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Ancient Bengal in Regional and Overseas Trade Networks: A Historical Analysis

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Abstract

Ancient Bengal occupied a strategic position at the head of the Bay of Bengal and at the seaward end of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta. This location enabled it to serve as a bridge between inland production zones, riverine markets, and maritime routes linking eastern India with Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, and wider Indian Ocean networks. Archaeological evidence from Tamralipti, Chandraketugarh, and Wari-Bateshwar, together with literary references and material remains such as beads, coins, and Rouletted Ware, indicates that Bengal was not a peripheral zone but an active participant in regional and overseas trade. This article argues that ancient Bengal functioned as a river-sea commercial interface whose significance lay in both exchange and connectivity. The study uses qualitative historical methodology based on archaeological, literary, and secondary scholarly materials.

Keywords: Ancient Bengal, Tamralipti, Chandraketugarh, Wari-Bateshwar, Bay of Bengal, maritime trade, Indian Ocean

1. Introduction

Ancient Bengal developed within a distinctive ecological setting shaped by major rivers, fertile alluvium, and access to the Bay of Bengal. This setting made the region commercially significant because river channels connected agrarian hinterlands to urban settlements and port outlets, while the coast linked Bengal to long-distance maritime exchange. In early historic eastern India, Tamruk or Tamralipti and Chandraketugarh emerged as important urban centres, and Wari-Bateshwar in present-day Bangladesh has also been identified as a major early historic site associated with trade and craft activity.

