

Ancient Trade Corridor Tamralipti and Bengal's Glory (200 BCE–700 CE)

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Abstract. Tamralipti was a port of ancient Bengal used as a corridor for international trade and it played a critical role in bringing fame and glory to Bengal. This study investigates the role of this port that contributed towards the socioeconomic and sociocultural supremacy from 200 BCE to 700 CE. Archaeological remains proved the trade contacts of this port with several domestic and foreign geographical entities such as Southeast Asia, China and Rome. The sequential dominance and fame of this port aided to enrich the society and structure the trade-related social classes in ancient Bengal until the deterioration and decline of this port after the seventh century CE. The study employs a qualitative method using historical research that focuses on ancient texts, archaeological findings and reports as primary sources. The information gathered from field visits and published literature is also consulted through archival and library research. The result of this study reveals the leading role of Tamralipti as a corridor that signifies the image of Bengal concerning political, economic and sociocultural aspects.

Keywords and phrases: Tamralipti, Bengal's glory, maritime trade, social class, culture

Introduction

Tamralipti was an international port with great maritime power in ancient Bengal¹ in the Indian subcontinent since the early historical period (fourth to third century BCE). It is well known that the existence of a port is a prerequisite for overseas trade and commerce in a region. In this viewpoint, Tamralipti grew naturally with some strategic geographical advantages and kept a leading role in ancient Bengal's trade and commerce-related activities. It is often referred

to in literary sources directly and indirectly as a famous port city since the 65th century BCE and continued up to the eighth century CE. Ancient texts and different accounts of foreign travellers, pilgrims and geographers also referred to Tamralipti as a bustling port city and a religious centre on the eastern coast of India (Jacq-Hergoualc'h 2002, 53–54; Schoff 1995, 41–45) since before the Christian era. Its fame was sustained in different periods – Maurya, Gupta and the Post-Gupta era of Bengal (Chattopadhyay 2018, 37–45). This harbour was renowned as a thriving port of the Indian subcontinent in the early time, but Indian traders used the port as their gateway to go to distant lands like Southeast Asia, China and they made their stopover in Tamralipti on the way to and from the overseas destinations. Its close commercial relationship with the foreign countries had a salutary effect on Bengal's economy, culture and civilisation (Ray 1993, 159–163, 275). In that time, the economic enhancement, emergence of social classes and religious exchange with overseas destinations helped glorify Bengal. The classical world connected with this region in terms of trading activities and several entities of Southeast Asia like Suvarnabhumi, Javawdipa, Baliwdipa were the principal destinations from Tamralipti. After the decline of this port in the eighth century CE, ancient Bengal's social, cultural and economic position became under a shadow of dimness for a long time.

Nevertheless, due to its importance as an archaeological site and port city, it received attention from researchers as a maritime port among scholars. It had been used as a corridor for South and Southeast Asia and other regions and its early contacts integrated into the glorious period of ancient Bengal. Ports are essential for a region in respect of intra and international exchange. Kidwai (1992) stated that it is the place of contact where goods, people and cultures are transferred between land and maritime space and in this knot, ocean and inland transport lines meet and intervene.

Moreover, “site” and “situation” are the two physical and cultural factors determining a port's origin, evolution and growth. The site is the area of land and the associated waters on which the port and port town developed. In that case, “situation” brings together physical as well as cultural aspects. According to Hoyle (1967, 7), the port comprises the socioeconomic and human environment of the hinterland and relationships to world sea lanes and other sea-ports.

This study also includes the river system changes, which were the causes of the decline of Tamralipti in line with the geohistorical and environmental context of human activity. Such an environmental situation makes historians more geographically aware and geographers more historically sensitive

(Braudel 1995, 1–2). Furthermore, to understand historical events, the historian should consider the merits of linking history and geography from a long-term perspective (Baker 2003, 22). The trade network connects the marketplaces and can be conceived in “nodal points” within the network. Here, Tamralipti is the nodal point of the trade network in Bengal within the mentioned time frame.

This study has scrutinised ancient Indian texts, archaeological sources and other secondary materials following a historiographic approach concerning ancient historical aspects. A considerable result comes to light regarding the enrichment of Bengal associated with the rise of Tamralipti. Besides, it throws light on the subsequent vulnerability of the socioeconomic condition that materialised due to the negative impact of the gradual declination of this prominent port. Hence, examining the issues about Bengal's glorious period and its close connection with the prosperity of Tamralipti port adds new and significant value to the history of ancient maritime Bengal.

Statement of Research Issues and Problems

Tamralipti deserves attention for its influential role kept behind bringing Bengal's socioeconomic and sociocultural fortification. In previous studies, researchers showed the importance of the strategic location of Tamralipti and its commercial activities as a port and port city (Patra 2013). It also indicated in strewn in several scholarly writings as an embarkation point to overseas voyages for the Indian sailors and merchants. Though the development of the Bengal economy mainly depended on the ups and downs of the Tamralipti port, researchers did not take it into consideration earlier with due attention. The glorious period of the Bengal maritime trade had been highly correlated with the overseas trade activities of Tamralipti in its early phase. After the seventh century CE, the richness of Bengal faded because of the demise of Tamralipti port. Such chronological progressions and contributions of Tamralipti to the economy of Bengal from 200 BCE to 700 CE were merely illustrated by scholars (Ray 1993, 159; Ramchandran 1951). Hence, it claims further research about itself as an ancient maritime port city. Scholars focused on and discussed this port as a famous geographical entity (*Janapada*²) and an archaeological site referring to its excavated remains. As a port, it was also significant and researchers had mentioned it and referred to its importance in several studies (Chattopadhyay 2018, 38; Chandra 1977, 159). In this connection, the question is how this port became vital and used as a corridor for international linkages and kept its influential role in the progression of economic and sociocultural aspects of Bengal.

