

Rise and Evolution of the Malla Kingdom in Bishnupur

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Abstract

During the medieval times, it is observed that many regional kingdoms have evolved in India using religion as a tool for expansion of their kingdom. Similarly, during the 16th century, the Malla kings of Bishnupur in Bengal rose to power leaving behind other small chiefdoms in their area. They used Vaishnavism, the then very popular evolving and peaceful religion as means to legitimize their kingdom. In this paper, the rise, development and progress of the whole Malla kingdom comprising of (Bishnupur, Bankura, Midnapur and some parts of Burdwan) will be shown. The unique way of legitimization through the help of the temples and its long term effect in the broader cultural assimilation of Bengal will also be discussed.

Keywords: Vaishnavism, Legitimization, Kingdom, Mallabhum, Religion, etc.

Between the 16th century and 18th century the gangetic delta in West Bengal over which the Mughals had established direct rule was surrounded by a series of autonomous, semi-independent principalities. The area around Mallabhum consisting of the whole district of Bankura with some parts of Midnapur, Purulia and Burdwan district of West Bengal, is considered as one of the most well known principalities. During the medieval period, it emerged as an important kingdom based on the foundation of some temples. In this paper, the rise, growth and progress of the Malla kingdom will be shown. The unique way of legitimization of this kingdom through lavishly decorated temple construction and its long term effect in the broader cultural assimilation of Bengal will be discussed.

It is observed that from the pre-historic times, the Rarh region has witnessed the early human settlements and growth of civilization. Several references of this region are found in various books of ancient India. However this trend of human establishment continued and it was linked with the formation of the kingdom of Mallabhum. The Mallabhum, situated in the South-West fringe of Bengal¹ rose in the 7th century A.D. and flourished as an important kingdom mainly during the medieval period with Bishnupur as its capital. It was situated in the South-East of the District, a few miles south of the Dwarakeswar river, in 23^o4'40" north latitude and 87^o22'0" east longitude.² Much of the kingdom of Mallabhum was covered with dense forests which protected it from external invasion. Thus the location of Mallabhum became a very big

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advantage for the kingdom formation process. The Mallabhum was not only stretched upto modern Santal Parganas in North, parts of Midnapur in West and eastern part of Burdwan, but this kingdom also included parts of Chota Nagpur.

Mallabhum covered the major portion of the present Bankura District.³ The Bankura District may be described as a connecting link between the plains of Bengal on the east and the mountains and highlands of Chota Nagpur on the West.⁴ However, Mallabhum is carrying its glorious legends for several centuries. The history of Mallabhum does not only cover the history of the Bankura District. To know the historical transformation of Mallabhum from a stateless situation to a ruling kingdom, the history of evolution and development of the Rarh region should be known. The region of Rarh is bounded by Ganga in the North, Bhagirathi in the East, Chotanagpur in the West. It includes the states of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura, Murshidabad, Midnapore.

It is noticeable that from the very early times, much interefence from the Greater powers of the centre is not noticed in this region. *Rig Veda*, *Satpatha Brahmanas* and various other texts have also not given much importance to the Rarh region. Bengal was considered for many centuries an abominable country by the Aryans.⁵ When the Mauryan empire was firmly established, the region of Bengal was annexed into their empire. The importance of the region of Pundavardan can be got from the contemporary Buddhist literatures like *Divyabaddan*. At Susunia Hill, which is almost 12 miles away from the town of Bankura, the earliest epigraphic evidence regarding the history of Bengal was found. After much study, it was found that the inscription was dated at nearly 4th century A.D. The inscription consisted of three lines. The language of the inscription is Sanskrit and the *script* is the eastern variety of the Gupta alphabet.⁶ From it, it is depicted that *Maharaj* Chandrabarna, lord of Pushkaran built one independent empire there. He was also described as a lover of Sanskrit culture.⁷ It was probably at this period when Gupta empire was losing its strength. However, it is mainly accepted that about 25 miles North-East from Susunia, there was a village named Pokharan, which was ancient Puskharan. Later, the portions of Bankura, Birbhum and Murshidabad fall under the kingdom of Shasanka, the powerful king of Bengal. From the description of Hiuen Tsang (602-664 A.D.), four important places of Bengal are known like Pundavardan, Karnasubarna, Samatat, Tamralipta. Tamralipta was then recognized as an important port. As *Tamralipta* was situated in the North-East India's south-west boundary, so it can be assumed that Mallabhum was divided between the then state karnasubarna and Tamralipta.

During the 10th-11th-12th century, many small independent states evolved in Bengal. In the 11th century, the emergence of Kottabi Kingdom came into being. Later during the time of the Sena rule, the Panchakot kingdom evolved annexing maximum portions of Mahisara Pargana, Gangajalaghati etc. By witnessing the temples at Bahulara, Sonatapal, Kendua, Salda, it can be understood that as strong rule can implement these type of constructions, good economical base as well as protection was provided for the temple constructions.

