THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'SAPTAGRAM', THE PORT CITY OF MEDIEVAL BENGAL, IN THE WRITINGS OF BIPRADAS PIPILAI AND MUKUNDARAM

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ABSTRACT

In this proposed paper I shall be engaged in an analytical study of the importance of the port city, Saptagram, in Medieval Bengal and how its significance represented in the writings of two contemporary celebrated writers ------ Bipradas Pipilai and Mukundaram. From the writings of these two poets we acquire enormous knowledge about Saptagram, its emergence and the eventual downfall of the port city. Therefore, this paper intends to demonstrate the history of Saptagram and its significance as a trading centre in Medieval Bengal, with the help of the writings of the two poets of that period.

KEY WORDS: *Saptagram, Bipradas Pipilai, Mukundaram, Port City, Trading centre, Medieval Bengal*

The cities or towns of ancient and medieval Bengal were developed mainly for two reasons ---------- one, as an administrative centre; and two, as a commercial centre.[1] Naturally, their location was along the land routes and on the banks of the rivers. Similarly, two reasons worked behind the disappearance of these cities or towns; the deterioration of political power or the change in the direction of the rivers. We find mention of two ports of ancient Bengal, better said pre-Sultanic Bengal ------- one is Tamralipti or Tamralipta; and the other one is Gangeya.[2] Although nothing special is known about the latter, the famous ancient port city of Tamralipta is mentioned in ancient scriptures.[3] However, from the first century to the twelfth century, traces of Tamralipta can be found from various sources. Absence of reference of Tamralipta in later Bengali literature proves that this port city lost its prosperity and significance after that. Perhaps the main reason for the loss of significance of Tamralipta is the change in the coastal area. Later, Saptagram of Hoogly district became famous as a port city in this region that is South West Bengal. Saptagram was a medieval village on the south bank Saraswati river, near the confluence of Bhagirathi, and three and a half kilometres from Triveni, the pilgrimage town of Bengal. There is a saying that it is called Saptagram because it consists of seven villages. Although disputed, it is generally accepted that these seven villages are Vasudevpur, Banshberia, Khamarpundar, Devanandpur, Shivpur, Krishnapur, and Trishbigha.[4] Among them Trishbigha village is currently considered as Adisaptagram, which was the centre of Saptagram in the middle ages, although Acharya Dineshchandra Sen has a different opinion about it. According to him, "this village was named Saptagram after the seven sons of a king of ancient Kanoj."[5] The town of Saptagram was extended from Bhagirathi to Triveni where the Yamuna and Saraswati flowed out. Saptagram was the Satgaon of the muslims.[6]

At the end of 1204, Saptagram was conquered long after the invasion of Nadia. According to historian Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, Zafar Khan Gazi captured Saptagram in 1298. Although he tells us that Saptagram was a big city before that. If his view is accepted, it is very clear that before 1298, Saptagram became a city[7]. A reference to Zafar Khan Ghazi's mosque in Triveni, dated 1298 AD, proves that Muslims had gained dominance in Satgaon-Triveni by the end of the thirteenth century.[8] Triveni and Saptagram are considered to be the same in the earliest inscriptions from this region. But there are considerable differences between these two cities. Triveni is a pilgrimage town of ancient Bengal; but it was by no means a 'city' in that sense. And Saptagram was a trading city. So its characters are also very different. Moreover, Saptagram was about two miles away from Triveni.[9] The late fifteenth century poet, Bripradas Pipilai has clearly explained that Saptagram and triveni are two different places. Late 16th century poet, Mukundaram has also shown Triveni and Saptagram as two separate places. Kabir Manas Saudagar used to go to market in Saptagram by tying a boat at Triveni ghat. From this it is quite clear that even at the end of 16th century there was a big market place in Saptagram.

