Chapter 1
Introduction

1. Theme and Aims of Research

The theme of the present research is the rural society and social networks in early medieval Bengal from the fifth to the thirteenth century A.D. In South Asian history, the early medieval period has been considered as the time when new structures of power and society arose and regions in the subcontinent were moulded into distinct contours. These changes and dynamics lead to the social formation of the later age.

In the context of Bengal, this is a period which precedes the making of the social system deemed to be typical in Bengal, namely, the social structure consisting of two varnas of brāhmaṇa and sūdra, division of non-brāhmaṇa jātis into sat and asat-sūdras, and division of brāhmaṇas and other dominant groups into kulinas, who claim their origin from legendary migrations from Madhyadeśa, and others.¹ The difference between the society characterised by these traits and the rural society in the fifth century, the starting point of the present research, is considerable. The development in the late medieval period, especially the creation of origin myth and its textualisation as the Kulagranthas by brāhmaṇas and its acceptance by other social groups, may have facilitated the making of such a social system in Bengal to some extent.² However, the later development and its direction was conditioned by the historical process of the previous period and this is discernible in the construction of the social framework, which would be the

¹ For these phenomena and their supposed history, see N. K. Dutt, Origin and Growth of Caste in India, vol.2: Castes in Bengal, Calcutta, 1965 (reprinted as combined volume with vol.1, 1986).
² As an attempt to understand the development of jāti system in late medieval Bengal based on the Kulagranthas, see R. B. Inden, Marriage and Rank in Bengali Culture: A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal, New Delhi, 1976.
basis of this development, in the thirteenth century, the terminal point of the present research. Needless to say, the direction and framework is an outcome of the complicated process in which various social groups interacted in a particular historical context. The present research is necessary for understanding this process and delineating its contours.

The present research aims at enquiring into some aspects of the rural society, especially the forms and patterns of social integration, internal contradiction and power relation. Life in a rural society includes many activities which need social networks different in membership and territoriality. In other words, a rural society can be interpreted as a multi-dimensional social structure which includes various relations among rural population themselves and contacts with outer world. This structure, needless to say, provokes, systematises and even restricts contradictions and power relations among members. On the other hand, the aspirations and actions of each member or social group constituting this structure and their interaction can affect and reshape it.

Though historical sources for the reconstruction of such a structure are scarce in the early history of South Asia, some regions provide better ones that can offer the information through interpretation with more effective frameworks. In Bengal, from the first half of the fifth century, we have a continuous series of inscriptions which contain much information on some aspects of activities in the rural society. We also have Sanskrit texts on particular topics written in Bengal from around the tenth century. Each of them would provide information on some of such multiple aspects of the rural society in early medieval Bengal and we can give a general view by synthesis of them. I would like to propose a perspective of multi-dimensional historical changes in early medieval South Asia through the interpretation of various historical sources on the rural society in early medieval Bengal.
2. Historiography

In the historiography during the early decades of the previous century, which was oriented to dynastic histories, researches on the rural settlement and society in the early history of South Asia were focussed on some aspects related to their function as a part of the larger system. While U. N. Ghoshal discussed land and revenue system based on the Dharmaśāstras and epigraphic evidences, R. K. Mookerji dealt with local bodies in Ancient India as a part of the governmental machinery. R. C. Majumdar discussed village assemblies especially discernible in the South Indian inscriptions as a part of economic and political corporative activities in Ancient India like śrenis and ganaś. While those descriptive works contributed rich empirical data about some phenomena in the rural society, their presupposition of a well-organised system and superficial use of sources made them overlook dynamism within the rural society and draw rather static pictures.

Research on the rural society became an integral part of the total understanding of the historical change from 1950's. D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma took the first step towards this direction through the application of the Feudalism theory to Indian history. Kosambi proposed the theory of 'Feudalism from above' and 'Feudalism from below', by which he supposed two stages of development: the decentralisation of administration by subordinate rulers and the rise of intermediaries within villages. Sharma's

6 For historiography, see H. Kulke, 'Introduction: The Study of the State in Pre-modern India', idem (ed.), The State in India 1000-1700, Delhi, 1995, pp.1-47.
7 D. D. Kosambi, An Introduction to the Study of Indian History: Bombay, 1956, Chs.9 and 10.
researches culminated in his monograph and later researches, in which he fully theorised Indian Feudalism for the period between the fourth and the twelfth century A.D. As symptoms of Indian Feudalism, he envisaged the closed economy due to the decline of Roman trade and monetary economy, and the feudal political and social setups, especially the rise of intermediaries and the subjection of peasants, mainly generated by land grants. His theory of Indian Feudalism was followed by a substantial number of scholars and they constituted what can be called the Indian Feudalism School.

One of the most important contributions to Indian Feudalism came from the works of B. N. S. Yadava. In his monograph on various aspects of the twelfth century North India, he described the decentralised political system based on the hierarchy of the king and subordinate rulers called sāmantas, and the agrarian economy and society based on the subjection of peasants by landed aristocracy as Feudal, with rich empirical data mainly extracted from the texts and inscriptions of western India. He further enhanced his claims through the following works which traversed a wide range of textual evidence and sensitively analysed the shifting connotations of important terms denoting social groups.

