Understanding the Changing Contours of Early Medieval Northern Bengal: Gleanings from Selected Pāla Epigraphs

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Abstract:The post-Gupta period, marked by features different from the ancient period, necessitated a distinct chronological classification. As a result, the term 'Early Medieval' gained scholarly acceptance to denote this transitional phase between the ancient and the medieval period. In the context of Bengal, this phase began following the decline of the Gupta Empire, which was marked by the rise of subregional kingships and localized centres of power. Following this, between the mid-8th and mid-12th centuries, dynasties such as the Pālas and Candras extended their dominion, promoting enhanced regional integration. The Pāla period represented a pivotal phase of transformation in state formation, social organization, and economic development. These transformations manifested differently across the sub-regions of Bengal, with this paper specifically focusing on the region of Puṇḍravardhana, also known as Varendra, attesting to Northern Bengal. This paper seeks to examine the evolving contours of the early medieval period, with particular emphasis on the wide-ranging evidence derived from the Pāla inscriptions of northern Bengal. The study will specifically focus on insights related to administrative hierarchies, socio-economic configurations, the physical landscape, settlement patterns based on toponyms, and religious affiliations.
Keywords:Puṇḍravardhana, Pāla inscriptions, Settlement toponyms, Social organisation etc.

Introduction

The Pālas governed northern and western Bengal, along with eastern Bihar, from the mid-eighth to the mid-twelfth century. Their reign was integrally linked to the broader political dynamics of early medieval North India, where they emerged as significant rivals to both the Gurjara-Pratihāras and the Rāṣṭrakūṭas. The principal sources for reconstructing Pāla history

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are inscriptions, especially copperplate charters issued by the royal court to religious beneficiaries, documenting grants of land or entire villages[1]. In the initial phase, inscriptions were primarily used to construct the political history of different dynasties, which was the primary aim of early epigraphic studies. However, in subsequent years, scholars have increasingly utilised epigraphic evidence to explore a wider range of themes, including the functioning of temple institutions, patterns of religious patronage, processes of state formation, social hierarchies, and aspects of the physical environment. The shift in approach has further facilitated a more nuanced understanding of history, with a wider range of information available in these inscriptions. For instance, these charters not only give information on the kings and Brāhmaṇas but also mention the other social groups like the merchants, landed peasants, herders, warrior chiefs, and even at times the sections belonging to the lower rungs of the society. This varied range of actors belonging to various social groups and economic backgrounds provides a more practical understanding, which makes inscriptions far more objective in nature.

Format and Composition of Pāla Inscriptions

Although the Pāla dynasty ruled for nearly four centuries and successfully unified a substantial portion of the Bihar-Bengal region, often extending their control beyond this core area, only 25 copperplate land grant charters have been discovered to date. These are attributed to 12 out of the 20 known Pāla rulers. The limited number of extant charters may be explained either by the possibility that the Pāla kings issued relatively few land grants or that a larger number of such records remain undiscovered and are yet to be deciphered[2]. According to an updated list of epigraphs pertaining to the Pāla period, Furui has opined that seven more inscriptions are yet to be deciphered[3]. However, the focus of the paper will be on the northern part of Bengal, which was generally referred to as *Puṇḍravardhana bhukti*, which initially comprised present-day districts such as Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, and Dinajpur, located across both India and Bangladesh. Although the territorial boundaries of this unit were not fixed or clearly delineated. In this context, a total of 12 copper plate inscriptions belong to northern Bengal.

The format of writing the content of a copperplate remained almost the same throughout the four centuries since the advent of the Pālas, i.e., the eighth century onwards.

As a result, most Pāla grants adhered to a standardized textual format, with only slight variations. The donative portion of Pāla grants typically consisted of the following: -

1. Royal Camp Description: A formal description of the *jaya-skandhāvāra* (royal victory camp) from which the royal order is proclaimed.

2. Royal Reference: Invocation or identification of the reigning monarch under whose authority the grant is issued.

3. Land Description: A detailed account of the geographical location and boundaries of the land or village being donated.

4. Public Proclamation: An address to the *samupagata-jana* (assembled populace) residing in or associated with the donated area, formally announcing the king's decree.

