

A Glorious Past: An Overview of the Janapadas of North Bengal

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Abstract: *Bengal's rich history is a tapestry of diverse regions, each bearing its unique name and significance. North Bengal, a part of this vibrant mélange, has undergone multiple transformations throughout the ages, influenced by a complex interplay of historical, geographical, and political factors. This paper narrates the ever-changing fortunes of North Bengal, with a particular focus on three distinct regions, Kasba and Tejpur, the janapada of Domohoni and Bandargachh. In the pre-Independence era, North Bengal, encompassing the districts under both the regions of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling, was not merely a geographical entity but an exclusive and vast territory. Its natural diversity, marked by numerous rivers, expensive forests, and fertile farmlands, gave rise to several Janapadas (small regions) and vibrant communities.*

The historical trajectory unfolds, illustrating how different empires and state powers, from the Mughals to the British, left their indelible imprints on North Bengal. This paper seeks to delve deeper into this unique matrix, emphasizing the less-known aspects of local history, based on both oral-aural and written sources.

Keywords: Kasba, Tajpur, Domohoni, Bandargachh, Railways, Urbanization.

Bengal had no specific name in the ancient past. Different regions of Bengal were known by different names from time to time. Similarly North Bengal, as a part of Bengal was also known by different names at different times. Districts under Jalpaiguri Sub-division were known as North Bengal in post post-independence era, though not on administrative grounds. From ancient times one of the important characteristics of North Bengal was its natural diversity. Due to innumerable rivers, vast and dense forest land from North to South and fertile farming land of South, many Janapadas were brought up in North Bengal along with the dominance of different communities. From ancient to modern times Bengal's eminency flourished with the contribution of every region of North Bengal. This region was the centre of many kinds of religions and on the other hand, many political, cultural and economic developments took place in different times. Many

places in North Bengal gained importance with the emergence and establishment of Kirat, Kochkamata, Pal-Sen, Sultan, Mughal, Bhutan and the English from time to time. Their important trends of developments contributed by several regimes which had reflected in many areas from North to South of present North Bengal.

Emergence of Kasba and Tajpur

From the ancient to modern ages many towns and cities emerged and developed in India due to different reasons. The ancient Harappa civilization was the first example of town planning with unique characteristics in India but the fact cannot be denied that the Sultani rules in the Middle Ages were instrumental in introducing exclusive town planning in India. However, the influence of Sultani rules was not felt in Bengal in its town planning. The Gaur in Bengal became famous like Delhi and Lahore in the ancient and Middle Ages; but the contribution of the Sultani rules was not seen in the development of Gaur, because Gaur and Pundrabardhan (ancient North Bengal) were very important from the political point of view from ancient times. It is to be mentioned that proper urbanization in Bengal began with the Mughals.

Humayun, the Mughal ruler nominally occupied Gaur or Bengal in 1538. During the time of Emperor Akbar Bengal directly came under the Mughals by the eminent Mughal commander in chief Munim Khan on 3rd March, 1575.¹ From that time Gaur gained importance as the capital of Bengal and subsequently many small regions came up both for the convenience of administration and war. Tanda in Murshidabad was the capital of Bengal before Munim's victory over Bengal. Munim shifted the capital of Bengal from Tanda to Gaur. Emperor Akbar constituted Sube Bangla or Bengal province comprising 24 units which was more extensive than the province of Bengal under the British Government. The newly constituted units of Bengal were alike the modern-day districts.

The English East India Company began the process of the formation of districts for their administrative ease. The first district was Dinajpur (at present a large number of parts belong to Bangladesh) under the English East India Company which was gradually taking shape as the town of Dinajpur. However, before the process of urbanization under the British, a district called Tajpur was formed about 200 years ago in 1587 during Akbar's time in the North West of present Raiganj town of the present North Dinajpur district. The Mughal rulers were determined to occupy Tajpur at any cost because of its geographical and economic importance. They defeated and killed the affluent Afghan Sardar Tahir Ilachak in 1574 and annexed it.² The Mughals renovated Tajpur and converted it into a city and district. At present Tajpur has lost its glory and remains with the ruins of the Mughal period which is turned into a small village of losing its former eminence and importance. It is to be noted that it is not unnatural because, from the historical perspective, many important places famous for their administrative and economic importance had to face the same fate.