Indian Feudalism provoked many discussions and criticisms even around the time when Sharma's monograph was published. One of the

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11 For early discussions and criticisms, see D. C. Sircar (ed.), *Land System*
major critics in this early phase was D. C. Sircar. Based on his vast knowledge of inscriptions and other sources, he criticised the inadequate use of those sources by Sharma and questioned applicability of the concept of Feudalism to the ancient history of India.\textsuperscript{12} He claimed that the land system in Ancient India should be interpreted as landlordism and that Feudalism is a misnomer, according to his understanding of Feudalism as a system peculiar to Europe.\textsuperscript{13} His criticism related to the use of sources and his evidence which contradict some notions of Indian Feudalism were valid and followed up by further researches, while his theoretical criticism based on the notion of Feudalism unshared by proponents and contraposition of a general concept like landlordism to it was not enough to challenge the theory and make more fruitful discussions.

The following criticisms of Indian Feudalism were both empirical and theoretical. One important question was the empirical validity of the notion of closed economy. While this question had already been raised by Sircar,\textsuperscript{11} the works of B. D. Chattopadhyaya, M. R. Tarafdar and B. N. Mukherjee showed the continuity of monetary economy and trade in the regional context.\textsuperscript{15} The paucity of coins was also questioned by J. S. Deyell through the extensive research on the early medieval coin hoards,\textsuperscript{16} and the

\textit{and Feudalism in Ancient India}, Calcutta, 1966; \textit{idem, Landlordism and Tenancy in Ancient and Medieval India as Revealed by Epigraphical Records}, Calcutta, 1969.

\textit{Ibid.}


\textit{Ibid.}, pp.60-61.


\textit{J. S. Deyell, Living without Silver: The Monetary History of Early Medieval North India.} New Delhi, 1990.
thriving condition of foreign and inter-regional trade was shown by the works of R. Chakravartti based on the various kinds of sources pertaining to trade and merchants.17

A serious theoretical criticism on Indian Feudalism came from H. Mukhia.18 Based on his understanding of European feudalism in terms of the change of the mode of production, he questioned its applicability to the Indian history, which had different agrarian conditions. He questioned the subjection of peasants in the early medieval South Asia and proposed the production based on economically free peasants through the evaluation of sources pertaining to the agrarian conditions.19 He also criticised the attribution of the establishment of feudalism to state action by protagonists of Indian Feudalism.20

The fundamental theoretical problem of Indian Feudalism was pointed out by B. D. Chattopadhyaya. He criticised the Indian Feudalism theory for its emphasis on a total bipolarity between the early historical and the early medieval period, which presupposes the presence of centralised political power and monetised economy characterised by foreign trade and urbanisation for the former and their absence for the latter.21 He claimed that the construct of Indian Feudalism based on assumed binary opposition bypassed the long term processes characterising South Asian history in general, namely, transformation of pre-state society to state society, and of tribes to peasants.22

17 R. Chakravartti, Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society, New Delhi, 2002.
18 H. Mukhia, 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?', Kulke (ed.), 1995, pp.86-133 (originally Presidential Address, Medieval Section, Indian History Congress 40th Session, 1979).
19 Ibid., pp.114-132.
20 Ibid., p.113.
22 Idem, 'State and Economy in North India: Fourth Century to Twelfth
Confronting those criticisms, Sharma himself and scholars following his line of reasoning tried to refine and defend Indian Feudalism through the new theories like de-urbanisation\textsuperscript{23} and Kaliyuga crisis.\textsuperscript{21} They also tried to enhance their position through the researches focussed on particular regions with emphasis on the regional variations.\textsuperscript{25} However, the fundamental questions raised by Mukhia and Chattopadhyaya have not yet been answered properly, though Sharma himself tried to update his position.\textsuperscript{26}

In spite of its theoretical flaw and later 'inflation' of the concept,\textsuperscript{27} Indian Feudalism enormously contributed to the study of the early medieval South Asia by countering the assumption of unchanging Indian villages prevalent in the earlier imperialist historiography. The discussion about the theory also enabled the scholars to share some basic notions like agrarian expansion in the early medieval period.

Since 1970's, alternative models to Indian Feudalism had been proposed. B. Stein tried to apply the Segmentary State model to South Indian history from the Pallava to Vijayanagara period.\textsuperscript{28} He conceived \textit{nādu}

\textsuperscript{23} R. S. Sharma, \textit{Urban Decay in India (c.300–c.1000)}, New Delhi, 1987.


\textsuperscript{27} Chattopadhyaya, ‘State and Economy in North India’, pp.326-327, 337.

