Chapter VII

SOCIETY, RELIGION AND CULTURAL PATTERNS

The literary and epigraphic sources as well as the foreign accounts indicate that till about the advent of Islam in the region in the thirteenth century, society in the northern division of Bengal (Puṇḍravardhana) was heterogeneous, multi-religious and multi-cultural in character, although the influence of Brahmanical culture seems to have been pervasive.

Drawing on the evidence of mainly the epics and the Purāṇas, Suniti Kumar Chatterji described Puṇḍravardhana as a Kirāta region along with the neighbouring Himalayan region and northeastern India in early times.1 The Mānava Dharmaśāstra (dated the first-second century) noted the presence of the Kirātas and the Puṇḍras side by side, along with the Vaṅgas, Sumhas, Śabaras and Pulindas2, indicating thereby that the Kirātas and Puṇḍras were two different ethnic categories. Describing the spread of Brahmanical settlements in the region, the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa referred to the Andhra, Puṇḍra, Śbara, Pulinda, Mutiba, etc., as belonging to the lower castes.3 Referring to this source of information, R.S. Sharma observed that the account provides an early example of the priestly ingenuity in the invention of genealogies for the non-Āryan peoples in order to assimilate them to the lower ranks of the Brāhmanical society and shows that recalcitrant and disobedient sons of the Aryans were also regarded as dasyus and antyajas (outcastes).4

D.C. Sircar found that the Baudhāyana Dharmaśūtra (sixth-fifth century BC) placed the Puṇḍras of North Bengal and the Vangas of south-east Bengal at a slightly lower stage than that of the Aṅgas and Magadhās. This was because anyone, especially a Brāhmaṇa, visiting the land of the Puṇḍras was required to perform the punastoma or sarvaprśtha

3 Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, VII 18, R S Sharma, Sūdras in Ancient India Motilal Banarasidass, New Delhi, 1958, p 72.
4 Ibid
sacrifice\(^5\) for the purpose of purification. Sircar also observed that even a later Puranic stanza which allowed a Brāhmaṇa to travel to Aṅga, Vaṅga, Magadha etc., without entailing ritual purification only for the purpose of pilgrimage did not include in the list Pūndra and Prāgjyotisha-Kāmarūpa. Therefore, the people of the land lying to the east of the Karatoya might have become worthy of being recognized by the other regions of India only at a somewhat later date.\(^6\)

The above-mentioned references and interpretations indicate that the inhabitants of the Pūndra region were originally non-Aryans (possibly Kirātas) but they were gradually assimilated in the Brahmanical society. However, as would be seen later, the literary and epigraphic sources did testify to the presence of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism with various schools and sects of their respective folds in the region since the Mauryan time, if not earlier.

**Spread of Brahmanism**

As stated already\(^7\), the literary works recorded the presence of Kirāta, Pūndra and Vaṅga people in the northern division of modern Bengal before the penetration of the Brahmanical culture into the region. Bālī and Bāṇa were among the asura rulers of the Pūndra region named in some of the Brahmanical works and the Purāṇas,\(^8\) whereas the *Mahābhārata* referred to Pauṇḍraka Vāsudeva as the Kṣatriya king of the Pūndras and Kirātas.\(^9\) Earlier, the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (dated about the seventh century BC), which described the beginning of the Aryan settlements in the region, considered the Pūndras as

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\(^6\) Ibi.

\(^7\) Supra, Chapter II.

\(^8\) *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*, VII.18; *Matya Purāṇa* pp.96-98; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* IV, 18.

belonging to lower caste. The Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra (dated to the sixth-fifth century BC), which listed the Vaṅgas and the Paunḍras among the peoples living in the regions beyond the sphere of Aryan civilization, confirmed the acquaintance of the ‘Indo-Aryan’ scholars with the land of the Paunḍras and the Vaṅgas before the end of the Vedic period. That the Aryans looked down upon the settlements beyond the sphere of Brahmanical civilization is also evident from the contents of the Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra, which accorded the Vaṅgas and the Paunḍras a lower status among the peoples of eastern India. This is clearly known from the prescription of purification rituals like the punastoma and sarvapṛṣṭha for the Brāhmaṇas or any one else visiting their land. The Mānava Dharmasūtra (first-second century) for the first time classed the indigenous tribes of Bengal — including the Vaṅgas, Sumhas, Śabaras, Pulindas, Kirātas and Paunḍras — as Kṣatriyas, but it grouped them with the Drāviḍians, Scythians, Chinese and other ‘outlandish peoples’. It further consigned the Paunḍrakas (Paunḍras) and Kirātas to the rank of Śūdras because they had (supposedly) forsaken Brahmanical rites and customs and had not come into contact with the Brāhmaṇas. Manu also identified the Paunḍras as ‘degraded’ Kṣatriyas. The law-giver is said to have branded them as ‘degraded Kṣatriyas’ or ‘fallen Kṣatriyas’ (patita kṣatriya) for forsaking Brahmanical practices. However, their social status improved by the time of the Mahābhārata, as both the Paunḍras and the Vaṅgas were called ‘sujata Kṣatriya’ (= good Kṣatriyas) in the text of the great epic. According to the Mahābhārata, the sons of Viśvamitra were cursed to become ‘mlecchas’ like the Andhras, Paunḍras and Śabaras, since they refused to accept the leadership of Devabrata against their father’s desire.

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10 Aitareya Brāhmaṇa, VII 18, R S Sharma, op cit, pp 71-72
12 D C Sircar, “Epico-Purānic Myths and Allied Legends”, in H K Barpujan (ed), op cit, p 79.
13 Mānava Dharmasūtra quoted in Rakhaladas Bandopadhyaya, Bāngālr Itihās, Vol I, p 13, R C Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc cit, pp 29, 413
14 Manusmṛti X 44; D C Sircar, Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1971, p 91, R C Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc cit, p 413.
15 Ibid, p 14; Rajanikanta Chakrabarti, op cit, pp 7-9
16 Mahābhārata, V. 85, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, Bānglādeskher Itihās, Vol I, loc cit, p 14
17 Mahābhārata, XIII. 3, Mandira Bhattacharya, "Religion in Pundravardhana", in B N Mukherjee & P K Bhattacharyya (eds), op cit, p 70
This information becomes important for the fact that the Mahābhārata which referred to the Pundras in one part as mleccha (‘unclean’) called them sujata kṣatriya (good or clean-born kṣatriya) in a later part. It is therefore possible that the upward mobility of the Pundras in the Brahmanical social order occurred during the period of composition of the great epic itself.

Brahmanical culture seems to have percolated into Bengal by the time of the Mahābhārata. A statement in the Ādiparvan of the epic referred to the Kṣatriya kings in the region, and among them were the likes of Karna, king of Aṅga, Vāsudeva, king of Pundra, Samudrasena, king of Vaṅga, and an unnamed king of Sumha. The epic also mentioned that besides Kṛṣṇa of the Yādava-Sātvata-Vṛṣṇi family, there was another claimant for the status of ‘Vāsudeva’. This was Pauṇḍraka Vāsudeva, i.e., Vāsudeva, ruler of the Pauṇḍra people. Some scholars even thought that this Pauṇḍraka Vāsudeva was actually the leader of a rival religious sect. D.C. Sircar, for example, considered Vāsudeva Kṛṣna and Pauṇḍraka Vāsudeva to have been leaders of two different religious sects and that Pauṇḍraka-Vāsudeva might have been really the leader of a rival sect, because (i) Patañjali seemed to make a distinction between Vāsudeva, the tatvabhavat (i.e., the most worshipful Vāsudeva) and the Kṣatriya Vāsudeva. (ii) the Bhāgavata work Pādma Tantra acknowledged the presence of two Vāsudevas and made a similar distinction between the two Vāsudevas, and (iii) in a Mahābhārata story, besides Kṛṣṇa of the Yādava-Sātvata-Vṛṣṇi family (i.e., Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva), there was another claimant for the status of Vāsudeva in Pauṇḍraka-Vāsudeva, that is, Vāsudeva, the ruler of the Pauṇḍraka people.

