

RE-EXPLORING DEVKOT: THE FIRST MUSLIM CAPITAL OF BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Devkot, the first capital of Muslims in Bengal, was a very ancient city and has been known by several names like Devikot, Diwkot, Ushavana, Kotivarsha, Sonitapura, and Bangarh throughout history. The city held greater prominence and played a more significant role than Lakhnauti during the reign of Bakhtiyar Khilji and his successors. Situated on the eastern bank of Punarbhaba and spread over a vast area, the site of Bangarh, as the ruins are known today, has emerged as a significant archaeological site in northern Bengal. Initial excavations by Kunja Gobinda Goswami of Calcutta University in 1938 CE, followed by subsequent efforts by the Archaeological Survey of India in 2007 and 2009 CE, have unveiled a treasure trove of artifacts spanning over 2,500 years. The findings from Bangarh offer insights into eight distinct periods of Indian history, ranging from 500 BC up to the time of Muslim rule in Bengal. These periods include the pre-Mauryan, Mauryan, Shunga, Kushana, Gupta, post-Gupta, and Pala periods. This paper delves into the historical significance, geographical analysis, and archaeological exploration of Devkot. Furthermore, the paper advocates for the preservation of the architectural heritage of Devkot and contributes new knowledge, interpretations, and methodologies to the academic discourse on Bengal and the Indian subcontinent.

KEYWORDS: *Devkot, Bangarh, Ekdala, Dighi, Varendra, Bengal*

OBJECTIVES

Historical Documentation: This research aims to thoroughly document the historical significance of Devkot in the history of Bengal. Through a detailed evaluation of historical accounts, it also seeks to explore the connection between Devkot and Ekdala, shedding light on their cultural impact and political relevance during the early medieval period of Indian history.

Archaeological Exploration: This research also endeavours to explore the archaeological remnants linked to Devkot through textual sources. Through a detailed examination of these texts, the study aims to reconstruct the urban layout of Devkot and gain insights into the prevalent architectural styles and material culture of the region.

Heritage Preservation: It also aims to raise awareness about the historical and archaeological importance of Devkot, advocating for the preservation of its architectural heritage. By highlighting the significance of Devkot's legacy, it seeks to mobilize efforts aimed at safeguarding the site for the benefit of future generations.

Contribution to Academic Discourse: Finally, this research paper seeks to contribute new knowledge, interpretations, and methodologies to the academic discourse on the history, geography, and archaeology of Bengal and the Indian subcontinent.

METHODOLOGY

First and foremost, all the primary and secondary sources concerning the topic, including historical texts, archaeological reports, and reliable online sources, were identified, and an extensive literature review was

conducted to gather information from them. These sources provided insights into the historical context, cultural significance, and political relevance of Devkot during the early medieval history of Bengal.

Following this, a geographical analysis was undertaken to determine the exact geography of Devkot and its environs. References from historical texts were cross-referenced with modern geographical data using satellite imagery to identify the potential sites of interest within and surrounding the city.

In addition to textual analysis, the research incorporated the use of historical maps, illustrations, and diagrams to enhance the understanding of the geography of Devkot. These visual aids proved integral in providing a comprehensive insight into the region's spatial context and historical evolution.

Moreover, modern scholarly perspectives on the historical texts were also considered, and interpretations were drawn based on them. Various viewpoints were carefully evaluated to enrich the knowledge of Devkot and Ekdala. Finally, the information thus obtained from the above-mentioned sources was integrated to derive conclusive insights regarding the topic.

INTRODUCTION

According to the local tradition, Bangarh is believed to be the capital of Banasura, the son of Mahabali and the King of Asuras. It has been known by several names like Devikot, Diwkot, Ushavana, Kotivarsha, and Sonitapura throughout history. [1] [3]

In Hemachandra and Keshava (author of the Kalpadrukosh), the terms Devikota, Umavana (or Ushavana), Kotivarsha, Banapura, and Sonitapura are synonymous and, according to K. G. Goswami, are supposed to be identical with the ruined site of Bangarh. Kotivarsha is mentioned in the Vayu Purana and in the Brihat Samhita of Varahamihira (6th century CE). We also find a mention of a class of Jains of Eastern India by the term Kodivarisiya (Kotivarshiya) in the Kalpa Sutra of Bhadrabahu. In the Vaijayanti of Yadav Prakash (11th century CE) the names Devikota and Kotivarsha are used interchangeably. The name Sonitapura is mentioned in the Vishnu Purana, Bhagvata Purana, and in the Narayana's commentary of Shriharsha's Naishadha Charita. [3]