The influence and the stronghold of the Mughals were visibly present in the North of Gaur. The mention of Ramoti or Ramavati in *Ain-i-Akbari* helps us to determine the location of Amati in the present day of Itahar under the North Dinajpur district.³ Therefore, it can be said that at once a town prospered in Itahar at Amati. Not only Tajpur or Amati, many small towns grew up adjacent to Raiganj in the district of present North Dinajpur under the influence of the Mughal rulers like Kasba, Taherpur, Altapur and Hematabad. From the name itself, the Muslim influence can easily be traced in these places because of the favourable geographical locations, Raiganj and its surrounding areas were famous for their agricultural abundance at that time which attracted the gluttonous eyes of the Sultani and the Mughal rulers. Therefore, the Mughal rulers constituted small towns or Kasba in this region for the better collection of revenue.

Kasba is a vivid example of the Mughal ruler's interest in urbanisation. Kasba is a Persian word which means a small city. Nizamuddin Ahmed mentioned during Akbar's regime wide-scale urbanization started in India. He mentioned that during the time of Akbar 120 cities and 3200 small towns came out in India.⁴ Emperor Akbar not only divided the Mughal Kingdom into 15 provinces for administrative ease but also divided each province into many Subas headed by a provincial Governor. Akbar divided Bengal into 24 Subas or districts out of which 6 were in Dinajpur region. Jannatabad Suba in Dinajpur was constituted of Banshihari in present South Dinajpur and some parts of Gangarampur in present South Dinajpur whereas Tajpur Suba was under Raiganj in present North Dinajpur.⁵ Kasba in Raiganj also grown up as a small town at that time. The present North and South Dinajpur districts were famous not only for their rich architectural values but also as important district towns and small towns.

The growth of Kasba was instrumental in maintaining law and order in the Tajpur Suba as well as for establishing the Mughal Supremacy in the region. The Mughal rulers were very conscious of Bengal because of its special characteristics. They realised the need to promote Kasba for a better collection of revenue. They preferred to promote these places as towns where at least 40% of the population was Muslim but Kasba in Raiganj was an exception to this theory. It cannot be denied that over time, Muslim habitation increased in places like Taherpur, Tajpur, Altapur and Hematabad regions. Many Masjids, Graveyards and Idgahs are still present at these places representing the memory of the Muslim rules though in the ruined conditions.

Bengal's first Mofussil Civil Court was established in Tajpur during the Mughal period. The entire Dinajpur region or Haveli Panjra comprising Malda, Rajshahi (now in Bangladesh) and some parts of Purnea came under the Civil Court.⁶ The Civil Court was shifted to Dinajpur (Bangladesh) after the formation of the Dinajpur district under Colonial rule. Changes of administration by the British company in the administrative field, the places of importance in the Mughal period lost their relevance and values.⁷ As a result, Tajpur disappeared from the map because of new administrative

measures taken by the British and Kasba lost its relevance. Consequently, both Tajpur and Kasba lost their glory and gradually turned into small places. But at the time of pre-independence, Kasba became a busy place of Raiganj with the increase in habitation. After independence, an army cantonment, schools and petrol pump were established in Kasba but Tajpur at present exists as a small and unknown village losing its earlier glory. Neither the history of these two places is not much known nor is there any mention in the national history as places of importance. Naturally, the question crops up why the Mughal rulers promoted these places as important cities whereas they did not like Bengal whether politically or geographically. The Mughals had always in their mind the revenue generated from the land of Bengal. The maximum share revenue deposited in the Mughal treasury came from Bengal. The documents of the Mughal period mentioned Bengal as *Zinnat-ul-belt* meant a heaven on earth or a heaven on the land of India because of its economic prosperity.⁸ Dinajpur region was considered the heaven on land in Bengal due to its fertile land and favourable climate, Dinajpur was always famous as a source of abundant grain. This was the reason that the Mughal rulers obtained the lion's share of the revenue from this part of Bengal. Therefore, the Mughal rulers by developing these twin cities Tajpur adjacent to the Nagar River and Kasba situated South of Tajpur wanted to ensure their revenue from both North and South. As a result, Tajpur and Kasba got the distinction of being important towns under the Mughals. It may not be out of place to mention that many new unknown facts come to light in future with further research on these two important places of Dinajpur.

