

New Research on Origin of Words: Bengal, Bangladesh & Vanga

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Dated 9th January 2014.

I am surprised to see that the encyclopaedias are not able to give the exact origin of the words Bengal (Vanga in Tamil) and Bangladesh. Linguists know very well that B and V are interchangeable. For thousands of years Tamils use the word Vanga for Bengal. This is continued until today.

Hindu scriptures such as Mahabharata and Bhagavatha Purana are very clear about the word Vanga. Two thousand year old Sangam Tamil literature is also crystal clear in describing the word. The word was used by later poets like Andal of seventh century AD.

1.Vanga (Bengal) in Mahabharata

According to Mahabharata (1-104), Dirghatamas, the blind poet, was asked to produce children in the queen of King Bali. Her name was Sudeshna. She had five children with Dirghatamas and their names were Anga, Vanga, Kalinga, Suhya and Paundra. Each one of them started a dynasty in their names in the Eastern part of India. This was confirmed again by Bhagavatha (9-23-5). This was according to an ancient custom of producing children through sages if one is childless. It is needless to explain Bengal and Bangladesh got the name from King Vanga (Vanga=Bengal=Bangla).

2000 year old Tamil literature used this word Vanga in at least eight places. It meant a ship. So they called the sea on the eastern side of India Bay of Bengal. This is used for the first time by a teenage Tamil Vaishnavite devotional poetess known as Andal. She was a very clever girl who mentioned the strange

behaviour of birds and lions. She also mentioned about the position of the planets Jupiter and Venus which helped us to confirm her date. She also mentioned about the maritime trade of the mighty Tamil kings in the last verse of her best work 'Tiruppavai'.

2.Andal's Tiruppavai

She used the word 'Vanga Kadal' in Tiruppavai verse 30. It meant the 'sea where ships (Vanga=ship) sail'. Since the maritime trade was very high during her times, she did not fail to mention it even in a religious verse. She lived 1300 years before our times in Tamil Nadu. The sea coast was not far from her place.

3.Sangam (Cankam) Tamil Literature

But the clinching evidence comes from another poet who lived at least 2000 years ago. He mentioned 'Gangai Vangam' meaning the ships sailing through the River Ganges (Natrinai verse 189). A contemporary poet Kovur Kizar mentioned about the ports in Tamil Nadu(Pura naanuru verse 400) with the facilities for sea faring vessels (Vangam). There are more references to the same sea faring vessels as ' Vangam'.

4. Bengal Port Tamralipti/Tamluk:

Why did they call these ships Vangam (Bengal)? They called them so because they travelled from Bengal ports. Tamralipti on the Ganges in Bengal was a well known port. We have references to sea travel from this place in ancient Hindu and Buddhist literatures. Even the Tamil 'Natrinai ' reference about Ganges ship is from a Tamil woman who longs for her husband. She wondered whether her husband is travelling in a Ganges ship doing business.

These verses not only give the meaning of the word Vanga (Bengal), but also information about the high volume of marine trade that was prevalent two

thousand years ago. We have plenty of references in other sources and archaeological evidence in Roman coins and Roman jars.

One of the verses in Aka Naanuru (255) describes the ships as awesome and gigantic. We have four mast ships portrayed in Java (Indonesian) sculptures.

5. Other meanings of 'Vangaa'

A bird is also called vangaa (long sound) in Tamil verses. Birds belonging to Vangidae family are endemic to Madagascar. They are called Vanga in the island. It is not just a coincidence. In ancient days they might have existed in both the places. I have already written about the connection between India and Madagascar in 'Madagascar-India Connection' in this blog.

Vanga also meant white metals such as Silver. Tamils might have imported them through Vanga (ships) and so they were named Vanga. But it requires further research.

6. Logical Conclusion

If we put the details collected from both Tamil and Sanskrit literatures together, we can arrive at a logical conclusion:

1. In the Epic and Puranic age there was a king by name Vanga who gave the name Vanga (Bengal) desh to the territory ruled by him 2. The particular type of huge ships that travelled from his Bengal's Ganges ports (Tamralipt) into seas were called Vanga/ Ships 3. The sea area was also named Vanga Kadal (Bay of Bengal) because of the maritime trade 4. Tamil poets of Cankam age and later devotional period used them in their verses confirming this.

Read also: Amazing Andal: Where did she see the Lion? (posted on 30 Januray 2013)

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