\textsuperscript{28} B. Stein, \textit{Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India}, New Delhi,
as an autonomous agrarian unit with political authority constituted by alliance of *brāhmanas* and higher peasants, over which the state could wield only a ritual sovereignty. His theory, especially the applicability of a theory about African pre-state society and the notion of alliance between *brāhmanas* and peasants, was doubted and severely criticised on both empirical and theoretical bases, and from these criticisms, studies on the economic and social history of early South India saw enormous development. Despite some defects on the empirical level, his notions about regional agricultural units and alliance between *brāhmanas* and higher peasants could have broad applicability in the early medieval context.

Another alternative model can be named as the integrative polity model. H. Kulke and B. D. Chattopadhyaya were its main advocates. In the context of Orissa, Kulke considered the historical process of early medieval South Asia as a process of the establishment of a state at the nuclear region and its integration of peripheral regions. He regarded the legitimisation of kingship through migration of *brāhmanas* and construction of royal temples, and the integration of local cults to a royal cult as a system of state integration. Chattopadhyaya conceived the expansion of agrarian and state society towards areas under pre-state condition as a continuous process of the early South Asian history and interpreted the historical

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29 Ex. D. N. Jha, 'Relevance of “Peasant State and Society” to Pallava·Cola Times', idem, *Economy and Society in Early India: Issues and Paradigms*, New Delhi, 1993, pp.118-144.

30 For thorough criticism of Segmentary State theory and formulation based on Feudalism, see K. Veluthat, *Political Structure*.

change of the early medieval period as intensification of this process.\(^{32}\) The focus on regional context has been common to all these theories since 1970’s.

The historiography described above has several implications for the present research. First to mention is the need to trace transitions and power relations within the rural society. Since the introduction of Indian Feudalism, the notion of change was accepted as a common ground and no serious research would describe the early medieval South Asian society as static. However, much emphasis was put on the external elements like decline of foreign trade or royal land grants in the early phase of the theorisation of Indian Feudalism. Though the proponents of the theory tried to overcome this problem by interpreting descriptions of Kaliyuga as the evidence of inner contradiction and social conflict, the formulation which makes the symptom of Kaliyuga both cause and content of the new feudal order is logically untenable.\(^{33}\) It is also difficult to interpret the notion which alludes to fear held by brahmanas as cognition of crisis in general, without properly locating the sources in their context. We need to detect contradictions in the rural society through the minute scrutiny of sources pertaining to it, not through the construction of a vague notion of crisis.

Second is the necessity of counting multiple agencies of social groups and powers around the rural society. While Indian Feudalism attribute the establishment of feudalism to the state action of land grants, the autonomy of the rural society was overestimated in Segmetary State model so much as the state was considered to hold only ritual sovereignty. In both cases, the complicated power relations surrounding the rural society and involvement of multiple social groups are glossed over. We need to consider the agencies

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\(^{33}\) Chattopadhyaya, ‘State and Economy in North India’, p.330.
of all those groups and their interactions to avoid such simplifications.

Third is the need of keener sense of context both in terms of sources and regions. Both the early conventional works and Indian Feudalism were characterised by their universalistic approaches. The former tasked itself with describing a particular phenomenon of Ancient India in general, while the latter claimed universality of feudalism in South Asian history as a stage of a linear historical progress. In both cases, the sources which suit their claims were indiscriminately used, sometimes out of the context. On the other hand, the simultaneous existence of a wide range of cultures in various regions of South Asia was well recognised and theorised in the integrative polity model, while the presence of such a difference even in the modern context had been recognised by Kosambi and described by him as 'living prehistory'. In this understanding, the transition in each region should be researched in its particular regional context. Accordingly, the sources should also be read in their regional contexts and it would result in their better interpretations.

As to the studies on the rural society of early medieval Bengal, the first step was taken as a part of the works on general regional history. Though they provided some interesting viewpoints, these works were general descriptions which lacked a notion of change.

Remarkable contribution in this stage was a work on the regional history by N. R. Ray in which he dealt with the society in terms of caste and class. He explained the growing rigidity of caste system by relating it with progress of Aryanisation and change of regimes from the Buddhist Pālas and Candras to the strictly Brahmanical Varmans and Senas. As to the class, he

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related the fluctuation of the social rank of each occupational class with the shift of economic importance from commerce to agriculture. While his broad view of social changes in Bengal has validity till date, some notions should be reconsidered. The dichotomy of the Buddhist Pāla-Candras and the Brahmanical Sena-Varmans is one of them. The religious identity of those dynasties is not clearcut one and the inclination towards Brahmanical norms and rituals are commonly observable among them including the later Pāla kings from the twelfth century, as I will discuss below.37 All the more, the use of dynastic framework in the study of social change gives undue importance to the royal initiatives in the transitions involving many other factors and social groups, which is well contemplated by Ray himself.

