

The Genesis and Historical Evolution of the titled 'Dinajpur': A Historical Perspective

Dipankar Barman¹

¹Research Scholar
Department of History
Raiganj University
Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal, India
Email: dipankarpt25@gmail.com

Abstract: The name 'Dinajpur' embodies a significant dimension of the historical identity of northern Bengal. Its origin and subsequent transformation are closely connected with the region's changing political, administrative, and socio-cultural landscape. This study investigates the genesis and historical evolution of the name 'Dinajpur,' tracing its development from the ancient geographical identity of Pundravardhana to the emergence and wider acceptance of the present nomenclature. In antiquity, the region constituted an important part of Pundravardhana, with Pundranagara serving as a major centre of political and cultural activity. Over time, successive political formations, administrative reorganizations, and local traditions contributed to the changing nomenclature of the region. Particular attention is given to the different traditions concerning the origin of the name 'Dinajpur,' especially those linking it with local rulers and historical personalities. The study critically evaluates these traditions against available historical and administrative evidence. It further examines the role of Mughal and colonial administrative practices in establishing 'Dinajpur' as a recognized territorial designation. Drawing upon historical, geographical, literary, and administrative sources, this study argues that the emergence of the name 'Dinajpur' was a gradual and layered historical process rather than the outcome of a single event. Thus, the evolution of its name provides valuable insight into the changing historical identity and territorial consciousness of northern Bengal.

Keywords: Ancient, Geographical, Dinajpur, Mughal, Pundrabardhana, Tradition etc.

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Introduction

Place-names are important historical sources for understanding the political, geographical and cultural development of a region. They often preserve memories of past rulers, settlements, administrative changes and local traditions. The name Dinajpur is particularly significant in this

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context, as its historical evolution reflects the changing political and administrative landscape of northern Bengal. The history of Dinajpur's nomenclature, however, remains complex. Before the emergence of the present name, the region was associated with several ancient and traditional geographical designations. The precise origin of the name Dinajpur is also debated. A popular tradition connects it with a figure named Dinaraj or Dinaj, while documentary evidence suggests that the name gradually acquired wider currency during the medieval period. The rise of the Dinajpur Raj further contributed to the consolidation of the name as a recognised regional designation.

During the colonial period, Dinajpur became firmly established in official records and administrative usage under the East India Company and subsequently the British government. Although the territorial boundaries of the district changed repeatedly, the name continued to survive. The Partition of Bengal in 1947 brought another major transformation, dividing the historic Dinajpur region between India and Pakistan, followed by further administrative divisions in postcolonial India. This article therefore seeks to trace the genesis and historical evolution of the name 'Dinajpur', examining the available literary, documentary and traditional evidence. Rather than treating the name as a fixed geographical label, it considers its development as part of the broader political, administrative and socio-cultural history of the region.

Etymology of the Name of Dinajpur

The name of the district was Dinajpur. It was one of the most rich and fertile land of Bengal Province. Dinajpur district was formed during the time of British rule in Bengal. But after the formation of Dinajpur, the historians have given many opinions to the naming of the district. It is very rare and difficult to find out the source information about the naming of a place in a historic context. Hence we can depend on indigenous and foreign travelers, accounts, memoirs etc. for such a study. Dinajpur district is no exception when it comes to tracing the origin of the name. There was no local actual tradition or source in the connection with the origin of name of Dinajpur district. Indeed, the explanation of the name is very difficult to be satisfactory.¹

Dr. Muhammad Moniruzzaman in his book 'History of Dinajpur' has written in a footnote, 'The origin of the zamindari of Dinajpur from the name of a dervish called Dinaj Waj was revealed in

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the local legend. His grave is still present today outside the Singhdwar of Dinajpur Rajbari.' One historian says that the name Dinajpur was derived from the word 'diwan' (dewan or manager). Dr. Francis Buchanan in his report entitled 'A Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of the District of Dinajpur' presented a theory of the name 'Dinajpur'. In the sense of Din, he thought it was a miserable or a beggar. Their abode, hence 'Pur'. Needless to say, it is very difficult to trace the true history of the naming of the city of Dinajpur, just as it is difficult to determine the origin of the name of many districts or cities in Bengal. However, between 1722 and 1760, the name of the city of Dinajpur was mentioned in various documents and correspondence of the East India Company.²

