

Emergence of Temple Centered Society in Early Bihar: *Mundesvari* Inscription a Case in Point

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In the early medieval economic and social circumstances religious centers developed in Bihar, which further led to the construction of temples by the rulers as well as by the locally powerful communities. It must be noted that these temples were not as gigantic or of great artistic value either as compared to the Buddhist monasteries of contemporary Bihar. The reason behind this was probably the fact that the Buddhist monasteries were built by the state or supported directly by them as well as patronized by the rich business community. On the contrary, few of the Brahmanical structures were getting these advantages and they were having support of the local followers. From the various excavation and exploration reports by archaeologists, temple structures of this period have been reported very often. But the ancient historiography of Bihar obsessed with the Buddhist, Jaina and other heterodox monuments, has tended to just ignore it. The question why such a large number of temples came up during this period, which is spread over the whole of modern Bihar, particularly near the important Buddhist sites, was never posed. Moreover, the question why the Pala rulers who were known for their Buddhist inclination later extended critical support to Brahmans has also remained unaddressed.

Keyword: trade, urbanisation, Agrarian, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Monestaries

Introduction

Post Mauryan historiography of ancient India suggests two important factors: (1) foreign invasions; and (2) shift of the political and cultural centre from the lower Ganga valley to central India as well as upper Ganga valley. This had affected the ancient glory of Pataliputra and its people a lot. Its whole gamut of economic as well as political dominance over other parts of the country started declining from the period of the 2nd century B. C. onwards. Loss of its position as epi-centre for political activities denied the mercantile community of Patliputra advantages which these people had enjoyed for not less than 4-5 centuries. State patronage for a long period made the business community of Patliputra more dependent on state power rather than trade or business equations. The people of Magadh were having one more advantage that was Patliputra's geographical location. Being situated on the bank of the Ganga and connected with the "Uttarapatha", "Dakshinapath" was also very helpful for trading activities. However, the change of political fortune left its impact on this region.

Politico-Economic Conditions

As a consequence of the loss of patronage from state the mercantile communities of Bihar were less prepared

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to face stiff challenges posed by the mercantile communities from other regions. In the post-Mauryan period, there are stray references about traders of Magadh trading with the people of Banaras (Müller, 1879-1910, Vol. 35, p. 2). In *Milinda-panho*, there are references that traders from Magadh were carrying on business in far away Sialkot (Müller, 1879-1910, Vol. 35, p. 244); but the volume of the trade started decreasing as compared to the earlier period. Faded references for trade are themselves indicative of the deterioration. The Kusana¹ two gold coins and few copper coins from two or three places supplement the idea. The situation further deteriorated during the pre-Gupta era. Frequent foreign invasions and decline in the Indo-Roman trade left the overall economic condition in a very miserable state. Political instability as well as economic insignificance seems to have compelled the people of Bihar to concentrate more on rural areas. The trade situation was not conducive as compared to the agrarian economy, which was yielding good results. The main reason for development in the field of agriculture was probably the fertility of the soil and the infrastructure provided by the Mauryan Empire. The horizontal expansion of rural settlements continued during the Sunga and Kanva rules. Political unrest and upheavals throughout the period were causing impediments for any sustained mercantile activity in this region. In these circumstances, Brahmanical religious reform movements and the reactions against the dominant Buddhist ideas also flourished (Sinha, 1974, p. 784). Probably this was not confined to state politics only, but also spread among the masses and the aggressive form of Brahmanism found its route. Performance of *yajnas* (sacrifices) by the rulers (Sinha, 1974, p. 784) was one of the obvious markers of the situation.

The dynastic history of Bihar from the post-Sunga period until the rise of the Guptas in early 4th century A. D. is undocumented and therefore very sketchy. After the establishment of the Gupta Empire, the economic condition of Bihar does not seem to have changed. The economy of Bihar during the Guptas was also predominantly rural. Land became the main source of sustenance. Two spurious plates of Samudra Gupta suggested that peasants and artisans were confined to their respective villages so that their self-sufficient economy might not be disturbed (Archaeological Survey of India, 1939-1940, 1940-1948, No. 9, 1. 9, C II, iii, No. 60, II. pp. 12-14).

