

GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS IN THE HISTORY OF 'BENGAL': REFLECTIONS FROM THE GUPTA COPPERPLATE INSCRIPTIONS

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Abstract

This research aims to delineate the geographical factors of the past inspired by the quest of 'understanding the past to protect the future'. Since time immemorial, numerous rivers have drenched the 'Bengal' delta. These rivers carried down a high amount of silt each year, contributing to the creation of this fertile delta. Moreover, the location of Bengal in the monsoon zone results in heavy rainfall each year. Favourable geophysical and climatic conditions have always been a blessing for the growth of a variety of flora and fauna and for shaping the geographical fortune of this region. The earliest trace of human settlement has been discovered in the Rarh region since at least the Paleolithic period, and to date, it has been the most densely populated region of South Asia. The excessive burden of the population has gradually ruined the environment, and many are looking forward to restoring the earlier state of ecological infrastructure. The approach of historical inquiry in this research sheds valuable insights on the Gupta copperplates as a conspicuous source material for early history and contributes to putting together scattered pieces of geographic elements of ancient Bengal as reflected in the Gupta copperplates.

Keywords: *Geography, Environment, History, Gupta, Copper plates, Bengal*

Introduction

Since the emergence of environmental history/historical geography in the 1970s, this specialised branch of knowledge has become a vibrant field of interdisciplinary studies. In present-day academia, this discipline has grown in prominence and exerts a significant impact on letting people know about the forgotten wilderness. Moreover, it evokes a sense

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of nostalgia and lament for the lost greenery among the readers. It is expected that historians would undertake more historical scholarships on past environments so that more informed decisions are likely to be made to achieve the environment-related goals of the SDG for a climatically vulnerable nation like Bangladesh. Few scholarly attempts have looked into the historical environment of early 'Bengal'. The key barrier to reconstructing past environments is the dearth of sources, as history has long been centered mainly on the tales of politics, polity, and elites. However, no distinct types of source materials are required to investigate the issues of the historical environments. By employing a geographical lens, historians could retrieve data on geographical factors from ancient records and artifacts. The source materials, combining both archaeological and literary that form the basis of history, references to various plants and animals, as well as rivers, tanks, hills, and seas, are likely to be found. Several studies have been conducted using copperplate charters to shed insights into the early history of 'Bengal' and emphasise issues other than politics. Barrie M. Morrison's (1970) *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal* is a seminal contribution to bringing some fresh outlooks in dealing with the inscriptions as historical data. He has investigated seventy-one copperplates, most of which are engraved in Sanskrit and dated between the fourth to the thirteenth centuries. Morrison has looked at the writing styles, dates, geopolitical units, names of the donors and receivers, references to royal employees, and different kinds of lands that were granted to figure out the major political and cultural regions that were in existence. A chapter titled "Some Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Gupta and Post-Gupta Bengal" in the book *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India*, written by Brajdulal Chattopadhyaya (1990) inquired into the rural settlements and society of Gupta Bengal mainly based on three copperplates namely the Dhānāidaha, Kalaikuri-Sultanpur, and Guṇaighar. A book chapter by Ryosuke Furui (2023) titled "Changing Patterns of Agrarian Development in Early Medieval North Bengal: A Delineation from the Inscriptions" in the book *The Archaeology of Early Medieval and Medieval South Asia: Contesting Narratives from the Eastern Ganga-Brahmaputra Basin*, edited by Swadhin Sen, Bhairabi Prasad Sahu & Supriya Varma, investigated the changing patterns of agrarian development in Varendra on the basis of the land charters from the second half of the fifth century to the late twelfth century CE. where he delineated the changing patterns of agrarian development in Varendra. This research

is concentrated on Gupta copperplate inscriptions of 'Bengal'; the focus is very definite and narrowed down to a specific 'region' and period of time. A corpus has been set with the updated knowledge of the Gupta plates, and a comprehensive investigation of the plates is provided in this study, bringing together the plates one after another in line with the Gupta era. These charters were mainly issued as religious endowments, but in doing so, they repeatedly mentioned the border landmarks, measurement standards, time, place, and some associated information on objects and donors (Furui, 2023, p. 139). The present discussion is mainly designed to delineate the geographical factors of 'Bengal' through the analysis of the Gupta copperplate inscriptions that are found and issued from this 'region'. The other objectives of this research are as follows:

- i. To generate motivation for conservation and restoration mechanisms to prevent further deterioration of the environment.
- ii. To see copperplates weigh up as a rich repository while simultaneously paving up potential research areas other than recreating political narratives.

The research questions thereby stand: Will the copperplates be considered conspicuous source materials to unveil some fresh understandings/new dimensions in history and inspire people to safeguard the virginity of natural landscapes? What kind of data regarding geographical factors has been reflected in the Gupta copperplates?

Clarification/Justification of the Terminologies

Geographical factors are the physical features of a certain geographic region that influence the various dimensions of human life and the environment. It includes climate, topography, natural resources, soil quality, biodiversity, accessibility, and natural disasters (Semple, 1909). Defining an ancient territory with a present-day 'territorial entity'/'a non-existent' / 'vague identity' is very worrying and problematic. The names and boundary lines that separate geographical and political units these days wouldn't precisely reflect how they were named and distributed in the early period. The name 'Bengal' refers to such a territorial entity that has not existed in any historical period and does not exist today. It is actually a distinct territory encircled by a natural girdle of mountains, deep forests, and sea at the eastern frontier of the Indian subcontinent. The process of making a regional identity in this region has been made throughout the historical ages in different historical, cultural, and political

contexts, but not in the popular term ‘Bengal’. In South Asian and ‘Bengal’ historiography, this term has been held to refer to the eastern frontier territory of India without taking space and time scales into consideration. ‘Bengal’, as a regional and political entity, is thus erroneously depicted in the historiography. Most importantly, no source has confirmed that the inhabitants shape and articulate this identity (Alam, 2017). Even Before 1200 CE, the year that marked the transition from ancient to medieval (Chowdhury & Chakravarti, 2018), the name ‘Bengal’ did not even exist to refer to any historical geographical units. Instead, this research advances the latest understanding on the issue of fixing territoriality of Bengal (Alam, 2020, p. 781); It is a ‘concept’ or ‘idea’ to refer to the territorial distribution of the eastern frontier of India, covering the present-day Bangladesh, West Bengal and Tripura, and some parts of Assam, Meghalaya, Bihar, and Orissa in India. Niharranjan Ray opted for a natural boundary of ‘Bengal’ in the following words:

“... at one extreme are the very high mountains, at the other the sea, and on both sides, the hard hilly country; within, all the land is plain. Such is the geographical fortune of the Bengali people (Ray, 1994, p. 53).”

