

Religion, Trade and Polity: River Ganga on the Gateway of Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The essay will shed light on River Ganga in the Kahalgaon- Sahibganj region. In the Historic Period (c.600 BCE- 400 CE) the banks and rocky islands of the river was a liminal space on the border of state societies ideal for ascetics. The riverscape as a mystical and sacred space has been testified by the writings of Xuan Zang in the 7th Century CE. This tradition continued in the following century as evidenced by the establishment of the Vikramashila Mahavihara. The riverscape is marred by rocky outcrops of the Rajmahal and Chotanagpur hills which were a source of minerals like iron, precious stones like agate, timber and fine alluvial soil for terracotta material. The presence of these raw minerals within the riverscape allowed for a robust trade. Evidence of such exchange could be found through a study of inland ports. The 6th Century CE was a period of state formation in Bengal. In the concurrent centuries Bengal emerged as a dominant political and cultural zone in the eastern part of South Asia. Ganga was the boundary between the ancient settlements of Champa (Bhagalpur) and the early medieval (c.600 CE- 1200CE) political centre at Pundravardhana (MaldaDinajpur). The river became a contested boundary and a crucial link between Bengal and northern India. The river and its surrounding landscape have lived through these multiple narratives in/of time and space. It was a liminal space, a site of production and exchange and a site of conflict and control. The riverscape is littered with evidence of these activities from the past. Archaeological evidence of religious activities can be seen etched on the walls and excavated cave sites on the rocky islands of Kahalgaon and the port site of Bateshwar (literally, god of travellers). Evidence of trade too can be found on the ports and in the surrounding landscape with evidence of iron smelting in settlements near the port. Fortifications on the hills besides the river at sites like Teliagarhi and Sakrigali present evidence of political history of the river in this region.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with the development of a riverscape. In one of its pockets, river Ganga flows along the Rajmahal Plateau. The silt deposition in the region has led to formation of alluvial tracts in the last five thousand years. The area gradually developed into a preferred site of human settlement. The site evolved from a liminal space in the Early Historic period to a well developed trading center and cultural zone by the early medieval period.

The shared perception of the river Ganga is that it is a uniform body with emanates from a signified spot (Gangotri), converges with its tributaries in the upper and the middle valley (Devprayāg & Prayāgraj), descends towards the lower valley creating deltaic formation and eventually merging into the sea. In essence the river is a complex and dynamic body eroding hilly terrains and forming new geological zones. The speed and depth of the river also depends on the terrain, nearby drainages, rainfall and a plethora of varied factors. In the context of the Gangetic basin this leads to a heterogeneity of the riverscapes formed in different pockets throughout the river system.

One such riverscape is the area where the river Ganga enters Bengal. The Rajmahal hills along with river Ganga forms the boundary between the cultural zone of Bengali and Hindi speaking populace. This cultural phenomenon is a product of the geological formations. The western boundary of the distinct riverscape begins at Kahalgaon. Kahalgaon is a sub-division of Bhagalpur district located approximately 50 km east of the district headquarters. Kahalgaon has a series of small hillocks. The voluminous river Ganga at the mouth of its lower plains collides with the Kahalgaon hills. A few of the rocky outcrops of the hills get submerged into the river. The collision diverts the movement of the river. From its origin river Ganga has a south-eastern trajectory however the collision at Kahalgaon leads to the river flowing in the north-western direction. The main stream leaps in the north-western direction bound by the ranges of the Patharghata hills. At Bateshwar, on the edge of the southern hills, river Ganga receives the voluminous discharge of one of its largest tributaries, river Kosi, often referred as the sorrow of Bihar. Charged with the waters of east-central Himalayas and terai, the river returns to its south-eastward trajectory.

The silt collected by river Kosi on its path from Himalayas creates a new alluvial landform all along the area north of the hills. The few river channels from the Rajmahal and its allied ranges also deposit silt in this region. These depositions date to the Holocene period between 7000-5000 years ago. The areas of the Diara formation in the northernmost part of the landform is characterized as a “soft unconsolidated sediments mostly inundated in the rainy season, bank erosion and deposition” by the Geological survey. This described the dynamic nature of this landform which has formed and continues to form in the last few seven thousand years.

The transforming landform was home to the Gharials (*Gavialis gangeticus*) an endemic species of fish-eating crocodile in the Indian subcontinent. The Gharials thrived in this region along with the river dolphins. This stretch of the river is declared as the ‘Vikramshila Gangetic Dolphin Sanctuary’ by the government. The marshy and silty terrain of the region, while ideal for wildlife, was by no means the most ideal space for human settlement. The dynamic river too disrupted the region through annual floods. The area was probably marshy in the early historic period and only gradually did the region experience dense human settlement.