It seems that whereas Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa was hailed in the northern and western part as an avatāra of Viṣṇu, the people in the Pundra region regarded their king as the son of Vāsudeva. On the other hand, the followers of Pauṇḍraka-Vāsudeva perhaps included the

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18 Mahābhārata, Ādiparvan quoted in A.K. Sur, History and Culture of Bengal, Chuckerlerti, Chatterjee & Co., Calcutta, 1963, p.31
21 F.E. Pargiter, Ancient Indian Historical Tradition, Oxford University Press, London, 1922, p.163; Y.K. Misra, op.cit., p.53. Bāli has been repeatedly mentioned in the Mahābhārata and the Purāṇas, e.g.,
Aṅgas, Vaṅgas, Kaliṅgas, Puṇḍras and Suhmas, for, as signified by the Bālī story they had a common ancestor in the person of a Brāhmaṇa (Dirghatamas) and they likely formed a homogenous ethnic group in the Bengal region. It would also appear that by the time the Mahābhārata was composed the social status of the Puṇḍras had improved and by then they were conferred with the ranking of ‘sujata Kṣatriya’ (= good Kṣatriya). In fact, the social and cultural status of the people of the region seemed to have been significantly upgraded in the Mahābhārata. It is evident from the fact that in the Mahābhārata the Lauhitya, the Karatoyā and the Gaṅgā are included among the holy rivers and the Gaṅgā-Sāgara-Saṅgama (i.e., the estuary of the Gaṅgā in southern Bengal) is referred to as a place of pilgrimage in connection with the legend of Bhagīratha and the holy dip by Yudhīsthira.

The elevation of the social status of the Puṇḍra region in the estimation of the Brahmanical writers might have been as a result of the process of Brahmanisation of the region. R.C. Majumdar assumed that the first stage of the process in the region took place between fourth century BC and fourth century AD. In support of his assumption he argued that the date of the Baudhyāna Dharmasūtra, which looked down upon the people of the Puṇḍra region, can be roughly put at about the fifth century BC, whereas, although it is more difficult to assign any such precise date to the Mahābhārata the text of which grew in volumes by repeated additions extending over centuries, there are good reasons to believe that the great epic assumed its present form in or some time before the fourth century. The lands of the despised Puṇḍras and Vangas of the Baudhyāna Dharmasūtra had by then become not only the seats of powerful kings but also flourishing centres of the Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical religions. According to Majumdar, all these significant changes must have been brought about between the ages represented by the Baudhyāna Dharmasūtra and the Mahābhārata. In fact, the elevation of the cultural status of the eastern and north-eastern portions of India is distinctly pronounced in the Mahābhārata, I, 74, XIII, 29, 88; Agni Purāṇa 272, Bhāgavata Purāṇa IX, 23, Brahmānda Purāṇa iii, 74-103, Brahma Purāṇa, 27-49; Matsya Purāṇa, 13, 35. Y.K. Misra, op.cit., pp.17, 53-56.


Mahābhārata, Vana Parva, 33, 2-5; R.C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc.cit., p.28.

Mahābhārata, loc.cit., p.28-29.
Vana Parva of the Mahābhārata. The source declared the Gaṅgā, the Karatoyā and the Lauhitya as sacred rivers. It was said that (i) in the olden days Lauhitya became so sacred a place by the influence of Rāma that any one visiting that place got large quantities of gold; (ii) a visit to the Karatoyā river after three days’ fast produced the same merit as the performance of an aśvamedha sacrifice; and (iii) one who bathed in the Gaṅgā from its western end after three days’ fast was freed from all sins.\(^{26}\)

The Purāṇas reinforced the Brahmanical traditions as incorporated in the Mahābhārata. According to the Vismu Purāṇa and the Matsya Purāṇa, the indigenous tribes of Bengal including the Vangas, Suhmas, Śabaras, Pulindas, Kirātas and Pundras were Kṣatriyas.\(^ {27}\) These Purāṇas reiterated that Bāli had five sons (from his wife Sudesnā through the Brāhmaṇa sage Dirghatamas) who were founders of the five well known janapadas which inherited their names.\(^ {28}\) Bāli is also said to have established the four-fold social order (caturvarna or varnāśramadharma) in his kingdom. His sons are said to have followed the tradition, and Dusyanta, the husband of Sakuntalā, is said to have been Bāli’s contemporary.\(^ {29}\) It was further said that Dirghatamas in his old age consecrated Bhārata, the son of Dusyanta. Samvarta, the cousin of Dirghatamas, is said to have officiated as the high priest of Mārutha, the king of Vaiśāli. Dirghatamas is also said to have been a Vedic rsi who authored the Rg Veda 1 (140-164). He is said to have lived in the hermitage of his paternal cousin whom the Purāṇas apparently called Saradvant.\(^ {30}\) The Vismu Purāṇa attempted a genealogy of Bāli. According to this source, Mahāmanas was one of the kings of the dynasty founded by Anu, son of Yayāti. Titiksu was younger son of Mahāmanas and the younger brother of Uśīnara. From Titiksu was born Ruṣadrath and his son was Hemā. Sutāpas, Bāli’s father, was the son of Hemā.\(^ {31}\) Therefore, Bāli seems to have been accorded an important role in the spread of Brahmanical culture in the Pundra region.

\(^{26}\) Mahābhārata, Vana Parva, 33, 2-5; R C Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc cit., p.28.


\(^{28}\) A K. Chatterjee, op cit., p.126.

\(^{29}\) F.E Pargiter, op cit., p 163, Y K. Misra, op cit. p 53

\(^{30}\) Ibid., pp.43-54.

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* provide some details about Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva, an important character of the *Mahābhārata* and perhaps the first historical ruler of the Puṇḍras. These works inform that Vāsudeva of the Puṇḍras was both a political and a religious leader. Like Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva also had a large number of devotees, although the authors of both the *Purāṇas* branded him a liar and an impostor. The compilers of the texts were staunch Vaiśṇavites who had absolute faith in the divinity of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa. Understandably, therefore, a devotee of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa would have regarded the religious rival of his master as an impostor. However, the sources clearly suggest that Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva (also called ‘Paṇḍraka’) had an appreciable number of devotees in eastern India. According to the *Viṣṇu* and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇas*, Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva was killed in the battlefield of Kurukṣetra by Kṛṣṇa. The *Purāṇas* also provided a genealogy of Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva: a chief named Ātithī was succeeded by Niśādha, who was succeeded by Nala (also named Nabhas) who in turn was succeeded by Paṇḍarīka (Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva). Paṇḍarīka was followed in succession by Kṣemadhanvan, Devarīka and Ahinagu. The texts also give the impression that there was no opposition to the faith of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa after the elimination of Paṇḍraka Vāsudeva.

The continuity of the Brahmanical culture in the region is evidenced from the *Rāmacaritam* (dated to the eleventh-twelfth century), which talked about the people of different castes and their ritual practices. The *Karatoya Māhātmyam* (a Sanskrit text of the twelfth-thirteenth century) referred to an ancient Viṣṇu temple on the western bank of the river Karatoya. The place where the temple was located later on came to be known as Mahāsthan (the erstwhile Puṇḍranagara).

