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Reconstructing Domestic Architecture in Ancient Pundranagar: An Ethno-Archaeological Hypothesis Based on Pāla Period Evidence

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Abstract

This paper investigates the domestic architecture of ancient Pundranagar through an ethno-archaeological reinterpretation of *existing archaeological excavation data* rather than new field excavation. Drawing on structural remains, material findings, and comparative vernacular traditions of northern Bengal, the study constructs a hypothesis on dwelling patterns during the Pāla period. While previous scholarship has largely focused on fortifications, monuments, and administrative structures, residential architecture remains poorly documented due to fragmentary evidence and limited household artifacts. By synthesizing secondary excavation data from the 1928–31 ASI investigations and the 1990s France–Bangladesh joint excavations, alongside living traditions of mud-and-brick construction, this paper proposes a more nuanced understanding of domestic spaces. The study argues that ordinary dwellings likely relied predominantly on unburnt clay walls and mixed-material construction, while burnt brick masonry was restricted to elite households and institutional structures. Roofing systems, semi-open porticos, and courtyard-based layouts are interpreted through both archaeological traces and continuing regional practices. This interdisciplinary approach offers a refined hypothesis of the socio-spatial fabric of Pundranagar and contributes to the broader discourse on ancient urbanism in Bengal.

Key words: Ancient dwelling, Ethno-Archaeology, Conjectural restoration, course of action, Ancient Urbanism.

1. Introduction

Pundranagar, one of the earliest known urban centers in Bengal, holds a pivotal place in the history of South Asian urbanism. Identified with Mahasthangarh, it is believed to have been a thriving city from as early as the 4th century BCE, serving as an administrative and cultural hub under various dynasties, including the Mauryan, Guptas, and Palas.[1] The archaeological significance of Pundranagar lies not only in its fortified layout and monumental structures but also in its domestic architecture,

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1 Akhtaruzzaman Ahmed, *Urbanism in Early Bengal*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2020.

which provides crucial insights into the societal, cultural, and environmental contexts that shaped its settlement patterns.

The study of ancient dwellings is essential in understanding how people lived, how urban spaces were organized, and how architectural responses were shaped by geography and climate. Domestic structures, unlike monumental buildings, reflect the daily lives of people, their social stratification, economic conditions, and cultural practices.[2] However, while much attention has been given to the defensive walls, religious monuments, and administrative complexes of ancient Pundranagar, limited research has focused on residential spaces and their spatial organization. This study aims to fill that gap by hypothesizing the characteristics of ancient dwellings in Pundranagar, based on available archaeological evidence, historical texts, and architectural analysis.

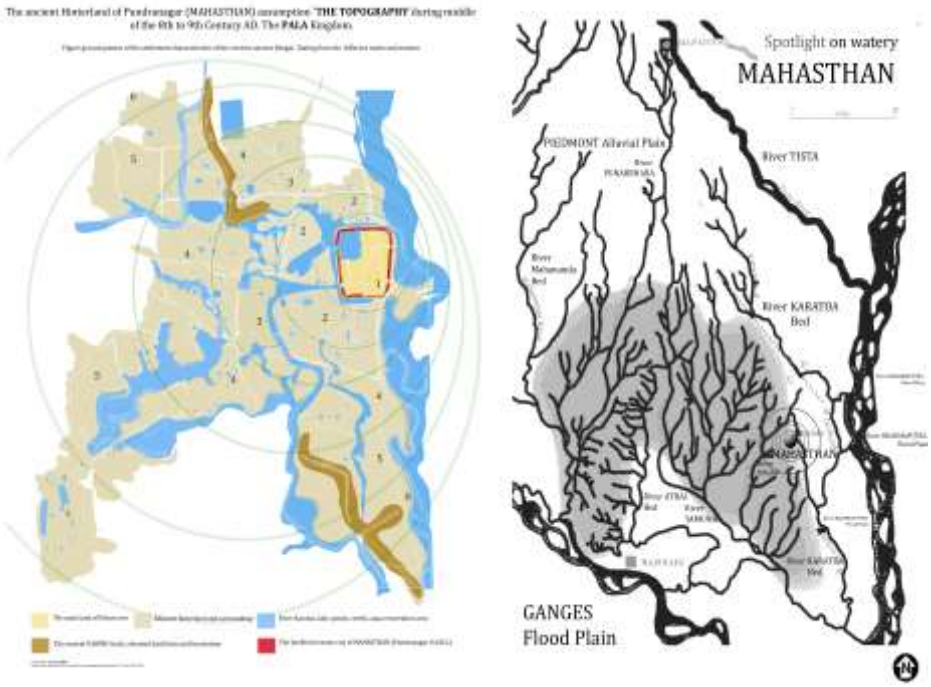

Fig. 1. Watery location and placement of ancient topography of Pundranagar, 8th -9th Century AD

2 Mahbubur Rahman Hasan, "Daily Life in Ancient Bengal: Domestic Spaces and Social Patterns", *Journal of Bengal Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2019), pp. 115–130

Archaeological excavations at Pundranagar have uncovered brick-built structures, terracotta plaques, and household artifacts, which provide insight into the residential life of the city's inhabitants.[3] Additionally, references to Pundranagar in early literary sources such as the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea and Chinese traveler accounts suggest a sophisticated urban settlement with planned housing and advanced water management systems.[4] By integrating this textual and material evidence, the study reconstructs a plausible model of ancient domestic architecture in Pundranagar.

The city flourished from the early historic period onward, serving as an administrative and cultural hub under several dynasties, including the Mauryas, Guptas, and Pālas. Although extensive research has been conducted on the fortified walls, religious monuments, and administrative complexes, domestic architecture remains understudied.

This research shifts the focus toward the everyday architecture of Pundranagar, using secondary excavation data and ethno-archaeological comparison rather than new field excavation. Such an approach allows a more grounded interpretation of ancient dwelling forms despite limited household artifacts.

2. Objective of the Research

The objectives of this research are designed to clarify the interpretive framework of the study and outline the analytical pathways through which domestic architecture in ancient Pundranagar is reconstructed. These objectives collectively support an ethno-archaeological approach that integrates excavation data, material interpretation, and comparative vernacular traditions.

Objective 1 (Spatial Reconstruction): To reconstruct the spatial organization and domestic morphology of Pundranagar using secondary excavation reports and ethno-archaeological analogies, allowing for a plausible arrangement of dwelling clusters, pathways, and settlement hierarchy.

Objective 2 (Construction Methods): To analyze construction techniques with particular emphasis on the likelihood that unburnt clay walls predominated in ordinary dwellings, while burnt-brick masonry appeared selectively among elite or institutional structures.

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3 Enamul Haque Rahman, *Archaeological Investigations at Mahasthangarh*, Rajshahi: University of Rajshahi Press, 2017

4 Nasreen Chowdhury, "Foreign Accounts of Ancient Bengal", *South Asian Historical Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2016), pp 44–59

Objective 3 (Environmental & Cultural Factors): To examine how climatic conditions, environmental constraints, and cultural practices shaped the architectural character and functional organization of Pāla-period domestic spaces.

Objective 4 (Comparative Vernacular Analysis): To compare archaeological findings with extant vernacular house forms in northern Bengal, generating cross-temporal parallels that strengthen hypothetical reconstructions.

***Objective 5 (Regional Contextualization*)**: To situate the domestic architecture of Pundranagar within broader regional and early medieval urban patterns, identifying similarities and divergences with other contemporary South Asian settlements.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this research is structured to bridge archaeological datasets with ethnographic analogies, allowing for a multidimensional reconstruction of domestic architecture in ancient Pundranagar. Since household-level archaeological evidence is often fragmented, the methodological framework integrates secondary excavation reports, vernacular architectural traditions, material interpretation, and geospatial tools to formulate a coherent and scientifically grounded hypothesis.

This study adopts a hybrid methodology combining archaeological interpretation, comparative architecture, geospatial analysis, and ethno-archaeological inquiry.

3.1 Archaeological Data Review

This study does not involve primary excavation. Instead, it analyzes previously published excavation reports including those of K.N. Dikshit (1928–31) and the France–Bangladesh Joint Mission (1993–99) as secondary datasets. Structural interpretations thus remain inferential and grounded in available documentation.

3.2 Ethno-Archaeology

Living traditions of mud-based construction in northern Bengal offer a vital comparative lens, providing analogies for reconstructing incomplete architectural evidence.

3.3 Material Interpretation

Given the scarcity of domestic brick debris in several excavation trenches, the possibility that unburnt clay walls predominated in dwellings is incorporated into the hypothesis as a central assumption.

3.4 Geospatial and Architectural Reconstruction

GIS mapping, site plans, and hypothetical sketches visualize spatial organization, roofing systems, and settlement patterns based on excavation-derived layouts.

4. The Assumption and Hypothesis

The assumptions and hypothesis of this research acknowledge the interpretive nature of reconstructing domestic architecture in ancient Pundranagar. As highlighted by the reviewer, the study relies on secondary excavation data, ethnographic parallels, and regional vernacular knowledge rather than direct excavation. Therefore, the proposed architectural model remains a scientifically reasoned interpretation grounded in available evidence, not a definitive reconstruction. These assumptions stem from the fragmentary archaeological record, the scarcity of household artifacts, and the varied material traces that complicate uniform conclusions.

The hypothesis proposes that domestic architecture in Pundranagar was shaped by environmental pressures, socio-cultural dynamics, and material availability. Built forms were likely expressions of both functional necessity and cultural meaning, aligning with archaeological theories that view architecture as a symbolic and utilitarian medium. However, such interpretations must be tested against material evidence to avoid overstating symbolic functions.

Environmental adaptability, particularly in response to monsoonal rain, seasonal flooding, and the riverine landscape likely influenced the configuration of dwellings. Yet archaeological evidence shows variability in roofing styles, wall materials, and construction methods across the site. This diversity suggests that domestic architecture was not standardized but instead reflected economic condition, household needs, and access to skilled labor. This observation supports the reviewer's comment that earlier assumptions may have overstated the uniform use of burnt brick masonry.

Similarly, the integration of religious and communal functions into residential clusters though consistent with South Asian settlement traditions requires concrete archaeological indicators. Without consistent traces of shrines, votive objects, or ritual installations within dwelling contexts, such integrative interpretations must remain cautiously hypothesized. A comparative framework enhances the hypothesis further. Ancient cities such as Wari-Bateshwar and Chandraketugarh reveal similar spatial and architectural tendencies, providing reference points that help distinguish regional norms from Pundranagar-specific characteristics. Such cross-site comparison strengthens interpretive accuracy and aligns with the reviewer's observation that broader contextualization is necessary.

In essence, the assumptions and hypotheses establish a balanced, interdisciplinary foundation for interpreting domestic life in Pundranagar. Emphasizing these

interpretations require continued empirical support through typological studies, spatial analysis, and future household-level excavations to validate or refine the architectural model proposed here.

The hypothesis asserts that domestic architecture in Pundranagar was shaped by environmental, socio-cultural, and material contexts. The settlement likely featured a combination of courtyard houses, semi-open porticos, and lane-based clustering.

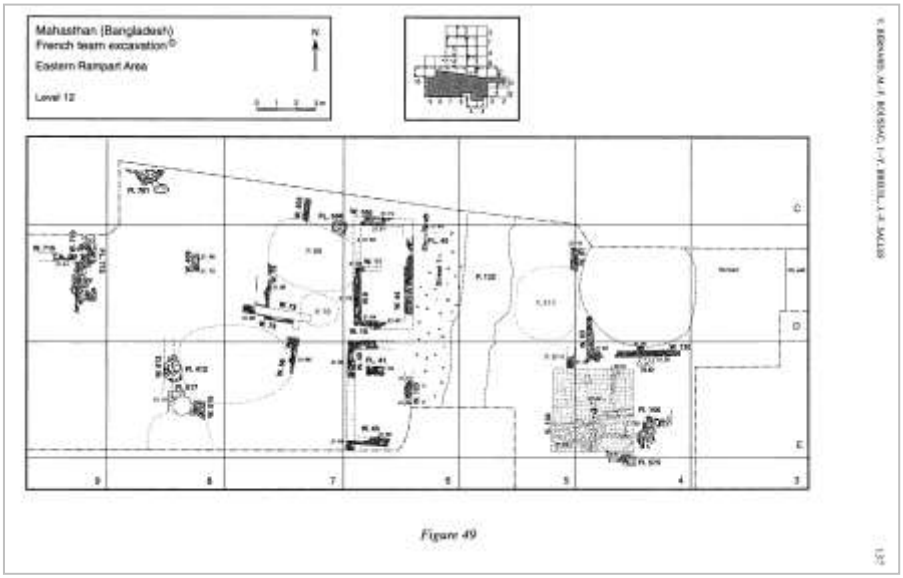

Fig. 2. Excavation layout by the French Team, showing homestead and street remains of Mahasthangarh
Source: *France-Bangladesh Joint Venture Excavations at Mahasthangarh: First Interim Report, 1993-1999*. Dhaka: Dept. of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Govt. of Bangladesh.

Focusing the hypothesis within the context of the Pāla dynasty is both methodologically strategic and historically significant. The Pāla period (8th–12th centuries CE) marked a cultural and political zenith in eastern India, particularly in Bengal, during which Mahasthangarh identified with ancient Pundranagar retained its urban relevance as a regional administrative and religious center[5]. Although the city's foundation predates this era, the Pāla dynasty provides a more concrete archaeological and epigraphic framework for analyzing dwelling patterns, due to the relatively better preservation of material culture from this time. Excavations conducted between 1993 and 1999 unearthed structural remnants, such as burnt brick

5 M.A. Rahman, *Excavation Report of Mahasthan (1993–1999),* Department of Archaeology, Govt. of Bangladesh, 2000

platforms, courtyard-based residential layouts, and drainage systems that align with known Pāla urban typologies.[6] These findings offer a viable temporal anchor for hypothesizing domestic architecture, particularly when earlier periods remain poorly stratified and less materially distinct.

Moreover, the scarcity of household artifacts from earlier strata, compounded by the taphonomic loss due to river erosion and human reuse of older materials, limits our ability to make definitive claims about pre-Pāla domestic life. In contrast, the Pāla era is not only better represented in the archaeological record but is also illuminated by textual sources such as the *Ramacharitam* and the accounts of Tibetan and Chinese monks, which reference Pundranagar as a vital center of learning and habitation.[7] These literary narratives, when read alongside the structural and spatial evidence, lend credence to the hypothesis that dwellings in this period bore both symbolic and pragmatic architectural significance. Thus, while the study does not disregard earlier phases, its analytical emphasis on the Pāla dynasty ensures both temporal precision and interpretive reliability, grounded in an era with verifiable architectural continuity and socio-religious dynamism.

5. Contextual Linkage of Assumptions and Hypothesis to Archaeological Reality

The assumption and hypothesis presented in this study gain contextual clarity when examined against the spatial tendencies observed in early Bengal settlements. The domestic clusters of Pundranagar, like many ancient towns in the region, evolved in close association with religious structures. Although the archaeological record does not always provide conclusive household-level ritual evidence, broader regional patterns support the idea that stupas, shrines, and small temples were positioned near secondary streets and residential lanes. This spatial proximity between sacred and domestic spheres still visible in many old Bengal towns suggests an enduring cultural preference for integrating everyday life with spiritual landscapes. Such interpretations align with ethnographic continuity, though they must be treated as cautious assumptions in the absence of explicit material confirmation.

Archaeological findings from Mahasthan reinforce this notion, revealing a moderately dense residential fabric punctuated by slender stupas, open congregational spaces, and strategically placed temples. These features imply a settlement logic in which private and public spaces coexisted within a shared spatial order, reflecting both

6 R. C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, University of Dacca, 1971
7 K. A. N. Sastri, *Cultural History of India*, Oxford University Press, 1976

social cohesion and ritual accessibility. The southern and southwestern zones of the ancient city appear to have been predominantly residential, while religious monuments were situated nearby, indicating environmental, symbolic, and practical considerations influencing placement.

Roofing traditions further illustrate the adaptive nature of domestic architecture. Excavations have produced fragments of terracotta roof tiles, attesting to their ancient use, though roofing styles likely varied across economic groups. Pitched roof forms, designed to manage heavy monsoonal rainfall, were probably widespread. This climatic responsiveness, combined with functional aesthetics, shaped a visually cohesive urban landscape.