The archaeological record suggests that the earliest settlements evolved in the region along the hilly outcrops at sites like Kahalgaon and Bateshwar. Settlement and agriculture in the newly forming alluvial zone probably started by the early medieval period. This paper will study the development of the three sites, Kahalgaon, Bateshwar and Vikramshila along with their hinterland from the early historic period till modern times. These settlements began as liminal space, outposts and a small port town in the early historic period. It was a sacred liminal space outside the purview of the Nagara, an urban center. Some trade could have occurred along the Kahalgaon-Bateshwar bank, however archaeological evidence of the trade is scanty. Trial excavations could shed further light on the issue. The area primarily seems to be a sacred-liminal space as suggested by literary records.

By the early medieval period the terrain surrounding these settlements became habitable and the area experienced a spur of architectural development. The period also saw the establishment of the Vikramshila Mahavihara. Vikramshila was established around the eastern border of the river bank site of Bateshwar, which had a monastery and cave dwellings from the Gupta period (end of early historic period). The dynamic relationship between these three sites will be at the core of this paper. The architectural spur is coupled with evidence of Iron production and other raw material trade in this region. Its political significance as the doorway to Bengal was aided by the emergence of state formation in Bengal. The settlements experienced the expansion of Buddhism primarily patronized by the Pala rulers of Bengal. The production of minerals including iron, kaolin, lime coupled with agriculture in the newly formed riverine tracts evolved a sustainable settlement in the region. While the Buddhist influence in the region declined, these areas continued to expand. Trade in Iron and other objects continued to thrive. Medieval sites present evidence of fine Kaolin ware, otherwise found in royal centers in Delhi or Gaud (Verma 2011). The area became politically much more significant with the formation of the Bengal Sultanate. The area acted as a borderland between two kingdoms as a key strategic zone. The area also experienced various conflicts often mentioned in medieval records.

The modern period experienced depopulation in this area. By 1812 CE when Buchanan surveyed the area, iron production had greatly reduced. He had to traverse inland to observe iron production, while the banks too had earlier evidence of iron production. The author feels that a large portion of land was wasted in the region, devoid of agriculture. The British developed large indigo farms in a plantation type zamindari settlement in the area. The marshy terrain provided for the required humidity in the soil for the cultivation of this cash crop in the nineteenth century. Archaeological evidence of English settlers along with infrastructure required for indigo production and shipment survive as remnants. The dynamic riverscape, settled beside the Rajmahal hills and its surrounding plateau has a complex history of settlement formation and destruction. Different phases experienced varied events which contributed to changes within the landscape. These changes were aided by natural factors coupled with other historical factors. These changes have been studied through the archaeological record from these sites. This essay will discuss these three sites in some detail before concluding with a discussion on the relationship between these sites.

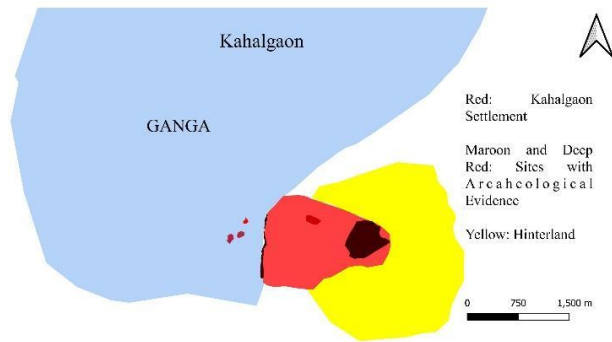
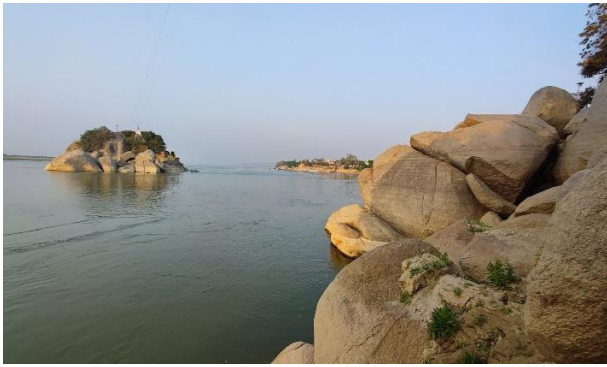


Figure 1 Kahalgaon (25°15'52.74"N, 87°13'57.12"E)

Kahalgaon is settled on the rocky outcrop of the Rajmahal Plateau. Descending in the south-eastern direction, the river collides with the plateau. A small portion of the plateau gets submerged under the voluminous river Ganga in its lower valley. Hilly rivers from the Rajmahal hills also drain into the river right before the settlement of Kahalgaon, charging the river hydrological system near Kahalgaon. Charged with the seasonal waters from River Koa, the river is quite deep around Kahalgaon. The depth is also aided by the undulating rocky terrain which has created uneven depth within the stream. The terrain is not suitable for silt deposition and hence the bank of the river has been the same since the area experienced human settlements. The terrain does not allow the city to flood, despite being at the bank of this mighty river.