5. Purpose and Occasion: A statement elucidating the intention behind the grant—typically for religious merit—or mentioning the individual at whose request the donation is made.

6. Privileges Granted: A list of exemptions and rights conferred upon the donee as part of the donation, often reflecting administrative or fiscal privileges.

7. Identification of the Recipient: Specification of the beneficiary of the grant, usually a brāhmaṇa or a religious institution.

8. Benedictions and Curses: Inclusion of customary *śāstric* benedictive and imprecatory verses, often derived from the Dharmaśāstras, to ensure protection of the grant and to deter violations.

9. Administrative Details: Concluding references to the *dūtaka* (royal emissary or official responsible for implementing the grant), the scribe, the engraver, and the precise date of issuance, typically recorded in regnal year and lunar calendar.[4]

This structured format highlights the formal and ritualistic character of land grants during the Pāla period and shows the consistent and organised nature of early medieval administrative practices.

Delineating the Early Medieval period in Northern Bengal through a critical examination of selected Pāla Inscriptions

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To gain a nuanced understanding of the interrelated political, social, and economic processes that shaped and transformed the early medieval landscape of Northern Bengal, a renewed and critical examination of selected Pāla inscriptions is essential. This paper aims to present updated insights and new interpretations based on a re-examination of the following inscriptions.

Indian Museum Plate of the time of Dharmapāla

This is the earliest known Pāla copperplate, dating to the 26th regnal year of Dharmapāla (c. 792 CE), recently published by Ryosuke Furui. It was issued from the military camp at Mudgagiri (modern Monghyr, Bihar), the grant records the donation of land to Buddhist *saṃghas* associated with three establishments: a *vihāra* at Antarāvanikā and two structures, *gandhakuṭī* and *vihārikā*, at Somapura Mahāvihāra, built by *mahāsāmanta* Bhadraṇāga and his consort Saṇhāyikā. Although it was recovered from Karṇasuvarṇa (Murshidabad), the grant links to areas in present-day Dinajpur and Bogra (Bangladesh) and South Dinajpur (West Bengal), reflecting the expanding influence of subordinate rulers after the Gupta decline[5]. The petitioner of the grant was mahāsāmanta Bhadraṇāga. And the purpose of the grant was the provision of cloth (cīvara), food (piṇḍapāta), bedding (sayana), seating (āsana), preparation for disease (glāna-pratyaya),16 medicine (bhaiṣajya), and so on, the practice of bali, caru, and satra, and the repairs of torn and opened parts (khaṇḍa-sphuṭita-ghaṭaka). The addressees in early Pāla grants, including this were divided into four distinct categories. This is a pattern seen in several inscriptions. However, by the later Pāla period, some of these categories merged or were omitted over time.

There is significant information on the boundary demarcations of the lands granted. The first plot is described as a flat tract (*talapāṭaka*) belonging to a *vihāra* built by *mahāsāmanta* Bhadraṇāga in the village of Antarāvanikā, located within the Snānīṭā-maṇḍala of Koṭīvarṣa-viṣaya in Puṇḍravardhana-bhukti. According to Sanyal, "To the east, a half stream (ardha-śrota) of the river named Cīrikā; to the south, the border of the northern side (uttara-yāga) of the pond (puṣkariṇī) of Rahayyāditya; to the west, a half stream of the river Pravara; to the north, the southern border of a flat land tract of Bhadraṇāga's vihārikā".[6]The boundary description follows the standard E-S-W-N sequence. However, details of the remaining plots are unclear due to extensive corrosion of the plate.