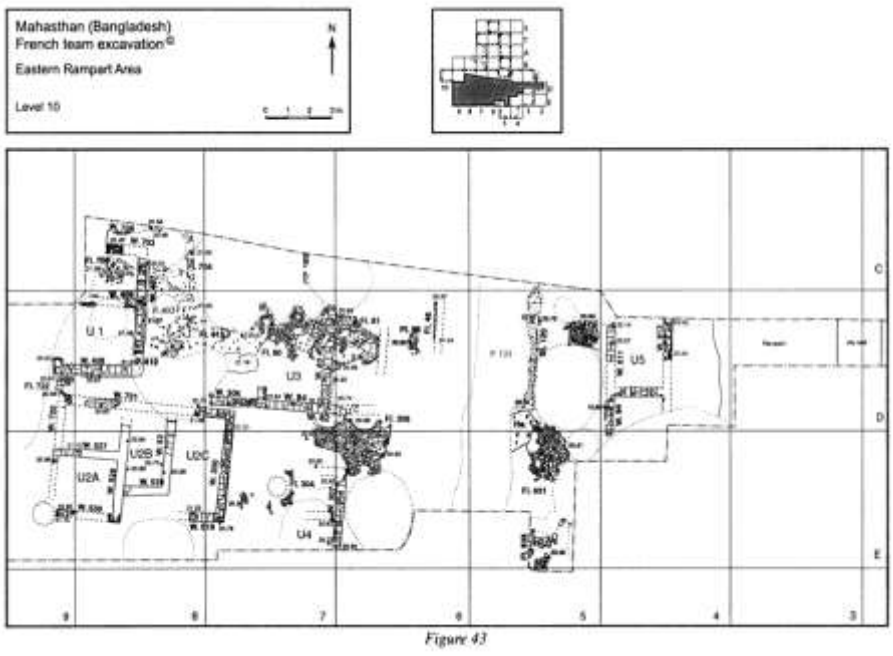

Fig. 3. French excavation at Mahasthangarh, 1996-1999
Source: *France-Bangladesh Joint Venture Excavations at Mahasthangarh: First Interim Report, 1993-1999*. Dhaka: Dept. of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Govt. of Bangladesh

6. Spatial Logic and Domestic Morphology of Early Pundranagar

The dwelling patterns of ancient Pundranagar can be better understood when examined through the combined lens of architectural form, material practice, and spatial organization. Roof types, particularly the *dochala* and *chauchala* forms, played a defining role in shaping both the visual profile and climatic responsiveness

of residential structures. Their pitched configurations facilitated efficient rainwater runoff, while terracotta tiles added both durability and regional character. These roofing forms, still echoed in northern Bengal's vernacular traditions, likely lent the ancient city a textured skyline distinguished by rhythmic slopes and earthy red tones.

Residential clusters in Pundranagar likely embodied organic spatial logic, where smaller dwellings grouped around courtyards, narrow lanes, and informal streets. These clusters, interspersed with larger structures and occasional sheds, contributed to a dynamic and adaptive urban fabric. Rather than following rigid planning grids, the settlement appears to have grown incrementally, responding to household needs, social relations, and topographical conditions. This adaptive pattern aligns with broader settlement tendencies in early Bengal, where domestic zones formed the connective tissue between economic, religious, and civic spaces.

Religious structures including temples, stupas, and monastic compounds were situated near residential areas, suggesting a spatial interplay between daily life and ritual practice. This arrangement reflects an urban culture in which sacred and secular spheres were interwoven rather than separated. Such integration is consistent with both archaeological patterns and long-standing cultural practices in Bengal, where community shrines and monastic institutions often anchor neighborhood life. (Fig. 4)

Public spaces within the residential fabric were equally vital. Narrow streets, small shops, and modest open areas facilitated social interaction and commercial exchange. These everyday spaces were shaped by movement patterns rather than formal planning, resulting in winding lanes that threaded through dense domestic zones. The blurring of boundaries between private courtyards, communal pathways, and sacred nodes reflects a lived urbanism rooted in proximity and shared experience.

In material terms, construction practices varied according to economic status and functional demand. Although brick was widely used in institutional and high-status structures, domestic units likely combined unburnt clay walls with selective brickwork, especially in plinths, thresholds, or façade elements. Exposed brick surfaces, often bonded with lime mortar, contributed to the tactile and visual identity of both residential and monastic architecture, establishing a modest yet coherent aesthetic language across building types.

Monasteries and multipurpose structures played an important role within this urban ecology. Serving simultaneously as religious centers, residential quarters, and

sometimes educational nodes, they contributed significantly to the social and spatial dynamics of Pundranagar.

Temporary marketplaces composed of lightweight structures were positioned near riverbanks and circulation routes, forming economic arteries that sustained the city's livelihood. These commercial zones added density and vibrancy to the urban landscape, reinforcing the interconnectedness of domestic, religious, and economic spheres.

Dwelling units likely varied in size and status, arranged organically with narrow lanes, informal streets, and mixed-use thresholds. Market zones may have clustered near riverbanks and major paths.

Small one-storied homes with unburnt clay walls and terracotta or thatched roofs likely dominated the residential landscape. Brick facades appeared selectively, offering structural and symbolic value.

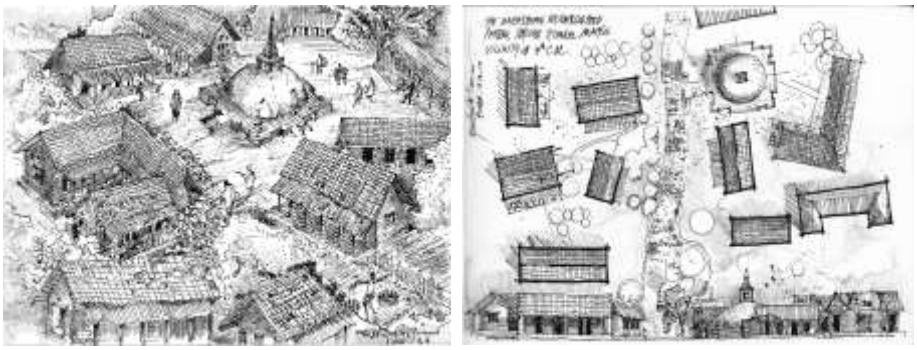

Fig. 4. Ancient vicinity, Mahasthangarh, 8th CE and religious structure (stupa) centered neighborhood
Illustration: Author

7. Monasteries settlement and Ancient Urban Fabric

The monasteries played a crucial role in the urban structure of ancient cities, offering a comprehensive vocabulary of architectural elements. The term 'comprehensive' here refers to their seamless integration with the surrounding residential areas. While monasteries were larger in scale, they contributed to a hierarchical and harmonious city fabric, blending with the everyday life of the city's inhabitants. The monasteries were designed with internal courtyards, facilitating the daily routines and activities within the community, providing both spiritual and practical functions.

In the case of Pundranagar, the riverine landscape of the Karatoa River once featured the massive brick façades of the city's structures, highlighted by the sharp finials of the temples. These structures not only dominated the landscape but also contributed to the overall visual coherence of the city, reflecting the architectural grandeur of the Buddhist city layout.

Elaborating further on the role of monasteries, temples, and stupas in the urban fabric, it becomes clear that there existed an invisible order within the Buddhist city structure. This order, perhaps driven by the spiritual and cultural principles of Buddhism, manifested in the city's layout, blending religious structures with residential areas in a way that created a harmonious environment. The integration of religious structures, including stupas, monasteries, and temples, was not only a key characteristic but also an iconic factor that defined the city's fabric.

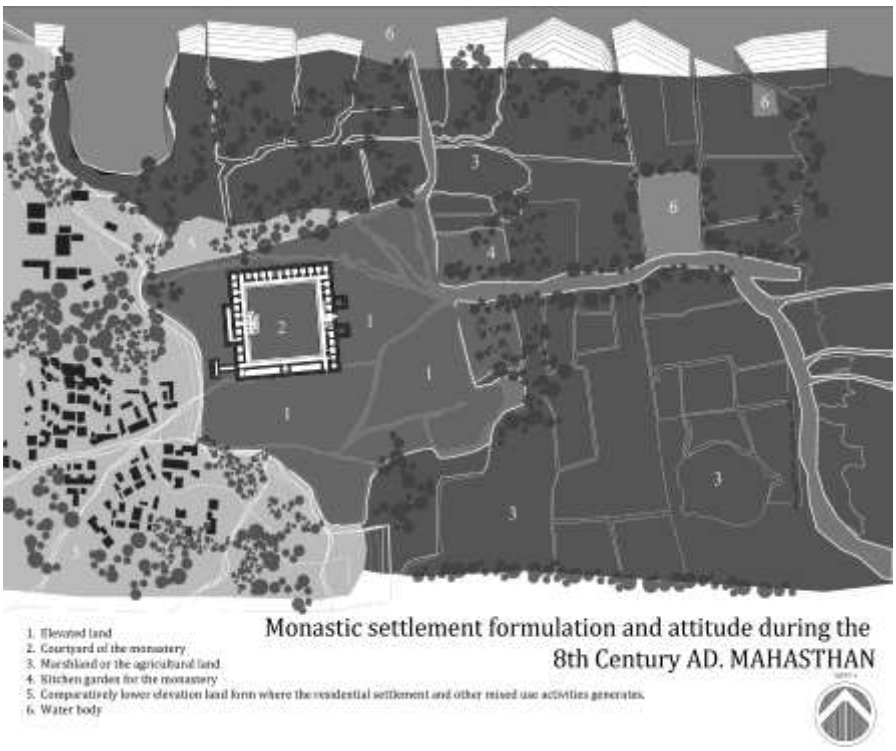

Fig. 5. Ancient settlement around the monastery, outskirt Pundranagar walled city.

In such ancient cities, the residential areas often served a mixed-use purpose, acting as the foundation for the city's urban fabric (Fig. 5). These areas were not isolated from religious or cultural spaces; instead, they coexisted with and were influenced by the presence of religious structures, creating a dynamic and interconnected urban environment.

Ancient cities, particularly those with riverine settings, were often celebrated for their royal structures and grand architectural compositions. The image of these ancient cities, especially when viewed in the context of their riverine landscapes, evokes images of towering temples surrounded by large gatherings of people, further emphasizing the central role of religious life in shaping the identity and function of the city.

Archaeological excavations were conducted at Pundranagar during the British Raj, with the earliest recorded efforts taking place in 1879 under the supervision of Alexander Cunningham, the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)[8]. Cunningham identified the site as the ancient city of Pundranagar, as mentioned in early texts. Later, between 1928 and 1931, K. N. Dikshit of the ASI carried out further excavations, uncovering structural remains, fortifications, and artifacts that confirmed Pundranagar's historical and cultural significance.[9] These British-era investigations laid the foundation for future archaeological research at the site.

Pundranagar, one of the earliest urban centers in Bengal, provides a significant archaeological record of ancient dwelling patterns. This research aims to hypothesize the spatial organization, construction techniques, and socio-cultural implications of the residential areas in this ancient city, particularly focusing on findings from archaeological excavations conducted in 1976 and 1993–1999[10]. These later excavations expanded upon the initial discoveries, providing deeper insights into the evolution of habitation structures and the urban fabric of ancient Pundranagar.

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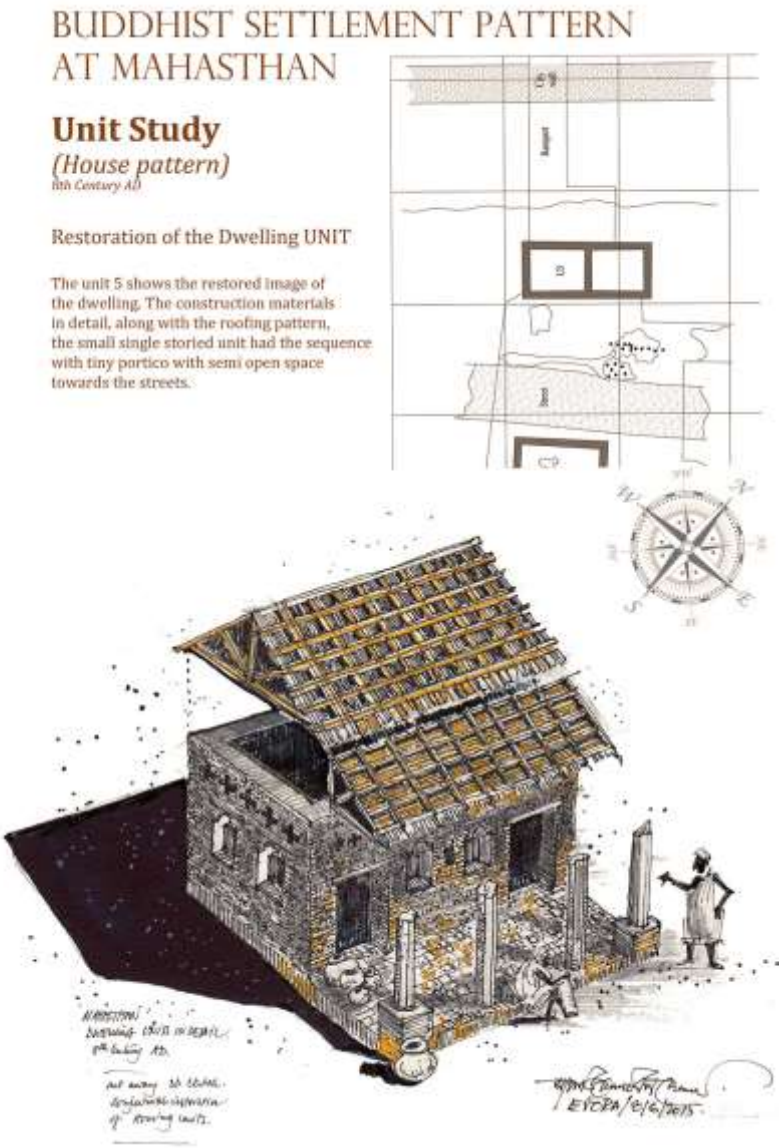
8 A. Cunningham, *Report of a Tour in Bihar and Bengal in 1879–80*, Archaeological Survey of India Report, Vol. XV, 1879

9 K. N. Dikshit, *Excavations at Mahasthan 1928–31*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55, 1938

10 M. M. Khan, *Mahasthan Excavation Report: 1993–94 Season*. Department of Archaeology, Bangladesh, 1994; M. S. Alam, 'Further Explorations at Mahasthan', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Hum.)*, 1999

8. Domestic Architecture Unit in Detail (8th Century AD): *Architectural Reconstruction of the Dwelling Unit*

The illustrated dwelling unit represents a restored version of an ancient house, reconstructed based on archaeological findings. Key architectural elements include:



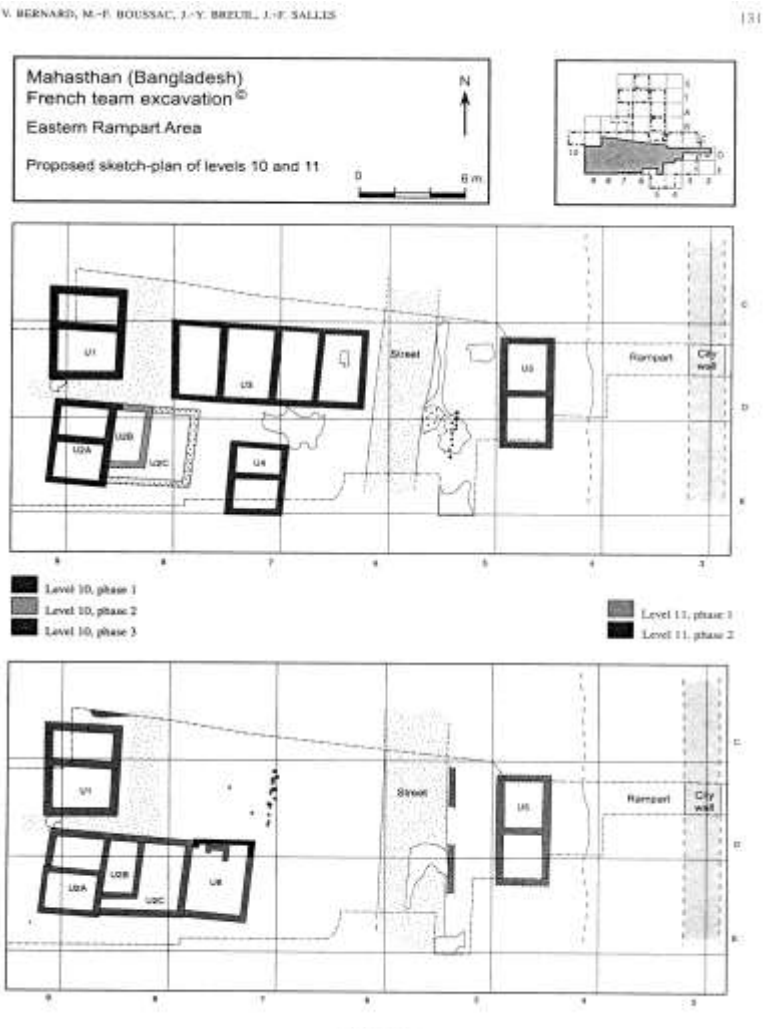


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the dwelling unit, based on excavation. Illustration: author
Source: *France-Bangladesh Joint Venture Excavations at Mahasthangarh: First Interim Report, 1993-1999*. Dhaka: Dept. of Archaeology, Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

8.1 Structural Composition:

Structural Composition: The structural composition of dwellings in ancient Pundranagar reflects clear socio-economic distinctions in material selection and building methods. While elite or institutional households may have utilized burnt brick masonry valued for its durability, symbolic presence, and refined bonding

techniques, most ordinary dwellings were likely constructed using unburnt clay walls mixed with straw, husk, and pottery fragments. This pattern corresponds with excavation findings that show limited brick debris in common residential layers and supports the broader understanding of a material hierarchy within early Bengal's urban settlements. The coexistence of these construction traditions illustrates how status, resources, and functional needs shaped the architectural fabric of the city (Fig. 6).

