glorious past and received water throughout the year and caused flood during the rainy season. But recently it receives water from Padma during the rainy season only (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 12-13).

**Bhairab**

The Bhairab is an old river. It has long been partly deserted and only sections of its channel can be traced. Parts of the remnant of its old channel flow within Bangladesh. It takes off from the Ganga in Lalgola police station within this district, opposite to the place near where the Mahananda meets the Ganga. It is believed that before the Padma started carrying the main flow of the Ganga, it used to be a continuation of the Mahananda. During the rainy season for a few days, it receives water from the Padma, otherwise it remains dry. At present, after a short journey across this
district, the Bhairab meets the Jalangi in the north of the Nadia district and loses its identity (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 13).

**Bansloi**

The Bansloi is an important tributary of the Bhagirathi. The Bansloi River originates in the Bans Hill in Sahebganj district of Jharkhand and flows through Pakur district of Jharkhand and Birbhum and Murshidabad districts of West Bengal. It enters the district from Birbhum near the village of Hussainpur and pursues on the whole an easterly course until it falls into the Bhagirathi a little to the north of the town of Jangipur (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 13).

**Dwarka**

The Dwarka River also called Babla is a tributary of Bhagirathi. The Dwarka originates in Santhal Pargnas in Jharkhand, flows through Deucha and then though Mayureswar and Rampurhut police station areas of Birbhum district. It finally flows through Murshidabad district, where it joins the Bhagirathi. The famous temple complexes of Dwarbasini and Tārāpith are on the banks of this river. Though a moderate river, it has several names and many small tributaries and estuaries. Its many backwaters and side channels also connect it with the Bhagirathi. It is a hill stream with beds full of pebbles and yellow clay.

The Dwarka or Babla is a moderate size stream, with many tributaries and effluents and flows through the south-western corner of Murshidabad. The channel which is considered the main stream, and which bears the name of Dwarka, enters the district from Birbhum, not far from Morgram. At first it flows in an easterly direction until its waters are augmented by those of the Brahmani at Ramchandrapur. It then turns towards the south-east and is joined on the right bank by the Mor and the
Kuiya, two rivers which also flow down from Birbhum. Numerous back waters and side channels commence here which connect it with the Bhagirathi and these channels with different names form a complex drainage pattern. The main stream forms the eastern boundary of the Kandi subdivision and quits the district at Raghupur. Like all hill streams it has a rapid current and is liable to sudden floods (O’MALLEY 1997: 10).

**Other rivers**

Among minor rivers may be mentioned the Brahmani, the Mor (or Mayurakshi or Kana) and the Kuiya, all of which flow from the west into the Dwarka, and are partially navigable during the rainy season. The pebbly beds of all these hill streams are full of yellow clay (O’MALLEY 1997: 10).

**Geology of the district**

The geological formations of the district may be classified under three types.

**Jurassic:**

The Rajmahal trap is found in the northern part of the district. It consists of basaltic lava flows with intercalated carbonaceous shales and clays. The basalt is a black colour, fine grained amygdaloid rock; when somewhat more coarsely crystalline, it resembles a dolerite. The amygdales are filled with chalcedony, calcite, zeolite, and other secondary minerals.

**Pleistocene-Recent:**

A Major part of the west of the river Bhagirathi is occupied by older alluvium and lateritic clay. It is suggested to be a continuation of the sub-Vindhyan region of lateritic clay and nodular limestone. The beds of
nodular limestone (*kankar*) are scattered at places in the western part. The lateritic clay is hard, grey or reddish brown in colour, and mixed with lime and oxide of iron. Because of intense leaching and low Base Exchange capacity, typical lateritic soil is lacking in the elements of fertility and is of little value for crop production, but secondary changes may produce fair soils.

**Recent:**

The rest of the district is occupied by recent alluvium mainly composed of sand and clays brought by the rivers. Several types of alluvium soils have been recognized in the district – clayey soil which splits up in hot weather an tenaciously muddy after rain; colurs are various –black, brown and red with yellow tint, that last named colour being found mainly on the west side of the Bhagirathi. Loamy soils are also of different colours, such as light brown, dark red and light grey. They are all very fertile and produce almost all kind of crops (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 14-15).

