Caste, Land, and Power in Early Medieval Bengal: An Epigraphic Analysis (c. 6th –7th Century CE)

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolution of the caste system in ancient and early medieval Bengal (c. 5th–7th century CE) through a critical analysis of copperplate inscriptions issued during the Gupta period and its aftermath. Rather than reflecting a rigid, pan-Indian varna hierarchy, these epigraphic sources reveal a fluid and regionally distinctive process of caste formation shaped by landholding patterns, political authority, and religious patronage. Bengal's social order was characterized by the dominance of Brahmanas not only as ritual authorities but also as agrarian elites, receiving extensive tax-exempt land grants (agraharas) and serving as intermediaries between state power and rural society. Drawing upon key inscriptions including the Dhanaidaha, Damodarpur, Kalaikuri–Sultanpur, Gunaighar, and Nidhanpur copperplates this study demonstrates how caste identities were constructed, codified, and negotiated through legal instruments and royal charters. The inscriptions highlight the absence or marginal presence of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, the emergence of intermediary castes such as Kayasthas and Vaidyas, and the incorporation of local and tribal groups into a Brahmanical framework through processes of Sanskritization. Tables, comparative summaries, and thematic mappings are used to trace the complex interplay between social hierarchy, occupational roles, and ritual status.

Keywords: Caste system, Copperplate inscriptions, Brahmanical hierarchy, social mobility, Early Medieval Bengal, Agrarian society, Ritual authority

Introduction:

The caste system in ancient and early medieval Bengal did more than just reflect religious beliefs; it also served as a practical way to organize social, economic, and political relationships. Inscriptions from Bengal, written between the 5th and 13th centuries CE, provide valuable insights into how caste hierarchies developed and how they were linked to land ownership, governance, and religious practices. (Bhattacharya 2001; Chattopadhyaya 1994). This paper looks at these inscriptions to explore how caste identities, their privileges, and roles were recorded in copperplate grants, stone inscriptions, and other legal documents. Unlike the standard four-fold varna system described in Dharmashastra texts, the inscriptions from Bengal show a more flexible and evolving reality. (Thapar 2003; Kulke and Rothermund 2004).

Caste identities in this region were often shaped by occupation, place of residence, and the local economy related to land. (Chakrabarti 2010). The lack or small presence of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, the strong role of Brahmanas as both religious leaders and landowners, and the rise of administrative and professional castes such as Kayasthas and Vaidyas suggest a unique pattern of caste formation in Bengal. (Banerjee 1983; Bandyopadhyay 2004). These inscriptions show that caste was not just a reflection of religious teachings, but was actively created through legal documents, religious rituals, and power from the state.

This paper examines the connection between caste and landholding in ancient Bengal through a detailed analysis of key copperplate inscriptions, including the Dhanaidaha, Damodarpur, Kalaikuri–Sultanpur, Nidhanpur, and Gunaighar grants, issued during the Gupta period and later. (Sircar 1965; Majumdar 1971). It argues that these inscriptions not only recorded the social hierarchies of their time but also served as tools for shaping society, embedding Brahminical authority and varna-based social structures into the legal and spatial framework of rural Bengal. (Chattopadhyaya 1994; Bhattacharya 2001). By studying the caste groups mentioned in these documents, their roles in society, and the changes in administrative systems, this study offers a deeper understanding of how caste functioned as both an ideological idea and a real part of everyday life in early Bengal.

Since the 1960s, the study of Indian history, especially ancient Indian history, has moved away from traditional narratives focused on dynastic rule toward broader investigations of social, economic, political, and cultural processes. (Thapar 2003; Chakrabarti 2010). Historians now pay more attention to themes like the economy, society, and the everyday beliefs and practices of ordinary people. Among these, the study of religion and caste has developed into a major area of debate and research. Concerns about caste practices and how they changed over time became prominent in both scholarly and political circles as early as the Indian independence movement. During this time, the idea of "Sanskritization," which was introduced by sociologist M. N. Srinivas, gained particular attention. (Srinivas 1956; Dirks 2001). It became a way for both colonial and nationalist thinkers to understand social change in India, highlighting how lower or less privileged groups tried to improve their status by adopting the traditions, rituals, and social habits of the Brahminical elite.

Bengal's society historically had a complex and varied caste system that was quite different from the standard varna system seen in other parts of India. One major difference was the limited or almost absent presence of the Kshatriya and Vaishya castes, something noted in both historical and textual records. (Chattopadhyaya 1994; Thapar 2003). This distinct social structure is clearly seen in two important regional Upapuranas from the 12th to 13th centuries CE: (*Brihatdharmapurana* and the Brahmavaivartapurana. Panchanan Tarkaratna (01), Brihat Dharmapurana, Calcutta, Nava Bharata Prakashani, 1380 Bengal) These texts divide society mainly into two broad groups: Brahmins and non-Brahmins. Within the non-Brahmin group, they introduced the concept of sankara-jati (mixed or hybrid castes), further splitting them into three levels: Uttama (upper), Madhyama (middle), and Antyaja or Adhama (lowest). Brihatdharma and Brahmavaivarta Puranas, written in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, are regarded as Upapuranas. Here an important speech has been presented on the origin of the mixed races of Bengal and their development. Here the Brahmins are told to eat fish which is

not mentioned anywhere in India. (Panchanan Tarkaratna (01), Brihat Dharmapurana, Calcutta, Nava Bharata Prakashani, 1380 Bengal), - Brihat Dharmapurana is divided into three hybrid castes namely Uttam, Madhyam, Antyaja. For example, Karan arose from the union of Vaishya and Shudra parents, while Sambandha or Vaidya arose from the union of Brahmin and Vaishya parents. Thus 20 castes have been identified as Uttam Sankara, 12 as Medium, 4 as Antyaja, and 9 as Jaya caste. The Brihatdharmapurana alone lists twenty specific hybrid castes under the Uttama category, indicating a detailed hierarchy based on professional roles. Professor R Furui has pointed out that the complex social layers seen in these texts likely reflect the evolving rural society of Bengal by the late 10th century CE. (Furui 2014).

According to Furui, this social complexity marked by the rise of mixed castes and professional subgroups was a result of agricultural expansion, village growth, and the blending of diverse local communities into a larger Sanskritic society. Brahmins, positioned at the top of this system, played a key role in defining and formalizing these caste divisions, using Smriti texts and Puranic compilations to set down these social structures. This process not only shaped the social order of Bengal but also addressed the tensions and interactions between older tribal and local identities and the emerging caste-based village society. The social structure of early Indian society is often viewed through the varna system, as described in Dharmashastra texts. (Rooshke Furui, Finding Nation in the Social Order: A Reading of the Varnasankara Section of the Brihatdharmapurana-essay shows how the tendencies of society in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries created the need to 'codify' them. He also wrote that the Brahmins or their own worldview viewed the entire society and recorded the caste system.). (Furui 2014).

However, the inscriptions from ancient Bengal especially from the 4th to 7th centuries CE show a more complex picture. While varna ideology was present in inscriptional records, evidence suggests that jati identities were fluid, and social mobility was possible, particularly in Bengal's frontier-like cultural environment. This section explores key inscriptions from Bengal to show how local elites, traveling Brahmins, and intermediate administrative groups negotiated and sometimes redefined their religious and social status.

Epigraphic sources from ancient Bengal reveal that caste was not a fixed system but a dynamic one shaped by land ownership, religious support, and language influences. Although varna categories formed the ideological background, the actual situation, especially in frontier areas like Bengal, allowed for jati mobility and religious flexibility. Local elites adopted Sanskrit and Brahminical practices to redefine their status, while migrant Brahmins gained power through state-supported land donations. As a result, these inscriptions must be read not just as records of donations, but as texts that shaped social structures, where identity was actively built, challenged, and performed. (Sircar 1965; Chattopadhyaya 1994).

Unlike other parts of India that had strong warrior traditions, Bengal did not have a significant native warrior class. This led to a less rigid varna hierarchy, with Brahmins at the top and a large group of Shudras at the bottom.