A representative unit includes:

- Unburnt clay walls with selective use of baked brick elements
- Timber-supported sloped roofs with terracotta tiles
- Semi-open verandas facing the street (Fig. 7)
- Central or side courtyards for ventilation and ritual tasks
- Narrow passageways connecting homes to community spaces

These reconstructions reflect the synthesis of archaeological traces and contemporary ethnographic parallels.

8.2 Roofing System:

- The inclined wooden truss framework supports terracotta roofing tiles, a sophisticated roofing technique that provides drainage and climate resistance.
- The interlocking perforated tiles indicate an advanced understanding of roofing technology, ensuring stability in monsoonal conditions.

8.3 Semi-Open Portico and Entrance:

- The column-supported veranda acts as an interactive space, illustrating the socio-spatial hierarchy of the dwelling.
- The presence of raised stone or brick columns reflects an architectural transition towards structural enhancement.

8.4 Interior and Functional Spaces:

- The unit includes a small open courtyard, possibly for ventilation, household activities, or religious functions.
- Multiple narrow windows and doorways facilitate air circulation while maintaining security and privacy.

8.5 Urban Context and Settlement Pattern:

- The dwelling aligns with row-housing typologies, suggesting an interconnected settlement layout.
- A Street-facing entrance highlights the dwelling's integration into the broader urban fabric, where semi-private spaces interacted with communal areas.

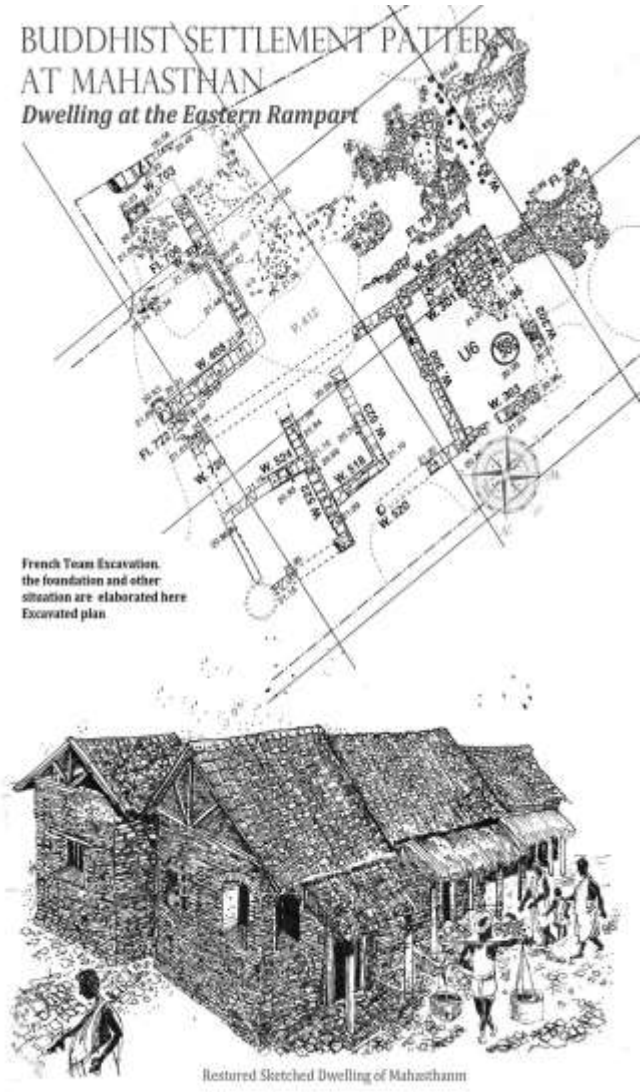


Fig. 7. Group and row housing settlement in Pundranagar

9. Archaeological and Historical Significance

- The reconstruction aligns with Pala-period urban planning, where dwellings were arranged in structured yet adaptable layouts.

- The presence of artifacts such as pottery, household tools, and terracotta elements confirms active habitation and an advanced material culture.
- The illustrated human figures and everyday objects reinforce the dwelling's role as a functional space within the settlement.

This reconstructed model (Fig.7) provides crucial insights into the architectural and socio-cultural aspects of 8th-century Pundranagar, portraying a balance between functionality, material efficiency, and climatic adaptability. The study further enhances our understanding of Bengal's early urban domestic architecture, reinforcing its significance in historical architectural discourse.

9.1 Extended Residential Block – Pundranagar Settlement

The second sketch showcases a row-type housing configuration with multiple dwelling units forming an interconnected urban fabric. Key elements include:

- **Clustered Housing Arrangement:** The layout follows an organic yet structured formation, supporting communal interactions.
- **Mixed Roofing Styles:** The combination of sloped, tiled roofs and extended thatched projections highlights architectural adaptation to climatic conditions.
- **Urban Circulation & Activity Nodes:** The depiction of market activity in front of dwellings suggests a socio-economic integration of residential and trade functions.
- **Material Continuity:** The use of brick masonry, timber reinforcements, and pottery shard-infused flooring aligns with excavation-based findings on construction practices in early medieval Bengal.

The reconstructed models of 8th-century Pundranagar dwellings, grounded in archaeological evidence from the Pāla period, illustrate a well-planned yet adaptable urban layout. They reveal the use of local materials, climate-responsive architecture, and socio-economic integration through shared spaces and trade activity. These findings deepen our understanding of Bengal's early domestic architecture and its cultural context within early medieval urbanism.

Table 1: Table Analysis: Residential Patterns and Construction Techniques in Pundranagar.

Category	Findings	Scientific Interpretation	Database Reference	Tentative Period (Pala Dynasty)
Neighborhood Pattern	The settlement exhibits a structured yet organic form, with co-existing dwelling units, mixed-use structures, and religious establishments.	The presence of defined urban matrices aligns with 8th-century AD urban planning principles in Bengal, demonstrating socio-religious influences on spatial arrangements.	Excavation reports from the French-Bangla Archaeological Team	Circa 8th–12th century AD
Construction Materials & Methods	The use of specialized Pala-period bricks (30 cm × 30 cm × 5 cm) indicates an advanced knowledge of material durability and construction technology.	High compressive and lateral strength of terracotta bricks suggests an emphasis on structural resilience and longevity.	Comparative analysis of Pala architecture and material strength studies	Circa 8th–12th century AD
Residential Structures	Evidence of wooden post-supported structures with mud walls mixed with pottery shards and baked brick fragments.	Reinforcement with pottery shards suggests early forms of composite material usage for enhanced stability.	Structural analysis of excavated dwelling remains	Circa 8th–12th century AD
Flooring Techniques	Variability in flooring from compacted clay to clay tiles; transition from thatched to terracotta-tiled roofs.	Evolution in construction materials reflects adaptation to environmental conditions and increased durability.	Excavation level stratigraphy analysis	Circa 9th–11th century AD
Roofing Systems	Fired terracotta tiles (16 cm width) with perforations for attachment, reminiscent of traditional dochala and *chouchala* designs.	The use of perforated tiles indicates an advanced roofing technique ensuring stability against climatic elements.	Comparative studies on historic Bengal roofing techniques	Circa 9th–12th century AD
Urban Fabric	Residential units arranged in row-type configurations or courtyard layouts with integrated religious structures.	Indicates a community-centric approach to urban design, balancing private and public spaces.	Settlement pattern analysis from archaeological surveys	Circa 8th–12th century AD
Architectural Vocabulary	Single-storied terracotta dwellings with porticos and semi-open spaces, blending with natural surroundings.	Suggests an ecological and contextual approach to urban aesthetics in early medieval Bengal.	Architectural survey of Mahasthan structures	Circa 8th–12th century AD

Category	Findings	Scientific Interpretation	Database Reference	Tentative Period (Pala Dynasty)
Modification Over Time	Evidence of continuous renovation, abandonment, and reconstruction of dwellings.	Demonstrates an evolving urbanism adapting to socio-environmental changes rather than a rigidly planned city.	Material and stratigraphic chronology analysis	Circa 9th–12th century AD
Infrastructure & Circulation	Narrow streets and lanes with a central axis functioning as a primary trade and interaction route.	Organic but deliberate planning likely fostered an interconnected urban framework supporting commerce and social cohesion.	Excavated pathways and traffic pattern studies	Circa 9th–12th century AD
Communal & Private Spaces	Semi-open porches, external porticos, and timber-supported spaces facilitating communal interactions.	A balance between open, semi-open, and enclosed spaces indicates socio-cultural priorities in urban form.	Comparative urban morphology studies	Circa 9th–12th century AD

Summary of the analytical table: The archaeological evidence from Pundranagar reveals a sophisticated yet adaptable urban settlement that evolved over time. The materials, spatial organization, and construction techniques underscore a deep understanding of functionality, resilience, and socio-religious principles that shaped early medieval Bengal's built environment.

10. Conclusion

The reconstruction of domestic architecture in ancient Pundranagar, as presented in this study, illustrates how early medieval urbanism in Bengal was shaped by a nuanced interplay of material availability, environmental adaptation, and socio-cultural practice. Rather than a uniform brick-built urban core, the settlement appears to have supported a stratified architectural landscape wherein unburnt clay dwellings predominated among ordinary households, while burnt-brick masonry was selectively employed by elite or institutional actors. This differentiated material culture not only aligns with the broader archaeological record of early Bengal but also responds directly to the interpretive gaps acknowledged in excavation reports.

The spatial logic of Pundranagar marked by courtyard-oriented homes, narrow organic lanes, and the close interweaving of domestic and religious structures reveals an urban fabric grounded in lived experience rather than rigid planning. The proximity of stupas, shrines, and monastic complexes to residential clusters underscores the cultural and ritual significance embedded within everyday life. This

integrated pattern mirrors long-standing settlement tendencies in the Ganges–Brahmaputra basin and affirms that religious identity was materially expressed in the architectural choices of the period.

Roofing traditions, including pitched forms supported by timber frameworks and terracotta tile coverings, further highlight the city's adaptive strategies to climatic conditions. These features together with selective brick façades and earthen construction contributed to a visually cohesive yet socially varied urban environment. The interpretive model developed in this study therefore reflects both environmental responsiveness and socio-economic differentiation, offering a more balanced reconstruction of domestic life in early Pundranagar.

The visual reconstructions and architectural illustrations presented here serve not merely as descriptive aids but as analytical tools that translate fragmentary archaeological data into coherent spatial hypotheses. By bridging textual interpretation with visual reasoning, these drawings help clarify architectural relationships that remain otherwise implicit in excavation reports. Their inclusion supports deeper scholarly engagement and opens pathways for renewed methodological reflection within South Asian architectural history.

While this study contributes a refined ethno-archaeological hypothesis for Pundranagar's domestic architecture, the city's archaeological record remains incomplete. Future excavations, especially those that target household strata, are critical for testing the assumptions proposed here. Comparative analyses with contemporaneous sites such as Wari-Bateshwar, Chandraketugarh, and Mainamati would further contextualize Pundranagar within the wider network of early Bengal urbanism. Such studies may reveal broader regional patterns or highlight distinctive architectural trajectories specific to Pundranagar.

Ultimately, the domestic landscape of Pundranagar offers an essential window into the history of urban development in early Bengal. Understanding how its inhabitants negotiated material constraints, environmental realities, and cultural priorities enriches our appreciation of early medieval life and underscores the lasting influence of these settlements on Bengal's architectural and urban traditions. This integrated approach combining archaeological evidence, vernacular parallels, and visual reconstruction provides a robust framework for future scholarship seeking to unravel the complexity of ancient Bengal's built environment.

The reconstructed dwelling patterns of Pundranagar provide essential insights into ancient urban life in Bengal. The settlement likely featured a hierarchy of material usage, climatic adaptation, and religious–domestic integration.

This hypothesis acknowledges the limitations of fragmentary evidence and emphasizes the need for future excavation specifically targeting household strata to validate or refine the proposed clay-wall dominant model.

By integrating visual documentation with textual analysis, the study contributes a holistic interpretive framework for understanding ancient urbanism in Bengal.

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Wanderers, Warriors and Threshold: Situating Ascetic Militarism in Eighteenth Century South Asia

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Abstract

South Asia witnessed a meteoric rise of the Hindu ascetics to the helm of political, commercial and most importantly military order at the turn of the eighteenth century. This coincided with a transitional time when many changes were unfolding in the sub-continent. Gradual decline of the centralized administration of the Mughal State widened the scope and opportunity for the wandering ascetics to flex their military muscle, as did for many other regional powers in Bengal, Awadh and in other parts of the empire. Wandering Hindu ascetics like Dasnamis, needs to be contextualized in the complexities of the eighteenth century Indian scenario as a threshold time. Lying in-between pre-colonial and colonial times it indeed carried the memories of the past, but also the seeds of the future. Routes of commerce gained a new currency under the leadership of both Indian and western traders, as did State authority through territorialisation of nuclear zones of power into regional kingdoms. A wide market for military labour had opened up in South Asia and people had begun to make their services available therein that included the peasantry. Perhaps such complexities called into order a complete recasting of spiritual, material and secular plane. The purpose of the present research paper will be to demonstrate how the Dasnamis, made an innovative addition to the military labour market by not only offering their military skill and services as a product available for sale, but also their spiritual and commercial services.

Key words: Hindu Ascetics, *Dasnamis, Nagas, Gossain,* Eighteenth Century, South Asia, Orient, yogic posture, Pranayam, Kundalini, sexuality

Invented in the Oriental imagination of the westerners India entered modernity as a land of snake charmers and naked sadhus, it was the ultimate epitome of exoticism portrayed by the stereotyped Orientalised imagery of India. Nudity of the *sadhus* smeared in ashes and carrying weapons became the stock image of the religious gathering of wandering ascetics at *Kumbh Mela* even in the post-colonial times. These power packed images represented Hindu ascetics as, by western standards of course, obscene and of a militant sort. Wearing their matted hair (*jata*) in bun overhead and carrying weapons like spear and swords they remained ingrained in

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western imagination of the Orient. So powerful was the image that it gradually entered the imagination of the Indians who began to see their own culture derivatively. Magic men and mystics, they were revered and feared, one at the same time. But what constituted the foundation of this reverence and fear? World renouncers, recluses, and practitioners of rituals perverse to social customary hierarchy, they claimed a place for themselves in the world, nonetheless. In the context of the eighteenth century, the wandering ascetics were a force to reckon with, both for the erstwhile Indian royalty as well as for the emerging colonial authority.

