
Kingship and Culture in Dialectical Convergence:Reconsidering the Medieval Bishnupur Malla Epoch

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Abstract:*The Malla dynasty of Bishnupur in Bengal, which arose to prominence from the 16th century, incarnated the intricate predicament of political sovereignty and cultural support in medieval India. Evolving amidst a constellation of fragmented chiefdoms, the Mallas consolidated territorial authority while strategically deploying Vaishnavism as a potent instrument of dynastic legitimization, thus inscribing religious ideology into the very edifice of governance. Their phenomenal patronization of the Vaishnava temples as well as the devotional practices epitomizes the convergence of aesthetic inventiveness. This study analyzes the creation, amalgamation and development of the Malla polity, emphasizing the dialectical interdependence of cultural investment and administrative spirit. Moreover, it explains the enduring implications of this synthesis, representing the ways by which Bishnupur's sacred and artistic efflorescence assisted broader procedures of cultural integration throughout Bengal. This study underlined the nexus of sovereign power along with the role of ritual economy and artistic patronage. Eventually, the article will demonstrate how the Malla epoch stands as an exemplary witness to the subtle interlinking of consecration and thus presented critical insights into the contrivances through which regional polities adorned themselves into tenacious historical and cultural narratives.*

Keywords: *Bishnupur, Dwarakeswar, Mallabhum, Legitimization, Temples, Vaishnavism etc.*

Date of Submission:29.09.2025

Date of Acceptance: 03.10.2025

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Introduction

The predominance of Mallabhum in the medieval times was seen as a distinguishing historical milieu wherein temple-construction functioned as the very fulcrum of political theology. It was celebrated as one of the most illustrious principalities of Bengal and was also seen as a distinguishing historical milieu wherein temple-construction functioned as the very

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fulcrum of political theology. It extended across the whole state of Bankura and spilled into the contiguous area of Bardhaman, Medinipur and Purulia. The Mallabhum area evolved like a luminous paradigm of semi-autonomous authority within the intricate constellation of chiefdoms that enfolded the Gangetic Delta. The Mughal imperium was established directly upon the Gangetic Delta of Bengal in the medieval times. This area was encircled by numerous quasi-independent states, amongst which Mallabhum achieved a chief stature. By transforming temple building into an instrument of imperial legitimation, the Malla kings consolidated their polity even though concurrently etching upon Bengal and forming an enduring legacy of cultural integration. The existing study pursues to delineate the genesis and consolidation of the Malla realm, and interrogating the broad implications of its lavishly decorated temples as embodiments of power and property, sanctity as well as integrative cultural identity.

Founded in the 7th century C.E., along Bengal's southwestern frontier,¹ the kingdom of Mallabhum rose to fame, attaining its pinnacle in the medieval times with Bishnupur as its political and cultural epicenter. During the latter half of the 15th century C.E., some small chiefdoms naming Bhum evolved in the Radha area. The Radha region, from the emergence of pre-historical periods, aided as a cradle for early human settlements and the gradual maturation of civilizations, a historical fact repeatedly attested in the canonical texts of ancient Indian history. This enduring pattern of habitation set the foundation for the growth of the Mallabhum realm. The capital Bishnupur was situated in the South-east of the district, a few miles south of the Dwarakeswar river.² Shrouded comprehensively in very dense forestlands, the monarchy relished a natural resistance against external incursions. Thus these forests became a geographical advantage that ominously aided the procedure of formation of strong kingdoms. The territorial ambit of Mallabhum was vast, elongating from the modern southern Parganas in the north to some portions of Medinipur in the Western side and the eastern tracts of Burdwan, whereas also integrating regions of Chota Nagpur, consequently emphasizing the substantial breadth and strategic profundity of the polity. The Mallabhum has borne the encumbrance of its illustrious legends alone for many centuries. Mallabhum covered the major portion of the present Bankura district.³ Thus the past historical tales of this dynasty has encompassed far beyond the confines of the district of Bankura. The Bankura district was a connecting link between the plains of Bengal on the east and highlands of Chotanagpur on the west.⁴ Considering the conversion of Mallabhum kingdom from a stateless region into a consolidated empire, obliges an investigation of the evolutionary

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trajectory of the Radha area. Geographically, the Radha is defined by the Bhagirathi in the eastern side, the area of Chota Nagpur to the western side and the Ganga in the northern side, and also includes the terrains of Birbhum-Burdwan and Bankura-Murshidabad and created the foundational landscape upon which the socio-political edifice of Malla dynasty was erected.