Geographers and historians have considered this naturally bounded area a distinct geographical region.

Research Methodology

This research is based upon the relevant findings of the copperplate inscriptions of the Guptas found within the geographical territory of ‘Bengal’. It involves an in-depth analysis of the archaeological resources and the readings of the charters by the scholars. The readings were drawn after several visits to the archives and libraries and retrieved from digital archives. Each copper plate had a table prepared to organise the relevant data on geographical factors (see appendix). These plates turned out to be a treasure of data on topographic expressions, flora, fauna, historical and geographical units, as well as time, provenance, donor, and so on. Notes, explanations, and comments from preceding investigations have been utilised to help explain the obtained information and offer further credibility. Eventually, based on primary sources, the present study shed light on the geographical factors of early ‘Bengal’ as reflected on Gupta copperplates.

Gupta Copperplates in Bengal: History, Geographical Factors, and Beyond

The period from around 300 to 600 CE witnessed the rise of the imperialist Guptas, who intended to strengthen and protect their political supremacy at the expense of giving land to religious hierarchs (Ghosh, 2015, p. 1). The Gupta period is often 'celebrated' in historiography as a breakdown from the past in multiple dimensions, and historical research on the Gupta empire often referred to this period as the 'golden age of India', marked by many new progresses and growths. There were significant transformations in economic, social, and political affairs in Bengal in the mentioned period. These changes were reflected in the structure of the polity and kingship, the execution of political control, the 'revolution' in agriculture, the flourishing arts & crafts, the extensive usage of Sanskrit, and the increased dominance of Brahmanic institutions (Banerji, 1933, p. 103; Hawkes & Abbas, 2016, p. 41). Understanding these transformations required thoughtful exegesis of the inscriptions, the most conspicuous source materials of this period. For over a century, these inscriptions served as a vital source of information for several Gupta period advancements, where they are mostly used to map the 'so-called' Gupta suzerainty in several regions (Fleet, 1888, p. 7-16; Banerji, 1933, p. 1-64). It goes without saying that the 'construction'/'reconstruction' of royal chronology and the socio-economic history of pre-colonial India would have been impossible if the discipline of Indian epigraphy, which has approximately 90,000 inscriptions, hadn't been established (Ali, 2001, p. 278).

Nearly a significant portion of our knowledge of the imperial Guptas has been drawn from the inscriptions (Salamon, 1998, p. 3-6). The largest group of inscriptions that were most likely recovered and deciphered during this era was the copperplate charters (Hawkes & Abbas, 2016, p. 41). These charters contain details about landed properties that were perpetually granted under the auspices of religious establishments by royal or official orders (Ghosh, 2014, p. 208). While the context, composition, and features of these charters had regional and individual variations from inscription to inscription, the data regarding the donations often remained minimal (Hawkes & Abbas, 2016, p. 41).

In the middle of the 20th century, the knowledge of copperplates gained more prominence. It was investigated with greater importance when new approaches and technologies in the studies of epigraphy were introduced.

Instead of examining the copperplates just in terms of the data that appear to be evident in their texts, it becomes possible to take a subtle approach to interpret them as a sign of a significant socio-economic transition (Hawkes & Abbas, 2016, p. 42). The following table shows the range of information that might be delineated from the copperplates:

Basic Particulars	Religious Affairs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Date & year ▪ Details of the engraver ▪ Illustration and artistic design ▪ Seals and symbols 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The donee ▪ Religious affiliation ▪ The nature of the grant ▪ Brahmanical sects ▪ Sacred symbols & icons ▪ Hateful maledictions to the confiscators ▪ Linguistic features ▪ Artistic expressions ▪ Other recipients of the grants
Polity and Kingship	Economic Matters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The donor ▪ The issuing place ▪ Details of the kings ▪ Ministers ▪ Accession year ▪ Issuing entity ▪ Familial relations ▪ Genealogy ▪ Political alliances ▪ Administrative divisions ▪ Royal officers ▪ Titles of the sovereign ▪ Military strengths ▪ Extant of the empire ▪ Neighbouring kingdoms/regions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Currency ▪ Trade ▪ Occupations ▪ Agricultural operations
Geographical and Environmental Data	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Core administrative units ▪ Territorial divisions ▪ Geographical units ▪ Boundary demarcations ▪ Geographic & environmental data ▪ Nature of the donated/sold lands ▪ Measurement standards ▪ Information regarding the universe ▪ Rural landscape ▪ Navigation 	

As mentioned earlier, the imperial Guptas are credited with bringing fresh ideas and inspiration to different aspects of life in Bengal. Under their suzerainty, the Bengal territory moved on from being a peripheral region. It emerged from its distinctly tribal, social, and political pattern to become a part of all Indian sovereignty. The Gupta Empire gained a strong foothold in Bengal, and this frontier region came under the larger arena of politico-cultural settings of North India (Pal, 2008, p. 79-80). The issuance of most of the Gupta copperplates from the Pundravardhana testifies to the evidence that it was their provincial administrative headquarter (Furui, 2020, p. 25). Using the Gupta copperplates of Bengal, many scholars have thoroughly investigated the question of their political presence and authority in Bengal. The historical scholarships regarding these plates mainly concentrate on the construction/reconstruction of political narratives. The chart above clearly indicates that the copperplates could provide diverse insights into various aspects of history. Despite their potential to shed light on a wide range of socio-cultural, economic, and environmental issues, academia has largely overlooked these aspects of Gupta copperplates in favour of portraying only political history.