South Asia witnessed a meteoric rise of the Hindu ascetics to the helm of political, commercial and most importantly military order at the turn of the eighteenth century. This coincided with a transitional time when many changes were unfolding in the sub-continent. Gradual decline of the centralized administration of the Mughal State widened the scope and opportunity for the wandering ascetics to flex their military muscle, as did for many other regional powers in Bengal, Awadh and in other parts of the empire. But considering the event as the founding moment of militarism practiced by the sect would be only too hasty. It was present in the ranks and files of the sub sects of the ascetic orders since the twelfth century for establishing their legitimacy.[1] This particular event merely served as a catalyst hastening their meteoric rise. Therefore, any discussion on the wandering Hindu ascetics like Dasnamis needs to be contextualized in the complexities of the eighteenth century Indian scenario as a threshold time. Lying in-between pre-colonial and colonial times it indeed carried the memories of the past, but also the seeds of the future. Routes of commerce gained a new currency under the leadership of both Indian and western traders, as did State authority through territorialisation of nuclear zones of power into regional kingdoms. A wide market for military labour, as Dirk Kolff,[2] points out had opened up in South Asia and people had begun to make their services available therein that included the peasantry. Perhaps such complexities called into order a complete recasting of spiritual, material and secular plane. Rise of the wandering warrior ascetic sects to prominence needs to be approached as a product of the transitional time when placed in a limbo order of things were changing, and changing fast. Ceremonial expression of authority needed more than just pomp and show. It needed to be strengthened with spiritual guidance and the show of military prowess. Mystical shamanism practiced by the monks of the ascetic order through Hath Yoga and regimented physical

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1 D.N. Lorenzen, "Warrior Ascetics in Indian History", *Journal of the American Society*, Vol. 98, No. 1 (January-March), 1978, pp. 61-75.

2 D.H.A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850*, (Cambridge 1990), pp. 15-157.

training helped them, apparently, to loosen the garb of social norms and search salvation in a higher plane of mind and being. They congregated around each other to disseminate and practice such skills in a space of like-minded practitioners, often referred to as *akhras*. The observations made by Dumont[3] and Pinch about the emblematic characterizations of Hindu ascetics as non-violent, vegetarian and theological tolerance by the colonial authorities and the anti-colonial leaders does find some resonance in such instances. Nevertheless, Dumont and Pinch let the spiritual skills and services that the ascetic order offered go unnoticed. Being world renouncers, the wandering ascetics built themselves in between spaces in the context of the eighteenth century. Existing caste or gender hierarchy did not intervene or in any way jeopardize the ascetic hierarchy that the monks created within the order. Traversing the territorial extent of various regional kingdoms the wandering ascetics created a supra-order of glory that the regional powers borrowed for acquiring military and spiritual legitimacy. Naturally, royal patronage was in order for most of the mystic cults of wandering Hindu ascetics. Treatment of preference earned from the state and existing royalties allowed them to function beyond the territorial limits of regional kingdoms. Access to such supra-state status allowed them to bring together trade and commercial networks of South Asia creating a network of commerce entirely controlled by the sub-orders of the wandering ascetics.[4] The purpose of the present research paper will be to demonstrate how the wandering ascetic orders of the Dasnamis made an innovative addition to the military labour market by not only offering their military skill and services as a product available for sale, but also their spiritual and commercial services, something that academic intervention of Kolff or even Bayly has not fully explored.

Threshold Time: Characterizing the Eighteenth Century Context

Eighteenth century in the history of the sub-continent has been characterised as the age of transition. But this transition was tumultuous as great many things underwent transformation, and new things emerged, within a very short span of time, just in the

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3 L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, (Chicago 1970), pp. 65-67; W.R. Pinch, *Warrior Acetics and Indian Empires*, (New Delhi 2006), pp. 172-180.

4 B.S. Cohn, "The Role of Gossains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1964, pp. 175-83; D. H.A. Kolff, "Sannyasi Trader – Soldiers", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1971, pp. 211–18; Giorgio Agamben, *The kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, tr. By Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteeo Mandarini, (Stanford 2011), pp. 87-95; C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870*, (Cambridge 1999), pp. 113-134. See also the review of the book, Reviewed by William Sweetman, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1998, pp. 245-51.

matter of a century. Two primary aspects of the age were juxtaposed against each other: on the one hand, the gradual waning of the Mughal political economy making way for regional political orders; on the other hand, a sea of change in society, polity and economy as the English East India Company steered its way into prominence in northern India after the Battle of Buxar, 1764.[5] It was a time when nuclear power zones so far bonded together by the cultural-filial bonds of *mansabdari-jagirdari* system were consolidating it into regional princedoms. Resources were now redirected from the centre to the provinces leading to growth and development to spread out over a larger area instead of being concentrated in few Imperial cities. Understandably, new cities catapulted to prominence because of this politico-spatial change of the flow of resources. Just as changes were overflowing with speedy exuberance, at the latter half of the century newer elements began to make its presence felt. A hitherto unheard of rule of law and rule of property invaded the socio-judicial lives of the people. Labour market underwent spgatial and material change in order to cope up with this impending change. It was an age when time stood in a fuzzy haze. On one side of the haze, stood an old world, fast waning, yet holding onto its last semblance, while on the other side, fermented a new world, nascent, building it up in baby steps. Thus, the essential characteristic of eighteenth century made it stand like a doorway from the old to the new: hence, time stood suspended, in a limbo, turning eighteenth century into a threshold time. Into this suspended time marched in the old: the wandering ascetic Dasnamis. Standing at the threshold, they retained many of their old selves, but also adapted to the new times (in self-defence) assuming a unique form and structure that shall be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Rites de Passage: Passage from Scholastic Monks to Pilgrims-in-Arms

Rise of armed ascetics as a *rites de passage*[6] can be traced as far back as the sixth century B.C.E. when it emerged and was reinforced through a constant process of *separation, liminal* and *re-aggregation.*[7]Ascetics were brought together at Benares through the extraordinary exposition of *Brahmasutras* made by Sankaracharya who enjoined these scholastic devotees into the ranks of *sastradhari* and *astradhari* monks. They followed the two-fold ideal to preserve and defend Hindu scriptural teachings, doctrinal learning and the Hindu *dharma* against heretical influences. Conversant in the religious canon and engaged in composing commentaries on it, they were men of letters who fought with their pen and word the onslaught of other

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5 S. Alavi, *Eighteenth Century in India*, (New Delhi 2002), pp. 1-2.
6 V. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Ithaca 1977), pp. 96-98.
7 Ibid., pp. 94-95.

contending heretical sects on Hindu *Dharma*. The effect it had on the existing societal structure was not quite what was envisaged by its founder. The scholastic ascetics differed with each other as well on such hermeneutical explication leading to the emergence of several sub-divisions within the rank and file of these world renouncers. Recluse though they were the ascetics not just confirmed to the set of scholastic ideas they preached but vigorously defended it against the notions disseminated by the rival sects or groups. Thus, accounts of debating confrontations between the Jain, Buddhist and the contesting Ajivika sages frequently appears in their religious canons.[8] This can be identified as a period of separation when the scholastic monks underwent ideational (related to ideas) and material detachment from the monastic order lay by Sankaracharya and entered a phase viz., Giri, Puri, Bharti, Aranya, Ban, Saraswati, Tirtha, Ashram, Sagar and Parbat[9] breaking into several sub-orders of asceticism of dissociation.

Separation from the core cultural ethos placed the *sastradharis* into a phase of limbo or a liminal phase. A transitory phase where such conflicts seldom remained restricted to battle of words alone. In a liminal phase there were no singular attribute to distinguish one ascetic idea of monasticism from the other. It stood in a phase of limbo where it became difficult to distinguish a unique quality of the past in it, and the new was yet to take shape. Perhaps this is the time when the wandering monks entered an incognito phase and very little reference of the sub-orders can be traced in different records. Apart from some isolated events of armed clash between the Dasnami and the Vaisnava Bairagis reported in 1266 on the occasion of Kumbh *Mela*[10] the vast extent of period that lay between their initial appearance and the emergence of the warrior monks in the thirteenth century can be identified as a period of liminality. Notional and material conditions that later came to identify the wandering ascetic groups underwent constant making and remaking in this phase of

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8 Lorenzen, op.cit., pp. 64-65.

9 Akshay Kumar Dutta, *Bharatbarshiya Upasak Sampraday,* Vol. 1, (Calcutta 1792BS/1907AD), pp.90-95. There is a small introduction on Nagas and Bairigis. Dutta is completely silent about the other groups of obscure cults that flourished in Bengal during the period under review. Dutta 'not only charted out a comparative religious framework of Indo-European lineages in the long prefatory section, but also met special mention of medieval mystical traditions, and the world of Auls, Bauls, and other associated groups' (Soumen Mukherjee, *Religion, Mysticism, and Transcultural Entanglements in Modern South Asia, Towards a Global Religious History*, (Switzerland 2024, p. 27). Mukherjee has visualized the periphery of mystic world on Homi Bhabha's terminology (Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", *Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, Spring, October 28, 1984, pp. 125-133).

10 Dutta, op. cit., p. 90.

limbo. But the re-aggregation that came post-liminal phase did not witness a reintegration into the older customs. New set of sub-orders came into being where the existing ethos acquired a different form unto each. Perhaps, the process of identifying a 'high' and a 'low', or of an 'other', during the liminal phase created a distinction among each monastic sub-orders. Though hailing from the same monastic order the sub-orders seldom saw eye to eye in matters not just spiritual, but also material. In their new state of dissociation social life resembled a form of dialectics where "high and low, communities (*an essential and generic human bond observable in any society*; Italics mine) and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality"[11] stood in a limbo. In the new state of liminality a process of initiation became the backbone of these sub-groups of monastic order.

The ascetics physically wandered and for all their mystical needs settled in *akhras*. This created, and still does, some confusion because in appearance they seemed detached and recluse, yet they formed a social association of their own tied strongly by the bonds of discipline and mystical practices. Symmetrical and immovable *yogic* posture formed the foundation of these practices. To maintain balance and to free oneself from restlessness the ascetics practiced *Padmasana* and *Siddhasana.* To control breath and stimulate *Kundalini Sakti* or spiritual force lying at the base of the spine *Pranayam* was practiced. In return this prevented seminal loss, kept the mind still and helped achieving *Samadhi*. Gross is of the opinion, these practices helped retain their 'sexual energy and spiritual power (*Kundalini Sakti*)' as one tantamount the other.[12] Mystical practice such as *yoga*, *Yoga- Sadhana*, *Brahmacharya* and *pranayam* along with several other restrictions viz., wearing a tight *langoti* (loincloth), taking cold baths and eating only simple static foods, helped retention of sexual energy in the form of semen and converted into *oja-sakti* (potency) that elevated the *Kundalini*.[13]

Nakedness (*naga, nanga*), matted hair (*jata),* and ashes (*khak; bibhuti*) served as symbols of asceticism as well as of liminality.[14] Raymond Firth[15] and Victor Turner[16] opine, these features are 'multi vocalic and multi referential'. For instance, the matted hair or the *Jata* stands out as a symbol of 'ascetic liminality and status'.[17]

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11 Turner, op.cit., p. 97.
12 R.L. Gross, *A Study of the Sadhus of North India*, (Jaipur 1979), pp. 248-49.
13 Ibid., p. 249.
14 Turner, op.cit., p. 303.
15 R.Firth, *Symbols, Public and Private,* (Ithaca 1979), pp. 25, 41, 52.
16 Turner, op. cit., p. 303.
17 Gross, op.cit., p. 304.

Leach further clarified, the matted stood for ascetic transcendence into a social order that completely disregarded personal physical appearance, as is the established social norm. Things held dirty by social standards are smeared on the hair; things like cow dung, cow urine, ashes and mud from the river Ganges. The longer and intricate a *jata* superior is the spiritual attainment of an ascetic because it is considered the seat of an ascetic's magical powers or *siddhi* attained through *tapas.*[18] From an iconographic point of view it also signifies control over natural and physical forces.[19] The appearance it gives an ascetic has embedded in its very essence a certain defiance of man-made social regulations. Dishevelled appearance it gives an ascetic is associated with grief, mourning, and despair for those still attached to the dead and dying phenomenal world.[20] Similarly; the wearing of ashes conveyed a sense of death, desolation, and a complete rejection of socially prescribed physical adornment or beautification.[21] Understandably, such disregard deeply embedded in their appearance, essence and being made them stand in a plane completely separate from that of the normatively structured social order, yet having multiple numbers of nascent practices that differed from one ascetic sub-order to the other. In this state of limbo they moved beyond the order of things established in a hierarchical social relationship. As a result, the monastic order in their liminal stage passes through a new cultural realm different from the order of things of earlier state of order or cultural conditions. This liminal phase was the threshold where the old attributes had little or no similarity with what eventually emerged. Once engaged in hermeneutical debates the ascetics often broke apart from the existing order of things of the monasticism. Whether removed forcibly or as an admonishment or simply as a deviant, the monks experienced dissociation. Such dissociation and creation of new monastic identity that was relative in nature (meaning dependant on an 'other') required constant legitimization through negation of the other. Instances of conflicts between one sect with the other seeking legitimacy often appeared in various primary sources. There are a variety of figures between holy folly, mental distractedness, insanity and poverty. One of the varieties of this group of people was their deviant appearance among the common people[22]. The eccentrical and deviating behaviour of *diwana*s and *faqır*s, particularly their symptomatic fits of anger and aggression, are

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18 E.R. Leach, "Magical Hair", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 88, No. 2, 1958, pp. 147- 164.
19 Gross, op.cit., p. 304.
20 Ibid., pp. 304-306.
21 Ibid., p. 305
22 Wolfgang Lipp, *Stigma und Charisma, ¨UbersozialesGrenzverhalten*, (Berlin 1985), pp. 71-77.

commonly interpreted as manifestations of the Islamic concept of *jalal*. Whereas a number of *diwana*s and *faqır*s, situated at the far end of the spectrum of Islamic mysticism, embody the notion of the holy fool (who has the 'free rein of the religiously confused') carrying the moral authority of the proximity (*qurb*) to God and of asceticism, others are considered by the public as mere idiots, lunatics and beggars. There is indeed a thin line between sainthood and folly. In this context, ethnographic data refer to different types of self-stigmatization, such as forms of ecstasy, eccentricity, criticism, exhibitionism, aggressiveness, abstinence and passiveness. It is said that the tomb of the Sufi saint of early modern India acted as an 'enduring spatial anchor' that made the present Indian landscape replete with a material and narrative archive of distant homelands and origin stories that animated religious and cultural life for emergent Muslim settler communities.

This proves the plurality of these cults. The competitiveness between the Hindu and Islamic mystic groups was found as early as the Turko- Afghan period and became more prominent during the period of Akbar, the Great Mughal. They used to fight, mainly, for the collection of religious donations on the occasions of bathing ceremony not only held at Kumbha *Mela* or Ganga Sagar *Mela* but also other religious congregations. It was quite surprising that Mughal Emperor like Akbar enjoyed these types of fight as recorded not only in the oral testimony of J. N. Farquhar but also in the Mughal chronicles, Persian and Marathi sources. Besides charitable contributions, it is assumed, that, recruitment of followers was responsible behind the inter-community competitiveness, but there is no direct evidence to show either in the Persian sources or in the official documents that recruitment went on full swing before the beginning of eighteenth century. It was particularly after the death of Aurangzeb (1707 A. D) there was a decline of the central power for which recruitment of disbanded soldiers and the poorer classes of the society had no other alternative but to sell their children in lieu of money. It may be argued whether Mughal State either central or regional forced these groups of people to take shelter under their banner. Since they were expert in the art of warfare the regional powers in all- India perspective recruited them as mercenary forces in lieu of stipends, but, the Mughal State and the regional powers did not have any restriction on their monetary extortion. Even the competition among the Vaishnavas was noticeable in one of the prominent stronghold of the Vaishnavas, i.e., Braja Bhum.Habib has shown how rivalry between the Radhaballavis and the followers of Sree Chaityana over encroachment on a seat (*nishastgāh*) was so acute that state interference was

essential[23] that it was never thought of disturbing the arrangements worked out in Akbar's times. Further, perhaps for the first time, going by the Vrindavan documents, he also granted lands ranging between 12 and 50 *bīghas* to eight individuals outside the temple-based grantees. Of these eight, a woman named Kunjdāsī got 30 *bīghas* in her own right. Shāhjahān's reign sent mixed signals. According to a passage in Lāhorī's *Pādshāhnāma*, in his sixth regnal year (1633–34), Shāhjahān ordered that no temple whose foundations had been laid in Jahāngīr's time but had not been completed would be allowed to be completed; and the successors of Aurangzeb, who did not apparently share his 'prejudiced outlook', could offer further conciliatory measures. An illustration of this was the 1718 *parwāna* of Māhyār Khān, the *faujdār* of Mathura. It said, Gossains, Bairagis, and Mahants had from old times been living in village Bindrāban and people coming from different provinces left large amounts in charity for them, which were secretly divided up… (but now representatives of the Gauḍiyas (Chaitanya sect), Radhaballavis, Haridídasis, Ramanandis etc. have) agreed to distribute charity among mendicants of their respective sects in a proper manner.[24]

This hypothesis questions Lorenzen's argument that warrior ascetics emerged in the sixteenth century[25] that has also been reiterated by Elliot and Dowson[26] and William Pinch. Drawing their conclusion from the accounts of Badauni,[27] Pietro Della Valle,[28] Duarte Barbosa,[29] Peter Mundy,[30] Francois Bernier[31] and W. G. Orr[32] they have neither paid due attention to the relationship the Hindu ascetics held with each other and the Muslim Fakirs, nor have they tried to explore the communitas (explained earlier) aspect of the pre-sixteenth century monastic sub-order when they were undergoing a process of formulation and re-formulation. It is in this phase, one must

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23 Irfan Habib and Tarapada Mukherjee**,** *Braj Bhūm in Mughal Times: The State, Peasants and Gosāins*, (New Delhi 2020), pp. 96-97.