Early names of the Region

The ancient region of Dinajpur was known by several names, although these were not consistently recorded in the available historical sources. According to Bogurar Itihas, the region corresponding to present-day Dinajpur formed part of Matsya-desa during the period associated with the Mahabharata and was known as Jyotishika. This reference suggested that the region had been identified by a different name in the ancient period, long before the emergence of the name Dinajpur.³

The name Dinajpur appeared to have originated during the Muslim period and was therefore in use before the commencement of British rule. However, there was no reference to the name Dinajpur in any known ancient text. Before the Muslim conquest of Bengal in 1204, the region formed part of the Kotivarsha Vishaya of Pundravardhana Bhukti. In terms of the political divisions of ancient India, a Bhukti was broadly comparable to a modern province, while a Vishaya corresponded approximately to a present-day district. No mention of the name Dinajpur was found in connection with these ancient administrative divisions. The ancient territory of Pundravardhana was considerably extensive and broadly corresponded to the region that later came to be known as North Bengal.⁴ Before the advent of Muslim rule, Pundravardhana had developed into a significant centre of political power and cultural activity. In the subsequent period, this region came to be identified as Dinajpur.⁵

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Zamindari system was introduced in Suba Bangala by Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. Zamindari Sanad was obtained by Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, the zamindar of Dinajpur. From that time the name of Dinajpur came into use. The zamindar of Dinajpur (who was also known as Raja) acquired the zamindari of the region which came to be known as Dinajpur and not by any other name. So it can be assumed that the name Dinajpur came into use in the second decade of the 18th century.⁶ Murshid Quli Khan Suba (province) introduced the Zamindari system in Bengal. Since that time, the name Dinajpur has been widely used. In the book 'Dinajpur: History and Tradition' edited by Sharif Uddin Ahmed, it is said that when the zamindaris of Bengal were reorganized under Murshid Quli Khan's 'Malzamini' system, the name Dinajpur was used since then.⁷

The Muslim rule was lasted for about three hundred years. The Afghan rulers had their capital at Gour and they took little interest in developing this area. This district at that time formation the northern most boundaries were with the Mohammedan kingdom that is why defence was their main concern. They utilised the old garrison and rampart at Bangarh for quartering their troops and seldom built any structure worth mentioning from architectural point of view except a few small tombs and mosques. Constant warfare and disability led to economic depression. The land once prosperous became poor. It has sarcastically been told by a historian in early British period that it was Dinajanapur (land of the poor) from which the word Dinajpur might had been derived.⁸

By the seventeenth century, this vast territory had come to be known as Dinajpur, a name derived from Ghoraghat, the Mughal headquarters of revenue administration and an important frontier military garrison. The emergence of a large and consolidated zamindari centered on the region known as Dinajpur added a new dimension to the area's earlier administrative organization, which had previously been structured around the *vişaya* and later the *sarkar*.⁹

Historians believe that the only Hindu king of the Sultanate era, Ganesh, assumed the title of 'Danujmardandev' and ruled for a few years in the early fifteenth century (1415-1418 AD). Perhaps the name Dinajpur was created in history from this Danuj word. Historian Himanshu Kumar Sarkar believes that there was a village called 'Dijinna' during the Gupta period, from which the name Dinajpur was derived. He also thinks that the word Dinajpur comes from the

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word 'Hitti Anaj'. The word Anaj means rice, vegetables. Pur means City. The city produces a large amount of rice, grains and vegetables, so its name is Dinajpur.¹⁰

It was Dinajpur. Westmecott (former magistrate of Dinajpur) said that the real name of the place where the present Raj Bhavan (Rajbari) is located was Dinaj. A man named Dinaj cleared the jungle and called it a village, and the place was named Dinajpur. When Sultan Ibrahim Lodi sat on the throne of Delhi, and Sultan Samasuddin wielded the scepter at Gaudah, a Hindu king threw off the mantle of independence and established an independent Hindu king at Dinajpur". "The departmental headquarters of the Mughal revenue administration and an important frontier and base date this vast territory to the seventeenth century from the prevalence of the name Ghoraghat. The rise of exclusive zamindari centered around the area known as Dinajpur added a new dimension to the establishment of the ancient administrative center and later the government. This new dimension later led to the region becoming known as Dinajpur district. The place where a person named Dinaj with his family and followers is said to have settled was called Dinajpur in accordance with the naming convention of the new settlement in the district. The name Dinajpur literally means the city of Dinaj. Persian scholars used to pronounce the word 'Danuj' as 'Dinway'; the word gradually evolved into 'Dinwaj'. In the seventeenth century Muslim rulers chose the term 'Dinwaz', from the Bengali Dinaj'. By adding 'pur' to it the place came to be known as Dinajpur.¹¹