Hereafter, the objective of this study is to investigate the affairs of Tamralipti as a corridor and its participation in early trade that helped build the prosperous economy and develop trade-related social classes in early Bengal. It also focuses on the chronological presence of Tamralipti with its prominence and enrichment. The study examines the considerable role of this port in international trade contact and the weakness of the Bengal economy in the later period that happened due to the decline of Tamralipti.

Therefore, the significance of this study is to fill the gap regarding the issues of Bengal's glory in line with its overseas connection. The current research presents the correlations among the rise and decline of the Tamralipti port that had contributed substantially towards the fame of Bengal, which had affected its socioeconomic and sociocultural life. It is also essential to understand the significant effect of Tamralipti in bringing glory to ancient Bengal.

Literature Review

Some pioneering literary contributions are essential to be knowledgeable about Tamralipti, though the sources of references on this subject matter are incredibly limited. The texts published earlier analysed overall issues of the trade-related activities of Tamralipti, an ancient port city of early Bengal and India. It was also considered a famous geographical entity and an archaeological site in a few texts. Additionally, in previous studies, the mention of Tamralipti as a leading port was minimal, though it was a prominent port city and brought prosperity to ancient Bengal. As a result, the association of Tamralipti with the glory of Bengal did not get attention from the earlier researchers.

However, in this context, two essential articles are "Tamralipti and Gange: The Two-Port Cities of Ancient Bengal and Connected Consideration" (Ray 1979) and "The Chandraketurah-Tamluk Region of Bengal: Source of the Early Historic Rouletted Ware from India and Southeast Asia" (Gogte 1996). The earlier one emphasis two ports of early Bengal connected by sea and land with various regions. The latter mentions specific archaeological findings that have proven the relationship between Tamralipti and Southeast Asia. In addition, Jahan (2005) also focused on its importance in her study and marked it as an early port of Bengal. However, these studies did not concentrate on the Bengal glory that closely related to the activities of Tamralipti port.

Datta's study (2000), which is about Tamralipti, focuses on identifying the location of this port in the context of historical geography. In other scholarly work, Datta (2004–2005) has concentrated on the myth and reality of Tamralipti and Gange, the two ancient ports of Bengal.

The research of Chandra (1977) is also notable regarding trade and traders of ancient India, which mentioned Tamralipti as a thriving port. The trade-related activities of several ages were described from the view of the Indian context and in this research, the Tamralipti port got attention inconsistently. Here, "Tamralipti: The Ancient Port of India" (Tripathi and Rao 1994) is another scholarly article that discusses trade and commerce, boat-building technology and the decline of Tamralipti. It also examines Tamralipti concisely without providing detailed information regarding the association of Bengal's glory as a port. Even it did not focus on the reflection of the declination of Tamralipti in the Bengal's society.

Ramachandran's study (1951) analysed the location and importance of Tamralipti as a port city based on ancient literary texts, Chinese accounts and other sources. However, in his study, the author did not concentrate on Bengal's economic development related to the trade activities of Tamralipti.

Patra (2008) identified in his study several ports of ancient Odisha (Orissa), including Tamralipti, based on literary and archaeological sources. With a short discussion, the author tried to determine the location and its importance based on ancient texts where the Bengal economic dependency on the international prominence of Tamralipti port was not highlighted.

Another critical authorship by Tripathi (2011) discussed the overall maritime trade of Eastern India with products, monsoon winds, Buddhist settlements and propagating in overseas lands. In that article, Tamralipti is logically pointed as a port in strewn, but it did not emphasise Tamralipti's relation to Bengal's glory.

Furthermore, the scholarships of Sircar (1971), Ray (1993) and Bhattacharyya (1977) are significant as the conventional sources for the discussion of ancient India and Bengal, where Tamralipti is referred to as an essential territory. In addition, the recently published book (first and second volumes) edited by Chowdhury and Chakrabarti (2018) is an indispensable text concerning ancient Bengal history that has thrown some light on Tamralipti. In this first volume, Gangopadhyay (2018, 425–440) examined Tamralipti as an archaeological site in a chapter titled "Tamluk".

Research Methodology

This study follows the historiographic approach in explaining the port, maritime trade and social classes developed in ancient Bengal by scrutinising ancient literature, archaeological sources and other secondary materials. Information has been gathered by visiting the Tamluk (Tamralipti) archaeological site and documents collected from museums and archives. This study also has examined the ancient Indian texts such as *Arthashastra*, *Kathasaritsagar*, *Raghuvamsa*, *Jataka* tales and other core literature and the archaeological reports and accounts of Chinese travellers. Though reconstructing ancient history is indeed relatively tricky due to its sketchy nature, this study has been carried out by combining primary sources and secondary investigative literature through archival and library research.