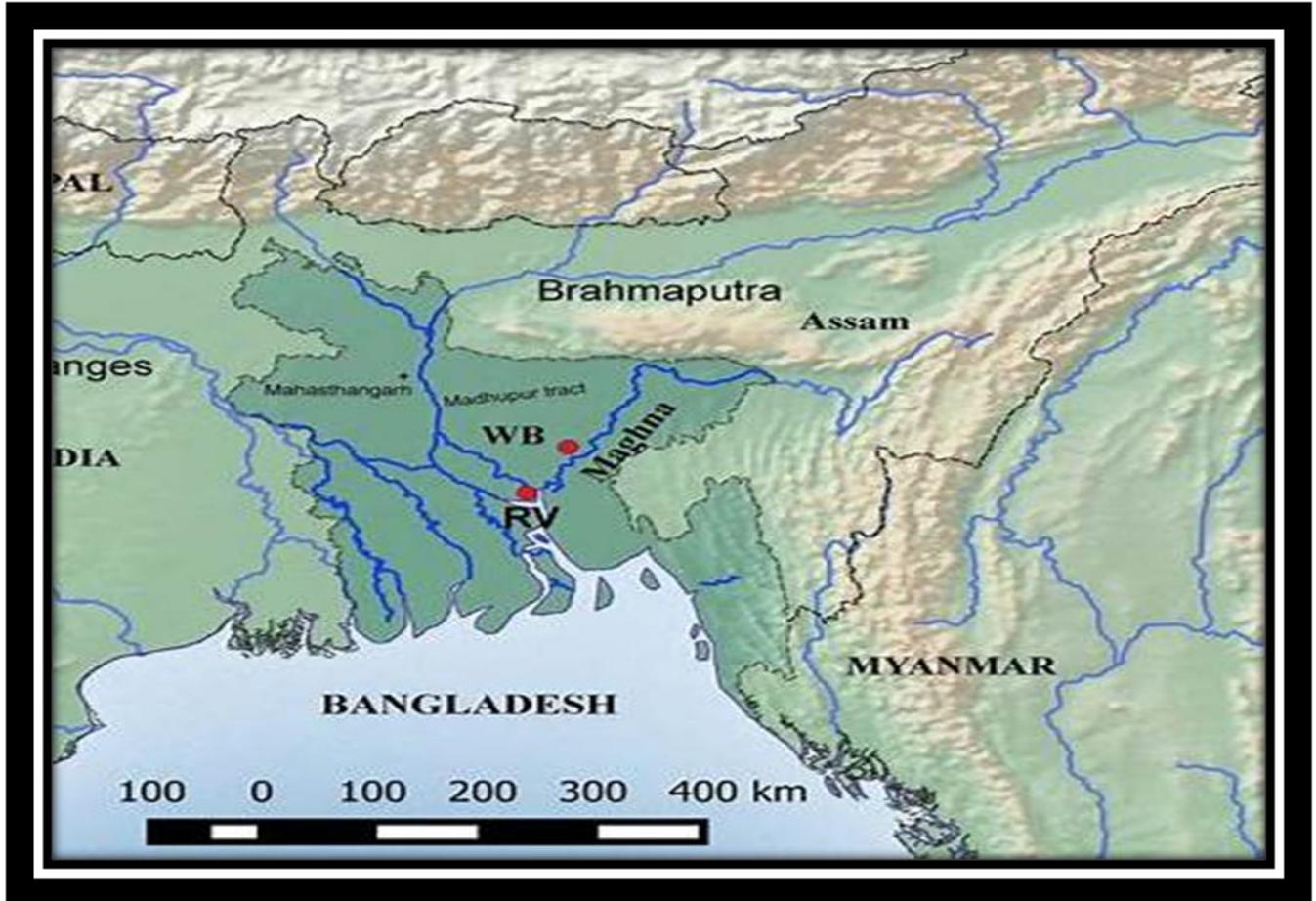


Figure 1. Map of Bangladesh and the location of Wari-Bateshwar within the wider riverine landscape of Bengal.

Source For Figure: Archaeological Location Map Associated With Wari-Bateshwar.

This geographical position allowed Bengal to play a dual role: it was both a receiving zone for inland goods and a forwarding zone for maritime traffic. The *Periplus* and Ptolemy mention a port called Gange near the sea, and modern scholarship often associates this with Chandraketugarh in lower Bengal. Tamralipti, meanwhile, is repeatedly described in literary and historical traditions as a major port connected with traders, pilgrims, and long-distance routes. These references suggest that ancient Bengal must be studied not merely as a political region, but as a commercial network structured by water routes and nodal ports.

2. Review of Literature

A. M. Chowdury (1991) highlighted Bengal's ancient trade and cultural contacts with Southeast Asia and viewed the region as an important eastern gateway. Monica L. Smith (1999) moved beyond older diffusionist explanations and emphasized the role of trade networks in shaping India–Southeast Asia connections. Himanshu Prabha Ray (2006) further developed this perspective by showing that Bengal's archaeology reveals mobile trading networks and cultural interaction across regions. Shahnaj Husne Jahan (2010), through her



excavation-based study of Wari-Bateshwar, identified strong evidence of early commercial activity in Bengal. S. Tripathi (2011) placed Bengal's ports within the wider maritime world of the eastern Indian littoral. More recently, Akhtar and Idris (2022) focused on Tamralipti and demonstrated its significance as an international trade corridor that connected ancient Bengal with Southeast Asia, China, and Rome.

3. Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the geographical foundations of ancient Bengal's participation in regional trade.
- To identify major ports, commodities, and trade routes linking Bengal with inland and overseas markets.
- To analyze the economic and cultural significance of trade networks in ancient Bengal.
- To assess the shifting nature of trade centres over time.

4. Research Methodology

This article follows a qualitative historical methodology based on secondary analysis of archaeological reports, encyclopedic historical entries, and scholarly research on Bengal's early historic trade. Literary references are read together with site-based evidence from Tamralipti, Chandraketugarh, and Wari-Bateshwar. Material evidence such as beads, pottery, coins, and urban remains is used to reconstruct trade linkages and regional commercial geography.

