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The Making of Regions in Indian History: Exploring the Spatio-Cultural Individuality of Early Bengal (5th to 13th Century CE)

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Abstract: *In the South Asian subcontinent, Bengal has long held a distinctive identity as a geographical and cultural region. Early Bengal serves as a unique example to illustrate the processes involved in shaping a geographical space into a fully established historical region. This article seeks to examine the concept of the region within the context of Indian history. The paper delves into the geographical and cultural dynamics that contributed to the development of Bengal's 'personality' or individuality, marked by distinct traits, from the 5th to the 13th century CE. This paper highlights the characteristics of new cultural developments within sub-region of Bengal and the impact of external and sub-regional influences on its physical and cultural landscapes, ultimately leading to its definition as a region. This study investigates the conflicts, amalgamations, and syntheses that characterized social and religious transformations in early Bengal. Additionally, it examines how Bengal played a pivotal role as a gateway in the broader network of trade, communication, and cultural exchange between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, thereby exerting a significant influence. This paper aims to explore and analyse, employing theories of historical geography and the concept of region as envisioned by eminent historians.*

Key Words: *Region, Socio-Cultural Region, Amalgamation and Synthesis, Cultural Interactions, Regional Identities, Early Medieval Bengal.*

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Introduction

The concept of region is amenable to a variety of meanings. Environment, ethnicity, culture, and languages serve as significant criteria for defining a region. After analysing various definitions, Beajeau-Garnier concluded that "a region is a spatial unit distinct from the space that surrounds it".[1] Regional history can involve the study of a specific region or the exploration of the political, administrative, socio-cultural, economic, and religious developments and achievements during a particular period. To grasp regionalism, it is essential to understand the various dimensions of the region. A region, as a geographical entity, is separated from other regions. As a social system, a region represents the relationships among individuals, groups, or communities. Regions demonstrate organized collaboration in cultural, economic, political, or military spheres. A region operates as an entity with its unique identity, language, culture, and traditions. Regions include sub-regions and localities. The integration of localities contributed to the formation of sub-regions, which in turn combined to making of a region. A region is perceived as a component of the whole rather than not as a whole in itself.

Historiography: 'Region' as Historical Categories

In India, regional histories emerged in the early 20th century as a nationalist response to the colonial practice of 'centralized archivisation' and the production and circulation of knowledge. By the 1960s and 1970s, regional studies evolved as a methodological approach, historians begun to address problems associated with a realistic history of the regions, and there has been a shift from regional histories to histories of the regions. This led to a shift from general regional histories to more focused studies of individual regions, revealing diverse historical processes, regional traditions, and socio-political trajectories.[2] The first clear articulation of the regions is visible in Niharranjan Ray's contribution at the end of the 1960s. He examined a wide array of issues related to regions and the development of regional trends, as reflected in their formative phase from the 7th to 13th centuries CE. According to him, "regionalism in territorial vision and in the pattern of political action; regionalism in art, language, literature, and script..." along with other characteristics, defined the transition to medievalism in Indian history.[3]

B.D. Chattopadhyaya introduced a fresh perspective on the study of 'space' and 'region'. He defines space in cultural terms, emphasizing that a region develops from broader spaces. The *janapadas* (inhabited spaces) were identified as non-homogeneous entities with diverse spatial and socio-economic characteristics. These were distinct from forest areas and comprised various types of spatial units, such as villages (*grama*), market centers (*nigama*), and cities (*nagara*). He analysed the concept of autonomous space, demonstrating the relationship between autonomous spaces and the state system is dynamic and that autonomous spaces are interconnected rather than isolated.[4] In contrast, B.P. Sahu focused primarily on the concept of the region. He argued that during the early medieval period, various transformative processes in culture, economy, and society occurred simultaneously and in relation to one another. Between the 4th and 6th centuries CE, agrarian expansion introduced new crops, leading to

the formation of localities which served as an agrarian space, these localities join together to form sub-regions— *deśa*. Regions were composed of distinct sub-regions and localities, shaped by their environmental, historical ethnicity, language and cultural differences.[5]