Emergence of Domohoni as Railway Town near Teesta River

A place gains importance with time due to geographical, economic political or administrative reasons. Similarly, its importance declines with time. Such is the story of Domohoni, a Janpad on the bank of Teesta under the police station of Maynaguri in Jalpaiguri district. The British did not show much interest towards the Northern part of Bengal for about a century during their rule in Bengal. They considered the Northern part of North Bengal as a place not fit for habitation, meant for devils. But it requires to be mentioned that the geographical picture of this region was different from other parts of Bengal. This part did not belong to Bengal till the second half of the 19th century. Though the whole of Bengal came under colonial rule in 1780, this part of Bengal remained neglected for about a century. This area was under the western Dooars. Dooars means door or entry point. It was the only entry point for the Tibetans and Bhutanese to come down to the plains. The Tibetans extended their influence over Dooars in the 8th and 9th centuries which later on came under the control of Bhutan. The Bhutanese traded with Coochbehar and Rangpur through Dooars from the 17th century till the Anglo-Bhutan war. The names like Rajabhatkhawa and Bhotpatti remind us of the influence of Bhutan and Tibet in the region at that time. There is a Bhutia market in Rangpur Bangladesh.

The Britishers established Janapadas for their own interest in the second half of the 19th century in this region. They promoted the western Dooars region of North Bengal because of its strategic location and huge business opportunities. The Britishers stopped the entry of the Bhutanese in western Dooars in 1865 in apprehension of the Bhutanese attack and converted it into a safe zone. Jalpaiguri District was formed in 1869 combining scantily populated Western Dooars and some parts of Rangpur after the Anglo-Bhutan war in 1865. At that time there were no important Janapadas in this region.

Maynaguri under the Bhutanese rulers was the most important place till Jalpaiguri District was created. The Colonial government divided the Western Dooars into four tahasils or important places; out of which Maynaguri, Falakata and Alipurduar were the large ones.⁹ The Deputy Commissioner shifted the administrative headquarters from Maynaguri to Jalpaiguri. Therefore, the importance of Maynaguri as an administrative Centre declined. However, the British government brought Maynaguri and its large pieces of land under the Jotedari system. As a result, places like Singimari, Bolbari, Chatrapara, Basusuba, Chhobabari and Domohoni came under the Jotedari system.

Domohoni is situated at a distance of 3 miles from Mynaguri of Jalpaiguri District. In order to visit places like Lataguri, Chalsa, Malbazar, Gorumara, and Murti which are rich in natural beauty, Domohoni lies on the way. It attracted the attention of the British rulers not only for its location but the natural beauty adjacent to the Teesta River also charmed them. The Britishers entered the Western Dooars for the introduction of Tea - garden in 1874 and the Railway services in 1879. The Britishers realised the importance of a developed communication system. Track for rail lines were laid by utilising the vast forest land of Dooars and Domohoni was identified as an important place for Railway communication. Consequently, the economic scenario of the region was completely changed. Timber and jute trade brought prosperity to this region. Domohoni and the Western Dooars started vibrating with life. Transportation of timber flourished through rivers like Teesta, Jaldhaka, Mujnai, Torsha, Kaljani and Sankosh of Western Dooars. For the convenience in timber trade, the English traders established many timber- depots in the Northern regions of North Bengal. The English traders also established a timber depot in Domohoni in the eighth decade of the 19th century. Jalpaiguri District was connected with three Railway services North Bengal State Railway, Bengal Dooars Railway and Coochbehar State Railway at that time. Domohoni came under the Bengal Dooars Railway. The construction work of the Bengal Dooars Railway began in 1891.

Domohoni Railway station was ready by 6th March, 1893.¹⁰ Construction work of 3 extended Railway lines under the Bengal Dooars Railway was undertaken from 1898 to 1899, the important one being between Domohoni and Lalmanihat covering a distance of 75 miles. The distance between Barnesh and Domohoni was 9 miles whereas the distance

between Barnesh to Barneshghat was one mile. Goods trains as well as passenger train was introduced between Domohoni and Barneshghat in 1933-34.¹¹ There was no bridge over the Teesta River at that time. The communication from Barneshghat was through the Railway and from Jalpaiguri to Haldibari was through the boat. The main office of the Railway manager of Bengal Dooars Railway was at Barnesh junction. Within a few times, the office was shifted to Domohoni and till the last day of the Colonial rule remained at Domohoni. It will not be out of place to recall that the railway track of Bengal Dooars Railway occupied an important place among the Britishers because it was the third largest contributor to the income from the railway during the Colonial rule in India.¹²