In the inscriptions of the Gupta period, Kotivarsha is mentioned as both the headquarters (adisthana) of a district as well as the district (vishaya) itself which formed part of the Pundravardhana-bhukti. Under the Pala dynasty, Kotivarsha is mentioned as a Vishaya only. In the Ramacharita of Sandhyakara Nandi (11th century CE) Sonitapura finds mention as a very prosperous and magnificent city. It was in continuous occupation till the invasion of the Turks in the beginning of the 13th century CE and was known to them as Devikot or Dev-kot. [3]

Archaeologists have uncovered terracotta figurines, beads, seals, pottery fragments, utensils, and ornaments etc. shedding light on the material culture and lifestyles of ancient civilizations that once thrived in the region. [1] The discovery of fourteen towers and the evidence of drainage and sophisticated water supply systems beneath the surface of Bangarh hints at a bustling urban settlement. Moreover, the excavations have unveiled evidence suggesting Bangarh's connections with ancient Greeks and other European civilizations. [2]

LOCATION OF THE CITY

Minhaj-us-Siraj states that Diw-kot was situated on the eastern side of the Ganga, in the region of Barind (Varendra). According to him, the territory of Lakhnauti was divided into two regions. The area which lay to the west of the Ganga was called "Rādh" (রাঢ়), and the area which lay to the east of the Ganga was called Barind (or Barindah). The city of Lakhn-or (not to be confused with Lakhnauti which lies to the east of Ganga) was situated in Rādh, i.e., to the west of Ganga and the city of Devkot was situated in Barind i.e., to the east of Ganga. [9]

Rādh is a geographical term used to refer to the area situated between the Chota Nagpur Plateau in the West and the Ganga Delta in the East. Rādh Plains composes part of the Lower Ganga Plains in northern part of West Bengal and eastern Jharkhand. [8] It includes the districts of Birbhum, Paschim Bardhaman, Purba Bardhaman, Bankura, Murshidabad of West Bengal and Santhal Pargana division of Jharkhand. Linguistically, the region is defined by the population that predominantly speaks the local Rādhī Bengali dialect.

Barind has been identified by Ramesh Chandra Majumdar with Varendra. The term Varendra Mandala occurs in the Kavi-prashasti of the Ramacharitam of Sandhyakar Nandi. He locates it between the rivers Ganga and Karatoya. The Silimpur, Tarpandighi and Madhainagar inscriptions prove its inclusion within Pundravardhana or the Pundra Kingdom. It included the present-day districts of Bogra, Rajshahi and Dinajpur in Bangladesh. [5]

Raverty suggests that Rādh could imply low-lying and flood prone region while Barinda or Varendra may denote elevated region which is less susceptible to inundation. Buchanan Hamilton is of the opinion that the part liable to inundation is called “Bang,” and the other “Barendra.”

The city is recorded as “Dihikot” or “Dehikot” in the Ain-i-Akbari. This volume of Akbarnama records 66 mahals (muhalla) organised within 6 juwars (divisions) situated in the sarkar (district) of Jannatabad or Gaur (Lakhnauti). These 6 juwars were grouped around 6 principal mahals, with Debikot (a mahal along with six other mahals) being one of them. The other five juwars included Akra, Darsarak, Ramoti, Sersabad, and Malda. [4]

Heinrich Blochmann has identified Devkot with Gangarampur which is situated in Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal. Sir Jadunath Sarkar also supports this assertion and mentions that Devkot (or Devikot) was known by the name of “Bana-pura,” and was a very ancient city. It was situated in Gangarampur pargana of Dinajpur district. The ruins of Bananagar (25°24'49.0"N 88°31'51.0"E) indicate the location of the old city. According to him the Muslim settlement may have been located at Dumdumah (a cantonment established near the original Hindu city which served as an additional defence for the existing fort) and over the course of time, both the areas came to be known by the same name. [10]

