

THE EMERGENCE OF URBAN CENTRES IN BENGAL : IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LATE PREHISTORY OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

Himanshu Prabha Ray

Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses common elements of material culture in eastern India (particularly Bengal) and central Thailand during the early centuries of the Christian era. It continues to discuss the nature of maritime contacts between eastern India and Mainland Southeast Asia. Indigenous developments of social complexity in both Bengal and Mainland Southeast Asia, stimulated by trade but prior to the spread of Indic religions and forms of kingship, are indicated by current data.

Archaeological research in the last few decades has provided evidence for the presence of village communities in the major river valleys of Mainland Southeast Asia from at least 2000 BC onwards. These communities participated not only in local and regional exchange networks, but also in transoceanic contacts. Around the beginning of the Christian era there was a trend towards centralisation, "which involved certain centres expanding significantly in area relative to others" (Higham 1989: 307). One of the regions that provides evidence of this process of centralisation is the Chao Phraya valley in central Thailand. Late prehistoric burial sites in the region dated around the fourth-third centuries BC have yielded evidence for prestige goods of Indian origin (e.g. Ban Don Ta Phet; Glover 1990). By the beginning of the Christian era there is evidence for intensive metallurgy, including the production and use of iron, associated with demographic concentration and the growth of moated settlements (Ciarla 1992: 111).

By the seventh century AD, a centralized polity termed the Dvaravati *mandala* had emerged in the region. Its élite used Sanskrit for inscriptions and both

Buddhism and Brahmanism were adopted as the dominant religions. The term *mandala* has been used to describe this type of political entity, in preference to the term "state", as the former term implies a political structure fluid in terms of boundaries and allies (Mabbett 1978).

One of the much debated issues in Southeast Asian archaeology, however, concerns the origin and evolution of these *mandalas* and the extent to which contacts with the Indian subcontinent acted as a catalyst in the emergence of the new political order. It has been argued that "Indians brought not only exotic goods made of glass, agate and carnelian, but also exotic ideas of kingship and religion" (Higham 1989: 313). These ideas were then adapted and incorporated by the local élites who invited *brahmanas* to their courts for the performance of rituals to enhance their status.

The objectives of this paper are twofold. Firstly, I describe some of the common elements of the material culture of eastern India and central Thailand in the early centuries of the Christian era, especially the pottery types and decorative motifs from central Thailand. Pots were widely used in antiquity for the transportation of goods and commodities and provide useful indicators for demarcating trade routes. The second part of the paper analyses the channels through which these cultural influences may have spread eastwards from the Indian subcontinent. The basic issue here addressed is the extent to which "localisation" can be accepted as a viable model for the emergence of states in Mainland Southeast Asia. Recently, Kulke has put forward a "convergence" theory regarding the simultaneous appearance of ideas and beliefs on both sides of the Bay of Bengal from the fifth century onwards (Kulke 1990: 24-5). He traces the beginnings of economic integration and cultural innovation in the region to nuclear areas which emerged as centres

for local political élites and as settlements of *brahmanas* responsible for the spread of north Indian "Aryan" social norms and religious teachings. It would be pertinent to discuss these models with reference to the archaeological data for the presence of urban centres in Bengal in the period between 300 BC and AD 600, but unfortunately there are as yet few indicators for the emergence of a state infrastructure in eastern India in the post-Mauryan period, or of *brahmana* settlements prior to the fifth century AD. Seafaring and maritime contacts with Southeast Asia are nonetheless attested.

The evidence of seals and sealings from Mainland Southeast Asia has been discussed elsewhere and it has been argued that some of these originated in eastern India (Ray 1991a). Others, such as a tin pendant from Oc Eo inscribed with what has been described as a legend in a mixed Kharoshti-Brahmi script, were in all probability cast locally (Mukherjee 1990: 72, pl.XLI, 61). A second category of finds, clearly imports at first although some techniques were later adapted locally, is ceramics.

The pottery of phase II at Chansen in central Thailand provides a number of parallels with assemblages from the Indian subcontinent, both in shape and decorative detail. An example is the thin-walled, slipped and black burnished sprinkler, unusual in Thailand, but with an extensive distribution in sites in the Ganga valley, both in fine black and Red Polished wares (Bronson 1976: 675). The shape continued in the first millennium AD and sprinklers, as also spouted pots with flared mouths, have been reported from a large number of Dvaravati sites in Thailand (Indrawooth 1985: 50).