Bengal was considered an abominable country for many centuries by the Aryans.⁵The aboriginal epigraphic validation of the historical continuum of Bengal may be credited to an inscription dated roughly around the 4th century C.E. Completed in the language of Sanskrit and engaging to the eastern recession of the script and alphabets of the Gupta kings,⁶ this record even though consist of a mere triad of lines, it bears far-reaching historical reverberations. In it's origination, it was said that Maharaja Chandrabarma was the sovereign of Pushkaran and thus representing him not simply as an emperor who built his kingdom there but also as the cultivated patron of the Sanskritic order.⁷ Thus the foundation of an ancient settlement at Pushkaran, located at 25 miles to the northeast of Susunia Hill, is conventionally credited to his sovereignty. Afterwards, the origin of the 7th century C.E. saw the predominance of Shasanka, the formidable and powerful monarch of Bengal, whose political supremacy reconfigured the region's landscape. The renowned Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang (602–664 C.E.) in his book, enumerated four cardinal centers of Bengal namely Pundavardhan, Karnasubarna, Samatata, and Tamralipta and thereby approving their strategic importance. Of these, Tamralipta of Bengal was noted as a maritime emporium of remarkable renown. It was situated in the North East India' south west boundary. The inference consequently says that the dominions of Mallabhum was divided among the state of Karnabarna and Tamralipta.

The time era covering the 10th to 12th centuries in Bengal was noticeable by extraordinary political disintegration and the rise of numerous principalities. Distinguished amongst these developments was the rise of the Kottabi Kingdom in the 11th century C.E., which was rapidly followed by the territorial ambitions of the Panchakot Kingdom under Sena patronage, leading to widespread seizures of territories such as Mahisara, and Gangajalaghati. The thriving of monumental temple architecture at positions like Bahulara, Sonatapal, Kendua, and Salda underscores an epoch in which the governance endorsed economic steadiness, thus enabling both spectacular creations and the indispensable fortification necessary for these consecrated places. During this time, the Malla dynasty distinguished itself by consolidating it's power with pronounced potency and strength. The

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roots of the Malla family, enclosed in layers of legend and rareness of concrete chronicles, are commonly traced to the 7th century C.E. Nevertheless, dependable historical attestations for the empire's initial consolidation remain indescribable, obliging recourse to oral tradition and the chronicles. Exotically, the maximum of these interpretations converge on the tale of Raghunath Singh as dynastic predecessor.

Admired as the sovereign of the indigenous Bagdis community, Raghunath Singh is accredited with founding the city of Bishnupur. He is also found to be ruling over an area variously known as Mallabhumi or the Jungle Mahals.⁸ His putative origins are supposed to be the subject of competing traditions, like one story asserts his descent from the regal ancestry of Jainagar near Brindaban,⁹ whereas another prevalent story claims him to be the son of a Rajput Kshatriya of North Indian origin. Rendering to local lore, an incident of maternal distress at the time of pilgrimage caused in his abandonment in a forestry, where a Brahmin consequently raised him, his youth expended in pastoral unrecognizability as a cowherd boy. The building of a Kshatriya identity and dynastic legitimacy was attained through a propagation of basis myths. The most noticeable among these is the tale of Adi Malla, or Raghunath Singh, noticing a golden ball while fishing in his youth, a sign foretelling his destined sovereignty. He consequently built a minor polity focused in Laugram, which is frequently named as the centre from which Malla power originated. Contrastingly, some supporting the Bagdis of Mallabhum argue that the Malla rajas were formerly of Bagdi extraction, with tradition acknowledging Adi Malla as the Bagdi ruler. Such divergent accounts recommend that proclamations of Kshatriya status possibly had been deliberately created to obscure autochthonous origins and legitimize their territory over the Bagdi population. Nevertheless, the Malla dynastic line followed an active military standpoint, regularly engaging intimidating chieftains and regularly boosting their domains through war and conquest. Upon Adi Malla's death, his son Jay Malla succeeded him and the latter also made the conquest of Padampur and seized the fortress of the king before moving the capital to the city Bishnupur. The initial clear mention to the Malla kings as independent rulers appears in the late 16th century C.E, Akbar Nama, where the Malla Prince is designated as an influential prince.¹⁰ During their preeminence, the aspiring rulers such as Adi Malla apprehended every chance to conquer the neighbouring kingdoms, symbolizing an ethos of resolute expansionism and durable supremacy inside the whole area.

