

# SOURCES FOR WRITING HISTORY OF ANCIENT BENGAL

- **“History is based on sources”**
- **Constructing/re-constructing history of ancient Bengal is very difficult mainly because of the paucity of sources**

**Available sources mainly focuses on King and/or religion**

- **Society and/or people are missing???**

# MAJOR SCHOOL OF THOUGHTS

Before addressing sources of history, we need to know some major school of thoughts of history of India in general and Bangladesh in particular. These are:

- Nationalist Historiography
- Marxist Historiography
- Subaltern Historiography
- Cambridge / British Historiography



# NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

- Nationalist approach in Indian and Bangladesh History was taken to means as a motivating force of national awakening and made use of to inspire patriotic feelings;
- National pride played a big role in providing inspiration to common people and historical consciousness began to grow steadily as never before;
- Reinterpretation(s) of History: 'The Revolt of 1857' renamed as the first 'Indian War of Independence'; Siraj ud Daula: A hero?



# NATIONALIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

- Methodological weakness
- “In order to prove his thesis Jayaswal employed a large range of sources, but used them in a manner of a barrister trying to win a favourable judgment, emphasizing every passage which tended to support his case, and interpreting it in the most favourable light, while virtually ignoring the evidence which went against him.”



# MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

- The centrality of social class and economic constraints in determining historical outcomes are the key aspects of Marxist Historiography.
- Analysis of explanation in terms of economic production and social classes have become basic tenets in historical construction.
- It also known as Historical Materialism.
- Far less narrative and descriptive and more explanatory and interpretative;
- Interdisciplinary methods are widely used



# MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

- Broadening the scope of history (from the state to society; from statesmen and soldiers to the people)
- Critique of Western understanding



# SUBALTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

- Subaltern Historiography focuses more on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society than among the elite.
- A historiography of protest???
- It challenges of both a) colonial or British Imperialist Historiography b) Indian nationalist historiography; and termed as elitist approach
- Guha asserts that parallel to elite politics, there was a domain of people's politics in which the principle actors were the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the population.



# CAMBRIDGE/BRITISH HISTORIOGRAPHY

- The main tenets of the Cambridge School of Historiography is to study British Empire using the imperialist point of view.

Previously,

- Indology and the recovery of Indian history
- Study of ancient text and documents : Colebrooke and Max Muller
- Discovery and study of old inscriptions, monuments and coins: Prinsep and Cunningham
- British Imperialist Historians
- The British Imperialist administrator historian





## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Western assumption regarding India's past is that
- A static, unchanging society
- Oriental despotism
- Justification for the continuance of British rule
- Dominance of the political element (not social or cultural; benevolence of British conquest and benevolence should continue)



# PERIODIZATION OF THE HISTORY OF BANGLADESH

*Mainly three categories:*

- Ancient Bengal (upto 1204)
- Medieval Bengal (1204-1757)
- Modern Bengal (1757- )



# WHY IS THERE LACK OF HISTORICAL CHRONICLES IN ANCIENT BENGAL??

- The absence of historical chronicles in ancient Bengal can not be explained by stating that later invaders destroyed them wholesale.
- It was more than that...
- Are we interested to preserve our own history even today?



## TWO TYPES OF SOURCES:

1. Archaeological sources
2. Literary sources



# ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

- Due to lack of literary sources, archaeological sources are vital for historians in reconstructing our ancient history;
- Archaeological sources include:
  - Inscriptions
  - Ruins of cities
  - Monasteries
  - Sculptures
  - Terracotta plaques, other terracotta objects, and pottery



## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES:

- “Inscription have been given the first place in the list because they are on the whole the most important and trust worthy source of our knowledge.” - Vincent Smith
- The copper plate inscriptions and *prasastis* (eulogies) composed by royal court poets, archivists and genealogists are piece of historical writings;



## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

- A large number of inscriptions are found
- Written in Sanskrit
- Divided in two broad categories: official and private
- The official records are mostly Prassastis of kings or land grants
- Deopara inscription of VijayaSena is such an example



## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

- Deopara inscription was written by court poet Umapatidhara;
- Land grants
- Copper plate and in rare instances also found on stone pillars
- What does it tell us?





## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCE

- The Khalimpur Copper Plate is another famous inscription that tells us about several Pala such as:
  - A) Devapala
  - B) Rampala
  - C) Dharmapala
  - D) Mahipala I



## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCE

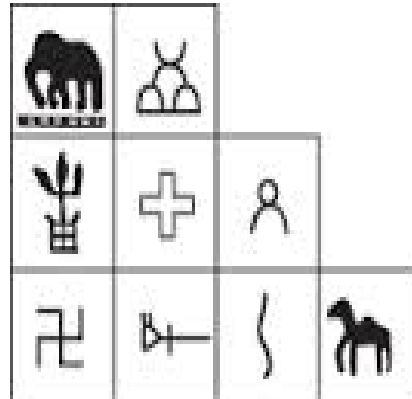
### ○Coins

- The symbol of sovereignty ????
- Very basic information such as the name of a king, place, date, religion, relationship with other king/emperor;
- Trade; basically economic history...



# COINS

- Punch marked coins
- Cast copper coins
- Imitation coins



# ANCIENT BENGAL

- Maurya Period (3rd Century BC)
- -- Mahasthangarh, Bogra
- -- Brahmi inscription suggests strong administration, relief system (distribution of paddy and money)
- -- First urban settlement
- -- Arthasastra of Kautilya: fine cotton fabric
- -- Thus famous muslin of Dhaka in 16th and 17th century is datables to Maurya period.



# MATERIAL REMAINS

- It helps to understand everyday life (mostly elite people???)
- Economic and military strength of a kingdom
- Religious belief
- Material remains can be found in the shape of the ruins of ancient cities, terracotta plaques, sculptures and articles of everyday use.



# MATERIAL REMAINS

- Some archaeological sites in Bangladesh are:
- Mahasthangarh
  - Paharpur
  - Mainamoti
  - Somapura vihara and the like.



# WRITTEN SOURCES

- Literature
- Overseas account
- Documents

Literature:

- Vedas, Mahabharata and Ramayana*
- Kautilya's *Arthasastro*
- Kalahan's *Rajatarangini*



# *ARTHASHASTRA* OF KAUTILYA

- ✓ **Written in 3rd century BC**
- ✓ **Refers to the fine cotton fabric of Vanga (south-eastern Bengal); beauty of women; and climate**





## LITERATURE

- Shandhyakaranandi's *Ramcharitam* (1159 AD)
- *Aryamanjusrimulakalpa* (8<sup>th</sup> Century AD)
- *Subhashita-ratna-kosa* (the treasury of well-turned verses); edited by Biddakar/Sen
- *Saduktikarnamatra* (Excellent sayings which are nectar for human hearing)/ edited by Sri Dhar Das/Sen
- *AryaSaptasati* of Goverdhana Acharya



# LITERATURE

## Overseas Account:

Greek and Latin Sources (3rd century BC - 1<sup>st</sup> century AD)

- Gangaridae (Greek)
- Gangaridai' (Latin)
- located in parts of southern and southeastern Bengal, adjacent to the mouths of the Ganges (Bhagirathi and Padma)