In Bengal, social standing was closely linked to land ownership and administrative duties. This led to the rise of influential groups like the Kayasthas and Vaidyas, who, even though officially considered Shudras, gained significant power and influence. The Kayasthas, especially, became a powerful landowning and administrative caste, often challenging the Brahmanas' dominance. The boundaries between different jati groups in Bengal were often flexible and changed with regional differences. The process of forming jati groups was ongoing, shaped by factors such as occupation, religious belief, and regional identity. This flexibility made the caste system in Bengal more adaptable and less rigid compared to other parts of India.

The imposition of the varna-jati system wasn't isolated from existing social structures.It interacted with those structures, causing both changes and resistance. The Dhanaidaha Copperplate Inscription (around 428 CE) is one of the earliest formal land grants in Bengal, predating the Damodarpur Copperplates, and shows early Brahmanical settlement patterns in Pundravardhana. (Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-17, pp. 57.) The Dhanaidaha copper plate (Gupta era 113) of Kumaragupta I mentions common Kshetrabars, Brahmins, and Mahattars of the village when the land grant was made. Many names in this text are referred to as 'Sanskritises' or 'sanskritizes', and many non-Sanskritic names like Ramak, Khadpar, and Khasak are also present. This raises the question of whether these non-Sanskritic names indicate that Bengal had a pre-Sanskrit society.

This inscription helps trace the spread of Brahmanical norms as the Gupta Empire extended its ritual and administrative control over Bengal's rural areas.The grant likely involved agrahāra conditions land given tax-free, hereditary, and inalienable which tied economic resources to ritual rights. These charters served as legal blueprints for embedding caste into the rural order: landowners (Brahmanas), state officials (Kshatriyas/administrators), and unrecorded labourers (Shudras). By legally binding land grants to Brahmanical lineages, the inscription reveals the early stage of a caste-based agrarian society where the varna system was not just theoretical but inscribed into the region's spatial and legal structure. Although brief and for a single recipient, this inscription laid the ideological foundation for centuries of Brahmanical dominance in Bengal's rural areas.

The grantee, Doneya, is identified with a gotra (Vatsa), aligning with early Gupta land grants where ritual genealogy confirmed Brahmana status. This reflects a structured varna hierarchy where Brahmanas were prioritized as landowners, legitimized through their Vedic training and lineage. The grant highlights ritual purity and knowledge, positioning the Brahmana as both a religious figure and a beneficiary of royal Favor.

Statecraft and Social Order: As an early example of Gupta land distribution in Bengal, the Dhanaidaha grant shows the start of using land grants to strengthen control and embed caste structure in frontier regions. By transferring land to a Brahmana, the state aligned itself with the Brahmanical order, using caste as a tool of imperial governance.

The inscription, like most Gupta copperplates, does not mention cultivators, artisans, or servile groups, though their presence is implied. This silence reflects an elitist tradition in

epigraphy that encoded varna privilege but excluded the productive base of society from official records.

The Kalaikuri-Sultanpur inscription from around 120 CE refers to sixteen Brahmin villages alongside individuals like Kotumbi, Bithi Kulik, and Bhima Kayastha. (Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-31, pp. 57.) As seen in earlier records, the inscription includes both Sanskritized and non-Sanskritic names. Notably, it mentions the Bithi Mahattara and several family groups. Among these, the appearance of individuals with the name Sharma is particularly notable. While Sharma is often associated with Brahmins, those with this name are not listed among the Brahmins but rather as Kotumbi, a category associated with village functionaries or agricultural roles. Some individuals bearing the name Sharma are listed under Kotumbi, not among the Brahmins, indicating occupational and social differences within the Brahmin community itself.

This inscription shows the presence of two types of Brahmins: one group involved mainly in religious, educational, and initiating functions, and another group actively participating in agrarian society. The presence of roles like Mahattara, Bithi Kulik, and Kayastha shows an organized rural society with clear administrative and occupational hierarchies. The mix of Sanskritized names (e.g., Sharma, Mahattara) with non-Sanskritic names suggests an ongoing process of Sanskritization and social integration in early Bengal.

This raises an important question: where these Brahmins fully integrated into agrarian society? Professor R Furui, in a research paper, has proposed that there were two distinct groups within the Brahmin community in early Bengal: one primarily engaged in religious, educational, and initiatory functions, and another actively involved in agrarian activities. (Furui 2014; Furui 2015). While definitive conclusions are still unclear, the evidence suggests a clear stratification within the Brahmin community. More broadly, the mention of Kotumbi, Village Kotumbi, Bithi Kulik, and Bhima Kayastha indicates a layered and differentiated village society. This stratification appears to reflect both functional and social divisions within rural Bengal during the early centuries of the Common Era. (Sircar 1965; Furui 2015).

One of the most important and dependable records of caste in Bengal comes from the Damodarpur Copperplates, issued by the Gupta administration in northern Bengal. These documents were written in Sanskrit and Prakrit and describe land grants given to Brahmins, especially those from respected lineages and Vedic schools, like the Bhāradvāja or Vāsiṣṭha, who were skilled in specific branches of Vedic learning. These land grants were often based on religious merit, which helped strengthen the caste-based ritual structure and the administration of the state. The Damodarpur Copperplate Inscriptions, a set of seven inscriptions, are among the most important early medieval land grant records found in Bengal. They were issued during the Gupta Empire, between the early 5th and early 6th centuries CE. These copperplates offer valuable insights into land management, social structure, and the varna-jāti system in Bengal under imperial rule. The inscriptions reveal the following key points:

1. The central role of Brahmins in legitimizing land ownership through religious authority.

2. The rise of agrahara settlements, which were tax-free communities for Brahmins.
3. Brahmins being given land as spiritual intermediaries between rulers and the people.All seven copperplates record land grants to Brahmins, and they identify them by their lineage (gotra), Vedic recension (shakha), and ritual background (pravara).

The Brahmins are often described as "sat-kula-sambhūta" (born of noble families) and "shrotriya" (experts in the Vedas). Here is an example (translated): "A plot of land in the village of Kosambi is hereby granted to the Brahmana Vatsyayana Vishnu Sharma, a resident of Madhyadesa, of the Bharadvaja gotra, well-versed in the Rigveda." The varna-jāti system is heavily focused on Brahmins, with little mention of other groups like Vaishyas, Shudras, or artisans.

However, villagers (grama-vasinah) and farmers (karshakas) are implied in descriptions of the agrarian economy and taxation systems. The lack of direct references to lower castes suggests that these documents were part of an elite culture that supported the legitimacy of power through ritual and authority. These inscriptions also indicate the spread of Aryavarta varna norms into frontier Bengal, a process sometimes called "Brahmanical colonization. " (Majumder 1970, Thapar 2003; Dirks 2001).

The first Damodarpur plate, (Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-15, pp. 130-131) issued during the reign of Kumaragupta in the 124th year of the Gupta era, mentions a Brahmin approaching a local government or council.The names of several individuals, such as Chiratdatta (city guild president), Dhritipala (city chief), Bandhumitra, Sarthabahu Dhritimita Kulik, and the architect, are also mentioned. Professor B. D. Chattopadhyay has described the presence of Bengal subjects during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. The first Damodar Patta shows the image of an artist-trader group. (Chattopadhyaya 1994).
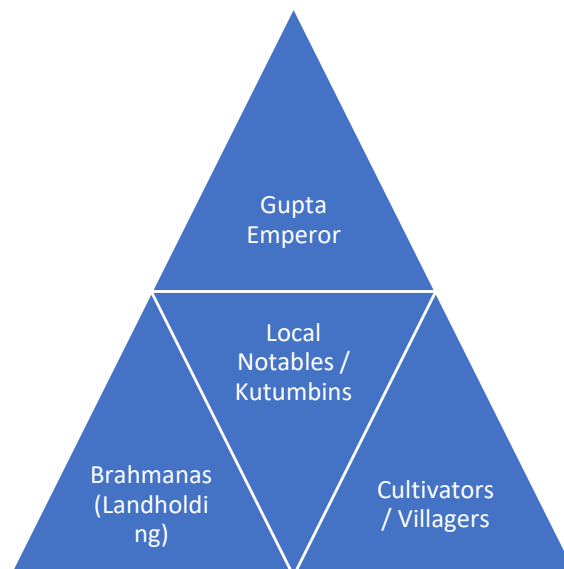
In the second Damodarpur plate, (Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-15, pp. 135.) issued in the 129th year of Gupta era under Kumaragupta, a person (with an illegible name) expresses a desire to purchase land for local council work. Here, Chirat Datta is noted as the superintendent, Dhritipala as the guild president, Sarthabahu Bandhumitra, and Dhrittimitra as the chief

craftsman. It is important to note that the period between these two donations was only five years, and the same individuals were present in the council.