In the seventh century of the common era, Buddhist traveler Xuan Zang crossed the riverine islands at Kahalgaon on his route from Champa to Kajangala.¹ On visiting these riverine islands he writes *“On top of a peak is a deva temple, where a deity often gives spiritual responses to prayers. Caves are excavated in the cliffs and water flows into ponds. There are flowery woods and exotic trees. With its huge rocks and perilous peaks this islet is the abode of wise and benign dwellers. It is so attractive that visitors sometimes forget to go home.”* (Li 1990). The rock-cut Deva temple still survives to this day and is protected by the Archaeological Survey of India. Xuan Zang’s encounter with the site presents it to be a mystical space in contrast from the larger urbanized settlements he had crossed earlier. He also mentions *“there are thousands of wild elephants and other fierce animals roaming about in packs in the mountains and jungles in the southern region of the country.”* This means Kahalgaon’s hinterland is still sparsely populated and under the cover of wilderness. The reference paints a picture of the site as a liminal space, wooded and beyond the purview of civilization in the seventh century of the common era. His record also mentions the wilderness which amongst other things was a great source of timber, an item of economic significance in all of human history.



Figure 2 Rock cut Deva temple at Islet in Kahalgaon

¹ Champa was located in modern day Bhagalpur and Kajangala in the Rajmahal Region

Xuan Zang refers to the presence of Deva temple, probably referring to a temple of Surya or Vishnu. He does not refer to the presence of Buddhism in the area. In the centuries after his travels, Kahalgaon developed a Buddhist influence in its settlements. This is evident from the iconographic finds from the top of the Kahalgaon hill in the SSB college campus. The college has many idols kept safely in a shed within the campus. The sculptures include two Avlokiteshwara images along with architectural members with pillar motifs. Buddhist sculptures also include large Votive stupa sculptures. These are, in all probability, the remains of a Chaitya on the hill top. Broken pedestal of a large Surya sculpture is also present on the site. Another hilltop located further inland at Kahalgaon has remains of an early structure. The bricks visible on the surface of the destroyed mounds can be dated to the early medieval period. Two parallel walls of the surviving base structure survive. This site requires urgent care to survive.



Figure 3: Sculptures at SSB College, Surya Pedestal and Avlokiteshwara



Figure 4: Two Parallel Walls of a buried structure; Stone and brick base of the structure

The liminal space of the early historic period became a bustling market and center of trade during the early medieval period. The survey of the town hints towards a denser settlement in the core areas of the settlement. Artifacts suggesting a growth of the settlement, are littered all throughout the settlement area presented on the map. These artifacts include sculptural artifacts and archaeological mounds. Along with timber the region might have also traded in Iron. The city was the juncture of trade with the Koa river valley. In the south of the main settlement of Kahalgaon, river Koa merges with river Ganga. River Koa in its lower valley deposits large quantities of silt. This creates a fertile zone fit for human settlement. The early medieval phase in this region was also one of political intervention. The region between Kahalgaon and Sahibganj was often a contested space between the rulers of North India and the Rulers of Bengal. The influence of the Pala rulers is visible in this area. This region was the staging point of various battles between the rulers of Delhi and those of Bengal. The most famous of such incidents is the encampment of Humayun at Kahalgaon in his campaigns in the east against Sher Shah Suri. The boundary of the pre-modern settlement of Kahalgaon and its hinterland can be identified by the congregated tombs of warriors fakirs. The graveyard was probably in the eastern part of the settlement in the medieval period. The city of Kahalgaon continued to be a market center even during the modern period. In 1866, the main line connecting Howrah-Delhi passed through Kahalgaon. The region lost its significance with the gradual integration of Bengal into as a province in India during the colonial rule.

Bateshwar (25°19'28.7" N 87°16'06.5 E)

Bateshwar-sthan is a port site around 10 kilometers north of Kahalgaon. A Gupta period monastery and cave site survives on the bank of the river here. A few of the ornate caves at the site survive under the protection of the Archaeological Survey of India. The cave structure has Gupta period sculptures carved into the rocks. Their carvings are dated to Gupta, post-Gupta period. Two of the four carvings could be identified as being influenced by the Vaishnava group. The first carving represents the beheading of Rahu and Ketu, the two demigods by Vishnu sitting on Garuda. The second carving depicts the scene of Krishna holding up the Govardhana hill on his little finger. The third carving depicts a Malla Yudda, or a fight between two wrestlers. The story behind the fourth carving is yet to be deciphered.