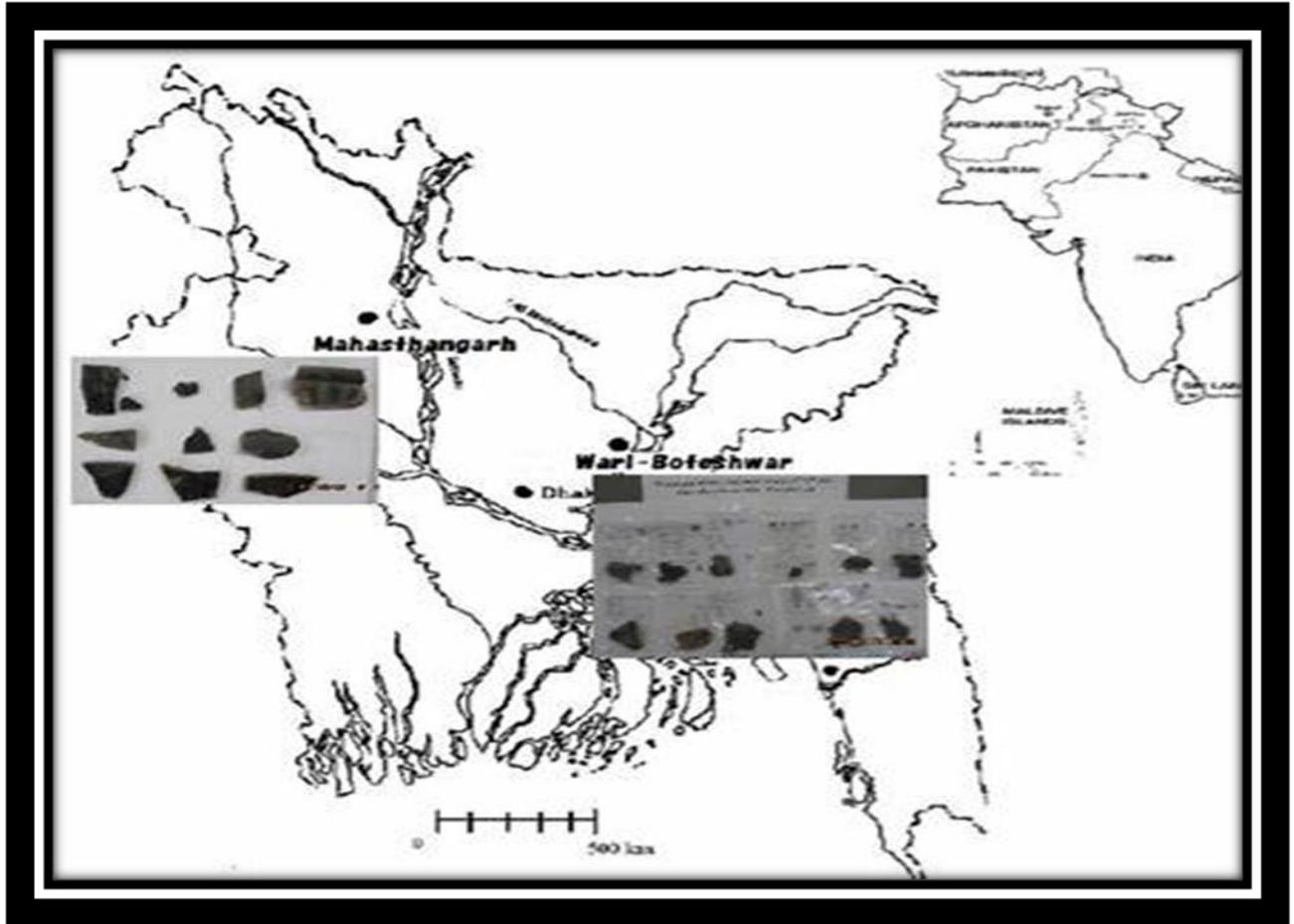


Figure 2. Map showing archaeological distribution in Wari-Bateshwar and its surrounding river system.

Source For Figure: Geoarchaeological Distribution Map Of Wari-Bateshwar.

The methodology is interpretive rather than quantitative because the evidence is fragmented and spread across texts, excavations, and material finds. Still, when site geography, artefacts, and historical references are read together, they make it possible to reconstruct Bengal's role within the Bay of Bengal and eastern Indian commercial world.

5. Discussion and Results

5.1 Bengal's Geography and Commercial Integration

The first objective was to examine the geographical basis of Bengal's trade. The evidence shows that Bengal's river systems were fundamental to its commercial development. Rivers linked interior agricultural and artisanal zones to larger settlements and ports, while the coast created access to interregional maritime traffic. Because of this structure, ancient Bengal did not depend on isolated overseas voyages alone; it developed as a layered exchange zone in which inland and overseas trade supported each other.

Wari-Bateshwar is especially important here. It lies on the bank of a former Brahmaputra channel and has yielded punch-marked coins and other artefacts indicating organized settlement and exchange. This supports the argument that eastern Bengal had access to regional trade networks through river-based transport and was not cut off from early historic circulation.