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The pre-dominance of Brahmanical religion and culture in Puṇḍravardhana since the Gupta period can be best gleaned from the epigraphic records, particularly the land-grants inscribed in Sanskrit in the prevalent pan-Indian format. The records began with the invocation of gods and goddesses. The grants were mostly in favour of deities, temples and Brāhmaṇas. In the Dhanāidaha Copper-plate of Kumāragupta I, all the names of the village officials and elders were in Sanskrit; some of them were clearly Brāhmaṇas by caste. The land for donation was purchased by a villager whose name ended with -viṣṇu. The purchase was as per a prevalent custom (called nīvīdharma) which allowed the Brāhmaṇas to buy land at reduced rates provided it was to be for religious purpose. In this instance the land was donated to one Varāhasvāmin, a Chāndogya Brāhmaṇa. In fact, the names in all the inscriptions of the period between the fifth and thirteenth century were Sanskritic names. The grant of land to a Brāhmaṇa by the Dāmodarpur Copper-plate grants I and II of Kumāragupta I were according to the nīvīdharma. The Bāigrama Copper-plate grant of the fifth century recorded the grant of land for the benefit of a temple of Viṣṇu, which was already in existence for a long time. The Dāmodarpur Copper-plate Inscriptions III of Buddhagupta recorded the purchase of a large plot of land in Caṇḍagrama by a wealthy inhabitant. It was for the settlement of some prominent Brāhmaṇas in the village. The Dāmodarpur Copper-plate grant IV of the same Gupta monarch recorded the purchase of land by the guild-president Ribhupāla for the construction of two temples and two store-rooms in the forest region of Himavacchikara within Puṇḍravardhana. This was in favour of Śiva and Viṣṇu. The Dāmodarpur Copper-plate Inscription V recorded the purchase of land by one Amṛtadeva, a wealthy nobleman of Ayodhyā, for an endowment to meet the expenses in connection with the worship of Viṣṇu in the forest region of Himavacchikara. The Khālimpur Copper-plate grant of Dharmapāla announced the gifting of four villages within Vyāghratatī-mandala of Puṇḍravardhana-bhukti by this Buddhist Pāla king for the maintenance of a temple of

37 Ibid., pp.45-49.
38 Ibid., pp.52-53.
39 Ibid., p.60.
40 Ibid., pp.63-64.
41 Ibid., p.73.
Nanna-Nārāyaṇa (Viśnu). The grant was made according to the bhūmicchidranyāya.\(^{42}\) The Āṃgāchi Copper-plate grant of Vīgrabhadra III (dated the ninth century) recorded grant of land to a Brāhmaṇa in Koṭivarṣa-visaya within Puṇḍravardhana-bhūti.\(^{43}\) The Bangaḍa Copper-plate of Mahipāla I (dated the tenth century) recorded the donation of the village Kuaraṭapallika to a Brāhmaṇa named Bhāṭṭaputra Krṣṇāditya. The donee was the son of Bhāṭṭaputra Madhusādana and grandson of Bhāṭṭaputra Hṛṣikeśa belonging to Parāśara Śakti gotra and Vasīṣṭha and Parāśara pravaras. He was a specialist in the Yajur Veda, studying its Vājasenayi śākhā and was also well-versed in Mīmāṃsā, Vyākaraṇa and Tarkaśāstra.\(^{44}\) The Manhāli Copper-plate grant of Madanapāla announced the grant of a village in Koṭivarṣa to Śrī Vatesvara Śvāmi Śarman by way of fee for chanting passages from the Mahābhārata at the request of Citramantikā, the chief queen of the king Madanapāla.\(^{45}\) The Rāmapāla Copper-plate Inscriptions of Śrīcandra (dated the eleventh century) recorded the grant of land in village Neḥakāṣṭhī in Nāṃya-maṇḍala of Puṇḍra bhūtī to the śāntivāriṇī Piṭavāsaguptaśarman, great grandson of Makkaḍagupta, grandson of Varāhagupta and son of Sumangalagupta, belonging to the Sāndilya gotra and the pravara of the three rṣis, for performance of sacrifices.\(^{46}\) The Belāva Copper-plate of Bhojavaran (dated the twelfth century) announced the grant of land by a royal charter affixing the illustrious seal of Viśnu’s wheel in the village Upalikā located at Āḍhāh-pattana-maṇḍala of Puṇḍra bhūtī to Rāmadevaśarman, the priest in charge of the apartment where propitiatory rites were performed.\(^{47}\) The Sunderban Copper-plate Inscription of Lākṣmīnārāyaṇa (dated the twelfth century) also announced the gift of land according to bhūmicchidranyāya to one Krṣṇādharadeva Śarman, priest-in-charge of propitiatory rites and a student of the Āśvalāyana śākhā of the Rg Veda for increasing the merit and fame of the king and his parents.\(^{48}\) The Tarpāndighi Copper-plate Inscription of Lākṣmīnārāyaṇa gifted land in the Vārendrī-maṇḍala of Puṇḍravardhana according to bhūmicchidranyāya. It was in favour of Lākṣmīdharedeva Śarman, a follower of the

\(^{42}\) Ibid., pp.107-109.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., p.193.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., p.206.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., p.222.
\(^{47}\) Ibid., p.235.
\(^{48}\) Ibid., p.294.
Kauthama śākhā-carana of the Sāma Veda. According to the same nyāya, the Ānuliā Copper-plate grant of Lakṣmaṇasena gifted a plot of land in the village of Māṭhāranḍiyā to Raghudeva Sarman, who was a great scholar of the Vedas.

The archaeological excavations and explorations have also unearthed religious sites in the region. The ruins of Govinda Bhūta and Bairāgir Bhūta in the Mahāsthān complex prove the presence of Vaisnava shrines in the region during the ninth-tenth centuries. The ruins of a Viṣṇu temple (known as Govindaśvāmi Temple) at Bāigrām in Dinajpur district and another Viṣṇu temple at Bīrat in Rangpur district are dated to the Gupta period. Among the archaeological finds pertaining to the early period, which bear testimony to the popularity of Brahmanical religion in Puṇḍravardhana are the remains of an ancient temple containing large-sized bricks, a hoard of ten Brahmanical bronze images in Banglahar; the temple ruins in Bīrajganj and Śrīcandrapur in Dinajpur district, and in Nilphamāri in Rangpur district; temples ruins in Mahāsthān; the Skanda temple in Bagopāra; the Kālī temple in Mālānchān in Bagura district; and the Pradhumnya temple in Deopārā. Besides, there are several Brahmanical images and the ruins of at least five temples in Ghātnagar, and of a temple in Jogigophā in Rajshahi district. Thus the sites are located in the Dinajpur, Rangpur and Rajshahi districts of present-day Bangladesh and in the heartland of ancient Puṇḍravardhana. The archaeological evidence is in conformity with that of the literary sources and extant artifacts preserved in museums and shrines ascribed to the early medieval period.

The Rājarāstramiṇi spoke of a temple dedicated to Kārtikeya in Puṇḍravardhana. It mentioned that the worship of the deity was marked by dances accompanied by vocal and instrumental music. Many extant temples and images of Kārtikeya, Ganeśa, Durgā, Indra.

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49 Ibid., p.301.
50 Ibid., p.311.
52 Ibid., pp.119-120,144-157.
Agni, Kuvera, Brhaspati, Gangā, Yamunā, and Mārka found within the region have been dated between the sixth and twelfth centuries.53

**Buddhism**

Buddhism also seems have become fairly popular in Pañcāravardhana. The rise of Buddhist centres in Pañcāravardhana and the neighbouring areas of early Bengal is known from various sources. A terracotta tablet — probably belonging to the Sunga period — found at Tamluk (in West Bengal) contains a scene from the Chandanta Jātaka.54 The Vinaya Pitaka informs that Buddhism made considerable headway in the Pañcra region, and Vanga also emerged as one of the important centres of Buddhism.55 In fact, the Pundra-Vanga region seems to have shot into prominence in the geographical frame of the land of the Buddhists during the life time of the Buddha himself due to the personal visit of the founder of the new faith to the region while he was on preaching campaign. Thus the Telapatta Jātaka spoke of the Buddha's visit to a locality called Deśaka or Setaka in the 'Suhma country' (corresponding to present-day southwest Bengal).56 The Samyutta Nikāya (dated about the third-second century BC) informed that Buddha himself lived for some years in the town of Setaka.57 The Bodhisattvavadana Kalpalatā mentioned that Buddha lived in Pañcāravardhana for six months for the purpose of preaching his religion.58 The Divyāvadāna (second century) also recorded a tradition to the effect that Buddha preached for three months in Pañcāravardhana.59 More importantly, this text contains some stories indicating that Buddhism was a flourishing religion in western and northern Bengal and suggesting that the Magadhan kings retained their hold

