

Locating the Hermitage of Medhas Ṛṣi in the Multi Religio-Cultural Backdrop of Early Bengal: Analyzing the Primary Sources Adopting a Geo- Historical Approach

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Abstract: Bengal was the home for many religions and cultural groups since the early centuries. From Niharranjan Ray and Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay to Mamtajur Rahman Tarafdar, Richard Maxwell Eaton and Abdul Momin Chowdhury, all have agreed on the preponderance of multi-religious and multi-cultural legacy in Bengal. In the case of the Brahmanical deva-devīs, the different geo - political units of Bengal yielded archaeological and textual evidences of diverse cult practices which include Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Saura, Śākta and other miscellaneous groups. The efflorescence of these ethos, the coexistence of such diversities, have found expression in this region's art, language, culture, religious beliefs and daily practices. By explaining all these above factors, the paper will seek to historically locate the hermitage of Medhas Ṛṣi mentioned in the Devī Māhātmya through a thorough analysis of primary sources with the aid of satellite imagery.

Keywords: Bardhaman, Devī Bhāgavata, ISRO, Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, Medhas Ṛṣi, Surath Rājā, Vaiśya Samādhi,

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Introduction

In the diverse religio-cultural sphere of Bengal, prior to the early historic period, the Brahmanical way of life left its imprint in the several sub-regions of Bengal since around c. fourth Century CE. There are evidences galore to indicate the spread of Brahmanism in various parts of Bengal. The earliest epigraph to substantiate this is the Susuniya Rock Inscription of Candravarman (c. 340-360 CE) which points towards the worship of Viṣṇu (*Cakrasvāmin*) in Bengal. The growth of Brahmanism in Bengal is further proved by the numerous Gupta epigraphs. The Gupta rulers of Bengal frequently used the title “*Pramabhāgavata*” in their inscriptions. Several Gupta copper plates like, The Baigram, the Damodarpur, the Dhaniaidaha, the Faridpur, the Gunaigharh, the Paharpur – suggest much prominence of Bhāgavatism in this land. This Bhāgavatism was not only restricted to the ruling class but had also

spread across all sections of the society as is evident from the Baigram copper plate inscription of Kumāragupta - I. This inscription shows, two villagers named Bhoylla and Bhāskara purchasing lands (EI XXI, 1931: 81) in Trivṛita and Śrīgohali identified as modern Baigram, Bogra district of Bangladesh in order to meet the expenses of repairing a temple of *Govindasvāmin*. Śivaism was also popular and there are also numerous archaeological evidences corroborating this. The Damodarpur acopper plate grant of Budhagupta clearly suggests that, Śiva was worshiped in North Bengal as liṅga form before c. 500 CE (EI XV, 1920: 140). The Gunaigarh grant (c. 506 CE) represents Mahārājā Vaiṅyagupta of Comilla as “*Mahādeva pādānudhyāta*” (IHQ VI, 1930: 40), which attests to the fact that Śivaism enjoyed royal patronage in eastern Bengal at that time. The bull-type coins and inscriptions issued by the “minor rulers” like Gopacandra, Dharmāditya and Samācāradeva, who ruled over Vaṅga between c.525 – 575 CE (Chowdhury, 1967: 4) shows that they were also devoted to Śiva. Along with Viṣṇu and Śiva, Sūrya also finds mention in the primary sources of pre - 500 CE Bengal. The Jagadishpur copper plate (c. 447 CE) mentions a devotee named Bhoiḷa who donated a piece of land in favor of *Sahasraraśami* which means *Sūrya* (Griffiths, 2018: 46). All this goes on to show that even before the early medieval period several regions of Bengal were well aware of the prime Brahmanical deities who received homage from both the rulers and the commoners.

