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Archaeological Evidence Unveils Medieval Urbanization in Varendra

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of archaeological evidence in unveiling the medieval urbanization of the Varendra region in Bengal, highlighting the transformation of cities under Muslim rule between 1200 and 1757 AD. Through inscriptions, coins, and historical accounts, the study explores the development of key urban centers like Gour, Lakhnauti, and Babarkabad, which served as major administrative and minting hubs. The paper discusses the impact of political shifts, the influx of foreign traders, and the role of Sufi mystics and merchants in fostering urban growth. Additionally, it explores how the relocation of capitals and geographic factors influenced the rise and decline of cities during this period. Varendra's cities, with their prosperous agricultural and commercial economies, were integral to Bengal's wider political, social, and economic evolution. The study also emphasizes the significance of material culture, such as coins and inscriptions, as primary sources for understanding medieval urbanization, revealing insights into governance, social structures, and the interplay between urban and rural life in the Varendra region.

Throughout its political history, Bengal has alternated between periods of independent sovereignty and subjugation to Delhi's rule. The influx of merchants and Sufi mystics, alongside the expansion of international trade, played a crucial role in fostering urban development. In contemporary thought, these cities can be understood as manifestations of urban consciousness. Archaeological evidence, particularly inscriptions, suggests that the cities of Gour, Lakhnauti, and Babarkabad were once prominent centers of administration and minting. Other significant cities of this era included Devkot, Bardhankot, and Babarkabad, with minting centers primarily located in the Varendra region before the Mughal period.

During the Muslim rule, urban development patterns in Bengal underwent a significant transformation. The frequent relocation of the capital, particularly in the early phases of Muslim governance, facilitated the emergence and growth of new

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cities. The geographical positioning of a location could elevate its social and commercial importance, although geographical and environmental factors could also contribute to the decline of its heritage.

These cities held considerable international significance. For instance, Gour attracted foreign traders, including Arabs, Iranians, and Portuguese, in addition to local merchants. This economic prosperity reflected the overall flourishing of the Varendra region, with agriculture and commerce serving as the backbone of urban life. The prosperity of the cities was further enhanced by the involvement of the ruling elites, feudal classes, and religious communities.

Structures built to meet the fundamental needs of society were seen as markers of civilization, and inscriptions on these edifices offer insights into contemporary governance, rulers' identities, artistic expressions, and social reforms. The urban layout, lifestyle, and interaction between cities and rural areas were shaped by administrative, commercial, military, and religious imperatives, though they provide only a partial view of the complexities of this historical period.

Between 1200 and 1757 AD, the Varendra region experienced significant political changes, social and cultural evolution, and economic development, particularly through its currency system and trade networks. Various foreign powers arrived in the region, drawn by its agricultural economy, and they contributed to shaping its social structures. Beyond trade and political motives, the natural beauty and simplicity of the people of Varendra also captivated foreign visitors. Society and culture were fundamentally intertwined with the daily lives of the people, and societal structures were shaped by the needs and activities of those living within the community. Society, politics, culture, and the economy were driven by the necessities of the people, adapting over time based on evolving circumstances.

Archaeological artifacts serve as silent witnesses to each historical era, offering insights into the management and transformation of society over time. While these changes are often confined within specific periods, the exploration of society and the economy can be undertaken through various forms of evidence. Literature, travelers' accounts, inscriptions, architectural structures, and coins all provide direct or indirect reflections of the contemporary social and economic environment.

Coins issued by the Sultans, as primary historical sources, affirm the emergence of cities in new regions. In addition to issuing coins from central administrative centers, minting activities also took place in smaller towns, such as the mint city of Babarkabad. Within the context of urbanization, cities that developed around minting centers played a critical role. Descriptions from historical sources, including travelers' accounts, provide evidence supporting this view.

