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Merchant groups in early medieval Bengal: with special reference to the Rajbhita stone inscription of the time of Mahīpāla I, Year 33

Ryosuke Furui*
Institute for Advanced Studies on Asia, The University of Tokyo
furui@ioc.u-tokyo.ac.jp

Abstract
Recent epigraphic discoveries shed new light on merchant groups in early medieval Bengal, a region whose history in the period from the mid-sixth to the thirteenth centuries is shrouded in obscurity. The present article attempts to provide a better delineation of this history with additional information from new inscriptions, and presents a transcription, translation and discussion of the Rajbhita stone inscription which records the activity of an association of merchants called *vaṇiggrāma*. The history of merchant groups in early medieval Bengal can be delineated as a process of the rural-ization of urban elites in its early phase, and of the organization of merchants located in rural space towards specialized groups comparable to *jāti*s in its later phase. The new inscriptions enable us not only to fill gaps with new information, but also give us perspectives from which we can go beyond unilineal simplicity.
Keywords: Bengal, Early medieval, Pālas, Epigraphy, Merchants, *Vaṇiggrāma*

Introduction

In contrast to the prominence of their predecessors as the dominant urban elite under the Gupta regime in the fifth and sixth centuries, the activities of merchant groups in early medieval Bengal are shrouded in obscurity.[1] Known references are limited to some short donative inscriptions on a stone pillar and images. On the other hand, the *Bṛhaddharmapurāṇa*, a text dating from the thirteenth

* I thank Dr M. Monirul Hok and Dr M. Abdul Kuddus of Varendra Research Museum for their generous help during my research at the museum. I am grateful to Dr Md. Zakaria, then the acting director of the museum, for his kind permission to take photographs of the inscription. I would like to thank Prof. Harry Falk and Dr Gouriswar Bhattacharya for their valuable comments on the interpretation of the inscription. My sincere thanks go to Dr Arlo Griffiths for patiently going through the draft and substantially improving it in many aspects through our intensive discussions. I also thank the anonymous referee for her/his valuable suggestions, though I could not adopt all of them. The research which resulted in the present work was supported by JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists (B) (22720264).

1 The prominence of the former is most evident in the appearance of *nagaraśreṣṭhin* and *sārthavāha* as members of *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa* in so-called land sale grants, to be discussed below.

century,[2] mentions several mercantile communities as a part of contemporary social groups deemed to be mixed *jāti*s (*varṇasaṃkara*s) (Shastri 1974: 3.13.35, 41, 3.14.63, 68). By that time, merchant groups seem to have attained a level of organization at which they could be perceived as *jāti*s by the *brāhmaṇa*s who composed the text. The paucity of information, however, has not allowed us to reconstruct their organizational process.

This situation has to some extent been changed by the recent discovery of two inscriptions. One is the Indian Museum copper plate inscription of Dharmapāla, which sheds light on the choice of a career as *sāmanta* made by members of a merchant family in the eighth century (Furui 2011a). More important is an inscription dating from the reign of Mahīpāla I, engraved on a stone slab found at Rajbhita in Hatpada *mauza* of Jabarhat union, Pirganj *upazila*, Thakurgaon district in the Rangpur subdivision of Bangladesh (Hok and Kuddus 2005: 8). It gives us a glimpse into the collective activity of merchant groups in eleventh-century North Bengal through an association called *vaṇiggrāma*, which is not mentioned in any known earlier or contemporary sources from Bengal.

The inscription is currently kept in Varendra Research Museum, Rajashahi, accession number 2002.23 (8640). It was first edited by M. Monirul Hok and M. Abdul Kuddus of the museum (Hok and Kuddus 2005).[3] It was read by Gouriswar Bhattacharya who presented its contents in a lecture (G. Bhattacharya 2007a).[4] His transcription of the inscription was published by Krishnendu Ray (2009) without permission, with discussions on its contents. Ray also published an article with overlapping contents (Ray 2008).

While appreciative of the efforts of Hok and Kuddus in reading and editing the inscription, with difficulty in terms of both research materials and infrastructure, I still have to point out their mistakes both in reading and interpretation. Ray's recognition of the importance and implications of the inscription for the activities of merchant groups in early medieval Bengal should be acknowledged. However, he made serious errors in interpreting the contents of the inscription, partly due to misreadings by previous editors but principally because he misunderstood the contents and made some far-fetched speculation. Given its importance, the inscription deserves better treatment.

Fortunately, I was able to prepare a better reading from photographs of the original inscription taken personally at Varendra Research Museum on 22 July 2009. This has resulted in a better interpretation which helps improve our understanding of aspects of the early medieval history of Bengal. In the present article, I will provide in part 1 an improved edition of the inscription with a translation and discussion of its contents. In part 2 I attempt to delineate the history of mercantile groups of early medieval Bengal with additional information from new inscriptions.

2 I follow the dating by R. C. Hazra, who conjectured that the text was composed in the latter half of the thirteenth century, based on its contents (Hazra 1963: 456–61).

3 I thank Dr Swapan Kumar Biswas of Bangladesh National Museum for providing me with a photocopy of the article.

4 From a personal communication.

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Part I: Rajbhita stone inscription of the time of Mahīpāla I, year 33

Physical features

The inscription, of six lines, is engraved lengthways on a slab of grey schist, sized 66 cm in length, 31 cm in breadth and 7 cm in thickness and weighing 30 kg (Hok and Kuddus 2005: 9). The most peculiar feature of the slab is a high relief in its lower part, which depicts three animals facing to the right, namely a donkey copulating with a sow and a camel behind them. A fleuron (flower motif) and the head of the last animal divide the third, fourth and fifth lines of the inscription in the middle (Figure 1).

The inscription, in Sanskrit prose, is engraved in characters generally called proto-Bengali or Gauḍīya. Both the engraving and the preservation of letters are excellent so that they are all clear and legible. The palaeography supports the identification of Mahīpāla, whose reign is mentioned in the inscription, with Mahīpāla I, the son of Vigrahapāla II and the father of Nayapāla. According to the Sarnath stone pedestal inscription referring to his reign (Maitreya 1912: 104–09), the year 1083 Vikrama Samvat (1026 AD) falls within his reign which lasted forty-eight years to our knowledge (Chowdhury 1967: 85–7). The reference to the thirty-third year of his reign in the present inscription may locate it to the first half of the eleventh century.[5]

Orthographically, the reduplication of consonants after *r*, a feature generally found in early medieval inscriptions of Bengal, is observed in this inscription. As for characters, the consonants *p* and *y* are so similar that they are indistinguishable in some places. The consonant *v* also has a peculiar shape, which looks like a character denoting *p* with a narrow neck.

Numerals indicating 3 and 1 appear in this inscription. Despite their recognition of the former at the date in the first line, the previous editors missed it in the fourth. They also failed to recognize the latter numeral in the fifth line.