Analysis

In light of data reflected in ancient texts and archaeological sources, Tamralipti is a port city developed as a consequence of brisk trade (Patra 2013). The term “Tamralipta” is received from two Sanskrit words, *tamra* and *lipta*, conjointly infers to mean “full of copper” (Chattopadhyay 2018). In the ancient text *Jain Pranayapana* and *Dasha Kumar-Charita* of Dandin, Tamralipti was presented as a part of Vanga.³ It was the same as Tamluk in the Midnapur district of Bengal, situated about 12 miles from the junction of the Rupnarayana with the Hooghly (Law 1954, 253). *Vayu Purana* states that the Ganges passes through it. The present name Tamluk is assumed to have been derived from Tamralipti (Dey 1927, 259). Scholars defined Midnapore as a Microlithic industrial site of Bengal. *Raghuvamsa* (IV.38) stated that Tamluk was situated on the bank of the Kapisa River. This nature of Tamralipti was categorised as *dronimukha* type sea-port (Chandra 1977, 159), located near the confluence of the river and sea. It was located on the seashore and also situated on a broad reach or bay of the Rupnarayan River (Cunningham 1871, 425). Because of the strategic location of Tamralipti, the maritime trade link with other parts of India, Sri Lanka and the Southeast Asian region was strengthened and Buddhism also flourished massively.

The rich Ganges delta and its dense fluvial network (Deloche 1983) helped create favourable sea traffic of Tamralipti for a distant land. This port served as the originating point for exporting trading articles. It was the centre of life for people in commercial, cultural and political fields (Patra 2013). The remarkable maritime facades, rich hinterland and natural gateway brought enormous success to the economy of the ancient Bengal.

Based on archaeological exploration and excavation, Tamluk bore some important clues concerning maritime trade. The excavation conducted by K.N. Dikshit, T.N. Ramachandran and Gurusaday (a group of individual scholars) in 1940 (Ramchandran 1951) revealed diversified artefacts like ceramics, cast copper coins and terracotta objects. Such discoveries from different parts of Tamralipti indicated the existence of foreign trade and commerce of ancient Bengal. However, few remains explored from this site were referred to the international linkage of this port with the Roman world. Kielhorn of the Leiden University identified a redware vase of Mediterranean origin and another was a sprinkler-like object found from this site (Ghose 1954–1955, 19–20). Under the supervision of Sri Paresh Chandra Dasgupta, the excavation of 1945 to 1955 was significant for discovering more essential remains. Northern Black Polished Ware, Black Slipped Ware, Red Ware, terracotta figurines, a fragmentary of Kharoshti-Brahmi inscription, several inscribed potsherds and a seal bearing perhaps a legend in the mixed scripts (Mukherjee 1990; Ghose 1954–1955, 23) were discovered in the Tamluk area. Among other notable remains were urban scenes bearing terracotta plaques, cast copper coins, rouletted ware, carnelian beads and stones such as agate, jasper, quartz, amethyst and etched variety were semi-precious in terms of quality and value (Dasgupta 1952–1953).

Most importantly, the above-mentioned same types of remains were found in Southeast Asian countries at different archaeological sites (Jahan 2005) such as Bukit Tengku Lembu, Kuala Selinsing and Tanjong Rawa in Malaysia; Cibutak and Sembilan, Kobak Kendal in Indonesia; Khian Luk Pat, U-Thong, Ban Don Ta Phet, Ban Chi Nam Lai and Prasat Muang Sing in Thailand; Trakieu and Oc-Eo in Vietnam; and Palawan Island in the Philippines. Specifically, Bengal originated Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi inscribed seals were found from U-Thong, Oc-Eo and Ko-Ying; Buddhagupta's inscription from Kedah; ivory comb from Chansan; semi-precious beads from Bukit Tengku Lembu, Ban Don Ta Phet and Cibutak and Sembilan. The Northern Black Polished Ware, Rouletted Ware, Knobbed Ware were discovered in U-Thong, Ban Don Ta Phet, Sembiran and other sites (Akhtar and Idris 2020).

The Greco-Roman world was a region that had infrequent and indirect contact based on the trade and commerce with eastern India through the port of Tamralipti (Basham 1971, 228). In this connection, the trade route from ancient Rome to the Indian region was through various sea routes of Africa and South Arabia. On the way to India, travellers used the sea routes of the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. After touching various points to the merchandise, they crossed the Bharukachchha port of the north-western part of India to sail towards its eastern region (Chandra 1977, 112–119). The Bengal region was also connected

with the Roman world through the Indo-Roman trade linkages (Datta 2005). However, the Southeast Asian linkage with the Tamralipti port was direct and more focused.

Over the discussion of Tamralipti, scholars sometimes stated that the excavated materials were not impressive much than the literary one that highlighted the prosperous and brisk trade carried out at this port (Chakravarti 2002, 130). Ancient text and literature were enriched with enormous references over Tamralipti, whereas sometimes, the archaeological remains and sources seemed mere in this regard. Description found in the literature regarding the vigorousness and prosperous status of Tamralipti also depicted a reality of bustling as an international port city.

However, understanding the association of the glory of Bengal with Tamralipti, the multidimensional characters of this port should be analysed from a few points of view. At the same time, by analysing the chronological existence of this port city, it might be clear that Tamralipti kept a crucial role in different ages.

Maurya and Kushan period

During the third century BCE, the area of Tamralipti was included within the boundary of the Maurya empire (Ramchandran 1951) and a great centre. It became an indispensable and prominent port in the Maurya empire in terms of maritime trade with the contact of overseas destinations. According to *Arthashastra*, this port carried out trade activities with Suvarnabhumi since the third century BCE. Early Buddhist literature mentioned Tamralipti as an ancient port with antiquity as great as Pataliputra (Maurya capital, today's Bihar). Smith detected that the Asokan empire stretched hugely and developed Bengal as far as the mouths of the Ganges, where Tamralipti was the principal part (Smith 1962, 171). The route is as shown in Figure 1.