24 Ibid., p, 116.

25 Lorenzen, op. cit., p. 63.

26 Nizamuddin Ahmed, '*Tabaqat-i-Akbari*'. Elliot and Dowson (tr.), *The History of India as Told by its own Historians*, Vol. 3 Reprint (Delhi 1991), pp. 536-538.

27 Al- Badauni, *Muntakhab-ul-Tawarikh*, Vol. 2, Reprint (New Delhi 1990), p. 228.

28 Pietro Della Valle (ed. & tr.), *The Pilgrim: The Travels of Pietro Della Valle*, (London 1989), p. 238.

29 Durate Barbosa, *A Description of the Coasts of East Africa and Malabar in the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century, notes and preface by Henry E.J. Stanley*, (London 1866), pp. 99-100.

30 *Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe in Asia, 1608-1667,* Vol. 2 *Travels in Asia, 1603-1614*, (ed.), R.C. Temple (London 1914), pp. 176-178.

31 A. Constable (ed.), *Travels in the Mogul Empire,1656-1668; A Revised and improved edition based upon Irving Broock's translation,* (Delhi 1968), pp. 154-155.

32 W.G. Orr, 'Armed Religious Ascetics in Northern India', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1940, pp. 81-100.

understand, the constant unmaking and reframing of monasticism of wandering ascetics perforce it to acquire a form that was both spiritual as well as militaristic.

In fact, the consolidation of the sub-orders into *akhras* that formed the spatial core of the spiritual and militaristic order has not received adequate treatment in the work of Pinch (2006). *Akhra* based records bring to light the spatial positioning of the monastic sub-orders that transcended statist boundaries.

Enjoined by fellow monks of the sub-order, who, migrated to these places and established centre of congregation, in such places, served three purposes: gathering followers, creation of commercial network and a safe haven for the wandering monks of the sub-order acting as a militarised fortification. In this connection one mention the presence of the Ukhi *math* founded by the Kedarnath order of Sankaracharya. Another principal *math* of the North was the Joshi *math* meant as the headquarters of the wandering Giri sub-order. Benares gained importance in this network of *math* for similar reasons of strategic importance and commercial benefit. *Maths* spread its wing into Mirzapur, Poona, Nagpur, and Gwalior by the end of eighteenth century because of its easy access to trade routes. Conduct of business and storage of goods became an integral function of these religious congregational centres facilitated by the provision these spaces either had or entrusted as centres of pilgrimage. The *maths* organized the Sanyasis in an interconnected network of spiritual and commercial link that was administered through an Assembly (*Panchayat*) elected by the assembly of each *math*. Spread across Awadh and Deccan *akhras* flourished in Juna, Mahanirvani, Niranjani, Atal, Avahan and Agni .In the pre-Mughal period *akhras* sprung up in Jaipur, Jodhpur and some other parts of Rajasthan[33] and at Prayag. However, due to its commercial significance Benares remained the principle centre where the *akhras* were densely concentrated with its distributaries spreading through Prayag, Nasik, Ujjain, Benares, Hardwar and Udaipur.The *akhras* provided the sub-orders an opportunity to consolidate their commercial-politico spatiality into a centre of pilgrimage, an inner spiritual frontier.

The spiritual-commercial congregation also served as centres of temporary residence for the ascetics where they engaged in commercial and administrative activities. Naturally as centres of immense importance these were zealously guarded by the ascetics. So, defence of the congregation was done in two ways: ceremonial public display of weapons by the ascetics, and militarised training of ascetics through *yogic* postures as warriors. Records show the *mahants* of Juna and Atal *akhras* known as

[33] G.S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*; *A Sociological Survey*, (Bombay 1964), pp. 67-68.

Siddhi Giris *mathiya* (*math*), situated at Awadh, were reportedly very militant. Even Sir Jadunath agrees that several fighting mendicants, expert in the art of warfare, frequented *akhras* like the Atal *akhras.* The militaristic training, which formed a part and parcel of their *yogic* training, also gave them a cutting edge over other sub-cults. For instance, during the bathing ceremony of Kumbha *mela* the militaristic training that the ascetics received was displayed with full pomp and show in the form of competition. Often such competitive displays led to consternations. Perhaps, it was another way of demonstrating before the other sub-cults, as well as disciples and followers, their superiority over the other mystical cult. Following of each cult was equally dependant on such demonstrative militarism. Presence of *akhras* of the Niranjani cult in distant locations like London, U.S.A. Sri Lanka and even Pakistan can be attributed to such spiritual-militaristic public performances.

Betwixt and Between[34]: Institutionalizing Ascetic Liminality

The celebrated Bhakti religious reformer Kabir noted in one his *Doha* of fifteenth century about the wandering and warrior ascetics. Disheartened by their actions he called them false ascetics, who were quarrelsome and too materialistic.[35] This makes one question the credibility of these warrior ascetics. Who were they- socially? To understand their social standing one must make some concession for the time in which they rose to prominence i.e. the time of sub-states functional under not an overtly centralized state. It was a time when within the ambit of central authority many regional sub-legates and commercial networks were functioning unhindered. Lying between the social structure and the state structure wandering ascetics developed a plane of their own. The plane lay embedded in the interstices of the *akhras* and the *maths.* Serving not merely as sub-cults but also as sub-cultural praxis where social norms and codes were denied and then reformed into a new mould. The distinctions of caste hierarchy that formed an integral part of the existing social structure did not find resonance within the sub-sets of the monastic orders. Engaged in Tantric and Saivite form of spirituality the distinctions of the socio-material world did not concern the ascetics. At least, not in principle, but in practice, caste hierarchies were not completely rejected and discarded from the day to day dealings of the order. It appears that the castes, both high and low, that formed a part of the monastic orders. Interestingly, these devotees or disciples who found a place within

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[34] Victor Turner used betwixt as a state of lying in between states where "socio-structural role playing is dominant especially between those who are of equal status." He concedes that such practices are visibly common among mendicants and ascetics. (Turner, op. cit., p. 138).

[35] Sukhdev Sinha (ed.), *Kabiradasa*, *Kabira-bijaka*, (Allahabad 1972), p. 172.

the ranks and files of the sub-order were professionals and based on the innovative and unique nature of their skill sets they were forged into new caste. However, new set of hierarchization was introduced in the sub-orders that, if not completely, did adopt few of the rules prevalent in the existing caste structure. As a result, lower caste recruits though allowed entrance in the sub-order could not rise up the ascetic ladder to positions reserved for Brahmins and Rajputs. Higher caste men entering monastic life rigorously maintained their circle of purity by refusing to eat food cooked or even offered by lower caste men or women.[36]

The hierarchization was overtly visible in the treatment meted out to women. Though celibacy formed a part of the ritualistic liminality of the orders, few amongst them were allowed to enter into matrimony. These monks were referred to as *gossains*. Celibacy was strictly followed and maintained by the *nagas*. But marriage was not completely unheard of among the ranks and files of the monastic order. For instance, a *gossain* of Giri sub-order could select anyone form other sub-orders but could not marry a woman of his own sub-order. Dasnamis are also known to have entered into matrimonial alliances with women of Brahmin caste and to have engaged in profession of cultivation. However, such alliances and the resultant progeny did not have any hierarchical claim to the leadership of the sub-order. Usually the leader nominated one of his disciples as his successor. The widows of the Dasnami monks were entitled to maintenance. But apart from that they had no claims over the wealth or administration of the sub-order. The Dasnamis were also practiced concubines. Many females formed a part of the household of a Dasnami monk not as legally wed wives, but as concubines. As a result Umrao Giri, the brother of Anup Giri had six sons of his own and three illegitimate children. The family of Umrao Giri was popularly known as *gossains* of Rasdhania and of Himmat Bahadur as Bandawala.[37] Thus, once they entered the ascetic order their old caste lineages were discarded in favour of new ones that reformed caste hierarchies in a new form and stature.

Juxtaposed to the marital relations and concubine practiced by the *gossains* stood the *yogic* practices of the *nagas*. Unlike the gossains who did not practice celibacy the Nagas (derived from the word nanga or naked) Dasnami ascetics had five *gurus*: *Mantra Guru*, *Langtoti Guru*, *Bibhuti Guru*, *Trishul Guru* and *Bija Guru*. The first four *Gurus* ensures the initiation of the new inductees from the liminal phase into a

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36 James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 6, (New York 1981), pp. 192-193.

37 H.R. Neviell, *Gazetteer of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Vol. I, (Allahabad, 1877), p. xxiv.

phase of aggregation by granting them *guru mantras*, ochre coloured loin cloth (symbolizing renunciation and simple living), the art of wearing *bibhuti* or ashes and the sacred trident (symbol of Shiva) for the defence of the order, respectively. Unlike the other *gurus* it was the duty of the Bija *Guru* was to acquaint a newly initiated with the *tangtora* ceremony. He acted as the semen preceptor who instructed the initiated candidate to masturbate and to offer that semen into the sacred fire as a sacrifice. Initiated Dasnami ascetic had to jerk hard on the male genitals (first to the left and then to the right) not only to control the body but also to disrupt the muscles, blood–vessels and nerves quintessential for erection. Often a special type of knife was used to sever the tissues of the genitals. Gross surmises, such practices emanated from the philosophical believe that it would ensure the end of sexual desires, hence, permanently damaging any chance of participation in worldly elusion.[38]

It helped them to prevent seminal loss, meaning prevention of the loss of sexual energy that allowed them to retain their spiritual power or the *Kundalini Shakti*.[39] Celibacy practiced by the *nagas* combined distancing of oneself from women with practice of controlling external physical desires. The loss of semen to carnal desires, the *nagas* believed, had an emasculating effect that took away their spiritual vigour. So alongside the practices of yogic postures like *mulabandha*, the contradicting of the anal, sphincter muscles *Vajrolikriya*[40] that subsumed their carnal desires, they also took the help of psychedelic elements like *ganja*. Consumption of *ganja* helped psychic transcendence that mellowed and reduced their instinctive desire for physical pleasures. Unlike the householder *gosains* who preached and practiced domestic sexuality, for the *naga* ascetics sexuality represented vigour, encapsulated in the *oja-shakti* (potency) or the semen that needed to channelize not for petty carnal desires but greater spiritual understanding and union. Gross noted the significance of rejection of sexual pleasure as a process of initiation by which the *nagas* enter the ascetic world of liminality.

The practices associated with *gossain* and *naga* order served as a means for institutionalizing the liminal or in-between nature of asceticism. Most importantly, sexuality played a key role in determining the place of each, rather subjectivity of each, in this liminal state. True, Turner[41] envisioned liminality in the same way as Arnold van Gennepp[42] had done before him, as a stage of many possibilities. But the

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38 Gross, op. cit., p. 346
39 Ibid., pp, 248-49.
40 Ibid., p. 345.
41 Turner, op.cit., p. 34.
42 A.V. Gennepp, The *Rites of Passage*, (Chicago 1960), pp. 57-62.

power-knowledge equation existing within the framework of ascetic order remained referential to the socio-sexual reformed within the boundary of ascetic liminality.[43] Thus, wandering ascetics reformed a possibility unique to their sub-order. Though being different from the existing social order, at least in terms of inclusion of lower castes and women, and practice of sexuality, hierarchization of the liminal sub-set that they created led to the emergence of a trope unique to their order, in-between yet referential to the existing social order.

Pre-Modern Commodity Fetishism: Into the Military and Spiritual Labour Market

Kabir, a pre-modern religious reformer, and poet Sudan[44] gave a harrowingly different account of wandering ascetics. The former identified them as uncouth and false[45], while to the latter they emerged as epitome of heroism and justice.[46] It seems moving beyond the idea and practice of asceticism, propounded (or if in a very Marxist sense- produced) by the sub-order, it acquired a fantastic life of its own accorded to it by branding. Different accounts of the sub-order emerged due to varied propaganda of such fantastic proportion. Such different accounts of a same group of people leaves one wondering about the true purpose of these ascetic sub-orders. The very in-between nature of asceticism needs to be analysed in the context of pre-modernity, the liminal time that lay betwixt between the rise of the colonial empire and the end of the Mughal imperium. It was a time of reinvention when centralizing forces were being replaced by more localised and regional authorities. Resources were redirected from centre to the locals. Naturally markets were accordingly reformulated. A shift of market was in order from the centralized capitals to more local centres of trade. Into this volatile market scenario of eighteenth century spirituality and warrior asceticism, itself a liminal trope, claimed a separate space for itself. To understand the nature of the spiritual and military services provided by the ascetics in an all-India perspective one needs to pay close attention to the patronage/branding they received from regional powers. Supported by both the common people and the regional powers the Dasanamis continued their military activities unhindered.

The spiritual plane that the ascetics created and dwelled in offered services to people across South Asia. Owing to their *Yogic* practices the Dasnamis they could make the

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43 G.C. Spivak, "Imperialism and Sexual Difference", *Oxford Literary Review*, 1986, pp. 225-40.
44 Sudan, *Sujan Charit*, (Varanasi 1906), pp. 147-174.
45 S.N. Sinha, *Mid- Gangetic Region in the 18th Century, Some Observations of Joseph Tiffenthaler*, (New Delhi1976), pp. 78-79.
46 Pinch, op. cit., pp. 247-254.

body symmetrical and virtually immovable. *Yogic* postures helped them control their breathing processes and stimulated their *Kundalini Sakti* or spiritual force lying at the base of the spine. Thus, retention of sexual energy was not a means of maintaining celibacy but a part of the spiritual experience and service that they could provide to the people. Spirituality of the ascetic had a physical presence. The elements of nakedness (naga, *nanga)*, matted hair (*jata)*, and ashes (*khak; bibhuti*) signified the ritual and magical status of ascetics, separating them and the mysticism they held from the rest. With a complete disregard for personal appearance the ascetics wore matted hairs, went about naked and smeared their body with ashes. In complete disregard of the social norm of decency the ascetics went about in social gatherings, yet earned not displeasure but respect for this very element.

Bhandaras served as the primary spiritual market for the ascetics. It formed a part of various religious congregations. For instance, Kumbh *Mela* functioned as one such religious congregation or spiritual market where the ascetics gathered to propagandize their efficacy of their spiritual skills and the benefits of the service. During *Guru Purnima* Dasnami *mahanth* seated himself on a silver throne or a *singhasana* and this served as a ritualistic gathering of lay devotees and ascetic disciples of the *mahanth* to pay their habitual obeisance to the spiritual leader. Mostly paid in cash the habitual obeisance comprised of surrendering their yearlong alms collection to the *mahanth*. '*Guru Purnima* serves to strengthen the bonds between members of sectarian sub-divisions by recognizing common linkages'.[47] Gross is of the opinion; the performance enacted at *bhandaras* was a means of strengthening the bonds between lay men and the ascetics.[48] Financed by wealthy men *such* religious congregations played the part of a spiritual market well where laymen/buyers gathered to look upon the skills and services available, and ascribe accordingly. Here, the exchange of spiritual product occurred not through change of hand of money, but through donations and patronage.