Dinajpur Raj and Historical Consolidation

Dinajpur, this was not only the name of the district. Dinajpur was also a place name rich in history and tradition. However, there was a lack of knowledge among the people about the source, when the name Dinaj-Pur originated, but there was a bright historical background and there are several proverbs and legends. In fact, Dinajpur was the name of a mouza. Dinajpur Rajbari was located on the north-eastern outskirts of Dinajpur city and named 'Dinajpur'. According to the English Civilians the name of the district town was Dinajpur.¹²

The Dinajpur Proper, according to the Dinajpur Gazetteer, referred to the north-eastern quarter of the town, where the Maharaja Bahadur of Dinajpur maintained his residence. As this part of the

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town had originally served as the seat of government, it came to lend its name not only to the town itself but also to the wider district of Dinajpur.¹³

Rajani Kanta Chakrabarty a historian of Malda, mentions a legendary story in the context of discussing the origin of the name Dinajpur. According to the story, Hariram Ghosh, son of king's employee of Uttarbati named Debaki Nandan Ghosh, married a maid servant of king Ganesha and got the name Dinraj Ghosh Jadu, (son of the king Ganesh) after converting to Islam, gave a Bish (administrative area) of North Bengal to Dinraj. When Dinraj started living in that place, the name of the place was called Dinraj pur. And finally the present name Dinajpur originated from Dinraj pur. But this Dinajpur was located about 20 miles north of the present city of Dinajpur. During the reign of king Sukdeb, the sardar of the Mughal and Uzbek occupied the southern part of his kingdom. Later, the king Prannath regained most of his kingdom and the place where he lived got the name Dinajpur for the king's settlement in Dinajpur. But Historian Rajanikanta Chakrabarty did not mention the sources of the incident. Again, some have suggested that the name of Dinajpur has originated from the name of Dina Nath or Dinwaj.¹⁴

Perhaps one of the principal reasons for this interpretation was the absence of any satisfactory or convincing explanation for the origin of the name Dinajpur. In the absence of a more plausible etymology, an attempt was therefore made to account for its origin by associating the name with Raja Ganesh, who bore the title Danuja Mardana Deva.¹⁵

Some historians and researchers suggested that Raja Ganesh, the prominent Hindu chieftain of North Bengal, had risen to power in the early fifteenth century and had established himself as the ruler of Gour, one of the important janapadas of medieval Bengal. He was said to have assumed the title Danujmardana-Deva. On the basis of this association, some scholars proposed that the name Dinajpur might have been derived from the title of Raja Ganesh. Although this explanation remained a matter of historical interpretation, it provided one possible explanation for the origin of the name.¹⁶

Buchanan Hamilton, Westmcott, Strong, and Jatindra Chandra Sengupta associated Raja Ganesh with the origin of the name Dinajpur and regarded the Dinajpur royal family as his descendants. However, they were administrators rather than professional historians, and their accounts largely followed Hamilton's interpretation. Their argument apparently arose from the mistaken identification of Raja Ganesh's title Danujmardana-Deva with the Hakeem of Dinwaj, followed

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by an unwarranted identification of Dinwaj with Dinajpur. Historical evidence indicated that Raja Ganesh had been the zamindar of Bhaturia and had no known connection with Dinajpur. Moreover, the Dinajpur royal family had reportedly originated from Ghoraghati-Vardhankot. Thus, identifying Raja Ganesh as the ancestor of the Dinajpur royal family appeared historically unjustified.¹⁷ Over time, local pronunciation is thought to have transformed Dinarajpur into Dinajpur, as speakers in the region commonly altered the sounds of certain consonants and vowels in everyday speech.¹⁸