In the Damodarpur plate, (Indian Epigraphy - Vol.-39, pp. 193-198). issued under Bhanugupta in the 213th year of Gupta era, a person from Ayodhya approached the local council to buy land. Arya Rivu Pal is noted as the head of the subject, while Sathu Datta was the chief merchant, Matidatta the chief Kulik, Skanda Pal the chief architect (Kulputrak), and Naranandin, Gopadatta, and Bhattapadin as the record keepers.

The Paharpur Copperplate Inscription, (Indian Epigraphy- Vol.-39, pp. 199-200). from the Gupta era around the 5th century CE, was created during a time when Bengal was only loosely controlled by local rulers known as samantas. Gopachandra, a local leader, seems to have acknowledged Gupta rule. This inscription shows how the Gupta rulers tried to bring different regions under their control by supporting Brahmins and expanding their agricultural areas. The person who received the land was a Brahmin, clearly identified by his family lineage, branch of the Vedic tradition, and his ancestral line this matches the style of Gupta inscriptions. The land given was called an agrahara, which meant it was free from taxes and came with full ownership rights. An example of how the inscription is structured is: "The village of Kalapadraka is hereby given to the Brahmana Vishnusharman, of the Vasistha gotra, a scholar in the Atharvaveda, for the performance of sacred rites."

The Paharpur inscription provides important information about: 1. The Gupta strategy of bringing peripheral areas like Varendra into their fold by promoting Brahmin influence. 2. How social and religious hierarchies were reinforced through land grants to Brahmins. 3. The lack of mention of artisans, traders, or lower castes suggests that these inscriptions focused on the elite. 4. These inscriptions, along with others like Damodarpur and Nidhanpur, show how caste rules were used to integrate frontier regions into the Gupta political system.

The Nidhanpur Copperplate Inscription, issued around 600 CE by Bhaskaravarman of the Varman dynasty in Kamarupa (modern-day Assam), is a key source for understanding interactions between Kamarupa and Pundravardhana in northern Bengal.
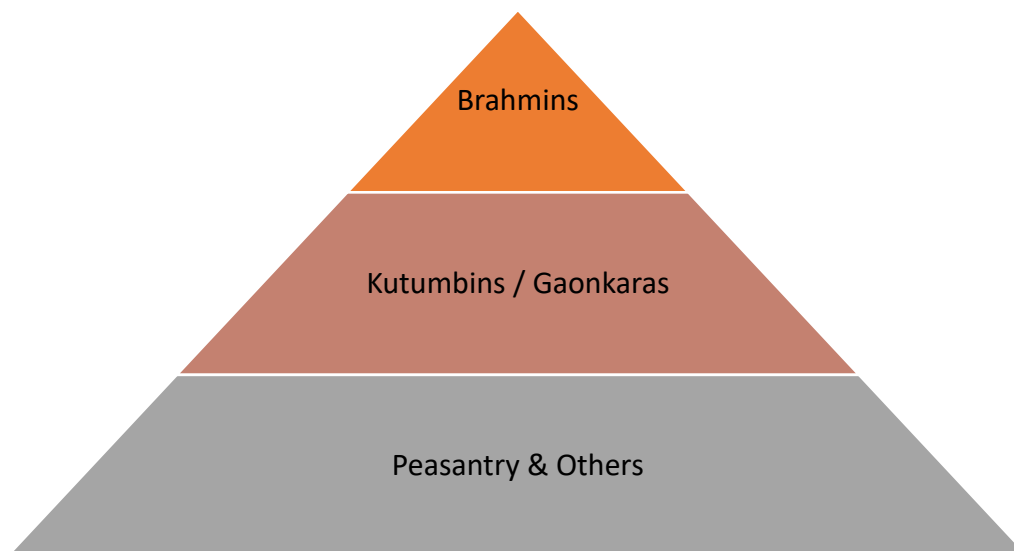
(This pyramid depicts the hierarchical redistribution of agrarian resources, showing the ritual elite at the apex, supported administratively and logistically by local intermediaries, and grounded in a largely anonymous rural base. The Nidhanpur Copperplate stands as a testament to how epigraphy served as a political technology not merely to record but to shape caste and land relations in a frontier zone. Through this inscription, Bhaskaravarman effectively stabilized political control, sanctified land tenure, and institutionalized Brahminical authority in Pundravardhana, laying a foundation for the cultural-political synthesis of Eastern India in the early medieval period.)

It records large land grants to Brahmins, shedding light on caste dynamics, land ownership, and the political structure of eastern India. The inscription names over 200 Brahmins with their family lineages, branches of Vedic tradition, and ritual specializations. These Brahmins were given land that was free from royal taxes and interference, and they were expected to act as religious experts, moral leaders, and community leaders.

This inscription is significant for: 1. Showing the large-scale spread of religious practices in eastern Bengal. 2. Demonstrating how caste was used to integrate areas into the empire. 3. Recording demographic changes and the spread of Indian culture.

The Nidhanpur charter also provides early evidence of: 1. Kamarupa's efforts to expand and integrate into Bengal's border regions. 2. Cultural continuity with Gupta-style political legitimacy and social organization. 3. The use of Brahmin settlements as a way to consolidate control, a method that would be widely used by later dynasties like the Palas.
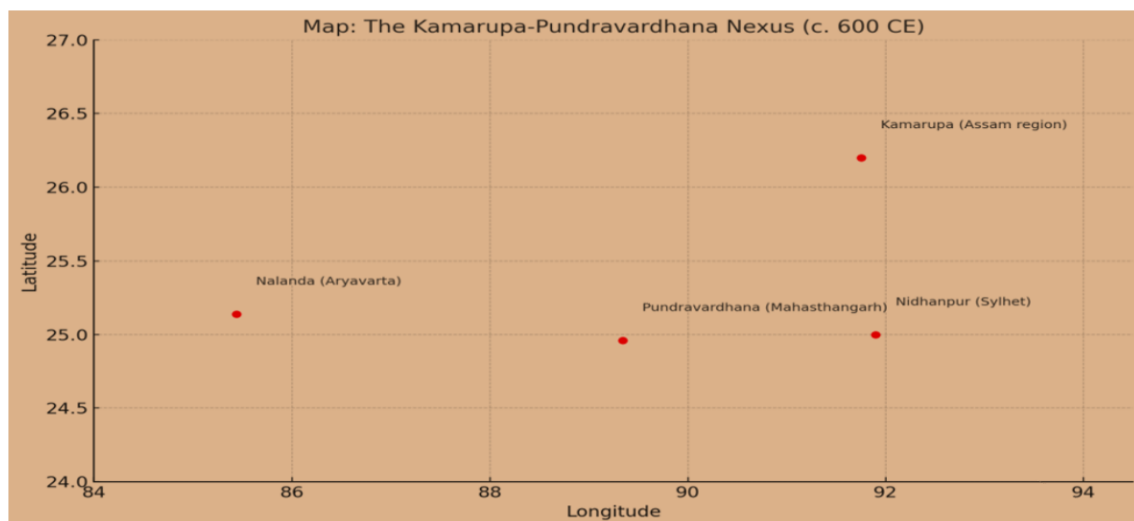
(This map visualizes the key geographical components associated with the Nidhanpur Copperplate Inscription (c. 600 CE), issued by Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa. The inscription, discovered in Nidhanpur (Sylhet), records land grants made to over 200 Brahmins in the Pundravardhana region (modern Mahasthangarh), highlighting a deliberate policy of Brahminical settlement and agrarian integration in Eastern India. The inclusion of Nalanda (Aryavarta) underscores the north Indian origin of the Brahmin recipients.Kamarupa: Political power center of the Varman dynasty, facilitating expansion. Pundravardhana: Frontier region integrated via land grants. Nidhanpur: Location where the copperplate was

found. Nalanda: Indicative of the cultural and ritual source of Brahmin authority. Figure Caption (APA-style):*Figure X. Map depicting the political-cultural nexus between Kamarupa and Pundravardhana during the reign of Bhaskaravarman (c. 600 CE), as revealed by the Nidhanpur copperplate inscription. Source: Constructed by author based on epigraphic and archaeological coordinates.)*

The Gunaighar Copperplate Inscription, (Indian Epigraphy - Vol.-39, pp. 141-148) issued around 507 CE by Vainyagupta, a local ruler claiming Gupta ancestry in the Samatata region, reflects the Gupta model of a sacred king who used land donations to Brahmins for both political support and religious purification of newly controlled areas.