The early medieval period witnessed a further increase in the popularity of the Brahmanical deities. A profusion of Brahmanical relics from several sub-regions of early medieval Bengal bears testimony to this. The Brahmanical specimens of this period, so far discovered, can be broadly divided into five categories; Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Saura, Śākta and miscellaneous. In the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* dated, c. 300 – 900 CE (Pargiter, 1904, XIII-XX) it is said that Viṣṇu (Hari) is resting upon the Indian subcontinent (*Bhāratabarṣa*) in his *Kūrmāvatāra* form. In the chapter 58 there is an elaborate list of the different geographical locations associated with Viṣṇu worship, in which Bengal’s Bardhaman region finds mention as an eastern region located on the mouth of the Kūrma Avatāra (वर्द्धमानाकोसलाचमुखेकूर्मस्यसंस्थिताः॥१४॥) (Shastri, 2004: 58.14). The popularity of Vaiṣṇavism continued unabated in this period is also evidenced by various sources of this time. The Tipperah copper plate of Lokanātha of c. 650 CE - 670 CE, (Ray, 2004: 121-25) for instance, refers to the worship of *Bhagavān Ananta-Nārāyaṇa* (EI XV, 1920: 301-15). The Pālas were also not far behind in declaring their adherence to Vaiṣṇavism as is made evident from some of their inscriptions. The Khalimpur copper plate of Dharmapāla (c. 774 – 806 CE) from Maldah, speaks about the *Nanna-Nārāyaṇa* devatā (EI IV, 1896: 243). Nārāyaṇapāla’s Badal pillar inscription (c. 873–927 CE) from Dinajpur district, mentions the erection of Garuḍa-pillar (EI II, 1892: 160). This trend was visible in the times of the Senas too. The Sena Ruler Vijayasena (C. 1096-1159 CE) granted a piece of land to a temple of *Pradyumneśvara* devatā (a syncretic form of Viṣṇu and Śiva) in Rajshahi district (Majumdar, 1929: 146). King Lakṣmaṇasena (c. 1179-1205 CE) was a worshipper of Viṣṇu and Narasiṃha and his inscriptions begin with the *Nārāyaṇa stuti*. His successor Viśvarūpasena (c. 1206-1222 CE) and Keśavasena (c. 1222-23 CE) continued the *Nārāyaṇa stuti* tradition in their inscriptions (Majumdar, 1929: 121-43) as well. The Candras and the Varmans also proclaimed their faith in the Vaiṣṇava creed. The early 12th Century CE Belava Copper-plate of Bhojavarman refers to the worship of *Puruṣottarna* and *Kṛṣṇa* (EI XII, 1913: 39), while the Mainamati Copper plate of Ladahacandra of Candra dynasty who happened to be a Buddhist (c. 1000-1020 CE), also seemed to have no qualm to appeal to *Vāsudeva* (“*aum namo bhagavate Vāsudevāya*”) in his inscription (Haque, 1992: 39). Alongside inscriptions, early medieval Bengal also produced a variety of Vaiṣṇava icons which include several types of *vyūha* images of Viṣṇu. The *caturviṃśatimūrti* type is one of such types, which comprises, Keśava, Nārāyaṇa, Mādhava, Govinda, Viṣṇu, Madhusūdana, Trivikrama, Vāmana, Śrīdhara, Hṛṣikeśa, Padmanābha, Dāmodara,

Vāsudeva, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, Aniruddha, Puruṣottamae, Adhokṣaja, Nṛsiṃha, Acyuta, Upendra, Janārdana, Hari and Kṛṣṇa. Avatāras of Viṣṇu like, the Matsya, the Kūrma, the Varāha, the Narasiṃha, the Vāmana, the Paraśurāma, the Rāma, the Balarāma, the kalkī etc have also been discovered throughout Bengal. Besides these, other Vaiṣṇava images like Hari-Hara, Puruṣottama, Garuḍa, Hanumān, Viṣṇupaṭṭa and several other Vaiṣṇava motifs and symbols were equally popular in early medieval Bengal (Haque,1992:37-129).