Obscure mysticism of the ascetics was propagandized by the mystics at religious congregations like fairs, as well. These emerged as spaces where the wandering ascetics demonstrated with pomp and show their spiritual vigour. The extreme penance demonstrated by *Urdhabahus* found near Parasuram Kund, which was a Shaivite pilgrimage centre in Assam, can be a point of reference. They would keep their right hand extended upwards using their left hand for daily activities. This was a way of transcending the social norms and entering a ground of union with the

[47] Gross, op. cit., p. 318.
[48] Ibid., p. 316.

Supreme. Such extreme penance exhibited as a part and parcel of their *tapasya* or *sadhana* could not be achieved through physical penance alone. It always was combined with consumption of psychedelics like *ganja* and *charas* that helped them to rise above the normative structure of the society. In an elevated state of mind the body of the ascetic went beyond the pains and pangs of the worldly life and physical plane. It entered a stage where they did not feel any physical pain, not because of their spiritual abilities, but due to the effect of the intoxicating psychedelics they consumed. Nonetheless, the spiritual influence of the show they put up due to it certainly made them revered and extremely sought by the laity. Few mendicants were found who even 'to assist this process, heavy rocks are tied to the end of the penis…In these ritual competitions, boulders weighing as much as fifty pounds or greater were tied to the penis and lifted off the ground in an attempt to demonstrate who among them possessed the highest degree of self-control and non-attachment to sexual arousal'.[49] The obscurity of these Hindu mystic cults largely depended on their spectacularity. It was something that set them apart from the social norms, and distinguished them as deviants, but the spiritual spectacularity of the performance earned them the reverence and awe of the people. Perhaps, it will not be too out of place to refer to them as the Marvel comics' superheroes of the early age who demonstrated powers and feats unthinkable for a normal human being. But to people it was not abnormal in a pejorative sense; it was revered by them as a supernatural feat that only men close to the Supreme Being could perform. The performance had panache for theatricality, something that was common to the spectacles demonstrated by most of the obscure mystical cults, but the pattern that established a connection between them was covert, not visible to undiscerning eyes, allowing each of the obscure cults to be identified as singularly different from each other. Spectacularity of the acts ensured increased adherence to the sub-order ensuring enhanced patronage and alms collection.

Sexual promiscuity formed an integral part of the spiritual performance that the ascetics presented before the disciples. An instance of ascetics taking advantage of women declared socially barren was quite common to the pilgrimage and fairs where spiritual congregation offered a platform to the ascetics to display their superhuman qualities. In fact, indulging in socially prohibited form of sexual intercourse with either sex formed a part of their spiritual exhibitionism. Hidden in the pages of *akhra* records lay detailed account of the many dalliances of the *gossains* and the *nagas.* Deviancy of such sexual acts served as just another ladder for the ascetics to climb beyond the normative framework of the society. However, to my understanding, all

[49] Ibid., p. 346.

sexual deviancies like drinking menstrual urine, inhumanly postures of sexual intercourse formed a part of their spiritual ritual. These were not practiced by the ascetics to garner carnal pleasure alone. It featured as a part and parcel of their ritualistic performance and indulgence in such acts was a ritualistic means to stepping from one ritual self to another, as in any communitarian tribal society. Intoxication and influence of psychedelics had a catalytic effect on their ritualistic performance. Interactions with the ascetics and personal interviews with them have convinced me that without the insinuating impact of such sense-enhancing *ganja* and *charas* they could not have engaged in acts of unrestrained sexuality. Whether it helped them attain superior spiritual plane or not that is debatable and not wholly ascertainable through narration of these isolated incidents. But it certainly does attest ascetics were banded together in a ritualistic hierarchy where before attaining transcendence one had to attain superior spirituality in the ascetic hierarchy to allow them to maintain their membership of the community.

Royal patronage for the ascetic orders further attests the sway their mysticism held over the ruling authorities of the sub-continent. It is noteworthy that the ascetics served as moneylenders and revenue-farmers in a socio-economic system largely monopolised by the aristocrats and nobility marked with distinction by the royalty.[50] These were men of the spiritual realm who were responsible for communion with the Supreme. Yet, as the sources suggest, they were engaged in worldly affairs such as these. A Marathi source refers to the grant of rent-free tenure in Khandesh by Alamgir II to Turant Giri.[51] Emergence of the tradition of granting *lakhiraj* or rent-free tenure to ascetics was begun to acknowledge the spiritual services of the ascetics.[52] Fifty-five *bighas* of land in the village of Cundrah in the *pargana* Afferowmah in Allahabad were given to the Sannyasis.[53] In 1711, Hirdya Sal and Jugut Raj, sons of the Prince Chattrasal of Bundelkhand, granted rent-free tenures to Mohun Giri for the services rendered by the Sannyasis.[54] Though the records do not specify what kind of services were provided by the ascetics, attestation from other sources raises the speculation that perhaps the ascetics granted both spiritual and military services to the royalties, in return for which they received rent-free tenures.

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50 Muzaffar Alam, "Some Aspects of the Changes in the Position of the Madad-i-Maash Holders in Oudh, 1676-1722", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 35, 1974, pp. 121-132.

51 Hari Gir & Prithwi Gir, *Gosavi Vatyacha Sampradaya*, (*History of the Gossains and their Communities*), (Baroda 1901), p. 261.

52 S.N. Sinha, op. cit., p.11.

53 Correspondence and Proceedings of the Resident at Benares 30 July 1789, Allahabad Regional Archives, Allahabad, pp. 469-72.

54 T.A.V. Row & T.S.K. Row (eds.), *The Indian Decisions (Old Series)*, Vol. 6, (Madras 1925), p. 735.

The rise of Dasanamis as obscure mystic cults needs to be contextualized alongside the rise of Indian regional powers. This will allow us to understand the distinctive pattern of fragmentary power structure held together by a semblance of regalia. Whether they were 'nuclear zones of power' or centralization of peripheral spectres or simply a Leviathan State stood upon something more than armours, swords, soldiers and horses. Giorgio Agamben rightly places this foundation on 'glory'. Beginning with the foundation of the Islamic empire of the Sultanate in the northern part of the subcontinent the foundation of the Mughal Empire was propped precariously on a balance between the Islamic identity and the identity of the subject population. Several barriers set them apart, be it language or culture. Nonetheless, the reign of the rulers of the medieval era stands out as a glorious mystique. What lends them this 'glorious mystique'? The glory of the empire largely depended on the mystical glory shared with them by religious men because it was, no doubt, the age of the Gods. The passage of the glory assumed different forms in various parts of the world but none as syncretistic as in the subcontinent. In this chapter, the trajectory of the nexus between the obscure mystic cults and the State powers will be discussed to unravel the mystery of the glory that the State assumed in the medieval era. There was no uniform kind of interaction between the secular authorities and the religious *Gurus*. Some cases of conflict would occur between the nagas, gosains, sangyogis with the state, whereas, there was no such conflict of the Islamic dervishes like Madaris, Malangs, Qalandars either with the state authority or the regional zamindars. But after the coming of English, situation began to change and bloody conflicts arose between the secular authority of English East India Company and the local zamindars who were acting as lackeys of the English East India Company

How and why was the spiritual influence of these ascetics, who mostly shunned social interactions, and lived a life recluse, leave a lasting impact on the minds of the people? In order to address this question one can draw a leaf out of the description of the Hindu wandering ascetics left behind by Kabir. He was vehement in his opposition of the ascetics as false sadhus or hermits because they indulged in worldly affairs. In context of the reallocation of resources to the regional authorities of the eighteenth century two things had definitely waned from the political scenario of the subcontinent- centralized authority and standing army. What remained were vestiges of self-trained, militant peasantry who had been identified as recalcitrant tenants since the agrarian disturbances of the late Mughal period.[55] These men offered their

[55] J.F. Richards, "Warriors and the State in Early Modern India", *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 47, 2004, pp. 390-400.

services for the infantry and as musketeers, because they lacked proper training in the use of the new gunpowder technology and did not have a horse of their own. Kolff,[56] Gommans[57] have applied the labour market theory to the late Mughal period to show how the vagrant peasantry did not wile away as victims of an oppressive system, but took up arms to earn their livelihood. But what seems wholly absent in their discussion finds a glean in the academic attempts of Pinch. He has tried to identify the Hindu ascetics as a major source of military labour in the labour market through an analysis of the lives of Anup Giri and Rajendra Giri. But even Pinch has missed out one fine point about the involvement of these ascetics, recluse and spiritual men, into worldly affairs. Perhaps, a detailed analysis of the patronage received by these men and the reasons involved in making these endowments can illuminate the hitherto unexplored zones of ascetic military labour in context of the eighteenth century military labour market.

Granting of *madad-i-mash was* a common practice not only among the Nawabs of Bengal Presidency but also among the Nawabs of Awadh that included other chieftains or local gentry. Muzaffar Alam has shown how the grantee enjoyed hereditary rights over it and lieu of which they provided mercenary services as and when required[58.] Resultantly most of the *madad-i-mash* holders began to conduct themselves like semi-independent chieftains. William Sleeman refers to them as an 'unquiet spirit' for which they were not only displaced or downgraded but removed from their position as and when the East India Company implemented revenue maximization policies. Though the Dasanami Nagas, *Yogis* or Sang-Yogis served as mercenaries to the regional powers they were often removed from their services as they lacked military skill.

It appears that Akbar, the Mughal emperor not only patronized the Dasanamis and other Hindu cults, like the Vaisnava Gosains of Braja Dham as it appears from the work of Habib and Mukherjee that Akbar issued so many *sanads* for temple management of the Vaisnava gosains that 'providing bases for delineating salient features of the Brajabhumi grants during the reigns of Jahāngīr (1605–27) and Shāhjahān (1628–58). Like the *farmāns* of Akbar, these too specified an ever-expanding list of officials who were expected to get the terms of grants implemented without any hindrance. According to Habib and Mukherjee ' Further, the grants of the two phases also contained lists of exemptions/privileges granted to the donees. High

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56 Kolff, 1990, pp. 78-79.

57 J.J.L. Gommans, *Mughal Warfare: Indian Frontiers and High Roads to Empire, 1500-1700*, (London 2002), pp. 25-27.

58 Muzaffar Alam, op. cit., pp. 199-203.

officials of the state affixing their seals were another common feature. Sometimes, however, seals of more than one officer are seen on the reverse side of the Mughal *farmāns*. Akbar's *farmān*of 1598 bears seals of as many as eight officers, of which three impressions are illegible.[59] A significant seal is that of Akbar's minister Todar Mal, affixed to his *parwānha* of 1584. It bears the legend 'Todar Mal, *Banda-i Dargāh, Rāmkīpanāh*', affirming both his loyalty to Akbar, and his allegiance to Rāma. Similarly Goswamy & Grewal[60] has mentioned about the land grants in the form of *madad-i-maash* or the right to collect revenue from certain lands in jakhbar (a town in the Gurudaspur district of the state of Punjab).

Sanctions of rent-free tenures were not mere outcome of the spiritual sway of the ascetics. Rather, the prowess they demonstrated in battle fields with their bands of followers and mystical appearance made their soldierly product quite revered and most sought after in the military labour market.[61] Services provided by the warrior ascetics did not emanate from any particular attachment or loyalty towards the royalty or their nobility. These men were bands of fighters who auctioned their services to the highest bidder.[62] Being disbanded, they immediately joined the service of Mirza Najaf Khan, the Regent of Delhi, who allowed them the right to live by plunder[63] as soldiers against the British, Mughal and Rajput in the battles of Lalsot, Patan and Merta.[64] But when the strategic relationship between the Marathas and the British took a turn towards worse Anup Giri did a *volte face*and switched camps.[65]

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59 Shireen Moosvi, "Charity Objectives and Mechanisms in Mughal India (16th and 17th Centuries)", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 73, 2012, p. 336; Bashiruddin Ahmed Dihlavi (ed.), *Faramin-e-Salatin*, (Delhi 1926), p 45. The Hindu ascetics of Benaras received a grant by Akbar in 1585 (Mohammed Azhar Ansari, *Administrative Documents of Mughal India*, (New Delhi 1984), Doc. Nos. 5&6, pp. 58-59). It was further extended by Jahangir (ibid, Doc. 15, p. 65) and renewed by Shāhjahān and Aurangzeb (ibid, Doc. Nos. 8 & 16; Habib and Mukherjee, *BrajBhūm in Mughal Times*, p. 85.

60 B.N. Goswami & J. S. Grewal, *The Mughals and the Jogis of Jakhbar: Some Madad-i- Maash and Other Documents*, (Shimla, 1967), pp. 87-88.

61 Ghulam Ali Naqvi, *Imad- Us- Sadat*, (Lucknow), p. 102; Select Committee Proceedings (Select) (National Archives of India, New Delhi) October 1768; Secret Committee Proceedings (National Archives of India, New Delhi) 6 July 1776 No. 4; J. N. Sarkar, *Readings in History of Hindusthan, 1782-1789* ,(Sitamau , 1941),p.132; William Franklin, *Military Memoirs of George Thomas*, Franklin,(London 1805), Appendix iii, p. 270.

62 A.L. Srivastava, *Shuja-ud-Daullah (1754-1765)*, Vol. I. (Calcutta 1939), p. 48; Secret Committee Proceedings 24 April 1775, No. 9.

63 Jadunath Sarkar, 'French Mercenaries in the Jat Campaign of 1775—1776', *Bengal Past and Present*, (January—June), 1936, pp. 75-83; Kalikaranjan Kanungo, *History of the Jats: A Contribution to the History of Northern India*, Vol. I, (Calcutta 1925), pp. 189-190.

64 Orr, op. cit, pp. 88-89.

65 AnupGiri allied with Ali Bahadur in the conquest of Bundelkhand. But the Maratha Government's plan to turn Bundelkhand into a base of operation threatening to violate the

Though Pinch analyses Anup Giri's alliance as a defensive strategy, in essence it was an arrangement of convenience for all the involved parties. It would not be wrong to hypothesize it as a stop-gap arrangement quite representative of the time and environment in which it unfolded.

The services they provided earned them glorious titles that carry within itself the seeds of its supposed endowment. Rajendra Giri, a Dasnami warrior ascetic, has also been referred to as Himmat Bahadur, the second being an honorary title granted to him for his military services. The title 'Himmat', meaning bravado, was certainly an endowment in recognition of similar acts. One can deduce, from the practice of granting such titles by the Late Mughal aristocracy and nobility, the military services of these ascetics was infallible to the military labour marketof eighteenth century. In fact, in certain circumstances, their services were considered more valuable than those of armed peasants. While identifying the importance of warrior ascetics in military labour market Pinch and Kolff failed to identify this one point of immense importance. What set them apart, and esteemed more valuable than armed peasants, was a skill-set that the peasantry lacked and could not attain i.e. spiritual mysticism. The very performance of mysticism smeared in ashes, draped in a loincloth, matted and unkempt hair, and most importantly flouting every norms of social decency, the ascetics offered quite a spectacle, that was endearing, yet unnerving. This was a novelty available in the military labour market of the eighteenth century. Novelty not because of the spectacle alone; but the reverence it commanded. So singularly revered was their appearance that words spoken by them carried an added value of respect.