Text[6]

(1) [Siddham] śrīman-Mahīpāladeva-pādīya-pravarddhamāna-vijaya-rājye samvat 33 Āśvina-dine | śrī-Deśihaṭṭa | śrī-Jayahaṭṭa | śrī-Gauḍahaṭṭīya-samasta-

(2) vaṇig-grāmeṇa | śrī-Sonnakādevīmādhava-śāsana āgaccak-āvacchunna-grāma | Dhātrīpura | Saptakhātaka | Khanitrapallī | Lakkhunnagrāmeṣu | se ke'pi |

(3) svasyāṃ svasyāṃ | vāṭikāyāṃ | vājya-bhūmau ca | [fleuron] guvāka-nālikera-vṛkṣān | ārjayanti | teṣāṃ vāg = dattā | yathā-phalan = nālikera-vṛkṣam = prati paṇa trayam | phala-

5 The dating based on the Pāla chronology reconstructed by D. C. Sircar, followed by both Hok and Kuddus (2005: 10–11) and Ray (2008: 140), is now untenable, for a total revision of the Pāla chronology is necessary after the discovery of two new kings, Mahendrapāla and Gopāla II, unknown to Sircar (cf. Sircar 1982: 81–4).

6 Read from the digital photographs taken by the author. Courtesy of Varendra Research Museum.

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Figure 1. The Rajbhita stone inscription of the time of Mahīpāla I, Year 33. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of Varendra Research Museum.

(4) vad-guvāka-vṛkṣam = prati paṇa ekaḥ | [image] śrī-Sonnakāmādhavasya pūj-ārtham | prati-samvatsaran = tair = ddātavyam | yatra | prati nālikera-vṛkṣaṃ hi pa 3 prati guvāka-vṛ-

(5) kṣaṃ hi pa 1 etan = niyamitā = thāt | [image] yaḥ kaś = cid = anyathā kurute | tasya dṛṣṭena | śrīmad-deva-pādāḥ | antar-ādattāḥ | garddabhaḥ pitā | gartta-ṣūkarī mātā | u-

(6) ṣṭraḥ pitṛvyo bhavet | ṣapatha iti |

Notes to the text

[H&K = Hok and Kuddus 2005: 11–12; R = Ray 2009: 275]

1. [siddham]: expressed by a symbol, a loop open to the left. ˚rājye: rājñe H&K; rāje R. ˚haṭṭīya˚: thus R.; haṭṭa yai˚ H&K. ˚samasta˚: thus R.; ˚samasū˚ H&K.
2. ˚grāmeṇa: ˚grāmena H&K; ˚dhāmeṇa R. ˚āvacchunna˚: emend ˚āvacchinna˚ cf. thus H&K; ˚āvacchanna˚ R. se ke'pi: emend ye ke'pi cf. thus R; sekyepi H&K.
3. vājya-bhūmau: vājña-sumau H&K; yājña [bhī]mau R. ārjayanti: emend arjayanti cf. thus H&K; ājayanti R. ˚phalan: thus R; ˚phālan H&K. paṇa: yaṇa H&K; pana˚ R. 3-4. phalavad˚: phālavad˚ H&K; [phī]lavad R.
4. paṇa: yaṇa H&K; Pana R. ˚Sonnakā˚: ˚sonnakā H&K; ˚sannakā˚ R. ˚samvatsaran = tair = ddātavyam: ˚samvase rantairddātapyam H&K; ˚saṃvatsaran tair dolata vyaṃ R. pa 3: failing to recognize the second sign as a numeral, H&K read yaṇṭa; pa[na], R. prati-guvāka˚: prati guvāka H&K; priti guvāka˚ R.
5. hi pa 1: H&K read di pata, failing to recognize the numeral; hi yatra R. etan = niyamitā = thāt: emend etan = niyamitā = rthāt cf. etamniyamitāthāt H&K; etan niyamita | – [t] R. tasya: thus R; taṣya H&K. antar-ādattāḥ:

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thus H&K; antarā dattā R. gartta˚: thus R; gastta H&K. 5–6. uṣṭraḥ: thus H&K; ustraḥ R.

6. pitṛvyo: thus R; pitṛvye H&K. bhavet: thus R; bhavetrū H&K. ṣapatha: emend śapatha.

Translation

Success! On the day of Āśvina [i.e. the day of Autumnal Equinox] in the year 33 of the prosperous and victorious reign of his majesty the illustrious Mahīpāla (I), the (following) word was given [i.e. an agreement was made] by the association of all the merchants (*samastavaṇiggrāma*) belonging to the illustrious Deśihaṭṭa, the illustrious Jayahaṭṭa and the illustrious Gauḍahaṭṭa, about all those who cause to grow areca nut and coconut trees at each small garden and *vājyabhūmi*[7] of their own in Dhātrīpura, Saptakhātaka, Khanitrapallī and Lakkhunnagrāma, which are the villages coming to [i.e. belonging to] and demarcated in the donated tract (*śāsana*) of illustrious Sonnakādevīmādhava (ll. 1–3): "three *paṇa*s per coconut tree according to the (growth of) fruit (and) one *paṇa* per fruit-bearing areca nut tree should be given by them every year for the worship of illustrious Sonnakāmādhava (ll. 3–4). In this regard, it is thus determined according to the cause: for each coconut tree *hi(raṇya) pa(ṇa)* 3, for each areca nut tree *hi(raṇya) pa(ṇa)* 1 (ll. 4–5). In full view of the one who does anything otherwise, his majesty the illustrious deity [i.e. Sonnakāmādhava] will be withdrawn; his father will be a donkey, his mother a sow of the ditch[8] and his paternal uncle a camel. (This is) the curse." (ll. 5–6)

Contents

The inscription records an agreement made by the association of all the merchants belonging to the three markets, in relation to those members who grow areca nut and coconut trees in their own small gardens and *vājyabhūmi*s in the four villages belonging to the donated tract of a deity called Sonnnakādevīmādhava. It is agreed that they would annually pay in cash (*hiraṇya*) three *paṇas* per coconut tree and one *paṇa* per areca nut tree for worship of the deity.[9] This transaction implies that some merchants of the association leased plots in the revenue-free tracts of the deity and cultivated fruit-bearing trees on them. The recorded agreement set the terms of the lease at the annual payment of a fixed amount in cash for worship of the deity, presumably through the association. It presupposes the sale of fruits by the merchants, and any

7 The meaning of this word is unclear, while its reading is clear. Its appearance side-by-side with a small garden (*vāṭikā*) as a land plot within the listed villages where areca nut and coconut trees are grown suggests its connotation as a category of land meant for horticulture. Grammatically, *vājya* can be interpreted as a gerundive made from √vaj. It may mean "to be strengthened" (i.e. fertilized), which is suitable for the context but philologically not necessarily certain. We need further verification from other sources.

8 It seems to denote a sow bathing in mud in a ditch. This possibility was pointed out by Harry Falk in a personal communication.

9 *Paṇa* is a unit of copper currency equal to eighty pieces of cowrie-shells, according to Bengali arithmetical tables cited by D. C. Sircar (1977: 51–2).

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money remaining after payment of prescribed dues seems to have belonged to them.