Association with Raja Dinaj or Danuj

This name was almost certainly the first part of Dinagepoor, which was understood to mean 'the City of Dinaj.' More specifically, the name originally belonged to the village on whose lands the Rajbari had been constructed. This village was one of the six or seven settlements that together constituted the town of Dinagepoor. It was therefore likely that Dinaj had been the name of the person who, accompanied by his family and followers, had first cleared and occupied the land. Such a system of naming newly established settlements after their original founders or occupants had continued to be followed in the district. This explanation appeared far more plausible than the commonly accepted interpretation of Dinagepoor as meaning 'the City of the Poor.'¹⁹

According to Buchanan Hamilton, the name Dinajpur was believed to mean "the abode of beggars" and was associated with Dinwaj, a Raja whose descendant, Gonesh, was said to have seized control of the government of Gaur. One possible interpretation was that an otherwise forgotten prince named Dinaj or Dinwaj had founded the Dinajpur ruling family and had given his name to the settlement.²⁰

Muslim chroniclers are said to have translated this designation into English as 'Hakim of Dynwas,' meaning 'Governor of Dinaj.' Subsequently, British writers described him as 'Perhaps a Petty Chief of Dynwaj,' implying that he was a minor feudal chief of Dinaj.²¹

The source further records that the area presently identified as Dinajpur once formed part of a small pargana known as Vijayanagar. As noted earlier in connection with Todar Mal's revenue administration, Vijayanagar pargana was included within the Panjara sarkar. On this basis, it has

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been suggested that the name 'Dinajpur' originated from the earlier designation 'Dinajpur'. However, this interpretation appears historically untenable and should therefore be rejected.²²

It may be conjectured that Dinajpur derived its name from a local ruler called Dinaj or Danuj. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, in *History of Bengal*, Vol. II, mentioned Danuj Rai of Sonargaon, who assisted Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban (1265–1287) against Mughisuddin.²³

Raja Ganesh adopted the title '*Danuja mardanadeva*'. According to this interpretation, Persians pronounced Danuja as Dinway, which gradually evolved into Dinwaj through a series of phonetic changes (Danjuja-Danuway-Dinwaj). The addition of the suffix pur, meaning 'town' or 'city,' gave rise to the place name Dinajpur.²⁴

In the article, "Dinajpur Shahorer Parisarik O Artho-samajik Biborton: Ekti Oitihāsik Porjalochona," Jinatunnessa, R. M. M. Khuda Khandaker Nizamuddin, and M. Q. M. Mahmud suggested that the town had derived its name from Dinajpur, who was believed to have been an architect or founding figure associated with the Dinajpur dynasty during the early fifteenth century.²⁵ One tradition holds that a man named Dinaj, together with his family and follower, established a settlement in this region. In accordance with the contemporary practice of naming newly founded settlements after their founders, the locality came to be known as Dinajpur, literally meaning 'the town of Dinaj.'²⁶

Religious Interpretation

Medieval literary tradition provides another account of the origin of the Dinajpur dynasty and its name. In Dinajpur Rajbanser Kotha, poet Brahamullah of Nathair village relates that a Tantrik from the east married the daughter of the local Bhumyadhihari. Their son, Din Nath, is presented as the founder of the Dinajpur dynasty, and the name Dinajpur is traditionally linked to him. While historically unverified, this narrative reflects an important strand of local tradition concerning the origin of the place-name.²⁷

Several popular traditions sought to explain the origin of the name Dinajpur. One legend connected it with a shepherd named Dina, who was said to have risen to become the ruler of the region, giving rise to the name Dinapur or Dinajpur. Another tradition attributed the name to a Muslim ascetic, Dina Fakir, who was believed to have settled in the area. A structure discovered

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near the former royal garden was sometimes identified as his tomb, but the absence of an inscription and its architectural form made this identification doubtful. Thus, both traditions appeared to have been based largely on local folklore rather than firm historical evidence. The accounts of contemporary colonial administrators, based on documentary and empirical observation, therefore provided a more credible basis for determining the historical origin of the name Dinajpur.²⁸

Folklore and Oral Traditions

According to a local tradition, the town was believed to have been founded about three centuries earlier and was associated with Raja Ramnath Ray. The tradition further held that the ascetic Kalikananda Brahmachari had granted his landed property to Sukdev Ray, the father of Raja Prannath. This grant was regarded as an important step in the formation of the family's zamindari and in the gradual consolidation of its political influence. After inheriting the estate, Raja Prannath was said to have established his capital at Bangar, from where he administered his territories.²⁹