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Several insights emerge from this newly discovered copperplate. Notably, the main petitioner, *mahāsāmanta* Bhadraṇāga, can be identified as a subordinate ruler. Unlike most grants, which rarely include the genealogy of such figures, except the Jagajjibanpur and Mohipur plates, this inscription uniquely provides a eulogy of both Bhadraṇāga and his messenger Śakradāsa, placed even before the main donative portion. Bhadraṇāga is said to belong to a lineage of *sārthavāhas*, or caravan-leading traders[7]. In the Gupta period, *sārthavāhas* appeared in North Bengal inscriptions as key urban elites within the *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa*, involved in city and rural administration, including land grants. However, they disappear from later records. It can be inferred that such families transitioned into subordinate rulers based in rural areas. This lineage includes *mahāsāmanta* Bhadraṇāga, his son, and grandson Uccaganāga, both holding the same title. The most striking part is their present status involved military roles, as highlighted in Bhadraṇāga's eulogy[8]. The second key aspect is the rising power of subordinate rulers, who built religious institutions within their territories and petitioned for revenue-free land grants to support them. This not only expanded their resources but also reinforced their local influence. These actions, framed as pious deeds, served as a means to systematically encroach upon royal authority. Thirdly, by building a *gandhakuṭī* and a *vihārikā* at Somapura Mahāvihāra, Bhadraṇāga likely aimed to connect his ties with King Dharmapāla, whose patronage of the site is confirmed by clay sealings found at Paharpur. This reflects a complex power dynamic where subordinate rulers, despite owing their status to the king, sought to expand their control and resources, often at the king's expense.

Khalimpur Copperplate Inscription of Dharmapāla

The Khalimpur copperplate, discovered near Gaur in the Maldah district, dates to the 32nd regnal year of Dharmapāla (c. 798 CE)[9] and begins with an invocation to the Buddha. Issued at the request of Mahāsāmantādhipati Nārāyaṇavarman and conveyed by the Dūtaka Yuvrāja Tribhuvanapāla, it records the grant of four villages to the temple of N[u]nna-Nārāyaṇa at Śubhasthalī. As the earliest known Pāla inscription, it offers crucial insights into the dynasty's rise, including the account that Gopāla was elected to restore order amid the prevailing anarchy in Bengal, which was likely a decision initiated by leading chiefs or officials and later affirmed by popular consensus[10]. According to Kielhorn, the editor of the plate, after

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expressing several doubts in regards to the name of the god, which could be Nanna or N[u]nna-Nārāyaṇa, it was speculated that it was the god Nārāyaṇa, who is a form of Vishṇu. However, the term Nunna or Nanna, which was prefixed to the name of the god, could be the name of the founder of the temple, and in this case, Nārāyaṇavarman[11]. In regard to the addressee section, there is a mention of four categories, similar to other Pāla grants. But, compared to the Gupta charters, the Pāla grants reflect a notable decline in the status of local elites like the mahāmahattaras and mahattaras, who were earlier placed in a similar position with adhikaraṇa members, as seen in a post-Gupta grant of Pradyumnabandhu. This shift suggests a weakening of rural authority and increasing social stratification.

A key feature of the grant is its detailed geographical delineation and toponymic references. It records the donation of four villages, Krauñcaśvabhra, Māḍhāśālmalī, Pālitaka, and Gopippalī, at the request of Nārāyaṇavarman. The first three villages were situated in the Vyāghrataṭī maṇḍala of the Mahantāprakāśa viṣaya, and the fourth in the Āmrashaṇḍikā maṇḍala of the Sthālikkaṭa viṣaya, all within the Puṇḍravardhana bhukti. Notably, the grant offers precise boundary descriptions for each of these villages, highlighting their administrative and territorial significance. This grant features the boundary details of all four villages mentioned above. However, for a better understanding, we will mention the details of the village of Krauñcaśvabhra and make an overall analysis of this unique feature.

"In the Mahantāprakāśa viṣaya, which belongs to the Vyāghrataṭī maṇḍala within the prosperous Puṇḍravardhana bhukti, is the village named Krauñcaśvabhra. Its boundary on the west is the dried channel (gaṅginikā); on the north it is the small temple (devakulikā) of Kādambarī and a date (kharjjura) tree; on the north-east, the dike (āli) made by the Rājaputra Devaṭa; it goes to and enters a citron (vījapūraka) grove; on the east is the dike of Viṭaka, entering into the small canal (yānikā) called Khāṭaka; [then] attacking [i.e. approaching] the small canal called Jambūyānikā [the boundary] has moved to the Jambū canal (yānaka); coming out from there, it moves up to vilvārdhasrotikā of Puṇyārāma (or, 'half stream of the canal called Puṇyārāma'?); from there [it comes to] the northern border (sīmā) of Nalacarmmaṭa; to the south of Nalacarmmaṭā [the boundary extends up to] Nāmuṇḍika, from there to Hesadummika (?), from there to Khaṇḍmuṇḍamukha, from there to Vedasavilvikā, from there to the border of the canal (joṭikā) of Rohitavāṭi-Piṇḍāraviṭi, [from there] to the

southern end of the Uktāra canal (joṭa) and the southern end of Grāmavilva, [up to] the Devikāsīmāviṭi [and] the small canal (joṭikā) called Dharmma".[12]