The next contributions were made by P. Niyogi and B. M. Morrison through the analysis of inscriptions. Niyogi researched on the expansion of Brahmanic settlements and Brahmanism by donations from the Gupta period in each sub-division of Bengal.38 Morrison envisaged sub-divisions of the region by plotting geographical distributions of the copper plate inscriptions. He also analysed the shapes, forms and contents of copper plate inscriptions and sorted them into four categories, and claimed the correlation of these categories with the political history and the character of governments in Bengal.39 T. Yamazaki also researched on socio-economic and administrative aspects of copper-plate inscriptions, especially the so-called land sale grants of the Gupta and the Post-Gupta period.40 While those works contributed to our understanding of land grants in the geographical context of Bengal, the recent discoveries of new copper plate

37 Infra, Chapter 6.
38 P. Niyogi, Brahmanic Settlements in Different Subdivisions of Ancient Bengal, Calcutta, 1967.
39 B. M. Morrison, Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal, Tuscon, 1970.
inscriptions require the reconsideration of some of their conclusions. Apart from them, a monograph by A. K. Choudhary can be referred to as a unique contribution. He explored every aspects of the rural life in early medieval eastern India by exhaustive use of various kinds of texts. 41 Though his work lacks a notion of change, his exhaustiveness should be followed with more refined interpretative frameworks.

A new approach was introduced by B. D. Chattopadhyaya. In his work on the comparative study of rural settlements and society of early medieval South Asia, he dedicated one chapter to delineation of the rural history of Bengal by investigation on the inscriptions. 42 He delineated the general settlement patterns in Bengal through the analysis of geographical information and pointed out the spatial and social interrelation among settlements. He also argued the supra-village social relationship of peasants in the Gupta period and its change in the Post-Gupta period, especially the rise of local magnates. His insights afforded clues to the interpretation of inscriptive data in the general context of agricultural and societal expansion in the early medieval period. It should be followed by an exhaustive analysis of all the available inscriptions.

Apart from these works, a monograph of K. Chakrabarti deserves a special mention. 43 Though it is mainly focussed on the process of the cultural interaction and making of regional tradition, which is called 'Puranic Process' by him, his notions of cultural hegemony of brāhmaṇas and interpretative frameworks for Purāṇas are useful for the textual consideration of Sanskrit sources. The framework suggested by him, especially the Brahmanical way of accommodating local cultures, is fully

applicable to understandings of the incorporation of festivals and the systematisation of social stratification, which would be discussed in the sixth chapter of the present research.\footnote{Infra, Chapter 6 Sections 4 and 5.}

3. Perspectives of Research

One perspective of the research is that the rural society as a social structure should be considered as a product of multiple agencies of the social groups involved with it. This perspective is formulated with consideration of the implications of the historiography discussed above. Even though they seem to be stable, all the social systems, especially ones including the relation of dominance and subordination, are results of historical process of interactions and negotiations among those groups. On the other hand, it should be kept in mind that this process works in the context of asymmetrical power relation between the dominant and subordinate groups. The former may possess enormous physical and cultural resources to impose their will on the latter and legitimatise their dominance. This is especially valid in the context of the early history of South Asia, where literacy is a monopoly of brahmānas and other elite groups.

As this research aims at considering multiple agencies of social groups and powers related to the rural society, it is especially important to include the activity and 'voice' of lower strata of the society in its ambit. However, the sources within our reach are mostly written in Sanskrit, which ceased to be a language of daily use long time before the period of the present research. All the more, the discourse of subordinate groups cannot find space in texts in their mostly illiterate condition. This situation can be understood by the concept of 'public transcript' and 'hidden transcript', which was theorised by J. C. Scott.\footnote{J. C. Scott, \textit{Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts}, New Haven and London, 1990.} In his discursive analysis of
domination and resistance in a wide range of cultures, Scott describes open interaction between subordinates and dominants by the term public transcript. For dominant elites, it is the self-portrait as they would have themselves seen and is designed to affirm and naturalise their power. and a credible performance of haughtiness and mastery are required for them. For subordinates, it is the performance of deference and consent which they offer to read the real intentions and mood of the power holders. The hidden transcript is the discourse produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript, and consisting of the “offstage” speeches, gestures and practices that confirm, contradict or inflect what appears in the public transcript. For subordinates, it is the discourse which takes place beyond direct observation by power holders. Scott suggests that the assessment of the discrepancy between the hidden and public transcripts allows us to judge the impact of domination on public discourse.

The hidden transcript of subordinates is totally unavailable to us. What is available is the public transcript of the dominant groups recorded in the inscriptions or codified as scriptures, and the public transcript of subordinates perceived by the dominant groups. As Scott discusses, any analysis based exclusively on the public transcript is likely to conclude that subordinate groups endorse the terms of their subordination and are willing partners in their subordination. However, the supposition of the presence of hidden transcript would enable us to interpret the available public

46 Ibid., p.2.
47 Ibid., p.18.
48 Ibid., p.11.
49 Ibid., p.3.
50 Ibid., pp.4-5.
51 Ibid., p.4.
52 Ibid., p.5.
53 Ibid., p.4.
transcript as a performance of domination and subordination, and to detect power relations between dominant and subordinate groups. Such an attitude towards our sources and their strategic reading and interpretation constitute another perspective of this research. It will be further clarified through the explanation of sources and interpretative strategies below.