Domohoni turned into an important Janapada during the Colonial rule due to the Railway industry. Therefore, a railway workshop was established in Domohoni. At the same time, infrastructure consisting of roads, schools, marketplaces, offices of Railway, bungalow for Railway officers and staff quarters also developed. Domohoni turned into a neat and clean Janapada the location of the main administrative office of Bengal Dooars railway. The British bungalows for the railway officials were very attractive to look at as each Bungalow had a tennis court. Red-coloured housing at a row was provided to the native Railway employees which are now in a decayed condition.

People from Eastern Bengal and South Bengal came as labourers and employees to join the Railway. Even people from far-off places like Dhaka, Khulna, Katwa, Ichhapur and Assam came to Domohoni to work in the Railways. Many local people also join them as labourers and staff of the Railways. Many Marwari businessmen also came to Domohoni because it gained importance as the headquarters of the Bengal Dooars Railway. Five to Six Marwari families lived in Domohoni at that time and were associated with the grain trade. The Marwaris also established 6 to 7 jute Godowns, tobacco Godowns and many paddy Godowns. Two Famous Marwari wholesalers were Tarachand Barodiya and Hansraj Basraj.¹³ Jute was carried from Domohoni to Barneshghat. Tobacco was transported to Lalmanirhat from Domohoni through Rail-services and dry Chilly from Adatmari station came to Domohoni through Rail.¹⁴ A big market grew in Domohoni during the British period. There was 10 to 12 goods shops catering to the needs of the Britishers. Besides these, there were about 100 shops in Domohoni taking care of the needs of the common people. It was also the main market for the Labourers of the nearby tea gardens. Domohoni became a busy town during the British period within a decade of the settlement of the Colonials.

There was a short route connecting Jalpaiguri to Domohoni via the North Bank of Teesta. Dughat was 4 km from Jalpaiguri and then a further 2 km was Domohoni.¹⁵ Thus the total distance between Jalpaiguri and Domohoni was 6 km. This short route was very useful in the seasons of winter and summer but very painful in the rainy season. There was no pucca road in the entire Jalpaiguri District till 1895.¹⁶ The communication between Jalpaiguri and Maynaguri was through a 3 km kutchra road. The

road construction in North Bengal was undertaken by the British in the 20th century. Metal roads were constructed and repaired between Lataguri and Maynaguri via Domohoni covering a distance of near about 12 miles in 1921.

Domohini was connected to Jalpaiguri not only through road but also through ferry- services. There was a regular ferry service between Domohoni and Paharpur at that time.¹⁷ A project report was prepared to upgrade the irrigation services to utilise hydroelectric power by building a dam on the Teesta River and to promote irrigation facilities in Domohoni by making canals and barrage before partition.¹⁸

Many Railway offices were set up in Domohoni in 1917 along with the self-sufficient headquarters of Bengal Dooars Railway (B.D.R). The railway workshop and loco shed were established on the opposite side of the present Railway station building. At least seven or eight engines could be housed in the loco shed. They were prepared after mechanical examination, which continued till two decades after independence. This loco shed was completely shut in 1978 and was shifted to Malbazar. The office of permanent Inspector, a coal-operated powerhouse and an RPF Training Centre were also set up at Domohoni. An Englishman Mr. T. H. Birds Tarzan was in charge of the training centre at Domohoni for some time even after the partition. Many Britishers came to Domohoni from time to time for the operation of the Bengal Dooars Railway; notable among them were Mr Palhoyel, Mr Reid, Mr Billy and Mr Gipps. Mr Gipps was also famous for his hunting skills. The bungalow of Mr Gipps still exists in front of the Palhoyel School. Most of the Indians were engaged in lowly jobs such as labourers, Khalasi, Gangsman, and Coachmen or operating upper gear, lower gear, Dynamo maintenance and powerhouse running. The salary of a Khalasi or Gangsman varied from Rs. 7 to Rs. 12 depending on their skills. The salary of skilled workers varied from Rs. 30 to Rs. 40 and that of a higher level employee varied from Rs. 50 to Rs. 60. At the time of partition a labourer used to draw a salary of Rs. 70 along with ration. After judging the competence of a worker his salary was further reduced if required. Therefore, the workers of the Domohoni Railway office were trying to be united. The Railway workers of Domohoni formed a Railway Labour Union in 1930 in order to protest against the curtailment of their wages. The railway authorities were forced to take back the decision to reduce the salary of the workers under pressure from the movement of the labour Union and gave their approval to recognise the Union. The movement by the railway workers at Domohoni was the first labour movement in North Bengal. This movement of the Railway workers later inspired the tea garden workers and farmers to unite.