Similar in detail description of the physical attributes of the environment surrounding the settlements is also mentioned in the case of the other villages, Māḍhāśālmalī, Pālitaka, and Gopippalī. The Khalimpur copperplate is remarkable for its precise and elaborate boundary descriptions, reflecting a shift towards more rigid and specific territorial demarcation compared to the Gupta charters, which are detailed enough to resemble a modern map. Another aspect that makes this boundary clause particularly intriguing is its use of predominantly natural and artificial landmarks, such as rivers, streams, canals, tanks, orchards, groves, and cattle paths, as boundary markers. This distinctive dependence on the natural landscape in formal administrative documentation reflects a deep human-nature relationship. Another notable aspect is the recording pattern of the boundary descriptions; while most grants mention the four cardinal directions, the Khalimpur plate at times also includes intermediate points between them, indicating a more nuanced approach to territorial delineation[13].

The Jagjibanpur copperplate inscription of Mahendrapāla

This copperplate was discovered at Jagjibanpur Mouza in Malda district, West Bengal. It is among the most significant Pāla-period inscriptions from northern Bengal. This plate was dated to the 7th regnal year of Mahendrapāla (c. 854 CE), was issued by Paramabhaṭṭāraka Mahārājādhirāja Śrī Mahendrapāladeva from his victorious camp at Kuddāla-khātaka in the Puṇḍravardhana bhukti and was petitioned by mahāsenāpati Vajradeva and conveyed through the dūtaka Vijñāpitāḥ. The grant records the donation of land in the Nandadīrghikā udraṅga for constructing and maintaining a Buddhist vihāra. The endowments were intended for religious worship, writing of Buddhist texts, and providing monks with essentials such as food, garments, medicine, and upkeep of the vihara, all aimed at enhancing the merit of Vajradeva, his parents, and all beings. The list of addresses in this grant follows a pattern similar to that of early Pāla charters, such as the Indian Museum and Khalimpur plates, and can be broadly classified into four categories[14].

This grant similar to the Khalimpur grant also mentions the details regarding boundary demarcations featuring various environmental markers.

> *"The half stream of the river Taṅgila marks the boundary on the east and (partly) on the south too, which is (further) demarcated by the half stream of Kubja-ghaṭikā, Kāśiggaḍa-bandhāka, in the middle, stretching up to the eastern boundary of Nārāyaṇavāsa. The western boundary is marked by Golayi nirjjhara, the lowland (avakhāta) of Ajagara-vāsaka (python habitat), termite mound, aśvattha tree (the holy fig tree, Ficus reigiosa), the western bank (paścima pāṭa) of Svalpanandādhāra, the Vilva tree (Aegle marmelos, bel) west of Bijjaga-bandh, the āmalaki tree (Emblic myrobalam) six reeds away (ṣaṇṇalāntara). Next, the northern boundary consists of the east-facing northern waterholes and (the area) from Nandasurāli on the south up to the half stream of (the river) Taṅgila ..."*[15]

A notable feature of this grant is the high degree of precision in its boundary descriptions, comparable to that of the Khalimpur plate. It adheres to the conventional East-South-West-North (E-S-W-N) scheme commonly found in other contemporary grants, with the Khalimpur plate being a rare exception. The demarcations incorporate a variety of natural elements, including specific species of flora and fauna, as well as distinctive water bodies and landforms, to define the territorial limits clearly. Particularly striking is the inclusion of certain tree species native to the Bengal region, reflecting an intimate awareness of the local ecological landscape.

