

# The Evolution of Sagardighi Wetland in Gour Malda from Colonial to Post Colonial Period, West Bengal, India

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The purpose of the paper is to portray regarding the unexplored environmental conveniences of the fort or the capital city *Sagardighi* during period of the Sena dynasty's administrators around the Sagardighi water bodies and to trace on cultural advancement, and it's evolution in all sorts are discuss in the following paragraphs from colonial to post colonial period.

The enormous tank lies about six miles south-west of the English bazaar block at Malda district on the north of road leading to the *Ganga Snan* or bathing *ghat* on the Bhagirathi- the earlier bed of the Ganges at Sadullahpur mouza. Another big tank is situated at Gaur that is called as *Chhato Sagar Dighi*. Total area of *Sagar Dighi* is about 800 yards in wide and 1600 yards in length. Notwithstanding, it is one mile area in length including the total area of its soil - embankment and half mile in width. Besides, a large number of water bodies are existed under the adjoining area of the two destroyed capitals named Gaur and Pandua. Adjoining area in and around of *Sagar Dighi* is incredibly prominent for its historical importance. Here various archaeological sources have been explored by the historians. People of the district could have claimed for their best position for the advancement of diverse architectural progresses among the several states of India. Along with this district would have succeeded for the excavation of such innumerable water bodies beyond the people's expectation. "Between the periods of 12<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, large number water bodies had been dig up by the Hindu and Muslim rulers due to people's welfare, and for the own requirements of that dynasty's administrators ."<sup>1</sup> I had have surveyed huge number of water bodies at Gaur and we have been seen that various size of water bodies are still now existed with full of water. These are using as economic purpose (pici culture) by local people. Such kind of the big tank is arboreal with the mango's garden in early time, nowadays it has more or less cleared and humanized.

## Location

Geologically, this tank is located under the authority of Sadullahpur mouza and the total area is about 1205.19 acres whereas 264.5 acres are water covered land throughout the year. Some other adjoining areas are directly connected with the vast area of *Sagardighi* namely 89 Jodupur mouza, 86 Hazrathpur mouza, 84 Mollapur mouza, 80 Nawda Bazar mouza, 108 Dharampur mouza, 107 Badachak mouza, 106 Arziful badi mouza and 104 Tiyakathi mouza. Local people it is said that, this tank was full of water by 1960.

## History of Sagar Dighi

The site of Gaur lies on a narrow strip of land near the former junction of the old Ganges and Mahananda rivers, and was probably selected as a capital for the convenience of water communication with all parts of country after downfall of former capital, and equally large , capital of Pandua. The ancient city was least 12.5 miles in length from north to south and about two miles in breath from east to west , giving a total area of 25square miles; but enter area was probably inhabited at one time. Dr, Buchanan Hamilton in

1808 described the area of the city as being 20 square miles. The population of the city at the time of its greatest prosperity is said by Faria Y Souza to have been twelve lakhs the site was deserted after he outburst of plague in 1575, and until about 50 years ago, was over grown with dense jungle; but cultivation is now rapidly spreading, and cluster of dwelling houses and new villages are springing up here and there three amid the ruins of the ancient city. <sup>3</sup>

When Sher Saha invaded Bengal in 1539, Gaur was sacked, and after this the wealthy capital began to decay and its buildings were neglected. The climate of Bengal is also singularly unfavorable to preservation of architectural remains: if the roots of a papal or a tamarind tree once find a resting place in any crevice of building, its destruction is inevitable. Moreover, in the rainy session, boats could easily reach the ruins; and boats loads of stones and bricks were removed to rising towns. So, in this way most of the old residential buildings of the cities of Gaur and Pandua were destroyed by men and the natural calamity of the country. <sup>3</sup>

It is said that the high land at *pichhli* near Gangarampur on the south bank of the Kalindri river, where a large area is still covered with bricks fragments and jungle, was the last residence of Raja Lakshmana Sen and his family. A further point to be noticed is that at kamalabari, which is situated a mile to north–west of the Sagar Dighi- the great tank which appears to have been the site of one of earlier Hindus settlement the patron Goddess of Gaur, Gaureswari Devi, was still worshiped in Cunningham’s time and a fair held in her honor in the month of June. “When the river Ganga shifted its course, the southern and western banks of the old river bed were converted into city by erecting substantial’s *bandh* all around. There is no doubt that the Hindu Kings made the first attempt at constructing these *bandh* to protect the town, but Muslim rulers afterwards improved them and made them much stronger.” <sup>4</sup> (**Gaur and Pandua , P. 27**) The wall of stone near the Patalchandi gates seems to be the work of the Muhammadan period and to have been constructed for the protection of the town from the action of the river. “The causeway of the Ghiyash Uddin – the present Rajmahal road is another example of protective work which was necessary owing to the river shifting to the west side of Gaur. The Large tank Sagar Dighi, Piyasbari Dighi etc, were originally deep depression of the river which, when it dried up, seemed lakes or large tank.” <sup>5</sup>