From the 1st-century writings of Pliny to the 7th-century accounts of Hiuen Tsang, travelers consistently described the wealth and clear lifestyle of ancient Bengal. Similar depictions are found in contemporary literary works, inscriptions, and

copper plates. The region's economy was heavily influenced by its fertile alluvial soil, with agriculture forming the backbone of economic life. Cities often developed in conjunction with agricultural systems, as evidenced by references in historical texts using terms such as *Kshetrasharan*, *Kachkan*, and *Krishkan*, which allude to agricultural practices.¹

Ancient land maps and agricultural sayings, such as *Kulya Bap*, *Dron Bap*, and *Ar Bap*, along with proverbs like *Dak* and *Khonar Bachan*, further emphasize the agricultural foundation of ancient Bengal. The agricultural practices and products that were prevalent in ancient times persisted into the medieval period. However, a transformation occurred in the economic landscape during Muslim rule, which is regarded as a crucial chapter in Bengal's history. Historians note that prior to Muslim rule, particularly under the Pala and Sena dynasties, the economy was almost entirely agrarian. In contrast, under Muslim rule, a coin-based economy emerged, accompanied by urbanization, the production of goods for local use and export, and the expansion of foreign trade. These developments mark the distinctiveness of this era.²

Monetary System

The Varendra region was home to several notable mint cities, including Lakhnauti, Firuzabad, Mahmudabad, Jannatabad, and Babarkabad,³ where a significant number of coins were produced. Coins minted between 1236 and 1334 AD frequently bear the name of the Lakhnauti mint. The first mention of the Firuzabad mint appears on coins from the reign of Alauddin Ali Shah (1338-1342 AD), and it continued to operate as a minting center until the reign of Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak Shah (1459-1474 AD). These coins often contain inscriptions such as 'Al-Balad Al-Muazzam' (the honored city) and 'Al-Balad Mahruza' (the protected city).⁴

The coins of Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah and his son Abdul Muzahid Sikandar Shah feature the name 'Shahare Nau Mint'. Coins were issued from this mint between 1345 and 1385 AD. It is speculated that Shahare Nau was a city near Lakhnauti, with some historians suggesting that Pandua was known by this name. H.N. Wright described Shahare Nau as a suburb of Gaur, while Professor A.K.M. Yakub Ali argued that it was an alternative name for Pandua. Historian Abul Fazl⁵

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1. Nihar Ranjan Roy, *Bangalir Itihas*, 1st Part 1402, p. 35
 2. M. R. Tarafdar, 'Use of Technology and Socio Profile in Medieval Bengal', *Sundaram*, 1993, Dhaka, p. 60
 3. M. R. Tarafdar, 'Muslim trade and era division Problem in Bengal', *Itihas patrika*, 1379, pp. 222-223
 4. E. Thomas, *Initial Coinage of Bengal*, Stephen Austin, 1866, Herford, p. 65; Abdul Karim, *Corpus of the Muslim Coins of Bengal*, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca, 1960, p. 160
 5. *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol-II, Tr. Jarret, pp. 122-123

noted that Mughal Emperor Humayun later renamed Gaur as Jannatabad, from which coins were issued during the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah.

The Mahmudabad mint, which issued coins for Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah (1454 AD), also appeared on coins from the reigns of Saifuddin Firuz Shah (1487-1490 AD) and Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah (1519-1532 AD). It is believed that the city of Gaur was renamed Mahmudabad after Sultan Mahmud. Additionally, the location known today as Mahisantosh, in the Naogaon district, is thought to correspond with Barbakabad.⁶ The ruins of an ancient city still cover a large area of Mahisantosh, which served as an important Muslim settlement and administrative center since the time of Iyasuddin Muhammad Shirran Khalji. The presence of educational institutions and its designation as a fortified city further attest to its significance.

Several other mints were established in the Varendra region, including those in Muzaffarabad (near Pandua), Hussainabad (believed to be Gaur), and Nusratabad (likely located either in Gaur or near the Ghaghrahat area). These mint cities played a vital role in supporting the urban economy. The advanced currency system they maintained facilitated city-based economic activities, contributing to the region's prosperity. The establishment of these mints and the currency system they supported were key drivers of economic development in this period.

