
**Rise and Growth of Pundravardhana: A Study on 5th Century
B.C.E to 5th Century A.D**

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Abstract: *The process of urban evolution in ancient India is a captivating journey over time, unveiling the complex process of how human settlements transformed from small villages into cities or towns of considerable size. The journey basically began with small agricultural settlements that gradually gained prominence due to several factors such as trade, governance and cultural exchange. In this context, an attempt has been made to delve deep into the urban condition of North Bengal in ancient times. The region of northern part of undivided Bengal was popularly known as Pundra or Pundravardhana or Pundranagara in so many ancient sacred and mythological texts. Both the literary and the archaeological sources ascertain the fact that, since the Mauryan period Pundravardhana was an important administrative unit as well as a very prosperous city that gained momentum in subsequent Gupta period and beyond. The present article discusses the ontological-geography of Pundravardhana, its aboriginals and the process of its emergence as an important urban settlement in ancient times.*

Keywords: *Gupta period, Maurya Age, North Bengal, Pundravardhana, Vedic age etc.*

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Introduction

In recent years, historians have undertaken several studies to delve deep into the concept of urban evolution and growth of cities in the remote past; as a result, many thought-provoking works have manifested concerning the origin and development of urban settlements in ancient Bengal. However, in the present research paper, efforts have been made to explore the concept of ontological-geography of Pundravardhana, its aboriginals and the process of its emergence as an important urban settlement in ancient times. The land known as Bengal (presently West Bengal in Indian Part and Bangladesh) was divided into several sub-regional divisions in early historical epoch ¹ and Pundravardhana is one of these sub-regions. The literary texts mention the name of

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the Pundra people, inhabiting this sub-region, probably from which its name Pundravardhana originated ². The earliest literary mention of the Pundras was found in the Aitareya Brahmana, which refers them as Antaja dasyu or low-class marauders ³ and also describes them outsiders of the Aryan fold. ⁴ But, by the end of the later Vedic period, the process of Aryanization had taken place in the eastern part of the Indian sub-continent ⁵, and the land of Pundras was also influenced by the cultural exchanges and interactions with the Aryans ⁶. Over time, they emerged as a distinct identity by developing their cities, enhancing agriculture and trading activities. Additionally, the geographical position of Pundravardhana played a pivotal role in shaping the urban characteristics of the region. However, the recent archaeological excavations and information from various literary texts indicate the urban condition of this region, but very little positive effort has been made so far to synthesis the available data in order to reconstruct the history of Pundravardhana's urban situation in ancient times. The present discussion will focus on the political and economic perspectives that led to the process of urban evolution in the said region.

Before entering into the discussion, it is necessary to have the knowledge about the geographical location of Pundravardhana. The geographical boundaries of Pundravardhana are really not clear to us, and they have varied over time. But information from various sources suggests that its area was probably determined by the natural boundaries. The eastern side was marked by the Karatoya river which separated Pundravardhana from the Kingdom of Pragjyotisha ⁷. River Kausiki probably demarcated the upper section of its western part which in ancient times traversed the area of Tajpur Paragana. Then it descended from Barah Catra of Nepal, reaching Tejpur and continued its flow to the eastward to merge with either Karatoya or the Brahmaputra in its downstream path. ⁸ Pundravardhana's western boundary in lower section was bounded by the Ganga River which separated it from Kajangala and Karnasuvarna. ⁹ On the basis of information from various sources, such as the records of the Gupta era and accounts of Chinese travellers it appears that ancient Pundravardhana roughly corresponded to the districts of Northern part of undivided Bengal i.e. undivided Dinajpur along with a portion of Malda in present West Bengal and Rajshahi, Bogra and a part of Rangpur district in modern Bangladesh, ¹⁰ which falls between 87°45'50" and 89°53' E longitudes and 26°38' and 23°49' N latitudes. The entire region is composed of Quaternary alluvial deposits. Pundravardhana lies within the Tista-Ganga basin and the area is drained by the river Tista and some of its tributaries. ¹¹