Local people still now believed that huge fragmented historical evidences are buried under this water bodies that should be explored immediately to know the real ancient history of Gaur and Pandua. There are several interpretations regarding the tenure of Sagardighi. Some researchers have been explored that it was excavated by the Ballal Sena. Their point is that, Ballal Bati (Ballal’s palace) has discovered and is situated towards the north portion of this enormous tank. So, it can be easily understood that this grand work was a great accomplishment of Ballal Sen. Moreover; some other historians argued that this work is said to have been commenced in the reign of Lakshman Sen in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Chhatto sagar dighi p. 76). They also strict on their thought and said, this tank sited from four miles distance where the last capital of the Pala Kingdom established. During this period their capital was surrounded by the soil-wall. Perhaps, the capital was ruined by perilous flood of the Ganga. “The tank had six masonry *ghats* or landing place, each 60 yards in breadth, four of which faced each other on east and west bank, while there was also one at each of the north and south ends.” <sup>6</sup> (**Memories of Gaur and Pandua” (A.A.Khan P.75)**). These are now distinguished by the mass of bricks and stones accumulated over their sites and by the more gradual slope of the bank towards water’s edge. K.S.M. Abid Ali Khan has expressed it is now full of weeds, but is still beautiful sight; while the water is pure and sweet up to the present day. <sup>7</sup> ( Memories of Gaur and Pandua. P.76)

### **Archaeological evidences around the Tank:**

The Vast territories of the defunct capital named Gaur and Pandua is located on the shallow tract of the river Bhagirathi. In early day, these tracts were well known as a flood affected area subsequently both defunct capitals were ruined by natural calamity and lackadaisical attitude of the British master was more responsible for its irreparable losses. At present there is a “*Piron-e-Pir*” on the north – south of Sagardighi that is very well-known as an *Ankhi Sirajdulla Usman Samadi* that is very prominent as holly of holiest site for Malda’s people and side by side others. Besides, there are two broken gates and Jhanjonia mosque is found in adjoining area that was the great architecture in the reign of Gaur’s ruler. Kamal Basak rightly expressed that (**Banlar Dighi o J alasay , p.405**) “ He had tripped around the tank before 40 years back and noticed there was various evidences of Hindu’s architectural style especially some well designed Hindu’s stone pillars were standing and few pillars among these fallen on the earth.”<sup>8</sup> He had also watched a lot of images of Hindus deities erected on the wall of the pillars but unfortunately some people had tried to fail to damage the erected deities of those pillars. However, those fragmented historical evidences around this tank have lost in course of new building construction in 1970. So it can be assumed that before the construction of it, there was big Hindu temple. According to Hindu culture it is said that practice of the temple construction in the north–west portion of the water bodies is being continued among the Hindus. Besides, Hindu’s ruler excavated huge tanks to achieve bless of God and well beginning of this practice was inaugurated from the beginning of Muhamadan period. Still now this ritual is introducing. Somewhat, dig up of large deep tank of the east-west earth is the great achievement of Muslim rulers. Said the local people there was big temple before the establishment of Muslim rule.

An enlarged soil-wall constructed in north–west portion of the river Bhagirathi that lies towards the west of the tank. Both Patal Chandi and Dwarbasini is historically popular name because there have been explored huge number of archaeological evidences (Deities of Hindus and Buddhist, currency of gold and copper) of Hindu rituals. Moreover, approximately 10-12 feet rock pillar has been discovered towards the north of the tank, while one side is erected picture of sun and moon is remained another side. At present this place is too famous as Haridham.

### **Aims of the tank:**

Several debates have already risen among the researchers regarding the aims of the tank. So, question may arise why Sagardighi was dig up? Still now we do not get authentic information about the history of excavation of the tank but huge fragmented evidences are there about it. It is said that ancient Hindu ruler dig up huge water bodies due to expansion of irrigation system, drinking purpose etc. for the peoples. Perhaps, it was dig up by rulers of the Sen kingdom to fulfill above mentioned factors. Some scholars believed that this great work is the grand symbol of the wonderful triumph of a ruler of the Sena kingdom. Most probably, a momentum of the magnificent victory was erected on the rock pillar to memorize permanently in future for future generation by the ruler in the middle of 12<sup>th</sup> century. If we explore such edict rock subsequently new history of it will come out. As I said that rulers of Sena’s empire had transferred their capital near the tank. Because, the spill channel of the river Bhagirathi flowed beside the tank. In the middle of 12<sup>th</sup> century, the main flow of the Ganga flowed through the present course of the Bhagirathi. Furthermore, river Mahananda is still flowing from few distance of *Sagardighi*. Therefore it can be said that geological location of the tank given security and safety to the rulers of the kingdom, in that, this tank and its premises was walled up very high by the administrators. Some scattered *gar* or sub-