Two of the decorative techniques for pottery adapted for use in Mainland Southeast Asia are the use of moulds and stamps. Both these techniques show an extensive distribution in India from 200 BC onwards, along the trade routes of the Ganga valley and the east coast (Ray 1991b). Among the sherds that were decidedly imports into Southeast Asia is the one of Arikamedu type 10 (Wheeler *et al.* 1946) from Sembiran in Bali (Ardika and Bellwood 1991: Fig. 3). The practice of stamped decoration was adapted in the Dvaravati period when pots were decorated on the shoulder with a variety of figural and floral motifs. Sherds with similar stamps have been found at several sites in the Ganga valley, including lower Bengal.

Contemporaneous with the use of stamps was the production of pots from double moulds, common shapes being the bowl and the cup, although there are considerable variations in shape and size. The decorative motifs are uniformly floral, the most common being long petals spreading radially from a small medallion at the centre of

the base. Though the evidence for these in central Thailand is still sparse, they have been found at other sites such as Beikthano in Burma, Nakhon Si Thammarat in south Thailand and Oc Eo in Vietnam (Stargardt 1990: Figs 89, 90). There is a change in the decorative motifs used in the Gupta period from the fourth-fifth centuries onwards with the emphasis changing to scenes depicting human and animal figures. This change is reflected in the pottery from Dvaravati sites as well (Indrawooth 1985: 52).

Another class of ceramics that needs to be analysed in some detail is the coarse paddle-impressed pottery. The technique is essentially part of a hand-made potting tradition and the pottery is classified as mat- or basket-impressed depending on the texture of the material wrapped around the potter's paddle while beating. In Southeast Asia such paddle-impression is a typical feature from the Neolithic period onwards. It continues into the period of Islamic Malay trade overlapping in time with European contact (Bellwood and Omar 1980). Significantly, some varieties have been reported from all sites that have hitherto provided evidence of early Indian contact.

In India, paddle-impressed pottery occurs in two different contexts — Neolithic and early historical. Its presence in the Neolithic period sites of Assam, e.g. Daojali Hading, Sarutaru and Ambari, is understandable on account of the close parallels of the assemblages here with those from sites in Southeast Asia. The problem is the absence of radiocarbon dates and the fact that many of the sites in Assam are dated to the early centuries of the Christian era (Rao 1977: 191-205). In contrast to this hand-made Neolithic pottery is the paddle-impressed pottery of the historical period where the paddle and anvil method was used in conjunction with the potter's wheel — a unique combination found in India and one which continues to this day (Saraswati 1978: 18). In this method, a pot is removed from the wheel while still incomplete with a large hole at the bottom. It is then beaten in a downward direction from the shoulder with a heavy wooden beater while the potter holds the flat working surface of an anvil on the inside. According to present practice the wooden beater is wrapped with a thin fabric to prevent it clinging to the damp clay, and this does not leave any distinctive marks. But in antiquity the beater was either grooved or wrapped with a mat or fabric, hence the marks on the lower portion of the vessel.

Paddle-impressed pottery occurs extensively at sites in the Ganga valley, as also along the east coast. An analysis of the ceramics from Sonkh near Mathura shows that although paddle-impressed pottery continued in the

Gupta and early medieval periods, the wooden paddle was later decorated differently with elaborate patterns (Achilles-Brettschneider 1980: 108). A similar elaboration of stamp shapes also occurred in contemporary assemblages in Island Southeast Asia (Tanjung Kubor ware: Bellwood and Omar 1980).

The ceramic evidence would suggest several parallels in the assemblages from South and Southeast Asia, as also the transmission of a variety of techniques. This, when coupled with the data from seals and sealings, some of which were inscribed locally, demonstrates the spread of several crafts and skills across the Bay of Bengal, the most notable being the spread of literacy.

So far there is little evidence for structural activity in the Chao Phraya valley in the pre-Dvaravati period. Excavations at the site of Tha Muang, within the precincts of the old town of U Thong, led to the recovery of numerous brick fragments in the pre-Dvaravati levels. This led the excavator to suggest that they may have been part of a religious or stupa complex (Loofs 1979: 349). Remnants of brick architecture were also unearthed during the excavations at Tha Kae, although the associated pottery at the site dates to the Dvaravati period (Ciarla 1992: 118).