The partition of India was a bolt from the blue for Domohoni. The dark clouds could be seen on the Western bank of Teesta. Five Police stations of Jalpaiguri-Boda., Panchagar, Debiganj, Patgram and Tetulia came under East Pakistan.¹⁹ A large section of Bengal Dooars Railway Barnesh to Lalmanirhat was cut off from Jalpaiguri District as Patgram has gone to East Pakistan.

Barneshghat-Domohoni railway line was removed in 1954. Newmal-Changrabandha Railway line was also closed in 1968 after the devastating flood. The Railway Town Domohoni which grew rapidly as it was catered to the commercial economic interest of the Britishers, suddenly met with the jolt and turned into a lame Janapada. The devastating flood in 1968 came as a Giant natural disaster within two decades of partition which eroded the Railway, the symbol of British pride. Though floods are not uncommon in these areas Teesta has threatened the people of these areas since the beginning which is evident from the proofs and records. Domohoni was badly affected by floods in 1881, 1892, 1902, 1996 and 1968. The floods of 1902 and 1906 were dangerous but the flood of 1968 exceeded all. The flood of Teesta in 1902 completely submerged Gazoldoba and caused extensive damage to the Domohoni railway station. About 200 metres of flood water completely ruined the Domohoni railway station and the railway track up to Maynaguri was badly disrupted. The Northern side of the Domohoni railway station was severely affected by the flood of 1906. Large losses of human lives and cattle were reported. The flood of 1968 still remains an object of terror to the people of Jalpaiguri and Domohoni. The flood water entered the Southern part submerging Maynaguri and breaking all barriers. The dam on the South East of Domohoni became extinct. After annihilating the railway station and quarters of Domohoni, flood water entered Maynaguri. The curse of partition and floods at regular intervals completely eroded the very existence of Domohoni.

Though business interest was uppermost in the mines of the Colonial rulers, still they came forward for the development of this Railway Town. Besides Railways, they were instrumental in promoting education, culture and sports activities. Bengal Dooars Railway had its own football team. Meritorious players were given jobs in the Railways. Therefore, football games of higher standard were played in Domohoni. Many famous footballers of Calcutta Clubs played in the team of Bengal Dooars Railway. Notable among them are Suresh Roy, Mozzamel Haque and Biman Nandi who played simultaneously for Calcutta Clubs and Bengal Dooars Railway.²⁰ Many renowned football players worked in Bengal Dooars Railway at that time.

There was no high school at Domohoni till 1927. Palhoyel High School was established in 1927 with the efforts of Mr Palhoyel, a culturally sensitive person. Uday Chandra Dutta, a Zamindar of this region donated the land for the establishment of the school.

There was a separate hostel for Hindu and Muslim students of Palhoyel High School. Both the school and hostels were run by the financial aid received from the British railway company. In order to enhance the beauty of the entry gate of Palhoyel School, mango and litchi trees were planted on both sides. These trees still stand tall reminding the golden days of the past. There was a Railway Institute near the present railway station building. The Britishers often came there with their families for the purpose of entertainment. Domohoni was not only the seal of Western culture and

education but the Indian culture and languages also existed side by side. A Sanskrit tol was also set up in Domohoni. There were five Sanskrit Tols in Jalpaiguri District and Domohoni Tol was the foremost among them.²¹ The childhood days of many renowned Scholars and Politicians are associated with this place. The childhood days of famous mathematician Keshav Chandra Nag and Poet Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay were spent in Domohoni.²² The former Chief Minister Jyoti Basu stayed at Domohoni for many years in order to strengthen the railway workers. On the other hand, the dead bodies of 13 martyrs of the Tebhaga Movement were laid on the platform of Domohoni station.