53 Rājarāja, IV, 422; R.C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc.cit., p.518. The photographs of some of the extant temples and icons of the pre-1200 AD period are given in Plates I to XXXVI in R.C. Majumdar's History of Ancient Bengal, loc.cit.
56 Ibid., p.183.
58 Ibid.
59 A.K. Sur, op.cit., p.32.
on Bengal till as late as the time of Asoka.\textsuperscript{60} The *Divyāvadāna* also stated that the eastern boundary of the Buddhist Madhyadeśa extended up to Puṇḍravardhana and that Puṇḍranagara was located on the eastern border of the region where Buddhism had prevailed since the time of the Buddha. The text also referred to the land of Buddhism as bounded on four sides as follows: by Puṇḍravardhana in the east; by the town of Saravatī in the south; by the Brāhmaṇa villages of Sthūna and Upasthūna in the west; and by the Usinagiri in the north.\textsuperscript{61}

The *Divyāvadāna*, which placed Puṇḍravardhana in the Buddhist Madhyadeśa, is generally believed to have been composed in the post-Asokan period. It recorded some traditions which suggest that the Maurya rulers took keen interest in the promotion of Buddhism and the protection of the Buddhists in Puṇḍravardhana and the adjoining areas. Thus, a tradition recorded in the *Divyāvadāna* shows that the Nirgrantha or Jaina religion was already established in the Puṇḍra region in the time of Asoka. It informed that the lay followers of Jainism in the city of Puṇḍravardhana had painted a picture representing Buddha falling at the feet of Jīna, and on hearing this Asoka sent a force which massacred eighteen thousand Jainas and Ajivikas of Puṇḍravardhana on a single day.\textsuperscript{62} According to the *Asokavadāna* (which was probably composed in the post-Asokan period), Asoka decided to punish an anti-Buddhist Nirgrantha who had drawn a picture depicting Buddha kneeling in humiliation under his (the Nirgrantha's) feet. On Asoka's order, eighteen thousand Nirgranthas were killed in Puṇḍravardhana.\textsuperscript{63} The *Asokavadāna* also referred to the capital punishment meted out by Asoka to a great multitude of 'naked sectarians' in Puṇḍravardhana for showing disrespect to the Buddha's faith.\textsuperscript{64}

The popularity of Buddhism in Puṇḍravardhana can be discerned from the accounts of the Chinese travellers in India, especially those left behind by Fa-hien, Hiuen Tsang and


\textsuperscript{61} B.C. Law, *op.cit.*, p.246; D C Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, loc cit , pp.159-160.

\textsuperscript{62} R.C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, loc cit , p.26

\textsuperscript{63} Supra, 54n.

I-tsing. Fa-hien had visited India and Sri Lanka during the period between AD 399 and AD 413, and stayed in Tāmralipti for two years at the beginning of the fifth century. He found not less than twenty-two Buddhist vihāras and a large number of sculptures and paintings of the Buddha in Tāmralipta alone. This implied the flourishing state of Buddhism in Bengal.  

Both the Śi-yu-Ki and the Tāng-Shu (dated the seventh century), whose authorship has been attributed to Hieun Tsang, contain information on Puṇḍra, Vanga and other neighbouring regions. The account left by the Chinese pilgrim contains valuable information on the position of Buddhism in Bengal during the seventh century. The pilgrim noticed six or seven vihāras in Kajangala near the Gangā and a big temple made of stone and adorned with various architectural designs. According to his accounts, the statues of Buddha and gods of the Brahmanical pantheon were installed in the temple. The pilgrim spoke of twenty vihāras in Puṇḍravardhana where more than three hundred bhikshus of both Mahāyāna and Hināyana sects resided. Moreover, it mentioned that two thousand pilgrims resided in the thirty vihāras in Samaṭa. He also referred to more than ten vihāras in Karnaśuvarna and the two thousand Buddhist pilgrims living there.  

He recorded a tradition to the effect that Buddha himself preached for three months in Puṇḍravardhana. Attracted by the reputation of Puṇḍravardhana, Hiuen Tsang stayed in one of the monasteries there. Many distinguished students had described the prosperity of Puṇḍravardhana with its hundred temples, twenty vihāras, burgeoning population, and tanks, hospices and flowery bushes. Hiuen Tsang narrated that in the kingdom of Puṇḍravardhana the partisans of the Little Vehicle (Hināyana) exercised their form of worship in complete liberty and it attracted a following as much as the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna). The pilgrim paid reverence to the sacred trees and visited about twelve saṅgharāmas and three thousand monks adhering to the Little and the Great Vehicles in Puṇḍravardhana.  

He further made mention of twenty monasteries with more than three

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66 Ibid., pp.187-192; Subhash Mukhopadhyaya, Bāngālī Itihās (Bengali), Paschimbhanga Bangla Academy, Kolkata, 1999, p.126.
67 Supra, 59n.
thousand inmates of both the Hinayana and Mahayana schools in Pundravardhana.\textsuperscript{71} I-ntsing, who travelled in India during the period AD 671 to 695, saw the ruins of the ‘Temple of China’, which is said to have been built near the Mrgasikhavana or Mrgasthapana monastery in Varendra (i.e., the name by which Pundra subsequently came to be known) for some Chinese pilgrims by a maharaja named Śrīgupta, about five hundred years before the pilgrim’s time. This maharaja has been identified with the progenitor of the Gupta dynasty of Magadha, Mahāraja Gupta, who flourished about the end of the third century.\textsuperscript{72} A Tibetan tradition suggests that Nagarjuna also built some vihāras in Pundravardhana and Vaṅgāla. If this is true, it is another testimony to the fact that Buddhism had its early sway in Bengal. When Brahmanism made inroads into Bengal, Buddhism continued to flourish and receive royal patronage. This information is said to be supplemented by the Mahāyanist literature.\textsuperscript{73} The Bhaiksuki inscription, currently preserved in the Malda Museum, is said to point to the existence of a community of ‘Mongoloid’ foreign monks in Varendra.\textsuperscript{74}

The Gunaigarh Copper-plate grant of Vainyagupta (dated the sixth century) recorded his transfer of five plots of tālapātaka situated in village of Kānteudaka in the northern division of Pundravardhana. The recipient was one acarya Śāntideva, a Buddhist monk of the Mahāyana school. The purpose of the grant was to meet the cost of providing perfume, flower, light, incense, etc. for the worship of Avalokiteśvara (Buddha) thrice a day in the vihāra; supplying garments, food, beds, seats and medicines to the host of monks; and also for repairing the vihāra from time to time.\textsuperscript{75} Śrīcandra’s Paścimbhāg Copper-plate grant (dated the tenth century) recorded the donation of land in several villages in three viśayas of Śrīhaṭṭa mandala within Pundravardhana-bhukti. The gift was in favour of four mathas (monasteries). The clauses of the grant also provided for the reservation of some land for Ratnāṭrāya in the name of Buddhahāṭṭaraka.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{71} B.N. Choudhury, \textit{op.cit.}, p.199.
\textsuperscript{73} A.K. Sur, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.82-84.
\textsuperscript{75} R.R. Mukherji & S.K. Maity (eds.), \textit{op.cit.}, p 68.
\textsuperscript{76} K.K. Gupta, \textit{Copper-plates of Sylhet.} Self Published, Sylhet, 1967, p.109.
The archaeological studies of the sites like Bhasu vihara and Behar (in the neighbourhood of Mahāsthāna in Bagura district), establish that there was a cluster of Buddhist monasteries in those sites in the ancient period. These are identifiable with some of the monasteries named by Hiuen Tsang. The antiquities discovered in the sites include bronze images, terracotta plaques, decorated bricks and inscribed terracotta sealing, which are comparable with those found in other important early Buddhist complexes. The images represent Buddha, Bodhisattva and Bodhisaktis. Buddhist sites have also been discovered in Sitakot in Dinajpur district, Pāhārpur in Rangpur district, and many other places within the heartland of Pundravardhana. The archaeological data pertaining to the ancient period supports the assumption that Buddhism prevailed in the region. Among the archaeological finds are a Buddha image and the site of a monastery at Rānishankail; an octagonal votive stūpa at Jhaljhali in Birājpūr; ruins of a stūpa or a monastery at Goaldihī; ruins of several stūpas and monasteries at Dheuli; the remains of stūpas at Badarganj and Tarpanghāt in Dinajpur district; a stūpa in Dharmapālgarh and the site of a Lokānipāra vihara at Rangpur district; ruins of stūpas and monasteries at Mahāsthāna in Bagura district; and ruins of monasteries in Deopārā at the Rajshahi district.