Mosques and Madrasas

During the Muslim period, three stone inscriptions were discovered in Barbakabad, located in the Varendra region, which provide valuable information regarding the construction of mosques. Additionally, several more inscriptions from the Sultanate period have been uncovered, including two related to the construction of madrasas during the reign of Sultan Yusuf Shah (1479 AD), as well as inscriptions from the Chhoto Sona Mosque (1512 AD), Bagha Mosque (1523-1524 AD), and Kusumba Mosque (1558 AD). These inscriptions document not only mosques and madrasas but also khanqahs and tombs, offering insights into the development of Muslim society in the region. Under the supervision of conquerors, preachers, and newly converted Muslims, the Muslim community in Varendra flourished, and mosques, madrasas, and khanqahs became central symbols of Muslim identity.

The development of Muslim society in this region appears to have been closely linked to the activities of patrons, builders, construction workers, material suppliers, and those who used these religious structures. Mosques were not merely places of worship; they also functioned as centers for maintaining social order. This understanding among the Muslim sultans led to the widespread construction of mosques in newly conquered areas. When Ikhtiyar Uddin established his capitals in Lakhnauti and later in Devkot, he built mosques, madrasas, and khanqahs

6. A. H. Dani, *Muslim Architecture in Bengal*, Dacca, 1961, p. 28; Abdul Karim, *op.cit.*, 1960, p. 162

in both locations, marking a process of social formation that signified economic stability.

During the Sultanate period, educational centers were established not only in the capital cities but also in various other places across the Varendra region. These included the Firozpur Madrasa in Malda,⁷ the Darasbari Mosque and Madrasa⁸ in Chapainawabganj, the Mosque-e-Durusiyah⁹ in Kaitaahar, and the madrasa in Bagha,¹⁰ Rajshahi, which are of particular significance. The establishment of an educational system followed the restoration of peace and order in society, and its growth reflects the broader social and economic conditions of the time. This system was intertwined with a professional community of teachers and the educated class, who contributed to the local economy.

Compared to other regions of Bengal, Varendra is a relatively elevated and dry area, which has historically supported a dense population.

Agriculture

Muslim rule was firmly established in the Varendra region, an area historically rich in agriculture, industry, trade, education, culture, and the arts, and part of the larger Indian administrative framework. During the Sultanate period (1204-1576 AD), cities such as Gaur, Pawa, Ekdala, and Tanda in Varendra served as capitals for the rulers. The economy was primarily agricultural, and due to the region's fertile land and relative immunity from natural disasters, the population did not suffer from food shortages or a lack of basic necessities. This conclusion is supported by archaeological evidence.

Despite advancements in trade, industry, and agriculture, the financial situation of the common people did not see significant improvement. Instead, a specific class of opportunistic elites reaped the financial benefits. The economy was centered on a rural, agriculture-based system, while urban life revolved around administrative activities. Most of the common people were dependent on agriculture, which also drove the country's industry and trade. The economy, therefore, remained fundamentally agrarian, with wealth and prosperity unevenly distributed across social classes.

Business and Trade in Varendra

Minhaj-i-Siraj's¹¹ account mentions that when Bakhtiyar Khalji arrived in Bengal at the beginning of the 13th century, Nadia was a prosperous city, home to many

7. A. Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, Dacca, 1959, p. 43; A. A. Khan, *Memoirs of Gour and Pandua*, Calcutta, 1931, p. 157

8. A. K. M. Yaqub Ali, 'An Inscription of Sultan as Salatin', *Journal of the Varendra Research Museum*, Rajshahi, 1975-76, p. 63

9. A. H. Dani, *op.cit.*, 1961, pp. 108-109

10. A. Karim, *op.cit.*, 1959, p. 43; A. A. Khan, *op.cit.*, 1931, p. 122

11. Minhaj-i-Siraj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Dacca, 1983, pp. 25-27

merchants. Khalji utilized the wealth of Nadia to construct a madrasa and mosque in Lakhnauti, reflecting the financial success of the Sultanate period. Gaur, too, was a wealthy city with markets in its suburbs, such as Firuzpur. Additionally, the Punorbhaba River hosted significant trading ports with busy markets, and Bholahat, located by the Mahananda River, was renowned as a silk port in ancient times. Other important commercial centers included Shivganj, known for its silk factories, and Shah Pahar, famous for its cattle markets.