DESCRIPTION OF DEVKOT ACCORDING TO MODERN AUTHORS

Montgomery Martin, in his account of Gangarampur, says that the Daroga and Munsif of Gangarampur reside at Dumdumah, which is towards the north-west, and at a distance from the centre of the division. According to him the proper name of Dumdumah is Devi Koth. It acquired this name due to its historical role as a military station during the early period of Muslim rule, as it was probably on the frontier of Varendra. The Wazir (chief officer) may have resided on the banks of “Dahal Dighi,” a large tank which was excavated by the Muslims. In various areas, particularly towards the northeast corner, there are piles of bricks, which are likely the remnants of houses once inhabited by Muslim officers. At the centre of the north side of the tank stands the Dargah (25°24'03.5"N 88°31'53.0"E) of a Peer named Mulla Ataaddin (known today as the Dargah of Shah Ata), accompanied by a small mosque. Both structures are in a state of disrepair, but a canopy still suspends over the tomb, which is now regarded as a place of worship. A stone-paved descent leads from these buildings to the tank, and the materials used in it appear to have been sourced from the ruins of a Hindu structure, as some broken columns, fragments of doors and windows, along with intricately carved stones, are mixed with plain ones. Traces of human figurines on the column prove that the ruins were part of a Hindu structure, and were most probably from Bannogor (Bananagar). The Wazir, credited with establishing the mosque and excavating the tank, is believed to be buried between them. His grave is marked by a large cavity covered with long stones. [6]

According to an inscription over the mosque's gate, it was constructed prior to the time of Mulla Ataaddin and Sheikh Mukbu by Wazir Shawr Musaur of Muzaffarabad, who served as the commander of the troops of Firozabad during the reign of Hussain Shah, Sultan of Hostina, in the year AH 718. Another inscription suggests that a place for prayer (Gumbaz) erected behind the tomb was commissioned by Sikandar Shah, son of Majahud Shah, in the year AH 765. Furthermore, an inscription in a wing of the mosque indicates that it was built as a place for prayer for Ataudin by Fateh Shah, son of Mahmud Shah, in the year AH 845. A section of the mosque known as Hamada, as per an inscription, was constructed during the reign of Ky Kaos Shah, under the orders of Sikandar Sani in the year AH 872. Lastly, an inscription over the door of an apartment to the right of the mosque, serving as a kitchen for Fakirs, suggests that it was built during the time of Mukhdum Maulana Ata, during the reign of Muzaffar Shah.

A short distance east of Dahal Dighi lies another sizable tank known as Kala Dighi, believed to have been excavated by Kala Rani, the spouse of Ban Raja (Banasura). It spans approximately 4000 feet in length from north to south and 800 feet in width. To the north of these two large tanks, there lie numerous smaller ones, which are likely the remnants of the suburbs of Bannogor (Bananagar), the residence of Ban Raja. The ruins of Bannogor stretch along the east bank of the Punarbhaba, running from northeast to southwest for about two miles, slightly above Dumdumah. The citadel forms a quadrangle measuring approximately 1800 feet by 1500 feet, enclosed by a substantial brick rampart and a ditch on the south and east sides. The remaining portion of the ditch has likely been destroyed by the river which, during the time of Ban Raja, is said to have passed to the north of the Brahmani (a tributary of the Dwarka River of West Bengal, not to be confused with the Brahmani of Odisha). [6] On the western side of the citadel, there is an outward projection, which likely served as an outwork before the gate. In the centre, there is a large heap of bricks, believed to be the Raja's residence. On the eastern side, there is a gate and a causeway approximately 200 feet long, leading across the ditch into the city. [3] The city, according to Martin, was likely square and over a mile in diameter, and was also enclosed by a brick rampart and a ditch. [6]

Towards the southeast corner of the city lies the monument of Sultan Shah which is now in ruins. The monument contains many stones that appear to have been taken from the aforementioned ruins. The pillars are of the same architectural style as those at the mosque of Dahal Dighi. Adjacent to the monument of the Muslim saint are two renowned pools, called "Omrito" or "Amrit Kunda" (the pool of immortality), from which an idol of Nandi or Vrishabha was found by Buchanan, and "Jivot" or "Jivat Kunda," (the pool of life). [3] They are not very large but the number of bricks around them indicate that they were once surrounded by large buildings. It is likely that these were sacred ponds (Pushkarni) occupying the areas of two temples. In the north-western corner of the ruined town, close to the Punarbhaba, are the remains of another Dargah of a Pir named Havakhari. A short distance from the north-eastern corner of the city, there exists the ruins of a temple dedicated to Virupaksha (Shiva) by Banasura. It is a chief place of worship for the Hindus in this region. Approximately half a mile west from the north end of the city, on the opposite (western) side of the Punarbhaba, there is a mound adjacent to a small tank, known as the Usha Rani Fort (25°25'14.5"N 88°31'53.5"E). It is believed to be the residence of Princess Usha, the daughter of Banasura, whose affection for Aniruddha (grandson of Krishna) led to the battle between her father and the Yadavas. [6]