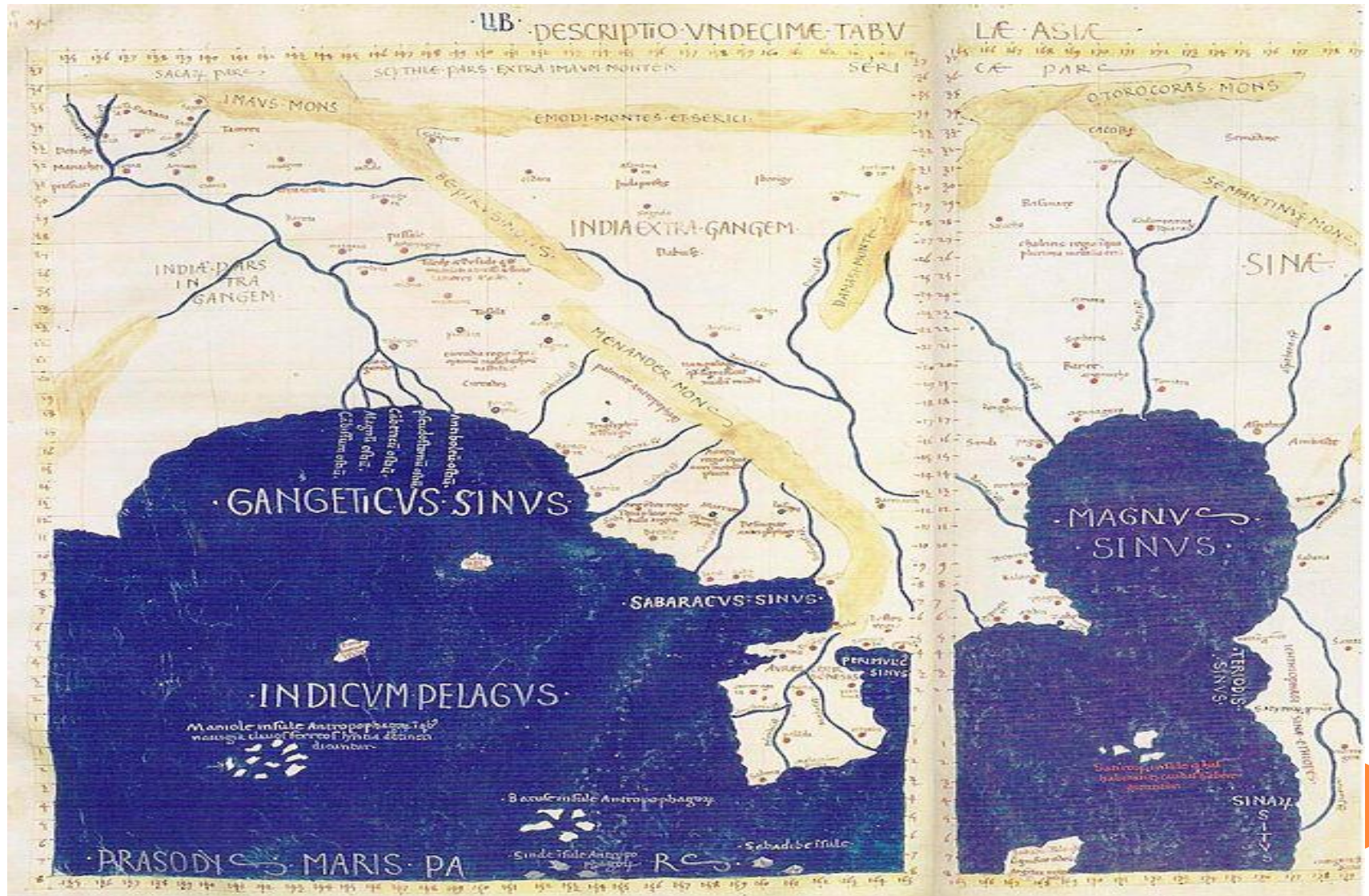


# PTOLEMY

- Greek Astronomer, Mathematician and Geographer
- His book was *Indica*
- Refers to a rich port named Tamralipti now in present Tamluk of West Bengal



DETAIL OF EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA IN PTOLEMY'S WORLD MAP. GULF OF THE GANGES (BAY OF BENGAL) LEFT, SOUTHEAST ASIAN PENINSULA IN THE CENTER, SOUTH CHINA SEA RIGHT, WITH "SINAE" (CHINA).



# LITERATURE

## Overseas Account

- Fa-Hien (399 AD)
- Hiuen- Tsang (c 630-638 AD)
- Ibn Batuta (1338-1349 AD)
- Lama Taranath (c 1608 AD)

## Fairy tales/Hearsay/Stories



# HOW DID WE GET THE NAME BANGLADESH ?

## Earliest References to Bengal :

1. Bangladesh
2. Bangla
3. Bengal
4. Bengala
5. Bangala
6. Vanga
7. Vangal

**Names of same geographical location as  
of present Bangladesh**



# ANCIENT BENGAL

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## ANCIENT BENGAL

- Gupta Period (4<sup>th</sup> century AD)
  - Imperial rulers e.g., Samudragupta
  - Benevolent government and political stability.
  - Bengal became an imp. Province
  - Sea trade within India and outside India, shipbuilding.
  - Fa-Hsien visited Bengal.
  - Brahmin rulers patronised Buddhism.





# ANCIENT BENGAL

## **Janapadas :**

**For 1000 years between 600 BC - 400 AD Bengal was politically divided into several Janapadas or principalities**

- **Pundravardhana : Mahasthangarh – Bogra**
- **Varendra : Rajshahi - North Bengal**
- **Vanga : Mymensingh - Dhaka - Faridpur - Barisal up to the Brahmaputra river**



## ANCIENT BENGAL

- **Vangal : Probably southern part of Vanga near the sea**
- **Samatata : Lalmai - Comilla including Tripura & Noakhali**
- **Harikel : Chittagong – Sylet up to Comilla**
- **Gaur : South of Murshidabad - Maldaha -- probably it included Birbhum & Burdwan too**
- **Sumha - Radh : West Bengal**



# ANCIENT BENGAL

## ❑ Sasanka

- First independent king of Gaur
- Capital at Karnasubarna (Murshidabad)
- Ruled from end of 6<sup>th</sup> / beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century to 650.
- Hsuen Tsang depicted Sasanka as anti-Buddhist.
- Invaded Magadha (Southern Bihar) and forerunner of aggressive policy followed by Dharmapala.