The majority of the plates from this era possibly have been recovered, and the available plates, except the extremely fragmented pieces, have been deciphered by scholars. The process of reading/re-reading the plates continues, and many new copperplates have come to the epigraphists in recent years. The author's in-depth analysis of the updated knowledge on the Gupta copperplates for this research put forward that the abundance of data on the economy, administration, and religions could significantly support the reconstruction of several unexplored areas of the Gupta era. Besides, historical research on geographical and environmental issues could let the people know about the past environments and outline the geographical and administrative units that existed within the territory of Bengal. The emergence of subsequent ruling houses and the arrival of numerous foreign political-cultural forces often resulted in the erasure or alteration of territorial and geographical identities, as depicted in the Gupta-era copperplates. The experiment of their present identifications based on scholastic observations in collaboration with inscriptional and historical data would be a fascinating contribution to the field of historical geography. The relationship between human beings and the environment could also be known through a rigorous analysis of the geographical and environmental factors reflected in the copperplates (Borah, 2023, p. 61). Moreover, the explicit demarcations of the boundaries in the charters

made it possible to reveal how these demarcations of the landed properties might characterise the rural landscapes (Ghosh, 2014, p. 207). The mutual interplay between the agrarian-based human settlements and their connectedness to the water systems would have been delineated from the boundary demarcations (See figure-1).

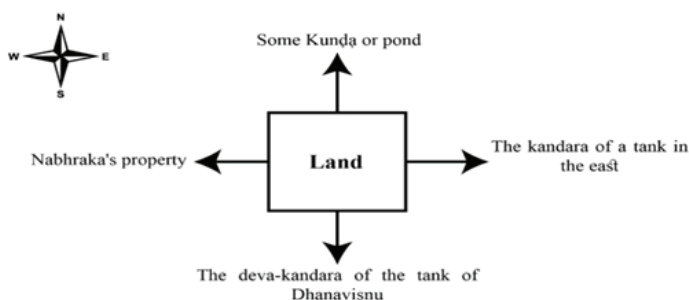


Figure 1: Figurative representation of the boundary demarcations reflected in a Gupta copperplate.

In light of the preceding points, this impression has been made that copperplates are a rich source of historical information and one of the most reliable materials of early history. That's why the process of investigating them to get relevant information about geographical factors must continue. The more academia explores the past environment, the greater the visibility and concentration of readers and policymakers on this issue. Moreover, the scope of taking references and inspirations on past environments from historical and literary works for the concerned entities would likely be expanded. Further investigations on the geographical factors of the early period using the copperplates as a whole would enhance the reliability and trustworthiness of historical works.

On the other hand, it encourages readers experiencing the repercussions of climatic hazards to adopt more eco-friendly behaviours and engage in community initiatives to halt the further deterioration of the environment. Therefore, the study of epigraphy prioritises and emphasises demonstrating greater proficiency in the language and script and utilising imaging and analysis technologies to refine the mechanisms for dealing with copperplates. Integrating modern technologies into the study of copperplates further improves the capacity of epigraphists to retrieve new information on ancient history or re-read the discovered plates.

This research has so far gathered 18 (eighteen) deciphered copperplate inscriptions of the Gupta period issued from the territory of Bengal roughly from the fifth century CE to the sixth century CE. Arlo Griffith (2015)

provided a table of Gupta copperplate inscriptions found in Bengal, where he provided a list of 11 copperplate inscriptions. In 2018, the same author (Griffith, 2018) revealed four more untouched copperplate inscriptions and published their first dissemination in a paper titled "Four More Gupta-period Copperplate Grants from Bengal," in which he presented a corpus of Gupta plates totalling 16 copperplate inscriptions. His corpus is missing the Guṇaighar Copperplate inscriptions, even though Guṇaighar fell within the territorial boundary of 'Bengal'. It is part of the big pargana Bardakhat (formerly Baldakhal), which is located 29 kilometres to the northwest of Comilla (Jatland, n.d.). The following table illustrates 18 Gupta-period copperplate inscriptions, including the Guṇaighar and a new copperplate of Vainyagupta deciphered by Ryusuke Furui in 2016 (Furui, 2016).

S.L.	Copperplates	Gupta Era
1	Dhānāidaha copperplate inscription of Kumāra Gupta I	113 (432-33 C.E.)
2	The Kalaikuri-Sultanpur copperplate inscription of Kumāragupta I	120 (439 CE)
3	Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Kumāra Gupta I	124 (444 CE)
4	Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Kumāra Gupta I	128 (448 CE)
5	Bāigrām Copperplate Inscription	128 (448 CE)
6	Bāigrām Fragment	Unknown
7	Jagadishpur Plate	128 (448 CE)
8	Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Budha Gupta	157-176 (476-495 CE)
9	The Grant of Land in the Tāvīra District	159 (479 CE)
10	Paharpur Copperplate Inscription	159 (479 CE)
11	Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Budha Gupta	163 (482 CE)
12	Nandapur Copperplate Inscription	169 (488 CE)
13	Raktamala Copperplate Grant	180 (499 CE)
14	A Second Grant Concerning the Raktamala Estate	Unknown
15	A New Copperplate Inscription of Vainyagupta	184 (503 CE)
16	Guṇaighar Copperplate Inscription of Vainya Gupta	188 (507 CE).
17	A Grant of Land to Monasteries at Sisipunja, Madhyamasrgalika and Gramakutagohali	198 (517 CE)
18	Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time ofGupta-5	224 (543 CE)

Geographical Factors Reflected in the Gupta Copperplates in Bengal:

The delineations of geographical factors from these land charters have been the primary focus of this historical scholarship to represent the geographical settings of the period under discussion. The first copperplate that comes into this discussion is the Dhānāidaha copperplate inscription of Kumāra Gupta I discovered from Dhānāidaha (Present Day- Natore, Bangladesh), issued in the Gupta year 113 (432–33 C.E.). Akshay Kumar Maitreya of Varendra Research Society had taken it into his custody and R.D. Banerji was the first epigraphist who published it in the *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Banerji, 1908, p. 457-61; Basak, 1923-24, p. 345-49; Mukherji & Maity, 1967, p. 41-42). It was issued for the endowment of 2 Kulyāvapas land. This fragmented land charter hardly provides any relevant information for this research except for the name of an administrative centre (Khāṭāpāra Viṣaya) and a village (Bhrāṭṛkaṭaka). The Dhānāidaha copperplate inscription offers a land measurement system prevalent at that time. Kulyāvapa, measured in 8x9 reeds, was the land measurement unit. Line no. 11 points out that 1 Kulyāvapa land is an area where 1 Kulya (winnowing-basket) of seed can be sown (Sircar, 1965, p. 330).