Patnitola and Nazirpur, situated along the Atrai River, were prominent hubs for the rice trade. Although these observations come from a later period, the steady growth of agriculture in the region suggests that Varendra experienced similar agricultural development during the medieval period.

In parts of northern India, the cultivation of lac, used in varnishes and dyes, became prevalent. Pottery had already seen significant advancement in ancient times, with large storage jars, water vessels, cooking pots, and lamps commonly produced. The region's artistic expressions, seen on burnt clay plaques, frequently depicted natural scenes such as vines and flowers. Mangoes, a significant product from Rajshahi, played a notable role in the local economy, a reputation that continues today. By the 16th century, under the reign of Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah, mangoes were even carved onto the burnt clay plaques of the Bagha Mosque, suggesting that local artists drew inspiration from their natural surroundings.

Contemporary Bengali literature highlights shipbuilding and trade activities in this region. Notable figures like Dhanapati Saudagar from Gaur and his son Srimanta¹² were involved in trade, as described in the *Manasa Mangal* poem by Jagajjiban. In the poem, Chand Saudagar commissions the craftsman Kusai to build fourteen ships, with the special wood for the vessels sourced from villages near Pandua. The Mahananda River, which flows through this region, supported many individuals engaged in trade.

Ghoraghat became known for producing fine silk and jute fabrics, while Barbakabad was famed for a special cloth called *Gangajali*.¹³ The Barendra region also produced fruits like oranges and *Latkan*, which contributed to the local economy. Rajshahi gained a reputation for its copper and brass crafts,¹⁴ although these small industries later struggled to compete with machine-made goods. Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam (reign 1389-1410) exemplified the region's economic prosperity by funding the construction of madrasas in Mecca and Medina, and sending gold as diplomatic gifts.

The architectural achievements of this period, seen in the Sura Mosque in Ghoraghat, the Durusiya Mosque in Kayatahar, the Choto Sona Mosque, and the

12. *Eastern-India*, Vol. II, 1838, p. 159

13. *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. II, Tr. Jarret, pp. 122-123

14. W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal*, Vol. I, London, 1876, p. 27

Bagha and Kusumba Mosques, demonstrate the region's craftsmanship. These buildings required the coordinated efforts of various workers, including farmers, traders, and skilled laborers, reflecting the strength of the local economy.

Although trade in the region expanded, an industrial revolution never materialized. Despite the availability of raw materials, capital, labor, and markets, Varendra did not establish long-lasting industries. The existing archaeological evidence of mosques and madrasas supports this conclusion. While products like muslin were exported internationally, there is little evidence that these crafts were preserved in museums or utilized as decorative arts.

A well-organized administration is a hallmark of a prosperous economy. During the reign of Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak Shah, inscriptions mention Ulugh Nusrat Khan, a military leader and regional administrator overseeing the Jowar and Barur areas. Another inscription from the shrine of Maulana Shah Ataullah in Devikot, Dinajpur, lists administrative titles such as *Sharabdar* (liquor officer), *Wazir* (minister), and *Sar-i-Lakshar* (military official). Under Alauddin Ali Shah's rule, Muslim governance expanded, and administrative structures became more complex. Stable politics and effective administration depended on a strong economy. An inscription from Barbak Shah's time in Gaur praises the Sultan as a symbol of justice, reflecting the balance between governance and economic productivity.