Apart from it, one key concept and its definition should be explained. It is 'Brahmanical.' As will be shown in the following chapters, the process of the establishment of the authority of brāhmanas and spread of Brahmanical norms constitute an important element of the historical changes of the rural society dealt with in this research.54 Hence it is necessary to define what Brahmanical means. In somewhat general manner, A. T. Embree suggests that the use of the adjective 'Brahmanical' does not imply an ideology confined to one group, but rather 'a set of values, ideas, concepts, practices and myths that are identifiable in the literary tradition and social institutions.'55 While this definition has wide applicability, its social aspect should be emphasised for the present research. In social aspect, what is implied by Brahmanical can be defined as the social framework and the system of code of conducts, which was claimed to conform to the social view propagated by series of scriptures explaining dharma or the proper social order. In practical terms, it is the social framework of four varnas centred on brāhmanas and the system of code of conducts based on one's birth and social rank. Though the concept of dharma is historically constructed and can have several connotations and variations, some notions have been established by the composition of the primary Dharmaśāstras like the Manusmṛti and shared by a wide range of social groups by the period of the present research. On the other hand, the extent of adherence to this social norm can be diverse

54 Infra, Chapter 6 Section 2.
according to the period, region and social groups. In the regional context of Bengal, the *varna* identity never became distinct except the cases of *brāhmaṇas*. Even among *brāhmaṇas*, there is some gradation from ones engaging in agriculture as a part of peasant householders to the others highly qualified in terms of their family background and academic qualification and working as specialists of rituals and *dharma*. However, the acceptance of certain Brahmanical social norms by the rural population is attested by the participation of peasant householders and other social groups in land donations to *brāhmaṇas* from the early phase. Even the framework of four *varnas* was deployable in explaining the social reality by the *Varnasamkara* theory in the *Brhaddevamapuraṇa*. Thus in spite of variations, the core of this social framework and the system of code of conducts are upheld in some ways. As far as the diversity is taken into account, the definition mentioned above may be valid in the context of the present research.

4. Sources and Interpretative Strategies

The main sources of this research are Sanskrit texts. In Bengal in the period of our concern, Sanskrit texts constitute the majority of sources through which we can access the society. As a privileged literary language, it is employed for a wide range of textual compositions from refined *Kāvyas* and inscriptions related to courts to the works like the *Kṣiparaśara*, which has rather a rural background. As Sanskrit has ceased to be the language of everyday life long before the period of our concern, we had better suppose

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56 Infra, Chapter 3.
57 Infra, Chapter 6, Section 5.
wider social space for some forms of Prakrit and other non-Sanskrit languages, which may not have materialised as literary works with a few exceptions. To interpret those Sanskrit sources properly, we need to consider the position of Sanskrit and its relation with other languages in the historical context.

The use of Sanskrit has already started by the middle of the fourth century, as is attested by an inscription found at Susuniya hill in Bankura district.\textsuperscript{60} Since then, especially after the fifth century, most of inscriptions, from land grants issued by kings to votive inscriptions caused to engrave by householders, have been written in Sanskrit. The fact that all the grants addressed to rural population were written in Sanskrit and that the influential section of the rural society was involved with the issue of some of these grants alludes to the existence of some class of people with Sanskrit literacy even in rural settings. As is shown by their involvement with the procedures related to land purchases and donations and issue of copper plate inscriptions recording them,\textsuperscript{61} the upper section of peasant householders and local literate groups like kāyasthas seem to have had some extent of Sanskrit literacy. On the other hand, the use of non-Sanskrit terms for some landmarks demarcating borders and for place names mentioned in inscriptions indicates daily use of such non-Sanskrit languages by local population. For an attempt at literary employment of the Bengali language started with the use of Old Bengali for the composition of verses called caryās under the strong influence of Western or Śauraseni Apabhraṃśa, as late as the period between 950 to 1200 A.D.,\textsuperscript{62} we should suppose mostly unwritten condition of the local languages in the period of our concern. What is inferable from these points is the presence of literate groups with access to

\textsuperscript{60} SI, 1, pp. 351-352.
\textsuperscript{61} Infra, Chapter 3 Section 1.
both languages and their mediation between the written communication through Sanskrit and the oral communication through local languages. Their mediation enabled transmission of the orders and information written in Sanskrit through oral channel to the wider section of rural population who did not have literacy of this language. It can be surmised that this mediation and oral communication were presupposed by the issuers of grants and the composers of texts like Purāṇas. In case of the former, the continuous issue of copper plate inscriptions in Sanskrit endorses this presupposition. In case of Purāṇas, their oral communication through recital at special occasions like vrata is prescribed by the texts themselves. The interpretations and explanations in vernacular languages accompanied with the recital can be guessed from the modern account of Purāṇa recitals.

Thus we can surmise that the contents of those grants and texts aimed at rural population include what the issuers and composers expected to be communicated to and to be understood by these people, even though they were written in Sanskrit. Accordingly, we can try to understand the rural society and its social networks through these Sanskrit texts, as far as we keep in our mind that images depicted in them were ones held by these composers and shared by the dominant section of the rural society.