Further, in the Jain text, *Brihatkalpasutrashya* referred to Tamralipti as the capital of Vanga and existed as *bhukti* or provinces of the Maurya empire at that time (Chandra 1977, 75–76). Frequent references were also found in the *Jataka* tales of Buddhist literature about the voyages hung around from Tamralipti to Suvarnabhumi for trade and Buddhist missionary activities. Thus, it led as the prime sea-port at the age of Maurya for materialising the local transaction and international trade contacts and the land route connection within and beyond India during the Kushan age that had ample evidence of archaeological materials and literature.

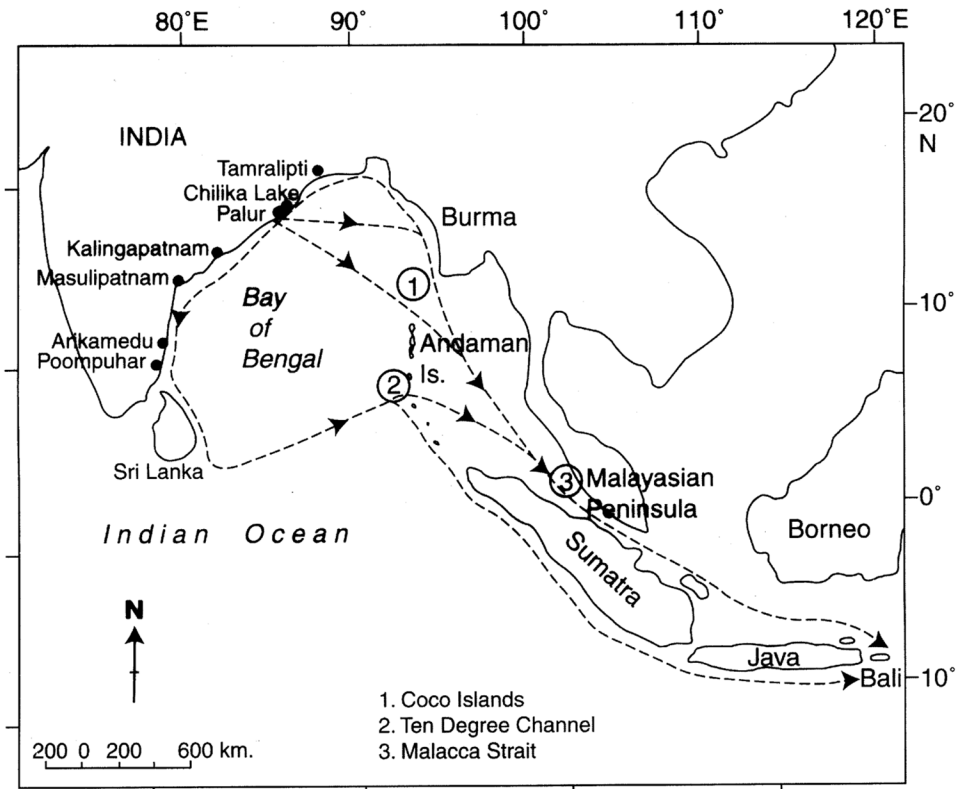


Figure 1. Map showing the ancient trade route from Tamralipti to Southeast Asian region
 Source: Adapted from Tripathi and Raut (2006)

The founding of the gold coin of the Kushan period from Tamralipti suggested its glory and good connection of the Kushan empire since it was a unique coin of the early Kushan age, as pointed by Dash Gupta (Gangopadhyay 2018). Kushan coins also appeared in the coastal areas and some other territories and facilitated as the medium of inter-zonal exchanges. The Mahasthan stone inscription refers to Pudanagales (Pundranagar, Mahasthan of North Bengal) suggests specific items with which the treasure or the storehouse had to be filled up (Sircar 1965, 79–80). It also refers to the *kaltis* (a type of coin or money made by gold), which *Periplus* translated as *katila*, the name of a gold coin (Mukherjee 1968). In terms of speedy economic transactions, different types of gold, silver, copper currencies appeared in the early centuries of the Christian era and before in the northern and coastal West Bengal (Mukherjee 1991). It also assumes that the punch-marked coins were introduced in Bengal in the Maurya period (Mukherjee 2000).

Tamralipti was also directly connected with Maurya's capital Pataliputra by land route. It has been labelled as the thriving entrepôt during the first century CE by the Roman philosopher and voyager Pliny, in his book with the name *Taluctae* that refers to *Natural History*.⁴ Likewise, Simhali great epic *Mahavamsa* of the second century BCE came with the reference of Tamralipti in which it described that Emperor Asoka sent a Bodhi tree through his envoy to Ceylon from Tamralipti and that journey took 14 days through the sea. In Buddhist *Jataka*, it was mentioned that there were business transactions by boat among Benaras, Champa and Pataliputra. Moreover, the port Tamralipti was responsible for expanding external trade-based activities and internal riverine communication in the late centuries BCE that had the largest concentration in lower West Bengal, which boomed Bengal's economy at that time (Mukherjee 2000).