The archaeological evidences of early medieval Bengal indicate that along with Vaiṣṇavism, Śivaism also prospered in this period. The seventh century king Śāśāṅka of Gauḍa was a patron of Śivaism (Majumdar, 1943:405). He had issued *abhiṣekha* type base gold *dinar* coins in which Śiva with bull and moon can be seen in the obverse side of the coin. The Pala and the Sena kings also professed their faith in Śiva. King Dharmapāla's (c.774-806 CE) Bodhgaya lintel inscription mentions the consecration (*Mahādevaścaturmukhaḥ*) of a *caturmukhaliṅga* (JASB IV,1835: 102). The Bhagalpur inscription of Nārāyanapāla (c. 873 – 927 CE) talks about a gift made by the king to the Śiva-Bhaṭṭaraka and his worshippers, the pāsupatas (Majumdar, 1943:405). The Sena inscriptions comprise many references to the different aspects of Śivaism. Vijayasena (c. 1096-1159 CE) and his son Vallālasena (c. 1159-1179 CE) called themselves *paramamaheśvara*. Vijayasena invoked Śiva under the name *Śambu* and Vallālasena used the name *Dhurjaṭī* and *Ardhanārīśvara* (Majumdar,1929: 46,57,61). Although their successors were either Vaiṣṇavas or Sauras, but that did not deter them from paying their homage to Sadāśiva as their *kuladevatā* (Majumdar, 1943:405). In the early medieval Bengal, Śiva was worshipped in both his aniconic and iconic forms. There were various categories of Śiva images found from the several sub regions of Bengal; these include the common Śiva *liṅga*, Ekmukhaliṅga, Caturmukhaliṅga, Pañcamukhaliṅga, Liṅga with four *Śaktis*, Aṣṭottaraśataliṅga etc. In his *saumya* form there are icons of Śiva which include Sadāśiva, Naṭarāja, Umā – Maheśvara, Kalyāṅsundara, Ardhanārīśvara, Nandī as *vāhana* and many more. Besides these *saumya* forms, the *ugra* representation of Śiva were also popular. Several kinds of Bhairava, Mahākāla and Aghora sculptures go on to highlight the popularity of Śiva's *ugrarūpa* (Haque,1992: 130-176). in early medieval Bengal.

Another important Brahmanical devatā of this time was Sūrya. The *Skanda Purāṇa* mentions Puṇḍravardhana as one of the 64 important places for the worship of Sūrya in the subcontinent (Pandey, 1971: 151). Issued from Karṇasuvarna, in the Nidhanpur inscription (Sylhet district in Bangladesh) of king Bhāskaravarman (mid- 7th century CE), he was compared with *Bhuvanapati* (EI XII,1913: 65-79), the Sūrya devatā. Verse 55 of the Sian stone Inscription (c. 1043 CE) from Birbhum refers to an offering of a golden lotus by a king for the icons of the Navagrahas in which Sūryawas present (Sircar, 1982: 85-101). Verse eight of Mahipāla – I's Bangarhocopper plate Inscription (c. 977- 1027 CE) compares king Gopāl - II with the Sūrya devatā (EI XIV, 1917 :324). In a similar manner the Mainamatina platea of Govindacandra (Sircar, 1973: 40) dated c. 1020i -s1055 CE and the Ramganj copperplate of Īśvaraghoṣa (Majumdar,1929: 149-57) dated c. 1040 - 1080 CE also compares the kings with the Sūrya devatā. In the text *Pavanadūtam*, the Bengal poet Dhoyī, who was the contemporary of king Lakṣmaṇasena, refers to a shrine of *Raghukulaguru*, which has been identified as a Sūrya temple on the Bhagirathi River bank (Chakravarti, 1926: v.30). In their copper plates the Sena kings Viśvarūpasena, (c. 1206 – 1225 CE) and Keśavasena, (c. 1225 – 1230 CE) claimed themselves as *pararmasaura*, which signifies their loyalty to the Sūrya devatā. Apart from these evidences, a profusion of early medieval Sūrya images have been discovered in different sub-regions of Bengal, though the majority come from northern Bengal. In Bengal, the category of Sūrya images mostly comprise several kinds of standing and seated Āditya and Sūrya icons including the images of Revanta and Navagrahas (Haque,1992: 181-200).