With this understanding of Sanskrit and Sanskrit texts in the rural society, I would like to proceed to the explanations of sources used in this research and strategies to interpret them. The sources are broadly categorised into inscriptions, Brahmanical texts and other texts.

Inscriptions used in the present research are ones pertaining to the rural society and landscape. Among them, the most important are the copper plate inscriptions. They are documents issued to grant land or income of villages with immunity from revenue charges to individual or group of

brāhmaṇas and religious institutions. They are addressed to relevant officers, subordinate rulers and local residents for announcement of donations and requirement of their protection by those people. They recorded procedures carried out on these occasions apart from the information on details of donations. The basic strategy to read these inscriptions is well explained in the following sentences of B. D. Chattopadhyaya:

In such endeavour, several components in the total structure of the inscriptions, and particularly those components that alter radically with the passage of time, need to be looked into closely. Changing phraseology, and of course the nature of the contents of the relevant components of the inscriptions are important indicators of changing relationship between political authority and the village, and therefore of the internal organization of the village.

This strategy is thoroughly adopted for reading copper plate inscriptions in this research.

In Bengal, we have two kinds of copper plate inscriptions according to the issuing authorities. One is the so-called land sales grants issued by the local body called adhikarana or local people associated with this organisation. Another is the royal grants issued by kings or their subordinate rulers. In the period from the first half of the fifth century to the middle of the seventh century, the majority of the grants belong to the former category. They record and announce the purchases and donations of land plots by certain individuals. As they minutely record procedures in which various sections of the rural society participated in different ways, the scrutiny of each record and the process described in it provides a precious glimpse into networks and relations among those groups. On the other hand, they are less formalised and show much variations according to the localities to which they belong, compared with later royal grants. Accordingly, each of these land sales

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65 For detailed descriptions of forms and contents of copper plate inscriptions in general, see D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*, Delhi, 1965, pp.120-150.
grants will be picked up and their contents will be minutely analysed in the third and fourth chapters, though it might look redundant.

Royal grants, the earliest of which belongs to the beginning of the sixth century, became the norm from the middle of the seventh century. They are royal orders unilaterally informing the donations made by the king, sometimes as a result of application by his family members or subordinates, and requiring protection of donated property and service to donees. They are issued to royal subordinates including officers and subordinate rulers, and residents of the locality to which donated land plots belong. While some grants belonging to the seventh century include ones issued by subordinate rulers, the issue of grants became monopoly of the kings with independent status from the eighth century onward.

These royal grants are highly formalised and the references to the rural society in them are limited to particular parts like address, privileges conferred on donees and stipulations for cultivators. These descriptions are stereotypical and commonly appear in almost all the grants of a particular dynasty. They may not necessarily reflect the reality at the ground level. However, the slight differences of contents, like constituents of addressees or additional privileges pertaining to particular cases, show some recognition of change and difference in each locality by the authority involved with the making of such documents. These differences should be investigated with sensitivity for understanding the conditions and changes in the rural society through these royal grants.

On the other hand, monopolisation of the issue of grants brought the political authorities including the king, his administrative apparatus and subordinate rulers to the focus of copper plate inscriptions. The claim of overarching control over the rural society by the king, the intention to infiltrate into the rural society by the political authorities, and the power relation between the king and his subordinate rulers became visible in these royal grants. Apart from them, the religious authorities including brāhmaṇa
donees and their relation with the political authorities also became conspicuous in these grants. These descriptions would enable us to discern the relation between these authorities and the rural society, and to understand the power relations in which the latter was located.

The other inscriptions include eulogies and votive inscriptions. The former records pious activities of influential people like kings, subordinate rulers and highly qualified brāhmanas, with lengthy verses adoring their genealogies and deeds. Though they are embellished with stereotypical expressions, the eulogies show how these people perceived themselves and their past. They are especially important for tracing the activities of subordinate rulers called sāmantas and networking of brāhmanas, which will be discussed in the fifth chapter. Genealogy is not limited to families as one inscription records genealogy of a particular religious sect, which shows their close connection with the political authorities.67

Votive inscriptions engraved on images and other objects of donations are rather short. Basic information contained in these inscriptions is names and titles of donees. Occasionally, they refer to genealogy, relatives and residential place of donees, and names and regnal year of the reigning king. As they record the donations of moderate scale, a wider range of social groups appear in this genre of inscriptions. Though information obtainable from these inscriptions is limited, references to these social groups are precious and the way of their representation can show some aspects of social relations among them. Apart from that, the votive inscriptions mentioning donations by Buddhist monks offer additional information about the network connecting Buddhist monasteries all over South Asia, as they refer to the activity of monks originating from distant areas at vihāras in eastern India.

Brahmanical texts used in this research are Purāṇas and dharma

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67 Bangarh Inscription of the time of Nayapāla, JAIH, 7, pp.135-158: 13, pp.34-56.
texts composed in early medieval Bengal. As they were composed to propagate and explicate particular social norms and code of conducts conforming to the social view which can be labelled as Brahmanical defined above, they are categorised as Brahmanical texts.