About three-quarters of a mile beyond this site, at a place known as Narayanpur, numerous small tanks and collections of bricks resembling an old town can be found. It is believed that this was the location of the battle that took place between Krishna and Banasura after Aniruddha had been held captive by the latter. Near one of the tanks, again clearly displaying Hindu construction features, is the Dargah of a Muslim Pir named Bahaudin. Adjacent to it is a small structure, intricately adorned with carvings. This structure according to Martin, given its resemblance to the Mausoleum of Ghiyasuddin at Peruya, likely houses the tomb of an individual of high rank. The extensive number of stones within these scattered ruins, along with a substantial number removed by the Rajas of Dinajpur for their construction projects, indicates that Bananagar was once a highly adorned place. The remaining walls suggest its significant size and strength. Locals claim that all the stones used in the constructions throughout this district were carried away from here, and even Gaur (Gauda) owes its most valuable materials to the ruins of Bangarh. [3] [6]

There is a Dargah, popularly known as the "Pirpal Dargah," situated about 2 km north-northwest from Bangarh. It is perhaps the same Dargah that Montgomery Martin refers to as the Dargah of Bahauddin. A sign in the Bengali language, placed by an unknown authority, identifies this structure as the tomb of Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khilji. It also states that he was killed by Ali Mardan Khilji after his disastrous campaign to Tibet. Upon closer inspection, we notice that the entrance of this modest mausoleum features a true arch, a structural element not found in even some of the most advanced architectural achievements of that era, viz. the Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque or the Adhai Din Ka Jhonpra. The authoritative sources on Medieval Indian history suggest that the true arch was not introduced to Indian architecture until the late thirteenth century. It leads us to two conclusions: either the resting place is not that of Bakhtiyar Khilji, or the mausoleum was erected much later than the time of his burial. Given the aftermath of his ill-fated expedition to Tibet, which resulted in significant losses and discontent among his supporters, it is plausible to suggest that there was little immediate interest or resources dedicated to commemorating his final resting place with a tomb. Hence, it is conceivable that the tomb might have been constructed at a later stage.