Besides Viṣṇu, Śiva and Sūrya, the other mainstream Brahmanical devas of early medieval Bengal were Brahmā, Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, who fall into the category of miscellaneous devatās and make their presence felt through the archaeological remnants as well. The Paschimbhag copper plate of Mahārājā Śrīcandradeva (c. 940 CE) records a piece of land which was dedicated to Brahmā within the Puṇḍravardhanabhukti (Habibullah, 1966: 175). Images discovered from Varendra and Rāḍha makes it clear that Brahmā was worshipped in Bengal in the early medieval period, though the paucity of the images makes it clear that his popularity was much less than Viṣṇu, Śiva and Sūrya. Along with the Brahmā images of Bengal which include both his standing and seated solo icons, there have also been found the syncretic images of Dattātreyā or Hari-Hara-Pītāmaha (Haque, 1992: 309-13). As regards Gaṇeśa, it can be said that though he is known as *vighnanāśana*, the remover of obstacles and *siddhidātā*, the bestower of success, but in early medieval Bengal icons, Gaṇeśa has been projected mostly as a *pārśvadevatā*. Several sub regions of Bengal have yielded many such images of Gaṇeśa where he is shown accompanying Umā-Maheśvara, Pārvatī, Godhikāvāhinī Gaurī, Lalitā, Kalyāṇsundara, Mātṛkās, Navagrahas etc. Apart from this *pārśvadevatā* representations, there have been a few solo depictions of Gaṇeśa as well which include his standing, seated and dancing icons (Haque, 1992: 313-26). Like Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya was also present during this period as it is suggested by different sources. The *Rājatarāṅginī* of Kalhaṇa mentions that there was a temple in Puṇḍravardhana, in the eighth century, which was named after Kārttikeya (Majumdar, 1943:408). Much akin to Gaṇeśa, in the early medieval Bengal icons of Kārttikeya too has been mostly depicted as a *pārśvadevatā*. In this form he has also been found with Umā-Maheśvara, Pārvatī, Godhikāvāhinī Gaurī, Lalitā, Kalyāṇsundara, Mātṛkās and in the so-called mother and child images of Bengal. However, there are some specimens found from North Bengal, Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra which bear a few rare solo depictions of Kārttikeya from the early medieval period (Haque, 1992: 327-33).

Amidst these male deities, the prominence of the devī cannot be undermined as Bengal registers her presence throughout its history. The *Devī Purāṇa* (c. 600 CE - 900 CE) (Haque, 1992: 71-77), for example, mentions the worship of the devī in her different forms in Varendra, Rāḍha, Vaṅga, Samatāṭa and Vardhamāna (Tarkaratna & Nyayatirtha, 1987:39.144, 39.144, 46.69, 46.70). The text *Rāmacarita* of Sandhyākar Nandī of Varendra also suggests the preponderance of devī as it goes on to list the names of *Umā*, *Kamalā*, *Gaurī*, *Caṇḍī*, *Bhavānī*, *Lakṣmī*, *Śrī* and *Sarasvatī* (Majumdar, Basak & Banerji, 1939: 4.45, 1.17, 10, 4.21, 2.26, 1.28; 2.23, 24; 3.17: 4.461, 1.132.23; 4.46). The archaeological sources of the time validate this as well. The seal of Tipperah copper plate grant of king Lokanātha, dated c.650 - 670 CE (Ray, 2004: 121), depicts the image of *Abhisiñcan Lakṣmī*. Apart from the copper plates, two label inscriptions have been found beneath two sculptures. The first one found from Deulbari, Comilla designates the bronze image as Sarvāṇī dated c. 660-690 CE (EI XVII, 1923:358-59). The second one is a stone image from Dhaka where the inscription reads *Caṇḍī* (EI XVII, 1923:360). Along with epigraphs, coins bearing images of devī have also been discovered. In the early medieval period, numismatic evidence of an eight-armed devī is shown on the reverse of many local coins discovered from South eastern Bengal (Allan, 1914: P. XXIV). In the gold coins of king Śaśāṅka issued from the Samatāṭa region devī Lakṣmī can be seen on the reverse (Islam, 2013: 363-68). Some newly discovered coins of king Dharmapāla (c. 774 - 806 CE) and Devapāla (c. 806 - 845 CE) also portray Lakṣmī on the reverse of their coins (Tandon, 2006: 1-7). The devī images found throughout Bengal have been depicted in both *saumya* and *ugrarūpās* and the several sub-regions of early medieval Bengal produced a massive number of mainstream Brahmanical devī images in both these forms. The *saumya rūpī* Brahmanical devī includes Gaurī, Pārvatī, Umā, Kumārī, Māheśvari, Siṃhavāhinī-Durgā, Lalitā, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, Gaṅgā, Yumunā, Vārāhī, Indrānī, Mātṛkās