_Purānas_ mainly used in this research are the _Mahābhāgavatapurāṇa_, the _Devibhāgavatapurāṇa_ and the _Brhadharmapurāṇa_, whose dates stretch from the eleventh century to the latter half of the thirteenth century. The _Kālikāpurāṇa_, which seems to have been more associated with contemporary _Kāmarūpa_, is also consulted for comparison. The composers of these _Purānas_ tried to represent themselves as highly qualified _śrotriya brāhmaṇas_ differentiated from low rank _brāhmaṇas_ called 'nominal _brāhmaṇa_ (brahmabandhu)' or 'fallen _brāhmaṇa_ (patita)', while the language used in these texts show a strong local influence. Their intention to make themselves distinct from other social groups is also discernible in the prescription for _brāhmaṇas_ to speak in Sanskrit when they are greeted by other three _varṇas_. These tendencies may indicate the correspondence between the composition of these _Purānas_ and making of clearer identity of _brāhmaṇas_ and settling of their highly qualified section in the rural society through networking, which will be discussed below.

As to the rural society, what is discernible in these _Purānas_ is the cognition of social reality by these _brāhmaṇas_ based on their own social

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68 Supra, pp.15-16.
70 Ibid., pp.232, 245.  
72 For the minute analysis of the language used in these _Purānas_, see Hazra, _Studies in Upapurānas_, vol.2, pp.278-279 (Mahābhāgavata); pp.353-355 (Devibhāgavata); pp.449-450 (Brhadharmā).  
73 _Brhadharmā_, 3.1.26-28ab.  
74 Infra, Chapter 5 Section 5 and Chapter 6 Section 2.
framework. On the other hand, their intention of social reorganisation and systematisation according to Brahmanical social view are detectable through careful reading of the texts. These aspects are especially clear in Puranic festivals prescribing social gathering and the description of mixed jātis or Varṇasamkaras in the Brhaddharmapurāṇa, which will be minutely discussed in the sixth chapter.75

_Dharma_ texts used in this research are Dharmanibandhas or digests of dharma composed in Bengal from the eleventh to the twelfth century. They were composed by highly qualified brāhmaṇas associated with courts of the Varmans and the Senas to explicate certain topics related to dharma with ample citations from older dharma texts and Purāṇas.76 In case of the Senas, kings themselves were involved with the composition of Dharmanibandhas.77 In this early phase, Dharmanibandhas are mainly concerned with a particular Brahmanical rituals or proper code of conducts for brāhmaṇas. What transpire from them are self images of brāhmaṇas and their connection with kingship through ritual services. These points should be considered in the context of the establishment of Brahmanical authority, which became clear in the twelfth century.78

Other texts include other genres of texts written in Sanskrit, _Caryāpadas_, and foreign accounts.

The most important text in the first category is the _Kṛśiparasara_, a Sanskrit agricultural text composed in Bengal in the middle of the eleventh century.79 As a text composed as an agricultural manual, it contains

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75 Infra, Chapter 6 Sections 4 and 5.
76 For those nibandhakāras, see HD, 1, pt.2, pp.639-652 (Bhaṭṭa Bhavadeva); pp.699-713 (Jimūtavāhana); pp.727-730 (Aniruddha); pp.622-639 (Halāyudha).
77 Ibid., pp.730-735.
78 Infra, Chapter 6 Section 2.
descriptions of the rural society. It might have been composed by a person belonging to the local brāhmaṇa or other moderate literate groups residing in a rural area. He constructed the intended audience of the text as cultivators-cum-householders with a cultural and intellectual background similar to his own. The social categories that can fit into such a construction are peasant householders from local brāhmaṇa and other intellectual groups like kāvasthas. Thus the image of the rural society depicted in the Kṛṣiparāśara can be interpreted as a cognition or an idealised image shared by the rural literate groups, who made up a part of the local notables. On the other hand, the consideration of the historical context, in which this text was composed, indicates another aspect of the composition, namely, an attempt at social reorganisation made by local notables. This point will be discussed in the fifth chapter.

Another genre of texts included in the first category is Kāvyas written in Bengal. Though they were mainly composed by court poets for consumption by elites around courts of the kings, some of them offer a glimpse of life in the rural society perceived by these elites. Especially important among them are the Subhāśitaratnakoṣa of Vidyākara and the Saduktikarṇaṁṭa of Śridharadāsa, the anthologies of Sanskrit verses compiled in Bengal. The former seems to have been compiled at some Buddhist monastery, which can be Jagaddala-vihāra in Varendra, about 1100 A. D., and the latter was compiled at the court of Laksmanaśena in 1205 A. D.

provenance, see Kṛṣiparāśara, introduction, pp.xix-xxi.
81 Ibid., pp.160-163.
82 Infra, Chapter 5 Section 4.
84 Subhāśitaratnakoṣa, introduction, pp.xxxi-xxxix.
D. While authors whose verses are included in these anthologies include poets of the earlier period like Kālidāsa and Bāna, some of them seem to be near contemporary poets living in Bengal, according to the references in other works and other information. They include many verses depicting life in the rural landscape, which offer information on the contemporary rural society. Though they are stereotypical, these verses might reflect the cognition of the rural society shared by these elites. If we consider the location of Buddhist monasteries in rural space and their association with the rural society as large scale landholders, it is possible that this cognition is based on the contact of these elites with the rural society. The most important feature of these verses is lower class cultivators called pāmaras, who do not appear in the contemporary inscriptions.