Notably from the 14th century onwards, Saptagram, the capital of South Bengal, emerged as an important port city.[10] According to Dr. Niharranjan Roy, Saptagram emerged as a flourishing city at the end of the fifteenth century. He states that 1475 AD was the ultimate stage of development of Saptagram.[11] He noticed a political reason behind this massive development of Saptagram. And that is the rise of Gaur as the capital of in the middle of 15th century. The importance of Saptagram as a trading port increased when the capital was shifted to Gaur at that time. Saptagram became the main port of the entire Eastern India during that time. Besides, since the end of the 15th century, the political turmoil increased due to the invasion of Arakan and Tripura in Chattagram. During that time, a bloody battle was going on around Bengal, Arakan, and Tripura. As a result of this, the

importance of Bhagirathi increased and Saptagram emerged as a major trade port. By the end of the 15th century, in the writings of the poet Bipradas Pipilai, Saptagram emerged as an open port, where Ganga, Saraswati and Yamuna flowed together; and there resides Devi Uma and Maheshswa. He writes -------- "Ganga Aar Saraswati/ Yamuna Nibose Tathi/ Adhisthan Uma-Maheshwar."[12] Mainly due to this reason, the commercial revival of Saptagram became possible. As a result, the population of Saptagram gradually began to increase from the end of the 15th century and Saptagram stated to grow as a city. Poet Bipradas Pipilai has described Saptagram extraordinarily in his poetry. He talked about rows of houses decorated with various flag in Saptagram city. Almost every house was Hindu, because each of them had Hindu idols. He said --------

"Abinava Surapuri   Dekhi Ghar Sari Sari

Proti Ghore Konoker Jhara.

Nana Ratna Abishal   Jyotirmoy Kanch Chal

Gaja Mukto-Pralabmbir Bara.

Sove Debe Bhakti Oti   Proti Ghore Nana Murti

Ratnamoy Sokol Prasade.

Anonde Bajay Baddi   Shankha Ghonta Mridangadi

Dekhi Raja Boroy Promode."[13]

After that the poet, Bipradas, said that Muslims also lived there; and among them he mentioned about the Mughals, who had not yet came to India. Hence, some consider this as a projective text. He said that many Muslims lived in Saptagrama and among them were Mughals, Pathans and many other; and there he worshipped Devi Manasa and asked to rescue him. He writes -------

"Nibose Yaban Joto   Taha Na Bolibo Koto

Manghal Pathan Mokadin.

Chaiyod Molla Kaji   Ketab Koran Baji

Dui Bhakta Kore Tachlim.

Majid Makam Ghore   Chelam Namaj Kore

Foyota Koroye Pityo-Loke.

Bodiya Monasa Devi   Dwijo Bipradas Kabi

Udhyariho Bhakat Sebake."[14]

Notably, Bipradas never mentions about any port here. Later the same idea can be found in Chaitanya biographer Brindabandandas's "Chaitanya Bhagavat' and in Jayananda's 'Chaitanyamangal'. Although they did not say anything about the port, they did refer to the rich merchants. These rich merchants must have been patrons of Vaishnavism, because Chaitanya Dev himself came to their house. Nityananda, one of the greatest followers of Vaishnavism, received the unstinting support and patronage of the merchant community of Saptagram. To save the merchant community, Nityananda Dev spent a lot of time in Saptagram ---------

"Banik Torite Nityananda Avatar.

Saptagrame Nirabadhi Koren Bihar."[15]

In describing the prosperity of the Bengali merchants of Saptagram, the poet, Jayananda, in his book 'Chaitanyamangal' gave details of precious cloths and precious gems of the merchants. He said that Nityananda lived happily in the house of the merchants of Saptagram and there were lots of gold, diamond, pearl and silver and very costly cloths in their houses --------

"Saptagrame Nityananda Banike Ghore

Mahamahatsobe Ratridin Nitya Kore.

Subarna Heera Mukta Rajat Bistore.

Deho Manahar Patbastra Shobha Kore."[16]

Even in the late 16th century, KabiKankan Mukundaram described Saptagram in a good way, while not depicting the whole Rarh region nicely. He said that among the Rarh regions, only Saptagram is exceedingly beautiful; and because of that Dhanpati Saudagar, the main protagonist of his book, rested there for two days ---------

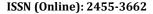"Rarha Majhe Saptagram Oti Anupam.
Dina Dui Sadhu Tahe Korilo Bishram."[17]

At that same time, he also said that the merchants of Saptagram had not to go anywhere, they stayed at home and earned enough wealth ---------

"Saptagramer Banik Kothah Na Jay.
Ghore Bosya Suk Mokkho Nanadhan Pay."[18]

The poet's figurative merchant, Dhanapati Saudagar, bought goods from Saptagram and embellished his Saptadinga and went to the confluence point of the sea through Saraswati river. So, from the writings of Mukundaram, it seems that there was no port up to the confluence point of Saptagram then. Hooghly had not become a port city during the time of Mukundaram, because Hooghly was not even mentioned for once in his writings. But there are mentions of Garifa (Gouripur), the other side of Bhagirathi river, and Halishahar. So, there is no doubt that Saptagram was the main sea port in Gaur.