Socio-religious Conditions

In this Politico-economic situation, people were left with sufficient surplus time for intellectual as well as religious activities. The horizon of Buddhists was widened by the philosophical ideas of Aryadeva, Vasubandhu, Buddhaghosa and Dinnaga. Inscriptions and seals found in various places of Bihar testify to the phenomenal growth of *Vaisnavism*, *Saktism* and *Saivism* during the Gupta age. In the period under survey, there was also a restatement of the values of life and affirmation of the *Puranic* values, which never denied the authority of the Vedas and held the *Sruti* as the infallible source of religion. An outcome of the greater intellectual activity was the controversies between the rival religious movements and philosophical schools (Bodh Gaya Inscription of Mahanaman, yr 269/588-89 A. D., CII, III, pp. 276-277). Steps taken by the Gupta Kings strengthened the growth and spread of Brahmanical religion among the masses (The Bihar Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta). Inscriptions of the Gupta period suggest that people of Bihar during this age were well acquainted with *Vedic* and *Puranic* myths. The powers and qualities of the king have been expressed through *Puranic* analogies. In one of the inscriptions Samudra Gupta has been described as equal to the Gods Dhanda, Varuna, Indra and Antaka and who was the very axe of the God Krtanta (Archaeological Survey of India, 1981, pp. 49, 51). The inscriptions of

¹ Two later Kusana gold coins were found at Patliputra during 1912-1913, Ratan Tata excavation was kept in Patna Museum, but unfortunately it was stolen in a later period. Their stock Nos. are 2091 and 2092 respectively.

the Maukharis who ruled in the Gaya region in the first half of the 6th century A. D. frequently alluded to the *Puranic* deities (Archaeological Survey of India, 1981, pp. 49, 51). The personal religion of Gupta rulers i.e., Budha Gupta, Narasimha Gupta, Kumara Gupta III and Vinaya Gupta whose royal seals have been found at Nalanda (Archaeological Survey of India, 1942, No. 66, pp. 64-67), must have helped to increase the influence of *Vaisnavism* in Bihar. The Basarh seal proves the popularity of *Vaisnavism* in North Bihar (Archaeological Survey of India, 1903-1904, pp. 110-111, Seal No. 31). Popular during the period was the *Avatara* concept of *Vaisnavism* (Archaeological Survey of India, 1913-1914, pp. 126, 133, Seal Nos. 54, 191). This *Avataravada* may be taken as an example of religious conflict and accommodation, because believers in this theory were trying to incorporate Buddha into their own faith. Whether it was the Buddhist *Dharma chakra* or the debate over the worship of the footprint of the deity, the believers of Brahmanical religion have their argument that Buddhism from *Vaisnavism* adopted these forms of worship. The practice of worshiping foot print first started with the worship of the foot print of Vishnu at Vishnupada temple of Gaya since the 4th century A. D (Sircar, 1956, Vol. 4, p. 130). Not only *Vaisnavism* but other branches of Brahmanical religion were equally popular in contemporary Bihar. Aniconic and iconic forms and representations of Siva have been found in a number of places like Basarh, Bhagalpur, Nalanda and Gaya. Other than, these *Saktism* are known from the inscriptions and images in Barabar hills. There are clear evidences for Sun worship from various places i.e., two seals from Basarh (Archaeological Survey of India, 1903-1904, No. 9, pl. XI ; 1913-1914, No. 607, p. 149), image of Surya from Bahraini², etc.. The existence of the votaries of the Sun in Gaya, Shahabed and Bhagalpur, a temple of the Sun at Deo-Barunanak and Nalanda are enough to prove the popularity of Sun God among the masses.