The First German Orissa Research Project (1969-75) marked the beginning of a comprehensive appreciation and understanding of the cultural heritage of the region. This interdisciplinary collective effort and the introduction of new questions into the study of the region facilitated an understanding of the key elements contributing to the formation of the region. The emerging socio-political discourse focused on the region's indigenous legacies, the ongoing process of local and sub-regional state formation, and the development of a regional tradition influenced by diverse factors over time.[6] Recent works, such as edited by Hermann Kulke and Georg Berkemer, explore the creation of cultural zones and their networks of interaction. For example, Bengal emerged from sub-regions like Rāḍha, Varendra, Vaṅga, and Samataṭa. These sub-regions were differentiated by factors like environment, food, language, art, and architecture. B.D. Chattopadhyaya also introduced the idea of the 'imitable model', challenging the notion of a singular cultural pattern dominating a region.[7] On the other hand, Romila Thapar, examines the rise of regional dynasties, loyalties rooted in shared culture and history, and historical narratives, evolution of institutions like caste, language, and religion, with architecture and sculpture reflecting regional identities in the post-Gupta period acquiring regional characteristics. Thapar later analysed regions within broader trans-regional contexts, emphasizing their interconnectedness.[8] In her work on Vengi, she described a region is seen as a part of the whole and not the whole itself, illustrating this by positioning Vengi within Andhradeśa, reinforcing the idea that no region exists in isolation.[9]

Bengal as a Historical Region

In the Early Medieval period (6th–12th Centuries CE), South Asia's varied landscapes saw the emergence of regional political powers and socio-economic growth, that would later culminate in the formation of regions. Bengal was no exception, witnessing multiple strands of historical transformations interwoven with one another. A regional 'identity' or 'individuality' developed in Bengal, with some 'distinctiveness' of her own.[10] Bengal, the world's largest delta, is situated in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent. The flatness of the land, bordered by the Rajmahal hills to the northwest and the Lalmai-Chittagong ranges to the south-east, creates a low-lying area that slopes gradually from the northern high plateau toward the Bay of Bengal.[11] Located on the eastern frontier of the Indian subcontinent, Bengal acts as a 'transition zone', with a relatively narrow land bridge connecting South Asia and mainland Southeast Asia. The region's rivers, tributaries, unique water bodies, and climatic conditions contribute additional dimensions to Bengal's geographical features.

Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti trace the origin of the name Bengal or Bāṅglā or Bāṅgālā to an ethnic group or geographical entity known as Vaṅga.[12] Historically, Bengal comprised an amalgamation of various units or sub-regions—each displayed distinct political, socio-economic, and cultural traits, each possessing a dynamic character unique to

itself. According to B.M. Morrison, the locations of land grants indicate that property transfers predominantly occurred within these political and cultural centers.[13] These sub-regions were never unified under a single authority before 1200 CE.

Sub-Regions of Bengal and their Characteristics

From pre-historic times to the medieval period, Bengal was divided into various *janapadas*. These *janapadas* did not emerge as significant powers simultaneously. At different periods, certain parts of the region rose to prominence, expanding their territories over vast areas and occasionally incorporating other powerful states into their domain. It is important to note that the borders and extents of these sub-regions were fluid and subject to change due to geological phenomena, such as river course alterations, and political developments. In terms of distinct geological, political and cultural formations; Bengal has been divided into different sub-regions:

- **Puṇḍravardhana:** Puṇḍra or Puṇḍravardhana originally referred to the northern part of Bengal, encompassing the Rajshahi, Bogra, and Dinajpur in modern Bangladesh, as well as parts of northern West Bengal. The earliest mention of the Puṇḍras as a group is found in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa.* Puṇḍranagara served as the capital of ancient Puṇḍravardhana (Mahasthangarh, Bogra district, Bangladesh). Administratively, Puṇḍravardhana was organized as a *bhukti* under the Gupta empire. This *bhukti* remained intact until the end of Pāla rule. During the Sena period, the jurisdiction of Puṇḍravardhanabhukti, which had included Samataṭa and Śrīhaṭṭa since the early 10th century CE, was extended to encompass Vaṅga and Puṇḍravardhana.[14]
- **Varendrī:** Varendra, also known as Varendrī or Barind which covered significant parts of North Bengal. During the Sena period, Varendra served as an administrative division under the political framework of Puṇḍravardhanabhukti. A notable part of Varendrī was apparently referred to as s Sāratthi. According to H.C. Raychoudhuri, the Gupta dynasty is believed to have originated from the Varendrī region. Morrison described Varendra as a 'buffer zone' between the dynastic territories of North India and the kingdoms located further downstream along the Ganga-Padma river system at Vikramapura.[15]
- **Rāḍha:** Rāḍha is frequently mentioned in both literary and epigraphic sources under various names such as Rāḍha, Lāḍha, Lāṭa, Lāla, Rāla, Rāḍhī, Rārā, Rāl, and Sumha. The earliest literary references to Rāḍha appear in the Jaina chronicle *Āchāraṅgasūtra*. This region roughly corresponded to the areas west of the Bhagirathi river, encompassing the present-day districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Burdwan, Hooghly, Howrah, and Medinipur in West Bengal. Rāḍha is further divided into two parts— Dakṣiṇa (South) and Uttara (North) Rāḍha—with the Ajaya river serving as the dividing line. The Naihati Grant of Vallālasena refers to Uttara Rāḍha as part of the *maṇḍala* of Vardhamānabhukti. By the latter half of

the 10th century, this area was incorporated into Daṇḍabhuktimaṇḍala, as noted in copper plate inscriptions of the Kāmbojas. This sub-region was among the earliest to witness proto-historic settlements marked by evidence of agriculture and black-and-red ware pottery. Suhma is often associated with Rāḍha.[16]

- **Gauḍa:** Gauḍa is noted in the *Harṣacarita, Rājataraṅgiṇī*, and *Vallāla-charita* as a historical geographical sub-region. Initially, it comprised the present Murshidabad district and the southernmost areas of Maldah district. Following the rise of Śaśāṅka in the early 7th century, Gauḍa came to signify the western part of Bengal or East India in general. Over time, the term even came to represent the entire Pāla Empire. Records of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas and the Pratihāras referred to the Pāla rulers with titles such as *Gauḍesvara*, and *Gauḍaraja*. By the 13th century CE, under the Bengal Sultans, Gauḍa referred to the entire sultanate's territory.[17]
- **Vaṅga:** The name Vaṅga, associated with a group of people linked to the Magadhas, is first mentioned in the *Aitareya Aranyaka*. Vaṅga is also noted in the *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* as a group dwelling beyond the boundaries of *Āryāvarta*. Vaṅga saw the emergence of an independent kingdom with a robust administrative system, evidenced by seven copperplate inscriptions issued during the second and third quarters of the 6th century CE by three monarchs: Gopachandra, Dharmāditya, and Samācāradeva. Between the 10th and mid-13th century CE, Vaṅga came under the rule of the Chandras, the Varmans, and ultimately the Senas.[18] According to B.N. Mukherjee, the earliest connotation of Vaṅga consisted of a larger territory which included the modern districts of 24-Parganas, Hooghly, Howrah, Medinipur and parts of Bardhaman along with the coastal region of present-day Bangladesh up to the mouth of Padma.[19]
- **Vaṅgāla:** Initially, it referred to the coastal regions of south-eastern Bengal. The Nesari plates of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas King Govinda III provide the earliest epigraphic mention of Vaṅgāla. D.C. Sircar suggests that Vaṅgāla may have evolved from 'Vaṅga', with the Prakrit suffix '*ala*' used to signify a significant district within Vaṅga. Grierson, on the other hand, interprets it as derived from Vaṅga and '*alaya*', meaning the homeland of the Vaṅgas. However, it is challenging to determine which derivation is accurate. It is clear that the terms Vaṅga and Vaṅgāla were used interchangeably in various sources, with both often appearing together.[20]
- **Samataṭa:** Samataṭa roughly corresponded to the area east of the Meghna river, encompassing regions such as Noakhali, Camilla, and Chittagong in present-day Bangladesh, along with portions of modern Tripura in India. It included sub-regions like Śrīhaṭṭa to the north and Harikelā to the south. The term Samataṭa has been extensively used as a territorial designation, starting with its appearance in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta in the 4th century CE, where it was described as a frontier state of the Gupta Empire. However, Paṭṭikeraka, an administrative division covering the entirety of this sub-region, emerged in the 11th century under the rule of the Candras.[21]