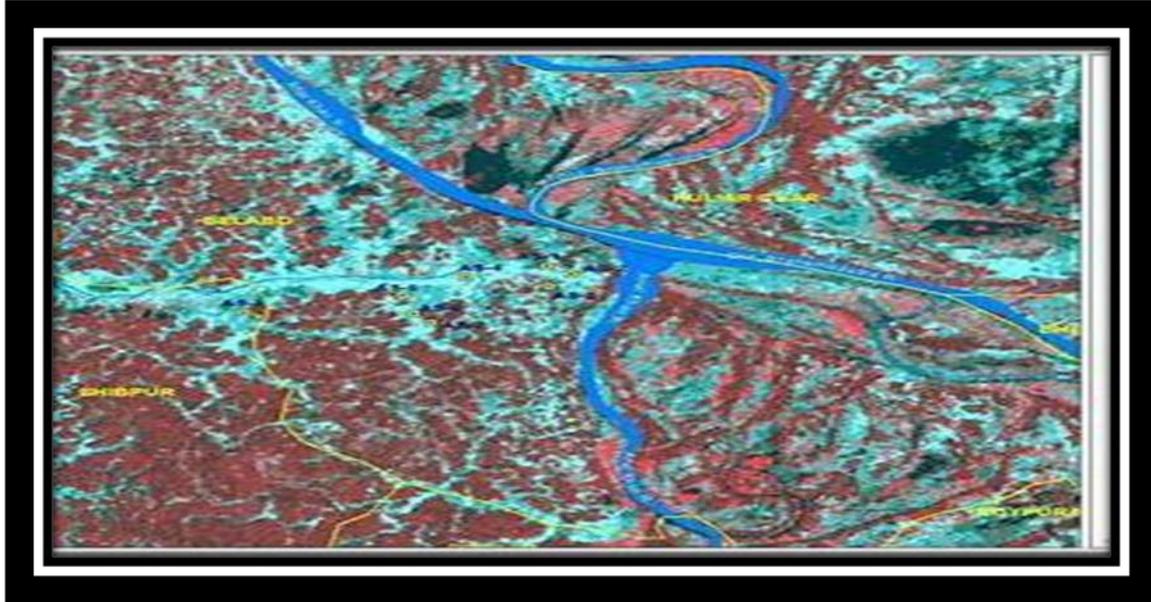


Figure 3. Map showing Wari-Bateshwar and another archaeological site in Bangladesh, useful for locating the site within the wider Bengal region.

Source For Figure: Archaeological Map Of Wari-Bateshwar And Mahasthangarh.

5.2 Ports, Commodities, and Routes

The second objective of this study was to identify the principal ports, commodities, and trade routes through which ancient Bengal participated in regional and overseas exchange. Among these ports, Tamralipti was the most prominent. Banglapedia describes it as an ancient settlement known from early Indian literature, Ceylonese texts, Greek geographical accounts, and Chinese pilgrim records, and notes that it was closely related to trade routes and was frequented by traders, travellers, and pilgrims. Modern scholarship likewise treats Tamralipti as the major maritime corridor of ancient Bengal and places its strongest phase of international significance between roughly 200 BCE and 700 CE. Chandraketugarh, located in lower Bengal, appears to have been another important urban-commercial centre and is often associated with the Gange mentioned in the *Periplus* and Ptolemy. Banglapedia further suggests that Chandraketugarh likely functioned as an important feeder port to Tamralipti, which indicates that Bengal's maritime commerce operated through an interconnected hierarchy of ports rather than a single isolated emporium.

The archaeological record strengthens this interpretation. At Wari-Bateshwar, excavations and surface finds have yielded punch-marked coins, semi-precious stone beads, glass beads, iron tools, copper objects, Northern Black Polished Ware, Rouletted Ware, Knobbed Ware, and Black Slipped Ware. The presence of Rouletted Ware is particularly significant because it has

been linked by archaeologists to exchange networks connecting eastern India with both South India and wider Bay of Bengal circuits, including Southeast Asia. These materials suggest that ancient Bengal was not merely importing prestige objects; it was also participating in craft production, redistribution, and monetized exchange. Jahan's study of Wari-Bateshwar explicitly links the site's material culture to early maritime contacts, while later archaeobotanical work confirms its position on a former Brahmaputra channel, making it a plausible inland node in a wider commercial system.

The routes themselves were both coastal and trans-Bay. A. M. Chowdury notes that from Tamralipti three principal overseas routes radiated outward: two toward Southeast Asia and one southwestward along the coast of Kalinga and Coromandel to South India, Sri Lanka, and beyond. Read together, the literary and archaeological evidence shows that Bengal's trade system combined ports, production centres, river transport, coastal shipping, and overseas navigation into one connected commercial network.

5.3 Urban Centres and Archaeological Evidence



Figure 4. Structural remains from Chandraketugarh, representing lower Bengal's urban-commercial archaeological landscape

Source For Figure: Photograph Of Excavated Remains At Chandraketugarh.

The third objective of this study was to analyze the significance of trade for settlement growth and commercial organization in ancient Bengal. The archaeological evidence indicates that trade was closely tied to the emergence of urban or proto-urban centres across the region.