Besides these forms of worship by the common people, the idea of *Bhakti* was also prevalent among them. Reference to the veneration of the foot-prints of Vishnu and Siva at Gaya, Basarh and Baiskaran are available. Ridge from Baiskaran, a place near Bhagalpur, showed the influence of the doctrine of *Bhakti*. The cult of *Bhakti* meant that the universe was a fraction of God and human beings should earn His grace by complete surrender (*Bhagvatgita*, Vol. 10, p. 42). References opposing this concept are also available during this period as Buddhist scholars like Aryadeva, Bhavaviveka and Chandrakirti who flourished in Bihar during the Gupta age have criticized the Sankhya, Vaisesika and Mimamsa schools (Bhattacharya, 1913, p. 11). Hsuan Tsang's account reveals that Brahmanical temples were more numerous in Vrji (Vaisali) and Kajangala (Rajmahal) areas (Watters, 1996, Vol. II, pp. 63, 81, 178, 183). He found nearly 50 Buddhist monasteries as compared to some tens of temples in Magadh (Watters, 1996, Vol. II, pp. 86-87). From these two references by Hsuan Tsang, it is clear that temple construction in Bihar started in or before Gupta period. Hsuan-Tsang's account could be taken as attestation for the idea of sectarian rivalry between the followers of these two popular religions of the period. Involvement of state in this religious rivalry is not found. Rather being believers of the Brahmanical, faith Sunga rulers were responsible for the erection of railings at Sanchi and Gupta rulers donated lands to the Nalanda Monastery. It was the common people and intellectuals who were responsible for the competitiveness although it did not give place to intolerance.

Emergence of Feudal Socio-religious Conditions

Further in the post-Gupta era urban economy deteriorated, trade and currency network were marginalized in the newly emerging structure of society. In this period we have enough evidence to prove the emergence of feudalism. Land grants were gifted to the Brahmans and many restrictions were imposed on the peasantry (Thakur,

² Found by Prof. R. K. Choudhury, presently the image is kept in G. D. College, Begusarai Museum.

1989, p. 87). We have definitive evidence of extensive royal grants to Nalanda monastic establishment both by the later kings of the Gupta dynasty and Harsha³. It is also claimed that the later Gupta King, Damodara Gupta who ruled in the 6th century A. D., created 100 *agraharas* (Fleet, 1888, CII, Vol. III, no. 42, 11. 8-10). Similarly, a prosperous village was given to Goddess Bhavani (Fleet, 1888, CII, Vol. III, no. 501.9), another village was granted to some priests (Fleet, 1888, CII, Vol. III, No. 46, 11, pp.6-7). The number of land grants apparently proliferated by the end of the 8th century A. D. due to the extension of Pala rule in Bihar. Many villages were granted according to the *Bhumichidranayaya*, which has been suggested as tenure of bringing virgin land under cultivation (Sharma, 1974, CHB, Vol. I. Pt. II, p. 370). The overall pattern of agrarian economy did affect the nature of contemporary urban economy as well. The existence of towns in early medieval Bihar seems to have been well rooted in the contemporary milieu. Towns being a super structural manifestation of the techno-economic base underwent a decisive transformation in their prime features, a development that was in consonance with the new economic pattern. Earlier urban centers of Bihar declined or disappeared by the beginning of the 7th century A. D.. Patliputra started losing its importance during the Gupta period (Altekar and Mishra, 1951-1955, p. 11) primarily due to its disassociation from mercantile activities (Thakur, 1981, p. 261). The new towns that emerged during the period had a distinctive nature compared to earlier urban centres. These transformed towns now revolved round two functions: political and religio-educational. An attempt to identify such centers in different parts of Bihar underlines either their ecclesiastical or politico-administrative basis, they were either religion centered or fortified administrative nuclei (Kumar, 2001, p. 17).

Trade primarily due to the new social context was sought to be localized, a development well-articulated with the popularity of *hattas* (local market). They were periodical in nature and near the religious centers. An inscription on a bronze image from Nalanda refers to *Devapaladevahatta* near Nalanda and another seal from Nalanda refers to Sri Nalanda Sri *Dharmahatta*. An inscription on the image of Avalokitesvara found in the Sun temple at Bargaon near Nalanda refers to another *hatta* named *Talahatta* (Tal is the region where Nalanda is situated) in Nalanda (Kumar, 2001, p. 51).

Beginning of Temple Constructions in Bihar

In these economic and social circumstances religious centers developed, which further led to the construction of temples by the rulers as well as by the locally powerful communities. It must be noted that these temples were not as gigantic or of great artistic value either as compared to the Buddhist monasteries of contemporary Bihar. The reason behind this was probably the fact that the Buddhist monasteries were built by the state or supported directly by them as well as patronized by the rich business community. On the contrary, few of the Brahmanical structures were getting these advantages and they were having support of the local followers. From the various excavation and exploration reports by archaeologists, temple structures of this period have been reported very often. However, the ancient historiography of Bihar obsessed with the Buddhist, Jaina and other heterodox monuments, has tended to just ignore it. The question why such a large number of temples came up during this period which is spread over the whole of modern Bihar, particularly near the important Buddhist sites, was never posed. Moreover, the question why the Pala rulers who were known for their Buddhist inclination later extended critical support to Brahmanism has also remained unaddressed.