administrative unit build up towards north and east - south to protect flood and foreign attack. In the early time, few hand-made-embankments constructed around the *Sagardighi* subsequently this district had followed same tradition in colonial Bengal. For that, however, the zone becomes very populated on the basis of *Sagardighi*. Perhaps, Laksman Sen had transferred his capital from Ballal bati to Sagardighi and this place was renamed by him as Laksmanabati. Mr. H.E Stapleton, Director of Public Instruction, West Bengal, stated “from the existence of the *Sagar Dighi* its probable that the headquarters of the Hindu kings who excavated the enormous tank were in its immediate vicinity and it would be only natural if the early Muhammad Governors and king of Bengal continued to use the vicinity of the *Sgar Dighi* as their headquarters.”<sup>9</sup>

In the 30 years back, huge bricks heaps have been noticed around the tank by the foreign travelers. Afterward, a foreigner stated “it was originally the site of the brick fields of Gaur.”<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, this area, named Laksmanabati, was highly populated in the reign of Hind rulers (Sen Era). Needless to say, its vastness is proved that due to the public purpose this big tank was excavated, but spiritual factor cannot be avoid for its exaction. As I said there have been excavated large numbers of deities’ pillars.

It is said that the Ganga River flowed from Laksmanabati west to Dwarbasani in the course of the river Bhagirathi and at that time goods loaded big boats took rest at Dwarbasani for business purpose. After that, those goods were carried by the small boats through the spill cannels reached ultimately in the north city of *Sagar Dighi*. Kamal Basak has rightly expressed “Estuaries route direction side by side a earlier bridge or *sankho* have been seen by him in the recent years back.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, it is proved that under the rule of Senas’ supremacy, a demanding business centre formed in surroundings the *SagarDighi*. However, the famous writer, Abid Ali kahan also said, “When the river Ganga flowed near the capital city Gaur where large boats carrying goods from distance places used to come to the city from which there was also an export trade. The high land of north Sagar dighi is supposed to have been the commercial town. It was protected on the east by an embankment connecting the Durbashini gate with the Phulwari gate.”<sup>12</sup> By which goods were carried to interior of the old city by small boats along a canal. Embankments, communicating with the new course of the Ganga, run southwards for 20 -25 miles from the present site of English bazaar. So, it can be mentioned that, this tank was dig up on the basis of multiple purpose.

Subsequently, Sena kingdom declined from Laksmanabati with the development of Muslim power. In course of Muslim rule Gaur becomes a popular capital. Unfortunately, during the colonial period Sagar Dighi remarked as abandoned area, after end of Muslim rule Gaur also collapsed same due to colonial ignorance. After a long period, bricks heaps of the two ruined capitals named Laksmanabati and Gaur are used by the local people for their construction. I had also visited several villages across Gaur and noticed that a lot of houses have been constructed by the bricks of ancient buildings. “ When vast adjoining area of the two ruined capitals were navigable, of which, tiny boats entered easily and carried out huge bricks and transferred them to the various rising cities like Malda, Murshidabad, Rajmahal, Hooghly and Calcutta.”<sup>13</sup> According to Grant’s (Vth Report, P. 285) The *Nizamal Daftar* of Murshidabad received Rs. 8000 annually from the local zamindar as fees for the privilege of demolishing the ruins and stripping from them their highly prized enameled bricks basalt stones (Sang- i- Musa). Early in the nineteenth century many carved stone, found in the ruined city of Gaur, are said to have become the prey of the Calcutta undertakers and others for monumental purpose. Since 1889 the practice of demolishing the ruined building of Gaur has been stopped by Government. Furthermore, Kazi Sahidul Haque and Kasem Bhuina (ed. Gaur O Panduar Smritikatha, 1987, P. 412) were expressed same view in their text, In the

reign of Bengal nawbab, a Kimatkisthagar department was formed by Nizam, ruler of Bengal, who given eight thousand rupees honoriam to the local chieftain due to damage of Gaur citadel. Sadly, honorees damaged it drastically.