In spite of its brevity, this inscription has a bearing on several important aspects of the early medieval history of Bengal. The first of these is the activity of an organization called *vaṇiggrāma*.[10] This organization showed its presence in western India as an association of merchants. The earliest reference goes back to the second century BC, as attested in an inscription on a pillar in a cave at Karle (Kosambi 1955: 66).[11] The activity and character of this organization in the sixth century AD is clearer, thanks to two copper plate inscriptions. The Sanjeli plate of the time of Toramāṇa, year 3, datable to the beginning of the sixth century, records the agreement by foreign merchants and resident traders to offer particular merchandise at fixed rates to the deity Jayasvāmin in Vadrapālī (Ramesh 1986: 175–81). Those merchants, who belonged to a *vaṇiggrāma*, are warned against breaking the agreement (ibid.: 181, ll. 9–10). This case attests to the collective activity of *vaṇiggrāma* and its character as an association of merchants both belonging to the locality and hailing from distant areas (Chakravarti 2008: 397–8). The copper plate inscription of Viṣṇuṣeṇa dated year 649 Vikrama Samvat, corresponding to 592 AD, gives us more insights (Sircar 1953–54). It is a charter of conduct and custom (*ācārasthitipātra*) issued by Viṣṇuṣeṇa, a local king, on application by the *vaṇiggrāma* of Lohāṭā. It approves and enumerates the customary rules for member merchants of the association about their prestige and autonomy against the interference of royal agents, about fines for offences, and about cesses and duties levied on different kinds of merchandise (Kosambi 1959: 285–9). The *vaṇiggrāma* in this case is an association of various kinds of merchants which imposes customary rules on its members and enjoys some degree of autonomy from political powers.

In the present case, the reference to *vaṇiggrāma* is important in itself, as this is the only one yet found in Bengal. The character and constituents of the organization are discernible in its description in the inscription. The *vaṇiggrāma* is constituted by all the merchants belonging to three markets (*haṭṭa*). As will be discussed below, a *haṭṭa* appears in the contemporary inscriptions as a rural market. The aforementioned expression suggests that those merchants belonged to particular markets and that such an affiliation was an important element of their identity. The names of *haṭṭa* suggest differences in their character and constituents. Deśihaṭṭa seems to denote a market for local merchants, while Gauḍahaṭṭa may be for merchants of the neighbouring sub-region of Gauḍa (corresponding to present-day Murshidabad district and the southern part of the Malda district of West Bengal). Jayahaṭṭa may be named after an individual and have constituents different from the others. All of them can be separately located in some proximity to the four villages mentioned in the inscription, though their identification with present settlements based solely on the similarity of names, attempted by Ray (2009: 273), is not convincing and needs further verification in terms of philological interpretations. It is remarkable that the

10 Reading of *grāma*, not *dhāma*, is clear in the inscription. Accordingly, Ray's speculation on the meaning of the latter is unnecessary (2008: 140–1; 2009: 272).

11 The *vāniya-gāma*, its Prakrit equivalent, is mentioned as the donor of the pillar.

merchants organized themselves as a collective in spite of their affiliations to different markets and probable differences in specialization.

The position of the *vaṇiggrāma* as representing the collective interest of the merchants is implied in the agreement made in its name. Its intervention in the relationship between members who leased land plots and the deity, an institutional landholder, suggests that the association negotiated on their behalf. This form of collective representation may have strengthened their bargaining power vis-à-vis the temple authority. On the other hand, it entails the imposition of inner regulation: members had to accept the terms set by the association while leasing, as individuals, land plots from the deity. For collective interest to be represented and pursued, cohesion of the association had to be maintained through the regulation of its members.

These features of the *vaṇiggrāma*, i.e. the membership including various merchants and the representation of collective interest with inner regulation, show some commonality with *vaṇiggrāma*s in western India mentioned above. What is different is the involvement of members in horticulture, for which they surely needed the service of a local agrarian group. No arrangement on this matter is mentioned in the present inscription, so it is unclear whether the association also regulated the relationship between the former and the latter.

The deity Sonnakādevīmādhava seems to be a form of Viṣṇu named after a woman called Sonnakā. A number of Viṣṇu images found in north Bengal, datable to the eleventh or twelfth centuries, are inscribed with the names of the deity ending with his epithets like Mādhava and Nārāyaṇa. The epithets are prefixed with male or female personal names, as attested by the specimens kept in several museums.[12] While one image inscription points to a donor installing the deity prefixed with somebody else's name,[13] others seem to indicate that they were named after donors. The installation of deities named after themselves is the practice often followed by the kings of South and South-East Asia in the early medieval period (Sanderson 2004: 415–6; 2009: 60, 274). A textual prescription for this practice is found in the *Kriyākāṇḍakramāvalī* of Somaśambhu (Sanderson 2009: 85–6, n. 150). The kings of Bengal were no exception as is corroborated by the Mainamati plates of Laḍahacandra, which record the donations to the deity named Laḍahamādhava installed by the king (Sircar 1973: 74, l. 53, 76, l. 20). This practice is not limited to the royal patrons: a verse in the Silimpur stone inscription says that a *brāhmaṇa* named Sāhila established a temple of Sāhilāditya, Viṣṇu named after himself, for his late father (Basak 1915–16: 291, ll. 9–10).[14] In view of all this, Sonnakā in the present

12 Malda Museum: bhaṭṭa-Padmanārāyaṇa (RVS-7), bhaṭṭa-Nāmbhāmādhava (RVS-25); Uttar Dinajpur District Museum: paṇḍita-Saṃkhapāṇimādhava (Acc. No. 3), Dhavanāmādhava (Acc. No. 15), Sāṭhomādhava (Acc. No. 28), Jayakayamādhava (Acc. No. 39); Balurghat Museum: Vallamaṇāmādhava (Acc. No. 12); Varendra Research Museum: Mahādevamādhava (VRM 81, Rahman 1998: 54–5), Makamādhava (VRM 349, ibid.: 66); Dinajpur Museum: Bhuñalāmādhava (Acc. No. 5, Haque et al. 2008: 212, no .220); Rangpur Museum: Śrīdharaimādhava (Viṣṇu 9, ibid.: 233, no. 304).

13 "paṇḍita-śrī-Dhoghī-kārī(ri)tamān-Vallamaṇāmādhavaḥ ||" (Balurghat Museum, Acc. No. 12).

14 Though the name ending Āditya rather connotes a form of Sūrya, the deity is clearly mentioned as Viṣṇu in the relevant verse of the inscription.

inscription also seems to be a donor who installed the Viṣṇu named after herself. Though her position is unclear, the honorific *devī* suffixed to her name in the second line and the fact that she could mobilize enough wealth to establish a deity which would hold at least four villages as donated tracts point to her high position. She could be a member of a royal family like Māhaṭā, the queen mother of Śūrapāla, who established Māhaṭeśvara in Vārāṇasī (Sircar 1986: 14–5, ll. 57–8), or a consort of a subordinate ruler like Saṇhāyikā, the wife of *mahāsāmanta* Bhadraṇāga who constructed a small *vihāra* (*vihārikā*) within Somapura *mahāvihāra* (Furui 2011a: 154, ll. 63–4).