The Kalaikuri-Sultanpur copperplate inscription of Kumāragupta I of the Gupta Year 120 (439 CE) was found in Kalaikuri-Sultanpur (Naogaon, Bangladesh). It was in the custody of the Varendra Research Society and first published in English by D.C. Sircar in the *Indian Historical Quarterly* in 1943. This plate was issued to donate 9 Kulyāvapas of land to the Brahmanas, from which the names of several territorial units of political and geographical significance, varying from Bhukti (province) to Grama (village), could be delineated. It refers to the fact that the recipients were the inhabitants of Pūṇḍravardhana, an important bhukti in the Gupta Empire (Banglapedia, 2003). The following table reveals some geographical and administrative information drawn from this copperplate.

Bhukti	Pūṇḍravardhana
Vithi	Pūrṇṇakauśikā, Śṛiṅgavēra
Mandala	Gōhāli
Villages	Hastiśīraha, Vibhītakī, Gulmagandhikā, Dhānyapātalikā, Gulmandika, Tāpasapōttaka, Dayitāpōttaka, Chitravātāngara.

This inscription refers to the boundaries of the 9 Kulyāvapas of land, featuring a river, an ancient moat and a pathway.

“Of the nine Kulyāvapas, one is enclosed by an ancient moat, with the vātā river on the north and the borders of Gulmagandhikā on the west, two drōṇavāpas are in Gulmagandhikā, in its east, to the west of the first pathway, and the remaining seven Kulyāvapas and six drōṇavāpas are in Tāpasapōttaka and Dayitāpōttaka in the prāvēśya of Hastīśirsha and Chitravātāṅgara in the prāvēśya of Vibhitaka” (Sanyal, 1955-56, p. 59).

D.C. Sircar has traced out the present 'Baranai' river in Tanore, Rajshahi district, as the vātā river mentioned in the inscription, and Śṛiṅgavēra as the modern Singra police station of Natore (1943, p. 20).

The Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription was issued during the time of Śrī Kumāra Gupta I in the 124 Gupta era (444 CE). It was one of the five copper plates discovered in Dāmodarpur, Dinajpur, Bangladesh (Dikshit, 1923-24, p. 193). All five plates were edited by R.G. Basak (1919-20) and published in *Epigraphia Indica*, vol-xv. This is not a grant but a sale deed. One Kulyāvapas of land was traded at less than market value to support religious pursuits (Mukherji & Maity, 1967, p. 41-42). The plate revealed the designation of the provincial viceroy of the province of Pūṇḍravardhana (Bogra-Rajshahi-Dinaipur) along with the district administrator of Koṭivarṣa (Banagarh, Dinajpur). The land sold through this plate was referred to as being located in the region northwest of 'Dōnga'. Several other geographical indications could be delineated from the first plate of Dāmodarpur. The nature of the land is labelled by referring to it as untilled and unclaimed jungle land. Apart from this, some significant galactic phenomena are mentioned in several verses of this plate, notably the 'earth', 'moon', 'sun', and 'stars'.

The Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Śrī Kumāra Gupta I on the Gupta Year 128 (448 CE) issued for the sale of 5 drōṇas of land in Koṭiva Pūṇḍravardhana. This plate is highly valued as it contains information about water management and irrigation of ancient days. The said land was granted with the authority to excavate a canal to irrigate the field located to the west of the village Airāvata-Gorājya. In the case of the land measurement unit, it referred to 8 Drōṇas of land, making 1 Kulyāvapa (Mukherji & Maity, 1967, p. 49).

Bāigrām Copperplate Inscription of the Gupta Year 128 (448 CE) issued from Bāigrām (present-day Dinajpur, Bangladesh) for the sale of 3.1 Kulyāvapas land (Basak, 1931-32, p. 78). The inscription refers to two localities, namely Trivṛta & Śrīgohālī adjacent to the village Bāigrām. The nature of the land is labelled as shrubless and fallow and the boundaries on

each side are permanently marked by chaff and charcoal. Three different land types are specified on the plate:

- i. Agricultural
- ii. Homestead
- iii. Flower garden

As stated earlier, references to animals, plants, and other fundamental elements of the environment frequently appear in the verses exclusively dedicated to religious matters. 3 Kulyāvapas of agricultural land are committed on condition that revenues from it would be used to source perfumery, incense, lamps, and flowers for religious ceremonies and to repair and maintain the temple. Besides, the engraving of the moon, sun, and star on the copperplate represents the permanence of the possession of the purchased land. The Baigram fragment lays out the nature of the land as ‘waste’.

Jagadishpur Plate of the Gupta Year 128 (447 CE) has remained under the custody of the Varendra Research Society since 1961. Kumāragupta I was the reigning monarch when the plate was issued (Sircar, 1969, p. 247; Siddhanta, 1972, p. 23). The plate was deciphered and published in *Bangla Academy Patrika* in 1379 (Bangla Year) for the first time. This plate mentions Pūṛṇnakaūsikā as the headquarters of the sub-division (vithi) Śṛiṅgavēra and two villages, namely Gulmagandhikā and Sarhgohalikā. The given plot of land is classified as fallow. The boundary of the land is clearly defined in the charter, making it possible to figure out many geographical indications. It was partitioned from the nearby properties by a pond in the north, two tanks in the east and south, and one Nabhraka’s property in the west.

The Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Budha Gupta (476-495 CE) was issued for the sale of 11 Kulyāvapas land in Koṭivarṣa, Puṇḍravardhana. This property is said to be located in a village named Ḍongāgramā. Moreover, the plate emphasises this village’s location, stating that it lies in the forest region of Himavacchikhara (the summit of the Himalayas) (Mukherji & Maity, 1967, p. 64). The fact that the snow-capped Himalayas form the northern frontier of ‘Bengal’ has remained the most prominent geographical feature throughout the millennia. The small strip of land lying on the foothills of the Himalayas, running between the rivers Sankosh in the east and Tista in the west, marks the northern frontier of ‘Bengal’ and Puṇḍravardhana was a key historical-geographical unit of

this region. The districts of the north have been marked by coarser alluvium, river channels, and forested tracts. A thick forest covers the Western part of this region (Hoque, 2018, p. 98). The land given in this copperplate is probably situated in the bushy tract of the northern foothills of the Himalayas. This plate also referred to the donation of one Kulyāvapas of homestead land, which was located to the east of a tank and south of a lake. This plate contains significant geographic information, such as the earth, sunshine, forest, lake, tank, and Himalayas.

The Grant of Land in the Tāvīra District in the Gupta year 159 was issued to grant 22 Kulyāvapas of wasteland. It was deciphered and published in *Pratna Samiksha* by Arlo Griffith in 2018. The name of the location where this inscription was issued is sadly no longer available; Arlo Griffith recovered this plate from a shop selling antiques in Dhaka (Griffith, 2018, p. 30). There is hardly any geographic information found in this copperplate, except for the district Tāvīra and some villages, namely Vidalaka, Sannāhakuṭumbaka and Gacīkuṇṭaka.

Paharpur copperplate inscription of Gupta year 159 (479 CE) was discovered by K.N. Dikshit (Dikshit, 1929-30, p. 129) in Paharpur (Naogaon, Bangladesh) and published in *Epigraphia Indica*. This land charter involves the sale of 2.5 Kulyāvapas of fallow land to an individual for humanitarian purposes, issued from Puṇḍravardhana. The given lands were stated to be located in the villages of Vṛtagohālī, Pṛṣṭhimapottaka, Goṣātapuṅja, and Nitvagohālī. These villages belong to the subdivision of Palāśāṭṭa in the district of Nāgirāṭṭa in Dakṣiṇāmśaka. This plate holds several geographical and ecological indications. Different types of land in the villages are made apparent from the plate, including fallow, homestead, garden, and living quarters. The last verse warns the prospective confiscators that they would “become cobras and reside in parched tree holes of the waterless Vindhya forest” (Mukherji & Maity, 1967, p. 53). Furthermore, certain religious verses offer valuable insights into environmental issues by referencing the use of sandals, incense, and flowers in religious rites. The variations in land value between the two areas of North Bengal indicate that the land of one area was relatively more demanding than the other, most likely due to factors viz. urbanisation, fertility, etc. (Sircar, 1965, p. 347).

The Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Budha Gupta (482 CE?) was issued from the Gupta regional province of Puṇḍravardhana

for the sale of one Kulyāvapas of wasteland. This copperplate lacks relevant geographic information for this research other than the names of two villages and the measurements of the areas. Of them, Vāyi-grāma has now been identified with Bāigrām in the Dinajpur district (Mukherji & Maity, 1967, p. 58) and the other is Caṇḍagārama.

Nandapur Copperplate of the Gupta Year 169 (488 CE) was handed over to N.G. Majumder for decipherment and publication, and he published it in *Epigraphia Indica*, vol-xxiii. According to the available information, he stated that it was discovered in Nandapur, located on the northern bank of the Ganges in Monghyr, Bihar (Majumdar, 1935-36, p. 53). 4 Kulyāvapas of fallow land were sold to the inhabitants of Nanda-Vīthī by this charter. This tract was located in the village Jaṅgōyikā; however, the charter was issued from Ambila. Despite not being able to identify Ambila and Jaṅgōyikā, Majumder referred to Nanda-Vīthī as Nandapur, where the plate was spotted. He also argued that it might have been drafted, engraved, and issued from North Bengal because of its strong resemblances to Bāigrām and other plates discovered from the same region (Majumdar, 1935-36, p. 53-54).

Raktamala Copperplate Grant of the Gupta Era 180 (499 CE) was deciphered and published by D.P. Dubey & S. K. Acharya (2014) in the *Journal of History and Social Sciences*. It was issued during the reign of Vainyagupta and discovered in a village near Māhāsthān, Bogra. This plate gives some insights into the geographical units of the late Gupta period. Puṇḍravardhana is portrayed as a key territorial unit in this region. The beneficiaries resided in Pusvotika village, while the land was in Govardhanaka. Two important localities are mentioned in the copperplate: one is Khaḍḍi (small) Raktamālikā, and the other is Mahati (great) Raktamālā. The Brahmanas lived in the earlier locality, while non-Brahmanas inhabited the latter. These localities were under the jurisdiction of a district named Kuddālakhātā. The seal of this copperplate bears a pair of illustrations of a lotus and an elephant.

The second Raktamala Copperplate Grant of the Gupta Era was published by Arlo Griffith in *Pratna Samiksha* in 2018. This plate is partly corroded and it isn't possible to retrieve exact dating. Griffith opined that it must be issued in the second century of the Gupta era (Griffith, 2015, p. 34-35). Like the first plate of Raktamala, the recipients of this plot of land were the inhabitants of a village named Puśvotika, and the given land is

situated in Govardhanaka, Puṇḍravardhana. A new copperplate inscription of Vainyagupta dated 184 Gupta Era (503 CE) was deciphered by R. Furui and published in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. The exact provenance of the plate is unknown, but Furui recommends that it was issued from Samatata, a sub-region of 'Bengal' (2016).

“Welfare! From Krīpura, the victorious military camp with great ships, elephants and horses, Pañcādhikaraṇoparika Mhāpratīhāra Mahārāja the illustrious Vainyagupta, in a healthy state, being favoured by the feet of the supreme lord (Paramabhaṭṭāraka), tells present, future and other dependents on his feet, after wishing for their health (1-2)” (Furui, 2016, p. 662).

