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Kingdoms of the Jungle Mahals: Medieval Hindu Rule in Bankura, Midnapore, and Purulia

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Abstract

The western districts of Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia—forming part of the historical region of Rarh—represent a significant yet often understudied zone in the regional history of medieval eastern India. This study explores the emergence, development, and characteristics of localized Hindu kingdoms in this frontier landscape between the Gangetic plains and the Chotanagpur Plateau during the medieval period (c. 7th–18th centuries). Focusing on prominent polities such as Mallabhum in Bankura and various garh-based and feudatory chiefdoms in Medinipur and Purulia, the paper examines their political organization, socio-economic foundations, and cultural contributions. These kingdoms, though smaller in scale compared to major imperial powers like the Pala Empire and the Mughal Empire, played a crucial role in sustaining regional autonomy and facilitating cultural synthesis. The study highlights how these polities functioned as intermediary zones, negotiating power with larger empires while preserving local traditions. Their patronage of religious movements—particularly Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism—along with the development of distinctive architectural forms such as the terracotta temples of Bishnupur, underscores their cultural significance. Additionally, the interaction between tribal communities and caste-based agrarian societies within these kingdoms contributed to a unique socio-cultural fabric. By situating these regional Hindu kingdoms within broader historical processes, the paper aims to reframe the understanding of medieval Indian history through a localized lens, emphasizing the importance of peripheral regions in shaping long-term cultural and political developments.

Keywords: Medieval Bengal; Rarh; Mallabhum; Medinipur; Bankura; Purulia; Regional Kingdoms; Feudatory Polities; Temple Architecture; Terracotta Temples; Vaishnavism; Shaivism; Shaktism; Tribal–Caste Interaction; Frontier Society; Mughal Empire; Pala Empire; Cultural Synthesis; Agrarian Economy; Garh-based Polities

1. Introduction

The western districts of present-day West Bengal—Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia—constitute a historically significant cultural and political zone that formed part of the ancient region known as Rarh. Characterized by lateritic soil, forested uplands, and proximity to the Chotanagpur Plateau, this region evolved as a frontier landscape where diverse cultural traditions, tribal communities, and agrarian settlements intersected. During the medieval period (circa 7th to 18th centuries), this transitional geography witnessed the rise of several localized Hindu kingdoms that played a crucial role in shaping the socio-political and cultural history of eastern India.

Unlike the dominant imperial powers such as the Pala Empire, Sena Dynasty, or the Mughal Empire, the Hindu polities of this region were relatively small, lineage-based, and regionally rooted. These kingdoms—most notably the Mallabhum of Bankura, along with various feudatory and garh-based polities in Medinipur and Purulia—operated within a decentralized political framework. Their authority was often negotiated through tribute, alliances, and strategic accommodation with larger powers, while maintaining considerable autonomy in internal governance. The historical importance of these

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regional kingdoms lies not merely in their political existence but in their role as agents of cultural synthesis and regional identity formation. They facilitated the spread of religious movements such as Vaishnavism, supported temple architecture—especially the renowned terracotta temples of Bishnupur—and contributed to the integration of tribal and caste-based societies into a broader Hindu socio-cultural order. Moreover, their position along the interface of Bengal, Odisha, and the plateau regions enabled them to act as conduits of trade, culture, and religious exchange.

This study seeks to locate and analyze the regional history of medieval Hindu kingdoms in Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia by examining their origins, political structures, cultural contributions, and interactions with larger imperial systems. By focusing on these often-overlooked local polities, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of medieval Indian history that moves beyond imperial narratives and highlights the significance of regional dynamics in shaping historical processes.

2. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, historical-analytical approach to examine the regional history of medieval Hindu kingdoms in Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia. Given the nature of the topic, which involves reconstructing past political and cultural processes, the research is primarily based on the interpretation of secondary sources, supported by available primary evidence such as inscriptions, archaeological remains, and regional records.

The study begins with a systematic review of existing literature, including historical texts, district gazetteers, archaeological reports, and scholarly works on medieval Bengal and eastern India. Special attention is given to works that discuss the regional dynamics of Rarh and the frontier interactions with the Chotanagpur Plateau. This review helps to identify prevailing interpretations, gaps in research, and the historiographical context within which these regional kingdoms have been studied.

A comparative regional framework is employed to analyze the similarities and differences among the political formations in the three districts. For instance, the relatively centralized structure of Mallabhum in Bankura is compared with the more fragmented garh-based polities of Medinipur and Purulia. This comparative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how geography, resource distribution, and cultural interactions influenced the nature of state formation in each area.

The research also incorporates an interpretative analysis of archaeological and architectural evidence, including temple remains, fortifications, sculptures, and settlement patterns. These material sources are used to supplement textual records and to provide insights into the cultural and religious life of the period.

3. Historical Background of the Region

The region encompassing Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia has a deep-rooted historical past that predates the medieval period. Traditionally identified with the ancient cultural-geographical zone of Rarh, this area occupied a crucial position between the fertile Gangetic plains and the

upland tracts of the Chotanagpur Plateau. Its unique environmental setting—marked by lateritic soil, dense forests, and undulating terrain—significantly influenced patterns of settlement, political organization, and cultural development.