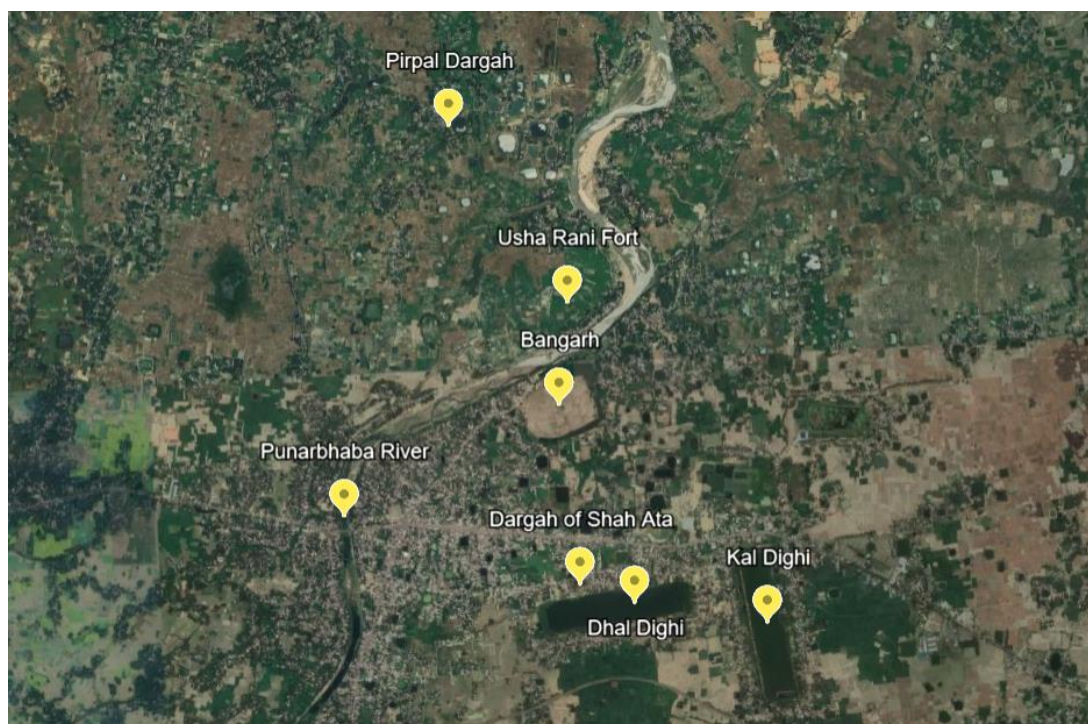


Fig. 1: Satellite imagery showing the location of supposed Devkot or Bangarh Fort (25°24'49.0"N 88°31'51.0"E) with a ditch surrounding it. To the south of it are two major tanks (Dhal Dighi and Kal Dighi as they are known today) with numerous smaller ones in the vicinity of Gangarampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, West Bengal. (Google Earth, 2022)

Alexander Cunningham writes that the fort of Devkot is situated on the eastern bank of the Punarbhaba (Punarbhaba) River, approximately 33 miles northeast of Pandua, 18 miles south-southwest of Dinajpur, and 70 miles (?) north-northeast of Gaur. To the north, there is a walled enclosure measuring about 100 feet square and beyond that there is a second fortified enclosure of similar size. Both these enclosures are surrounded by earthen ramparts and wide ditches. The Muslim quarter of Damdama lies to the south of it and there is an embanked road that leads to the east, passing by the two large lakes known as “Dahal Dighi” (supposed to be an Islamic construction as it stretches from east to west) and “Kala Dighi.” [10]

TRACING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DEVKOT AND EKDALA

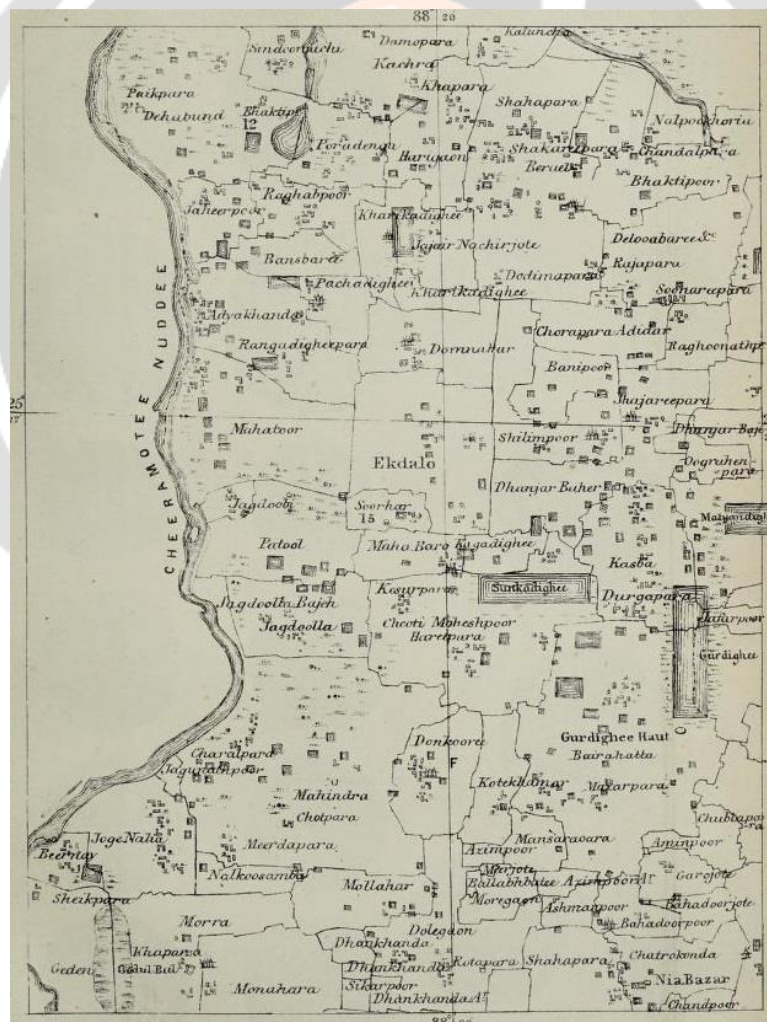
Henry George Raverty, the translator of the history of Minhaj-us-Siraj, draws attention to a place called Damdama situated between Lakhnauti and Dinajpur and states that the name is evidently a corruption of Damdamah (meaning a cavalier, a mound, etc.). He notes the presence of an ancient fort near Damdama (which he identifies as Diwkot or Devkot), and further to the east, three sizable tanks or ponds. He speculates that since the name of Ekdala is not mentioned in history for some time after the Khilji Dynasty of Bengal, it is possible that the name of Devkot was changed to Ekdala afterwards. [9] While Raverty’s identification of this place as Devkot aligns with other authorities on this subject, it appears that his analysis did not consider the research conducted by E. Vesey Westmacott, which presents an alternative perspective on the identification of Ekdala.