Jainism

Like Buddhism, Jainism also held sway in the Puṇḍra region. The Kalpa Sutra, an important Jaina text, indicated that Tāmrālīpi (Tāmluk), Koṭīvarśa and Puṇḍravardhana were well known in ancient Bengal as the centres of Jainism in early times. The text mentioned that there were four śākhas of the ‘Godaśangana’ in Bengal. The Jaina monks were called ‘Tāmrālīpiṭiya’ (i.e., of or belonging to Tāmrālīpta), ‘Koṭīvarśiya’ (i.e., of or belonging to Koṭīvarśa), Puṇḍravardhaniya’ (i.e., of or belonging to Puṇḍravardhana) and ‘Khabbadiya’ (i.e., of or belonging to Karvata). That the four different branches of the sect were found in different regions is indicative of the fact that Jainism had acquired a strong hold in Bengal. A statement in the Kalpa Sutra showed that Godaśa, a disciple of

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79 R.C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc cit., p.26; Amitabha Bhattacharyya, op.cit., pp.41-53.
80 Supra, 73n.
Bhadrabahu, founded a school named after him: 'Godaśa-gana. In course of time, it had four śākhas or branches, of which three were known as Tamraliptika, Kotivarsiya and Puṇḍravardhaniya. Obviously the names were derived from three well known places, viz., Tamralipti, Kotivarśa and Puṇḍravardhana. The nomenclatures leave no doubt about strong Jain influence both in northern and in southwestern Bengal. Some of the Jain texts also recorded that there was some resistance to Jainism and that sometimes Jain preachers were persecuted. According to the Āyāranga Sutta, Mahāvira had to undergo sufferings and hardship on this account in Vajjabhūmi and Subbhabhūmi within the Rādha country. The inhabitants not only treated the ascetics cruelly but even incited dogs to bite them. Such measures however did not succeed in preventing the advance of Jainism in Bengal. The Āyāranga Sutta spoke of the wild nature of the people of Rādha and the ‘uncivil’ reception of Mahāvira, who is said to have travelled into their land. As already stated, eighteen thousand Jainas and Ajivikas were killed in Puṇḍravardhana under the orders of the Maurya emperor Aśoka for humiliating Buddha. This source provides a clue to the numerical strength of the Jaina community in Puṇḍravardhana as early as the fourth century BC. Although the source does not mention the figures of the Jaina and the Ajivika victims separately, it may not be incorrect to presume that the majority of the victims belonged to the Jaina faith, because the presence of the Ajivikas in the region is not recorded in other sources. On the other hand, the prevalence of Jainism in Puṇḍravardhana is testified by a large number of sources. For example, Hiuen Tsang informed that there were numerous Jainas residing at Vaiśālī, Puṇḍravardhana, Samaṭāṭa and Kalinga, and that Puṇḍravardhana was a great Jaina centre.

The popularity of Jainism in the Puṇḍra region is evidenced by the epigraphic and archaeological sources as well. The Pāhārpur Copper-plate grant (dated about the fifth century) recorded that the city-council headed by Brāhmaṇas and householders allowed a Brāhmaṇa named Nāthaśarman and his wife Rāmī to purchase a plot of land in the village of Nityagohāli within Puṇḍravardhana-bhukti for perpetual endowment to the Jaina

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81 Supra, 62n.
82 A.K. Sur, op.cit., p.82.
85 Supra, 73n.
monks. The purpose of the grant was to facilitate the construction of a rest-house and a garden for the Jaina monks in the local vihāra. The inmates of the vihāra were the disciples and grand-disciples of the Jaina monk Guhanandin of Varanasi, who belonged to the sect called ‘Puncastūpanikya’. The discovery of a Jaina image (dated about the eighth-ninth century), along with some Brahmanical and Buddhist images at an archaeological site in Birajganj in Dinajpur district is further illustration of Jaina influence and of the co-existence of the followers of different religions and communal harmony in the region.

The Cultural Dimension

The extant historical facts suggest that Punḍlavardhana had passed through a cultural transformation through immigration, acculturation and assimilation during the period under study. The literary and epigraphic sources as well as the foreign accounts testify that till about the advent of Islam in the region in the thirteenth century, society in Punḍlavardhana was dominated by ethnic elements categorized as Kirātas. Presumably the early chiefs like Bāli and Bāna perhaps belonged to the Kirāta fold and were often designated as ‘asura’ in the sense of those falling outside the ambit of ‘Aryan’ or Brahmanical culture. Apparently the presence of the Kirātas and the Punḍras was noticed side by side, along with the Vangas in the neighbourhood till about the first-second century. As suggested elsewhere, ‘Punḍra’ denoted the territorial identity of the ethnic group called Punḍras. According to tradition, one of Bāli’s sons (named Punḍra) is said to have established a kingdom in his own name. The Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (dated the seventh century BC), which described in detail the spread of Brahmanical settlements in the region, referred to the groups of the Andhra, Punḍra, Śabara, Pulinda, Mutiba etc., as belonging to lower castes. The Purāṇic and the Buddhist works also show that the people of the land lying to the east of the Karatoya were considered to be of impure stock; for this reason, the Brāhmaṇas visiting those areas were required to undergo certain purification rituals. On the other hand, the legend of rṣi Dirghatamas (who begot on the

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87 D.K. Chakrabarti, op.cit., p.185.
queen of *asura* king, Bāli, five sons, named Aṅga, Vaṅga, Sumha, Puṇḍra and Kaliṅga, who founded five kingdoms named after them) is perhaps indicative of the fusion of the ‘Aryan’ and ‘non-Aryan’ in the region. However, the Purānic sources projected the rulers like Bāli and Bāna as ‘Hinduised’ rulers. Bāli was credited with establishing caste system or *caturvarna* in the region. Puṇḍra, the king, is said to have been born of a Brāhmaṇa sage. A later king, Paunḍraka Vāsudeva, is said to have been the leader of a religious sect and a rival of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa. The epics, however, accorded the Puṇḍras a higher social status, as is known from the reference to them as ‘*sujāta*’ (good-born) Kṣatriyas. Some scholars have pointed out that the inhabitants of the Puṇḍra region were originally Kirātās or ‘non-Aryans’ who were gradually assimilated into the Brahmanical society.