In early historical times, parts of this region were associated with territories such as Vajra-bhumi and were known for their relative isolation from the mainstream centers of power in Bengal. The limited penetration of large imperial states into this forested frontier allowed indigenous communities and local chieftains to retain a degree of autonomy. Archaeological findings, including Jain sculptures and early temple remains, particularly in Bankura and Purulia, suggest that the region was an active center of religious and cultural interaction from ancient times.

From the 13th century onward, with the expansion of the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal Empire, the region was incorporated into broader political networks. Yet, due to its frontier character and difficult terrain, effective control remained limited. Local rulers often functioned as tributary chiefs or semi-independent zamindars, maintaining internal autonomy while acknowledging the suzerainty of imperial powers.

Simultaneously, the region experienced increasing cultural integration. The spread of Brahmanical Hinduism, alongside existing tribal beliefs and earlier Jain influences, led to a process of **religious and social synthesis**. This period also saw the gradual transformation of forested landscapes into agrarian settlements, supported by land grants and the expansion of cultivation.

4. Medieval Hindu Kingdoms in Bankura:

The district of Bankura occupies a central place in the history of medieval western Bengal due to the rise and consolidation of the powerful Hindu kingdom known as Mallabhum. Ruled by the Malla dynasty, this kingdom represents one of the most enduring and culturally significant regional polities in eastern India during the medieval period.

5. Rise and Formation of Mallabhum

The foundation of the Malla dynasty is traditionally attributed to **Adi Malla**, who is believed to have established the kingdom around the 7th century CE. Initially emerging from a local chieftaincy—possibly linked to indigenous or semi-tribal origins—the Malla rulers gradually consolidated their authority over the surrounding forested and agrarian tracts of Rarh. The kingdom came to be known as Mallabhum, meaning “land of the Mallas.” Its capital was established at Bishnupur, which later evolved into a major political, cultural, and religious center.

6. Medieval Kingdoms of Medinipur

The region of Medinipur emerged as a **গুরুত্বপূর্ণ** frontier zone in the medieval history of eastern India, shaped by its geographical position between Bengal and Odisha and its access to both inland and coastal networks. Unlike more centralized political formations such as Mallabhum in neighboring Bankura, the medieval political landscape of Medinipur was marked by a mosaic of small Hindu kingdoms, local chieftaincies, and garh-based polities that

functioned within a loosely structured and decentralized framework. The historical trajectory of this region was deeply influenced by the legacy of Tamralipta, an ancient port city that retained its cultural and economic significance into the early medieval period. As a major center of maritime trade and religious interaction, Tamralipta played a foundational role in shaping the socio-economic patterns of the region. Even as its prominence declined due to geomorphological changes such as river silting, its influence persisted in the form of settlement patterns, trade routes, and cultural exchanges that continued to define medieval Medinipur.

Culturally, medieval Medinipur was a zone of synthesis where Brahmanical Hinduism interacted with indigenous tribal traditions. Religious practices such as Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism gained prominence, often blending with local beliefs and rituals. The spread of the Bhakti movement further contributed to the religious transformation of the region, fostering a devotional culture that transcended rigid social hierarchies. Temples and religious institutions received patronage from local rulers, reinforcing their legitimacy and integrating diverse communities into a shared cultural framework. In essence, the medieval kingdoms of Medinipur represent a complex and fluid political order defined by decentralization, cultural interaction, and adaptive strategies of governance. Rather than forming a unified kingdom, the region functioned as a network of interrelated polities that negotiated their position between larger imperial forces and local socio-economic realities. This distinctive historical experience underscores the importance of regional perspectives in understanding the broader patterns of state formation and cultural development in medieval India.

7. Medieval Polities in Purulia (Manbhum Region)

The region of Purulia, historically known as Manbhum, formed a **গুরুত্বপূর্ণ** frontier zone in the western part of Bengal during the medieval period. Situated along the eastern fringe of the Chotanagpur Plateau, this area was characterized by rugged terrain, forest cover, and a significant presence of tribal communities. These geographical and social conditions shaped the emergence of a distinct pattern of political organization, marked not by large centralized kingdoms but by a network of small, localized Hindu polities and chieftaincies. In earlier historical phases, the region was associated with Vajrabhumi, a territory noted in ancient texts for its relative remoteness and cultural uniqueness. This legacy continued into the medieval period, when Purulia remained only loosely integrated into the political systems of larger empires. As a result, local rulers—often drawn from indigenous or semi-tribal backgrounds—played a dominant role in shaping the region's political landscape.

Unlike the more structured kingdom of Mallabhum in neighboring Bankura, the political formations in Purulia remained fragmented and fluid. Different parts of the region came under varying degrees of influence from external powers, including the rulers of Bengal, the Odisha-based Gajapati kings, and the chiefs of the

Chotanagpur plateau. However, due to the region's difficult terrain and decentralized social structure, effective control by these larger powers was often limited and indirect.