Mehrab Ali, a local history writer at Dinajpur town (now in Bangladesh), had drawn everyone's attention to 'Dinajpur Rajbansher Kotha' written by poet Brahanullah. It was narrated in this poem that a daughter of Dinajpur was married to a man named Tantra Ray from Purbadesh and the name of their son was Dino Nath. The Dinajpur dynasty was started from Dino Nath and from his name, this place is named as Dinajpur.³⁰

Colonial Period and Changing Boundaries

In 1765, when the British East India Company acquired diwani (revenue collection) powers from the Mughal Emperor of Delhi, they divided the Bengal suba (country) into 28 districts, one of which was Dinajpur. Naturally, it can be assumed that when a geographical area was named, there was a specific basis and reason behind the naming. It is natural that the foundation is centered on 'Dinaj'. In this case, another issue comes to the fore. That is, Dinajpur was formed as a central town even before the arrangement of Dinajpur district or geographical area.³¹

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M. E. Westmacott was among the most keenly interested researchers of the history of the Dinajpur Raj family. He spent six years in Dinajpur between 1868 and 1877, serving first as Joint Magistrate and subsequently as District Magistrate. In his account, he observed that during the period of Akbar's revenue settlement, a person named in Buchanan's writings as Kasi held extensive possessions in the areas that later constituted the districts of Dinajpur and Malda. Westmacott suggested that this individual might have been a descendant or relative of Raja Ganesha, whose connection with Dinajpur had existed less than two centuries earlier. However, he noted that the identity of this person remained uncertain, as the name Kasi had long since disappeared from local memory. A grave believed to be associated with him was reportedly pointed out near the entrance of the mandir within the Rajbari complex.³²

The Dinajpur Gazetteer has given a clear explanation about the reason why the newly formed district and the district town were named Dinajpur at that time -That is, since the capital village of the kings of Dinajpur was called Dinajpur, so the district and the district city were named Dinajpur in honor of the dynasty. It was worth noting that this information was first revealed by the history of Dinajpur.³³

Partiton of Dinajpur

The present administrative configuration of the Dinajpur region was shaped by a series of political and territorial reorganisations in the post-colonial period. The Partition of India in 1947, followed by the reorganisation of states in 1956, led to the formation of the district of West Dinajpur. This administrative arrangement, however, did not remain permanent. On 1 April 1992, West Dinajpur was again reorganised and bifurcated into two distinct administrative units, namely Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur, thereby giving the region its present territorial and administrative structure.³⁴

Conclusion

The evolution of the name Dinajpur cannot be understood as a simple matter of linguistic derivation. It was closely intertwined with the political history, administrative reorganisation and changing territorial consciousness of northern Bengal. The earlier names associated with the region, including the traditional identification with Jyotiṣika, point to a much older geographical

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memory, although their precise correspondence with the later Dinajpur territory remains open to historical scrutiny. The emergence of the name Dinajpur and the traditions connecting it with Dinaraj or Dinaj represent an important stage in the formation of the region's historical identity. Yet tradition alone cannot establish the precise circumstances in which the name originated. The growing prominence of the Dinajpur Raj, followed by the increasing use of the name in Mughal and British administrative records, gradually transformed it from a regional designation into an established territorial identity.

The colonial period was particularly significant in this process. Administrative surveys, revenue arrangements and official records gave Dinajpur a more clearly defined place within the political geography of Bengal. At the same time, the repeated alteration of its territorial boundaries demonstrates that the geographical extent of a district could change without necessarily disrupting the continuity of its name. The events following the Partition of 1947 introduced yet another dimension to this historical process. The division of the old Dinajpur region between India and Pakistan, followed by subsequent administrative reorganisations, transformed the political and territorial significance of the name. Nevertheless, Dinajpur continued to survive as a powerful marker of historical memory and regional belonging. In this sense, the history of Dinajpur is not merely the history of a name. It is a history of how place, power, administration and collective memory interacted over time. Tracing the changing uses and meanings of the name therefore provides a useful way of understanding the wider historical transformation of northern Bengal. While the precise origin of the name may remain a subject of debate, its enduring presence across successive political regimes and territorial changes testifies to the deep historical continuity of the region it came to represent.

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