The dominance of the chief of Jatbihar, Pratapnarayan, considerably amplified his authority and respect among the ancient locales of Kotalpur and Indus.¹¹ In his architectural

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assistances, he established a temple at Puntswari,¹² demonstrating his power. He got married to Chandrakumari,¹³ the daughter of Indra Singh, a western prince reigning the solar race family. This marriage served to validate the rank of a Kshatriya chief, thereby enabling more effective governance. Furthermore, Jay Malla, succeeded him and continued the coalition with the Padampur Raj, the sovereign of that area, which culminated in the paramount of the locality a century afterwards.¹⁴ The clash followed when the Padampur Raj was attacked by Jay Malla, whose conquest in this hostility facilitated him to found his territory by seizing the fort—a significant turn marking the beginning of a realm forged through warfare. The third independent king, Beni Malla, presided lacking territorial expansion but pursued to strengthen the realm's borders. Consecutively, the fourth ruler, Kalu Malla, defeated the king of Indus and seized his area. The following rulers, including the sixth sovereign Kanu Malla, who conquered the Kakatiya realm, and the eighth ruler Sur Malla, subjugator of the Bagdi domain of Midnapur, sustained the expansionist policy against the neighboring states—an indispensable mission for the kingdom's extension. A key figure was Jagat Malla, crowned in 1033 C.E., under whose sovereignty the realm's capital was moved from Padampur to Bishnupur,¹⁵ thus enhancing the imperial supremacy. The supremacy of the 33rd king Rama Malla, crowning in 1277 A.D., further highlighted the kingdom's importance. Between the 15th and 16th century C.E., the Mallabhum empire gathered intensified gratitude among proximate states. However, the Muslim subjugations hardly affected Bishnupur's monarchs due to the area's obscurity among the Muslims and its natural defenses of dense woodland, jungle, and robust forts. Furthermore, the geopolitical scenery, marked by arid and infertile surroundings, donated to the absence of extensive external territory, eventually leading to tribute payments in exchange for non-interference. The supremacy of the 49th monarch, Mallabhum Bir Hambir, signified a peak in the kingdom's past, contemporaneous with the Mughal emperor Akbar. He specially made the construction of three famous temples and did significant fortifications, foreshadowing a reign noticeable by both architectural and military progressions. Preceding to his change to another faith, historical accounts portray him as a tyrannical and dishonest tyrant.¹⁶ Though, underneath his rule, the realm also experienced a rebirth in Sanskrit literature and culture, inspiring the kingdom's intellectual stature and founding it as a stronghold of knowledge.

The ascendancy of the Vaiṣṇava conviction within Bishnupur initiated a novel socio-religious vigor, conclusively redesigning the polity and cultural fabric of the Malla territory. The ruler, a passionate votary of the creed under the guidance of the well-known preceptor

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Shreenibas, used prodigious resources in the proliferation of this devotional order. Even the urban attachments of the capital—designated Krishnanagar, Madhavganj, Shyamārī Bazar, and Rathtalā¹⁷ actually stood as testimony to this holy desire, while the waterways, styled Kalindī and Yamunā, were dug to supply clean water for the public, thus entwining civic well-being with religious enterprise. The monarch's attempt, consequently, was not merely limited to organizational protection, but extended towards consolidating his subjects underneath a unifying mystical canopy shaped by the Vaiṣṇava indulgence.

The area around Bishnupur and Bankura slowly became a combined cultural and religious midpoint under the Malla monarchs, as the monarchs and their publics largely shadowed the similar belief. Festivals such as Ras, Dol, and other revels drew in both the monarchs and the commoners, generating a shared atmosphere of pleasure and involvement. This intimacy between the sovereign and their subjects nurtured a bond of affection, which is replicated in the construction of splendid temples like the Radhashyam, the Shyam Rai the Rasmancha, the Madanmohan, the Murulimohan temples etc. In the medieval era of Chaitanya based Vaishnava religion, the fierce manifestation of Krishna was converted into the worship of the playful child image of Krishna.¹⁸

Through such creativities, Bishnupur imprinted out a distinct individuality in the cultural landscape of Bengal. The terracotta portrayals of the 10 avatars of Bishnu were mostly replicated at almost every temple of Bishnupur.¹⁹ The Mughal monarchs, identifying the faithfulness of the Mallas, offered them various zamindari rights instead of imposing heavy taxes. The gesture by the Mughals supported the economic base of the territory of the Mallas. With the flow of more finances, trade and commerce prospered, though the Malla kings, out of reverence, offered the Mughals annual tribute.²⁰ They probably did that however only as a voluntary gesture,²¹ but never under severe pressure. The bond with the Mughals also left its watermark on the art and architecture of Bishnupur, particularly the terracotta temples such as Jor Bangla, appreciated for their intricate art and craft.