- **Harikelā:** Harikelā also referred to as Harikeli or Holikola, coexisting with the tracts of south-eastern Bengal. Scholars such as D.C. Sircar, R.C. Majumdar, and Abdul Momin Chowdhury argue that Harikelā represented the region of Śrīhaṭṭa or Śrīhaṭṭadesa, now identified as Sylhet.[22]

Considering all this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that these sub-regions, which were interrelated at various points in time, collectively formed a cohesive geographical entity that comprised Bengal. Together, these sub-regions represent a single entity named Bengal— a territorial unit in a historical sense and often recognized by geographers as a 'region' within the subcontinent. The sub-regions of Bengal interacted with one another in numerous ways. Although each sub-region had its own political center of power, and none succeeded in fully unifying all of them, some political entities extended their influence over others. Consequently, terms like Gauḍa and Vaṅga occasionally denoted broader territories during certain periods. The rivers that defined the borders of these sub-regions also served as channels for communication, facilitating non-political exchanges such as trade among them. Certain historical events and transformations were shared across these sub-regions.

Rise of Sub-regional Kingdoms

From the first half of the 5th century CE, inscriptions of Kumāragupta I and his successors confirm Gupta dominance in Puṇḍravardhana. Following the decline of the Guptas, localized rulers with titles like *mahārājādhirāja* emerged in Bengal during the mid-6th century CE, including Pradyumnabandhu, Dharmāditya, and Samācāradeva.[23] By the early 7th century CE, Śaśāṅka rose to power in Gauḍa, extending his control over eastern Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa. After Śaśāṅka, Bhāskaravarman briefly ruled Karṇasuvarṇa, as evidenced by his Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription, followed by the rise of the Khaḍga and Deva dynasties in eastern Bengal and Samataṭa between the 7th and 9th centuries CE.[24] The Pālas, established a vast kingdom from the late 8th to the 11th century CE, extending their influence to Rāḍha, eastern Bihar, and even Kanauj, often clashing with the Gurjara-Pratihāras and Rāṣṭrakūṭas.[25] From the 10th century CE, the Candras became the leading power in Vaṅga, Samataṭa, and Śrīhaṭṭa, followed by the Varmans, who likely originated from Kaliṅga. The Senas, emerging as vassals of the Pālas in Rāḍha, expanded their control to Vaṅga and Varendra under Vijayasena, briefly unifying Bengal before losing to Muhammad Bakhtiyār Khaljī in the 13th century CE.[26] These dynasties shaped Bengal's dynamic political history.

Regional Individuality in Society and Culture

Bengal's intricate and diverse history also exerted a profound influence on social life, impacting not only the upper echelons of polities but extending to the rural and peripheral societies of the indigenous people. The social framework evolved uniquely across the various sub-regions. Ryosuke Furui argues that this multifaceted society was organized around power dynamics and land control, beginning with the sovereign monarch, his subordinate rulers, and the landed elites, down to the cultivators and labouring classes. Society also experienced

an expansion of the caste system, which arose from the assimilation of new social groups, particularly the previously nomadic and indigenous populations.