Finally, the most remarkable feature of this inscription, that is the curse mentioning donkey, sow and camel and its graphic representation, should be considered. There are contemporary or later stone objects on which images of a donkey copulating with a sow are engraved. This is an expression of a curse on a transgressor by which his parents would be reborn as these animals, as corroborated in some cases by corresponding inscriptions. In eastern India, three eleventh-century stone boundary posts from Budhpur, Purulia district of West Bengal, two twelfth-century or later stone inscribed stelae from Ratnagiri, Jajpur district of Orissa, and two thirteenth-century stone inscriptions from the area around Bodhgaya have such images engraved on them (Walsh 1937: 442–3; Gupta 1965: 92, no. 12; Mitra 1983: 214–5, plates CLXIII–CLXIV; Majumdar 1919: 47, note 33; Vidyavinoda 1913–14: plate facing p. 29). The inscriptions from Ratnagiri include an imprecatory verse corresponding to the image (Mitra 1983: 214, verse 3, ll. 5–6, 215, verse 4, ll. 7–8). This is the same as for the inscription discovered from Janibigha near Bodhgaya (Majumdar 1919: 47, verse 4, ll. 10–13). The description of the curse in both engraved image and sentence is also found in the two stone inscriptions of Kuruspal in the Bastar district of Chattisgarh, datable to the third quarter of the eleventh century (Lal 1909–10: 32, l. 25; 34, ll. 14–6). On the other hand, a variant form which depicts a donkey copulating with a woman with textual reference to a transgressor's father becoming the former appears in the inscriptions of the mid-thirteenth century from Jhansi and Vidisha, central India (Prasad 1973: 89–90, ll. 16–8, plate facing p. 88; Trivedi 1978: 207, ll. 7–10). The same motif with a different textual explanation, identifying the woman with a transgressor's mother, is found in some Śilāhāra inscriptions of twelfth- and thirteenth-century North Konkan (Mirashi 1977: 146–8, 148–50, 153–6, 156–8, 161–3, 280–2; cf. Griffiths 2009: 471–2).

The cases mentioned above show that the depiction of the curse as an image of donkey and sow was prevalent in eastern India, while the variant form with donkey and woman spread in central and western India. The present case can be included in the former category. However, its depiction of animals in a refined high relief is remarkable, compared with the rather crude engraving in other cases. Furthermore, the appearance of a camel as a possible fate of the paternal uncle clearly distinguishes it from others. Camels were not unknown to the people of early medieval Bengal, as an official in charge of troops of elephants, horses, camels and boats is listed in the address section of all the Pāla grants.[15]

15 "hastyaśvoṣṭranauva(ba)lavyāpṛtaka" (Furui 2011a: 153, l. 43).

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Still its appearance in the present inscription is noteworthy. Though not necessarily realistic, the characteristics of a camel – hump, long neck and height – are captured well in this image. It is probable that the merchants who ordered this inscription with relief had some acquaintance with this animal through their mercantile activity.

With the information provided by the present inscription and its clarification made above, I would like to proceed to a discussion and delineation of the history of mercantile groups in Bengal.

Part II: Merchant groups in Bengal

From dominance as urban elites to obscurity

The presence and activity of mercantile groups in Bengal becomes visible in historical records from the mid-fifth century onwards, thanks to the so-called land sale grants issued under the Gupta provincial administration of Puṇḍravardhana-bhukti in North Bengal. These copper plate inscriptions record the sales of waste/fallow land plots to individuals against monetary payment in gold and silver currencies, sanctioned by an organization called the *adhikaraṇa*, consisting of influential local people, and the donations of these plots to some religious agents (Yamazaki 1982). Merchants appear in these documents mostly as members of the *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa*, i.e. the city office.

Four of the five Damodarpur copper plate inscriptions record cases of land sales approved by the *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa* of Koṭivarṣa-viṣaya, the supra-village administrative unit roughly corresponding to the present districts of Bogra and Dinajpur in Bangladesh and South Dinajpur in West Bengal. The *adhikaraṇa* seemed to be organized at the city of Koṭivarṣa, identifiable with the present site of Bangarh in South Dinajpur district (Goswami 1948: 1–2). For the period of at least 100 years covered by those inscriptions, i.e. from 124 to 224 Gupta Era (444–543 AD), the same group of leading urban figures had constituted this organization. Mercantile members designated as *nagaraśreṣṭhin* and *sārthavāha* were among them, together with chief artisans (*prathamakulika*) and chief scribes (*prathamakāyastha*) (Sircar 1965: 291, ll. 4–6; 293, ll. 4–5; 337, ll. 3–4; 347–8, ll. 4–5). According to the Paharpur plate dated year 159 Gupta Era (479 AD), plural *nagaraśreṣṭhin*s were also constituents of the *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa* of the city of Puṇḍravardhana, identifiable with the present site of Mahasthangarh (Sircar 1965: 359, l. 1). *Nagaraśreṣṭhin*s seem to have been chief merchants engaged in trade and money lending, while *sārthavāha*s were traders whose engagement in long-distance trade with caravan organizations is depicted in contemporary literary sources (Maity 1970: 159–61). The context of their activity was the thriving trade between Bengal and other regions, attested in the return journey of the Chinese monk Fa-hien from Tāmralipti to Siṅhala on a merchant vessel (Nagasawa 1996: 319; cf. Li 2002: 203).

Contemporary clay sealings discovered at Basarh in northern Bihar, the site representing the ancient city of Vaiśālī, attest to the fact that *śreṣṭhin*s, *sārthavāha*s and *kulika*s were running a guild-like organization called *nigama*

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on their own or with other groups.[16] In view of the term "chief" (*prathama*) prefixed to the title of some of them, it is plausible that the same groups in Koṭivarṣa also maintained such organizations and constituted the *adhikaraṇa* as representatives of each organization, though the clay sealings discovered so far through the limited excavations of the site of Bangarh do not include the same kind (Goswami 1948: 12–3).

What is notable is that the jurisdiction of the *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa* was not limited to the city itself but covered rural settlements in its proximity. This is clear from the venues of land sales recorded in the four Damodarpur plates and the Paharpur grant: they respectively include villages within Koṭivarṣa-viṣaya and Dakṣiṇāṃśaka-vīthī of Puṇḍravardhana-bhukti (Sircar 1965: 292, l. 11; 293, l. 9; 337, l. 6; 349, ll. 15–7; 359–60, ll. 1–3). By involvement with this organization as its members, those merchant groups could create and extend their vested interests in the rural area. This is evident in the case of *nagaraśreṣṭhin* Ribhupāla recorded in the Damodarpur plate of the time of Budhagupta, without date, assignable to the last quarter of the fifth century (ibid.: 336–9).

Ribhupāla was a member of the *adhiṣṭhānādhikaraṇa* (ibid.: 337, ll. 3–4). He petitioned for the sale and donation of land plots to construct two temples and two small storehouses for the deities Kokāmukhasvāmin and Śvetavarāhasvāmin in the vicinity of land plots which he had previously donated to them in Doṅgāgrāma. According to Sircar, Kokāmukha was a pilgrimage place (*tīrtha*) located in the eastern part of present-day Nepal, and Ribhupāla may have been there on pilgrimage and, after his return, donated a large area of land in his native district to those deities (Sircar 1971: 275–81). Then he constructed temples and storehouses for the same deities near to the donated tract, due to the difficulty in sending income from the land to the *tīrtha* in Nepal (ibid.: 281). On both occasions, Ribhupāla seemed to be involved in the management of temple land and in forwarding its income. Through these acts, he was able to establish a strong presence and influence in the village while furthering his interests in the city as a merchant: he established in the village two temples and their landed property, in whose management he may have held a vested interest. At least one of those temples, that of Śvetavarāhasvāmin, survived to be the donee of the case recorded in the Damodarpur plate of year 224 Gupta Era (Sircar 1965: 346–50). This fact attests to the success of Ribhupāla's attempt.