As we have already mentioned that, the region was inhabited by the Pundra people. The term Pundra refers to both; a caste of ancient Bengal as well as a place, and therefore maybe,

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in the earliest time, this part was known as Pundra or Pundravardhana or Pundradesa by the name of its inhabitant Pundra caste.¹² The genesis and historical roots of the Pundras has been found in various literary sources, including texts like the Mahabharata, the Puranas and other sacred and mythological texts. The first literary mention of Pundras was found in Aitareya Brahmana, which indicates that they inhabited the eastern section of the Indian subcontinent. The text further narrates that the Pundras were the descendants of the sons of Visvamitra who had been cursed by him, and they were referred as *dasyus* or barbarians.¹³ The Mahabharata and the Puranas describes another interesting story concerning the origin of the Pundras: once the king *Asura* Bali rescued Dirghatama, the blind sage, from the river Ganges. The king had no child and wished to have children from the sage. The sage fulfilled his wish and queen Sudesna, the wife of Bali, gave birth of five sons, and these five sons were named as Anga, Banga, Pundra, Sumha and Kalinga.¹⁴ It seems that the Pundras were the descendants of this 'Pundra', one of the sons of king Bali, who founded the Pundra kingdom. However, the Vangas and Pundras were mentioned as well-born Ksohtriyas in the *Sabhaparvan* of the Mahabharata¹⁵. The *Sabhaparvan* also refers to the course of 'digvijaya' of one of the Pandava brother, who arrived to the land of the Pundras from Modagiri (modern Monghyr)¹⁶. The *Tirtha-yatra* section of Mahabharata mentions the river Karatoya as a sacred river¹⁷, which was the eastern boundary of Pundravardhana. According to Mahabharata, Bhima, the second Pandava brother is said to have defeated the king Vasudeva, who was the ruler of Pundras. The *Santiparva* of the Mahabharata refers that, Pundras had an alliance with Jarasandha, the king of Magadha, who were the supporters of the Kauravas during the *Bharata* war¹⁸. Karna is said to have established one United Kingdom by integrating the Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Pundra and Suhma, after the death of Jarasandha by Yudhishtira¹⁹.

Baudhayana in his book "*Dharmashastra*" (C. 5th Century B.C.) mentioned Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Pundra, Dakshinapatha, Magadha etc. as profane counties that are inhabited by people of mixed castes and he further instructed if one goes to these countries he has to atone with material sacrifices. Even "Manu" (C. 3rd Century B.C.) (X. 43-44) said the same, as they declared Pundras as *sudras* for they did not do any sacrifices (Kriyalopad)²⁰. From the Jataka stories and even from Kautilya's Arthashastra we can find the trace of Pundras²¹. The Ramayana mentions that, those who were sent to find 'Sita' in the Eastern part of the sub-continent, asked to go to the country of the Pundras²². Patanjali also makes a reference of Pundras in his book *Mahabhasohya*. V. S. Agarwala in his book *India as known to Panini* mentions that, Panin has referred two important cities in eastern India namely Mahanagara which is identified with Mahasthangarh, the capital of Pundravardhana and another one is Navanagara identified with the

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ancient name of Navadvip²³. Not only the Indian but also many foreign literatures, such as Greek and Chinese writers have mentioned the name of Pundra or Pundravardhana in their respective writings on so many occasions. For instance, Greek classical writers refer to the people of *Prasii* and *Gangaridai* as Pundras²⁴. From Si-Yu-Ki, the account of Chinese traveller Hiuen-tsang, we come to know that he had to cross the Ganges to travel from Kajangala to Puna-fa-tan-na, identified with Pundravardhana²⁵.