The presence of officials like the viá¹£ayapati (district governor) indicates that administrative systems were already in place at a local level, showing how Gupta-style bureaucracy was influencing Bengal's frontier regions. The Gunaighar inscription is a clear example of how religious and bureaucratic practices merged in early medieval Bengal. It: 1. Combines Gupta-style imperial practices with local conditions in Samatata. 2. Embeds Brahminical hierarchy into land law through Agraharas. 3. Shows how caste society was not static, but shaped by documents, laws, rituals, and the physical layout of space.

The historical importance of the Gunaighar inscription includes: 1. Frontier Ritualization: It illustrates how kings extended their control by making newly acquired land ritually acceptable, turning wild areas into legitimate agricultural spaces. 2. Social Hierarchy Fixation: It formalizes a strict hierarchy with the king as the grantor, the Brahmana as the recipient, and the cultivators and villagers as subordinates. 3. Administrative Maturation: It shows the development of local governance structures, hinting at the future roles of Kayasthas and other professional scribes. 4. Religious Justification of Inequality: It uses religious concepts of merit and spiritual sin to justify land ownership and social hierarchy, while silencing the lower castes in the text.

The societal and caste issues in the Gunaighar inscription are: 1. At the heart of the inscription is the grant of land to a Brahmana, identified by his family lineage, branch of Vedic tradition, and ancestral line. This reflects the Gupta method of using Brahmin religious authority to reinforce political and religious power. The Brahmana is not just a priest but becomes a landholding elite, enjoying special rights and social superiority over the local people. The donor, Vainyagupta, is a local king who claims Gupta ancestry, using Brahmin support to validate his rule. By making this donation, he reinforces the idea of dharma where a Kshatriya (king) supports a Brahmana (religious elite) to shape society according to religious principles. This blending of state power and caste hierarchy was a key part of early medieval land grants.

2.The presence of officials like the viá¹£ayapati (district administrator) in the grant shows the development of a bureaucratic layer beneath the king and the Brahmana. These officials, not specified by caste, had scribal and fiscal roles that would later evolve into the Kayastha caste. This shows an important shift where administrative work became a caste-based function.

3.Although villagers and cultivators are not named, their presence is clear from the structure of the grant. The purpose of the agrahara was to get agricultural produce from local workers,

but they are left out of the text, reflecting an exclusion of lower castes from historical records. This omission shows how elite texts maintained ritual purity and land rights, while ignoring the laboring majority from historical memory.

4.Transforming a village into a tax-free agrahara creates a ritualized space where Brahmins hold the highest position and local cultivators are placed beneath them by obligation, not by birth. The inscription thus uses space to represent caste, assigning not just rights but also specific places within the social and geographical structure.

While Gupta inscriptions found in ancient Bengal provide insights into the social structure, they mainly show how varna and jati were flexible and changing, highlighting their roles in land control, government positions, religious support, and evolving social rankings, rather than confirming a rigid or fixed caste system like in later times. The inscriptions suggest a dynamic relationship between the theoretical framework of varna, local jati communities, and the practical realities of power and social movement in the Gupta era.

The copperplate inscriptions from early Bengal especially those from Kalaikuri–Sultanpur, Jagadishpur, Damodarpur, and Gunaighar offer important evidence of changing caste hierarchies, job specialization, and village stratification between the 5th and 6th centuries CE. These inscriptions don't just show land donations but also serve as detailed administrative records that help us understand the complex social organization in early medieval Bengal.One key feature across these records is the presence of Brahmins, not only as religious leaders but also as landowners.

For instance, in the Kalaikuri–Sultanpur inscription (around 120 CE), (Indian Epigraphy - Vol.-39, pp. 203-205). people named Sharma appear outside the formal Brahmin list categorized instead under Kotumbi indicating early differences within the Brahmin community. Some Brahmins became part of agricultural life while others remained focused on rituals and education. This supports Professor Rashuke Furui's idea that Brahmins in Bengal had two roles: ritual experts and landowners.

Similarly, the Jagadishpur copperplate. (Indian Epigraphy- Vol.-23, pp. 155-161) mentions Rudra Das as Mahattara, a significant village leader or administrative figure. Interestingly, the same person is listed as a Kayastha in the Kalaikuri–Sultanpur inscription, showing both job continuity and the early emergence of the Kayastha group as village administrators. The Kayastha caste, which later became key in Bengal's administrative and writing roles, is first mentioned in these copperplates.

The Damodarpur inscriptions, issued under Kumaragupta and Budhagupta, add more to this picture. Alongside Brahmins and Mahattaras, they refer to Nagarshreshthi (guild leaders), Kulik (craft leaders), Sarthavaha (traders), and builders. The repeated mention of these people shows a well-developed system of governance in both urban and rural areas by the mid-5th century CE.

The Gunaighar inscriptions, dated to 184 and 188 in the Gupta era, are especially revealing. (Select Inscriptions - Vol.-2, pp. 24-25.) The first mentions the Ajivaka sect, which is rare in Bengal's inscriptions, along with job titles like Shreshthi, Karmantaka (workers), Vardhakar

(builders), Vaidya (doctors), and Bhilal (a possible community or occupational group). These references show religious variety and an economy focused on specialized jobs.

The second Gunaighar inscription is important because it records Karana-Kayastha as a formal group for the first time in Bengal's inscriptional history. Their presence with *Vaidya and Dosivog* (likely a cloth merchant group) shows an early stage in Bengal's social development, where job groups started becoming defined jatis, as seen later in the Brihatdharmapurana. This suggests that job specialization was a step toward a more fixed caste system.

In conclusion, comparing these inscriptions shows that Bengal's early medieval caste system was both ranked and complex.It wasn't only about Brahmins but also included middle groups like Kayasthas, Karanas, and Vaidyas. These groups developed within contexts of rural growth, administrative tasks, and trade networks. The inscriptions show a society in transition, moving from flexible, job-based groups toward a more strict and formal caste structure by the time after the Gupta period.

Understanding the social structure of this time is important for a full picture of Gupta society.1. Inscriptions that were carved on copper plates and stone pillars are key for learning about the real social conditions of the time. This essay will examine Gupta inscriptions found in ancient Bengal, roughly matching today's Bangladesh and West Bengal in India, to explore how they contribute to understanding the varna, jati, and emerging caste systems. It will argue that these inscriptions don't show a fixed or predetermined caste system, but rather show how social categories changed and developed in Gupta Bengal, where varna was a general idea, and jati represented local communities with flexible boundaries, all influenced and affecting land ownership, leadership, religious support, and social movement.

2.The varna system, as described in dharmashastras and other religious texts, divided society into four main groups: Brahmanas (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and leaders), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (laborers and servants).

3.Land grants to Brahmanas are common in Gupta inscriptions of Bengal. These are usually agrahara villages free from taxes, showing the growing influence of Brahmanas in rural management and administration. The inscriptions often highlight the Brahmana's family background, knowledge of Vedic texts, and ritual purity, giving them a high status. However, they usually focus on the specific family line (gotra) and branch of Vedic knowledge studied, rather than just the varna. This suggests that while varna was recognized, jati identity within Brahmanas was more important in showing social position and role.