Armed Spirituality: Concluding Remarks

An alternate state of consciousness was laid by the meandering course of the Hindu mystical cults in the subcontinent. This also laid the foundation of an alternate plane of power. Functioning under the authority of the Islamic empires and the rising rule of law of the English East India enterprises, the wandering ascetics laid the foundation of an alternate space that was neither entirely temporal, nor completely secular; it dabbled in both. Combining the ritualistic performance of physical prowess with a clear demonstration of transcendence over and above sexual desires, as enacted in seasonal fairs, became the key identification marker of these cults. Such spectacular performance of prowess turned them into an object of reverence as well

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Treaty of Bassein (1802) led the British to dispatch a force there. In these circumstances an apprehensive AnupGiri left the Maratha camp and joined the British to assist them in the conquest of Bundelkhand. F.S. Growse, *Mathura, A District Memoir*, (Ahmedabad 1978), p. 308; W.W. Pogson, *History of the Boondelas* (Delhi, 1974), pp. 120-126.

as fear. Naturally, Eighteenth century that stood in a hazy limbo opened its doors of innumerable possibilities to such ascetic liminality. Perhaps, for that very reason many unlikely instances and situations stood facing each other. Militarisation of spiritual men as mercenaries can be analysed as the by-product of the age in which it dwelled. Raising from the ashes or *bibhuti* the ascetics occupied a central portion of the stage where the story of pre-modern India was unfolding just as the bomb of final collapse of the Empire was ticking fast. At this juncture when the old world was waning, while the new was trying hard to make inroads, the ascetics as a product of the age old became the ushered of a new age. Breaking free from the centralized standing army system of the age old the ascetics' participation in the military labour market did not just provide the Indian regional powers, but the European powers as well, with a source of military labour. The military labour provided by the ascetics was of special value because it had closely associated with it the essence of spirituality. The magical element that the appearance, attire, and the gestural activities of the ascetics accorded to the service added a reverence for their military actions, overall. Moreover, the extensive congregational association of the ascetics through trade or pilgrimage or even *akhra* network rendered them omnipotent and omniscient. Within the parameters of different regional states they had begun to function like supra-territories or, it will not be an overstatement to judge it as, a supra-state. The power and sway they held was not restricted to political or military arena alone. In terms of commercial exchange as well, as pointed out by Kolff[66] and others their network had spread widely over trading precious articles and moneylending. One reason, at the dawn of the modern age the Europeans thought it prudent to demilitarize the ascetics and to establish a unified rule of law over the entire land. They gave rise to a rather compelling image of an alternate order of things that chose the spiritual path not merely for a mystical union but also perhaps for transcending the established order of things. True, they seldom challenged the established order, but they did not let go of their unique order of things either. Perhaps for this very reason, people and the ruling authority deemed them formidable. Thus, they emerged as an enigma. People and the order, but none could deny their existence altogether which granted the alternate state of consciousness an alternate plane of existence order.

[66] Kolff, 1990, pp. 86-90; J.J.L. Gommans, op. cit. p. 22; Agamben, op. cit., pp. 27-29.

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Understanding Women's Subordination and Patriarchal Practices in the Context of *Kālidāsa*'s *Śakuntalā*: An Analysis

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the position of women in the social structure of the time and the issues of discrimination against women within the patriarchal social system of the Indian subcontinent, as portrayed in the play "*Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*". In these subcontinental societies, women have "traditionally" been considered subordinate to men, where women always had to be under the authority or control of one or multiple men. Men or husbands had the right to exercise a disproportionate power over women or their wives. *Kālidāsa*'s play *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* gives a detailed picture of the status of women in the subcontinental patriarchal society of India at that period. The author has represented the women through the portrayal of the titular character *Śakuntalā*. The text represents the Vedic period and the social system of that time, where social attitudes are reflected in the journey of our protagonist character. In that social system, the rules and regulations of society were in the hands of men and governed by patriarchy. Women were like puppets tied with strings, controlled by men. In this structure, men had been at the top of power, i.e. the superior ones. Even when the author chooses *Śakuntalā* to be the protagonist, as we will see throughout this discussion, she remains firmly in a place of inferiority, where her position is never accorded equal power to that of King *Duṣyanta*. The men are shown as superior in every stratum even in the greatest of Sanskrit plays. Mainly this is a study of contemplating the role of society in creating the distinctions in the status of women and men.

Key words: Dependency, Discrimination, Dominance, Patriarchy, Religious Barriers, *Śakuntalā*, Subordination.

Introduction

Every human society is characterized by the solidarity of men and women. Indian subcontinental historical perceptions of the status of women in earlier society show a declining trend in women's position. Analysis of the status of women in the primitive subcontinent of India reveals significant differences between women and men. This difference between men and women in those societies has come up in various ancient writings from the very beginning. Even in older Indian literature, such as ancient

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essays, stories, plays, novels, myths, and epics, the inequality between men and women has come to the fore. In this case, Indian writers *such as Mahāvīra, Bhāsa, Patañjali, Aśvaghoṣa, Śūdraka, Kālidāsa, Harṣha, Bhavabhūti, etc.,* can all be put forward as exemplary cases. *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* is the play of Mahakavi *Kālidāsa* and *Śakuntalā*, the character of this play can be very important if we want to understand the role of women in ancient history. She is the daughter of the great sage *Viśvāmitra* and the heavenly damsel *Menakā*. *Menakā* comes to earth under the instruction of *Indra* to break the intense penance of *Viśvāmitra*, but *Viśvāmitra* and *Menakā* fall in love, as a result, *Śakuntalā* is born. At one point, *Viśvāmitra* refuses to stay with his daughter and wife and *Menakā* leaves *Śakuntalā* in a forest and sage *Kaṇva* finds her and nurtures her like his own daughter. This story has essentially been taken from the epic *Mahābhārata*. Kamana Aryal mentions,

> Birth of Shakuntala is the result of Menaka's intriguing seduction to the sage who was in deep penance. The Gods [were] horrifying from the growing powers from his intense meditation and thus they sent a nymph, Menaka, to disrupt his expiation. The sage could not control himself seeing the enticing Menaka and their union gave birth to Shakuntala… Menaka was obliged to return to heaven once God's purpose was satisfied, leaving behind her child with Vishwamitra. Shakuntala was raised by her foster father, Kanva, the great sage without motherly love.[1]

Even in the age of the *Rāmāyaṇam*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the earlier Sanskrit literature, women had no better condition in this society. In *Rāmāyaṇam*, we find *Sītā* as a woman controlled by patriarchy, and this manifests most fully when she has to face humiliation from her husband even after being considered as an ideal wife, she has to pass through a death test called "Agni Pariksha" to prove her fidelity. In the *Mahābhārata* too, *Draupadī* was not treated better than the mere project of patriarchy. According to Kaur Kamaldeep:

> Draupadi is portrayed as an enigmatic woman, her experience of being the wife to five husbands, shocking even by today's standards, was never really explored. In most narratives she is the victim of patriarchy who was forced to marry all the five brothers lest they fight among themselves for her… In any case she dared not refuse the decision of her mother-in-law, Kunti, who in one masterstroke ensured that Draupadi would be bound to the Pandavas forever.[2]

Throughout the text of *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, we see how *Śakuntalā* accepts all the injustice toward her, even after being neglected and deceived by her husband like *Sītā* and *Draupadī*. Despite the ultimate humiliation of womanhood by her husband, she keeps dwelling a solitary life, engrossed in her husband's thoughts. The text is

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[1] Kamana Aryal, "The Subjugated Woman 'SELF' in Kalidas's Shakuntala", *Butwal Campus Journal*, Vol. 7(2), 2024, p. 211.

[2] Kaur Kamaldeep, "Gender and Narrative: A Comparative Analysis of The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood and The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakurni", *Caesura*, Vol. 6(1), 2019, p. 33.

always a replica of the Indian sub-continental society, where the nuances of social life are meticulously reflected by the authors. The play focuses on the critical conflict between the social system and women run by the patriarchy. From the text that we come across the treatment of women in a male-dominated patriarchal society and know about the position of *Śakuntalā* as a woman wronged by the seemingly infallible patriarchal system in Indian subcontinental society.

The paper intends to analyze the representation of women from the different aspects of society by the authors from ancient times. The sections of the core text provide us with information pertaining to the different social, political, religious, and economic roles occupied by women in the society of that time. Also, the text shows how women had been marginalized across class and caste during the period in question.

Background

There are a large number of critics who have explored the position of women in Indian subcontinental society. Especially, M. R. Kale[3], Pankaj Solanki[4], Dr. Pritilaxmi Swain[5], Ruksana Sharma Pokhrel[6], Naresh Rout[7], Mrs. Sampa Paul[8], Tanushri Mahata & Bablu Mandi[9], Kalsang Yangzom[10] have discussed the various aspects of women and women's situation in society on the basis of sex, gender, power, feminist point of view, patriarchal social system, social power relation and how gender affects the power relation between woman and man in the patriarchal society. To explain the situation of women some of them have taken many ancient female characters from ancient text as a reference. Many writers and critics have tried

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3 M. R. Kale, *The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969).

4 P. Solanki, "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory", *International Journal of English Language and Humanities*, Vol. 7(12), 2019.

5 D. P. Swain, "Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam: An Analysis", *Inter.national Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)*, Vol. 1(1), 2015, pp. 69-73. Retrieved from http://www.irjims.com

6 R. S. Pokhrel, *Representation of Women in Ancient Texts with Special Reference to Abhijanan Shakuntalam* [Master`s Dissertation], (Sikkim University, 2019).

7 Naresh Rout, "Role of Women in Ancient India", *Journal of Government of Odisha*, (January, 2016).

8 M. S. Paul, "Unheard Voice and Identity Crisis of Shakuntala: A Study of Abhijnanashakuntala", *India's Higher Education Authority UGC Approved List of Journal*, Vol. 19(4), April, 2019.

9 T. Mahata, & B. Mandi, "Social Values of Women in 2nd – 4th Century B.C with Special Reference to 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' by Kalidasa", *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, Vol. 6(6), June, 2019. Retrieved from http://www.jetir.org

10 K. Yangzom, "Abhijnana Shakuntalam: character analysis and critical perspective", *Indira Gandhi National Open University Journal*, April, 2019, pp. 33-43.

to analyze *Kālidāsa*'s *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* drama as a reference in discussing the position of women in ancient societies. Dr. Pritilaxmi Swain explains there are certain social, religious taboos which operate as social sanctions against the woman in the reference of *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* and has shown how a woman fully complies with her husband's wishes. Dr. Pritilaxmi Swain argues, "Abhijnanasakuntalam has an iconic status in the history of Indian literature and within the ideologies of nationalism and domesticity of nineteenth century elite Indian societies that drew from Brahmanical social values and still continue to dominate lives and politics in contemporary India."[11]

M. R. Kale gives a clear and vivid idea in his book "*The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*"[12] about the situation of women in the play and the different sections of this book help to understand the overall idea of the play from the historical considerations to the plot. He has also explained in detail the characteristics of the play and highlighted the different notions of understanding the position of women in early societies, where we can see the inferior position of women in all cases. Also, Pankaj Solanki in his paper "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory"[13] analyzed the patriarchal representation of *Śakuntalā* by the authors from ancient times to the present. For this purpose, he has worked on the ancient work *Kālidāsa*'s "*Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*" with the reference of the modern work "*Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*" by Namita Gokhale[14]. Pankaj Solanki mentions, "Shakuntala is representative of women's situation in patriarchal Indian society. In patriarchal Indian society women have been treated as men's subordinate. However, they have been hailed as goddesses all the time but at the same time they have been put under control of men made rules and regulations."[15]

Besides all these works, also Arthur W. Ryder[16], Oasis Kodila Tedika and Simplice A. Asongu[17], Tanushri Mahata and Bablu Mandi, D. M. Singh[18], Aswathy Cheriyan[19],

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11 D. P. Swain, "Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam: An Analysis", *International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)*, Vol. 1(1), 2015, p. 69. Retrieved from http://www.irjims.com

12 M. R. Kale, *The Abhijnana Shakuntalam of Kalidasa*. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1969).

13 P. Solanki, "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory", *International Journal of English Language and Humanities*, Vol. 7(12), 2019

14 Namita Gokhale, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory*, (Viking India, 2005).

15 P. Solanki, "A Comparative Study of Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam and Namita Gokhale's Shakuntala: The Play of Memory", *International Journal of English Language and Humanities*, Vol. 7(12), 2019, p. 222

16 A. W. Ryder, *Kalidasa Shakuntala*, (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 1999).

Uma Chakravarti[20], Dr. Hiren H. Trivedi[21] and more eminent writers have discussed the women's position in society as a place of superiority or inferiority from different points of views. Dr. Hiren H. Trivedi mentions about the time of *Śakuntalā*, "Woman, in those days, considered her husband a deity. Service and obedience to the husband was believed to be the highest ideal of woman's life. She was respected as the mother in the society."[22]

Kālidāsa has a rich and unique achievement to the Sanskrit literature of the Indian subcontinent. He is considered to be the greatest dramatist and the poet in the Sanskrit literature and *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam* is the marvelous masterpiece work of *Kālidāsa*. Regarding *Kālidāsa*'s period, Santanu Chakrabortty mentions,

> Kalidasa was a court poet of Agnimitra Sunga (second century BC) who lived during the years of the Sunga Empire 184 BC to 78 BC. According to the belief, Kalidasa made Agnimitra Sunga the protagonist of his first play Malavikagnimitran. Another view of Kalidasa's period places him in first century BC during the reign of Vikramaditya of Ujjain, around 57 BCT.[23]

There is a third opinion regarding *Kālidāsa*'s period in the 5th century. Arthur Berriedale Keith mentions, "Kalidasa lived before A.D. 472, and probably at a considerable distance so that to place him about A.D. 400 seems completely justified."[24] It can be said with some certainty that *Kālidāsa* lived before the 6th century A.D., i.e., about 1400 years ago. *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, the pinnacle of *Kālidāsa*'s works, mirrors the condition of women of conventional subcontinental society. Through this text, we see the social, economic, political, and religious undervaluation of women in that period, as well as men's attitudes towards women in

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17 O. K. Tedika & S. A. Asongu, "Women in Power and Power of Women: The Liberian Experience", *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2017.

18 D. M. Singh, "Understanding Nature Through Literature: An Eco-critical Study of Kalidasa`s Abhijnana Shakuntalam", *Journal of Interdisciplinary Cycle Research*, Vol. 11(6), June, 2019.

19 A. Cheriyan, "Representation of Harmonious Relation Between Man and Nature in The Abhijnana Shakuntalam", *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation Studies (IJELR)*, Vol. 3(4), 2016. Retrieved from http://www.irjims.com

20 U. Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste through Feminist Lens*, (Calcutta: Stree, 2003).

21 D. H. Trivedi, "Women-Through the Ages: A Literary Study", *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 1(7), September, 2013.

22 Ibid, p. 32

23 Santanu Chakrabortty, "A Brief Discussion on Kalidas*", International Journal of Humanities Social Science and Management (IJHSSM)*, Vol. 4(5), 2024, p. 102.

24 Arthur Berriedale Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 82.

society and their limitations. Based on *Śakuntalā*'s recognition, the play is divided into seven acts.

According to Pritilaxmi Swain, the story was already nascent in *Mahābhārata*, but *Kālidāsa* had embellished it beyond recognition with a lot of innovations. This drama provides a very effective context for dissecting the concept of gender from different perspectives within the Indian subcontinent and explains it in terms of contemporary social structure. According to Ruksana Sharma Pokhrel, in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, the age of Chandra Gupta II, women were the objects of enjoyment, and they did not enjoy a high position in society. In terms of women's condition of that period, the text can be divided into three parts. In the first part of the play, *Śakuntalā* is presented as an ordinary obedient and weak woman in the forest hermitage, she is seen as a provider of nurturing and caring for household items and whose main purpose is solely marriage and husband's service, or in a word, dependency.[25] We also see that she has physical intercourse with *Duṣyanta* only when she is assured of marriage like the conventional and rather convenient (for patriarchy) portrait of a woman of the Indian subcontinent. For a child, only the father can be the main protector, maintainer, and guardian in the family, which has been forcefully implanted in women's heads for ages by the patriarchy. In the second part, we can see the rejection, the ultimate humiliation of femininity and defendant inferiority, which *Śakuntalā* has to accept like a puppet of patriarchy. Here we see that, even after being rejected and humiliated by her husband *Duṣyanta*, she leaves without protesting for her own rights, her unborn child's rights in the royal palace of King *Duṣyanta*. According to patriarchal norms, the husband's house becomes a woman's main address after marriage and remains so even after becoming a widow. Simultaneously, society forces women to stay in their husband's house until their death and do not allow them to remarry, but men can be freely polygamous. In the third part, we see *Duṣyanta*'s acceptance of *Śakuntalā* and *Bharata* as his wife and son, where *Śakuntalā* accepts *Duṣyanta* as her husband without any protest, without any objection, even after living a solitary life in a forest for a long time because of her husband's rejection. This is where the plight of Indian women exceeds that of *Penelope* (*Odyssey*) in the Greek epics. The character *Penelope* is taken from the epic *Odyssey*. *Odyssey* is one of the greatest ancient Greek epic poems of Homer. Later in 1998 Silvana La Spina wrote a novel in that context named *Penelope*. According to Greek mythology, *Penelope* was the daughter of the *Icarius* and the *Periboea* of Sparta and the wife of the greatest Greek hero

[25] R. S. Pokhrel, *Representation of Women in Ancient Texts with Special Reference to Abhijnana Shakuntalam* [Master`s Dissertation], (Sikkim University, 2019).