and the likes, while devīs like Cāmuṇḍā, Bhairavī, Mahiṣamardinī, Mahiṣāsūramardinī etc. belong to the *ugra* category of the typical Brahmanical devīs in Bengal. The *Devī Māhātmya* dated c. 601 – 700 CE (Bhandarkar, 1914: 22, 23-74) narrates the story of Surath Rājā receiving the grace of the devī. It recounts how after being defeated by the enemy, as Surath Rājā came back to his kingdom Svapur, he was attacked again and this time his own officials also betrayed him. Losing everything, he went to the forest with his horse. Inside that dense forest he found the āśrama of the Medhas Ṛṣi and also met the Vaiśya named Samādhi, who had also sought refuge in the āśrama.

“न्यूनैरपिसतैर्युद्धेकोलाविध्वंसिभिर्जितः॥५॥
 ततः स्वपुरमायातोनिजदेशार्धिपोऽभवत्।
 आक्रान्तः समहाभागस्तैस्तदाप्रबलारिभिः॥६॥
 अमात्यैर्बलभिर्दुष्टैर्दुर्बलस्यदुरात्मभिः।
 कोशोबलंचापहतंतत्रापिस्वपुरेततः॥७॥
 ततोमृगयाव्याजेनहतस्वाम्यः सभूपतिः।
 एकाकीहयामारुह्यजगामगहनंवनम्॥८॥
 सतत्राश्रममद्राक्षीद्विजवर्यः सुमेधसः।”

Devī Māhātmya, 81.5-8

Both the Rājā and the Vaiśya troubled by their fate, pleaded with the Ṛṣi to show them the way. It was then that the Ṛṣi narrated the Devī Māhātmya to them. After his narration, Ṛṣi Medhas advised Surath Rājā and the Vaiśya to perform a pūjā for the devī to get rid of the obstacles plaguing their lives (Jagadiswarananda, 1953: Ch.93). As advised, they both performed several *tapasyās* and recited *devīsūktas* on the nearby river sandbank. They made an earthen idol of the devī and worshipped her with flowers, incense, fire and water. They also offered the *bali* (sacrifice) to the devī and sprinkled blood drawn from their own limbs. Thus, after three years of their honest *arādhana*, the devī pleased with their dedication appeared before them and blessed them stating that they would definitely get what they were seeking.

“..... इतितस्यवचःश्रुत्वासुरथःसनराधिपः।
 प्रणिपत्यमहाभागंतमृषिसंशितव्रतम्॥४॥
 निविण्णोऽतिममत्वेनराज्यपापहरणेनच।
 जगामसद्यस्तपसेसचवैशयोमहामुने॥५॥
 संदर्शनार्थमम्बायानदीपुलिनसंस्थितः।
 सचवैश्वयस्तपस्तेपेदेवीसूक्तंपरंजपन्॥६॥
 तौतस्मिन्पुलिनेदेव्याः कृत्वामूर्तिमहीमयीम्।
 अर्हणांचक्रतुस्तस्याःपुष्पधूपग्नितर्पणैः॥७॥
 निराहारौयतात्मानौतन्मनस्कौसमाहितौ।
 ददतुस्तौबलिंचैवनिजगात्रासृगुक्षितम्॥८॥
 एवंसमाराधयतोस्त्रभिर्वर्षयतात्मनोः।
 परितुष्टाजगद्धात्रीप्रत्यक्षंप्राहचण्डिका॥९॥
 श्रीदेव्युवाच

यत्प्रार्थ्यतेत्वयाभूयत्वयाचकुलनन्दन।
मत्तस्तत्प्राप्यतांसर्वपरितुष्टाददामतत्॥10॥”

