



An Archaeological and Historical Study of the Garhs in Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur District

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ABSTRACT

The history of the Garhs in the Islampur Subdivision of the current Uttar Dinajpur district is a relic of ancient civilization. The Garhs of this Subdivision are said to have been built during the Gupta period, the Sultanate Period, and the British period. These Garhs are associated with various mythological and historical tales. Also, these Garhs, scattered across various parts of the Subdivision, stand as silent witnesses to the Socio-political and military developments of past centuries. Through an analytical approach combining archaeological findings, historical records, and oral traditions, this research attempts to reconstruct the past and trace the role of these structures in shaping local history. Moreover, it emphasizes the importance of preservation and documentation of these neglected heritage sites for future generations. Ultimately, this research contributes to the understanding of the intertwined relationship between archaeology, history, and local culture in the context of North Bengal's historical landscape. These three Garhs (Asuragarh, Gelandigarh, and Bazargaongarh) are an integral part of the history of the Islampur Subdivision, showcasing the local culture.

Introduction: The present Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district was a part of the undivided Purnea district of Bihar. In 1956, this Subdivision was included to West Dinajpur district of West Bengal. The region of Islampur Subdivision, located in the northern part of West Bengal's Uttar Dinajpur district, possesses a rich and diverse historical background that remains largely unexplored. Among its most



remarkable yet neglected features are the Garhs - ancient fortified structures or earthen fort that once served as centres of political power, defence, and cultural activities. These Garhs are not only remnants of early settlement patterns but also important symbols reflecting the socio-political and cultural evolution of the region through different historical phases. The term Garh traditionally denotes a fort or stronghold, often associated with local rulers, tribal chiefs, or Zamindars who exercised authority over specific territories. This study seeks to examine the archaeological remains and historical narratives surrounding these Garhs to reconstruct their role in the political, economic, and cultural development of the region. Thus, the archaeological and historical study of the Garhs in Islampur Subdivision not only contributes to the reconstruction of local history but also enriched the broader understanding of North Bengal's Heritage and its place in the cultural history of eastern India.

1. Asuragarh: This Asuragarh is located in Asuragarh village under Chakulia police station of Islampur Subdivision of present Uttar Dinajpur district. The present Asuragarh village is a historical place that symbolises culture and heritage of Uttar Dinajpur district. There are many popular mythological tales associated with this Asuragarh. It can be said this Garh that it was located across many places. "The fort, which is about 1,200 yards in circumference, rises from the surrounding plain to the height of 10 or 12 feet."¹ There were many houses in this Garh, which have been buried underground over time. "It is enclosed by earthen ramparts, and inside are the debris of many buildings, the lower chambers of which have been found under the surface."²

According to a popular belief, Asuragarh was built during the Mahabharata era and remains a topic of discussion among researchers today. This region is considered an important part of the Matsya Kingdom in the Mahabharata. "Local tradition still speaks of the struggles and conquests of the Kiratas, and a Kirata (Kiranti) woman from the Morang or Tarai is said to have been the wife of Raja Virat, who, according to legend, gave shelter to Yudhishtira and his four Pandava brothers during their 12 years exile. The site of his fort is still pointed out at Thakurganj in the north of the district."³ Francis Buchanan states that, this Asuragarh was the residence of king Kichak and Kichak was the brother-in-law of Raja Virat. Also, Kichak belonged to the demon race. "This part of the country is acknowledged to be in Matsya, and a ruin is pointed out as having been the house of Kichak. It is usually called the Asura Gar, or house of the Infidel, and in general the natives do not pretend to know who this personage was. Some intelligent people, however, as I have said, allege that this Infidel was no other than Kichak, the brother-in-law of Virat the Raja of Matsya, and this is in some measure confirmed by its having been said in Dinajpur that the neighbouring parts of that district belonged to this personage."⁴ There were some miraculous events associated with a pond in Asuragarh, as mentioned by W.W. Hunter. "That the earth



of the tank, if taken near any other tank, has the power of immediately drawing forth from it all the fish it contains."⁵ Also, this Asuragarh was under Raja Virat and Raja Virat sheltered the Panchapandavas during the Mahabharata was as mentioned by W.W. Hunter in his work.⁶

Asuragarh is also associated with various historical legends, which are mentioned in the works of Francis Buchanan, W.W. Hunter, and L.s.s.o' Malley. According to W.W. Hunter, the Panchbhrata(Benu, Barijan, Asura, Nanha, and Kunha) arrived in the undivided Purnea district in 57 B.C. during the time of Vikramaditya. Also, they constructed five Garhs in their own names, which are significant in the history of the region. This is a historical fact that reflects the culture and history of the region "The five brothers are said to have lived in the Vikramaditya period, that is to say, about 57 B.C., and the forts, it is added, were built in a night. The story locally current as to the origin of these Garhs are that there were five brothers, Benu, Barijan, Asura, Nanha, and Kunha , who each built a garh or fortified residence, and named it after himself."⁷ Among the five brothers, the brothers named Asura demonstrated his skill by constructing the Asuragarh Fort. Many researchers believe that this Asuragarh fortress was built during the time of the second Chandragupta in the Gupta period. Dr. Brindaban Ghosh and Dr. Partha Sen point out that during the Gupta period, during the reign of Vikramaditya, Panchabhrata came to the area and built five forts under his own name. Dr. Brindaban Ghosh says that - In Asuragarh village of Surjapur area under Chakulia police station, five brothers named Benu, Barijan, Asura, Nanha, Kanha built a fort overnight during the Vikramaditya era of the Gupta period. It was surrounded by a wall to protect it from enemy attacks. They were Asuras by caste. Hence, their fort is known as Asuragarh.⁸ Dr. Partha Sen says that - Locals believe that during the time of the Gupta Emperor Vikramaditya the five brothers namely Benu, Barijan, Asura, Nanha, and Kanha came here and each brother built a Garh named after himself. These Garhs were made in one night.⁹ L.s.s.o' Malley in his gazetteer similarly states that- The story locally current as to the origin of the fort is that there were five brothers, Benu , Barijan, Asura, Nanha, and Kanha, who each built a garh or fortified residence and named it after himself.¹⁰ Hindus were afraid to go there. They believed that if they went there, the demon would be angry them. To satisfy this demon, Hindu would provide offerings. This Asuragarh was full of big trees. "The people on the spot state that some hundred years ago the place was covered with trees; and that no Hindu would Venture to live on it, lest Asur Deo should be offended."¹¹ During the Islamic rule in India, a saint appeased a demon at Asuragarh by sacrificing a cow. Descendants of this saints cleared the forest and started farming there. "At length a holy Musalman came, and, killing a cow, took possession, which his descendants retain. They have cleared and cultivated the whole place, and enjoy considerable reputation."¹² In the seventeenth century, various seals and plates were scattered around this Asuragarh. "There are ample