Bengal's Social Structure

Furui identifies four historical stages in the development of rural Bengal's social structure during the early medieval period. The first stage (400–550 CE) saw *kuṭumbins*, or peasant householders, playing a pivotal role in the agrarian landscape of Puṇḍravardhana, with *adhikaraṇas* (administrative offices) functioning through collaboration among *kuṭumbins*, urban elites, *karaṇas* or *kāyasthas*, and local leaders. Meanwhile, Samataṭa experienced a different pattern of state formation and agricultural development.[27] During the second stage (550–800 CE), social transformations varied across sub-regions. In Vaṅga, Rāḍha, and Puṇḍravardhana, *mahattaras* (landed magnates) dominated the *adhikaraṇa*, alongside the emergence of *sāmantas* (subordinate rulers) who influenced rural communities. Collaborative relationships developed between landed elites and literate groups. In Samataṭa, Śrīhaṭṭa, and Harikelā, religious land grants under royal patronage spurred the rise of extensive landholding elites and the integration of forested areas into agrarian domains.[28] The third stage (9th–12th/13th Centuries CE) marked the expansion of regional powers, state apparatus, and Brahmanical networks. Agricultural advancements and rural trade fostered new occupational groups and increased state influence, as evidenced in copperplate inscriptions. Land grants, often to Brāhmaṇs or Buddhists, facilitated converting forested areas into arable land, strengthening Brāhmaṇical centers in Rāḍha and Varendra. These centers drove economic growth and social mobility, with surplus wealth from landed estates contributing to the commercialisation of rural areas.[29] Overall, Furui highlights the evolving dynamics of power, collaboration, and state influence, alongside agricultural and economic transformations, which shaped rural Bengal's settlements and culture during the early medieval period.

The inclusion of merchants as rural inhabitants indicates a degree of commercialisation in early Bengal. The standardisation of land assessment in a single currency across Bengal by the 12th century CE highlights the growth of monetary transactions and rural commercialisation, fostering the rise of diverse occupational groups. Alongside the increasing power of the *sāmantas* in rural production, evolving dynamics between kings and subordinate rulers strengthened the Brāhmaṇs' position in royal courts and rural society. Brāhmaṇs played a pivotal role in legitimizing political authority and became dominant rural figures, facilitating political control and creating social stratification. Brāhmaṇs categorized various social groups as *jātis*, stemming from the *varṇasaṃkara* concept described in texts like the *Manusmṛti*. These groups, deemed as Śūdras (both *sat* and *asat*), or *antyajas*, were hierarchically arranged with Brāhmaṇs at the top. Each group's occupation was defined to maintain Brahminical intellectual dominance, resulting in organized *jātis*. This classification is reflected in the *Bṛhaddharmapurāṇa*.[30]

Beyond Brahmanical Boundaries: Bengal's Unique Cultural Trajectory

The development of Bengal's regional identity involved significant contributions from pre-Vedic and non-Brahmanical elements. It took over a thousand years for Brahmanical

orthodoxy to establish itself in Bengal, primarily due to the region's considerable distance from the north-western part of Brahmanical heartland, which served as the primary entry point for Brahmanical influence. This delayed process of Brahmanisation allowed the pre-Vedic or non-Brahmanical culture to remain deeply rooted in the area. At the same time, it cultivated among the local population a mindset that embraced only minimal external influences while preserving their unique cultural identity.[31] Bengal reshaped Brahminical assimilation by integrating indigenous practices, such as the worship of female deities and Tantricism, etc. These elements, deeply rooted in pre-Vedic mental frameworks, defined the region's cultural outlook. The Paschimbhag Copperplate (10th century CE) reveals the adaptation of Brahmanism in north-eastern Bengal, evidenced by Brāhmaṇic names with local non-Brāhmaṇic traits, such as *Dāsa*, *Datta, Ghoṣa*, and *Mitra*. This indicates a fusion of local and Brāhmaṇic identities. The copperplate also mentions deities representing both Brahmanical and *Mahāyāna* Buddhist traditions, highlighting a shared cultural framework.[32] The Nidhanpur plates (7th century CE), point to the establishment of Brāhmaṇic settlements in north-eastern Bengal, a process that continued into the 10th century CE.[33] These inscriptions reflect the region's unique 'compromised Brahmanism', shaped by pre-existing non-Brāhmaṇic legacies and the integration of local culture into Brahmanical practices.[34]