Figure 5: Vaishnava carvings on the wall of the caves of Bateshwar Hill (2 top); Carving of a wrestling match between two people (left bottom) and a person sitting in a court setting (right bottom)

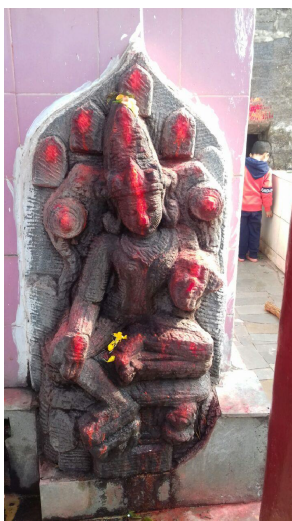


Figure 6: Chisel Market Sculpture

Bateshwar and Oriup are strewn with Saiva, Vaishnava and Buddhist sculptures belonging to the early medieval period. During this period, this was also a site of sculpture production. This can be argued with the help of an incomplete sculpture of Avlokiteshwara, a Buddhist deity with chisel marks. The site of Oriup beside Bateshwar has presented evidence of settlement dating to the Early Historic and even the Chalcolithic period. Along with Kahalgaon, Bateshwar too is an old port site which had survived from the early historic period. The significance of the hill continued in the medieval period as it became a significant Saiva site. Influence of tantric worship continues on the site. An annual fair is held in this region on the full moon nights in the month of February. The Bateshwar hill has vast quantities of Kaolinite deposits. This has been in use historically on the site. During the British Raj, the site was quarried. The Bateshwar hill has tunnels from one its sides.

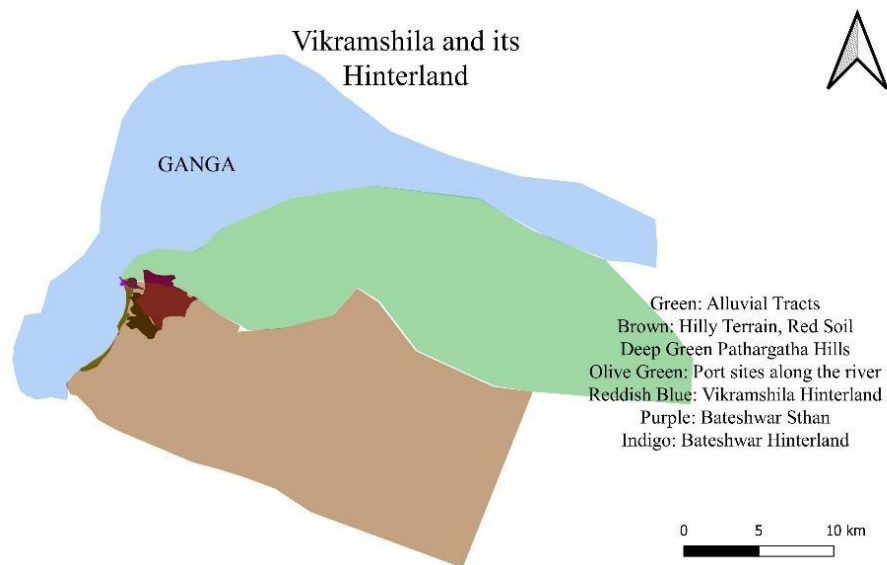


Figure 7 Vikramshila (25°19'26.20"N, 87°17'4.25"E)

Vikramshila was constructed besides the settlement of Oriup in the eighth century. The monastery was constructed under the patronage of Pala ruler Dharmapala. The monastery was constructed on the edge of the Rajmahal plateau. One advantage of this location was the minimal chance of flooding. The alluvial tracts to the north of the site provided the agrarian surplus required for the functioning of the monastery. The riverine tracts to the North of the monastery has presented evidence of multiple settlements dating back to the early medieval period. Settlements continued in the medieval phase as well. A dominant activity visible in the red soil plateau region of the study area was the smelting of Iron. The Patharghata and Gangeldai hill rocks were used to extract Iron from magnetite ores. The soil in the villages south of the monastery is littered with slag along with chunks of burned furnace. While a lot of this activity might have occurred in the late medieval phase, further research including excavations and the carbon dating of slag might aid in the research on trade in the early medieval period in this region. It can be suggested that the monastery would have been involved in agrarian as well as trading activity in the region.

The comparison between the market site of Kahalgaon and the monastic site in the Bateshwar-Vikramshila region. Both the clusters of sites present different types of activity. It is quite visible that Vikramshila emerged in the early medieval period, probably to cater to the demands of the market for iron products. Kahalgaon was an older market settlement. The monastery might have played a greater role in the expansion of the trade economy in the region.

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