The region's currency system was a critical technological development of this period. The minting of coins required highly skilled craftsmen proficient in metallurgy, coin-making, and mold usage. These craftsmen also specialized in refining gold and silver, melting metals, pouring them into molds, and engraving inscriptions. Consequently, a specialized group of mint workers emerged, contributing to the overall economic structure.¹⁵

The arrival of Muslims in Bengal brought about significant social transformations. Their relatively simple lifestyle influenced local architecture, and many of the Muslims who settled in the region were Sufi saints. Even those who came for political reasons integrated into local society by aligning with the existing population.

Commerce and Industry in Medieval Bengal

Chinese records¹⁶ from the 15th and 16th centuries mention the use of tree bark for paper production. By the reign of Sultan Hussain Shah (1494–1519 AD), parts of the *Sahih Bukhari* were copied at Ekdala Fort, indicating the use of paper for scholarly and religious purposes. Furthermore, during the reign of Nusrat Shah (1531–1532 AD), illustrations of Nizami's *Sharafnama* in Gaur also attest to paper's increasing utility. This suggests that the use of paper likely facilitated

15. Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. II, Tr. Jarret, 1891, p. 136

16. P. C. Bagchi (Tr.), *Visha Bharati Annals*, 1945, Vol. 1

commercial transactions, contributing to more organized and efficient economic activities.

Local sugar production utilized simple but effective technology, where sugarcane was crushed using hand-operated wooden presses, sometimes driven by animals. European accounts from the period provide further insight into the region's economic infrastructure. João de Barros (1540 AD) noted the bustling cities of northern Bengal, characterized by well-constructed roads lined with trees, and Faria y Sousa (1640 AD) described a fortified city near the Ganges. Similarly, Manrique (1641 AD) remarked on the use of gold coins and precious stones in commercial transactions, reflecting the wealth and sophistication of the region's economy.

Chinese records from this period offer vivid descriptions of urban life in Bengal, noting organized markets, rows of shops, ruler's residences built from brick and lime, wide staircases, decorated halls, and a carefully planned urban layout. These details suggest a vibrant and structured society, where commerce played an integral role.¹⁷

However, despite this economic vibrancy, much of the Barendra, Gaur, and Rarh regions remained predominantly rural and agrarian. Farmers and craftsmen were key contributors to the local economy, relying on traditional methods and an intimate understanding of nature. As trade routes began to decline, particularly after the ports of Tamralipta and Gangabandar lost navigational importance, even non-farming populations were drawn into agricultural work.

The decline of trade had profound social and economic consequences. Traders who once thrived along these now obsolete routes shifted to farming, a transition mirrored in the copper inscriptions from the Pala and Sena dynasties, which recorded growing demand for land. Though Rajshahi was known for its copper and brass crafts,¹⁸ the advent of machine-made goods in later periods caused the decline of these cottage industries.

While Bengal maintained connections with international trade networks, the establishment of administrative centers, mints, and grand mosques during the 14th century spurred the growth of urban life. The use of coins, particularly in the Barendra region, facilitated trade and economic interaction, bringing together a mix of artisans, traders, and administrators. The Mughals, however, struggled to consolidate political control, often contending with local landlords and chiefs. Although revenues from land and foreign trade were sent to the central government, the region's economic prosperity remained limited, as these funds were not reinvested in local infrastructure or welfare.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, p. 123

The lack of modern technology further inhibited progress. People in the region did not possess the tools or knowledge to mitigate natural disasters or improve production, resulting in a stagnation of living standards for the majority. The scarcity of artifacts from this era also suggests limited material wealth among the populace. Yet, the region's architectural remains—mosques, madrasas, and other structures—provide valuable insight into the economy and craftsmanship of the period.

Coins offer a crucial window into the region's economic history. Beginning with Bakhtiyar Khalji, most sultans of Bengal issued their own currency, many of which were minted in the Barendra region. The circulation of gold and silver coins indicates the prosperity of the area during the medieval period, supported by thriving export trade and abundant local products.

Archaeological findings, such as Abbasid-era gold coins, point to international trade links, with the shifting courses of rivers playing a vital role in determining the commercial success of these cities. The prosperity of these trade networks was often intertwined with the administrative significance of the cities. Goods were traded according to the needs of the populace, with the branching rivers of Bengal serving as essential arteries for transportation and trade.