The epigraphic sources of the period from fifth to twelfth centuries recorded the large-scale immigration of Brāhmaṇas into the Puṇḍra region.\(^8\)\(^9\) Literary sources, epigraphic records, foreign accounts and the excavated and extant archaeological sources point to the presence of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainaism, along with their various schools and sects within their respective folds, in the region.\(^9\)\(^0\) The epigraphic records also show that the Brahmanical and the Buddhist kings extended favours to the Brāhmaṇas and patronage to the Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina temples and deities by gifting land. Thus the Guṇāigarh Copper-plate of Vainyagupta, a worshipper of Mahādeva (Śiva), granted land for a Buddhist monastery and Āvalokiteśvara (Buddha); the Dāmodarpur Copper-plate of Buddhagupta granted land for the worship of both Śiva and Viṣṇu; the Pāhāpur Copper-plate of another Gupta king donated land for a Jaina shrine; the Khālimpur Copper-plate of the Buddhist king Dharmapāla announced the endowment of land to a Brāhmaṇa from Gujarat for the establishment of a temple of Nanna-Nārāyaṇa; and the Bāṅnagāḍa Copper-plate of Mahipāla donated land to Bhaṭṭaputra Hṛṣikeśa, a Brāhmaṇa scholar in the *Mimāṃsa*, *Vyākaraṇa* and *Tarkaśāstra*.\(^9\)\(^1\) Some epigraphic

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\(^9\) R.R. Mukherji & S K Maity (eds.), *op cit.*, (see the copper-plate inscriptions pertaining to the region of Pundravardhana). Also see Table II Landgrants & Settlements in Pundravardhana (Pundra heartland/ Northern Bengal).


sources show that the Buddhist Pāla kings engaged Brāhmaṇa scholars for reciting and interpreting Hindu scriptures to the members of the royal family. Such scholars were remunerated by gifts of land. One instance is the Manahāli Copper-plate grant of Madanapāladeva. It recorded the gift of a village situated in the Hālavarta-mandaḷa within the Koṭivarṣa-viśaya under the jurisdiction of the Puṇḍravardhana-bhukti. The grant was made to one Śrī Bateśvara Svāmīsarmā, as daksīṇa (fee) for chanting the Mahābhārata at the request of Citramatṛka, the chief queen of Madanapāla. This perhaps signified respect for all religions. Or, the chief queen was born into a Brahmanical family and continued to practice her own religion even after her marriage. This also suggests that inter-religious marriages were not unknown, and that the rulers encouraged the practice of religious toleration. Archaeological excavations have unearthed ruins of Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jaina temples and shrines at several places in the heartland of Puṇḍravardhana. There are also cases of Brahmanical sculptures turning up in the Buddhist temples, and vice-versa. Extant temple structures and icons in the region, dated between AD 600 and 1200, are also representative of the co-existence of different religions in various sites. On the basis of archaeological evidence, D.K. Chakrabarti observed that the personal religion of the rulers did not affect their patronage to various religious establishments belonging mainly to the Buddhist and Hindu orders, since the large number of structural ruins representing temples, stūpas and monasteries, which are still in existence, should be attributed not only to the stable political condition but also to the element of religious catholicity and liberalism.

The period also noticed considerable development in the fields of art and architecture, and language and literature. This is known from the extant specimens of literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence. The Mahāsthān Stone Inscription (dated the fourth century BC) was in Brāhmī script and Prākrit language. Subsequent epigraphic

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The period also noticed considerable development in the fields of art and architecture, and language and literature. This is known from the extant specimens of literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence. The Mahāsthān Stone Inscription (dated the fourth century BC) was in Brāhmī script and Prākrit language. Subsequent epigraphic
records (from about the fifth century onwards) were in Sanskrit, and then in proto-Bengali and Old Bengali, besides Sanskrit (from ninth to twelfth century). As discussed already, a large number of inscriptions recorded the grant of land to the scholars in various branches of the Veda and other disciplines of learning. It may be justifiably assumed that those donee Brāhmaṇas played the pioneering role in the spread of education and learning in the Pūndra region. There are some instances to support this assumption. It is said in the colophon to the Haricarita Kāvyā of Chaturbhūja (tenth century) that the Varendra Brāhmaṇas of the time of the Pāla king Dharmapāla (ninth century) were experts in Śruti, Śmṛti, Purāṇa, Vyākaraṇa and Kāvyā. Chandragrāmin, the Buddhist author of Chāndra Vyākaraṇa and the founder of the Chāndra School of Sanskrit grammar, whose works are dated between AD 465 and 544, is said to have been born in a Kāyastha family in Varendra. Kulluka, who wrote a commentary on the Manusmrṭi (eleventh century), claimed himself to be originally an inhabitant of a locality in Varendra. Sandhyākaranandin, the author of Rāmacaritam (eleventh-twelfth century), a kāvyā on a historical theme covering the life and time of the Pāla king Rāmapāla, also belonged to Varendra and was the son of a minister of the Pāla king. Chakrapāṇidatta, author of the celebrated work in medical science called Caraka-Samhitā is also said to have belonged to the same region. Some of the couplets (dohā) orally composed by unnamed and innumerable folk poets of the region (during AD 800 - 1000) are believed to have found place in the Caryāpada and Dohākośa which laid the foundation of the Assamese, Bengali and Oriya languages. The authorship of a good number of Kūlaji (Vamśāvali or early medieval Bengali family history) and Upa-purāṇas (like Brhad-Dharma Purāṇa, Brahmanavarta Purāṇa and Vrihannāḍrādiya Purāṇa) as well as a few local versions of the Padma Purāṇa in Bengali (twelfth-thirteenth century)

97 R.R. Mukherji & S.K. Maity (eds), op.cit, Inscriptions Nos 1-47
98 Supra, Chapters V & VI.
99 R.C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc cit., p.352
100 Ibid., p.354.
101 D.C. Sircar, Studies in the Geography in Ancient and Medieval India, loc cit., p.294.
103 Ibid., p.391.
104 Ibid., p.374.
are attributed to the scholars of northern Bengal. In all probability the educational and
literary fervour in the region towards the end of the period under study generated a
cultural upsurge which spontaneously impacted the indigenous population.

The significant cultural transformation of the region under Brahmanical influences is also
discernable from the fact that a considerable mass of local literary sources, besides
archaeological materials, are available in the region, although those are also in the
Brahmanical formats. As a matter of fact, the Pundra region is well covered by the
mainstream as well as the local sources of history. More than fifty stone, pillar and
copper-plate inscriptions have been recovered from within the Pundra region itself which
were issued by the imperial authorities like Mauryas and the Guptas from outside as well
as the regional rulers like the Pālas, Senas, Candras and Varmans from within the region
of Pundravardhana. Mahāsthāŋgarh, Bāṅgarh, Pāhārpur and Pātilaṅga are important
archaeological sites in northern Bengal. The artifacts, including neolithic tools, potteries
and coins, recovered from various sites within the region are preserved in various
museums. The Kathāsārtaśāgara and the Rāmacaritam are important literary
sources composed by writers originating from within the Pundra region. There are also a
large number of Bengal Purāṇas, and of these the Vṛhad-dhārma Purāṇa, Brahmapaivarta Purāṇa and the Vṛhadmnāradya Purāṇa are said to have been authored
in northern Bengal. The local versions of the Padma Purāṇa are also important sources
of history (such as those associated with the worship of the various forms of the Mother
Goddess, e.g., the Maṇasāmangala section). Some of the Cāryāpadas and the Buddhist
dohās, which are religious lyrics and couplets respectively and marked the beginning of
Bengali literature, are believed to have been composed by the local bards of northern

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105 Ibid., pp.373-374; R C Hazra, Studies in the Purānic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs, Delhi,
1940; reprint 1975, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, p 416, K K Basak, "Navigation in North Bengal in Early
Historical Ages", in B N Mukherjee & P K Bhattacharyya (eds.), op cit., pp.79-82; Rajanikanta
Chakrabarti, op cit., pp 123-125 For the cultural background of the immigrant Brāhmaṇas see Table IV
Cultural Profile of Individual Donees of Land in Pundravardhana
106 R R Mukherji & S K Maity (eds.), op cit., see ‘Introduction’
107 R C Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal (2 vols), Calcutta, 1908
108 Kathāsārtaśāgara, tr C H Tawney, 2 vols., Bibliotheca Indica, Calcutta, 1880
109 Rāmacaritam (of Sandhyākaranandun), tr Haraprasad Sastri, 1st edn 1910, reprint (with additional notes
and comments by Radhagovinda Basak) 1969, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta
110 Rajanikanta Chakrabarti, op cit., pp 123-125
The **dohācaryā-gūtikā** (or **Caryapadas** and **Dohā-kośas**) branched into **Sahajiyā gīt, Vaiṣṇava pada, Dāri-pada, Sākta hymns. Bāul songs, etc., during the nineteenth centuries. These are popular lyrics composed in a variety of metres and in the language of the common people. Bengal had also developed a popular tradition of maintaining family histories of the important families since the early medieval period, particularly among the Brāhmaṇas. These were called **Kūlajīs**. Several of these **kūlajīs** are family histories of the Varendra Brāhmaṇas. The **Caryāpada, dohā** and **kūlaji** are rich in historical contents and, therefore, are important local sources of history. While the **kūlajīs** are genealogical histories of the individual Brāhmaṇa families, the **dohā-caryās** contained the voice of the common followers of the popular forms of Buddhist, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Tāntric cults in the region in mystic language. The singers sought refuge in God from the miseries of worldly life, generally expressing the common folk’s view of marching towards a common end or destiny. The same longing is noticed in the folk songs, particularly the songs of the boat-men (**mānjhi**) of northern Bengal of the later periods, which are lyrical and melodious expressions of the hopes and aspirations of the common people and their faith in the final verdict attributed to God.