Kunal Chakrabarti highlights the 'Purāṇic Process', where Brāhmaṇs integrated local cultures through regionalized Purāṇas to sustain their hegemony. This interaction led to a distinctive 'regional Brahmanical culture' marked by shared values and cultural denominators typical of Bengal. The interplay, conflict, and synthesis between Purāṇic Brahmanism and local traditions shaped Bengal into a unique religio-cultural sphere, combining indigenous and Brahminical elements into a cohesive cultural identity. In Bengal, the Purāṇas adapted local goddesses to create a 'regional cult' that eventually became a prominent symbol of the region's cultural identity. The Brahmanical social hierarchy in Bengal faced significant challenges during the early centuries of the Common Era due to the widespread influence of Buddhism, Tantric practices, and similar factors. In response, Brāhmaṇs sought to incorporate individuals from non-Brahmanical backgrounds into their fold, thereby strengthening their leadership and influence. According to Chakrabarti, this process resulted in the formation of a composite and syncretic religious system that integrated diverse beliefs and rituals while preserving the social dominance of the Brāhmaṇs. This syncretic tradition evolved further between the 8th-13th centuries CE with the composition of numerous *Upapurāṇas* in Bengal, which struck a balance between the Purāṇic Brahmanical framework and distinctly regional traditions.[35] As a result social-religious change, conflict, amalgamation, and synthesis of 'Purāṇic Brahmanism', 'compromised Brahmanism', and 'Brahmanical way of accommodating local culture' in early Bengal.

Individuality of Early Bengal: The Evolution of Buddhism

Buddhism in Bengal also assimilated various local elements, such as image worship, influenced by the region's unique cultural identity. Despite being a rejection of Buddha's original

teachings, this transformation evolved into branches like *Vajrayāna, Tantrayāna, Sahajayāna*, and *Kālachakrayāna*, emerging from *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Trevor Ling notes that Buddhism in Bengal became 'too popular', aligning closely with the region's folk culture. Bengal emerged as a hub for *Vajrayāna-Tantrayāna* traditions, which subsequently influenced Buddhism in Tibet, China, and other parts of East Asia.[36] These distinct beliefs and practices fundamentally differed from those in northern and southern India, showcasing Bengal's unique approach to accommodating and shaping cultural and religious systems. During this period manuscripts or *pothis* like the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, Pañcarakṣā sūtras, Kāraṇḍavyūha sūtras, Dhāraṇīs* were produced in abundance, often with detailed illustrations in Eastern India. Additionally, these manuscripts are profoundly influenced by the local traditions of the region.[37] As a result, illustration of Buddhist manuscripts became the popular culture in Eastern India as a book cult.

Regional Genre of Literary Culture

A vast number of early medieval Bengal inscriptions highlight the emergence of a rich Sanskrit language and a distinctive literary style. Communities of literate groups such as Brahmanical scholars, *Vaidyas*, and *Karana-Kāyasthas* played a pivotal role in shaping this literary culture. *Kāyasthas*, noted for their dual roles as scribes and administrators, significantly contributed to the socio-political framework of urban and rural Bengal. Some *Kāyasthas* engaged in engraving copperplates, often migrating from regions like Varendra and Samataṭa, further indicating their mobility and influence. The regional literary style, known as the *Gauḍī rītī*, gained prominence and was characterized by gentle yet elaborate language, long compounds, ornate poetry with metaphors (*upamā*), analogies (*drṣtānta*), and hyperbolic expression (*atiśoyokti*).[38] However, the full development of literary style in epigraphy flourished during the Pāla and Candra periods. By the 10th century CE, the identity of composers became more apparent, reaching its zenith under the Varmans and Lakṣmaṇasena in the 12th and 13th centuries CE.[39] During this period, there was a clear regional trend in medical literature in Bengal. During the 7th-11th centuries CE, commentaries were written on major medical texts. The works of Īśvarasena, Gadādhara, and Gayādāsa exemplify this trend. Furthermore, independent treatises and specialized fields also began to appear during this time. A thorough analysis of Bengal's medical texts from this era (11th-12th centuries CE) reveals a pattern of intertextual studies of medical texts, paralleling the development of regional pedagogical traditions.[40]

Trade, Contacts and Cultural Interactions Between Early Bengal and Beyond

Bengal's unique geographical location and natural overland and maritime routes made it a key hub for extensive trade, communication, and cultural exchanges with the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, Southeast Asia. Travel accounts from Fa-Hsien, Hsuan Tsang, I-tsing, and Minhaj-ud-din, along with inscriptions, detail the network of routes connecting Bengal with other regions. Overland routes linked Pāṭaliputra to Puṇḍravardhana, Puṇḍravardhana to Kāmarūpa, Kāmarūpa to Samataṭa, Samataṭa to Tāmralipta, and extended to places like