The history of Aryanization in India has long been a matter of debate to the historians. During the Aryan supremacy in northern part of India, the role of the eastern part of the sub-continent was peripheral, inhabited by the non-Aryan tribes like the Asuras, Kiratas and so on²⁶. The entire region was known as land of “Kiratas” or “Kiratbhumi”²⁷. Around sixth century BC, Magadha was incorporated into Aryan territory. It was during this period that some part of Bengal began to be Aryanized²⁸. According to the Satapatha Brahmana (1.4. 14-17): Videgha Mathava, the ruler of *Kosala-Videha* Gana-rajya, along with his priest Rahugana, carried out the sacrificial fire from the bank of the Saraswati river up to the banks of the *Sadanira* river. It also mentions the infiltration of Brahmana, their dwelling and agricultural activities in this region. The English translator of Satapatha Brahmana, Julius Eggling assumes the river *Sadanira* as the *Gandaki* river. But the famous lexicographer of ancient India, Amarasimha identified the river *Sadanira* with the *Karatoya* river of Northern Bengal. River Karatoya is also mentioned as *Sadanira* in the text named ‘*Karatoyamahatmya*’. Even no other ancient text has been identified *Sadanira* river with *Gandaki* or any other rivers of ancient India. Therefore, it seems that, the Aryans colonized this region and started the process of Aryanization as well²⁹.

According to the traditions, Buddhism and Jainism also flourished in and around Pundravardhana. Many Buddhist and Jain teaching-learning centers were also established in the said region. The famous Buddhist text *Bodhisattvavadana Kalpadata* mentions that, Sakyamunin Goutama Buddha once visited Pundravardhana for keep invitation of one of his female disciple Sumagadha, who married to a man of Pundravardhana³⁰. B. M. Barua, the interpreter of the *Mahasthan inscription*, mentions a schismatic sect of the Buddhists, Chhavaggiyas, who was settled in Pundravardhana early in the Mauryan period³¹. According to the Buddhist text *Divyavadana*, the famous Mauryan emperor Asoka killed about eighteen thousand Ajivikas of Pundravardhana as punishment for disrespecting the Buddha³². It is evident from the two inscriptions, inscribed on the Sanchi Stupa that two disciples of Buddha from Pundravardhana, named Dharmadatta and Rishinandana made their contributions towards the constructions of the railing and gate of the Sanchi Stupa³³. Jainism also had a great influence in Pundravardhana in

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the pre-Christian era. According to *Brihatkathakosa* of Harisena, the great Jaina teacher Bhadrabahu (4th Century B.C.) who was the guru of Chandragupta Maurya, was born in a Brahmin family of Devkot or Kotivarsha in Pundravardhana³⁴. After the death of Bhadrabahu, author of the Jain text *Kalpasutra*, there was a split among the Jains- that led to the emergence of a number of schools and teaching centers within the main stream of Jain philosophy. Tradition goes that, Bhadrabahu's disciple Godasa was founded a school called 'Godasa-gana' which in course of time further divided into four sakhas (Kodivasia, Pondavaddania, Tamalittia, and Khabhatia³⁵), among them two were called after the name of two important towns of Pundravardhana, one was the Pundravardhaniya Sakha and the was Kotivarshiya Sakha³⁶.

The Pundras were started their civilization and developed as a distinct identity very slowly by the later Vedic age³⁷. Both the archaeological as well as the literary sources ascertain the fact that, Pundravardhana held an important position in the Mauryan empire. Its capital city was Pundranagara, which is identified with Mahasthangarh³⁸. According to Cunningham, Mahasthangarh lies on the bank of the river Karatoya and about 7 mile north of the modern town Bogra in present Bangladesh³⁹. The place is a rich archaeological site having a fortified city about 1,525 metres from north to south and 1,370 metres from east west. Around 36 mounds of different sizes, brick mounds, high embankments, old tanks etc. have been excavated in this region within a radius of 8 km⁴⁰. According to the sources, the region began to prosper during or before the Mauryan era and the process of urbanization accelerated when the Mauryan overlords established their stronghold over Pundravardhana. Some large towns of considerable size were grown up in the said region. Archaeological excavations carried out at Bangarh (presently situated at Gangarampur police station, South Dinajpur district), confirmed the existence of a walled city during the Mauryan period⁴¹.