However, it is apparent that although the political supremacy in Bengal was obscure, the economy flourished massively during the period of the Maurya and Kushan rule in India. This economic glory of Bengal principally centred in the port of Tamralipti (as shown in Figure 2). It also kept its role as the gateway for the Indian traders towards Southeast Asia (as shown in Figure 1) and other foreign commercial destinations.

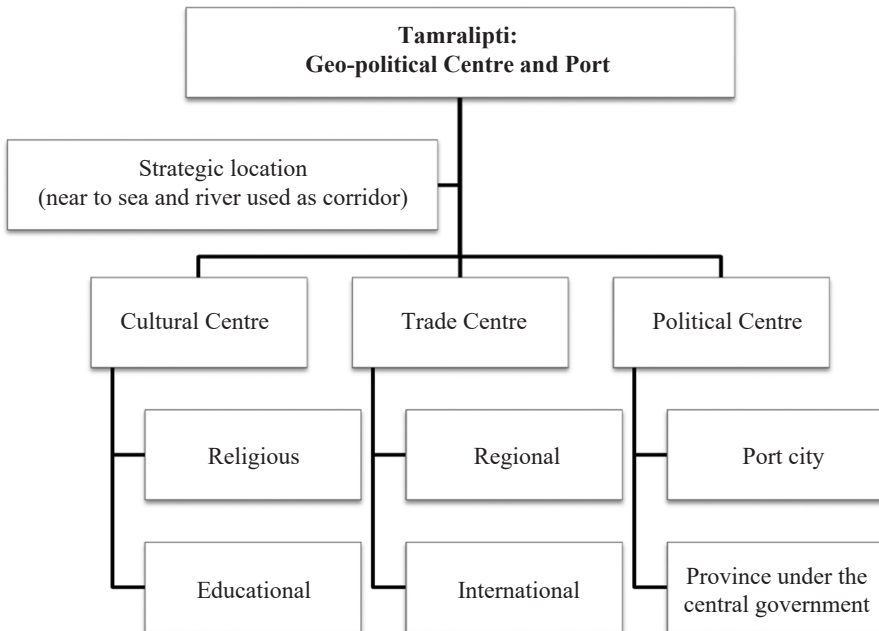


Figure 2. Three broad areas of the dimensional activities of Tamralipti

Gupta period

Steady growth in trade and commerce appeared in the Gupta period of Bengal. After the age of Chandragupta I, almost the whole area of the ancient Indian subcontinent, including Bengal, was conquered by the great empire Samudragupta (Dasgupta 1995). In that case, Tamralipti had been a great port city and commercial region under the Gupta empire. Ancient famous literature, *Raghubamsham* of Kalidash, *Brihat-Samhita* of Varahmihira also referred to Tamralipti as a port of Bengal during this period. Chinese pilgrims, Fa-Hien, in the fourth century, mentioned Tamralipti as a port with its appropriate embarkation station (Patra 2013). Its commercial relation with China and Southeast Asia flourished by the export and import trade to a great extent during the Gupta period, as evident in the account of Fa-Hien. He went to China on a merchant's vessel from here (Legge 1886, 100) and mentioned that traders out bounded towards China and Southeast Asia from this port. Cotton, silk goods, *malabathrum* (cinnamon, like aromatic plant leaves), tortoise shells were exported from Tamralipti (Chandra 1977, 119). It was a hub of merchants and foreigners who purchased pearls and Gangetic nard (oil of mixed kind) from this port city for their business (Chandra 1977, 126). In the fourth century, it also continued with possessing the leading position on India's eastern coast.

During this period, merchants and other traders organised into guilds that helped get tax exemption in foreign trade. Guilds worked behind gearing up the business volume and strengthened the economic condition of the empire further by the foreign exchange in line with smooth and efficient overseas trade connection mainly with Southeast Asia and China. For example, *mahanavika* (great sailor) Buddhagupta went from Tamralipti to the Malay Peninsula for business that had been depicted in a fragmentary stone inscription of Buddhagupta. Similarly, the overseas sea connection is indicated with the quotations in the *sagarmati-pariprccha* (the question of ocean mind) in an inscription discovered by Wales from Bujang Valley (Wheatley 1961, 193) of about sixth century CE from the Wellesley province, Malay Peninsula. The earlier one referred to *mahanavika* Buddhagupta hailed from Raktamrittika, which was identified with famous Raktamrittika Mahavihara in the Chiruti region Murshidabad, West Bengal. *Mahanavika* is the captain of a *mahanau* or a big ship that was also mentioned in *Arthasastra* as a large ship (Sircar 1965, 497). Such reference of the big ship indicates an excellent transport facility and a thriving merchant community who used to take the risky sea voyage to profit through foreign trade, especially trade with the countries of Southeast Asia.

The *Kathasaritsagara* (XIII, 74) marked Tamralipti as the emporium of commerce since the fourth century CE, from which embarked the old Kedah (west coast of the Malay Peninsula) bound merchants (Ramchandran 1951). Chinese pilgrim, Fa-Hien during his visit to India (399–414 CE), spent two years at Tamralipti and described its location as being on the seashore (Cunningham 1871, 504), where established 22 Buddhist monasteries and the law of Buddha were flourishing (Ramchandran 1951). During this period, the Gupta rulers issued many gold and silver coins. The gold coin was known as *suvarna mudra* or *dinarius* (Ray 1993, 159). Most of this gold for coinage was imported from the Southeast Asian region and transhipped through the sea route primarily via Tamralipti. During the fifth century, land transfer in Bengal happened in exchange for gold coins or dinars.