E. Vesey Westmacott, in his “Note on the site of Fort Ekdalah, District Dinajpur” published in the Volume 43 of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, states that the village called Ekdalah or Ekdalo lies to the east of the river Chiramati (a tributary of the Mahananda River). It is an elevated area planted with mango trees and shows traces of embankments and brick structures. During the monsoon, when the surrounding region experiences widespread flooding, it looks like an island. This characteristic aligns seamlessly with the fort that thwarted Firoz Shah’s army from conquering it. [7] He cites the “Account of Dinageepoor” of Dr. Buchanan, published by Robert Montgomery Martin in his second volume of “Eastern India” as follows:

Located approximately 1.25 miles west of the Baliya is a substantial tank known as “Molan-dighee” (the Tank of the Lotus), which was dug by arani (a princess). About 1.25 miles further west lies “Gor-dighee” or “Gurh-

dighee” (the Tank of the Fort), the water of which is extended about six hundred yards from north and south, and four hundred yards east and west, and is a Hindu work. A significant part of this tank has been reclaimed for rice cultivation. Roughly 1,200 yards west from this tank is another one named “Alta Dighee”.* This tank, nearly equivalent in size, is oriented from east to west, signifying its Islamic origin. Between these two tanks, the site of “Borohata” (Bairhatta) reveals extensive mounds or heaps, largely comprised of bricks. In various places, one can discern the foundations of walls, as well as the dimensions of chambers. All these chambers are of a small size, due to which they have resisted the attacks of time better than more spacious apartments. They are primarily concentrated in the southern division of the town which is often referred to as “Kootee-baree” (Kootee signifying a masonry building). In the centre of these ruins are the remains of a small square fort which is surrounded by a double wall of brick and an intermediate ditch. There also lies a monument of a Muslim saint, called Peer Bodol Diwan, to the north of these ruins.

Westmacott points out that the village of “Ekdalah” is only half a mile from the northwest corner of the most westerly of these three tanks. The ruined fort, as described by Dr. Buchanan, is about a mile and a half to the southeast of this location. He suggests that the name “Ekdalah,” its distance from Pandua, the presence of two large lakes aligned east and west (indicating a likely Islamic origin), the remains of brick buildings, the fort itself (?), the third tank known as the “The Tank of the Fort,” and the extensive inundations to the west of it, all seem to indicate that this site corresponds to the historical Ekdalah mentioned in the Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi’s of Ziauddin Barani and Shams-i-Siraj Afif.



* The three lakes mentioned by Westmacott lie approximately 22 km to the west of Gangarampur as the crow flies. But, despite our best efforts, the measurements and distances between these large lakes do not seem to match up correctly. However, the region is full of lakes and it might be possible that Westmacott is referring to some other lake that has been dried out.

Fig. 2: A map of the environs of Ekdalah, published by E. Vesey Westmacott in Volume XLIII of the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1874).