Most probably, Chandragupta Maurya inherited the land of Pundra from the Nanda rulers⁴². During the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, Pundravardhana became an important centre for study the Jain religious doctrines⁴³. According to the famous Tibetan monk Taranath, Chandragupta Maurya's son Bindusara was born in Gauda. The term Gauda usually referred to the land of North Bengal, including the districts of Malda, Dinajpur, Bogra, Rajshahi etc., although sometimes the term Pundra and Varendra also used. However, if we assume this statement of Taranath as true, then we can confer the fact that, the region was included within the Mauryan Empire. But unfortunately we do not have any other evidence to support this claim⁴⁴. Emperor Ashoka further strengthened his control over the region by doing so many administrative, religious and economic activities there. The posting of a *mahamatra* by the

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Mauryans in Pundravardhana reflects the administrative quality as well as the nature of its function which reminds us of the theory of an ideal government mentioned in the Kautilya's 'Arthashastra'⁴⁵. K. N. Dikshit, an Indian archaeologist, carried out an extensive excavation at Mahasthangarh in 1928-29⁴⁶, discovered the existence of a large prosperous city during the Mauryan period. The discovery of a fragmented stone plaque inscription of Ashoka in Mahasthangarh on 30th November 1931⁴⁷, which has six lines of Brahmi script, is considered as the earliest written archaeological document of Bengal. The message on that inscription about a famine and the directions regarding the relief measures to be taken by the government during the time of natural calamities. It also describes Pundranagara as prosperous city⁴⁸. The discovery of some Mauryan terracottas, N.B.P. fragments, many iron artifacts, punch-marked coins and the use of beads made of semi-precious stones from the site of Mahasthangarh, clearly indicate that the region was developed as a flourished city during the Mauryan period. The structural remains and a considerable number of ringwells uncovered the fact that during the Mauryan era the city had some developed urban characteristics. It is already mentioned earlier that Pundravardhana was a walled city during this phase, but existence of state granaries traced within the fortified city filled with grains for the use of local governors during the time of emergency which indicating the existence of a hinterland for the supply of goods on condition of repayment with either in cash or in kind⁴⁹. However, the Mahasthan inscription mentions Pundravardhana as "Sulakhite" which means prosperous, perhaps for its huge resources gained from agricultural, trading and commercial activities.⁵⁰ Another important site, Bangarh was excavated by K. G. Goswami from 1938 to 1941. The earliest artifacts and structural remain of this site was as old as Mauryan or early Sunga period. According to K. G. Gowasmi, Pundravardhana or North Bengal was under the sway of the Mauryan kings and Devikot or Bangarh was also included within the Mauryan Empire⁵¹. Kautilya in his Arthashastra mentions four varieties of textiles: Karpasika, Patrona, Kshauma and Dukula, and those were mainly manufactured from Pundravardhana and Varanasi.⁵² There is no room for any doubt that, the region was not only developed in the field of architecture and masonry works but also flourished in production of commodities and trading activities.

We have proper evidences to prove the continuous development of Pundravardhana and its surrounding areas during the Sunga and Kushana period⁵³. Although the region was not directly ruled by the Sungas and the Kushanas, they seem to have intensified the process already set in motion by the Mauryan rulers. It is evident from various archaeological sites in North Bengal that the economic life of this region underwent substantial changes after large scale

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deforestation⁵⁴. After the excavations carried out at Pundravardhana and Bangarh, typical clay and terracotta figures of Sunga, gold coins of Kushana period in considerable number⁵⁵, rampart and other constructions made of large and burnt bricks, the existence of proper drainage system etc. are found which proves the urbanization as well as prosperity of this city at that time⁵⁶. So, it can be rightly said that, during Sunga-Kushana period, this region had a great cultural and trading relations with the rest part of India.