Mohipur copper-plate of Gopāla II

This copperplate dates to the 4th regnal year of Gopāla II (c. 866–870 CE) and was discovered in Mohipur village, Sherpur upazila, Bogra district (Bangladesh). It records the donation of the village Kaṅkā-vāsaka to a Buddhist vihāra established by mahāsainyapati Kokkāka, who petitioned the king through dūtaka Vajravarman. The inscription was engraved by Dakkadāsa, son of Jayadāsa. Following the format of earlier Pāla grants like the Indian Museum, Khalimpur, and Jagjibanpur plates, it was issued from a military camp at Śohana (Śohana-samāvāsita-śrīmaj-jaya-skandhāvārād), situated along the Bhāgīrathī River, a common feature in Pāla charters. This plate shows some changes in the addressee section. From the reign of Gopāla II in the late ninth century, the format of addresses in Pāla grants became more standardized. Unlike earlier grants from Dharmapāla's reign, which included four categories of addressees, this grant was directed to only two groups associated with the donated village. The first group mentioned 'royal officials' (rājapuruṣa) or 'dependants of the king', including forty-three offices and titles which consist of royal officials and subordinate

rulers, while the second group consisted of the residents, of whom *brāhmaṇa*s are foremost, headed by *mahattama*s and *kuṭumbin*s, reaching to *meda*s, *andhraka*s, and *caṇḍāla*s (*prativāsinaś ca brāhmaṇottarāmmahattamakuṭumbipurogamedāndhrakacaṇḍāl aparyantān)[16]*.The village Kaṅkā-vāsaka, including Gomuṇḍaka and Pārāvāra-bhūmi, was part of Uccavṛkṣa-maṇḍala in Sthālīkaṭa-viṣaya within Puṇḍravardhana-bhukti.

Like the Khalimpur grant, this plate illustrates how subordinate rulers, such as generals, expanded their influence by constructing religious institutions and petitioning for land grants, which was a pattern also seen in the Indian Museum and Jagjibanpur plates. Subsequently, unlike the detailed boundary descriptions in the Dharmapāla and Mahendrapāla grants, such as the Indian Museum, Khalimpur, and Jagjibanpur plates, this grant presents a generalized and stereotypical depiction of the land, lacking specific geographical markers and offering only a conventional view of the rural landscape.

There is also an interesting insight in regard to the migration of literate groups across various sub-regions of Bengal. The eulogy of mahāsainyapati Kokkāka reveals his family's origin from Samataṭa in Varendra, identifying them as a *sāmanta* lineage formerly serving the kings of Samataṭa. It appears this family migrated to Varendra and entered the service of the Pālas as subordinates. The inscription also mentions another Samataṭa-origin family, that of Dakkadāsa, the engraver, who likely belonged to a scribal lineage previously active in Samataṭa. The repeated phrase 'sat-Samataṭa' and the recurring suffix 'dāsa' in names like Maṅghadāsa (engraver of the Bhagalpur plate of Nārāyaṇapāla) and his son Vimaladāsa (engraver of the Jajilpara plate of Gopāla III) suggest that this family continued as engravers for generations after relocating to Varendra, while still retaining their Samataṭa identity. Notably, Dakkadāsa is also credited with engraving the Pāhila stone inscription from Nimgacchi (Pabna district) and the Mirzapur plate of Śūrapāla. A comparable case is that of *māhāmudrādhikṛta* Śubhāṅga from core Varendrī, who acted as a messenger in the Paschimbhag plate of Śrīcandra, linked to the Srīhaṭṭa region. These instances collectively indicate that literate and administrative groups were migrating across various sub-regions of Bengal[17].

Rangpur Copperplate of Mahīpāla I

This copperplate, dated to the 5th regnal year of Mahīpāla I (late 10th–early 11th century), records the donation of two villages to the brāhmaṇa Śrī-Diṅgaramiśradevaśarman. Issued

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from a military camp at Indrānī-grāma, the grant addresses individuals connected to Rājikāgrām-odraṅga in Uddhanna-Kaivarta-vṛtti-vahikala of Trapatagrāma-maṇḍala and Kuñjabhaddhika-ādāma of Śivagrāma-maṇḍala, and both were within Phāṇitavīttī of Puṇḍravardhana bhukti. The inscription provides considerable detail about these villages.