Post-Gupta period

In the post-Gupta period (after 520 CE), the political power of Bengal had been passed through a critical situation. At that time, as a political entity, it was not under the rule of the central power of India, as well as its political and economic situation was not stable as the Maurya and Gupta periods. Foreign attack by Hunes and Shakas was the leading cause of the weakening and decline of the Gupta dynasty. After the decline of the Guptas, the currency system and guilds also lost their ancestral glory.

Bengal came under the suzerainty of Sasanka with Tamralipti during 606 CE to 637 CE and had to face attack by the central or North Indian political power. Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang visited Bengal after the death of Sasanka and mentioned that Kajangala, Pundravardhana, Karnasuvarna, Tamralipti and Samatata were the individual kingdoms of Bengal during the seventh century (Beal 2003, 203). It can be assumed that these states declared their independence after the death of Sasanka (Ray 1993, 482). Tamralipti was also spaced in the description of I-Tsing, who visited India (673–693 CE) and stayed in Tamralipti for five months and learned Sanskrit there along with *Sabdavidya*, the “Science of words” and stated Tamralipti as a chief port and Buddhist centre. He mentioned two routes towards India from China; one through Khotan and Northern India and the other was the Southern Sea route that touched Canton to Condore (Kunlun), throughout the Strait of Malacca, old Kedah, Pegu and Tamralipti (Ramchandran 1951). It had the distance between Nicobar to Tamralipti as 900 miles to 960 miles that took 15 days to sail (Gerini 1974, 527). Another evidence that Tamralipti was regarded as a trade centre was the Dudhpani Rock Inscription (Kielhorn 1894, 343–345) of Udayamana of eighth century CE that stated, from Ayodhya, three brothers went to Tamralipti and

made plenty of money by trading. Such a statement suggests Tamralipti was a prosperous trading and commercial centre during the post-Gupta period.

Unfortunately, since the middle of the seventh century, the fading of Bengal's glory was observed through the decline of trade and commerce and deteriorated political sustainability. This time, Gupta rulers lost their supremacy and a kind of unsteadiness prevailed from the middle of the seventh to the middle of the eighth century in the political arena of Bengal where the influential individuals were grabbing the comparatively weaker persons in the society that was called in Sanskrit as *matsyanyayam*⁵ (the big fishes swallow the small fishes) in the history of ancient Bengal. Furthermore, because of economic diminishing, the silver coins disappeared from the market at the end of the seventh century and after that, no information was found regarding gold coins. A small amount of fake silver and copper coins were available in the eighth century.

The political and economic downgrading resulted in a broken condition of Bengal's economy that brought thick darkness in Bengal's sky. Most significantly, nature also negatively impacted the port city of Tamralipti by changing the river streams that accelerated the disappearing trading activities there. As a result, the frequency of the local and foreign traders towards Tamralipti and to the outbound distant land trading activities decreased immensely, about which Roy stated that after the seventh century CE, the trade-related triumph of Tamralipti was started to fade away (Ray 1993, 160–161, 361).

Tamralipti as a cultural centre

Before the eighth century, Tamralipti was also famous as a cultural centre besides its economic glory, which attracted foreign travellers. It might be pointed out that Buddhism and Buddhist religious institutions were firmly established in the eastern frontier of Bengal before the sixth century CE (Majumder 1971, 523). For this instance, Chinese Buddhist pilgrims came here frequently in the Gupta to post-Gupta periods. The religious and cultural performance of Tamralipti blossomed along with its trading tradition. Fa-Hien visited Tamralipti in the fifth century CE and found this port city flourished with the international fame of Buddhism. He found 22 monasteries with resident monks and stayed there for two years (Legge 1886, 100). Another famous Chinese pilgrim, I-Tsing, visited this place in 673 CE and stayed there (Takakusu 1896, 152–154). He studied Sanskrit literature and translated one Sanskrit text into Chinese (Bagchi 1938, 539). Another Chinese pilgrim, Ta Ch'eng-Teng, stayed in Tamralipti for 12 years and met there with I-Tsing. He acquired an extensive knowledge of Sanskrit-Buddhist text. Tao-lin also came from China for religious learning

and stayed here for three years in Tamralipti and learnt Sanskrit. In the seventh century CE, Hiuen-Tsang visited Tamralipti and mentioned that there had been 10 Buddhist monasteries and more than 1,000 learners (Majumder 1971, 524).

Ancient Indian text from the sixth century, *Dashakumaracharita*, mentioned the Binduvasini temple of Tamralipti (Ray 1993, 296). Fa-Hien visited this temple in the fifth century and Hiuen-Tsang visited the same place in the seventh century (Law 1954, 263). Due to the changing stream of the Rupnarayan River, this temple was also destroyed. Hiuen-Tsang described that the people of Tamralipti were so busy and hurried. Both the travellers noted, the inhabitants were wealthy and belonged to a high standard of moral character (Mookherji 1912, 256) who also had a fondness for learning (Ramchandran 1951).

About the prominence of trading activity and the religious and cultural richness of Tamralipti, Ray stated that merchants were the pioneer here. Along with them and for their well-being, religion came in place and then the priests practised the religion followed by the influence of defence and culture according to the universal rule of history (Ray 1993, 157). Thus, Tamralipti played an essential role as a cultural centre that stretched out to the international sphere regarding the propagation of Buddhism with its long-standing fame as a commercial port city.