From the Allahabad Prasasti of Harisena, the famous court poet of Samudragupta, we can assume that, during his reign the entire region of Pundravardhana was an important part of the Gupta Empire⁵⁷. Pundravardhana became a *Bhukti* or division during the imperial Gupta rule⁵⁸. According to the copperplate inscriptions of the Guptas, found in various places in North Bengal, this Bhukti was further divided into few Vishayas, such as, Kotivarsha, Panchanagari and Khadapara or Khadatapara Vishaya⁵⁹. The Dhanaidaha Copper Plate Inscription makes a mention of the Khadatapara Vishaya that is situated in the present Rajshahi district of Bangladesh. Whereas, the Damodarpur copper plates refers the name of Kotivarsha Vishaya, identified with Devikot, presently situated at Bangarh, near Gangarampur in the South Dinajpur district, West Bengal.⁶⁰ The Baigram copper plate issued in the Gupta era 128, refers to the Panchanagari Vishaya, and in this place the court of ‘Kumaramatya Kulavridhi’ was located⁶¹. According to the Damodarpur inscription of Budhagupta, Pundravardhana was under the jurisdiction of a provincial governor, who was appointed by Gupta emperor, and the governor himself appointed the officers-in-charge for various districts⁶². It is evident from the four Damodarpur inscriptions that, Vishaya was ruled by a *Kumarmatya* or Vishayapati by the assistance of a board of four members⁶³. The Damodarpur inscription which was issued in the 163 Gupta era, provides us another interesting form of administration that was ran by a “village jury consisting of eight members and headed by the mahattara (elder) and the agriculturist householders who are village headmen.”⁶⁴

The epigraphs suggest that, Pundravardhana Bhukti was an important centre for trade and commerce. We can find the presence of three important institutions at Kotivarsha, these are, royal officials or *Kumaramatya* associated with administration, *gothis* concerned with agriculture and the third one is trading groups. There is no room for any doubt that, cities like Pundravardhana and Kotivarsha were very prosperous and had urban characteristics attracting wealthy agriculturists and various trading communities⁶⁵. From the epigraphs we found the information of purchasing land from the local government by paying the ‘dinars’ (Gupta gold coins) and donating these lands to the ‘brahmanas’ for their settlement and religious purposes⁶⁶.

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The Damodarpur CPI issued in the 543 A.D., refers the name of Amrtadeva, who was a noble man of Ayodhya, bought some land in the region ⁶⁷. However, the archaeological excavations also support this view that during the classic Gupta age, these cities were developed as urban centres, having huge brick activities such as big rampart walls and residential buildings made of bricks, cesspits and drains as well ⁶⁸.

Conclusion

Gordon Childe, a prominent historian, outlined the fundamental traits that characterized the urban revolution in ancient times. Among these defining features were monumental buildings, the emergence of large settlements with dense population, non-food producing classes including rulers, skilled artisans, and merchants played essential roles in shaping the urban characteristics of ancient cities. ⁶⁹ A. Ghosh mentions several factors such as administrative and mercantile organizations that are essential to the formation of a city or urban centre. ⁷⁰ Based on the aforementioned literary and archaeological data, it is reasonable to assume that Pundravardhana initially emerged as an administrative as well as a political center during the Mauryan period that undoubtedly developed as an important religious and economic center in later times. For an example, the Arthasastra mentions a kind of silk, named *Paundraka* which was exported from this region, indicating its economic importance ⁷¹. The river system and existence of several non-food producing groups undoubtedly played a vital role in facilitating inland trade and commerce. During the Gupta era, Pundravardhana became a Bhukti which had several urban cities, flourished as a hub for inland trade and commerce. This was largely due to the strategic location, connecting the region with the other parts of the empire. However, in later times, specifically during the Pala-Sena period the region received a new momentum to its journey towards urbanization.

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