As far as the temples are concerned they were not concentrated in one pocket of Bihar, but spread over a

³ In the first half of the 7th century A.D., the monastery of Nalanda was maintained by the revenue of about 100 villages (Beal, 1906, p. 112). While in the second half of the same century this number rose to 200 (Takakusu, 1998, p. 65).

wide area starting from South Deo-temple at Aurangabad, Vishnupada temple at Gaya, Apshad near Nawada, Sun temple of Bargaon, near Nalanda, temple of Siva and Vishnu at Valgudar, Deo-Barunarak near Ara, Bhagirath at Munger, and Mundesvari temple of Rohtas to Vatesvarasthana near Patharaghata, adjacent to Vikramsila. The situation in North Bihar seems to be not different from the South. Many temple structures are reported i.e., Dumra, Akaur, Ucchaitha, Kopagarh, Kapilesvara, Mangrauni Balirajgarh, Andhra Thari and Rajnagar in Madhubani and Darbhanga districts⁴. Pandavgarh⁵ in Samastipur, Naulagarh and Jaimangalagarh⁶ in Begusarai district and Bargaon in Saharsa district provide evidence for temples.

The above-mentioned temples of early medieval Bihar were not constructed only in this period, but the construction activities started from the Gupta period itself (Watters, 1996, Vol. II, pp. 86-87). Constitution of the fief or the free holdings as private domains of governmental jurisdiction and autonomous units of surplus production took place by the end of 6th century A. D.. In the religious sector, these developments seemed to motivate the substitution of old sacrificial liturgy by the temple based sectarian units. The construction activities continued on a large scale during the post-Gupta period and subsequently this resulted in *Tirthayatras*. The people of Bihar during the early medieval period were quite familiar with this idea. Particularly Gaya and Rajgriha developed as centers for *tirtha* as early as the 4th century A. D., people started going to these places for *Sraddha* (Pathak, 1978). References regarding local markets near these temples are examples of economic activities being carried out at these places. The growing importance of *Tirthayatras* succeeded to some extent in establishing a worthwhile contact between the other centers of the contemporary period. Religious centers were well connected to each other by the land and river routes. Majority of these centers were situated on the ancient trade routes of Bihar i.e., Mithila-Rajgriha, Mithila-Kapilavastu, Mithila-Champa, Mithila-Tamralipti, Patliputra-Champa, Rajgriha-Gaya and Patliputra-Gaya. A survey of early medieval temples of Bihar thus reflects the significant changes in the social structure. Society became rural and the surplus from the agrarian economy was invested in religious activities because the contemporary economic structure was not attracting investments. In the agrarian structure, the big land-holding class had developed and possibly these were the people, influenced by *Puranic* ideology and his *Bhakti* cult, who were responsible for the construction of temples in various regions of Bihar. The rulers and the feudal lords also immensely contributed in this process.

Temple Construction at Mundesvari

Construction of temple at Mundesvari hills near Bhabhua in Bihar is the best example in this regard. The inscription found at the temple site attests construction of temple at this place in early period (Jha, 2010, Vol. 74). R. D. Banerjee and N. G. Basak have deciphered inscription found from this temple complex (Jha, 2010, Vol. 74), but the conclusions regarding the dates given by these two historians are different. R. D. Banerjee placed this inscription in the 17th century and N. G. Majumdar had the opinion that date of this inscription would be the 5th century A. D.. Both the scholars have given their opinions primarily based on the paleographic analysis of this inscription. The controversy regarding the date has given scope for further analysis of this inscription.

First of all paleographic and stylistic analysis of the letters of Bramhi used in this inscription i.e., *gha, ka, ma, ya, va (matra on va), ta, sa, re, dva, me* etc. is identical with the letters used in Gupta period Bramhi script, which has been used widely in the Gupta inscriptions.