It is also evident from the sources that in course of time during the period under study, the Kirāta ethnic identity gradually diversified and gave way to the Puṇḍra territorial identity, and finally, the Puṇḍra identity merged into the larger cultural and linguistic identity of Bengal. It bears noting however that even today the caste-Hindus of the area corresponding to erstwhile Puṇḍravardhana take pride in differentiating themselves from the rest of the Bengali society, as, for instance, ‘Puṇḍra Brāhmaṇa’, ‘Puṇḍra Kṣatriya’, ‘Varendra Brāhmaṇa’, ‘Varendra Kṣatriya’, ‘Varendra Vaiśya’, etc. R.C. Majumdar observed that the Kṣatriyas and Vaiśyas were almost unknown in early Bengal, but the

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112 Rajanikanta Chakrabarti, **op. cit.**, pp.123-125; R.C. Majumdar, **History of Ancient Bengal**, loc. cit., pp.391-394.

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Brāhmaṇas played a dominant part in its history. These Brāhmaṇas, belonging to various gotras, pravaras and branches of Vedic school and performing Śrauta rites, had settled in large number all over Bengal by the sixth and seventh centuries. Their number constantly increased by fresh immigrations from northern India for which there is abundant epigraphic evidence. In course of time, the Brāhmaṇas in Bengal were divided into various branches such as Rādhiya, Varendra, Vaidika, and Sākadvīpi. The Varendra and Rādhiya Brāhmaṇas in particular were known according to the localities in which they had settled, and they were classified in several grades of honour and distinction (kūlina) according to personal qualifications during the time of the Sena ruler Vallālasena who was responsible for the introduction of kūlinism in Bengal. These grades were revised from time to time before the fifteenth century, when they became hereditary and have continued till today. Nonetheless, although there were multiple identities created within the society on the basis of caste or sect and religion, a regional identity too emerged within Bengal in the name of Puṇḍra or Varendra. Therefore, despite the religious and sectarian diversity a regional cultural homogeneity was fast emerging in the Puṇḍra region under Brahmanical influence. This phenomenon may be described as part of the pan-Indian culture continuum.

The process of Brahmanisation, which had been the key to bringing about cultural homogeneity and integration of society in the Puṇḍra region into the society of the mainland of India, seems to have resulted in social differentiations and discrimination against women as manifested in the low status accorded to them in the mainstream Brahmanical society. It also impacted individual families in the stratified society. The dearth of source material is indeed problematic for historical reconstruction of the status of women in the pre-Brahmanised Kirāta-Puṇḍra society, and for that matter even after Brahmanisation, in the region. The only two women who figured in the early legends were Sudesnā, wife of king Bāli, and Kālārāni, wife of king Bāna. Bāli, portrayed as the progenitor of the Puṇḍras, was the father of five ‘kṣetraja’ sons sired by the Vedic rṣi and scholar, Dirghatamas, through Sudesnā, Bāli’s wife, as desired by Bāli himself. These

\[\text{\footnotesize R.C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc. cit., pp.427-428.}\]
five sons established one principality each after their own names.\textsuperscript{116} This perhaps suggests that there was an attempt to bring about some degree of socio-cultural integration in the Puṇḍra region by means of myths and legends in an area which was by and large outside the ambit of Brahmanical culture. Similarly, the existence of a huge tank in Gāṅgārāmpur called Kālādīghi after Bāna’s spouse, Kālārāṇi, suggests that some of the Brahmanical law-givers wanted to legitimize their influence in the area where the tank was situated and therefore gave it the name of a character, viz., Kālārāṇi, who came to be mentioned in the local legends.\textsuperscript{117}

Although there is no direct evidence for the impact of Brahmanisation or Sanskritisation on gender roles in northern Bengal or the Puṇḍra region in particular, it may be presumed that the situation was not very different from that of the rest of the subcontinent. If the evidence of later Vedic times is to be taken literally, the wife was looked upon as only half of the husband; and even if the women may have composed hymns, learnt the Vedas and cooperated with their husbands in all religious acts, there was an under-current of opinion which was hostile to women and they may have been treated with contempt. The rules of the Dharmashastras were definitely prejudiced against women. The rules made women increasingly dependent on men in all matters. Manu (X.18) prescribed norms depriving the women of any share in property on partition or any claim to inheritance and privilege of reciting the Vedic mantras. In the Gupta period scholars like Varāhamihira vigorously protested against the injustice towards women and recommended that women should legitimately always be given honour and wealth, but this did not in any way seem to have changed the status of women for the better in the Brahmanical society.\textsuperscript{118}

The situation in eastern India was possibly better than in the north. Manu’s law on the right of women to inheritance was modified partially by Yājñavalkya, who is said to have been from Bengal. He included the daughter in the list of heirs to ancestral property. The smṛti-writers accepted Yājñavalkya’s rule and tried to argue that the daughter’s right was natural and legitimate. Jimūtavāhana, another ancient interpreter of law in Bengal,

\textsuperscript{117} B.C. Law, \textit{op.cit.}, p.246.
\textsuperscript{118} P.V. Kane, \textit{History of the Dharmashastras, Vol II, Part I}, pp.574-582.
accepted the *smṛti* tradition embodied in Yājnavalkya’s law-book. He recommended transmission of the right to property to the mother’s family immediately after the collaterals within four generations of the basic family unit and included the sister’s son, father’s sister’s son and the grandfather’s sister’s son among the collaterals in the list of inheritors. The scheme of Jimūtavāhāna seems to have been accommodated within the system of *kūlinism* introduced by the Sena king Vallālasena in Bengal in the twelfth century: four generations from both sides were important in determining the social status. Nonetheless, the social disability and discrimination against women continued in various forms in the Bengali society. It was against this that Raja Rammohun Roy, Isvarcandra Vidyasagar and others had to launch reform movements in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{119} However, R.C. Majumdar was of the opinion that the great Bengal jurist Jimūtavāhāna asserted the right of a widow to inherit her husband’s entire property in the absence of any male issue. Jimūtavāhāna noted the conflicting views on this subject and refuted in an elaborate argument the opinion of those who held that the brother and other relations of the deceased should have the preference over his widow, or that the latter would be entitled only to maintenance. Nevertheless, Jimūtavāhāna also prescribed that the widow would have no right to the sale or mortgage or to gift the property of her deceased husband in any way, and that her enjoyment should be consistent with the life of a chaste widow, solely devoted to the memory of her husband. She was to live with her husband’s family and his parents, abstain from luxury and spend just enough to keep her alive in order that she might do all acts and rites beneficial to her dead husband. Besides, she had to be fully subservient to her husband’s family, even in respect of the disposal of her own property. In the absence of any near male relation of the husband, she was to live under the guardianship of her father’s family.\textsuperscript{120} Therefore, it may not be wrong to presume that the process of Brahmanisation brought about the subordination of women in Bengal, including the Pūňḍra region, as well.