# ANCIENT BENGAL

## **Matsanayam**

- period of anarchy between 650 – 750;
- Following the century, after the death of Sasanka, Bengal saw very little of stable government and the whole country was torn by internal strife and disturbed by invasions from outside.
- This found mention in the Pala records as state of matsyanyaya



# MATSANAYAM

- Matsanayam denotes, according to Kautiliya, “When the law of punishment is kept in abeyance, it gives rise to such disorder as is implied in the proverb of fishes, i.e., the larger fish swallows a small one, for in the absence of a magistrate, the strong will swallow the weak.”
- Sources to construct history: Khalimpur copper plate and the account of Lama Taranatha



# ANCIENT BENGAL

## **Pala Dynasty (750-1097)**

- Founder Gopala, 18 kings ruled for 400 years.
- End of Matsanyayam
- Golden age of Buddhism
- Invasion towards North India by Dharmapala
- Somepur Mahabihara, Paharpur, Rajshahi
- Religious tolerance, art and sculpture



# PALA DYNASTY

1. Gopala-I (c 756-781 AD)
2. Dharmapala(781-821)
3. Devapala (821-861)
4. Vighrahapala-I (861-866)
5. Narayanpala (866-920)
6. Rajyapala(920-952)
7. Gopala-II(952-969)
8. Vighrahapala-II (969-995)
9. Mahipala-I (995-1043)
10. Nayapala-I (1043-1058)



## PALA DYNASTY

11. Vigrahapala-III (1058-1075)
12. Mahipala-II (1075-1080)
13. Surepala (1080-1082)
14. Ramapala (1082-1124)
15. Kumarapala (1124-1129)
16. Gopala III (1129-1143)
17. Madanpala (c.1143-1162AD)





# GOLDEN AGE ???

- The long reign of the Palas form a glorious period in the history of ancient Bengal.
- The dynasty ruled for about four hundred years, a rarity in the annals of dynastic history.
- The achievements of Bengal during this long period are indeed the glories of the Palas.

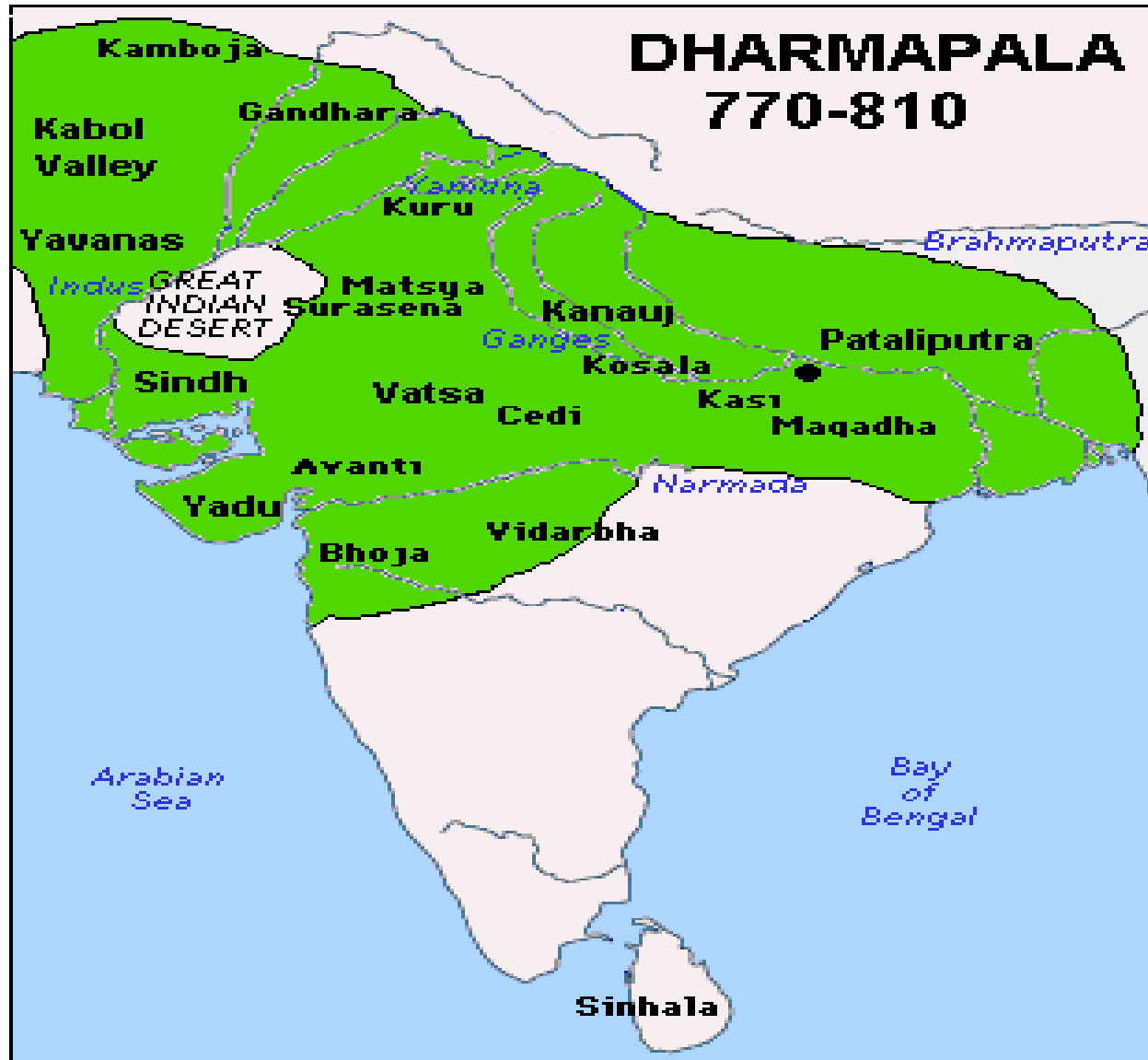
Widespread empire, organised administrative system, ruling policy oriented towards welfare of the people, unprecedented excellence in the field of arts and cultivation of knowledge and literature all these are the achievements and glories of the Pala dynasty.