> *"The first village is said to have puṣkariṇī (pond) and hasty-āśaya (resting place of elephants). It measures five thousand nine hundred and ten with a reference to some tracts related to kirātas. The latter village is described as accompanied by (sahita) the land of Kṣapaṇḍaka-śubha-hāsa, belonging to itself and measures forty-one kulyavāpas and one āḍhavāpa. Following the format like the other pāla grants this to addresses firstly all the royal officials ((aśeṣa-rāja-puruṣa) or subordinates of his royal majesty (rājapād-opjīvin) including forty-five officials and unnamed others and secondly the residents beginning with mahattamas, uttamas, and kutumbins reaching medas, andhras and caṇḍālas, accompanied by brāhmaṇas".[18]*

The content of this inscription offers valuable insights into the rural socio-economic structure of early medieval Bengal. Rājikāgrām-odraṅga is located within Uddhanna-Kaivarta-vṛtti-vahikala, a designation notably paralleled in the Belwa plates of the same ruler, which mention a similarly named village, Ossina-Kaivarta-vṛtti, as part of a land grant. The term *Kaivarta* traditionally refers to a community associated with fishing and boatmanship, often regarded in literary and epigraphic sources as belonging to the lower strata of rural society. However, the inclusion of Kaivarta-vṛtti settlements in formal land grants suggests a socio-economic shift, indicating that sections of the Kaivarta community may have risen to the status of landholders. The term *vṛtti*, denoting land assigned for livelihood or service, reinforces this interpretation and reflects the increasing integration of previously marginal groups into the agrarian order.This grant also references another marginalized group, the *Kirātas*, in relation to land near a hill (*kudhra*) or a tamarind tree (*cukrā*), where certain activities were to be undertaken by them. Traditionally associated with forest-dwelling tribes in eastern India, the mention of *Kirātas* indicates the village's proximity to forested regions and reflects the broader early medieval process of agrarian expansion through forest clearance and incorporation of tribal communities into the rural economy[19]. A notable feature of the grant is the coexistence of different land measurement systems within the same administrative unit, Phāṇitavīttī. While Rājikāgrām-odraṅga is measured as 5,910 units (with no specified unit), Kuñjabhaddhika-ādāma is measured as 41 *kulyavāpas* and 1 *āḍhavāpa*; these are units also found in Gupta-period inscriptions from North Bengal. This variation

highlights the continuity and coexistence of diverse measurement systems in early medieval administration.

Conclusion

The study of the above inscriptions indicates changes in multiple spheres. It can be concluded that the early medieval transformation of Northern Bengal was driven by a confluence of agrarian expansion, rural commercialization, and evolving social hierarchies. These processes were underpinned by significant changes in social organization, particularly the rise of a landholding class and the increasing stratification of rural society. Political actors, from kings to local chieftains, strategically utilised land grants to consolidate authority, legitimize their rule, and extend control over both economic and ideological domains. However, the strategic rise of subordinate rulers with the help of constructing religious institutions like temples and vihāras (monastic complexes) and bringing more land under their control in the form of donations from the king is discernible from the early pāla grants like the Indian Museum, Khalimpur, and the Mohipur grant. Such practices can be observed in multitudes in the pāla period grants, making religious institutions and their benefactors very crucial markers of the socio-religious aspect of early medieval northern Bengal.

Furthermore, the Indian Museum grant, alongside the Khalimpur and Jagjivanpur copperplate inscriptions, provides valuable insights into the physical environment, particularly through their detailed accounts of boundary demarcations. These meticulous descriptions underscore the administrative emphasis placed on clearly defining the territorial limits of granted lands or villages, thereby making the geographical location of these settlements more identifiable within the landscape. Another significant aspect of the copperplate inscriptions is the presence of toponyms associated with the granted land. These place names serve as crucial indicators for locating the provenance of the grants and for reconstructing the spatial relationships between the granted land and neighbouring settlements. The Mohipur and Rangpur copperplate inscriptions inform us about the composition and dynamics of early medieval social groups. The Mohipur inscription highlights the mobility of literate professional groups, such as engravers, along with references to their places of origin, indicating a network of skilled individuals operating across regions. In contrast, the Rangpur inscription documents the integration of marginalized

communities, specifically the Kaivartas and Kirātas (traditionally positioned at the lower strata of the social hierarchy), into the expanding agrarian economy and rural socio-economic structure. By and large, it can be deduced from the study of the Pāla inscriptions that, in a broader perspective, the political, social, and economic processes influenced one another, which facilitated changes in the early medieval context of Northern Bengal.

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