**Soils of the District:**

In the north eastern portion of the district, the low lying area to the east of the Bhagirathi is known as Bāgḍī. It is subject to inundation. The soil is alluvial and very fertile growing *aus* paddy, jute and *rabi* crops. South of this tract, that is the south eastern portion of the district lies the Kalantar tract. It is a low lying area. The surface soil is stiff dark clay. Under suitable weather condition it can grow good *aman* rice, but very often water logging makes it un-suitable for *rabi* cultivation. The portion of the west of the river Bhagirathi is known as Rāḍha. It has many *bils* and old river beds. The soil is hard clay. It is capable of growing good *aman* rice and sugarcane. Mulberry grows well and hence sericulture has developed
here. Several types of soil are found in the district. *Mathal* or *methel* is clayey soil. It cracks when dry but is tenaciously muddy when wet. Among clayey soils, *methel* is black, *bagh methel* is brown and *ranga methel* is reddish in colour. *Ranga methel* is found in the Rāḍha tracts. Loamy soils are generally known as *doansh*. Among *doansh* soils, *pali* is light brown, *sham pali* is ash–coloured and *doma* is dark red in colour. They are all fertile soils and can produce good crops. Sandy loam is generally known as *mete bali* and when sand content is higher, it is called *doma bali* (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 11).

**Minerals:**

There are no significant mineral deposits. The traps may form a useful source for ballast and road metal. The silts and clays and used in manufacture of bricks and tiles (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 15).

**Flora:**

The flora resembles those of the deltaic districts of West Bengal. The northernmost portion has some plants of drier species. In the swampy area there are some marshy species on the low land and pond and in the Kalantar areas of the district. Bamboos are found in all part of the district. Similarly Mango (*Magnifera indica*) and Kanthal (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) are found abundantly. Bot (*Ficus benghalensis*) and Aswatha (*Ficus religiosa*) or sacred fig are available along the old road (medieval route) and at the centre of the most of the villages are worshipped as goddess Sasthi. Some Segun (*Tectona grandis*) Sisso (*Dalbergia sissoo*) Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*), Kend (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), Palas (*Butea monosperma*), Babla (*Vachellia nilotica*), Simul (*Bombax*), Kul (*Ziziphus mauritiana*) are also found. Previously *Indigofera Linctoria* was cultivated abundantly in the district for the
production of indigo. In the Jangipur Sub-division Tunte tree are also found. The district has different types of fruit trees specially (different varieties of mangos). The district is one of the major producers of rice in West Bengal. Wheat, maize, barley, jute and different types of vegetables are also cultivated (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 16).

**Fauna:**

At present there are no wild animals in the district. They have disappeared with the development of rural and urban settlements and extensive deforestation for agricultural land. The revenue survey of 1857 mentioned the presence of leopard, tigers, rhinoceros and a few wild buffaloes. The present faunal distribution comprises monkeys, jackles, fox, wild duck, snipes geese, teals, pigeon and partridges (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 18).

**Climate:**

The climate of this district is characterized by an oppressive hot summer, high humidly nearly all the year round and a well distributed rainfall in the south-west monsoon season. The year may be divided into four seasons. The average annual rainfall is 136 cm. The average minimum and maximum temperatures are 11.9º C and 39.2º C respectively (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 17-18).

**Population Structure:**

The total population of the district of Murshidabad was 2,940,204 as per 1971 Census. It consisted of 1,503,427 males and 1,436,777 females. According to the 2000, Murshidabad district has a population of 7,102,430 roughly equal to the nation of Bulgeria. This gives it a ranking of 9th in India (out of a total of 640). The district has a population density of
1,334 inhabitants per square kms (3,460/sq mi). Its population growth rate over the decade 2001-2011 was 21.07%. Murshidabad has a sex ration of 957 females for 1000 every males, and a literacy rate of 67.53%. The present day population of Murshidabad may broadly be divided into tribals and caste-groups. Nearly 7.8 per cent of the population is constituted of various groups of tribal population. Of these, nearly three-fourth is distributed in the villages. The overall population density according to 2011 Census of the district is worked as 1101 people per square kilometer (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 84).

