

Role of Prachya-Desha in Indian History

Ambika Prasad Morarka

The beginning of settled civilization in India dates back to roughly about three thousand years before the Christian Era. Indian civilization has thus completed five thousand years of its existence. During this long journey of the growth of Indian culture, its different parts have played pivotal roles during different periods and thus continued its course uninterrupted. The dawn of urban culture took place in the north-western region of India in the form of the Indus valley civilization. The culture of the vedic Aryans was also nourished in the same region which was known as the Sapta Sindhu Desha. But with the beginning of the Sixth Century B.C., the centres of political and cultural activities were transferred from north-west to north-east and the latter continued to play a significant role in the future course of Indian History.

Geography has been rightly regarded as one of the eyes of history, because it is the main factor in shaping the history of any country. The change of theatres of the development of Indian culture from north-west to north-east was also an outcome of the geography of India. The protective wall of the Himalaya had completely blocked the way in the north and north-east. Therefore, the entries of foreigners were possible mainly through the passes of the north-western region. The early settlers had entered India through these passes and chose the Indus valley for their settlement because of its richness and fertility. The Aryans also made their early settlements in the same area ; but later on expanded their colonies towards the east and south. Thus began the process of the Aryanisation of India, which was almost completed by the 7th century B.C.

The sixth century B.C. opens a new epoch in Indian history. Firstly, it marks the beginning of the historical period. Secondly, it witnessed the rise of new religions in the form of Jainism and Buddhism which were destined to have deep influence on the future course of Indian history and culture. Thirdly, the period synchronised with the first foreign invasion from the north-west in the form of Persian invasion. Fourthly, it saw the change of the centre of political and cultural activities from the north-west to the north-eastern part of India. The north-eastern region continued to play a pivotal role in Indian history through out the ancient period. The founders of both the new religions, Jainism and Buddhism hailed from this region. The Kingdom of Magadha which

later on rose to the status of an all India empire was situated in the same land. The universities of Nalanda, Vikramashila and Odantapuri, which were regarded as international seats of learning were in the same area.

Again we see geography as the main factor behind these developments. Unlike the north-west, the north-eastern region was free from the fear of foreign aggression. Secondly, the land was watered by the Ganga and the Brahmaputra river systems which had made it extremely fertile. The rivers also provided good highways of communication through their broad beds and deep and also water courses. The fertility of the land and the easy means of communications gave an impetus to the growth of industries and commerce and brought an unprecedented prosperity to the land. As a result of this the region became the nucleus of political and cultural activities.

Antiquity of the North-Eastern Region

Even before the Aryanisation of this region, it had developed a rich culture. The earliest literary references to this region can be dated back to about 2000 B.C. ¹ The Kashyapa Samhita divides India into five divisions out of which the north-eastern region has been named as Purva Desha ². The same region was also known as Prachya Desha. The Greek writers have referred to the same as Prasii and Gangaridae. The following Janapadas or countries of the Purva Desha ³ have been mentioned in literary sources.

1) Katiyarsa

It has been identified with Katwa region under the Burdwan district of West Bengal.

2) Magadha

The earliest reference to this Janapada is found in the Atharvaveda ⁴. Its name also figures in the Mahabharata ⁵. It originally comprised the Patna and Gaya districts of South Bihar and had its capital at Rajagriha (Rajgir near Patna) and then at Pataliputra (Patna itself). From the sixth century B.C onwards its boundaries went on expanding to all the directions and under Chandragupta Maurya, it was converted into an all India empire.

3) Mrittika Vardhamanaka

It is identified with Bardhamana district of West Bengal.

4) Matanga

Its location has been suggested to the south-east of Kamarupa in Assam. It was celebrated for its diamond mines.

5) Pundra

The name of this country first appears in Aitareya Brahmana. It comprised the adjacent parts of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa ⁶. It was also known as Pundravardhana and comprised the seven countries of Gauda, Varenara, Niviti, Suhma, Zarikhanda, Varaha-bhumi and Vardhamana.

6) Vanga

The name of this country has been mentioned by Kalidasa in the Raghuvamsha ⁷. It was situated to the east of Suhma. It is identified with the present Bangla Desh or East Bengal. It was also known as Samatata.

7) Gauda ⁸

It is mentioned in the Bhavishya Purana and originally comprised the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Panini also refers to it. The name Gauda is supposed to be derived from the word 'Guda' meaning 'sugar'. The region was famous for the manufacture of sugar since ancient times. The legacy of this tradition could still be seen by the fascination of the Bengalis for sweets. Karnasuvarna was the capital of this country which has been identified with Rangamati near Murshidabad. The Gauda country was sometimes referred to by the name of its capital Karnasuvarna. The city reached the climax of its glory under Shashanka, the contemporary Gauda ruler of Harshavardhana. The Palas transferred the capital from this place to Gaudapura, equated with Gaur in Malda district. During the course of time the Gauda country represented the West Bengal region.

8) Suhma

It is referred to by Kalidasa. Tamaralipta (modern Tamruk in Midnapur district of West Bengal) was probably the capital of this country. It was a great port through which was carried the maritime trade between India and China and other countries of South-East Asia. The Suhma country was referred to by the name of its capital also. All the three Chinese travelers viz. Fia-Hien, Yuan Chwang and I-tsing have described the greatness of this port town in their accounts. The country comprised the delta region of the Ganga and played a significant role in India's cultural and trade relations with the eastern and south-eastern countries. The Kasyapa Samhita refers to it as Tamralipta ¹⁰.