Another important text among कव्यास is the रामारितa of Sandhyākaranandin. This is a work which narrates in double entendre a summarised version of the रामायणa and deeds of Rāmapāla, the Pāla king, and his descendants. It was composed by Sandhyākaranandin, a court poet of Madanapāla, during his reign around the middle of the twelfth century. The narrative centres on the so-called kaivartta rebellion, which temporarily ousted the Pālas from Varendra. This text, especially with its contemporary commentary written by an anonymous author, offers minute account of this event. In the historical context constructed by the inscriptions and other contemporary sources, this event can be interpreted as a culmination of several tendencies in the contemporary rural society. With the consideration

85 Saduktikarnāṃṛta, introduction, p.viii.
86 For authors and their possible identities, see Subhāsitaratnakosā, introduction, pp.lxxi-cvi; Saduktikarnāṃṛta, author index, pp.1-28.
87 For such verses included in Subhāsitaratnakosā, see D. H. H. Ingalls, 'A Sanskrit Poetry of Village and Field: Yogeśvara and His Fellow Poets', JAOS, 74, 1954, pp.119-131.
of the context, the account of the event provides an interesting insight into them, as I will discuss below.\textsuperscript{89}

The \textit{Caryāpada} is the collection of verses composed in Old Bengali language and considered as a first attempt at employing this language for literary use.\textsuperscript{90} Those verses were composed by \textit{sidhācāryas} of Sahajiyā Buddhist sect, which belonged to a Tantric strand.\textsuperscript{91} They are written in a cryptic language called \textit{sandhābhāṣā}, which would convey esoteric meaning to the initiates of the sect who learned how to decode them.\textsuperscript{92} Descriptions of daily life in the contemporary rural society are often employed in those verses as metaphors to convey esoteric teachings.\textsuperscript{93} The fact that they can work as metaphors show that those descriptions were fully understandable to the intended audience of this work, who might be prospective devotees and members of the sect living in rural space. As such, we may interpret those descriptions as a part of social reality recognised by the members of sedentary society.

Foreign accounts mainly consist of travel accounts by Chinese Buddhist monks and Arab merchants and travellers. Their itineraries and accounts show the inter-regional trade networks with which Bengal was connected. The account of the military expedition by Muhammad Bakhtyār Khaljī recorded in the \textit{Tabakat-i-Nāsiri}, the chronicle written by Minhāj, also shows a part of this network.\textsuperscript{94} The accounts of Chinese Buddhist monks,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{89} Infra, Chapter 5 Section 6.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Chatterji, \textit{Origin and Development}, p.116.
\item \textsuperscript{91} For their philosophy and practices, see S. Dasgupta, \textit{Obscure Religious Cults} (3rd ed.), Calcutta, 1969, pp.35-50, 87-109.
\item \textsuperscript{92} The \textit{Caryāpadas}, Ed. and Tr. by A. Mojumdar, Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1973 (2nd ed.), pp.93-102.
\item \textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid.}, pp.10-26.
\end{itemize}
especially I-ching's work on the religious practices observed in South and South-East Asia,\textsuperscript{95} also offer interesting information about life in Buddhist vihāras. They especially shed light on one aspect of these vihāras, namely, their emergence as large scale landholders, which will be discussed below.\textsuperscript{96} They also offer precious information about the network connecting Buddhist vihāras and their close connection with the political authorities. The last point is also attested by the history of Buddhism by Tāranātha.\textsuperscript{97} Though it was written in Tibet around 1600 A. D.,\textsuperscript{98} the text contains legends connecting the Pāla kings with the eminent Buddhist mahāvihāras. They compliment the information obtained from the inscriptions.

In addition to these texts, some archaeological data are used as subsidiary sources. They consist of reports of excavations and surface explorations.

With these perspectives and understanding of the sources, I would like to pursue this research on the rural society and social networks in early medieval Bengal. Before the main discussion, the definition of Bengal as a region and its sub-regions will be discussed in the next chapter as a preliminary.

\textsuperscript{95} J. Takakusu (tr.), \textit{A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and the Malay Archipelago (AD 671-695) by I-tsing}, New Delhi, 1998 (Reprint).
\textsuperscript{96} Infra, Chapter 4 Section 5.
\textsuperscript{97} D. P. Chattopadhyaya (ed.), Lama Chimpa and A. Chattopadhyaya (trs), \textit{Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India}, Delhi, 1990.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Ibid.}, p.xxiv.