The Portuguese arrival in Bengal and their subsequent permission to build trading posts marked a shift in trade dynamics. Local merchants began to focus more on internal trade, and Bengal's agricultural and industrial products attracted merchants from across Asia, Africa, and Europe. Despite flourishing during Muslim rule, the importance of these land routes and ports gradually declined due to political shifts in the region.

Administrative Structure

During his brief rule, Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji established political and administrative authority in the Barendra region. The territory was divided into administrative sections known as 'Iqtas', each governed by administrators called 'Muktas'. These Muktas operated with considerable autonomy within their jurisdictions. While revenue collection was the primary source of income, there is limited archaeological evidence detailing the specifics of this system. The names of revenue officers and officials from this period remain unknown. Although a feudal system initially existed during the early Sultanate period, its influence waned over time.

The land system consisted of various categories, including government-owned (Khas land), Jagir land, and land granted to religious figures (Samad's land). According to the *Ain-i-Akbari*, taxes were paid in monetary form and were assessed based on estimated agricultural production. This practice of monetary taxation predates the Mughal era. The primary objective of the administrative structure was to ensure the efficient collection of taxes.

While agriculture was the dominant occupation, specific information on the tax amounts collected during the Sultanate period is lacking. However, the traveler Ibn Battuta noted that, by the mid-14th century, farmers in Sylhet paid half of their crops as taxes. It remains unclear if this practice was consistent across Bengal. Historian Abul Fazl later recorded a system wherein one-third of the crop yield was collected as tax, based on visual estimation. The exact value or currency used for tax payments is not well-documented, and archaeological evidence offers limited insight into the pre-Sultanate landowners or the Sultanate's administrative framework.

Beginning in the 13th century, Bengal was divided into administrative units such as Iqlim, Arsa, and Diar. The Wazir held significant financial authority during this period. Revenue was primarily generated from land taxes and trade duties. Under Mughal rule, land was granted to high-ranking officials, along with resources to maintain their armies and staff.

Communication System

Although detailed information regarding Bengal's communication and transportation system is limited, some insights are found in inscriptions and accounts from ancient travelers like Fa-Hien, I-Tsing, Huyensang, Kya-Tan, and Zhao Qian. During the Hindu period, travelers, missionaries, traders, and diplomats often preferred land routes over waterways. Arab merchants, on the other hand, found water routes more convenient for their commercial activities. Merchants from northern Bengal utilized both land and river routes. Goods were transported on camelback through the Khyber and Bolan passes to reach Central Asia and Persia.

With the advent of Muslim rule, the Chittagong seaport became a critical hub connecting Bengal to the wider world. The region's rivers, particularly in Barendra, have since changed course or lost depth, though they were once integral to the region's fertility and communication. The Karatoa River lies to the east, while the Mahananda River borders the west. Other significant rivers include the Atrai, Tangon, Tulshiganga, Nagar, Shiv, Barnai, and Ichamati. In the southeast, the Chalan Beel wetland also played an important role in local communication.

Ghiyasuddin Iwaj Khalji (1212-1227 CE), after succeeding Bakhtiyar Khalji, moved the capital from Devkot to Gaur or Lakhnauti. In addition to addressing military needs, he significantly improved the communication systems to better serve administrative and societal functions. During this period, Bengal became part of an international trade network stretching from Alexandria, Russia, and Aden to Cambay, Malabar, Coromandel, and as far as Malacca. This extensive trade network not only facilitated economic growth but also enhanced Bengal's communication infrastructure.

In medieval times, Bengal's trade ships traveled long distances, reaching China, Arabia, Persia, and Abyssinia. Portuguese merchants played a prominent role, transporting goods from Bengal to destinations like Pegu, Malacca, Sumatra, Borneo, Macao, the Philippines, China, Sri Lanka, and the coasts of Africa,¹⁹ among others. The prosperity of the region was evident in the accounts of foreign travelers, who described Bengal as a wealthy and fertile land. Archaeological findings of Abbasid-era gold coins further demonstrate Bengal's strong involvement in international trade.