This Railway Town was established to promote the Colonial interest of the Britishers but has gradually lost its importance since the Partition. However, within a decade after partition, an attempt was made to construct a barrage over Teesta to control its flow and to make channels for facilitating irrigation in the region. After the construction of a bridge over Teesta in 1965, the communication between Domohoni and Jalpaiguri via Maynaguri has become easy and fast. On the basis of infrastructure development in the small Janpada during the British period, it was declared a non-municipal town in 1961 under the Jalpaiguri District, even at that time it enjoyed an important place as the centre for business and commerce with a population figure of 9064. According to the 1971 census, its population was reduced by 1500 after the devastating flood of 1968. As per the Census 2011, Domohoni consists of an area of 273.2 hectares with 368 householders and its population is 1505.

At present Domohoni is merely a station on Newmal-Changrabandha section under N.F. Railway under Maynaguri outpost. Domohoni has been given the status of a town in the census of 1961 and 1971. Most of the people are not urban as far as livelihood is concerned. Though it is not a Municipal town it consists of Domohoni Anchal-I and Domohoni Anchal-II comprising 11 Gram Panchayat. There are no major offices here except the Panchayat office, Central Bank, Post Office and land revenue office. In Maynaguri a college was established under Domohini Anchal-I in 1999. The Palhoyel High School has been upgraded to a higher secondary school but it is no more under the Railway administration. It is a recognised School under the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. The school was shifted to New Jalpaiguri in 1980 under the name of Domohini High School. There are a girls' school, a junior high school, and 6 primary schools besides Palhoyel School in Domohoni. The travel between Domohoni and Jalpaiguri became convenient after the construction of a pucca road in 1987 over the Teesta dam. Besides this, the travel from Jalpaiguri to Lataguri, Chalsa and Malbazar has also become shorter through this road. Most of the people in Domohoni are farmers. The number of salaried people is very less and most of them work in Jalpaiguri, Maynaguri and Siliguri. Landless people work as daily wage labourers in Jalpaiguri and Maynaguri in the hope of earning more, Labourers migrate to other states as there is a lack of job opportunities here. At present about 500 families belonging to the Kairvarta

community reside near the bank of Teesta. Catching and selling fish is their only source of livelihood. They sell fish in the old market of Domohoni, Maynaguri, Paharpur and Jalpaiguri. Many of them also work as farmers as their second profession. They grow crops near the river bank of Teesta. At present, there are two markets in Domohoni and the number of shops is around 125.²³ The railway authorities transferred its employee from Domohoni to Alipurduar and New Jalpaiguri in 1981 and from 1987 the railway movement at Domohoni came to a halt, but the RPF Training Centre is still running. Local people can earn a bit because of this training Centre. There is a bi-weekly Bazar at Domohoni every Sunday and Wednesday. Local trade is carried out through this Bazaar. A branch line from Domohoni goes to Assam. A DMU Bamanhat passenger train runs through this branch line. A new track has been laid from Changrabandha to New Mal via Domohoni and the railway station has been renovated. The Travel on the Bengal Dooars Railway was full of excitement at the time. Passengers were charmed by the natural beauty while travelling from Domohoni to Malbazar from Lataguri to Ramsai or from Domohoni to Chalsa or Malbazar up to Madarihahat. If new train services are introduced, passengers will get an opportunity to enjoy the rare natural beauty of the region and at the same time, the Janpada which has seen golden days may get a new lease of life.

History is intertwined with the place Phansidewa or Bandargachh

There is a place called Bandargachh to the north of the present Phansidewa. Bandargachh along the Mahananda River had a different look and very popular area in the pre-independence era. The name of the port itself suggests that this popularity was centred on the river transport system. Once the Mahananda River had enough navigability, big boats were plying in the Mahananda River. Reports from the late 19th century indicate the Mahananda's high tides and shipping during the monsoons. Not far from Bandargachh is the Tantulia region of Dinajpur. When Siliguri did not attain the status of Mahakuma, i.e., from the first decade of the 20th century to the partition of the country in 1947, the importance of this port was immense. River transport, proximity to Dinajpur and substantial production of agricultural products such as rice, jute, mustard, dal etc. were cultivated by local Rajbanshis and Kaivartas communities. It is pertinent to mention that the Rajbanshis were mainly agriculturists and the Kaivartas were fishermen who were primarily associated with the agricultural and fishing economy of the region. Apart from this, there were people of undivided Bengal who are now called East Bengal people.