This brings us to the second issue; the nature of the maritime contacts between eastern India and Mainland Southeast Asia in the early centuries of the Christian era. The impetus for these contacts was undoubtedly commercial and a variety of trading groups travelled along the sea routes. Perhaps more important than the economic basis of these networks was the fact that these exchanges opened up channels for communication, leading to for the spread of a variety of skills and crafts. Buddhist monks travelled regularly on proselytising missions, along with trading caravans and ships. It is also seldom appreciated that, in addition to their proficiency in matters of religion, the monks possessed wide-ranging secular skills in writing, accounting or architecture. Yet an intriguing feature of early historical eastern India is a general lack of monumental temple architecture. A new medium that came to be used was burnt brick, especially for fortifications, tanks or Buddhist monastic establishments, but the Brahmanical temple remained still in an embryonic stage until the fourth-fifth centuries AD.

Another important factor is the uneven expansion of urban centres and state infrastructure in the Indian sub-continent, from a nucleus in the middle Ganga valley. An appropriate example of this is provided by the evolution and growth of trading networks in Bengal in the early historical period. Bengal is referred to in early Sanskrit literature of the first millennium BC as the homeland of

one of the tribal groups — the Pundras — living on the periphery of *madhyadesa*, the heartland of early Brahmanical settlement. It is significant that only around the beginning of the Christian era was Bengal included, according to literary sources, within *madhyadesa*. Archaeologically, the nucleus of protohistoric sites in eastern India was inland, in the present districts of Burdwan in West Bengal and Birbhum in Bihar. The transition towards urbanisation and consequent social change in the region is generally attributed to the Mauryas in the third century BC (Ray 1988: 12-3).

An early Mauryan limestone inscription attributed to a predecessor of Asoka has been found at Mahasthangarh, on the banks of the river Karatoya in Bogra district of Bangladesh, 350 kms east of the Mauryan capital at Pataliputra. The record describes the measures to be adopted by the local administrator for famine relief, involving the distribution of grain and money, the latter referred to as *gandakas* and identified with cowries (Sircar 1962: 85). The mound at Mahasthangarh rises to 4.5 metres above the plain and is surrounded by brick ramparts. Within a radius of eight km around the site are more than 30 other mounds of various sizes (Ahmed 1981). Several archaeological excavations have been conducted at the site since the first season in 1928-29, the most recent being a joint French-Bangladesh mission (Salles 1995). Although vast quantities of material have been excavated from the site there is still little archaeological evidence of Mauryan settlement in the area, the most prosperous period being Sunga (post-Mauryan).

In the post-Mauryan period, around the second-first centuries BC, there was a shift in settlement pattern in eastern India, with the majority of sites now being located along the coast rather than inland. Two major sites that became important at this time were Tamruk on the river Rupnarayan and Chandraketurgarh on the now dried-up course of the Vidyadhani, 35 km northeast of Calcutta. Both these sites were occupied earlier, the mud fortification at Chandraketurgarh being dated to the Mauryan period. However, it was the post-Mauryan phase that was more prosperous in terms of material culture. Both sites have a profusion of cast copper coins, Rouletted Ware sherds, fine red polished pottery and perhaps locally-made amphora sherds. A brick tank and ring-wells at Tamruk also date to this period. In addition, there are a large number of terracottas, including female figurines and so-called toy carts (Bautze 1989: 123-8). Made in moulds, these terracottas are characteristic of an eastern production centre dated to the beginning of the Christian era. The function of the "toy carts" has not been adequately explained, and equally intriguing are

female figurines with intricate ornaments suggestively imitating goldwork.

A major handicap to a meaningful analysis of the archaeological data from coastal Bengal is inadequate publication and documentation. As a result, generalisations abound in historical writing and the prosperity of the post-Mauryan period is attributed to external stimuli, including Indo-Roman trade (Chakrabarti *et al.* 1994). It is nevertheless evident from literary and archaeological data that the prosperity of lower Bengal in the post-Mauryan period was a result of increased coastal trade with other parts of the Indian peninsula — the distribution of the Rouletted Ware is a good indicator of this — as also with Southeast Asia, especially Thailand. These early beginnings were supplemented considerably in the following centuries and there is now a profusion of data from terracotta sealings and pots inscribed with Kharosthi legends dated to between the second and fifth centuries AD (Mukherjee 1990).