Probably, the word Krīpura was the earlier name of Comilla (Sen, 1942, p. 95) and the present name of the West Bengal state of Tripura, both lying in the Samatata. This copper plate revealed the existence of numerous villages in the region, which sets it apart from other Gupta plates.

Jayanāṭna, Pūbamaṇḍala, Jakkanaśāṭi, Heṣamakhalla, Ṣollavillagṛama, Makhaḍapatti, Jakkanaśāṭi, Pāyanāṭana, Ghidharāvadda, Ulagiuccālikā, Peraññaśaka, Arīuccāli, Kheṇṭavilla, Nagnapaṭṭoccalikā, Maramallatuṣappa, Gothāna, Ghomaśāka, Tyugroccālikā, Marameta, Peratyugra, Ambukarmāntika, Khaddatyugra, Khaddamattanoccalikā, Peragodamakotṭa, Udyātaśāṭi, Peravakaṭi, Uraṅgipaccālāgrahāra, Bhāśilaśāṭi, Pradyumna, Nademaka, Ghdhānika, Ūracaṇḍa, Vendāsyagrahāra, Ketogapaṭṭoccalikā, Phalaśapaṭṭikṣetra, Bhīmārikṣtra, Khaddatyugra, Svākaḡileraka, Vātagaṅgā, Unnatasāra, Dakṣiṇmaṇḍala, Taralacaṇḍa, Pūśanapaṭṭameta.

The land plots were transferred on twelve occasions; the witnesses to these transfers were listed with their names and addresses. The plate revealed particular geographical features of the region from where it was issued, featuring a river, forest, embankment, fort, storehouse, and cremation ground. References to ships are vital when outlining a region's environmental history, especially for Samatata, which is located on a coastal belt and relies significantly on waterways for transport, trade, and military activity. Furthermore, this plate mentions elephants and horses, incense, fragrance, oblation, milk, rice, etc.

Guṇaighar copperplate inscription of Vainya Gupta of the Gupta year 188 was deciphered and published in the *Indian Historical Quarterly* by

D.C. Bhattacharyya (1930). It was issued to donate eleven pātakas of uncultivated land in five plots. This inscription serves as a rich reservoir of information regarding the environment and geography. It mentioned about two ports, namely Cūdāmoni and Nagaśrī. Vatsa, one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas, is also referred to by the names of some villages, viz. Kānteudaka, Miduvilala, Guṇekāgrahāra, Pakkavilāla, Yajnarāta, Nādadaḍaka, etc. Several verses point to marshy land, channels, lakes and rivulets. Among the plants and animals found on this plate were tuskers, horses, roses, and elephants. In one verse, the mention of the word ‘medicine’ probably indicates the herbal means of treating diseases. The boundaries across the five plots are quite obvious. These boundary demarcations also provide valuable information on those days’ land management and geographical features (Sanyal, 2019). A look at the following illustrations on the boundary demarcations of the donated lands might help the readers comprehend better.