From long time this tank treated as unhealthy and undeveloped place. Water of the tank was not drinkable in terms of unhygienic, not usable in terms of irrigation and attack of crocodiles. W.W. Hunter mentioned “All the suffering summer of 1770 the people went on dying, the husbandmen; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed –grain; they sold their sons and daughters, till at length no buyer of children could be found.; they eat the leaves of trees and grass of the field; and in June 1770 the resident at the Durbar affirmed that the living were feeding on the dead”<sup>14</sup>

### **Environment and Economic Valuation:**

Now we shall consider the historical perspective of the big tank. About the geographical location and types of large deep tank is particularizes here. Local people said that, this tank was full of water by 1960. After few years, this tank was splitting up by Fisheries department of West Bengal due to the development of pici culture and induced breeding. There a lot of soil embankments have been constructed by co-operative society for that. A government office has constructed on the south embankment of the tank due to proper management of pici culture and induced breeding. People in surroundings water bodies are directly depended on the multiple services of it like irrigation, vegetables sale, sale of lotus leafs and domestic purpose. Livelihood of the lower class people in surroundings water bodies is not derived without benefits of tank. Alternative source of income of it has been enjoying by local people from generation to generation .Today, it has become as a very popular picnic place which has increased the scope of employability among the people. Therefore, it can be said that, this tank plays important role in maintaining source of income of the marginal people. Moreover, it has been providing a good habitation of biodiversity from the beginning of early medieval period.

After the independence of India, this area was full of jungle and bushes were said by local people. This tank becomes in good physical shaped to innumerable snake species, bird’s species and other creatures. This is an example given below to understand about decay of the great tank before 60-65 years back. When the peoples crossed the inaccessible place due to cremation (*Sagardighi*), at that time, they kept many types of weapons to save themselves from attackers. For that inaccessibility, a lot of people were attacked by assailant in the jungle of the tank. Such oral history is heard from the aged persons.

The artificial breeding of fishes and pisciculture are available here at large. A day of week Fishes collected from the lake, then, fishermen have to sell them against the price determined by the fisheries department. In spite of these facilities, the lake suffers an infrastructural set back since long. There is no electric light around the lake, though electric poles are available. Only eight posts of night-guards are lying vacant. The police camp that was deployed there has already been withdrawn. The staff quarters are also in a ram shackled condition. *Sagardighi* severely fallen to the devastating flood in 1998. The lake that spans over 1000 hectors was badly affected by the flood water and mud. The state fisheries minister assured to restore of it. But concerned minister of the fisheries department has visited to *Sagardighi* from several times. He also planned to promote the lake as a popular tourist venue. However, there has been no visible development of infrastructure of the lake yet. The staff quarters are also in a dilapidated condition. The Sabhadhipati of Malda Zilla Parishad (MZP) Mrs Sabina Yeasmin also conceded the fragile infrastructure of *Sagardighi*. Passing the buck to the fisheries department, Mrs Yeasmin alleged: “It is the indifference

of the fisheries department that has been responsible for poor infrastructure of *Sagardighi*.” “If boating and fishing in the lake against a fee can be made available in *Sagardighi* and its surrounding areas, the place would easily be elevated into a centre of attraction for the tourists beside generating employment for local youths, “she added. In addition she informed that the tourism minister of the state Mr Manab Mukherjee had been invited to visit the spot to explore its worth for tourism. The assistant director of the fisheries department Mr Mafijur Rahaman said: We have already submitted a report to the minister regarding the development of the infrastructure of *Sagardighi*.

Thus, it can be concluded that the natural wetland *Sagardighi*'s multiple services are intricately linked up with the Life and livelihood of the vulnerable people in surroundings bil. And archeological progress of the site is associated with the fortunes of Malda as well as the state of West Bengal since time immemorial. So, the relationship between wetland and men has been old and friendly. In the early historical ages, the men of Bengal were too much advanced in navigation and they excelled in it. Both literary as well as inscriptional evidences bear ample testimony to it. On the basis of early- medieval archeological sources, and literary sources are proved that the physical topography of the tank or the old course of the river Ganga flowed beside the capital city of the Sena dynasty in Malda district. At present time that has been degrading drastically. Degradation of the tank has brought changes pessimistically on economic sustainability, ecology and natural calamity. In early time it was popular city but it was ruined with the effect of climate, and lackadaisical outlook of the later administrator towards the environmental changes are more or less responsible for such destruction. At present it remained as defunct water bodies. Therefore, it should be preserved and pre-cautioned due to restoration of the ecological balance, sustainable development and cultural sustainability that has been flourished in the twelve century; side by side tourism should be developed due to extension of employment, and experience of history, and cultural development of the Early- medieval history should be enhanced for all the people in order to know the environmental perspective of that period. Therefore, we have to take experience of history for our development for the present and future generation in future time across the country.

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