\textsuperscript{119} K.M. Kapadia, *Marriage and Family in India*, Calcutta, 1955; 9\textsuperscript{th} reprint 1986, OUP, Calcutta, pp.240-244.

The historical evidence prove that the custom of dedicating girls to the temples for the purpose of providing religious services, popularly known as devadāsī, was not uncommon in the Pundra region. The Deopara Inscription of Vijayasena (v.30) recorded the personal beauty and charm of one hundred damsels whom the Sena ruler Vijayasena dedicated to a Śiva temple that he erected in Deopara (Rajshahi, northern Bengal). Similarly, the Bhuvaneswar Temple Inscription of Bhavadeva Bhaṭṭa (v.30) proclaimed that Bhavadeva, a wealthy Brāhmaṇa of Rāḍha, assigned one hundred charming young girls to the temple for service to Viṣṇu. While describing the pomp and grandeur and serenity of the royal palace, the Edilpur Copper-plate Inscription of Keśavasena (v.9) mentioned that in the evenings the skies used to be filled by the pleasing notes emanating from the moving anklets of courtesans. Dhojī's Pavanadīta (v.28) also referred to such women in a temple erected by the Sena king Laksmanasena in Sumha. The prevalence of the practice in the earlier period is evident from the reference in the Rājatarangini (IV. 421) to a courtesan named Kamalā who was a dancing girl in a temple in Pundra in the eighth century. The 'deva-vāra-vanitā' of the capital city of Rāmāvati (capital of Rāmapāla in Varendra) mentioned in the Rāmacaritam also probably referred to the devadāsī.

The society in Bengal may not have been as rigid in respect of women as it was in northern India. Although the Brhad-dharma Purāṇa (II.8.1-2), an early medieval Bengal Purāṇa, repeated the old dictum that the duty of the wife was to serve her husband, the Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa (LXI.79), another early medieval Bengal Purāṇa, laid down that a woman forcibly ravished against her will was not to be regarded as degraded or excommunicated but instead could purify herself by performing a penance.

121 R.R. Mukherji & S K. Maity (eds), Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions, loc. cit. pp 256-257, see Deopārā Stone Inscription of Vijayasena, v 30
122 R R Mukherji & S K. Maity (eds ), op. cit. pp 160, see Bhuvaneswar Temple Inscription of Bhavadeva Bhaṭṭa, v 30
123 R.R. Mukherji & S K. Maity (eds ), op. cit. pp 341, see Edilpur Copper-plate Inscription of Kesavasena, v 9
124 Dhojī's Pavanadīta, v 28, cited in R C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc. cit., p.465
125 Rājatarangini, IV. 421, p 281
126 Haraprasad Sastri (tr and ed.), op. cit., Canto III, v 37, pp 33-34
127 Brhad-dharma Purāṇa (II 8.1-2), cited in R C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc. cit., p 455
128 Brahma-vaivarta Purāṇa (LXI 79), cited in R C. Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal, loc. cit., p 456
Vatsyayana’s *Kāmasūtra* (VI 5 33) mentioned that the women of Gauḍa (northern Bengal) had the reputation of being soft and timid, sweet-speaking and graceful. The same text (V.6 41) mentioned that the women of the royal harem of Vaṅga were not accustomed to move about freely.129 Dhoyi’s *Pavanadūta* (v 32), a twelfth century account, mentioned that the purdha system was not in vogue for the women of the capital city of Laksmanasena.130 The same source (v 40) mentioned that the women of Gauḍa and Vanga were educated, and many of them were literate.131

As is evident from the epigraphic and other historical records pertaining to the period of study, women did not find a place in public life in Pundra, as compared to men. The eulogy sections of several inscriptions, like Khālimpur Copper-plate Inscription of Dharmapāla,132 Gosrāvārī Rock Inscription of Devapāla,133 Garuḍa Pillar Inscription of Nārāyanapāla,134 Rampā Copper-plate Inscription of Śrīcandra,135 Deopārā Stone Inscription of Vījayasena,136 or Madhānagar Copper-plate Inscription of Laksmanasena,137 glorified the beauty, grace and character of the queens and the royal mothers and the protection, comfort and dignity of life accorded to womenfolk in the royal households. But the stark reality was that officials and urban and rural elites named in the inscriptions were all men. The references to important women are very scanty and only occasional.

As mentioned earlier, certain queens formed the audience for the narration of passages from the *Mahābhārata* by specialists (pāthaka) employed by the rulers.138 According to the Pāhārpur Copper-plate Inscription (fifth century), Rāmī and her husband Nāthaśarman, a Brāhmaṇa, were allowed to buy large plots of land within Pundravardhana-*bhūkta* for the support of the establishment of the Jaina monk

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129 Vatsyayana’s *Kāmasūtra* (VI 5 33), cited in R C Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, loc cit, p 455
130 Dhoyi’s *Pavanadūta*, v 32, cited in R C Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, loc cit, p 456
131 Dhoyi’s *Pavanadūta*, v 40, cited in R C Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, loc cit, pp 455-456
132 R R Mukherji & S K Maiti (eds.), *op cit.*, p 103, see Khālimpur Copper-plate Inscription of Dharmapāla, v 5
133 R R Mukherji & S K Maiti (eds.), *op cit.*, p 136, see Gosrāvārī Rock Inscription of Devapāla, v 4
134 R R Mukherji & S K Maiti (eds.), *op cit.*, p 157, see Garuḍa Pillar Inscription of Nārāyanapāla, v 10
135 R R Mukherji & S K Maiti (eds.) *op cit.*, p 227, see Rampā Copper-plate Inscription of Śrīcandra, v 5
136 R R Mukherji & S K Maiti (eds.), *op cit.*, p 250, see Deopārā Stone Inscription of Vījayasena, v 2
137 R R Mukherji & S K Maiti (eds.), *op cit.*, p 284, see Madhānagar Copper-plate Inscription of Laksmanasena, v 7
138 R R Mukherji & S K Maiti (eds.), *op cit.*, p 210, see Manhālī Copper-plate of Madanapāladeve, v 23
Guhānandin.\textsuperscript{139} There is however no information on the social background of Rāmī. The Deopārā Stone Inscription of Vijayasena mentioned the flowers made of precious stones, necklaces, ear-rings, anklets, garlands and bracelets worn by the wives of the king’s servants; the jewellery worn by the temple girls, and even stated that the Brāhmaṇas versed in Vedas had become so wealthy that their wives had to be trained by the wives of the townsmen to recognize pearls, pieces of emerald, silver coins, jewels of gold, etc.\textsuperscript{140} The \textit{Rāmacaritam} described jewellery made of gold, diamond, pearl, emerald, etc. of the womenfolk.\textsuperscript{141} On the other hand, the women contributed to the income of the family by participating in agriculture and crafts. The \textit{Dāyabhāga} of Jīmūtavāhana,\textsuperscript{142} mentioned that the married women of Bengal helped their husbands by earning extra money by means of spinning, weaving or some other art. The same text (i.e., \textit{Dāyabhāga} of Jīmūtavāhana) also informed that sometimes employers offered bribes to the wives of labourers in order to induce them to send their husbands or some other members of their families to work.\textsuperscript{143} Therefore, it may be presumed that the women in northern Bengal (Pundra region) were also involved in various occupations along with the menfolk to supplement the income of the family.

\textsuperscript{139} R.R. Mukherji & S.K. Maity (eds.), \textit{op. cit.}, p.54, see Pāhārpur Copper-plate Inscription of Kumāragupta, v.4.
\textsuperscript{140} R.R. Mukherji & S.K. Maity (eds.), \textit{op. cit.}, p.256, see Deopārā Stone Inscription of Vijayasena, v.29.
\textsuperscript{141} Haraprasad Sāstri (tr. and ed.), \textit{op. cit.}, \textit{Canto III}, vv.33-34, p.33.
\textsuperscript{143} Supra, 142n.