In those days when there was no discovery channel or BBC; people learnt about distant lands through the travels of brave travelers who undertook perilous journey across thousands of miles. Travelling was certainly not easy in those days when there were no airplanes, motor vehicles or diesel powered ships. Travelling was also not possible through personal endeavor only; often travelers undertook voyage under the patronage or sponsorship of religious institutions or funding from Kings. For these travelers who mainly travelled on foot, caravans or by ships, India was always a favored destination for number of reasons. Stories of the great wealth of India had reached far and wide, the abundance of Buddhist literature and monasteries also invited the travelers to come to India. So we may say India was an attractive destination because of both material and spiritual reason, and thus we find a number of travelers visiting India at different times.
Hsüan-tsang, Ibn Batuta, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Francois Bernier all visited India in different times and left for us a reliable picture of life in India in those times.

Hsüan-tsang got the confidence to travel India through a dream. This man slipped through the gates of Yumen, travelled across the Gobi desert, walked through the Bamiyan province, Khyber Pass, Kashmir, Jalandhar and then turned east reaching Lumbini, where Buddha was born. Mainly his interest was to visit places connected with Buddhism; so it was kind of pilgrimage for him. He also visited Nalanda, Tamralimpti (Tamluk), went as far as Assam before turning towards South India into Andhradesa. In this great trip he also paid a visit to our district of Murshidabad about twelve kilometers south of Berhampore in a place called, Karnasubarna. In his account it is written:

“From Tamralipti he travelled north west for over 700 li to the Karnasubarna country. This was about 4450 li in circuit and its capital was about 20 li in circuit. The country was well inhabited and the people were very rich. The land was low and moist, farming operations were regular, flowers and fruits were abundant, the climate was temperate, and the people were of good character and were great patrons of learning. There were more than ten Buddhist monasteries, and about 2000 brethren who were all adherents of Sammatiya school; there were 50 deva temples and the followers of the various religions were also very numerous.
There were also three Buddhist monasteries in accordance with the teaching of Devadatta, milk products were not taken as food. Beside the capital was the Lo-to-no-chi monastery, a magnificent and famous establishment, the resort of the illustrious brethren. It had been erected by a king of the country before the country was converted to Buddhism to honor a Buddhist srmana from south India who had defeated in public discussion a boasting disputant of another system also from south India.”

In fact, our monk made some minor mistakes in narrating his journey, the country of Karnasubarna as he calls it is not North West of Tamralipta, but actually in the North East. Hiuen Tsang calls both the country and the capital as Karnasubarna but Karnasubarna basically was the capital of the kingdom of Gauda. As a matter of fact this kingdom is referred to in all other relevant texts as, “Gauda”. King Sasanka whom we will discuss shortly was the King of the Gauda kingdom with its capital in Karnasubarna. Sasanka killed the Rajah of Thaneswar, Rajyavardhana in 605 AD and this is mentioned in Harsha-charita by Banabhatta. Banabatta specifies that Rajyavardhana was killed by the, “lord of Gauda”. In fact Kautilya’s Arthasastra also mentions the textile products of Vanga and Pundra and the silver of Gauda. Varahmihira in his Brihatsamhita mentions kingdoms called, Suhma, Samatata, Lauhitya, Gaudaka (Gaud), Paundra, Tamraliptika
Sasanka

Bengal’s history did not come into limelight until the fall of the Imperial Guptas. In the dwindling days of Gupta power an independent kingdom of Vanga was established in East and South Bengal in 525 AD. After the final fall of Guptas in 550 AD the kingdom of Guada which comprised of North and West Bengal raised its head, but its rival power the Maukharis pulled it down. Half a century later the Gauda kingdom was again occupied by Sasanka (in 606 AD) in whose time it reached the zenith. Sasanka proved to be a brilliant conqueror; he even conquered Orissa and because of his conquests the kingdom of Bengal attained a prominent position. After securing his kingdom Sasanka marched against the arch rivals Maukharis who had joined alliance with the kingdom of Thaneswar. To counter this alliance of Maukharis and Thaneswar, Sasanka shook hands with the Malwa king, thus creating two contending poles in North India. After a bloody struggle the Bengal group under Sasanka emerged victorious. Sasanka reigned supreme till at least 619 AD.
Sasanka’s Fall