Phansidewa is located very close to this port. During the British period, Phansidewa was an important place for education, law etc. From the statistics, it is known that until 1941 the population of Phansidewa was more than that of Siliguri.²⁴ In 1864, the British established the headquarters of the Terai Subdivision at Phansidewa. In 1865, the first Middle English school was established at Phansidewa. This Middle English school was the only one in Phansidewa in the entire Terai region. Many students from undivided

Bengal used to come to study in this school. The British also built a bungalow house at Phansidewa. From 1864 to 1880, Terai Sub-Division Headquarters was the administrative office of the British at Hanskhawa under Phansidera.²⁵ Lawyers used to go from Siliguri to Phansidewa court for litigation.²⁶ The headquarters of the Deputy Magistrate and the office of the Deputy Collector were shifted from Phansidewa to Siliguri in 1880 as a result of the expansion of the North Bengal State Railway. Darjeeling Himalayan Railway started from Siliguri in 1881. Shifting the headquarters or office of the Deputy Magistrate from Phansidewa to Siliguri was not liked by the common people due to the weather and climate of Siliguri.²⁷ But the businessmen welcomed these facilities for the sake of trading. The importance of Phansidewa was greatly diminished by the establishment of the railway at Siliguri and the communication with Darjeeling by rail. It is thought that the ferry between old Siliguri i.e. present-day Jalpaimore to Phulbari area and Phansidewa was very active during monsoon.

3 km away from the present Hanskhawa tea garden there is a high mound near Bhojnarayaan tea garden. Hanging was done here according to the folklore of the area. Elders of the region say that their forefathers heard that criminal Bhutanese officials were hanged here as punishment.²⁸ This is why the place is named Phansidewa. On the other hand, there is a legend that in the past criminals were hanged on a jackfruit tree by the Mahananda River in Bandargach. The locals believe that the origin of the name Phansidewa is related to that wanton practice. That particular jackfruit tree does not exist anymore. A huge Banyan tree has now replaced the old Jackfruit tree. There is a three-tier altar under the tree, known as *Phansidewar Than* to the local people. The other side across the river Mahananda from this *Phansidewar Than* is Tentulia Thana of Panchagarh District of Bangladesh. Today, the site of *Phansidewar Than* is pushed across the barbed wire into the Indo-Bangladesh border area and an Indian border guard camp has been established. The area is now heavily guarded by Indian border guards.

The Phansidewa or Bandargach region was very important to the British both militarily and commercially. The Britishers realized this importance a century before the British took over Morang. Looting and dacoity were rampant in North Bengal after the Great Famine of 1770 that ravaged unbroken Bengal, and this led to revolts by Sannyasis and fakirs. Although the Sannyasis' main business was trading, they also carried on a moneylending business. Farmers and even landlords in North Bengal depended on Sannyasis for money loans. As a result of the famine, they realized that it was no longer possible to get back the lakhs of money owed to them, so they resorted to looting and robbery to get back the invested money. Fakirs joined them. In the southern part of North Bengal especially in the Dinajpur region from the middle of the seventeenth century i.e. from the time of Shah Suja, the shelter of fakirs was built. East Morang was full of deep forests. Bandargachh or Phansidewa of eastern Morang was forested. Rivers were the only means of communication at that time. To the

west of Phansidewa, the Mahananda River was the boundary line and the only link between Dinajpur and Purnia. The Sannyasi and Fakir Rebellions occurred soon after the 1770s. The lax administration of Sikkim at that time and the political and administrative unrest caused by the annexation of Sikkim by Bhutan led to the development of a hermitage of Sannyasis and fakirs at Phansidewa. Rebellious Sannyasis and fakirs used to come to the Phansidewa region from Dinajpur on the Mahananda route. At that time, both sides of the Mahananda River were full of forests. Some Sannyasis with the surname Giri reside still in a small village in Phansidewa, claiming to be the descendants of the rebel Sannyasis. It is historically evident that some of the Sannyasis who participated in the Sannyasi rebellion were hanged here. Hence Phansidewa by the river Mahananda and Tentulia port on the other side became the free refuge of the rebel Sannyasis. Captain Jones of the English East India Company felt the military importance of the area and requested Warren Hastings to occupy the area to quell the attacks by Sannyasi and Fakirs. Once the shelter and court of Sannyasi, this place is known as SannyasiSthana to the locals, bordering the river Mahananda to the west of Phansidewa. That is, history testifies that this place near Mahananda of Phansidewa is a place steeped in antiquity. In ancient times this region belonged to Paundravardhana. The place names of Mahipala and Bhimbhar near Phansidewa, are considered a name related to ancient history. On the other hand, it is assumed that the Pal and Sen kings of Bengal extended their rule in this region of Terai. Renowned historian Dr. Ananda Gopal Ghosh writes that during the rule of the Pala kings of Bengal, this region was the frontier territory of Gaur.