Trade oriented elite classes

The period from 200 BCE to 700 CE was remarkable for unprecedented growth in trade in Bengal. With the wide fame of Tamralipti in the global spheres, the trade-oriented social class of Bengal emerged in a wide frame simultaneously. Since this entrepôt was the busiest market with export-import trading, a distribution centre for foreign and local merchants and a large hinterland in Northern India (Mukherjee 2000), immense big and small merchants emerged orbital to this port city. As a result, the merchants were classified as the *sreshthi* and *sarthavaha*. They made this port city a hub of merchants stretched every corner in that market-town (Ray 1993, 157). *Sreshthi* had their shops in villages and towns and fulfilled the necessity of local people and *sarthavaha* (caravan traders) who travelled from one place to another, carrying local and foreign goods with them. At the same time, they controlled the import-export-trading and acted as wholesalers and suppliers to the local *sreshthi* (Patra 2008).

Merchants of Tamralipti were wealthy and were directly involved in the Gupta administration since they maintained the guild system. Guilds were the organising body for selling and distributing surplus production of the villages and urban centres (Patra 2008) and worked to protect the economic and legal interests of the people involved in the trade-related profession (Fick 1920, 267). These autonomous bodies had their own rules and regulations and were usually accepted and respected by the state (Majumder and Altekar 1954, 328). Moreover, they were also considered the corporation of people in business and used to conduct trade on a cooperative basis.

During the fifth century CE, the *Kama Sutra* (VI, 38, 41) of Vatsayana regarded the Gupta merchants as a wealthy group of citizens who gained wealth by gift, conquest, purchase, deposit or inheritance from their forefathers. In terms of daily life, they maintained high standard luxury by having their houses with different compartments occupied by balmy perfumes and female attendance and the residence situated near some water surrounded by the garden. They used fragrant ointments and body perfumes regularly by keeping pots containing collyrium and other fragrant substances (Mallanaga 1996, 21). Vatsayana also mentioned that Southeast Asian perfumes and aromatic products had a good demand from Bengal's merchants and wealthy persons. Thomas stated that the state power in the Gupta age showed great honour to the merchant's representatives. Such information was found from the inscriptional evidence of Damodarpur copper plates of Kumargupta and the inscription of Bouddhagupta (Thomas 1925, 113). Some other authentic documents suggested the involvement of business class or guild as the representatives of the local government of the Gupta administration in Bengal

Decline of Tamralipti

Usually, the changes of the river courses happen naturally from time to time and this geographic shifting influences the human activities that are understandable from the hydrographic map of an area (Brunhes 1952, 36). In this connection, after the seventh century, Tamralipti lost its prominence and gradually declined due to the changes in the river courses, especially the drying up of the river Saraswati and Bhagirathi. In that time, Bhagirathi reached the lower position and Saraswati abandoned the former stream and they came to flow directly to the South (Ray 1993, 82–156). These environmental variations played a crucial role in navigation, trade and commerce and were closely associated with the emergence and decline of human settlement and civilisation in that region.

In this context, the decline of Tamralipti had been attributed to hydrography (Chakravarti 2002, 165). The channel on which Tamluk was situated and afforded the facilities for navigation was silted up (Mukerjee 2009, 185). Even once Tamralipti stood by the seashore, shifted to 50 miles away in the hinterland and by the continuous changing of the river, the course took by Saptagram or Satgaon (Geological Survey of India 1992, 7–11), the newly established city of mediaeval Bengal. Hence, this world-famous port city lost its glory due to the changing river channels and the natural process of new land formation. Even after the eighth century, there was no information about the appearance of the sea-port of Tamralipti. The strongly land-based states might also have di-urbanised and di-commercialised lower Bengal to some extent (Roy 2012, 45). Because of such deterioration, unfortunately, no evidence or accounts were found in any ancient literature regarding its commercial glory rather than merely named Tamralipti as an ordinary trade centre.

Moreover, political instability and the weakening of the ruling power in Bengal expedited the ruining of the fame of Tamralipti. This demotion principally happened after the death of King Sasanka, who ruled the whole Bengal after the Gupta age. Moreover, the political situation was not stable because of continuous war and conflict within states and with the central kingdoms of ancient India. As a result, a sort of haphazard situation rose in the society of Bengal that scholars identified this period as *Matsyanyayam* (Kielhorn 1896–1897, 243) or an unpredictable time for ancient Bengal that prevailed since mid of the seventh to mid-eighth century. This condition created a strain on the long-standing economic glory of Tamralipti that was initiated long before the Christian era.

Results and Discussion

Tamralipti played a vital role in Bengal's internal and foreign trade and commerce in the early period. Beyond the Indian subcontinent, the Roman world and the Southeast Asian region were the leading destinations for this trade contact. This regular commercial connection kept a significant role in the societal development of early Bengal through the emergence of the merchant class with their dominating power in the state. In this instance, from the early historical period to the post-Gupta time was the flashlight when Tamralipti port played its most significant role. Subsequently, the Bengal's glory headed to a peak position by creating an appropriate societal coherence for further development in trade and commerce. Such assertions did not come out in the earlier scholarships.