⁴ Survey was done by Dr. D. K. Chakrabarti and the Directorate of Archaeology, Bihar in 1991.

⁵ Excavation by KPJRI (2001).

⁶ As reported by Prof. R. K. Choudhary.

Comparative Figures of Gupta and Post-Gupta Brahmi Letters (See Figures 1, 2, 3)

When we compare the letters used in the *Mundesvari* inscription with this figure where the detail of stylistic changes of Bramhi inscription over the period is provided, matter becomes clear that letter style of *Mundesvari* inscription is very much similar to the letters used during the Gupta period.

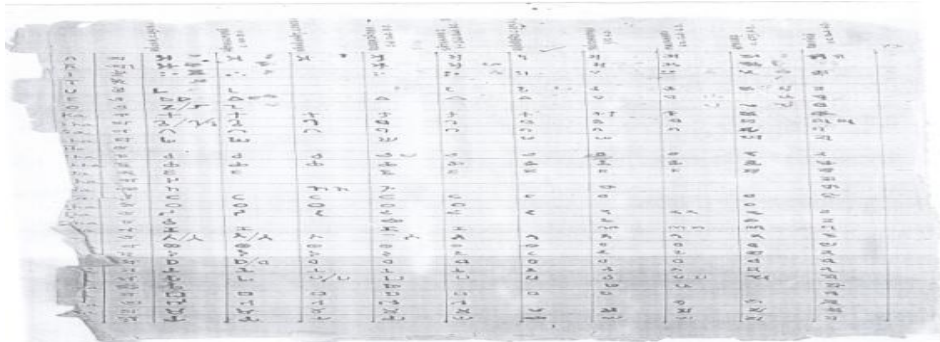


Figure 1 Gupta Brahmi

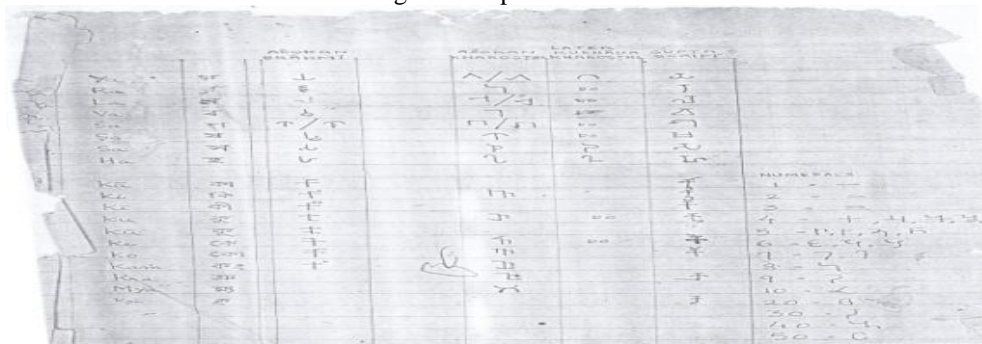


Figure 2 Later Gupta Brahmi

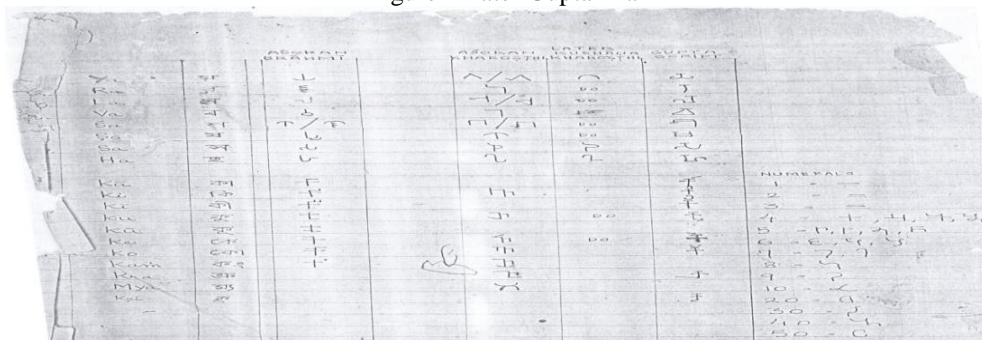


Figure 3a

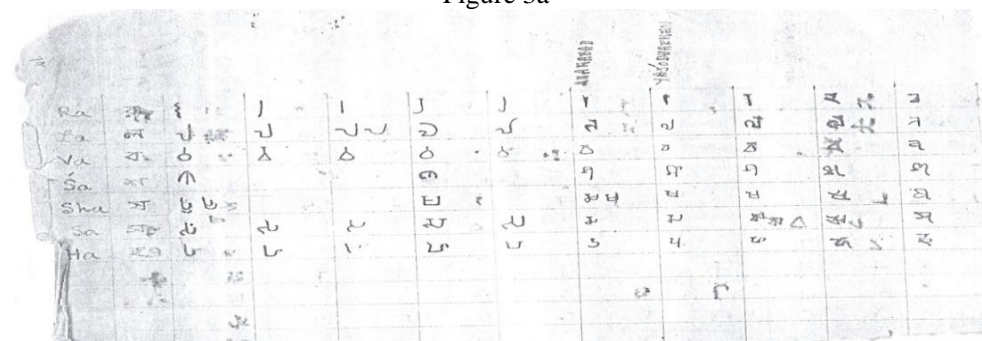


Figure 3b

Figure 3 Comparative figures of Gupta and Post Gupta Brahmi

Another significant conclusion about the date of this inscription is the names of official mentioned in this inscription. Officials like, *Mahapratihar* (Sircar, 1966, p. 358), *Mahasamanta* (Sircar, 1966, p. 358), and *Dandanayaka* (Sircar, 1966, p. 358) were certainly the government officials during Gupta Empire. During Gupta period, *Mahasamanta* was feudatory ruler and we should not confuse that feudatory rulers were sovereign rulers during this period, rather they were in charge of a province under the state structure, another officer *Mahapratihar* was superintendent of the troops in charge of the defense of the gates of palace, capital and probably also the kings body guards. Similarly, officer *Dandanayaka* was in charge of revenue collection and in some inscription we get reference of *Dandanayaka* called *Samantas*.