**Religion:**

According to the Census of 1971, out of a total population of 2920204 persons, 1655406 persons or 56.33 percent of the district population were Muslims. Hindus numbered 1277873 persons and accounted for 43.46 percent of the district population. The Christians numbered 3013 persons and accounted for only 0.10 percent of the district population and Jains numbering 2472 persons accounted for only 0.08 percent of total population. Sikhs, Buddhist and adherent of other religions together added up to only 440 persons and accounted for only 0.01 person of total district population (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 106).

**Tribal Population:**

The tribal population is concentrated to a great extent in the Rāḍha area than the Bāgdī. Only a small chunk of the tribal population consisting of *Santals, Orao, Muinda, Bhumij, Koda, lodha, Mahali, Bhutia,* and *Bede* are found settled in different parts of the district under jurisdiction of different police stations (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 183).
The Santals (38941 in 2001) are the earliest inhabitants of the Santhal Parganas of the state of Jharkhand. They constitute the largest single ethnic group in the district. They are counted as scheduled tribe and are found mainly in the western part of the district. The Police Stations of Sagardighi, Nabagarm, Khargram, Burwan, Bharatpur, and Kandi have the largest Santal population. Only a small section of them is found in the eastern and northern part of the district. Their traditional occupation is collecting forest products besides hunting, fishing and cultivation. The nature of their day-to-day life, fairs and festivals closely correspond to those of their counterparts in the other region of Bengal (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 111).

The Orao is the second largest tribal population in the district of Murshidabrad. They are usually concentrated in the western and south-western part of the district.

The Bhumij is considered to be one of the oldest tribes in the district. They are usually concentrated in the western and south-western parts of the district.

The Koras are mainly distributed in the areas under the Police Stations of Nabagram, Sagardighi and Khargram. Besides the above groups of tribal population, there are other tribal groups like Lohar, Mahali, Bhutia, Bede and Sabar who are sparsely distributed in the district.

B. Lower castes/Sub-castes:

The district of Murshidabrad has a good number of population of lower caste groups. They are widely distributed over the entire district. However, the western, northern and south western parts of the district have a relatively larger concentration of these lower caste groups than other parts of the district.
1. The **Bagdis** are widely distributed in West Bengal and also in the district of Murshidabad. According to the Census of 2000, there were 94163 **Bagdis** in the district forming 0.16 per cent of its total population. Now their population is increasing. Traditionally, **Bagdis** are occupied in fishing in addition to small-scale farming. In fact, they are found employed in a wide variety of occupations and are economically much better off than the **Bauris**. The **Bauris** worship Śiva, Kali, Dharmaraj, Manasa, Durgā and numerous other deities like Śakti. The **Bagdis** themselves consider Manasā or the snake-goddess as their principal deity. The festival of **Bhadu** is quite popular among the Bagdi (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 183)

2. **Chamar**: The **Chamars** (also known as Charmakar, Muchi, Rabidas, Ruidas, Rishi or Satnami) form yet another large caste belonging to the Scheduled Caste category. They are also widely distributed in the district. The occupation of the women of this category is to serve was as wet nurse or foster mother (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 183).

3. **Rajbangshi**: According to the 2001 census they are 72513 in number of the total population of the district. Agriculture and fishing are the main occupations of this caste. According to Risley they belong to the Cooch of North Bengal. Ethnically they are not same as the Rajbangshi of North Bengal (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 186).

4. **Namasudra**: Namasudra or Chandal are the same caste. They are one of the oldest caste groups of Bengal. Now agriculture is the main
job and they follow Vaisnavism (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 186).