It is generally said that after the arrival of the Portuguese in Bengal in the early 16th century, due to their demands, the trade of Bengal grew enormously. Saptagram was the 'Port Picano' meaning the main port for the Portuguese. Arabian, Indian, Portuguese and many other foreign merchants used this port of Saptagram. The condition of Saptagram port probably got worsened from the third decade of the 16th century.[19] At the same time, the water of Saraswati river stated flowing through Adiganga. As a result of this, large Portuguese ships can no longer come to Saptagram through Saraswati river. The big ships came to Betor and took the goods to Saptagram by boats. The biggest proof of this is that there is no mention of the Betor in the writings of Bipradas Pipilai and Bijaygupta; but mention of Betor can be traced in the works of Mukundaram in the late 16th century. The flourishing trade has been fading away in Saptagram, and that can be found from the description of the traveller Caesar Fredericki in 1567. By 1567, Caesar Fredericki noticed thirty ships in the port of Saptagram carrying cloth, sugar, gains etc. He also mentioned the arrival of big ships up to Betor. But Saptagram was still prosperous and populous. The fact that the water of Saraswati was gradually decreasing, can be understood from the actions of the Portuguese. In 1579, they created an alternative port on the Hooghly river with the consent of Emperor Akbar. From this, it can be understood that the water of Hooghly river had increased then. But nothing was said about whether the big Portuguese ships could have come to that river immediately. After that, traveller Ralph Fitch in 1583 and the Persian traveller Vincent Le Blanc in 1575 called Saptagram flourishing, but no one talked about the port anymore. The late 16th century poet, Mukundaram says that the merchants of Saptagram do not go anywhere, all the trading goods come to Saptagram. And he also gives a list of the countries, from where all the goods were coming; and most of these traders were from South East Asia. So, it can be said that the foreign trade was not very satisfactory then, but its internal trade was keeping the city alive and bustling. So, it is very clear that the Saraswati river near Saptagram was losing its flow by the end of the 16th century. Historians assume that the connection with Bhagirathi gets separated near Betor.

The fate of Saptagram has been repeatedly determined by the capital city of Gaur. Once with the rise of Gaur as the capital, Saptagram emerged as a trading city. Similarly, the decline of Saptagram was associated with the decline of Gaur. After 1565, when the capital moved further to the west from Gaur to Tanda, Saptagram's foreign trade came to an end. After Shershah and Humayun attacked Gaur, the political instability in the capital increased. From the middle of the 16th century, the bloody battle began among Sultans and Afghans, Mughals, and Portuguese. When Mehmud III of the Hushen-Shahi dynasty gave permission to collect revenue and tax from Saptagram region, the political rights of Saptagram port got transferred from the Sultans. Muhammd Shah Gazi took control over Saptagram in 1542 during the reign of Islam Shah Sur. In 1550, the last coin was found in Saptagram.[20] Therefore, it can be understood that the importance of Saptagram as the main provider of the capital in decreasing by the end of the 16th century.

CONCLUSIONS

We have seen earlier that the city of Saptagram continued to grow even when the foreign trade had stopped. By that time Hooghly port emerged on the banks of Bhagirathi, and foreigen trade of Saptagram started passing through Hooghly port. Despite this, the city of Saptagram continued to grow and had a flourishing market which we have not seen before. Therefore, it is clear that the city of Hooghly was growing due to its growing trade, and it became possible because Saptagram served as a supplier of that trade. In fact, Saptagram survived because its internal trade was supplying for Hooghly. But as a result of the battle of Palashi, Kolkata emerged as a port city and Hooghly port started to lose its significance; and consequently Saptagram also left abandoned.

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