Karṇasuvarṇa, Kaliṅga, Bodhgaya, Ayodhyā, Mithilā, and Andhra. These evolving routes facilitated intra-regional mobility and communication across Bengal and beyond, connecting it to other parts of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. Maritime trade routes tied Bengal to Tāmralipta, Chandraketugarh, Wari-Bateshwar, Savar, and Chanagrama.[41]

The spread of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in South-east Asia likely extended from Eastern India, where it flourished simultaneously. Discoveries of Bodhisattva images and sanctuaries in Myanmar, the Malay Peninsula, Java, and Cambodia indicate *Mahāyāna* Buddhism's influence in Southeast Asia during the late 8th to early 9th centuries CE, likely under the Pāla dynasty's patronage and Nālandā's influence. Bengal, as a hub of Buddhist culture, significantly contributed to this expansion. The development of mystic Buddhist traditions, including *Vajrayāna, Tantrayāna, Sahajayāna*, and *Kālachakrayāna*, exemplifies this influence.[42]

The cultural influence of Bengal on Southeast Asia is prominently evident in art and architecture. Scholars have identified influences from Pāla-Sena art of Bengal in the images and monuments of Myanmar, Thailand, and Java. Bengal's distinct contribution to architectural style is exemplified by the development of a unique 'cruciform' temple pattern. Excavations at Paharpur and Mainamati have revealed examples of this architectural style. The Ananda Temple at Pagan, a significant achievement of King Kyanzittha, reflects this Eastern architectural inspiration.[43] Although there are differences in execution, character, and tone, the underlying design influence can be traced back to Bengal. These architectural forms highlight the cultural and artistic connections between Bengal and Southeast Asia, showcasing the profound impact of Bengal's creativity and innovation in the region.[44]

Epigraphic evidence highlights Bengal's role in Southeast Asia's commercial and religio-cultural exchanges.[45] Two Sanskrit inscriptions from Cambodia—the Phnom Penh Stone Inscription of Bhavavarmala (639 CE) and the Prah That Kvan Pir Inscription of Pukara (716 CE)—display distinctive features of the 'Gauḍī style', leading G. Coedes to suggest they were composed by a scholar from Bengal or trained there. Bengal's cultural ties with Southeast Asia are also evidenced by the Sailendra ruler Balaputadeva of Java and Sumatra requesting Pāla emperor Devapāla to grant land for a Buddhist monastery at Nālandā.[46] Devapāla fulfilled this request by granting five villages to support the monastery, illustrating the regions' close connections.

Conclusion

In India, nationalist historiography has driven regional history to focus on grassroots-level explorations, countering earlier generalisations centered on the Ganges Valley. Regional history highlights lesser-known societal sections and their cultures, enriching our understanding of subaltern narratives. By conducting comparative and statistical analyses, it fosters connections between diverse regions and enhances comprehension of administrative and urbanisation patterns. As such, regional history continues to expand, broadening the scope of historical knowledge. Cultural traits develop and transform over time, reflecting continuous renewal and adaptation. Bengal's cultural identity emerged through historical transformations and dynamic

interactions between people and their environment. As both a geographical and cultural region in South Asia, Bengal's unique ability to assimilate various cultural influences significantly contributed to the development of regional culture. The geographical environment played a crucial role in shaping Bengal's socio-cultural traditions and continuities. From the 5th to 13th century CE, the political, socio-economic, and rural societal transitions in Bengal represent a distinct regional-historical phenomenon. The evolution of religious beliefs and rituals in Bengal stemmed from the integration of Jain, Buddhist, Brahmanical, and Tantric practices with prehistoric tribal traditions, festivals, and customs. These practices, deeply rooted in Bengal's history, diverge from those of other Indian provinces, underscoring Bengal's unique identity in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. The region's distinctive approach to culture and its interactions with religion and society emphasize its exemplary and unparalleled role in South Asian history.

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