9) Anga

It is always referred to along with Vanga. It comprised the Monghyr and Bhagalpur districts of Bihar. Its capital Champa was situated at the confluence of Chandan and Ganga which is

identified with modern Champapur near Bhagalpur. It was one of the greatest cities in the north-eastern part of India.

10) **Kalinga**

It is present Orissa. It was also known as Utkala.

11) **Silahatta**

It is identified with the present Sylhet District of South Bengal. It is referred to in the inscriptions as Shrihatta Desha ¹¹ and literary sources mention it as Harikela.

12) **Kamarupa-Pragjyotisha**

This was one of the most important country in the north eastern region comprising the Gauhati region of Assam. Pragjyotishapura was its capital which is now represented by Dispur, near Gauhati. The name of Kamrupa figures in several inscriptions ¹². Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha are sometimes used as synonyms and comprised the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. It has also been referred to as Lauhitya.

Hill tribes of the north-eastern region

The hill tribes of Bengal and Assam have been referred to as Kaikayas ¹³, Kiratas ¹⁴ and Pulindas ¹⁵. Originally the Kaikaya people lived in Punjab. But the same term is used in connection with the Kukis of Assam and Manipur. Kaikaya was also one of the ancient Kingdoms in Karnatak. The Pulindas and Kiratas were the hill tribals of the Vindhya. But the same terms are used in connection with the hill tribes of Bihar, Assam and North Bengal. This was probably due to the Aryanisation of this region. The Aryans named the newly conquered territories and people after the names of countries and people of their earlier settlements. This practice was also followed in naming the mountains, rivers and cities of the newly acquired territories ¹⁶.

Contribution of the north-eastern region to the growth of Indian culture

With the rise of Magadha as a strong Kingdom, the centre of political activities was shifted to the Prachya Desha. The Magadhan capital Pataliputra became the capital of India and it continued to be so for more than one thousand years. The foundation of the greatness of this kindgom was laid down by the Mauryas. Under the Guptas it reached the climax and marked the golden age of Indian history. The rise and growth of new religions took place in the same region. The rock-cut cave architecture which later on

developed into one of the most important forms of ancient Indian architecture had its first appearance in the Barabar hills of Bihar. The intellectual progress is marked by the role of the universities of Nalanda, Vikramashila and Odantapuri which had attained the fame of international seats of learning.

The region also played a significant role in the economic development of the country. Several cities flourished as industrial and commercial centres. Ayodhya, Champa, Vaishali, Karnasurvarna and Tamralipta were the most prominent among them. Tamralipta (modern Tamluk in Midnapur district of West Bengal) was the chief port through which Indian commodities were exported to foreign countries. This is substantiated by the discovery of Roman type of antiquities at Tamluk on a large scale¹⁷. Roman pottery and other antiquities were also found in several sites of the 24 Parghna district of West Bengal¹⁸, Sishupalgadh in Orissa¹⁹ and Ayodhya itself²⁰. It gives an idea of the brisk trade between this region and the Roman Empire. The Chinese travellers have also referred to Tamralipta as the chief port of the region.

The chief industry of this region was Textile Industry. Panini and Patanjali have specifically mentioned the textile industry of Bengal. The Arthashastra gives a graphic description of the cotton and silk industries of this region²¹. The silk products were named after the places of their manufacture such as Magadhaka, Vangaka, Paundraka and Suvarnakudyaka. Various varieties such as Dukula, Kshauma, Patrorna and Kausheya were manufactured. Duku'a was used by royal families. The peculiarity of this silk was that it was not dyed like the Chinese silk. The threads of different colour were obtained from the leaves of different plants. The high quality of the muslins of Bengal and its popularity in the Roman Empire have been attested to by Ptolemy and the Periplus. These Greek sources have described the 'Gangetic' muslins as the finest. Several inscriptions and accounts of foreign travellers have recorded the flourishing textile industry of Bengal right upto the 16th Century A.D.²².

Besides the manufacture of silk and cotton textiles the region was also known for other rural crafts such as clay, wood, metal, sugar, salt, stone, bamboo, ivory and conch shell. It is interesting to note that the tribal communities such as Pulindas, Kiratas and Nishadhas had attained great excellence in these crafts²³.

The north-eastern region has played a prominent role in the expansion of Indian culture in south-east Asian countries, like Burma, Indonesia, Malasia and the Indo-Chinese countries.

References

1. "Geographical data in the Kasyapa Samhita," *Prog. of the Indian History Congress*, 1978, pp. 87-98.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. V. 22. 14
5. *The Vedic Age*, p. 327
6. D. C. Sircar, *The Geography of ancient and Medieval India*, p. 98
7. H. C. Chakladar, *The Geography of Kalidasa*, p. 49
8. D. C. Sircar, Op. Cit. pp. 110-122
9. H. C. Chakladar, Op. cit. pp. 42-43
10. *Prog of the Indian History Congress*, 1978, p. 87
11. D. C. Sircar Op. cit. p. 169 ; *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, 1984, p. 20
12. Fleet, *Gupta Inscriptions*, p. 8
13. D. C. Sircar, Op. cit., p. 102
14. Ibid, p. 95
15. Ibid, p. 103
16. H. S. Thosar, *Studies in the historical and cultural geography and ethnography of Marathwada*, p. 96
17. *Indian Archaeology - A Review*, 1954-55, pp. 19-20
18. Ibid, 1955-56. p. 71
19. Ibid, 1970-71, p. 30
20. Ibid, 1976-77, pp. 52-53
21. Annapurna Chattopadhyaya, "Some crafts of ancient Bengal (Textile)", *Prog of the Indian History Congress*, 1980, pp. 133-141
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.