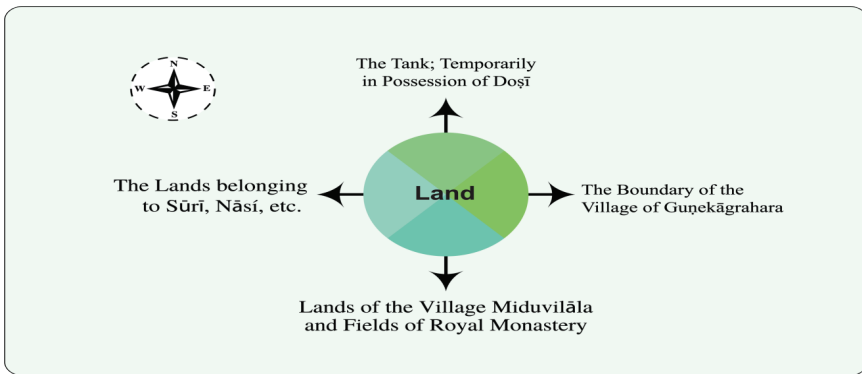


Figure 2: The demarcation lines of the first plot of land

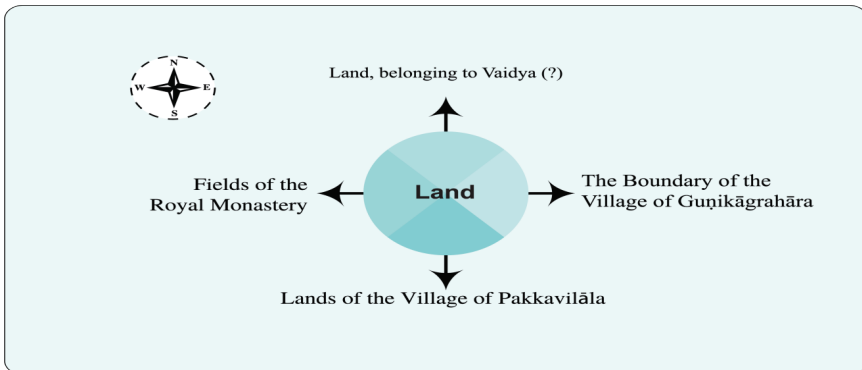


Figure 3: The demarcation lines of the second plot of land

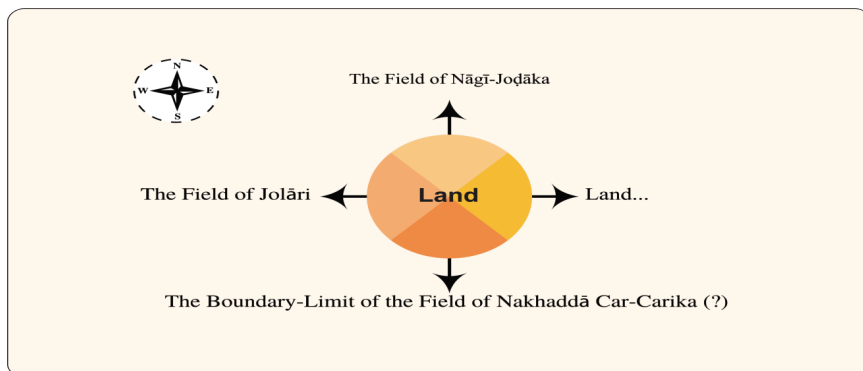


Figure 4: The demarcation lines of the third plot of land

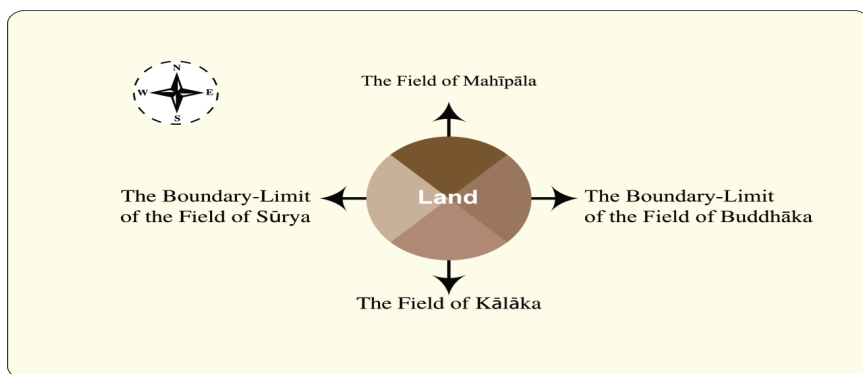


Figure 5: The demarcation lines of the fourth plot of land

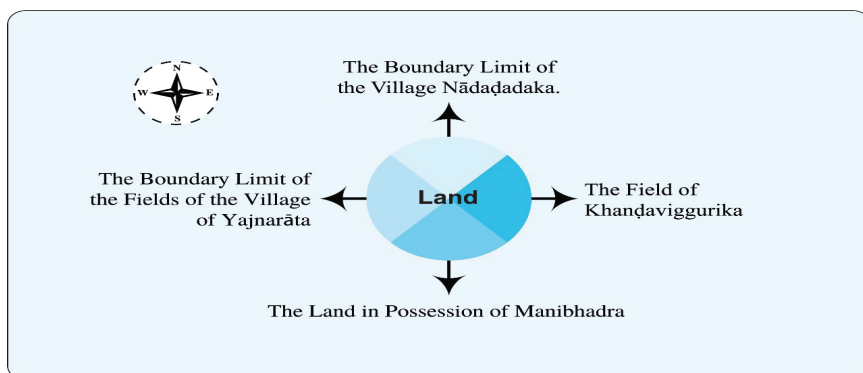


Figure 6: The demarcation lines of the fifth plot of land

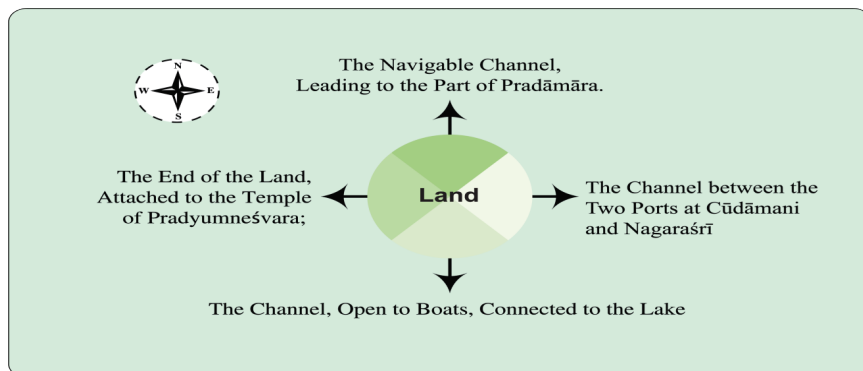


Figure 7: The demarcation lines of the lowlands belonging to a monastery

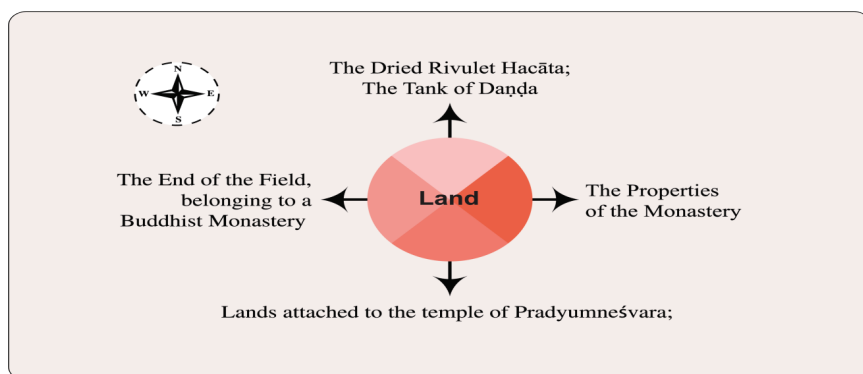


Figure 8: The demarcation lines of the water-logged waste, rent-free land

A Grant of Land to Monasteries at Sisipunja, Madhyamasrgalika and Gramakutagohali of the Gupta year 198 could not provide relevant data for the present research except a word describing the nature of the land, ‘waste’.

The Dāmodarpur copperplate in the 224 Gupta Era refers to the names of some territorial units, viz., Koṭivarṣa, Ayodhā, Svachandapāṭaka, Lavaṅgaskiā, Paraspatika, and Puraṇavṛndikari. One Kulyāvapas of fallow and untilled land was given through this charter.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of the history before the pre-pala period is often considered a complex and speculative endeavour, as the inhabitants of the ‘Bengal’ region probably had no motivation to preserve their deeds

and accomplishments. The source materials that have been recovered are mostly concentrated on political and religious issues. Historical scholarship on the geographical factors of the time frame in question is extremely rare. This research conglomerates the Gupta period copperplates found in Bengal. It sheds specific focus on the geographical factors to reveal the physical characteristics and environmental conditions as reflected in these plates. However, the results of these land charters did not provide a complete portrayal of the issues investigated. It would definitely be a rigorous attempt at the academic domain of historical geography that has been in demand to quench the thirst of history readers in the 21st century. Although this research is sound in its methodology, it does have some limitations. In some cases, the clarification and analysis of the classified information gathered from the copperplate inscription might have remained erroneous. Any scientific and methodical study on the copperplates of this period found in 'Bengal' in particular and 'India' in general may open up new avenues towards various perspectives on the early history of 'Bengal'.