5. **Pod/Pundra:** They are also known as Pudarikaksha or Puda. This caste has been mentioned in the different texts like Aitereya Brahmana, Boudhayan and Mahabharata. According to Risley they are divided into four sub-castes i.e. Bagandi, Bangla, Khotta or Mouna and Oriya. The Pundra of the Murshidabad district belongs to the Mouna sub-caste. The main occupation of this caste is agriculture besides the cultivation of Mulberry leaves (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 186).

6. **Hari/Mathor:** Traditionally they are suppliers and carriers of earthen pots used during cremation and post cremation activities. They also clean and carry off the dirty materials. Besides these, they are engaged as kulis, chowkidars, palanquin carriers, musical instrument players, and pig domestication activities. They worship Kali, Mangalchandi and Sitala (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 185).

7. **Jele:** the term jele is commonly used for fishermen of Bengal. Malo, Tiour, Kaivarta, Rajbangshi, Bagdi, Bauri and even Musalman are known as Jeles. Besides fishing they are also engaged in agriculture (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 186).

8. **Suri:** The *Sunris* are yet another group of the Scheduled Castes. Their traditional occupation is distilling and selling spirits and liquors (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 185).
9. **Bauris**: They are predominant among the lower castes. Their original occupation had been palanquin-bearing and they also acted as the strong armed men or as guards of the landlords. Presently, they are mostly landless labourers (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 185).

10. **Doms**: The *Doms* numerically form one of the largest caste-groups. Their origin can be traced from the aborigines of the region. The ethno archaeology of this community provides enough scope to explain some archaeological assemblages. They worship Dharmaraj or Dharma Thakur. A section of this group is also involved in the basketry work and they became very popular in the making of artisan products made of bamboo, bone, shell and even wood (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 185).

11. In addition to the above groups the district also has a handful of other lower castes, such as *Gop/Goala, Sadgop, Konai, Mal and Chain* (BANDOPADHYAY, SENGUPTA, BISWAS 2003: 185).

**C. Other major Caste-groups:**

1. The Mahisyas form the highest number among the total number of the caste-Hindus. A majority of the Mahisyas are peasants in their own holdings. They occupy a rank between the nabasakha castes and Antyaja caste in the local caste hierarchy. In their rituals they are not served by the proper Radhiya or Varendra Brahman; they employ their own priests called Vysakto Brahman (BHATTACHARYYA 1979: 110).
2. Sadgop: The *Sadgops* form the next most significant caste of the district. *Sadgops* seem to have originated from the *Goalas* sometime in the past. Most of the members of this caste group have taken to agriculture. They occupy a rank between the nabasakha castes and Antyaja caste in the local caste hierarchy. As the proper Brahmans serve them, they claim a higher status than that of the Mahisyas (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 110).

3. Brahmins There are three completely different classes of Brahmins in Murshidabad and they are strictly endogamous. Most of the Brahmins of the district belong to the Radhiya *sreni*. The *Rādhiyas* occupy the highest rank among them. The *Varendra* claim the next rank. The third and lowest group of Brahmins is called *Vaidik sreni*. A number of old Zamindars and Talukder families are Brahmins (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 110).

4. The *Kayasthas* (*Karanas* of earlier age) form one of the largest caste-groups in the district. In fact, they are mostly found in the western part of the district. They belong to the *Uttara Radiya* group. Singha of Kandi and Zamindars of Panchthupi and Jajan are Kayastha. They use surnames like Singha, Bose, Ghosh, Mitra, Sarkar etc. and are mostly now engaged in non-manual occupations requiring an educational background (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 110).