Compared with their prominence in the earlier period, merchant groups were relatively insignificant after the mid-sixth century. The continuance of their trade activity in the late seventh century is confirmed by the account of the Chinese monk I-ching, which describes hundreds of merchants travelling from Tāmralipti to the Magadha area forming a caravan (Adachi 1942: 139; cf. I-Ching 1986: 79). The same text attests to the seaborne trade network connecting Tāmralipti and Harikela in Bengal with South India, Siṅhala and South-East Asia in the seventh century (Adachi 1942: 78, 93, 174; cf.

16 *śreṣṭhinigama* (Spooner 1917: 126, nos 36 and 53, 139–40, no. 282, 140, no. 286 etc.); *śreṣṭhisārtthavāhanigama* (Bloch 1906: 111, no. 40); *śreṣṭhisārtthavāhakulikanigama* (ibid.: 110, no. 28 etc.).

I-Ching 1986: 41–2, 61, 94–5). It is plausible that merchants in Bengal were also involved in this network. However, unlike their counterparts in the previous period, merchant groups are totally absent from the land sale grants of the period between the mid-sixth and early seventh centuries, in spite of the continuance of the practice of land sales and accompanying monetary transactions in both Vaṅga and Rāḍha, respectively sub-regions of central and western Bengal (Sircar 1965: 363–7; 367–9; 372–7; 370–2; Bhattasali 1925–26; Furui 2011b). This phenomenon can be partly explained as being the result of the shifting focus of activity of land sales from the relatively developed area around urban centres of North Bengal to less developed tracts. On the other hand, the sources of the later period indicate a change in the form of presence of those merchant groups, which must have germinated in this period.

Two forms of ruralization: landed magnates and rural merchants

After two-and-a-half centuries of absence, merchant groups reappear in the inscriptions of Bengal and the adjoining areas from the early ninth century onwards. References in the inscriptions indicate a change in their presence that may be described as two forms of ruralization: their acquisition of a new status, either as landed magnates or as rural merchants.

The first form is discernible in a copper plate inscription of Dharmapāla dated year 26, assignable to the beginning of the ninth century (Furui 2011a). It records a royal donation of land plots petitioned by *mahāsāmanta* Bhadraṇāga, a subordinate ruler. It includes the eulogy of four generations of his lineage in five verses (ibid.: 153, ll. 46–55). What is remarkable is that his great-grandfather Balanāga is mentioned as *sārthavāha*, a trader (ibid.: ll. 47–8). It suggests the continuing presence of merchant groups in North Bengal in the early eighth century, the period to which Balanāga could belong, in spite of the silence of contemporary sources.

At the same time, the eulogy indicates a choice made by the merchant family: their shift of status to a lineage of subordinate rulers. This shift occurred in the time of Uccaganāga, the grandson of Balanāga, who is called *mahāsāmanta* (ibid.: l. 49). One element which facilitated this change was the military activity rather clearly described in the eulogy of the former's son, Bhadraṇāga (ibid.: ll. 51–5, vv. 17–8). What prompted this shift is unclear due to the corrosion of the relevant portion of the inscription (ibid.: ll. 48–9, v. 15). It can only be guessed that the status of subordinate ruler could bring better fortune to the family, in view of the prominence of this group under early Pāla rule (Furui 2007: 188–96). It should be noted, however, that a power base in rural society was indispensable for this shift, in addition to the military capability mentioned above. The stronger section of merchant groups seems to have had the potential for the transformation, with landholdings and vested interests in the rural settlements, as attested in the case of Ribhupāla discussed in the previous section.

While the case of Balanāga's family shows a choice made by a prominent section of merchant groups, some short inscriptions on images and a stone pillar datable to the period between the ninth and twelfth centuries indicate the presence of merchant groups in eastern Bihar and Samataṭa, a sub-region of eastern Bengal, though less significant than their counterparts in fifth- and sixth-century

North Bengal. In the first area, the Rajauna image inscription of the time of Śūrapāla, year 5, records the installation of an image of twelve Ādityas by Ranoka, the son of *vaṇik* Śrīdhara residing in the town of Kṛmilā in the latter half of the ninth century (Banerjee 1975: 107). One of the bronze images discovered from Kurkihar, which seems to be contemporary, is engraved with the name of the donor, *vaṇika* Māṇeka, the son of Jānū (Gupta 1965: 142, no. 89). Similarly, the Nalanda pillar inscription of the time of Rājyapāla mentions the erection of a pillar by Vaidanāthadeva, the son of Manoratha, belonging to a *vaṇika* family in the mid-tenth century (Sircar 1949: 8). The Chandimau image inscription of the time of Rāmapāla, year 42, which mentions as the donor *vaṇika sādhu* Saharaṇa, the son of *sādhu* Bhādulva originating from Rājagṛha and residing in Etrahāgrāma, indicates the continuance of such cases as late as the first half of the twelfth century (Banerji 1915: 93–4).

In Samataṭa, the Mandhuk image inscription of the time of Gopāla II, year 1, mentions senior trader (*vṛddhasārtha*) Jambhalamitra as the donor (Sircar 1952: 57, ll. 2–3).[17] In the Baghaura image inscription of the time of Mahīpāla I, year 3, the donor is *vaṇika* Alokadatta, the son of Vasudatta belonging to Vilakīndaka in Samataṭa (Bhattasali 1923–24: 355, ll. 2–4). Similarly, *vaṇika* Buddhamitra, the son of *vaṇika* Jambhalamitra residing in Vilikandhaka of Samataṭa, is mentioned as the donor in the Narayanpur image inscription dated year 4 of the same king (Sircar 1943: 125, ll. 2–4). The first inscription belongs to the second half of the ninth century, while the last two can be assigned to the end of the tenth century.[18] Vilakīndaka and Vilikandhaka, settlements mentioned as the residences of donors in the last two inscriptions, are probably identical (ibid.: 123), in view of the poor execution of both inscriptions and possible mistakes on the part of engravers.

These cases show that some sectors of merchant groups continued their mercantile activity as a hereditary occupation in the mostly rural landscape. The hereditary character is clear from the expression "merchant family" (*vaṇikakula*) in the Nalanda pillar inscription and the title *vaṇika* prefixed to both father and son in the Narayanpur inscription (Sircar 1949: 8, l. 3; 1943: 125, ll. 3–4). Though it is not mentioned explicitly, other cases referring to either the donor or his father with the same title seem to presuppose heredity (Banerjee 1975: 107, pt. 2; Gupta 1965: 142, no. 89; Banerji 1915: 94, l. 1; Bhattasali 1923–24: 355, l. 3). The rural background of their presence is also discernible, except in the case of the Rajauna image inscription in which the donor was a resident of Kṛmilā (Banerjee 1975: 107, pt. 2), an urban settlement suffixed with the word "city" (*adhiṣṭhāna*) in the Valugdar image inscription of the time of Dharmapāla (Sircar 1949–50: 144, l. 1). The residence of the donor is mentioned as a *grāma* in the Chandimau image inscription (Banerji 1915: 93, l. 1) and Vilakīndaka/Vilikandhaka in the Baghaura and Narayanpur inscriptions may also be a rural settlement (Bhattasali 1923–24: 355, ll. 2–3; Sircar 1943: 125, ll. 2–3). The diminished presence of those merchant groups is suggested by

17 For the identification of the king with Gopāla II, who was unknown to Sircar, on palaeographical grounds, see G. Bhattacharya 1999.