However, after the seventh-century CE, with the decline of this port, the guild of *sreshthi*, *sarthavaha* and other trade-related social classes started to disappear and lost their dominance in the state power. At the same time, they lost their financial solvency and fame that were resulting in the fading of the position of the trade-based classes in society and state; although the *sarthavaha* existed as a leading merchant class up to the Gupta period and the comparatively lower merchant class, the *vaishya*, came in the scene of the society. Unfortunately, the previous literature did not address such ups and downs of Bengal's socioeconomic condition where the maritime link of Tamralipti port was closely associated.

In this changing situation, international trade volume was decreasing excessively and societal development depended on agriculture-based activities. Because of the decline of business-related actions, importing gold and silver decreased and limited the trade of Bengal within the territory itself and in the intra-regional trade of India. Then, the commercial products were also locally produced, including fine cloths, sugar, salt, coconut, betel-leaf, betel-nut, sugarcane and others. Undesirably, such small-scale trade activities were not able to establish any international ranked maritime port like Tamralipti. Though there have been emerged other small ports in Bengal during the seventh and eighth century and they had a trade-based relationship to the Southeast Asian region, they could not achieve fame like Tamralipti. Such a significant point is merely emphasised in the earlier writings.

It also resulted in the reluctance of Pala-Sena's kings after the seventh century CE in determining currency valuation by gold. Moreover, because of not having an overseas trade connection, they did not feel the necessity of regulating gold value. Compared to the fourth to fifth century CE, it was a different scene when normal landowners bought and sold their land in gold currency. Hence, in line with the statement of Niharranjan Ray, it can be said that after the seventh century CE, the glorious time regarding the ancient maritime trade of Bengal did not come back again. Consequently, after the eighth century CE, the trade-based economy and society of Bengal searched her dependency on the alternative platform. Later, the agriculture-based economy emerged and flourished day by day.

Above mentioned analysis showed some factors concerning the periods of the emergence and decline of Tamralipti. During its flourishing ages (200 BCE–700 CE), the international trade of Bengal was directly linked to the Southeast Asian countries and in Bengal, gold and silver coins were issued regularly. At the same time, trade-oriented classes (*sarthavaha*, *sreshthi* and others) became stronger

and the economy of Bengal was dependent principally on trade and commerce. On the other hand, the glory was frustrated (700 CE and later) with diminishing trade prominence that resulted in maintaining intra-regional trade, disappearing of gold coins, trading activity ran by ordinary businessmen (*vaishya*, farmers and vessels) and the economy was dependent on agriculture. By considering these characteristics and features, it is to be alleged that this study would fulfil the gap regarding Bengal's glory associated with the Tamralipti port. Moreover, it may open new avenues to conduct extensive research since there are possibilities of getting new evidence of artefacts by further excavations.

Conclusion

To put it briefly, in terms of the new appraisal of the trade and commerce and the glory of Bengal (200 BCE–700 CE), Tamralipti was a thriving port city having international contact. It may define that during the Maurya to the post-Gupta period, this port was used as a favourable corridor for the merchants of Bengal. In this way, Tamralipti brought economic and cultural glory for ancient Bengal by facilitating a long-standing trade contact with the Southeast Asian region and other international destinations. It existed as an ancient port and cultural centre along with its long-continued affluence that had a strategical position, favourable trade routes and foreign accessibility. Moreover, it was developed with a skilled trading class that enriched Bengal's society and their active role brought a sustainable dominance in every realm of human life that made the period of Tamralipti a golden era of Bengal. After its decline, Bengal's glory was shaded with the weakening of foreign trade and lowering the status of merchants, by which agriculture-based activities started to get priority in the Bengal economy. This situation indicates ancient Bengal's trading and economic downfall up to the next 500 years, even though many small ports or commercial centres emerged like Devaparvata, Samandar and others.

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Notes

1. In this research, “Bengal” is the geographical area of the Indian subcontinent in South Asia. It was a province in British India called with this name up to 1947. In the ancient period, the Bengal's territory covered several geographical entities, or the ancient Indian townships called *Janapada*. These townships were part of ancient India and occasionally, some townships were independent. Moreover, all these ancient townships were under the geographical area of present Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. From the Muslim period (13th century) to the partition of India in 1947, it was known as Bengal (see *History of Ancient Bengal*, 1971, p. 1–14 for more details).
2. *Janapada* is a Sanskrit word that was used for several geographical entities of ancient Bengal. Hydrography had been the main factor in determining the limits of these geographical as well as administrative divisions. Among them, Vanga, Gauda, Radha, Tamralipti, Harikela and Samatata were the notable townships. No doubt, the territorial limits of these divisions sometimes varied within each division and sometimes they were extended for political and administrative reasons.
3. In the ancient period, Vanga was known as the famous *Janapada* or represented as the name of people and a geographical region or entity. Sometimes this entity is identified as the region to the west of the river Bhagirathi. In this way, Tamralipti was included under Vanga.
4. *Naturalis Historia* which also known as *Natural History* was written by Pliny, Gaius Plinius Secundus the Elder (Pliny the Elder) – a Roman author, naturalist, philosopher and naval commander of the early Roman empire. It was a vast encyclopaedic work and the only book series by Pliny. Initially, it was composed and written in classical Latin in around 77 CE with divided into 37 books. It is comprehensive in scope and includes the field of botany, zoology, astronomy, geology, mineralogy that is worthwhile as the source for constructing ancient history.
5. A Sanskrit word that expresses the instabilities of the society of ancient Bengal compared such as to the situation in a pond where the big fishes swallow the small fishes. This situation continued around 100 years from the middle of the seventh century to the mid-eighth century.

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