Odysseus. After the Trojan War she waited twenty years for her husband *Odysseus* to return. During that period, she had to fend off more than a hundred suitors and endure persecution from the gods and goddesses. According to Kaur Kamaldeep, "In the myth Penelope is shown as a chaste and patient woman who waits endlessly for her husband, while Odysseus beds every nymph and siren he can get his hands on."[26] *Penelope* was a woman who sacrificed herself for her husband's satisfaction by repulsing her being, this what a man expects from a woman in every traditional patriarchal society.

The Portrayal of *Śakuntalā* as a Weak Woman

Kālidāsa himself has portrayed *Śakuntalā* as a product of the patriarchal society. At the first glance of the play *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, we see how our protagonist *Śakuntalā* as a woman becomes a secondary character in the presence of the characteristics of the male character *Duṣyanta*. Here in the first few scenes, we see King *Duṣyanta* entering while holding a bow and arrow and riding a chariot in pursuit of a deer. The chariot picks up speed and the king prepare to shoot. *Duṣyanta* is introduced as a man of power who hunts in the forest. On the other hand, *Śakuntalā* is introduced as a common woman in the forest hermitage, as a character with weak features. Here in the text, she is described as engaged in the cultivation and production process. The women in the text remain engaged in agriculture, where the watering of the plants, the nurturing, and the collection processes are clearly mentioned, while men are portrayed as hunters. *Śakuntalā* is relegated here to a role of nurturing with weak characteristics. Apud Melchiorre (as cited in Angelica Nicoleta Neculaesei) argues:

> Differentiation leads also to inequality by provided stereotypes. In general, gender stereotypes devalue woman, who is regarded as being inferior to man, without the capacity to reason, as it appears in Aristotle or Jacque Rousseau's works. They associate her with passivity, renunciation, structural weakness/fragility, or lack of virtues, as opposed to masculine traits seen as positive ones.[27]

By differentiating the stereotypes given in the play, *Śakuntalā* has also been cast into inequality as a female character in *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*. She is shown inferior in position in front of the character *Duṣyanta*. *Śakuntalā*'s first introduction, behavioral features, conversations with her confidants, not protesting even after her husband's rejection, accepting her husband without any objection: all these embodiments of

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[26] Kaur Kamaldeep, "Gender and Narrative: A Comparative Analysis of The Penelopiad by Margaret Atwood and The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakurni", *Caesura*, Vol. 6(1), 2019, p. 37.

[27] A. N. Neculaesei, "Culture and Gender Role Differences", *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, Vol. 17(1), January, 2015, p. 34.

self-abnegation, inertia, tenderness, non-confrontational nature and lack of courage have left *Śakuntalā* in a position of inequality in terms of superior characteristic features. We see in patriarchal society that women have always been kept in a lower place in society in terms of gender stereotypes, and *Kālidāsa* also portrayed *Śakuntalā* in the same way. In terms of social acceptance, these injustices have been taken as positive and *Śakuntalā*'s fate and curse have been blamed rather than the patriarchal social system for the adverse treatment she suffers. Even a great author like *Kālidāsa* comes across as a champion of patriarchy in this play. So, we see how *Śakuntalā* has faced discrimination as a female character in the text by the author himself.

Religious Barriers and Values

In the play, women are relegated to an inferior position through some Vedic Hindu ritualistic thoughts and it shows how the caste system created inequality in Vedic Hindu society. We see here how this determines the character traits in this play. In the beginning of the play after seeing *Śakuntalā*, King *Duṣyanta* tries to determine *Śakuntalā*'s suitability as his lover and wife and then he thinks about her caste. From the English translation of W. A. Ryder, we can see *Duṣyanta* thinks thus, "King: may I hope that she is the hermit's daughter by a mother of a different caste."[28] This is because a man of a higher classes can't marry a girl of the lower class. From the information of K. Yangzom, "A man can marry a woman who is of the same caste or one caste lower."[29] We find *Duṣyanta* and *Śakuntalā* belong to the same caste, so as to appease the elite and normative audience of that period. In the Vedic period, social values depended a lot on the caste. Tanushri Mahata & Bablu Mandi argues,

> Social values form an important part of the culture of a society. Values account for the stability of social order. They provide the general guidelines for social conduct. Values such as fundamental rights, patriotism, respect for human dignity, rationality, sacrifice, individuality, equality, democracy, etc. guide our behavior in many ways.[30]

Śakuntalā's acceptance as a suitable wife or lover was questioned here also by the caste system in the face of a religious order, which is controlled in hindsight by the male-dominated system. In the case of *Śakuntalā*, her father's main concern was to give her daughter to a well casted worthy husband, thereby restoring her caste in

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[28] A. W. Ryder, *Kalidasa Shakuntala*, (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 1999), p. 11.

[29] K. Yangzom, "Abhijnana Shakuntalam: character analysis and critical perspective", *Indira Gandhi National Open University Journal*, April, 2019, p. 40.

[30] T. Mahata and B. Mandi, "Social Values of Women in 2nd – 4th Century B.C with Special Reference to 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam' by Kalidasa", *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research (JETIR)*, Vol. 6(6), June, 2019, p. 1417

society, and one of the reasons *Kaṇva* accepted *Duṣyanta* as his daughter's husband was because of his wealth and his upper caste. Women were seen as an obstacle to society and its religion, as can be seen through this example. They were completely obedient to the male members of her family, like husband, father, son, etc. On the other hand, the husband had jurisdiction to marry more women at the same time. Naresh Rout mentions-

> During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women's liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without their husband's permission. They became worse off in the Gupta period. The Smritishastras abused them; Manu dictated a woman would be dependent on her father in childhood, on her husband in youth, and on her son in old age. Apart from child marriage and Sati, prostitution and the Devadasi system became widespread.[31]

Dependency and Subordination

We see a kind of practice especially among the Hindus in the Indian subcontinent since Vedic times, where the most senior male person in the family was at the root of all actions and decisions. In that social system, the rules and regulations of society were in the hands of men and governed by patriarchy. Women were like puppets tied with strings, controlled by men. We see in the play *Śakuntalā* was adopted by rishi *Kaṇva* and he became her sole parent. As narrated in the text, we come to know that *Kaṇva* wants her daughter to be married off to a worthy husband so that *Śakuntalā* after her marriage can be in a good position in her husband's house, both financially and socially. From the point of view of Amy Blackstone's paper "Gender Roles and Society"[32], it can be said that *Śakuntalā* had been considered as a weak woman in her family from the beginning, and the desire of her father to marry her daughter to a wealthy rich man shows her status as a dependent. *Śakuntalā* remains a woman in subordinate roles with elements of serving and nurturing male dreams and desires. It is clearly visible here how gendered norms portrayed women as weak before patriarchal society. Amy Blackstone says at one point-

> Gender roles are the roles that men and women are expected to occupy based on their sex…. Therefore, the traditional view of the feminine gender role prescribes that women should behave in ways that are nurturing. One way that a woman might engage in the traditional feminine gender role would be to nurture her family by working full-time within the home rather than taking employment outside of the home.[33]

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[31] Naresh Rout, "Role of Women in Ancient India", *Journal of Government of Odisha*, January, 2016, p. 42.

[32] Amy Blackstone, "Gender Roles and Society", *An Encyclopedia of Children, Families, Communities, and Environments*, 2003, pp. 335–338.

[33] Ibid, p. 337

So, we can see from this concept how the social system presents a woman in society from the patriarchal point of view. On the other hand, the marriage of *Śakuntalā* to *Duṣyanta* bestowed upon her the position of a queen, but it did not ensure any form of inheritance to property. There are no indications in the text that women have the right to property under any circumstance. The patriarchal society rules the system in a way so that a woman has to be dependent on a man both before marriage and after marriage, and in this context, D. P. Swain argues, "The widow could not inherit her husband's property in those days; she was simply entitled to maintenance…. They are recognized as the oppressed class of society and merely a puppet in the hands of a male-dominating society."[34] Since Vedic times Hindu women had no right in property and this was one of the major reasons behind their dependence. As a result, they become dependent on their male family members, such as son, father, and husband. They always had to be subservient to men and freedom was controlled by patriarchy. Society was following the patriarchal posterity women were subjected to gender discrimination socially, politically, culturally and economically in subcontinental Indian society. Here, the male members of a family exert greater control over the economy than the female members, and men consequently experience greater power in society than women. Throughout the entire play, *Śakuntalā* remains a victim of this situation. Being a woman, she could not free or independent to do anything of her own accord, and neither does it cross her mind. In this system women were controlled by certain social and religious restrictions controlled by men which she had to follow.

Male Dominance and *Pativratā*

Śakuntalā is portrayed as a woman living firmly under the frame of Patriarchy. But on the other side, *Śakuntalā*'s mother was an Apsara/Celestial being. According to K. Yangzom, "Apsaras are known for their disorderly femininity, in the sense that these women are not controlled by the strictures of the patriarchal mortal world. They are, mostly, free to act on their own accord and are seen as more sexually free than mortal women."[35] In the play we see *Śakuntalā* once went to the *Duṣyanta*'s house and claims her status as his wife. He regards her as another's wife and when she tells him about her pregnancy, he accuses *Śakuntalā* of being opportunistic and falsely

[34] D. P. Swain, "Social Values of Women in Abhijnanasakuntalam: An Analysis", *Inter.national Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)*, Vol. 1(1), 2015, p. 72.

[35] K. Yangzom, "Abhijnana Shakuntalam: character analysis and critical perspective", *Indira Gandhi National Open University Journal*, April, 2019, p. 38.

claiming another's child as the King's. This statement shows how a man in a patriarchal society exercises patriarchal power over a woman and *Śakuntalā* falls victim to that power. Amy Blackstone argues, "A feminist perspective would assert that men tend to hold more power in their marriages than women since men are less likely to lose power or social status if their marriages dissolve"[36] and *Duṣyanta* has used that power over *Śakuntalā* as a practitioner of patriarchy. It is clear that the actual position of a female protagonist in the play and her situation reflect the status of women in the Indian subcontinental society of that period, where the female protagonist becomes a puppet of the patriarchal social system. At that period, women were comparatively subordinate to men and powerless being.

The play shows how *Śakuntalā* has been neglected in her life and struggled for an identity of husband. Even *Śakuntalā*'s companions who grew up together in the hermitage house, try to convince her that now her husband is everything in her life, her only goal is to get his husband's recognition as a wife and to take care of him. In the fifth act, we see King *Duṣyanta* denying her existence, and then *Śakuntalā*'s plan to return to hermit house but her companions *Sarangrava* and *Gautami* refuse to take *Śakuntalā* to the hermitage. According to the translation by W. A. Ryder, *Sarangrava* and *Gautami* tell *Śakuntalā*: "If you deserve such scorn and blame what will your father do with your shame but if you know your vows are pure, obey your husband and endure."[37] After that *Śakuntalā* goes to the forest and lives a solitary life with the desire to get her husband back again. So, we see here the inferior position of women formed by patriarchy in the play. Amy Blackstone argues, "Because men are expected to be the primary breadwinners for their families, women often find themselves to be in poverty if their marriages dissolve."[38] These issues of patriarchy point to women to be loyal to their husband and achieve the husband's devotion by nurturing the senior members, husband and children of the family in maintenance and domestic work. The reason here is that woman has been seen only from the male point of view. Here she is an element of the society formed by male dominated society and patriarchal values. They are shaped as maidservants of men within the framework of religious and social norms covered by patriarchy for the man. Where a

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[36] Amy Blackstone, "Gender Roles and Society", *An Encyclopedia of Children, Families, Communities, and Environments*, 2003, p. 337.

[37] A. W. Ryder, *Kalidasa Shakuntala*, (Cambridge, Ontario: Parentheses Publications, 1999), p. 60.

[38] Amy Blackstone, "Gender Roles and Society", *An Encyclopedia of Children, Families, Communities, and Environments*, 2003, p. 337.

woman is advised to be dependent on her husband's house even after accepting all the discrimination and inattention. After her rejection by *Duṣyanta*, she leaves her husband's house and does not even fight to assert her rights there. After leaving and being unrecognized by her husband, she lives an ascetic life and does penance to get her husband back. She lived in the forest dedicating her life to her husband and blames her fate for this situation. She was a representative of a typical and expected Indian woman, who herself carried the idea of a patriarchal social system. Also in the epic *Rāmāyaṇam*, especially in *Uttara Kanda*, *Sītā*'s ordeal and her exile, which was done to prove her chastity and purity, show twice the conquest and complete subordination of a woman. Another example is *Lakṣmaṇa*'s wife, Urmilā, who set a dignified example of the sacrifices a woman had to make in ancient India. *Śakuntalā* is another succession in these tales told by men to appease their conscience regarding how they had enslaved women. *Śakuntalā* hits harder as she is a character in literature, not mythos or religious tales. She waits for a long time for a husband who has disavowed her. And when *Duṣyanta* comes to take her back, she forgives him without a word. Here *Śakuntalā* characterized herself as a *Pativratā* woman, whose main purpose is to take care of the family members, husband, and raise children. *Kālidāsa* portrayed the character in the shape of an Indian sub-continental *Pativratā* woman who turned her husband's wishes into her own, even after being neglected and cheated by her husband. This is exactly how Śakuntalā portrays herself as a traditional, conventional subcontinental Indian woman.

We know that in patriarchal societies, women are treated as men's subordinates. Women are like puppets tied with strings controlled by men. They are not allowed to be free or independent to pursue their wishes. They are rather elements of serving and nurturing male dreams and desires. This discussion will help us explore the various positions of women in our society through the perspectives and characteristics of Śakuntalā as described in the play.

Conclusion

Kālidāsa presents a realistic picture of the subcontinental Indian woman in *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*, where the inferior position of women in the patriarchal social system is poignantly revealed. It can be understood through an analysis of the protagonist, Śakuntalā, in the play. She was an obedient element of Patriarchal society, where she acted as a puppet in a man's control. She is portrayed as a woman who accepts all the discrimination, inequality, and humiliation that society inflicts upon her. She remains an enchanted woman in that system, where women were

recognized only as daughters, wives, or mothers. From the point of view of the prevailing society at that time, she is an ideal woman, but in the question of equality as a daughter, as a mother, and as a wife, she becomes a living martyr of the patriarchal system. We see how the patriarchal system and the thought work to make women inferior in society and *Śakuntalā* represents a victimized woman of that system.

Since the social system of the Indian subcontinent during the Vedic period was patriarchal, only men consistently sought high status and respect. A woman was considered her husband's or her father's property, and thus their identity and respect became her own identity and honor. They were not allowed to be conscious of their own identity, and the system has never allowed women to leave the place of housework or family nurturing and work with equal dignity to men; they were never considered equal. In this text, *Śakuntalā* represents a far wider class. She struggles to establish her husband's identity as her own and repeatedly fails. We find *Śakuntalā* as a conventional *Pativratā* woman who is bound in the frame of patriarchy. As a representative of the subcontinental traditional Hindu woman, *Śakuntalā*'s position was in an inferior place as compared to men. In this article, we see how the social values and beliefs of a male-dominated society turned Śakuntalā into a gendered subservient figure. However, as the text's position on women shows, the discussion clearly shows that *Śakuntalā* represents the women of conventional Indian subcontinental society. As a female character of the play, she has been a victim of identity crises, gender discrimination, and religious and patriarchal power politics in her whole journey. Therefore, it is quite clear to understand that *Śakuntalā* is an example of this system and the women of that time were in an inferior position, treated as bearers of serving and nurturing male dreams and desires, always controlled by men and embodying the idea of a patriarchal social system. *Kālidāsa*'s *Śakuntalā* is the perennial representative of this woman-victim, immortalized in the subcontinental patriarchal society.