18 Accordingly the Jambhalamitras of the first and the last inscriptions seem not to be identical.

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the fact that their donative activities were limited to the installation of images or the erection of a pillar. There is no evidence indicating their involvement in donations and other transactions related to landed properties as in the case of their counterparts in fifth- and sixth-century North Bengal.

The presence and activity of those merchant groups in rural society were enabled by the spread of rural markets and commercial activities around them.[19] The earliest reference in Bengal to a rural market called *haṭṭa* is found in the Damodarpur plate of the time of Kumāragupta I, year 128 Gupta Era (447 AD). It is mentioned as an accompaniment to the donated land plot in the village of Airāvatagorājya (Sircar 1965: 194, l. 10). This fact seems to indicate that a *brāhmaṇa* donee was given the right to income from a market. References to *haṭṭa* became more frequent from the ninth century onwards. A small market (*haṭṭikā*) accompanies the four donated villages in the Khalimpur plate of Dharmapāla (Sircar 1983: 68, ll. 51–2). Dhṛtipurahaṭṭikā is mentioned as a part of donated tracts in the Mainamati plate of Laḍahacandra, year 6 (no. 1) (Sircar 1973: 74, l. 45). In some other land and village grants, the right over *haṭṭa*, namely the right to the cess on income from sales at the market, is listed as one of the privileges conferred on donees.[20] *Haṭṭa* also appears as a part of a place name in some inscriptions.[21] One stone inscription, probably from Bihar, currently kept in the British Museum, mentions a market named Ajāhaṭṭa accompanied by fishers (*kaivarta*) and vintners (*śauṇḍa*), (where one cowrie-shell (*varāṭikā*) each should be charged at fish shops (G. Bhattacharya 2007b: 72, ll. 5–6). These cases suggest that markets with vigorous mercantile activities spread so well in rural settlements that the right over them could constitute a privilege for a donee of land and village grants.

The last case shows the character of the *haṭṭa* as a local market where foodstuffs and other commodities for daily use are exchanged. The merchandise may also include agrarian products with commercial value. Mango and mahua trees, or mango, jackfruit, areca nut and coconut trees, often accompany land and village grants by the Pāla and Candra kings as privileges conferred on the donee from the mid-ninth century onwards.[22] The products from these trees could mostly be consumed by the donees themselves, for domestic use in the case of *brāhmaṇa*s or for ritual services in the case of religious institutions. However, the sale of at least coconuts and areca nuts at rural markets is implied

19 This phenomenon was connected with the expansion of agrarian society and settlements whose need had to be catered to by new small-scale trade centres. This interconnection will be discussed in the near future.

20 Khalimpur plate of Dharmapāla (Sircar 1983: 68, l.52); Irda plate of Nayapāla (Majumdar 1933–34, 155, l. 25); Rangpur plate of Mahīpāla I (Furui 2011c: 241, l. 39); Ramganj plate of Īśvaraghoṣa (Majumdar 1929: 154, ll. 24–5); Mainamati plate of Vīradharadeva (S. C. Bhattacharyya 1984: 26, ll. 12, 14–5).

21 Devapālahaṭṭa in the Nalanda image inscription of the time of Devapāla (Ghosh 1939–40: 335, l. 1); Talahaṭṭaka in the Nalanda image inscription of the time of Śūrapāla (Sircar 1953: 302, l.1); Vṛhaddhaṭṭa in the Bhaturiya stone inscription of Yaśodāsa (Sircar 1959–60: 153, l. 2); Rāghavahaṭṭa in Saktipur plate of Lakṣmaṇasena (Ganguly 1931–32: 218, ll. 31, 36).

22 The former first appears in the Monghyr plate of Devapāla, year 33 (Maitreya 1912: 39, l. 36). The earliest reference to the latter is found in the Paschimbhag plate of Śrīcandra, year 5 (Sircar 1973: 68, l.52).

in the Rajbhita inscription discussed above (Part 1). It indicates the trade of agrarian products, at least their surplus, in the rural area by mediation of merchants. It even implies their involvement in commercial cropping for which they especially leased land plots with fruit-bearing trees from the religious institution.

The trade in rural areas may not be limited to the exchange of local products at rural markets. There are references to "income at the gate" (*dvārikādāna*) in relation to the donated villages in the Jajilpara plate of Gopāla III (Misra and Majumdar 1951: 142, l. 23) and income from boat landing (*ghaṭṭa*) as one of the donee's privileges in several copper plate inscriptions.[23] Both seem to be cesses charged on commercial goods passing through those nodes of transportation. They attest to the inter-local trade through which commodities were transported both by river and by land. Those commodities may also have been exchanged at *haṭṭa*s with the involvement of rural merchants.

It should also be noted that cowrie-shells, which were the medium of exchange in the Pāla territory according to the account of an Arab merchant (Ahmad 1989: 44), had to be imported from foreign countries like the Maldives as mentioned by Ibn Battuta in a later period (Husain 1953: 201). Their circulation in the rural area is confirmed by the stone inscription kept in the British Museum mentioned above and a hoard found at the site of Paharpur (G. Bhattacharya 2007b; Dikshit 1938: 33). The flow of cowrie shells into the rural settlements may have been facilitated by merchant groups who kept connection with the outer world while establishing themselves in the rural markets.

The case of the Rajbhita inscription reiterates the second form of ruralization of merchant groups, namely their mercantile activity in the rural landscape, and its precondition, vigorous trade around rural markets. The agreement recorded in the inscription presupposes the sales of agrarian products at rural markets by merchants. Its reference to the *vaṇiggrāma*, however, reveals another aspect. As discussed above (Part 1), it was an association of all the merchants belonging to several markets (*haṭṭa*). Its absence in other contemporary sources could be due to their character, recording small-scale pious deeds by individual merchants with reference at most to their family. It is noteworthy that a transaction which involved properties of a deity and entailed negotiation with its temple authority could only be enacted through the association of merchants. It forms a stark contrast with the case of Ribhupāla in fifth-century North Bengal, who could single-handedly mobilize enough resources to establish two temples with related facilities and landed properties, with the tacit agreement of the *adhikaraṇa* members including himself and other urban elites (Sircar 1965: 336–9). This fact confirms the diminished presence of merchant groups in this period, which can be inferred from the other inscriptions. At the same time, it suggests the significance of association for merchant groups in enhancing their position in the rural area. The organization of *vaṇiggrāma* was a new phenomenon, which can be differentiated from the organization of urban elites of fifth- and

23 Jagajjibanpur plate of Mahendrapāla (S. C. Bhattacharya 2007: 69, l. 46); Irda plate of Nayapāla (Majumdar 1933–34: 155, l.25); Rangpur plate of Mahīpāla I (Furui 2011c: 241, l. 39); Ramganj plate of Īśvaraghoṣa (Majumdar 1929: 154, ll. 24–5).