While Gupta rulers almost certainly identified with the Kshatriya varna, this isn't clearly stated in most inscriptions from Bengal about the Gupta dynasty.

References to kings and their military strength suggest Kshatriya status, but the emphasis is usually on their family history and the legitimacy of their rule, not on their varna. More importantly, some inscriptions show people from non-Kshatriya backgrounds moving into military and political roles, challenging traditional varna divisions.

Mentions of Vaishyas and Shudras are not often found in Gupta inscriptions from Bengal. This does not mean they were unimportant, but it might show that they had less access to resources and power, which would have made them more likely to be recorded in official texts. Their work in agriculture and trade was essential, but their involvement in the administrative and religious activities mentioned in the inscriptions seems to be very limited. Some scholars think that the lack of regular references to these groups shows that the formal varna system wasn't strictly followed in practice, especially in areas like Bengal where Brahmanical influence might have been weaker than in the main part of the Gupta empire.

Though the varna system set up a general framework, the jati system, which included many local, endogamous groups, was more deeply connected to daily life in Gupta Bengal. Jati identities were often linked to particular jobs, places, or religious beliefs. The inscriptions give some hints about the presence and significance of jati identities:

The inscriptions often mention people in specific jobs, like artisans and traders. While these are not directly called jatis, the connection between certain skills and communities likely helped form jati identities over time. For example, mentions of oil presser guilds (tailikas) or weavers suggest the existence of distinct groups that may have developed into separate jatis.The inscriptions also frequently mention the places where individuals, especially Brahmanas who received land grants, came from.

This focus on where people lived might show how location played a role in shaping jati identities. Brahmanas moving from areas like northern India (Madhyadesha) to Bengal may have created new jati groups with their own customs and networks. The inscriptions sometimes reference religious groups, like followers of Vaishnavism or Shaivism. These religious ties could have led to the creation of different social groups with shared beliefs and practices, possibly forming distinct jati identities over time.

There was also some flexibility in the jati system. Cases of intermarriage, changes in jobs, and adopting new religious views suggest that jati boundaries weren't always fixed. Individuals could sometimes adjust their social identities to some extent. The Gupta inscriptions from Bengal show the relationship between land ownership, administrative authority, and the varna and jati systems.

Land grants to Brahmanas and others were not just religious acts but also tools of political and economic control. These land grants helped the Gupta rulers:

1. Create loyal elites: Giving land to Brahmanas and other groups helped build a class of supporters who would back the rulers and help maintain control in the countryside.
2. Boost agriculture: Having responsibility for managing land led to more farming and greater revenue.
3. Spread Brahmanical ideas: Establishing agrahara villages helped spread Brahmanical culture and religion, gradually changing local traditions toward a more Sanskritized form.

Granting administrative roles to Brahmanas and others from different jati backgrounds had a major impact on social structures. Some inscriptions mention officials from non-Kshatriya

backgrounds holding high positions in government, suggesting that gaining power wasn't always based on varna status. This might also show that the Gupta administration valued competence and loyalty more than strict adherence to varna rules. The interactions between the people who received land (often Brahmanas) and the local population, which included various jati groups, would have influenced the balance of power and social relationships.

Social Mobility and the Limits of Varna/Jati Hierarchy:

Although the varna and jati systems definitely shaped social layers in Gupta Bengal, the inscriptions also show that people could move up in society, though not always easily. There are cases where individuals from lower varnas gained wealth, power, or respect, showing that social standing wasn't completely fixed from birth.

1.**Economic chances:** During the Gupta time, thriving trade and business may have given people from Vaishya and Shudra backgrounds a chance to become wealthy and raise their social status.

2.**Religious support:** Supporting temples and monasteries might have increased the status of people from different jati groups. Some inscriptions mention donations given by merchants, artisans, and even those whose varna wasn't clear, implying that religious devotion could be a way to gain more respect in society.

3Adoption and Sanskritization: Combining local gods and traditions with the Brahmanical system, along with using Sanskrit names and customs, might have allowed some groups to become part of higher-status jatis over time.

However, it's important to note that social movement was probably limited by things like jati endogamy, job restrictions, and the strong position of Brahmanas and other elites. The inscriptions do not show big social changes, but instead show that social change happened slowly and step by step.

Comparison with Inscriptions from Other Parts of the Gupta Empire in Bengal: To better understand the varna and jati systems during the Gupta period, it's important to compare the inscriptions from Bengal with those from other areas, like northern India and the Deccan.

1. Inscriptions from different areas show how much varna and jati were emphasized, reflecting the different social and cultural situations of the Gupta empire. For example, inscriptions from northern India may show more focus on the varna system, while those from the Deccan may highlight local customs and traditions.
2. Even with these differences, some key themes appear in Gupta inscriptions, such as the important role of land grants to Brahmanas, the use of jati in regulating social interactions, and the possibility of social movement.
3. The varna and jati systems in each area were affected by local conditions, such as resources, different ethnic groups, and religious traditions.

By looking at inscriptions from different areas, we can better understand the mix of national and local factors that influenced the social structure of the Gupta period.

Conclusion:

In summary, Gupta inscriptions from ancient Bengal give us important insights into how society was organized during that time. While they show some idea of the theoretical varna system, they also reveal a more complex picture where jati identities were key in shaping social relationships, economic activities, and political influence. The inscriptions suggest that the varna system was more of a general idea, but the actual social structure was fluid, with a mix of varna, jati, land ownership, administrative power, religious support, and social movement. The evidence moves away from the idea of a rigid and unchanging caste system and instead shows a more flexible and localized social setup where social roles could change. More research, connecting epigraphic evidence with other sources like archaeological findings, literary texts, and coins, is needed to better understand the complex and evolving social structure of Gupta Bengal. This analysis encourages us to move away from simple views of a static and unchanging caste system and to appreciate the complexities of social life in ancient Bengal. By focusing on the specific historical background and using primary evidence, we can gain a more accurate and detailed understanding of the varna, jati, and emerging caste structures of the Gupta period.

Brahmanas are consistently seen as important figures in land grants and religious support, but their roles weren't all the same. The rise of dual roles among Brahmanas acting as both ritual leaders and landowners shows a close connection between caste and the economy of rural Bengal. Similarly, the growing presence of scribe and administrative castes, like Kayasthas, Karanas, and Vaidyas, points to the slow formation of specialized jatis that later made-up Bengal's complex caste system.

These inscriptions tell us that caste in early Bengal wasn't fixed or applied the same way everywhere. Instead, it was a flexible system that adapted to local conditions, influenced by royal support, social movement, job roles, and religious authority. Rather than being a separate part of India's caste history, Bengal's experience offers important insights into the local processes that helped form and keep caste hierarchies in early Indian society.

By challenging the idea of a strict and complete varna system, this study suggests we need to rethink early caste forms as outcomes shaped by history, not fixed rules.These inscriptions don't only record history they help shape it, embedding caste into land, law, and family in early Bengal.