5. The *Gops/Goalas* are most numerous in the eastern and north-eastern parts of the district. They usually live in groups of their own caste-members (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 110).
Among the other castes mention should be made of Baidyas, Telis, Karmakar, Kumars, The traditional medical practitioners like Baidyas, Bedes etc. existed in the rural set up of Murshidabad as well as other parts of West Bengal. The Telis form a distinct caste which is considered clean. They are spread all over the district. The occupation ascribed to this group is of cooking oil and its trading. The Karmakars are traditionally metal workers and traders in metals (mainly iron). Presently, many Karmakars have left their former caste-occupation and taken to full time agriculture with the introduction of factory finished metal products. Their settlements are unevenly distributed in the district. The Kumars/Kumbhakaras are by tradition, clay-workers or pottery manufacturing communities. In India, potters have always enjoyed a favoured status primarily because of their indispensability in providing household and storage utensils. The Chhatris form a caste which is not quite common in West Bengal. The labour and ancillary requirements are provided by Chutors/Sutradhars (carpenters), lohars, chamars and doms, for an agrarian based settlement structure. They are generally accommodated in patches of land for their settlements on the condition of supplying daily requirements to the landlords in exchange of food and clothings. The Bauris and Doms also cluster around the periphery as they are involved in the disposal of refuse and waste materials. The services of Doms are crucial in the process of child birth as Dhatri and the disposal of the dead as well as in the funeral rites. Since such a large number of landless people cannot be employed by the landlords except in the period of harvesting, many of them in recent years, have taken to multiple trading occupations and have opened their outlets/shops near the village bus-stand or in the nearby towns. Some are now migrant labourers and they travel as far west as Punjab and Delhi and also neighbouring cities like Kolkata. Bagdis are palanquin bearers though presently reduced to a heritage profession. They also participate in various rituals (including
religious ceremonies, fairs and festivals) as palanquin bearers. Similarly, *Malakars* are involved in the production of decorative/art objects used in secular and religious ceremonies and by profession they are engaged in seasonal festivals particularly in the decoration of images of Durgā, Lakkśmī and other deities (who are worshipped in the autuminal festivals of Bengal) and even in the illumination of pandals and temple complexes (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 111).

The artisan class includes the metal-workers (*Karmakars/Swarnakars/Poddars*), clay-workers (*Kumars/Kumbhakars*), carpenters (*Chutors/Sutradhars*), leather-workers (*Charmakars/Muchis*), distillers of local spirits/alcohol and liquors (*Suris*) and masons (*Rajmistris*) who were predominantly Muslims. The *Telis* (makers of mustard oil), *Tambulis, Suvarnakaras/Suvarnabaniks* represent the trading classes of the society.

**The village Set-up**

In Murshidabad district lands above flood plains are usually chosen by people to form villages and hamlets. Availability of fertile soil is main criteria for the development of settlements in the district. The villages in the district are scattered all over, although the northern part (Hijal) and south-eastern (Kalantar) regions show a much lesser number of villages than the other parts. The villages are more or less similar to those in other districts of West Bengal. Availability of suitable land for cultivation is one of the prime considerations of these village-settlements. Usually the houses in the villages are not as narrowly clustered as in other parts of Bengal. The average distance between two houses can be between a one fourth and half furlong. In the Bāgḍī area of the district the settlements are concentrated along the communication line. On the other hand the villages of the Rāha
part of the district are amorphous agglomeration, while those situated on the river or on the new alluvial plain are closely clustered amorphous agglomerates, those situated on lateritic soil are loosely clustered agglomeration. In the low lying Kalantar area, small closely clustered hamlets separated from each other by low lying lands form villages.

Every big village in Murshidabad is a unit by itself. It is evident that the occupational areas have bearing on the distribution of caste-groups. In the amorphous agglomerates the landed gentry of the upper Hindu castes, nabsakhas castes and Ashrafs are found to locate their houses on high lands around the centre of the village, though their too the Muslims and the Hindus live in separate localities. Hindus belonging to the Antyaja caste live in their own cluster on the fringe of the villages in linear settlements, the upper caste Hindus and nabasakhas and Ashrafs are found to have their houses at the centre of the villages along the main line of communication, while the peasants and artisans live in the second or the third line in separate localities allotted for each caste group. In the rural areas of the Rāḍha part of the district most of the huts of the marginal farmers, share croppers, landless labourers and sundry wage earners and artisans have walls made of wattle and clay daub over plinths and floors made of clay and straw. The roofs of these houses are made with two or four slantingly arranged frames of bamboo strips joined at the top. These bamboo frames are topped up by well spread layers of paddy straw. The roofs take the shape of overturned boats with convex linear ends. When two frames are joined together the hut is known as *do-chala* and where there are four frames it is known as *char-chala*. These huts are often single-room habitats and occasionally two-room house with a verandah running either at the back or at the front. The sweep of the roof covers the rooms as well as the
verandah. The ground plan is rectangular with little or no projections and recessions.