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sixth-century North Bengal centred on a certain urban settlement. It was a viable option for merchant groups in the context of their diminished presence in the face of the rising class of subordinate rulers, which integrated some of their stronger sections like the family of *sārthavāha* Balanāga (Furui 2011a: 150). A similar process of organization into occupational groups by literates and artisans can be observed in the contemporary inscriptions (Furui 2007: 208–23). One result of such a process is discernible in the social outlook of *brāhmaṇa*s codified in the following period.

Organization towards specialized groups

Merchant groups cease to appear in the inscriptions of Bengal and Bihar from the mid-twelfth century onwards, while the association of artisans called *śilpigoṣṭhī* in Varendra, North Bengal, is mentioned in the Deopara stone inscription of Vijayasena (Majumdar 1929: 49, l. 32). Rural markets appear only once as a place name,[24] while the Vangiya Sahitya Parishad plate of Viśvarūpasena, belonging to the first quarter of the thirteenth century, contains some references alluding to them. This inscription records the bestowal of revenue-free *śāsana* status to plots of land accumulated by a *brāhmaṇa* through donations and purchases. The land plots include seven betel vine plantations (*varaja*) and one areca nut plantation (*kalana*) (Majumdar 1929: 146, ll. 45–6, 50–1; Sircar 1954: 204–5). For the last plantation, the price (*mūlya*) of three thousand areca nuts to be produced annually is also specified (Majumdar 1929: 146, ll. 50–1). These references indicate the cultivation of crops with commercial value, which is confirmed for areca nuts. The sales of betel leaves can also be inferred from the description of "income from betel vine plantation" (*varajāya*) as an additional component of the income from the donated tract, together with the price of areca nuts.[25] The sale of those products indicates the continuance of commercial activity in rural areas, which gave an incentive for the cultivation of commercial crops. Rural markets may have been the venue, even though they are not mentioned as frequently as before.

In contrast to the silence of the inscriptions, the *Bṛhaddharmapurāṇa*, a local *Purāṇa* of Bengal composed in the latter half of the thirteenth century (Hazra 1963: 448–61), gives us a glimpse into the possible process of change experienced by merchant groups.[26] In the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of its *Uttarakhaṇḍa*, the text narrates origins of social groups in Bengal, including several merchant groups, as a result of a mixture of *varṇa*s (*varṇasaṃkara*) enforced by the evil king Veṇa and explains their hierarchical order and occupations fixed by the righteous king Pṛthu, Veṇa's son, in consultation with qualified *brāhmaṇa*s present at the "gathering of *dharma*" (*dharmasaṃgraha*) convened by him.[27]

24 Rāghavahaṭṭa in the Saktipur plate of Lakṣmaṇasena (Ganguly 1931–32: 218, ll. 31, 36).
25 "kalanaguvākamūlyavarajāyasameta" (Majumdar 1929: 147, l. 59). Modified according to the notes of Sircar (1954: 207).
26 For the composition of local *Purāṇas* in Bengal as an instrument for establishing Brahmanical hegemony through the absorption of local cults and adoption to local social context, see Chakrabarti 2001, especially 44–72.
27 For details of the narrative and its interpretation, see Furui 2013 forthcoming.

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As I have discussed elsewhere, the composition of this narrative can be interpreted as an attempt by *brāhmaṇa*s to comprehend and explain the social reality with their own framework and to impose their idealized social order on the other groups at the same time (Furui 2013 forthcoming). The analysis of the descriptions of merchant groups in this narrative thus informs us of their perception by *brāhmaṇa* textual composers and, furthermore, of their relative position and power relation vis-à-vis *brāhmaṇa*s and other social groups.

Among the social groups described in relevant parts of the text, those clearly recognizable as merchants are *gandhika vaṇik* (condiment merchant)/*vaṇik* and *svarṇavaṇik*/*kānaka vaṇik* (gold merchant), while *tāmbūlin* and *taulika* can also be included for their occupations, defined as sales of betel leaves and areca nuts respectively.[28] All of them belong to the category of *saṃkara*/*saṃkarajāti* claimed to be the progeny of the intermarriage of different *varṇa*s and their descendants.[29] *Saṃkara*s, also called thirty-six *jāti*s, are deemed to be *śūdra*s (Shastri 1974: 3.14.28) and divided into the three hierarchical ranks of *uttama* (best), *madhyama* (middle) and *adhama/antyaja* (lowest) according to the combination of their parents (Furui 2013 forthcoming). The *gandhika vaṇik*, claimed to descend from a *brāhmaṇa* father and a *vaiśya* mother, belongs to the first (Shastri 1974: 3.13.35), while the *svarṇavaṇik* is assigned to the second *madhyama* rank as an offspring of an *ambaṣṭha* (physician) father and a *vaiśya* mother (ibid.: 3.13.41). *Tāmbūlin* and *taulika*, both deemed to be the progeny of a *vaiśya* father and a *brāhmaṇa* mother, also belong to the *uttama* rank (ibid.: 3.13.39). This is a ritual hierarchy in which the first is said to deserve ritual service by qualified *śrotriya brāhmaṇa*s, while the second and the last are to be served by fallen *brāhmaṇa*s with the same status as themselves (ibid.: 3.14.73–5). The last rank is also claimed to be outside *varṇāśramadharma* (ibid.: 3.13.48cd).

The descriptions of merchant groups in the text suggest that they were perceived by *brāhmaṇa* composers as endogamous occupational groups like other *saṃkara*s. The term "thirty-six natural occupations" (*ṣaṭtriṃśajjātakarma*) used in the text to denote *saṃkara*s indicates this perception (ibid.: 3.13.49ab). It can also be seen in the statement that *brāhmaṇa*s recommended that Pṛthu prohibit the further mixture of *saṃkara*s and fix their occupations, as a solution to the disorder brought by *varṇasaṃkara* (ibid.: 3.14.11–3). The merchants had already shown their character as a hereditary occupational group in the previous period, while relationships between its members, such as marriage alliances, were not clear from the short inscriptions they left (see above). Their recognition as endogamous groups suggests that the process of their organization through networking among themselves, of which the formation of *vaṇiggrāma* shows one aspect, had reached a certain level at which they could be perceived as *jāti*s. It was, however, not a straightforward process

28 The occupation of *tāmbūlin* is only mentioned in the edition by P. Tarkaratna (1907: 3.14.60ab). For that of *taulika* see Shastri 1974: 3.14.64cd.

29 The text also describes another category of social group, namely outsiders, as children of *mleccha* born from Veṇa's body (Shastri 3.13.53–4). *Devala*/*śākadvīpī vipra* and his descendants (*gaṇaka* and *vādaka*), on the other hand, occupy an ambiguous position between *saṃkara*s and outsiders (Furui 2013 forthcoming).

and a very detailed analysis of the text would lead us to detect a certain complexity surrounding it.