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Banglapedia identifies Tamruk, associated with ancient Tamralipti, and Chandraketugarh as two of the most important urban centres of early historic Bengal. This is significant because both sites stood within river-linked landscapes that connected inland production zones with coastal circulation and maritime outlets. In other words, urbanization in ancient Bengal did not develop in isolation from trade; rather, it was sustained by riverine mobility, exchange, and access to wider regional networks.

Chandraketugarh is especially important for understanding this process. Banglapedia describes it as an archaeological site on the Vidyadhari River, once a significant tributary of the Bhagirathi, and notes that repeated excavations have revealed materials proving both the antiquity of the site and its archaeological importance. Its riverine location is crucial, because it helps explain why Chandraketugarh could function as a centre of movement, exchange, and possibly port-related activity in lower deltaic Bengal. The scale of recovered material culture has led scholars to treat it not as a marginal village settlement but as a substantial early historic centre integrated into commercial circulation.

A similar pattern appears at Wari-Bateshwar in present-day Bangladesh. Jahan's archaeological study places the site on a detached portion of the Madhupur tract, close to the Old Brahmaputra, Laksya, and Meghna river systems, and records a large body of cultural material from exploration and excavation. These finds include coins, beads, pottery, and other artefacts commonly associated with exchange, craft specialization, and organized settlement. When read together with the evidence from Tamruk and Chandraketugarh, Wari-Bateshwar strengthens the argument that ancient Bengal contained multiple centres of trade, production, and redistribution rather than a single dominant port.

Thus, the archaeological record makes one conclusion difficult to avoid: ancient Bengal was not a passive endpoint of trade. It possessed several interconnected urban and proto-urban centres that linked the middle Gangetic basin, lower deltaic Bengal, and the Bay of Bengal maritime zone into a wider commercial system.

5.4 Cultural and Historical Significance

Trade in ancient Bengal had effects that went well beyond the circulation of goods. Ports, river routes, and commercial corridors also enabled the movement of travellers, monks, pilgrims, and ideas. Tamralipti is especially important in this regard. Banglapedia notes that the port is mentioned in early Indian literature, Ceylonese texts, and the accounts of Greek geographers and Chinese pilgrims, and that it was frequented not only by traders but also by travellers and pilgrims. The Chinese pilgrim I-tsing is also recorded as having stayed at Tamralipti for about three years in the seventh century CE, which suggests that the port functioned as a place of residence, learning, and religious mobility as well as commerce. This makes Tamralipti more than a market node; it appears as a contact zone where economic infrastructure supported wider cultural exchange across the Bay of Bengal.

The wider scholarship supports this interpretation. A. M. Chowdury argues that trade between Bengal and Southeast Asia generated sustained cultural contacts and helped connect Bengal to broader eastern networks across the Bay of Bengal. Himanshu Prabha Ray similarly emphasizes that trading activity was inherently mobile, crossed political frontiers, and created its own networks of communication and information transfer. Read in this light, Bengal's



ports were not merely outlets for export and import. They were spaces through which religious practices, artistic forms, social habits, and systems of knowledge could travel between eastern India and other littoral societies. Trade thus contributed to the making of cultural identities and regional historical linkages, not just to material prosperity.

The overall result of this study, therefore, is that ancient Bengal functioned as a river-sea commercial interface. Its historical importance lay in its ability to connect inland production zones, lower deltaic centres, and maritime routes within one integrated system. Evidence from Wari-Bateshwar, Chandraketugarh, and Tamralipti shows that Bengal was not a passive edge of the subcontinent, but an active participant in early historic exchange networks extending across eastern India and into the wider Bay of Bengal world. The commercial significance of these sites was inseparable from their cultural significance, because the same routes that moved goods also moved people, beliefs, and institutions.

6. Conclusion

Ancient Bengal played a significant role in regional and overseas trade because of its ecological and geographical advantages. River systems connected hinterlands to market centres and ports, while access to the Bay of Bengal linked the region to larger maritime circuits. Tamralipti, Chandraketugarh, and Wari-Bateshwar together show that Bengal's trade was organized through a network of connected sites rather than one isolated emporium. Archaeological evidence from coins, Rouletted Ware, beads, and urban remains confirms Bengal's participation in early historic exchange networks.

The article therefore concludes that ancient Bengal was a connective commercial region whose role in history must be understood through both inland and overseas trade. Its significance lay not only in what it exported or imported, but in how it linked eastern India to the wider Bay of Bengal world.



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