During this period of time, the Malla dynasty evolved more powerfully. Though the history of the origin of the Malla dynasty is full of mystery and it generally traced back its origin to the 7th century A.D, no solid historical evidence is found to claim the consolidation of the Malla kingdom. For the early history we have to depend on chronicles. Most of the chronicles agree that Raghunath Singh was the founder of the Malla Dynasty. He is celebrated in history as the king of the Bagdis (aborigines). He founded the city of Bishnupur. For long his kingdom passed under the name of Mallabhum, then as the Jungle Mahals (forest country)⁸. He was also known as Adi Malla. He derived his origin from the kings of Jainagar near Brindaban.⁹ Thus he is claimed to be a son of a Rajput Kshatriya kingdom from North India. Because of sudden delivery pain by his mother on the way to a pilgrimage, he was left by his father in a forest along with his mother. He was brought up by a Brahmin. In his childhood, he used to work as the cowherd.

Different types of stories were mentioned to claim the Kshatriya status and to foster the valid legitimacy of his kingdom. On one story Adi Malla in his childhood founded a golden ball while fishing in a water course.¹⁰ Later, he carved a small principality in these land of forest. His capital was situated at *Laugram*. This is one part of their story of origin. But on the other hand, the Bagdis of Mallabhum regard the Malla *rajās* as Bagdi in origin. A myth prevalent among the Bagdi says that Adi Malla was the first Bagdi begotten by Siva and parvati.¹¹ Thus it seems that the kshatriya status was intentionally fostered to cover up their aboriginal origin and to deny their relationship with the Bagdis. Adi Malla's descendants had remained engaged in warfare with the neighbouring chieftains and had in many cases annexed their territories.¹²

He was succeeded by his son, Jay Malla, who invaded Padampur and took the *Raja's* fort. He removed the Capital to Bishnupur.¹³ The earliest historical reference to the Mallas found in the late 16th century text *Akbar nama*, indicates Malla *Raja* as a powerful prince.¹⁴

Ambitious Adi Malla did not left any scope when he got a chance to fight with the nearby

chief of Jatbihar, Pratapnaryan. This increased his power and prestige in the locality of the old sites of kotalpur and Indus.¹⁵ He also built a temple of Pundeswari.¹⁶ He married Chandrakumari,¹⁷ the daughter of Indra Singh, a western prince of the solar race.¹⁸ This marriage claimed and elevated the status of a chief to that of a Kshatriya king more efficiently. His son Jay Malla succeeded him. Though initially he continued the friendship with the Padampur *Raj*, the lord paramount of the locality¹⁹ later this Padampur *Raj* tried to control his power. Thus a big conflict arose between them in which Jay Malla became victorious. Jay Malla did not hesitate to siege the fort of Padampur and make his first step to the formation of his kingdom through warfare. He also married princess of western solar race. His kingdom thereby began to increase in size,²⁰ by warfare or other matrimonial alliances. Thus a long list of 56 Malla kings ruled over this kingdom. The 3rd king Beni Malla though did not increase this kingdom, but continued to make arrangements for the defence of his frontiers. The fourth king Kalu Malla defeated the king of Indus,²¹ and annexed his kingdom. Mention may be made of the sixth king Kanu Malla who conquered the Kakatiya kingdom and the eighth king Sur Malla who captured the powerful Bagdi kingdom of Midnapur.²² Thus warfare against these states began to be continued by the later kings, which was essential for the extension of the kingdom.

Of the next important kings mention may be made of Jagat Malla, who was crowned at 1033 A.D. He protected the empire and shifted his capital from Padampur to Bishnupur.²³ The reign of the 33rd king Rama Malla proved to be very important. He was crowned in 1277 A.D. During the 15th-16th centuries the kingdom of Mallabhum began to get more appreciation from the nearby states. The conquest of the Muslims could not much influence the kings of Bishnupur because it was little known to the Musalmans. It was surrounded by extensive tracts of scrub wood, sal jungle and strong forts.²⁴ One of the other reasons for the non-interference of the external powers was that this area was extremely dry, parched and unproductive. Later when the rule of the Muslims began to get consolidated on all sides, they came with demand of tribute, which were tactically paid by the rulers of Mallabhum.

The reign of the 49th king of Mallabhum Bir Hambir was the most important. He was the greatest monarch of his kingdom and a contemporary of the Mughal emperor Akbar.²⁵ He not only erected 3 big temples but also reconstructed the fort along with the placement of guns. Before his conversion to another religion, he was described as an unscrupulous and tyrannous ruler.²⁶ The king slowly developed a taste for literature and sanskrit texts. Under him Bishnupur became the main centre of learning and Sanskrit culture.²⁷ The upper caste men appraised the

king of the *Smarta-PuranicBrahmanical idioms* and helped him in the so called *Suddhachara*, i.e. performing the rituals which the upper castes should do.²⁸ For the source of the new dawn of civilization in Bishnupur, one of the major incident was the acceptance of the religion of the Vaisnava guru Srinibas. It caused a new social force in Bishnupur.²⁹ The king becoming an ardent Vaisnava spent much resources to spend this religion. Even the colonies of the city, were named as Krishnaganj, Madhavganj, Shyamrai market, Rathtala.³⁰ The canals were also named as Kalindi, Jamuna. There canals constructed at Bishnupur were to meet the needs of the drinking water for the people.³¹ Thus the king looked after the welfare of the state and he also took initiative to bring all the people under one common influence by this Vaisnava religion.