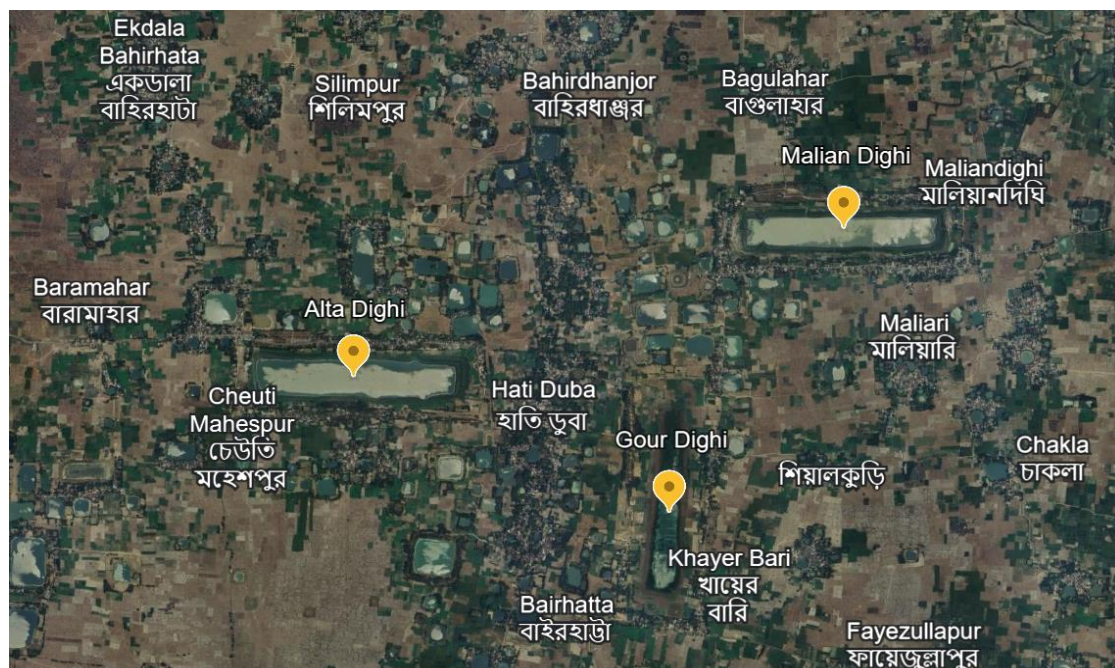


Fig. 3: Satellite imagery showing the three great tanks mentioned by Westmacott as they are known today, situated approximately 22 km west of Gangarampur. The village of EkdalaBahirhata is located to the northwest of these lakes, and a place named "Bairhatta" can be observed at the bottom of the map. (Google Earth, 2022)

He also notes the existence of another place named Ekdalah, situated fifty miles to the east-southeast of Pandua. However, he does not find compelling reasons to believe that this second Ekdalah is the same as the one mentioned in historical records. [11]

CONCLUSION

Through a careful examination of geographical data and historical accounts, we have gained a clear understanding of Devkot within the broader landscape of Bengal, highlighting its strategic position on the frontiers of Varendra on the eastern bank of the Punarbhaba River. While some historical accounts and geographical analyses may suggest a connection between Ekdala and Devkot, it is essential to approach such assertions with caution. The geographical and topographical features of Ekdala, including its distance from Pandua and the presence of large lakes, may align with certain descriptions of Bangarh, but the absence of conclusive evidence, such as archaeological findings or any historical records explicitly linking Ekdala to Bangarh or Devkot, raises doubts about this correlation. On the other hand, researches conducted by Francis Buchanan as well as E. Vesey Westmacott have distinctly established Ekdala as a separate site from Devkot. Furthermore, the discovery of the grave of Bakhtiyar Khilji near the ruins of Bangarh strengthens the argument in favour of Bangarh being Devkot. If the place known as Pirpal Dargah really is the resting place of Bakhtiyar Khilji, the site of Bangarh is indeed Devkot.

As custodians of our cultural legacy, it is imperative that we protect and cherish sites like Devkot and Ekdala, ensuring their preservation for the generations to come. The gradual decline of significant sites like the Usha Rani Fort and Pirpal Dargah serves as a poignant reminder of the urgency of our conservation efforts. The loss of important archaeological sites like Bangarh to encroachment underscores the pressing need for action. It is not solely the responsibility of organizations like the Archaeological Survey of India to conserve these sites; rather it is our collective responsibility to protect them. Preserving those expansive reservoirs known as Dighis is not just about honouring their historical significance but also about protecting our environment. By safeguarding

these remnants of our past, we not only pay homage to the diverse history of humanity but also deepen our connection to our origins.

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