- “In the beginning of the ninth century the Palas succeeded in spreading their sphere of influence up to Kanauj, if not over the whole of northern India, and this was Bengal’s first successful involvement in the politics of northern India. Though their hegemony in northern India did not last long, but it must be said that the power and strength that was generated during the early years of Pala rule, allowed them to hold their own against the aggressions of the northern Indian powers in the 10th and 11th centuries AD.”



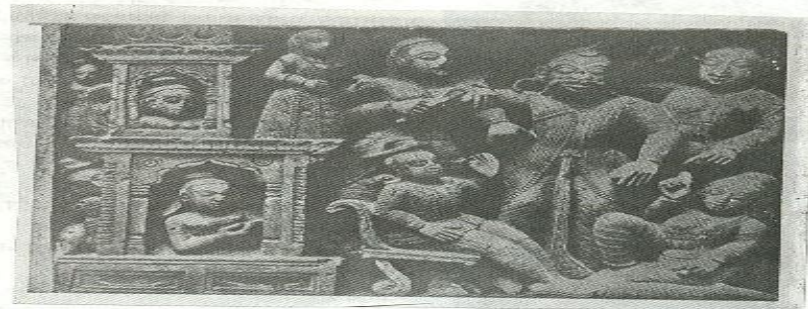
# PALA EMPIRE (DHARMAPALA)



- “The brightest aspect of Pala glories was manifest in the field of different arts. Distinctive achievements are seen in the arts of architecture, terracotta, sculpture and painting. The SOMAPURA MAHAVIHARA at PAHARPUR, a creation of Dhamapala, proudly announces the excellence of the architectural art achieved in the Pala period. It is the largest Buddhist Vihara in the Indian subcontinent and the plan of its central shrine was evolved in Bengal. In the Nalanda inscription of Vipulasrimitra it has been described as *jagatam netraikavishrama bhu* (pleasing to the eyes of the world).”



# PALA ART WORKS



# SOMAPURA MAHAVIHARA, PAHARPUR



- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dBgdvipHmn4>



# ANCIENT BENGAL

## **Sena Dynasty (1097-1225)**

- Founder Vijayasena defeating Palas.5  
generation of kings e.g., Vallalsena,  
Laksmansena
- Sanskrit literature (Gitagovinda by  
Joydeb)
- Caste system by Vallalsena.
- Religious intolerance, Hindu orthodoxy,  
decline of Buddhism





# ANCIENT BENGAL

## **Dynasties of Southeastern Bengal**

- Maintained separate political entity despite attempts to intrusion.
- Bhadra, Khadga dynasties existed in 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- Deva dynasty was established in Mainamati-Lalmai area in 8<sup>th</sup> century.
- Harikela was ruled by Chandra rulers in 9<sup>th</sup> century, evidence of sea trade, boat building etc found.



# THE SEN RULERS

- Hemanta Sen (c. 1070–1096 AD)
- Vijay Sen (c. 1096–1159 AD)
- Ballal Sen (c. 1159–1179 AD)
- Lakshman Sen (c. 1179–1206 AD)
- Vishwarup Sen (c. 1206–1225 AD)
- Keshab Sen (c. 1225–1230 AD)



# Thank you

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