Towards the close of Sasanka’s reign, Harsha undertook yet another military campaign to the east (his first proved futile). Sasanka was now dead and he had not left an able heir to guard his Empire. Harsha consequently had no difficulty in overrunning it. He conquered Magadha and carried his victorious armies through West Bengal as far as Kongoda (Ganjam district), the southern limit of Sasanka’s Empire. The rest of Sasanka’s dominions i.e. North, South and East Bengal passed into the hands of Bhaskarvarman king of Kamrupa (Assam).

Both Banabhatta the author of Harsha-charita and Hsüan-tsang were vocal in defaming the character of Sasanka. Both refer Sasanka as ruthless and wicked king; Hiuen Tsnag going one step forward accuses him to be completely intolerant towards Buddhists and charges that he was responsible for atrocities against Buddhists monks. However that would not have been the case. Banabhatta—of course we understand, was under Harsha’s payroll and so he obviously will say awful things about his rival Sasanka. But Hsüan-tsang for reasons unknown accuses Sasanka of all sorts of nuisance. As a matter of fact Sasanka was a Hindu, Shaivaite king. This theory that Sasanka was an
intolerant King does not hold ground simply because of the presence of flourishing Buddhist institutions in the suburbs of his own capital Karnasubarna.

So there are indeed contesting ideas, but apparently there are signs of thriving Buddhist community here in Karnasubarna. It was for this reason that for many years archaeologists have tried to trace the land of Karnasubarna and the famous Raktamittrika Mahavihara. Their efforts bore fruit when an archaeological team under S R Das from the University of Calcutta in 1962 dug out the famous monastery from the village of Jadupur, twelve kilometers south-west of Berhampore. The place is called Rajbadidanga as this was once attributed to the ruins of King Karna’s palace but evidently it was the *Raktamittrika Mahavihara*. How did the archaeologists know that this was the same place where the grand and magnificent Vihara once stood? Well, they found seals with two lines of inscriptions

1. Sri-Rakta(m)rttika-mahaviha
2. Riyarya-bhiksu-(Samgha)sya

The sealing also bore the Dharmachakrya-deer symbols. Before 1960’s the exact location of *Raktamittrika Mahavihara* was a matter of speculation among archeologists. Hsüan-tsang referred the *Raktamittrika Mahavihara* as lo-to-no-chi. In another account
In the Footsteps of Hsüan-tsang, in Karnasubarna

we find the name *Raktamittrika*. Karnasubarna was a great centre of trade as well; it was beside the Bhagirathi a tributary of Ganges and in those times the legends of sea faring merchants occupied a prominent position in various literature as well. In fact the people of Gaud are said to be a sea-faring; an important finding supports this theory. One of the several inscriptions found in the Malay Peninsula refer to “the captain”, a Buddhist “Mahanavika”, Buddhagupta, who was a resident of “Raktamittrika”. It shows that Karnasubarna or Gauda as a whole had great trade connections as far as to the Malay Peninsula. Probably there was thriving community of Buddhist merchants like Buddhagupta who might have sought blessings of the monks before sailing off on a new journey.

When the excavation started in 1962, my mother recalled she was in school and the students were taken for an excursion into the excavation site. She fondly remembers a large number of people had come to see the excavations and the great many stories flowed in the air. In this air of speculations and myths a large number of relics of archaeological significance were found, like, stucco heads, sealing’s with Buddhists symbols and copper chakras.

It is amazing to walk in the where history was alive fourteen hundred years ago, in fact I was trying to imagine what a thriving metropolis this might have been. The site where Raktamittrika Mahavihara once stood is undulated and has several mounds underneath which are the remains of a thriving monastery. While climbing up the mounds to survey the sites from an elevation an interesting feeling comes into the mind that- history remains buried beneath the cover of time.

**Notes**

i *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, by Dineshchandra Sircar

ii *Ancient India*, by Ramesh Chandra Majumdar

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