In conclusion, the medieval polities of Purulia (Manbhum region) represent a unique form of regional state formation shaped by geography, tribal traditions, and external influences. These small-scale Hindu kingdoms and chieftaincies played a crucial role in mediating between local societies and larger political systems, contributing significantly to the historical and cultural evolution of western Bengal.

8. Nature of Medieval Hindu Kingdoms in the Region

The medieval Hindu kingdoms that developed across Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia exhibited a distinctive character shaped by their frontier location within the broader cultural landscape of Rarh and their proximity to the Chotanagpur Plateau. These kingdoms differed significantly from large, centralized empires, reflecting instead a localized and adaptive model of polity formation rooted in environmental, social, and cultural realities. The **agrarian foundation of the economy** played a crucial role in sustaining these polities. The gradual transformation of forested land into cultivable fields led to the expansion of settled agriculture, which became the primary source of revenue. Land grants to Brahmins and religious institutions were common, contributing not only to agricultural development but also to the spread of Brahmanical Hinduism. Control over forest resources, including timber and minor forest produce, further strengthened the economic base of these kingdoms. Another important aspect was the **close interaction between tribal and caste-based societies**. In essence, the medieval Hindu kingdoms of Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia were characterized by decentralization, agrarian expansion, cultural synthesis, and political adaptability. Their nature reflects a form of regional state formation that was deeply embedded in local conditions, offering an alternative perspective to the more centralized and hierarchical models of medieval Indian polity.

9. Interaction with Larger Powers

The medieval Hindu kingdoms of Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia did not evolve in isolation; rather, their political trajectories were continuously shaped by interaction with larger imperial and regional powers. Situated within the frontier zone of Rarh, these kingdoms maintained a dynamic relationship with expanding states such as the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, and the powerful Hindu dynasties of Odisha.

A more structured form of interaction developed under the Mughal Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Mughals incorporated these regions into their administrative framework, particularly under the *subah* of Bengal. However, effective control remained uneven. Regional rulers, such as those of Mallabhum, were recognized as tributary chiefs or zamindars. They were allowed to govern their territories internally while fulfilling obligations such as revenue payment and military support. This created a **layered sovereignty**, where

imperial authority coexisted with local governance. The frontier kingdoms also had to respond to external pressures such as the Maratha incursions in the 18th century, commonly referred to as the *Bargi raids*. These invasions severely disrupted the economic and political stability of the region, exposing the limitations of small-scale polities in resisting large, organized military forces. The resulting instability further weakened local kingdoms and paved the way for eventual colonial intervention.

Overall, the interaction between the medieval Hindu kingdoms of Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia and larger powers was characterized by **adaptation, negotiation, and resilience**. Rather than being passive recipients of imperial expansion, these regional polities actively engaged with dominant powers through tribute, alliance, and cultural exchange, thereby maintaining their relevance and autonomy within a shifting political landscape.

10. Cultural and Architectural Legacy

The medieval Hindu kingdoms of Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia left behind a rich and enduring cultural and architectural heritage that continues to define the identity of western Bengal. Despite their relatively small political scale, these regional polities made significant contributions to religious life, artistic expression, and architectural innovation, reflecting a synthesis of local traditions and broader Hindu cultural influences. Beyond Bankura, the regions of Medinipur and Purulia also bear evidence of significant architectural activity, though often in more fragmented or less monumental forms. In Medinipur, temple architecture reveals strong influences from Odisha, particularly the **Kalinga style**, characterized by curvilinear spires and elaborate stone carvings. This reflects the historical interaction between Medinipur and the Odishan kingdoms, which facilitated cultural and artistic exchange across regional boundaries.

In Purulia, the architectural remains include early temple structures and scattered sculptures associated with Jainism as well as later Shaiva and Shakta traditions. Although many of these structures are now in ruins, they provide valuable insights into the religious diversity and artistic practices of the region. Influenced by the Bhakti movement, local rulers and communities promoted forms of worship centered on devotion to Krishna and Vishnu. This gave rise to a vibrant tradition of music, literature, and ritual practices. The **Bishnupur Gharana** of classical music, developed under the patronage of the Malla rulers, remains one of the most significant contributions of this period.

9. Conclusion

The regional history of the medieval Hindu kingdoms of Medinipur, Bankura, and Purulia reveals a complex and dynamic pattern of state formation that challenges the dominance of imperial-centric narratives in Indian historiography. Located within the historically significant zone of Rarh, these regions developed distinctive political structures shaped by geography, resource availability, and socio-cultural diversity. Furthermore, these kingdoms functioned as important **frontier zones**, mediating economic, cultural, and political exchanges between Bengal, Odisha, and the Chotanagpur Plateau. Their

strategic location enabled them to act as conduits of trade and cultural interaction, while also exposing them to external pressures such as imperial expansion and military incursions.

In conclusion, the study of medieval Hindu kingdoms in western Bengal underscores the importance of regional histories in understanding the broader processes of political and cultural transformation in India. These polities, though limited in scale, played a crucial role in shaping the historical identity of the region and contributed significantly to the rich and diverse heritage of eastern India.

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