Due to the spread of this religion, the whole capital Bishnupur integrated as the king and the people were followers of the same religion. Thus in various festivals like Ras, Dol, the Malla kings participated and mixed with the general people. Thus a very healthy relationship and the environment of love grew in his reign, which were expressed in the building of various temples, like the Shyamrai Radhashyam and the Rasmancha. In this dimension, a new picture was presented by Bishnupur to the heart of Bengal.³² The common people began to obey every policy of their king whole heartedly. The Mughal rulers gifted the Malla kings with certain zamindaris,³³ which indirectly increased the financial fund of the kingdom. Thus due to the rise of money, the spread of trade increased. Thus the king acknowledging their suzerainty,³⁴ paid an annual tribute. But this tribute was paid by the king as per his wish.³⁵ Because the Mughal emperor never forced for tax. The effect of this friendship fall even on the temples like Jor Bangla, which consists of a lot of terracotta work on the luxurious life of Amir Omaradaha. The effect of the Muslim influence also fall on the social life of the people.

The society of Mallabhum was mainly centered round the villages. For the administration of this kingdom, they divided the kingdom into four administrative divisions, namely, the samanta territories, the talukdari, ghatwali and the khalsa areas.³⁶ The Samantas on being the subordinate chiefs, had to help the Mallas with tributes and army when necessary. The Malla kings had several service groups. To collect revenue from the talukdari or ghatwali areas, each of them were divided into several parts, known as taraf. Each taraf was placed under a tarafdar who collected rents.³⁷

The *Rajas* built several temples along with a large number of deities. There temple architecture and terracotta designs were not only the pride of Bishnupur but the whole of

Bankura.³⁸ For the legitimization of the rule, a large quantity of land mainly rent free lands like debottar, vaishnavattar, brahmottar and mahatran lands were granted to the Brahmins. Renowned poets and singers also received brahmottar or mahataran rewards.³⁹ In return the Brahmins had to work as priests in the newly erected temples.

But slowly the internal weakness began to evolve during the date 17th and early 18th centuries. During the rule of the Nawabs of Bengal, the last 3 Malla kings ruled in this territory, namely Raghunath, Gopal and Chaitnya Singha.⁴⁰

However after Bir Hambir, Dhari Hambir ascended the throne. But he was soon dethroned by his brother Raghunath Singha. The inscriptions of the temples built by him are an important source of his kingdom. During his time, the trade flourished extensively among Bankura, Mednipur and Hooghly. Thus geographically this region became very important.⁴¹

After the reign of Raghunath Singha the kingdom came under the rule of Bir Singha in 1657 A.D. He also constructed canals for the welfare of his subjects. Equal importance was paid by him in the administrative matters. He confiscated some of the rent-free lands and treasures enjoyed by the members of the Raj family.⁴² Under his son, Durjan Singha, the military glory of the Mallas rose into fame. Today's Baghi area of Midnapur, Garbeta, Chandrakena was annexed by him into his empire.⁴³ The next authority was passed to the king, Raghunath Singha II in 1701 A.D. During his time, Shova Singha Rahim Khan, the *zamindar* of the Chetna and Bardar area revolted against the Mughals. But Raghunath Singha realized that the increase of power of Rahim Khan might cause trouble to his kingdom.⁴⁴ Thus Raghunath Singha with practical knowledge supported the Mughals and later at the desirable time, he himself conquered Chetna, Barda area.⁴⁵

Gopal Singh ascended the throne in 1712 A.D. During the early years of his rule, Murshid Quli Khan increased the amount of revenue. Moreover the Marathas under Bhaskar Pandit attempted to attack Bishnupur.⁴⁶ During the reign of Chaitnya Singha from 1748 A.D., no evidence of attempts to fortify the capital was seen. Rather it was evident that he granted lands to various religious institutions.⁴⁷

One of the main reasons for the rapid development of Bishnupur, was the spread of trade and commerce. Bishnupur was famous for its silk, timber. East India company had to collect these things from here. After 1765, Chaitnya Singha began to lose his effective control on the kingdom. He was deeply affected by the Maratha raids. Later the kingdom got divided and led

into smaller states by the E.I.C. Under the later successors of the Malla dynasty, situation became more worse and even the zamindari was sold on account of non-payment of revenue.

The evolution and kingdom formation along with the cultural achievements of the kingdom was very unique and will always make Mallabhum a remarkable episode in the history. The Malla kings from the very beginning continued their military expeditions through random warfare and by regular expeditions they made every effort to maintain their sovereignty. The reconstruction of forts, canons were done to protect their empire from any type of external attacks. The influence of the new religion in this kingdom brought the king closer to his people. Thus one strong and healthy relationship grew between them which helped the formation of the Malla kingdom in a more concrete shape. However, the basic defects in administration, the internal weaknesses, and too much devotion for the Vaisnava religion later led to the decline of the kingdom.

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