The social order described in the text does not include the comprehensive category of *vaiśya* or *vaṇik* as a separate *varṇa*. The word *vaṇik* is used rather as a synonym of *gandhika vaṇik* (Shastri 1974: 3.14.63b) and all the merchants including them constitute a part of *saṃkara*s with specialization in particular types of merchandise. It contrasts with descriptions of merchants simply as a *vaṇik* or *sārtha* in the inscriptions of the previous period (see above). It could be interpreted as a reflection of social change which occurred by the thirteenth century, namely, the progress of specialization among merchant groups. It should be noted, however, that this perceived change contradicts the organizational principle of *vaṇiggrāma* deducible from the Rajbhita inscription. The organization consisted of all of the merchants belonging to several markets, with a single category of *vaṇik*. Though some of them were to engage in sales of areca nuts, they were not differentiated as *taulika*. The absence of a comprehensive category of *vaiśya*/*vaṇik* and the emergence of identities of specialized merchant groups suggest that the organization of *vaṇiggrāma* could not lead to the establishment of a merchant group as a bloc sufficiently powerful to be perceived as such, unlike their counterparts in western India who held a strong position with their corporations (Jain 1990: 227–32).

The social order described in the text, which also lacks *kṣatriya varṇa*, consists of bipolarity of *brāhmaṇa*s and *śūdra*s without intermediate *varṇa*s. It must be borne in mind, however, that this is not just a reflection of the contemporary social situation, which witnessed neither the rise of political powers claiming authentic *kṣatriya* status nor the dominance of merchant groups, but also a Brahmanical claim of hegemony over any other groups deemed to be *śūdra*s (Furui 2013 forthcoming). The fact that *brāhmaṇa*s could make such a claim indicates that neither military nor merchant groups could become an alternative power challenging the former. It endorses the possible "failure" of merchant organization discussed just above. *Brāhmaṇas* attained some level of hegemony with which they could attempt to impose their idealized social order (Furui 2007: 244–59). The imposition, however, entailed tension and negotiation between *brāhmaṇa*s and other social groups including merchants, as the text tells us.

At the *dharmasaṃgraha* described in the fourteenth chapter, the king subjugates dissenting *saṃkaras* and fixes their occupations according to the advice of *brāhmaṇas*. The groups whose occupations are fixed on this occasion are limited to most of the *uttamajāti*s, *svarṇakāra*s and *svarṇavaṇik*s among *madhyama*s, and finally the *gaṇaka*s. These are social groups of some importance whose compliance was sought by *brāhmaṇa*s to wield hegemony in rural society (Furui 2013 forthcoming). Most important among them are the non-*brāhmaṇa* literate groups of *karaṇa* (scribe), *ambaṣṭha* (physician), *māgadha* (panegyrist) and *gaṇaka* (astrologer), to whom special plots consisting of eight to thirteen verses each or one full verse are devoted (Shastri 1974: 3.14.30–40 [*karaṇa*], 41–53 [*ambaṣṭha*], 55–62 [*māgadha*], 71 [*gaṇaka*]). Their minute analysis reveals the effort of *brāhmaṇa*s to secure the co-operation of these literate groups by admitting their prominent position among *saṃkara*s and possession of particular branches of specialized knowledge on the one hand, and by

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claiming their dependence on *brāhmaṇa*s for their position and knowledge on the other (Furui 2013 forthcoming). They are perceived as groups with the potential to challenge Brahmanical authority through their alternative knowledge.

In comparison merchant groups seem not to matter much to *brāhmaṇa*s. Only half or a quarter of a verse each is devoted to the description of their occupations.[30] This treatment is the same as that of artisans such as weavers (*tantravāya*) and blacksmiths (*karmakāra*) or service groups like barbers (*nāpita*) (Shastri 1974: 3.14.63a, 64ab, 63c). Thus *brāhmaṇa*s make no special efforts in the text to entice merchant groups. Though their importance in rural society is recognized by the former, they do not hold a distinctive position in relation to other groups. This tallies well with their diminished position observed in the previous period (see above).

However, careful reading of the relevant portion still reveals some caution exercised by *brāhmaṇa*s against merchant groups. The equation of *vaṇik* with *gandhika vaṇik* can be interpreted as their denial of the presence of wholesale merchants and intention to restrict occupations of merchant groups. The caution of *brāhmaṇa*s is clearer in the ambiguity concerning the position of *svarṇa-vaṇik*, together with *svarṇakāra*. In spite of their *madhyama* status, their occupation is explained together with those of the *uttamajāti*s. On the other hand, what is designated as their occupation is not the trade in gold inferable from their name, but the inspection of the genuineness (*tattvaparīkṣā*) of gold and silver ornaments (Shastri 1974: 3.14.68ab).[31] These facts belie the arbitrariness of their definition. We may detect here an attempt by the *brāhmaṇa*s to contain these particular groups by assigning them to a lower ritual rank and by limiting their occupations, while they could not help but treat them as being on a par with *uttamajāti*s. Such an effort may be induced by the caution of *brāhmaṇa*s against these groups with potential wealth.

Thus the analysis of the *Bṛhaddharmapurāṇa* shows the progress in organization of merchant groups resulting in the formation of specialized groups comparable to *jāti*s and its failure to produce an influential bloc of mercantile communities. On the other hand, the text also alludes to the potential of merchant groups which provoked the caution of Brahmanical composers. The later period would see the continuance of this tension in a different historical context.

Concluding remarks

The history of merchant groups in early medieval Bengal delineated above can be summarized as a process of the ruralization of urban elites in its early phase, and that of the organization of merchants located in rural space towards specialized groups comparable to *jāti*s in its later phase. The new inscriptions enable us

30 "Vaṇijāṃ gandhavikrayam" (Shastri 1974: 3.14.63b); "tāmbūliny akarod ājñāṃ tāmbūlavikraye dvija" (Tarkaratna 1907: 3.14.60ab); "tai(tau)like hy akarod ājñāṃ guvākavikraye khalu" (Shastri 1974: 3.14.64cd).

31 *Svarṇakāra* (goldsmith) is also assigned to the examination (*nirūpaṇa*), not the craft, of gold and silver ornaments (Shastri 1974: 3.14.67cd).

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to fill gaps with new information, and also give us perspectives from which we can go beyond unilineal simplicity. The genealogy of the family of Balanāga in the Indian Museum plate shows an alternative available for an eminent merchant family, namely the shift of status to a lineage of local rulers. The activity of the *vaṇiggrāma* recorded in the Rajbhita stone inscription suggests not only a possible form of organization but also its impasse detectable in the contradiction between its organizational principle incorporating diverse merchants and the division of merchants into specialized groups described in the later *Bṛhaddharmapurāṇa*. The careful reading of the last text, on the other hand, reveals tension between merchant groups and *brāhmaṇa*s who tried to restrain the former by imposition of inferior ritual ranks and specialized occupations.

The process discussed in the present article proceeded, needless to say, in the overall context of the early medieval history of Bengal in which the interaction of elements such as agrarian expansion, the stratification of landed relation and the establishment of regional kingdoms brought about historical change. The history of merchant groups can be understood only in this context. At the same time, it was an important constituent of this historical change, together with the interconnected phenomena of spread of markets and monetary transactions to rural societies, of which only the former is discussed in the present article. These elements and phenomena should be studied intensively in their totality. I hope that the present study contributes something to the study of the historical process of early medieval Bengal by providing a better understanding of this partial but important constituent.

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