The houses of the middle farmers, Jotdars and other rural well–to-dos are little more elaborate. These have walls made of bamboo thatch over which mud is plastered. Several hutments are joined together to form a homestead or ground plan is altered to form an L-shaped house and together with L shaped hutment of homestead is formed. Often some projections and recessions in ground plans have been found. Such homestead often becomes a square or a rectangular with a central courtyard; entry to the different rooms is gained from the central rectangular courtyard and gallery like verandah goes round the courtyard connecting the rooms. The front window of these homesteads is often two-storeyd entitles – char-chala above a char-chala and then makes it an aat-chala hut. Instead of paddy straw the rural rich often use terracotta tiles or corrugated iron sheet for covering the roofs. These types of house have changed very fast due to concrete structures (BHATTACHARYA 1979: 115-116).

**Discussion:**

A study of the land and people of Murshidabad provides an insight to the successive stages of the evolution of the regional identity of Murshidabad. The geographical factors undoubtedly have influenced the character of the settlements and their association with different social groups. There is every reason to believe that, the western part of the district of Murshidabad, like other parts of Bengal, was originally inhabited by the Austric and Dravidian speaking people whose descendants are the Santals, Maler, Malpahariyas, Oraons and other ‘Antyaja’ classes. Anthropologists are unanimous in respect of the view of de-tribalization, the process by
which the lower castes are derived from the primitive tribes and later on accommodated within the structure of the caste hierarchy. Not only the lower castes but also a major part of the higher castes were partially amalgamated with the primitive tribal population. However, the process of social organization and the formation of social hierarchy in a settlement were assumably engineered by the Brahmins who changed the earlier homogeneous settlement matrix. Archaeologically, it would be interesting to make a study of the settlement sites particularly in the plains, with the above perspective. The settlement character of the Rāḍha certainly differs from that of the Bāgdī. Obviously, the characteristic features of a settlement were monitored by the economy as well as the survival strategy of the settlers.

The population structure of Murshidabad reflects the process of absorption of different social groups comprising farming and non-farming communities of both the areas of Rāḍha and Bāgdī. Subsequently, the population structure of Murshidabad also accommodated the consequences of the migration particularly the Muslims. The movement of population from its adjoining areas could be visualized with reference to their changing contexts of survival strategies and certainly it followed the subsistence economy from food-gathering/intensive foraging to food-producing. The present database will delineate the transformation of the hunter, gatherers into early village farming (henceforth EVF) and their consequent movement from border land of Birbhum and Bardhaman to the Bhagirathi basin. The study of the land and people of Murshidabad provides us a definite framework or device from which we may reconstruct the cultural history of the region based on archaeological remains and artefacts.
An understanding about the past environmental mosaic of the region under study is a key to define the distribution pattern of major natural and human resources and it is certain in the foregoing pages (where the same has been discussed) that the former has a crucial bearing on the archaeological history of the region concerned. Apart from ecological factors, the knowledge about seasonal as well as spatial distribution of all these resources is a basic aid in reconstructing the past. The environmental diversity of this region derived from its geo-physical position might have the roots of the process of ‘continuity and change’ through the ages. The same geographical bearing could be visualized in the context of convergence between the Chhotanagpur plateau and the coastal corridor that skirts the Gangetic Basin. The archaeological assemblage of Murshidabad, exhibits an amalgamation of the biotic community indigenous to the above areas. The marked topographic variations and natural resources have also acted to create an environmental refuse of the earlier past. It is better to sum up here that the ecological background combined with the pattern of population diversity in the present study area has left a permanent impression on the history and society of the region. This is reflected in the present database, the framework of the present discourse.