Life in Mallabhum principally turned around the village settlements. To safeguard the smooth governance, the realm was split into four main dissections, namely the talukdari, ghatwali, samanta, and khalsa. The Samantas, acting as subordinate chiefs, helped the Malla rulers with both tributes and military aid when essential. Different groups of service communities were also knotted to the structure. Revenue collection in talukdari or ghatwali areas was always carefully planned, with each zone distributed into smaller units called tarafs. These were looked after by tarafdars, who were accountable for collecting rents.²² The

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Malla kings left behindhand not just an organizational outline, but similarly an lasting cultural bequest. Their devoutness is best perceived in the numerous temples and deities that they commissioned. The terracotta creativity and temple architecture of Bishnupur turn out to be the signs of pride as not only for the realm but for the whole area.

Aimed at the legitimization of the rule, a huge quantity of land was granted to the Brahmins as rent free lands such as brahmottar, debottar, vaishnavattar,mahatran lands etc. The famous poets and singers were too given brahmottar or mahatran lands.²³ In return, the then created temples had priests employed in them.The Malla rulers gave importance to the Hindu gods and goddesses as well as they gave respect to Vaishnava, Jaina and local deities.²⁴Nonetheless during the late 17th and early 18th century C.E.,the internal weakness gradually started to grow. Under the Bengal Nawabs, the latter 3 Malla kings, specifically Raghunath Singha, Gopal Singha and Chaitanya Singha, governed the land. Subsequently after Bir Hambir, the Malla seat of power was taken by Dhari Hambir. But quickly, he was ousted by his brother Raghunath Singha. The temples constructed by him are a significant foundation of his realm. The trade succeeded widely among Bankura, Medinipur and Hooghly throughout this age.

Subsequently after the reign of Raghunath Singha, Bir Singha took the realm under his rule. For the well-being of his subjects, many canals were built by him. Equivalent importance to the organizational matters was remunerated by him. Many rent-free lands and treasures of the Raj family memberships were impounded by him. Durjan Singha, his son paved the military glory of the Mallas rose into fame. In 1712 C.E, the Malla sovereignty was soared by Gopal Singha. Throughout the early years of his rule, the revenue was increased by Murshid Quli Khan. Bishnupur was endeavored to be attacked by the Marathas under Bhaskar Pandit. Throughout the reign of Chaitanya Singha after 1748 C.E., people saw no indication of efforts to fortify the capital. Rather the people of Malla society found that the lands were approved by him to numerous religious societies. One of the chief motives for the rapid growth of Bishnupur was the spread of trade and commerce. Bishnupur was renowned for its silk and timber.The silk industry of Bishnupur was famous all over Indian subcontinent.²⁵ These belongings had to be collected from here by the East India company. After 1765, Chaitnaya Singha initiated to mislay his real control on the realm. The Maratha attacks severely affected him.When the rule of the company started, the rate of the revenue was constantly increased. Later the E.I.C. distributed the realm and led it into minor

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federations. Under the later inheritors of the Malla reign, the condition became further inferior and even the zamindari was sold on account of non-payment of revenue.

Observations

The course of kingdom of Mallabhum and its political alliance, in combination with its cultural traits, establishes a singular phenomenon within the annals of eastern Indian history. From the beginning of their reign, the Malla rulers wanted to strengthen their territory not simply through ceremony and religion, but similarly by constant militarization. Their armies involved in irregular operations thereby continuously reaffirmed the dominion in contradiction of both regional adversaries and external intrusions. The defenses were repeatedly restored, and artillery predominantly cannonry was positioned with the thoughtful intent of protecting the territorial integrity from foreign invasions. Similarly decisive, was the infusion of Vaishṇava religiosity into the political fabric of the kingdom. The acceptance of this devotional ethos did not stay limited to courtly ritualism but pervaded the social base, thus representating the ruler and his subjects into a nexus of shared cultural uniqueness.

But the sturdiness of this order was eventually damaged by structural fissures. The organizational scarcities, compounded by hidden internal oppositions, deteriorated the institutional framework of the kingdom. Furthermore, an overextended dependence upon the Vaishṇava devotionism, though primarily integrative, slowly diverted the ruling elite from pragmatic apprehensions of governance and military vigilance. This uneven preoccupation with religious principles, contrasted with the domain's inherent vulnerabilities, triggered the ultimate demise of the Malla polity, leaving Mallabhum as a warning example of the imbalance between piety and political prudence.

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