Devī Māhātmya, 93.3-10

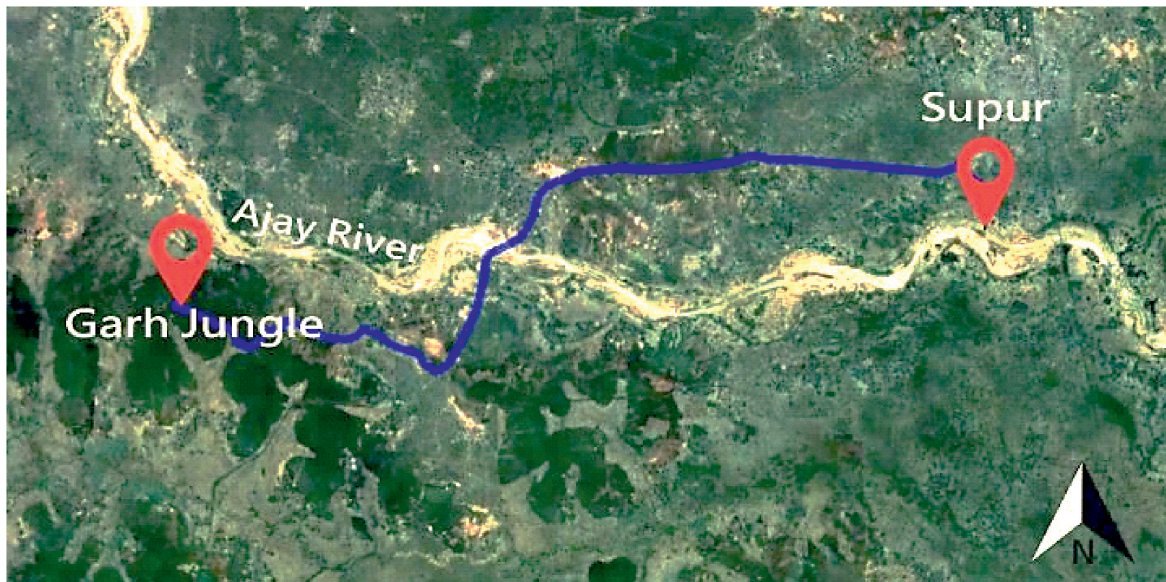
The episode of Mahārājā Surath also finds mention in chapters 32, of the fifth canto of the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* dated c. 950 – 1200 CE (Hazra, 1963:343-45). In this story the Surath Mahārājā was defeated by the hill tribes who were the Mlechchas. Here also, all of his ministers betrayed Surath Rājā and joined the enemy side. The Rājā had no other option but to escape from his city. The disheartened king, unsettled by the turn of events, left the city alone, mounted on his horse. The helpless Rājā then entered a dense forest inside which he found the hermitage of Medhas Ṛṣi after riding three *Yojanas* from his kingdom.

“..... इतिसञ्चित्यमनसाराजापरमादुर्मनाः।
एकाकीहयमारुह्यनिर्जगामपुरात्ततः॥19॥
असहायोऽथनिर्गत्यगहनंवनमाश्रितः।
चिन्तयामासमेधावीक्कगंतव्यंमयापुनः॥20॥
योजनत्रयमात्रेतुमुनेराश्रममुत्तमम्।
ज्ञात्वाजगामभ्रूपालस्तापसस्यसुमेधसः॥21॥”

Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Canto 5. 32. 18-21

The Surath Rājā episodes from the *Devī Māhātmya* and the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* provide significant clues regarding the geographical location of the Medhas Ṛṣi’s shrine. The research found that, in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* the Bardhaman region of south-western Bengal finds mention as the eastern region of the subcontinent (Shastri, 2004: 58.14). It proves that the south-western Bengal region was known by the composer/s of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. On the other hand, according to the *Devī Māhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, Surath Rājā was the ruler of Svapur. This Svapur can be identified as modern Supur in Bolpur (ancient Bolipur) subdivision of the Birbhum district of south-western Bengal. The *Devī Bhāgavata*, providing further details of the hermitage of Medhas Ṛṣi, states that the distance between the kingdom of Surath Rājā and the said āśrama was three *Yojanas*, which is approx. 36 km (one Yojana = 12 kilometres, three Yojanas = 3 x 12 Km = 36 Km. approx.). Now, from the modern Supur, Birbhum, the nearest and only dense forest is located in the western side of Birbhum which is the Garh Jungle (Rāḍha region) of Bardhaman region. This geographical location of Bardhaman as an eastern also unit finds mention in the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* in chapter 58 (Shastri, 2004: 58.14). Therefore, it can be said that in this text, both the sites of Bardhaman and Supur were part of Bengal where devī worship was predominant throughout the seventh Century CE during the time of the composition of the *Devī Māhātmya*. It is in this Paschim Bardhaman region at present the newly built Maharshi Medhashram is situated (Fig.1). Interestingly, the current distance between the modern Supur and the Garh Jungle is exactly 36 km or three *Yojanas* as described in the *Devī Bhāgavata*(Map.1). In the *Devī Māhātmya* there is also a mention of a river sand-bank near the āśrama of Medhas Ṛṣi, where Surath Rājā and the Vaiśya Samādhi performed the pūjā for the devī. The river, on the bank of which they performed their austerities, can be identified as the modern Ajay River of south-western Bengal which is famous for sand mining and is just less than two kilometers away from the Garh Jungle. Detected by the present study, all these textual evidences fit perfectly with