The country's commercial significance was deeply tied to the shifting courses of its rivers. Cities that held administrative importance also flourished as trade centers, where goods were exchanged based on local demand. The numerous river branches within Bengal made transportation and trade more accessible, and the region's agricultural and industrial output attracted traders from Asia, Africa, and Europe. Trade routes by both land and river facilitated extensive commercial activities.

Although government officials were typically members of the upper class, those with considerable religious and legal expertise were appointed to important positions such as Qazi, Sadr, Mufti, Mir, and Muhtasib. Other professionals, including doctors, teachers, poets, and artists, lived modestly, valuing intellectual pursuits over material wealth. Religious scholars were not only employed in mosques and madrasas but also played a vital role in rural communities' social life. In urban areas, wealthy patrons employed architects, goldsmiths, and jewelers, while shipbuilders and boat makers contributed to the thriving maritime economy. The common class comprised farmers, singers, artisans, laborers, and dancers, alongside professionals such as gem traders, storytellers, letter writers, healers, and various other craftsmen. These diverse occupations formed the backbone of the region's economic structure.

The rigid Hindu caste system persisted in the Barendra region, creating distinct social classes. While individuals from different classes often lived in close proximity, social interaction between them was limited. Brahmins occupied the highest position in society, performing religious rites, followed by the Kshatriyas, who held influence in education and various professions. Vaishyas, primarily farmers and traders, formed the third class, while the Shudras, excluded from religious education, worked as manual laborers and servants to the Brahmins. Those below the Shudras, including the Chamar, Dom, and Chandala, were considered outcastes and worked as cleaners on the outskirts of settlements.

In Muslim Bengal, the introduction of a currency-based economy marked a shift toward greater engagement in international trade. The development of cities, industries, and a merchant class was closely linked to this monetary system.

19. W. W. Hunter, *op.cit.*, 1876, p. 27

Although there is little evidence of a native merchant class, foreign merchants dominated Bengal's shipbuilding, capital investment, and industrial ventures. The luxurious lifestyles of Bengal's rulers and landlords, as well as military expenses, were sustained primarily by agriculture.

Medieval literature reveals that agriculture formed the foundation of Bengal's economy, with most of the population showing little interest in commerce or urban life. The use of metal coins, especially silver, reflects the economic prosperity of the period. The introduction of currency and the cities that developed around mints played a critical role in shaping the region's social and cultural landscape. The structures and settlements built around these mints in Varendra are a testament to the region's socio-economic affluence.

During the Sena rule, the economy of the Varendra region, along with its port cities, exhibited unique features. From the 8th century onwards, Arab traders expanded their maritime routes from the West to the East. During this period, international trade was dominated by Egyptian and Roman merchants. By the 13th century, however, many of the ports and settlements described by earlier travelers like Huyensang had disappeared, and Bengal's economy had become increasingly dependent on agriculture. The decline in trade negatively impacted urbanization, which had relied heavily on handicrafts and agriculture. Under Muslim rule, cities such as Lakhnauti, Suvarnagrama, and Saptagrama, which had been in decline, experienced a revival, becoming centers for a new culture influenced by Islamic traditions.

Conclusion

The Varendra region has always been a wealthy area. The goods produced here were not just used locally but were also sent outside. Even when natural disasters caused problems, the hardworking people of this region found ways to improve their lives. However, the region has faced dangers like foreign invasions, resources being taken away, and internal conflicts leading to bloodshed. Despite the availability of raw materials, capital, labor, and markets, Varendra did not establish long-lasting industries. The existing archaeological evidences of mosques and madrasas support this conclusion. While products like muslin were exported internationally. Although trade in the region expanded, an industrial revolution never materialized. The region also struggled with internal problems like low income, disinterest in education, illiteracy and old-fashioned thinking, which slowed down economic progress. Despite these challenges, the people of Varendra have managed to keep their economy moving forward.