materials for archaeological researches, as rocks and portions of pillars with figures and inscriptions are to be seen lying about the sites."¹³ This Asuragarh may have had various trade relations with different regions, which played an important role in the local economy. A copper coin of the reign of emperor Kanishka has been found at Asuragarh.¹⁴ The copper coin from the era of emperor Kanishka could provide new information in modern research.

2. Gelandigarh: Gelandigarh is located near to Hossain dighi of Daspara village under Chopra police station. The construction of this Gelandigarh is associated with various historical tales. Two famous researchers (Dr. Partha Sen and Dr. Brindaban Ghosh) of Uttar Dinajpur District have mentioned different opinions about this Gelandigarh. The Muslim ruler of Bengal, Hussain Shah, advanced towards the North-East towards the Kamatapur-Kamrup kingdom for the expansion of his Empire. When Hussain Shah went to invade Assam, the regions of Islampur and Chopra were significant for him. The Sylhet inscription(1512) mentions Hussain Shah's conquest of Kamrup-Kamatapur.¹⁵ Hussain Shah constructed Gelandigarh during the invasion of Assam. The Sultan of Bengal, Hussain Shah, built the Gelandigarh fortress to secure his soldiers during the invasion of Assam. Also, he built a large Dighi(Pond) near Gelandigarh, known as Hussain Dighi.¹⁶

This Garh was built by the British during the 1857 rebellion, primarily to detain the rebels. The impact of this great rebellion was widely felt in Jalpaiguri, deeply influencing the local community. Commissioner of Bhagalpur marched towards Tetulia via Kishanganj with troops to stop the rebel soldiers of Dhaka to stop the Rebel soldiers of Jalpaiguri. Then the Englishmen stayed in Gelandigarh with troops and it was the Englishmen who built the Gelandigarh fortress.¹⁷

3. Bazargaongarh: This village named Bazargaon is known as a prosperous locality in the Karandighi police station Area. There was a huge market in this village. People used to come here from far away to buy and sell goods through Pitani river. Hence this village is known as Bazargaon. This Garh was built during the Sena era of Bengal, which carries historical significance. Lakshman Sen had completely conquered the Gaur region. He is referred to as Gaureswar due to this victory. Dinajpur and North Bengal were under his rule for a long time. Lakshman Sen's Kingdom extended from Kalinga to Kamrupa. Lakshman Sen built this Garh in the village of Bazargaon so that his rule could be firmly established in the Kamrup region. The Garh spread over an area 15 bighas and the walls of the Garh were quite wide.¹⁸

This Garh had many structures and the balcony was decorated with several columns. The columns were adorned with various carvings, showcasing a masterpiece of sculpture. Local people collected many



intricately designed stone pieces from this Garh. Besides, maini burnt clay spherical balls are recovered from here.¹⁹ Lakshman Sen was a devotee of the Vaishnavism religion and he helped promote this faith. He also established a Vishnu idol in the Garh. Bakhtiyar Khilji captured Gaur by removing Lakshman Sen around the 11th century. Overtime, the Muslim rulers had conquered the entire region of Gaur and they promoted their culture there. The Gaur was also occupied by the Muslim rulers during the Sultanate period.

It is said that a boy from a Hari community in this region was given the responsibility of managing the garh's army. This demonstrates his skill in managing military strategies. He lived in the fortress anywhere, which showcasing his strength. He got married to a beautiful married Muslim women from a neighbouring village. The Hari boy converted to Islam and worshiped lord Vishnu. The Begums used to visit his Bibi, where they exchanged various stories. Hence this Garh is also known as Begum Bibi Garh.²⁰

Conclusion: The Garhs in the Islampur Subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district reveals the deep-rooted legacy of early settlement patterns, local government, and regional defence systems. These Garhs -once centers of political, economic, and cultural significance - stand as silent witnesses to the evolution of the region's Socio-political landscape. Through archaeological evidence, oral traditions, and historical records, it becomes evident that the Garhs not only served as fortifications but also played an important role in shaping the identity and cultural continuity of local communities. Due to neglect and lack of resources, the historical significance of these structures is at risk of being lost. The lack of human awareness is creating a major obstacle in preserving these structures. Therefore, this study highlights the necessity of systematic archaeological documentation, conservation measures, and public awareness to protect these valuable remnants of regional history for future generations.

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