Appendex

Dhanaidaha Copperplate

Feature	Details
Inscription Name	Dhanaidaha Copperplate
Date	c. 428 CE
Place Found	Dhanaidaha, Rajshahi District, Bangladesh (Ancient Pundravardhana)

Ruler / Issuer	Kumaragupta I (Gupta emperor)
Language / Script	Sanskrit / Gupta Brahmi
Form of Grant	Copperplate land grant to a single Brahmana
Donee Details	Brahmana Doneya, belonging to the Vatsa gotra
Content Summary	Donation of land with tax exemptions and full rights to the Brahmana

Summary Table: Social Hierarchy in the Dhanaidaha Inscription

Social Group	Role in Grant	Caste Implication	Mentioned in Text
Brahmana (Doneya)	Recipient of land; Vedic identity (Vatsa gotra)	Twice-born ritual elite	Named explicitly
Gupta Ruler (Kumaragupta I)	Sovereign granting land (Kshatriya order)	Patron of dharma and caste order	Named
Cultivators (karṣakas)	Implied labourers on the donated land	Shudra agricultural class	Implied only
Artisans / others	Supporting castes (service, craft)	Possibly antyaja or local jatis	Not mentioned

Table: Social and Caste Structure in the Kalaikuri-Sultanpur Inscription

Feature	Details
Inscription Name	Kalaikuri-Sultanpur Inscription
Date	c. 120 CE
Place Found	Kalaikuri–Sultanpur region (Bengal)
Ruler / Issuer	Not specified; local administrative record
Language / Script	Sanskrit with non-Sanskritic elements / Brahmi
Form of Record	Land grant or administrative village record
Main Purpose	Recording social organization and land ownership

Table: Social Hierarchy and Caste Groups in Kalaikuri-Sultanpur Inscription

Social Group	Term Used / Mentioned As	Function / Role	Caste Implication	Presence in Text

Brahmins (16 Gram)	Brahmana Gram	Religious, ritual authority, landholders	Twice-born elite	Explicitly named
Kotumbi	Kotumbi, Village Kotumbi	Local village head, administrative figure, sometimes farmers	Mixed partly Brahmin, partly agrarian	Explicitly named
Sharma (non-Brahmin)	Sharma (listed as Kotumbi)	Farmers/agricultural community members	Probable agrarian Brahmin sub-group or hybrid caste	Not listed under Brahmin category
Bithi Kulik	Bithi Kulik	Artisans/traders, village service group	Middle-tier hybrid caste	Named
Bhima Kayastha	Kayastha (Bhima Kayastha)	Scribes, record-keepers	Proto-Kayastha, early evidence	Named
Bithi Mahattara	Mahattara	Village notable, elder	Local elite/mixed caste	Named
Common Villagers	Not named individually	Cultivators, general populace	Shudra (implied)	Implied

Overview of the Inscriptions

Copperplate	Ruler	Date (CE)	Location Found	Language/Script	Content Focus
Damodarpur I	Kumaragupta I	c. 443 CE	Damodarpur (Dinajpur)	Sanskrit / Gupta Brāhmī	Land grant in Kotivarsha
Damodarpur II–VII	Budhagupta, Vainyagupta	476–530 CE	Kotivarsha (North Bengal)	Sanskrit / Gupta Brāhmī	Renewals and further grants

Findspot: Damodarpur, in the historic region of Pundravardhana, Bengal (now Bangladesh).

Social Hierarchy in the Inscriptions

Group	Role in the Copperplates	Status
Brahmanas	Land recipients, Vedic experts, ritual authority	High (Twice-born)
Gupta Officials	Seal bearers, executors of royal orders	Administrative elite

Grama-vasis	Inhabitants of villages (implied cultivators, artisans)	Subordinate
Kutumbins	Wealthy householders/local notables (not always named)	Local elite/middle tier

Thematic Table: Landholding by Caste Group (Implied)

Group	Land Ownership	Mention Mode	Notes
Brahmanas	High (Agrahara grants)	Named with full ritual identity	Received tax-free lands for religious services
Administrative Officials	None (Agents only)	Named for administrative acts	Seal-bearers, execution of order
Villagers (karshakas)	Cultivated land	Not individually named	Implied to remain on land to ensure revenue

Paharpur Copperplate Inscription

Feature	Description
Name	Paharpur Copperplate Inscription
Issuer	Gopachandra, a local feudatory under Gupta suzerainty
Date	Approx. late 5th century CE
Place Found	Paharpur, Varendra (now Naogaon District, Bangladesh)
Language/Script	Sanskrit / Gupta Brāhmī
Content	Land grant to a Brahmana

Region: Northern Bengal (ancient Varendra), under Gupta imperial control.

Caste Hierarchy

Group	Role in Inscription	Varna Implication
Brahmanas	Grantees of land	Twice-born (Dvija), elite
Villagers	Described as existing inhabitants	Likely peasant Shudras
Feudatory (issuer)	Agent of political authority under Guptas	Possibly Kshatriya

Thematic Summary Table: Varna and Landholding in Paharpur (Gupta)

Social Group	Function in the Inscription	Status	Land Rights

Brahmana	Recipient, religious legitimacy	High (ritual elite)	Full, tax-free ownership
Local peasantry	Inhabitants of the village	Low (Shudra class implied)	Continued cultivators
Issuing Authority	Donor, executor of Gupta policy	Feudatory (upper varna)	Patronage-based rights

The Caste-Landholding Nexus

Caste Group	Mentioned Roles	No. of Grantees	Location Origin
Brahmanas	Recipients of land, ritual experts	Over 200	Aryavarta, Madhyadesa, Gauda
Kutumbins	Local stakeholders; possibly witnesses	Several (unnamed)	Local region
Kayasthas	Not explicitly mentioned, but likely involved as scribes	Implied	Bengal

Table 1: (The primary sociological feature of the Nidhanpur charter is the systematic Brahminization of Pundravardhana : The caste-specific endowments illustrate the state's active role in constructing a hierarchical agrarian order rooted in varna ideology, legitimized through land grants and ritual authority (Sharma, 1985; Chattopadhyaya, 1994)

Thematic Analysis: Settlement and Control

Theme	Details
Landholding	Grants of fertile, tax-free land (agraharas) to Brahmins
Political Control	Integration of Pundravardhana into Kamarupa's sphere
Cultural Hegemony	Sanskritisation and ritual dominance of Brahmin migrants
Legal Sanction	Use of royal seal, detailed boundaries, punitive clauses
Local Participation	Local villagers (Kutumbins) noted as informants, legitimizing the transfer

Table 2; The inscription, discovered in Nidhanpur village, Sylhet (now in Bangladesh), was issued by Bhaskaravarman (r. c. 600–650 CE), a powerful monarch known for his alliance with Harshavardhana of Kanauj. The grant documents land endowments to 200+ Brahmins primarily from Aryavarta, signifying not only patronage but also state-sanctioned

demographic engineering in the Pundravardhana region. Composed in Sanskrit and written in an early Gupta script, the charter exemplifies the eulogistic prashasti form, beginning with genealogical glorification and concluding with the land grant details. The style closely mirrors Gupta epigraphic conventions, reflecting cultural assimilation between Bengal and the Kamarupa court.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Feature	Details
Inscription Name	Gunaighar Copperplate
Date	c. 507 CE
Place Found	Gunaighar, Comilla District, Bangladesh (ancient Samatata region)
Issuer	Vainyagupta, local ruler claiming descent from the imperial Guptas
Language/Script	Sanskrit / Late Gupta Brāhmī
Form	Copperplate land grant (single plate)
Recipient	A Brahmana, identified by gotra and Vedic shakha
Nature of Grant	Agrahāra (tax-exempt land grant)
Purpose	Religious merit (*puṇya*), legitimization of rule, ritual-based social control
Findspot Region	Samatata (frontier deltaic zone in southeast Bengal)

EPIGRAPHIC STRUCTURE

Section	Content Summary
Invocation (Maṅgala)	Blessings of deities or Sanskritic cosmology
Praśasti	Genealogy and virtues of Vainyagupta
Legal Formulae	Grant of land to Brahmana, including boundaries, previous owner, and exemptions
Administrative Layer	Reference to viṣayapati (district governor) and others present during the grant
Dharma Clause	Declares that violators of the grant will accrue sin equivalent to killing a cow
Conclusion	Signature/date clause, attested by scribes or officials

THEMATIC TABLES

Table 1: Caste Groups and Social Roles in the Gunaighar Copperplate

Caste / Group	Term(s) Used	Function / Role	Social Status	Named / Implied
Brahmana	dvija, srotriya, gotra, pravara	Donee of land; ritual authority	Highest (twice-born)	Named (specific individual)
Ruler	rājā, mahārāja	Issuer of land grant; source of dharma	Kshatriya (implied)	Named (Vainyagupta)
Viṣayapati	viṣayapati	District-level administrator	High administrative elite	Named
Grāmavāsis	Implied term	Local villagers; residents of the granted land	Shudra/peasant (implied)	Implied
Karṣakas (Cultivators)	Not named directly	Farmers; real producers of surplus	Shudra (lower tier)	Implied
Artisans, Servants	Absent	Support economy (crafts, oil-pressing, etc.)	Lower castes, Antyaja	Completely absent