Appendix

Dhānāidaha copperplate inscription of Kumāra Gupta I	
Administrative Centers	Khātāpāra (Viṣaya), Bhrātrkaṭaka (village)
Object	2 Kulyāvapas land
The Sultanpur copperplate inscription of Kumāragupta I	
Administrative Centers	Puṇḍravardhana (Bhukti), Pūrṇṇakausikā, Śṛṅgavēra (Vithi), Gōhāli (Mandala), Hastiśīraha, Vibhītakī, Gulmagandhikā, Dhānyapātalikā, Gulmandika, Tāpasapōttaka, Dayitāpōttaka, Chitravātaṅgara (Vill.)
Geographical Features	A River, An ancient moat, A pathway
Object	9 Kulyāvapas
Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of Śrī Kumāra Gupta I in the 124 Gupta Era (444 CE)	
Administrative Centers	Puṇḍravardhana (Province), Koṭivarṣa (District), 'Dōngā (Region)
Geographical Features	Untilled and unreclaimed jungle land, the 'earth', 'moon', 'sun', and 'stars'.
Object	1 Kulyāvapas of land
Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Śrī Kumāra Gupta I on the Gupta Year 128 (448 CE)	

Administrative Centers	Koṭīva, Puṇḍravardhana, Airāvata-Gorājya (village)
Geographical Features	Canal
Object	5 drōṇas of land
Bāigrām Copperplate Inscription of the Gupta Year 128 (448 CE)	
Administrative Centers	Trivṛta & Śrīgohālī (two localities), Bāigrām (village)
Geographical Features	Shrubless and fallow, the moon, sun and star
Flora & Fauna	chaff and charcoal, Flower
Object	3.1 Kulyāvapas land
Jagadishpur Plate of the Gupta Year 128 (447 CE)	
Administrative Centers	Pūrṇṇakauśikā (Head Quarter), Śrīngavēra (vithi), Gulmagandhikā and Sarhgohalikā (villages)
Geographical Features	Pond, Tank
Object	Gifted one Kulyāvapas fallow land
Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Budha Gupta (476-495 CE)	
Administrative Centers	Koṭivarṣa, Puṇḍravardhana. Ḍongāgramā
Geographical Features	The forest region of Himavacchikhara (the summit of the Himalayas), the earth, sunshine, forest, lake, tank, and Himalayas.
Object	The sale of 11 Kulyāvapas land
The Grant of Land in the Tāvīra District in the Gupta year 159	
Administrative Centers	Tāvīra (the district), Vidalaka, Sannāhakuṭumbaka, Gacīkuṇṭṭaka (villages)
Object	The grant of 22 Kulyāvapas of wasteland
Paharpur copperplate inscription of Gupta year 159 (479 C. E.)	
Administrative Centers	Puṇḍravardhana, Vaṭagohālī, Prṣṭhimapoṭṭaka, Goṣāṭapuṇja and Nitvagohālī (villages), Palāsāṭta (subdivision), Nāgiraṭṭa (district), Dakṣiṇāmśaka (subdivision)
Geographical Features	Fallow, homestead, garden and dwelling sites.
Flora & Fauna	Cobras, parched tree holes, waterless Vindhya forest, sandals, incense and flowers
Object	the sale of 2.5 Kulyāvapas of fallow land
Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of Budha Gupta (482 CE)	
Administrative Centers	Vāyi-grāma, Caṇḍagārama
Object	The sale of one Kulyāvapas of wasteland

Nandapur Copperplate of the Gupta Year 169 (488)	
Administrative Centers	Nanda-Vīthī, Ambila, Jaṅgōyikā (village)
Object	4 Kulyāvapas of fallow land
Raktamala Copperplate Grant of the Gupta Era 180	
Administrative Centers	Puṇḍravardhana, Govardhanaka, Puśvotika, Khaḍḍi (small) Raktamālika and the other is Mahati (mahati) Raktamala, Kuddālakhātā (district)
Flora & Fauna	A lotus and an elephant.
A New copperplate inscription of Vainyagupta in the 184 Gupta Era (503 CE)	
Administrative Centers	Kṛīpura, Jayanāṭna, Pūbamaṇḍala, Jakkanaśāṭi, Heṣamakhalla, Ṣollavillagṛāma.....
Geographical Features	River, forest, embankment, fort, storehouse, and cremation ground
Flora & Fauna	Elephants, horses, incense, oblation, milk and rice
Dāmodarpur copperplate in the 224 Gupta Era	
Administrative Centers	Koṭivarṣa, Ayodhā, Svachhandapāṭaka, Lavaṅgaskia, Paraspatika, and Puraṇavṛndikari
Object	One Kulyāvapas of fallow and untilled land
Gunaighar Copperplate Inscription of Vainya Gupta-Gupta year 188 (507 BC).	
Administrative Centers	Kṛīpura (Tripura), Kānteudaka (Village)- Northern territorial division, Vatsa (One of the Sixteen Mahajanapadas), Miduvilala, Guṇekāgrahāra, Pakkavilāla, Yajnarāta, Nādadadaka (Vill), Cūdāmoni and Nagaśri (Two Ports)
Geographical Features	Water-Logged, Waste Land, The Tank, Fields, Lands, Channel, Lakes, dried rivulet Hacata; the tank of Danda
Flora & Fauna	Tuskers, Horses, Flower, Food, Medicines, Elephant
Object	Eleven patakas of uncultivated lands in five plots
Dāmodarpur Copperplate Inscription of the time of ** Gupta (543 CE)	
Administrative Centers	Koṭivarṣa (District), Ayodhā, Svachhandapāṭaka, Lavaṅgaskia, Paraspatika, and Puraṇavṛndikari (Villeges)
Geographical Features	Earth, fallow and untilled land, forest, river Jambū
Flora & Fauna	Cow, incense, flowers, madhuparka & horse
Object	One Kulyāvapas of fallow and untilled land

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