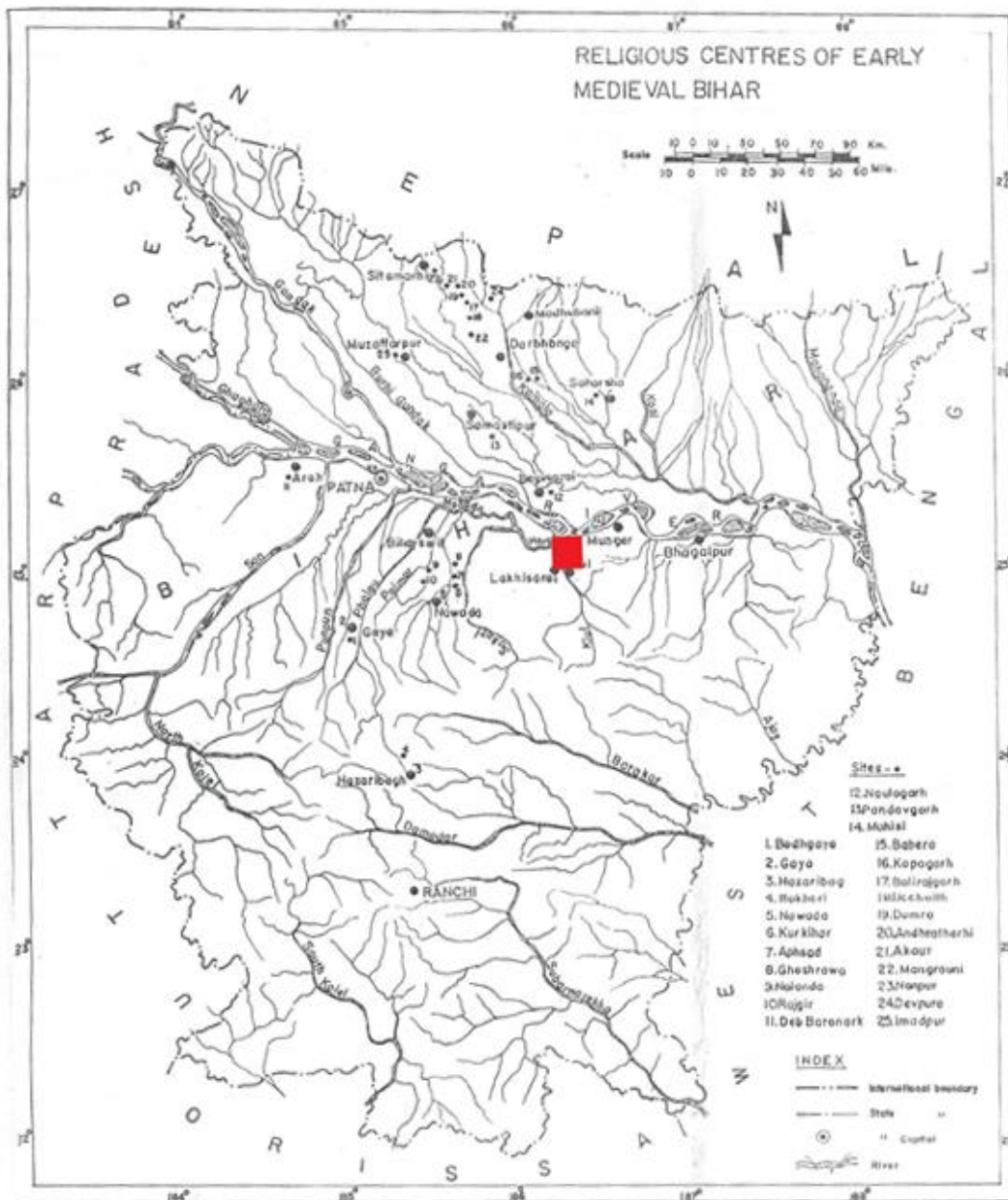


Figure 4. Map of Existence of Religious Centres in Gupta and post-Gupta Bihar
 (This map highlights the existence of religious centres of Bihar)

There is significant information about the historicity of this temple complex which has been provided by J. S. Roy. Author has collected a seal with inscription incised on it from Mundesvari hills, which suggests us existence of a stupa, which was constructed by Ceylonese king Dutthagamani in the 1st century. B. C. (Roy, 2004, pp. 26-27). This shows that this place was very important in early period. Probably situation of this site was on the ancient Ayodhya-Tamralipti trade route. There are similar religious centres situated on this ancient route, Itakhori is one of the examples in Hazaribagh District (see Figure 4). Coexistence of Buddhist and Brahmanical religious centre is very common feature in this part of the country. Here we also get evidence of existence of Buddhist as well as Brahmanical monuments at the same place. This trend probably started by Sunga has continued until the late part of early medieval period. Particularly in Bihar, we have several examples such as Kurkihar, Ghosrama, Nalanda, Lakhisarai, etc..

The last line of the inscription is very interesting where Yudhistira has been assigned the duty of maintaining the temple grants. Certainly, Yudhistira was not the part of administration and if we consider him as landholder (Jha, 2010, Vol. 74), this would be evidence for the material support of Brahmanical temples during this period in eastern India was from landed magnets of nearby region. This will strengthen the hypothesis that probably temple construction activities were the result of pressure from within the existing society, instead of imposition by the rulers for their legitimization.

Conclusions

Therefore, after interpreting the socio-economic, political and religious character of this part of Indian subcontinent, it gives us a clear picture of emergence of construction of Brahmanical temples. These temples were not only constructed due to the religious regions. There were socio-economic and political regions equally responsible for the emergence. The inscription found at Mundesvari temple and its paleographic analysis has further cleared the picture. Paleographic similarity and historical analysis of this inscription we can safely place in post-Gupta period, i.e., 7th-8th century A. D., and for adjact dating and other aspects of historical interpretation, a systematic survey is essential. The early medieval phase of Indian history has been the subject of intense study and research in recent years. However, in these studies, eastern India, more specifically the Bihar region, has received less attention mainly because, the region, in comparison to the peninsular India of the corresponding period, suffers from a relative paucity of source material. The material remains found in the Mundesvari temple, amply indicating that the situation is not that hopeless and it is possible to obtain a more comprehensive picture if the area is studied thoroughly and immediate exploration and excavation are carried out by competent agencies in at least a few important sites. If and when this is done, the region is bound to provide clues to resolve many vital issues in early medieval historiography of Bihar.

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