Table 2: Caste–Land–Power Relationship

Social Group	Land Rights	Power / Authority	Caste Function
Brahmana	Full ownership (agrahāra, tax-free)	Ritual mediator; controls land and peasantry	Upholder of varna-dharma and cosmology
King (Vainyagupta)	Ultimate donor of land	Grants religious merit and land simultaneously	Patron and upholder of Brahmanical order
Viṣayapati	No landholding rights	Bureaucratic enforcement and recording	Proto-Kayastha or Kshatriya functionary
Villagers	Must remain and cultivate land	Obey donee; pay rents in kind/labour	Support caste pyramid silently

Table 3: Legal & Fiscal Exemptions Claimed

Term Used	Meaning	Implication

Uparikara	Extra tax	Exempted for donee
Bhāga-bhoga	Share in produce and enjoyment of land	Transferred from king to Brahmana
Udaka-bhoga	Water usage tax	Removed
Kara / śulka	Standard taxes or tolls	Removed
Abhāradeya	Tax immunity (term for agrahāra lands)	Legalized full revenue diversion to Brahmana
Dānapatrasiddhi	Religious merit clause authorizing donation	Dharma becomes legal currency

Table 4: Comparative Place of Gunaighar Among Gupta-Era Inscriptions

Inscription	Region	Issuer	Caste Insight	Similarities to Gunaighar
Damodarpur Copperplates	Pundravardhana	Kumaragupta I	Brahmana gotra, kutumbin role, peasant implied	Yes land to Brahmanas, elite administration
Paharpur Copperplate	Varendra (Naogaon)	Gopachandra	Ritual elite, peasant inferred	Yes Gupta-style form, agrahāra emphasis
Nidhanpur Copperplate	Sylhet	Bhaskaravarman	200+ Brahmanas, gotra-specific data	Yes lineage, frontier Sanskritisation
Gunaighar (this plate)	Samatata (Comilla)	Vainyagupta	Single Brahmana donee, local governance	Gupta format in deep frontier zone

V. TABLE FOR INCORPORATION (Caste & Function in Gunaighar Inscription)

Group	Role in Inscription	Status	Visibility in Text
Brahmana	Land recipient, ritual elite	Twice-born (dvija)	Fully named
King	Donor, political sovereign	Kshatriya (implied)	Named (Vainyagupta)
Viṣayapati	Bureaucratic enforcer	Proto-Kayastha elite	Named
Cultivators	Revenue base, implied labor	Shudra (implied)	Implied only

Artisans/Others	Unnamed service castes	Possibly antyaja	Absent

Table 1: Basic Comparative Features

Feature	Dhanaidaha (c. 428 CE)	Damodarpur (435–445 CE)	Gunaighar (c. 507 CE)
Region	Pundravardhana (Rajshahi)	Pundravardhana (Bogra)	Samatata (Comilla)
Issuer	Kumaragupta I	Kumaragupta I & Budhagupta	Vainyagupta (local ruler with Gupta ties)
Script / Language	Sanskrit / Gupta Brāhmī	Sanskrit / Gupta Brāhmī	Sanskrit / Late Gupta Brāhmī
Recipient(s)	Brahmana Doneya (Vatsa gotra)	Multiple Brahmanas (Gotra-defined)	Brahmana (Gotra and pravara specified)
Grant Nature	Single agrahāra-type donation	Multiple land grants in fiscal records	Single agrahāra donation with full immunity
Type of Land	Fertile village (agrahāra)	Arable lands in local districts	Full village in eastern delta
Caste Reference	Explicit Brahmana identity	Brahmanas, kutumbins, villagers implied	Brahmana, viṣayapati, anonymous villagers

Table 2: Social Structure and Caste Hierarchy

Group / Category	Dhanaidaha	Damodarpur	Gunaighar
Brahmana	Single Vatsa gotra Brahmana (Doneya)	Many, with precise gotra and pravara	Named Brahmana with detailed Vedic credentials
King / Ruler	Kumaragupta I (Gupta emperor)	Kumaragupta I, Budhagupta	Vainyagupta (Gupta-linked, local)
Administrators	Not mentioned	*Mahattaras*, *bhukti-pati*, *vishayapati*	*Viṣayapati*, scribes
Peasants / Kutumbins	Not mentioned	*Kutumbins* sometimes as intermediaries	Implied (karṣakas, grāmavāsis)
Artisans / Labourers	Absent	Implied in rural ecosystem	Epigraphically silent

Caste Dynamics	Ritual-centered hierarchy	Multi-tiered: Brahmana–kutumbin–peasant	Three-tier: Brahmana–admin–producer

Table 3: Key Functions of Land and Caste

Function	Dhanaidaha	Damodarpur	Gunaighar
Land as Ritual Capital	Yes: puṇya for king and donee	Yes: Brahmana settlements expand	Yes: sacralisation of frontier lands
Land as Political Tool	Single grant, elite legitimation	Imperial-scale documentation	Localised assertion of Gupta identity
Brahmana Function	Spiritual elite and grantee	Ritual elite, sometimes tax intermediaries	Ritual elite and village landlords
Caste Ordering Purpose	Emerging structure	Institutionalising varna at scale	Deepening caste through epigraphy

Caste and Varna-Jati References in Gupta Bengal Inscriptions

Inscription	Date (CE)	Location	Caste / Group Mentioned	Terms Used in Inscription	Role/Function	Notes on Social Structure
Damodarpur Copperplates (I–VII)	443–453	Damodarpur, Pundravardhana (North Bengal)	Brahmanas	dvija, srotriya, gotra, pravara	Recipients of land; Vedic scholars	Numerous named individuals from specific gotras (e.g., Kashyapa, Bharadvaja); indicate structured Brahmana jati settlements
			Kutumbins	kutumbinah	Landholding peasants; village elites	Possibly upper Shudra or Vaishya

						agrarian castes; witnesses in land grant process
			Mahattaras	mahattara	Village elders; community leaders	Status implies high ritual and social respect at the local level
			Ayuktakas, Lekhakas	ayuktaka, lekhaka	Officials; administrators and scribes	May be proto-Kayastha or bureaucratic castes; not named as jati but suggest early administrative hierarchy
Gunaighar Copperplate	c. 507	Comilla (Tripura region)	Brahmana Donee	dvija, srotriya	Land recipient	Similar Brahmana lineages; reinforces expansion of caste settlements eastward
			Vishayapati	vishayapati	District governor	Feudatory role; likely Kshatriya varna or administrative function

Mahasthan Stone Inscription	5th c.	Bogra region	Brahmanas	brahmana-dānāya	Beneficiaries of religious donations	Indicates temple-centered Brahmanical landholding
Nidhanpur Copperplate (refers to Gupta grants)	c. 7th (ref. c. 5th c.)	Sylhet	Multiple Brahmanas	200+ named with gotras and pravaras	Settlers in villages granted by earlier Gupta kings	Reflects jati-specific lineages, spatially clustered Brahmana society; legacy of Gupta social planning

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					society; legacy of Gupta social planning

Thematic Table: Landholding by Group in Gupta Bengal Inscriptions

Social Group / Caste	Type of Landholding	Mode of Acquisition	Legal / Ritual Status	Role in Society	Inscriptions Referenced
Brahmanas	Individual or clustered land parcels (often whole villages or shares)	Royal land grants (brahmadeya); tax-exempt, heritable	Highest ritual status; dvija; Vedic entitlement (srotriya)	Religious elite; custodians of Vedic knowledge and ritual; often absentee landholders	Damodarpur I–VII, Gunaighar Plate, Mahasthan Stone Inscription, Nidhanpur (retrospective reference)
Kutumbins (Householders)	Ancestral and cultivated land within villages	Hereditary tenure; implied local control; not state-donated	Medium ritual status; likely Vaishya or Shudra jatis	Agrarian backbone; cultivators and revenue providers; witnesses in land transfers	Damodarpur Plates I–VII
Mahattaras (Village Elders)	Likely holders of larger family landholdings	Implied hereditary land rights; not formally granted by king	High local status; probable Vaishya/Shudra; non-Brahmana	Local leadership; decision-makers in land and community affairs	Damodarpur Plates I–VII
Royal/Feudatory Officials (e.g., vishayapati, ayuktaka)	No private landholding recorded; administrators of land grants	Authority via royal appointment	Kshatriya or higher-ranking jati officials	Oversaw land administration; facilitators of land transfers to Brahmanas	Gunaighar Plate, Damodarpur Plates