the ISRO Satellite imagery (Map.1) and the geographical location of Garh Jungle as the *āśrama* of the Medhas Ṛṣi. *Purāṇas* and epics are often relegated entirely to the domain of myths, the story of Medhas Ṛṣi and his hermitage visited by the Surath Rājā and the Vaiśya Samādhi were probably also no exception. Although the *Devī Māhātmya* feature in a very important juncture of *śakti* worship and has been profusely used by the historians of religion to chart the course of her evolution, it hardly ever passed off as any historical document. Nevertheless, the present research, carefully working up on the clues given in this said *Purāṇa* and bolstered by the ISRO Satellite imagery clinched on the fact that the present day Paschim Bardhaman was indeed the place of the ‘fabled’ *āśrama* of Medhas Ṛṣi.



Map.1: Supur, Bolpur, Birbhum; Garh Jungle, Paschim Bardhaman & The Ajay River
Map Courtesy: Bhuvan, Indian Geo-Platform of ISRO.

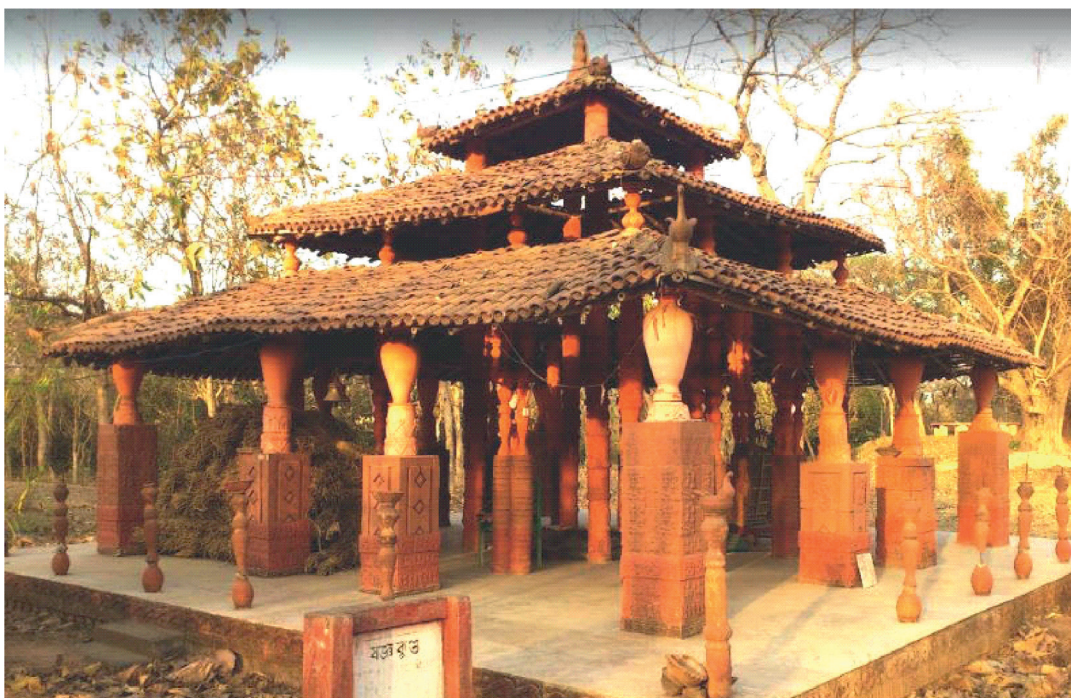


Fig. 1: Yajñakuṇḍa, Maharshi Medhashram, Paschim Bardhaman, West Bengal 23°36'19.4"N 87°25'51.7"E,
Image Source: Author, 2014

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