Phansidewa was a part of the British-occupied area known as East Morang. According to researchers, the region between the Mahananda and Mechi Rivers belonged to Eastern Morang. Until the 16th century, Eastern Morang was under the rule of the Raikat of Baikunthapur under Cooch Behar.²⁹ Previous to that period, Eastern Morang was under Sikkim and in the middle of the 17th century, a representative of Sikkim, looked after the administration of Phansidewa and collected taxes on behalf of the king of Sikkim. However, in the 18th century, Sikkim lost this region to the king of Bhutan. But could not hold it back for long. Meanwhile, a powerful nation-state rose in Nepal under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah and an aggressive Nepalese army occupied Eastern Morang. Then Nepal started raiding Sikkim continuously and looting. Nepal did not stop attacking Sikkim but started plundering the East India Company's territories in the southern part of the Mahananda. During this time the Governor General of the East India Company, Warren Hastings, became keenly interested in trade with Tibet. This region of North Bengal was the only route for the British to trade with Tibet.³⁰ When Sikkim asked for the company's help to save itself from Nepal's aggression, the company went to war with Nepal on that call. The defeated Nepal signed the Treaty of Sagauli in 1815 with the East India Company and renounced all claims to East Morang. The East India Company recovered Morang from Nepal and returned it to Sikkim in

1817 through the Treaty of Tantulia. However, the Company soon realized the military importance of Tentulia and requested Sikkim to hand over the territory east of the Mahananda near Phansidewa to the Company. But as Sikkim did not agree, the Company adopted an aggressive policy towards Sikkim and brought East Morang under British rule. In 1850, the British conquered the Darjeeling Terai region from Sikkim. Thus Phansidewa, a part of East Morang, belonged to the British-created Terai region. In 1850 the British brought Phansidewa region under their administrative structure after the Company acquired East Morang. The British administration introduced the Land Revenue System in 1853 for a period of ten years. For this, forested areas were first cleared for cultivation. The British created the Jotdar class by giving direct land rights to people who pledged to pay certain revenue. Initially, this region was kept under the administration of Purnia by the British, but in a short time, it was included in the administration of the Darjeeling district. After coming under the British administration, the importance of hangings increased. The fact remains that the British colonizers started turning this area into a green colony by setting up tea gardens in the 1860s. Taking advantage of the destitute conditions of the Mundari tribal population particularly in the Singbhum, and Manbhum areas of today's Jharkhand, indentured labourers were brought to the terai region under duress and engaged as tea garden workers. Under the oppressive management, they were subject to inhuman torture most of the time. If some of those workers ever raised their voices against the colonial planters, they were immediately branded as rebels to receive spankings and other torturous methods. At times the British and Scottish planters used to hang belligerent workers to intimidate the working community. Thus this place Bandargachh is replete with the horrible history of hanging and rechristened with the Phansidewa.

The Britishers made Hanskhawa near Phansidewa their headquarters. Offices, courts and schools were built in Phansidewa.³¹ On the other hand, Phansidewa became the centre of trade and commerce around the Mahananda River. The importance of Phansidewa as a riverport continued to grow. As an important port, the area of Phansidewa came to be known as Bandargachh. Common people and businessmen of Dinajpur & Purnia across the Mahananda river used to come to the port by boat. From the report, it is known that for two days a week, Thursday and Sunday, there was a market used to happen at Bandargachh. The port was full of people from different places. This place also came to be known as Hatkhola as there was a marketplace on the banks of the Mahananda River. Slight traces of the old remnants of it are still visible, this is the tragedy of History.

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