Artisans / Lower Jatis	Not recorded	Possibly hereditary tenancy or service-based rights	Epigraphically invisible; likely Shudra or below	Builders, service groups, unrecorded cultivators	No direct mention in Gupta Bengal inscriptions
Monastic Institutions (e.g., Buddhist monasteries)	Rare in Gupta Bengal epigraphy (more visible in Nalanda region)	Royal or private donation	Not caste-based, but ritually recognized	Religious role; Buddhist learning centers	Only marginally present in Gupta-era Bengal corpus

Comparative Chart: Caste and Landholding in Gupta vs. Early Medieval Bengal

Aspect / Period	Gupta Bengal (c. 4th–6th CE)	Early Medieval Bengal (c. 7th–13th CE)
Dominant Landholding Caste	Brahmanas state-endowed (brahmadeya) grants in new settlements (e.g., Damodarpur)	Brahmanas + Kayasthas + Emerging Jatis expansion of agraharas, landholders from scribal, temple, and service castes
Type of Land Grants	Brahmadeya (tax-free grants to Brahmanas); entire villages or plots; ritual legitimation	Brahmadeya, Devadāna (to temples), Agrasreni (merchant guilds), Jatikas (community-specific grants); increase in complexity
Caste Hierarchy Reflected	Classical varna model Brahmanas (top), peasant jatis unnamed, state officials without jati title	Clear jati hierarchy e.g., Kaivarttas, Kayasthas, Sadgopas, Karṇas, Vaidyas, often explicitly named
Administrative Castes	Officials (e.g., lekhaka, ayuktaka) unnamed in caste terms	Kayasthas emerge prominently as landholders and record-keepers in inscriptions (e.g., Khalimpur, Dinajpur plates)
Lower Castes / Shudras	Implied but never named in inscriptions; invisible in official discourse	Frequently mentioned by jati name (e.g., Kaivarttas, Dom, Chandalas); some hold land or serve temples
Monastic / Temple Landholding	Rare in Bengal inscriptions (unlike Nalanda region)	Significant temples, mathas, and monasteries (both Hindu and Buddhist) are large landholders (esp.

		Pala period)
Regional Patterns	Mostly Pundravardhana region under imperial officers	Broader spread Varendra, Rāḍha, Vanga, Samatata; local dynasties issue land to multiple jatis
Language of Inscriptions	Sanskrit	Sanskrit and hybrid vernacular (Sanskrit with regional inflections); Bengali appears later in literary texts
Social Mobility Indicators	Varna rigidity; social status closely tied to ritual purity	Rise of service and scribal jatis; examples of Kaivarttas becoming feudal lords (e.g., Divya's revolt in Varendra)
Examples of Jati Mentions	Absent or implied only (e.g., kutumbins)	Explicit: Kaivartta, Karṇa, Sadgopa, Nāpita, Vaidya, Chandala, etc.

Notes & References

1. M.N. Srinivas, A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization, Far Eastern Quarterly, 15.
2. Brihatdharma and Brahmavaivarta Puranas, written in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, are regarded as Upapuranas. Here an important speech has been presented on the origin of the mixed races of Bengal and their development. Here the Brahmins are told to eat fish which is not mentioned anywhere in India.
3. Panchanan Tarkaratna (01), Brihat Dharmapurana, Calcutta, Nava Bharata Prakashani, 1380 Bengal, - Brihat Dharmapurana is divided into three hybrid castes namely Uttam, Madhyam, Antyaja. For example, Karan arose from the union of Vaishya and Shudra parents, while Sambandha or Vaidya arose from the union of Brahmin and Vaishya parents. Thus 20 castes have been identified as Uttam Sankara, 12 as Medium, 4 as Antyaja, and 9 as Jaya caste.
4. Rooshke Furui, Finding Nation in the Social Order: A Reading of the Varnasankara Section of the Brihatdharmapurana-essay shows how the tendencies of society in the twelfth-thirteenth centuries created the need to 'codify' them. He also wrote that the Brahmins or their own worldview viewed the entire society and recorded the caste system.
5. Nirmal Kumar Bose, The Structure of Hindu Society, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1975, The famous Bengali book of his book is, Structure of Hindu Samaj. Here he first analyzed the caste system of Hindu society.
6. M.N. Srinivasa's famous theory is 'Theory of Sanskritization'. Andre Batey is a famous sociologist who has made important statements about the caste system in India. Louis Dumo is famous for his theory of 'Homo Hiercas' who has given the concept of sanctity and new relation behind the stratification of the caste system.

C. Bugle is one of the most important exponents of the caste system. The youth itself has made important discussions about the caste system.

7. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar History of Ancient Bengal Calcutta, G. Bharadwaj, 1971. While explaining Varnajati in his book, he has identified various castes including Aryakarana entry of Bengal, Brahmins, Vaishyas separately.

8. Niharranjan Roy, History of Bengali (Early Part) Calcutta, Days Publications, 1980. Roy has provided important information about the development and expansion of caste and society of Bengal and the people of different occupational groups in the chapter Varna Vyanaya-Sreni Vyayana in his book.

9. Shahnara Hussain, Everyday Life in the Pal Empire Dhaka A Shiite Society of Pakistan, 1968. He has done important research in the book. 9.

10. Rathikanta Tripathi, Social and Religious Aspects in Bengal Inscriptions, Calcutta, Firsa Kalam Pa. Ltd., 1987. She has done important research on the social life of Bengal and researched on caste and professional identity, position of women.

11. Brajdulal Chattopadhyay, Suspects of Rural Settlement and Rural Society in Early Medieval India, Calcutta, Calcutta Center for the Study of Social Stains: 1990. In his chapters on Rural Settlements and Rural Society in the Gupta and Post-Gupta Periods, he makes important studies on the relationship between rural society and rural masses and the stratification that existed within village society.

12. Chitrarekha Gupta, The Brahminy of India: A Study Based on Inscriptions, New Delhi, Sandeep, 1983.The Kayasthas in Ancient India, Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi, 1996.

13. Kunal Chakraborty, Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Religious Tradition, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001, paints a picture of early medieval Bengali society with various mythological and various secular texts and the emergence of religious practices.

14. B.M. Morrison, Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal, Delhi, Raitt Publications, 1980, he first developed the 'concept of political cultural sub-regions' in his book, and in Bengal- Pundavardhan-Dinajpur-Rajshahi, Bahura District, North Bengal and later Sylhet in Bangladesh. Comilla District Radha-Bhagirathi River West Bank-Murshidabad, Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia, Burdwan, Hooghly, Howrah.Bengal-Central delta region which includes Dhaka, Bikrampur, Faridpur region. Faridpur places of Samat-Harikal-Meghna River. Noakhali, Comilla etc.

15. Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-17, pp. 57.

16. Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-31, pp. 57.

17. Rashuke Furui, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, J. In. U. University, pp. 291.

18. Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-15, pp. 130-131.

19. Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-15, pp. 135.

20. Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-21, pp. 81-82.

21. Epigraphia Discoveries in East Pakistan, Dinesh Chandra Sarkar, pp. 61-63.

22. Showing this Rudradasa as Kayastha and talking about his role – Professor Chitrarekha Gupta. Kayastha in Ancient India, pp. 701

23. Epigraphia Indica, Vol.-20, pp. 59.
24. Epigraphia Indica - Vol.-15, pp. 135-136.
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33. Indian Epigraphy - Vol.-39, pp. 203-205.
34. Indian Epigraphy- Vol.-23, pp. 155-161.
35. Indian Epigraphy- Vol.-18, pp. 74-86.
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