Before we discuss the nature of political structure in Bengal in the post-Mauryan period, prior to the rise of the Guptas in the fourth century AD, it is relevant to analyse the theories on urbanisation that have dominated archaeological literature in India so far. The central question has been that of tracing the origins of the cities. On the one hand we have an emphasis on technological change, especially the introduction of iron and its role in the accumulation of surpluses (Childe 1950; Kosambi 1956; Sharma 1966; Thakur 1981). On the other hand we have a focus on political developments, especially the rise of states (Ghosh 1973; Chakrabarti 1974). More recently, there has been a shift to regional archaeological survey and the study of increasing social complexity as a prerequisite for any analysis of urban growth (Lal 1984; Erdosy 1988). Unfortunately, the research potential of eastern India in this regard has still to be exploited and there is scant information on the hierarchy of settlements in the region.

In the case of the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*, for example, it has been argued that between the sixth and fourth centuries BC it was primarily the largest centres that were capable of supporting religious establishments. This trend, however, did not continue and by the third and second centuries BC even minor centres show evidence of some involvement in long-distance trade as well as support of religious establishments (Erdosy 1988: 131).

In eastern India, there is as yet no archaeological evidence for the presence of religious structures prior to the 7th century AD, although many of the terracottas from Tamruk and Chandraketugarh show evidence of familiarity with Buddhist texts, especially the *Jatakas*. Terra-

cotta Buddha images made in a double mould from Tamruk date to the Gupta period, and a fragmentary Buddha image of Kusana date, manufactured at Mathura, was found at Chandraketugarh. The inscriptions at the Buddhist monastic site of Sanchi in central India record donations by residents of Pundravardhana, identified with north Bengal. Buddhist texts from the early centuries of the Christian era refer to Bengal, especially to Tamruk, as the region from where Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka. In the recent excavations at Mahasthan, a square, massive brick structure with a central cavity dated to the pre-Gupta or Gupta periods has been identified as a *stupa*, although this requires further investigation (Salles 1995).

In spite of the existence of urban centres, there is only limited information for the presence of a state system in Bengal. Mauryan inscriptions refer to the tribe of the Pundras in the east, though precise details of their settlements are not given. Recent research indicates that, far from establishing a centralized political authority, the Mauryas sought to initiate working relationships with the existing polities, especially in peripheral regions such as Bengal. There is also no evidence that Kusana rule extended eastward beyond Varanasi to as far as Bengal. Early Greek sources refer to the kingdom of the Gangaridai in eastern India. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (section 62) describes the Ganges as the greatest of all rivers in India and mentions a port of trade on it with the same name as the river.

Thus, in terms of the evidence referred to, there are no indications of the existence of a state level of political organisation in eastern India prior to the Guptas in the fourth-fifth centuries AD. There was nevertheless a flourishing pre-Gupta trade, both with centres further west along the Ganga and with coastal and transoceanic regions. There is, however, inadequate information regarding the functions of the earliest urban centres in Bengal — archaeological excavations have not been detailed enough and there are no early inscriptions from the region. It is also evident that no general model either regarding the nature of urban centres or the emergence of the state can be applied uniformly to the Ganga valley, much less to the Indian subcontinent. Hence Kulke's theory that the pristine emergence of kingdoms in Southeast Asia had nothing to do with direct Indian influence, and that at a certain stage of development *brahmanas* were invited to legitimise the new status of chiefs, needs to be reexamined and reanalysed, especially with reference to developments in eastern India and central Thailand.

In conclusion, I would like to argue for a shift in research strategy towards regional studies, with a focus on tracing the development of complexity in the structures

of early societies. An important input to such developments was provided by the early maritime routes that linked South and Southeast Asia in a mosaic of trade networks (Ray 1995). An understanding of the nature of these networks and the diverse nature of the influences transmitted along them is essential for any analysis of social change in the region. While Buddhism was the dominant ideology of the ruling élite, as also of trading groups, until the third-fourth centuries AD, the equation between Buddhism and Brahmanism underwent a change in favour of the latter with the development of the Brahmanical temple in India under the Guptas in the north and the Ikshvakus in the Deccan. This change was not merely a matter of religious ideology, but had implications for the social and economic fabric as well.

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