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Socio-Political Development of Surma Barak Valley from 5th to 13th Century A.D.

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Abstract

The Barak Valley of Assam consists of three districts, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj situated between Longitude 92.15" and 93.15" East and Latitude 24.8" and 25.8" North and covering an area of 6,941.2 square Kilometres, this Indian portion of the valley is bounded on the north by the North Cachar Hills District of Assam and the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, on the east by Manipur, on the south by Mizoram and on the west by Tripura and the Sylhet District of Bangladesh. These three districts in Assam, however, together form the Indian part of a Valley, the larger portion of which is now in Bangladesh. The valley was transferred to Assam from Bengal in 1874 and the Bangladesh part was separated by the partition of India in 1947.

The social and polity formation processes in the Barak Surma Valley in the Pre-Colonial period were influenced by these geo-graphical, historical and sociological factors. On the one hand, it was an outlying area of the Bengal plains and on the other hand, it was flanked by the hill tribal regions. The extension of the Indo-Aryan settlements from mainland Bengal in early times inaugurated the social formation processes, while the contacts and intermingling of the races reinforced the process and perpetuated the growth of a distinct culture group in the valley.

Keywords: Surma, Barak Valley, Socio-Political, Development etc.

Introduction: The crucial issues of enquiry in the social and polity formation studies are labour process, surplus and social differentiation. The form of labour process, the manner of extraction of surplus and the system of distribution of surplus determined the social formation processes. In polity or state formation studies one looks into how in the early egalitarian societies inequality and stratification started with the emergence of private property and interest groups. The political organizations in early societies were founded on territory and property. The state as a higher form of political organization came into existence when the economic relations were further sophisticated by privatization of property and extraction of surplus by the dominant groups in the society. The 'divine right'

theory strengthened the assumed authority of the rulers. In India, the Brahmanical myths concerning the divine origin of the kings contributed to royal legitimation. In all cases, however, the common crucial factor was the surplus (generation, extraction and redistribution).

The social and polity formation processes in North East India were spontaneously influenced by its geo-political situation which absorbed pan-Indian traditions and the developments in neighbouring South East Asia. In the past, the region experienced a fine blending of these two traditions represented by the Indo-Aryans and the Indo-Mongoloid tribal communities. The emergence of states from the indigenous and immigrant tribal social bases was a significant development in the early history of the region. In case of the Koch, Kachari, Meitei, Jaintia and Tripuri, who were settled in the region since early times, the societies were stratified with the emergence of private property on the basis of differentiated land-holding and individualized income. The notables at clan or village levels emerged as chiefs and they extended their sphere of dominance by subduing other clans, tribes and communities. The Ahoms experienced these early processes before their advent in Assam and they built the most powerful state in the region by military conquest. The hinduisation formalized the social stratification and legitimized the royal supremacy in all cases. In final forms, the states were able to develop elaborate apparatus strong enough for sustenance and surveillance.

The Barak Valley of Assam consists of three districts, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Situated between Longitude 92.15" and 93.15" East and Latitude 24.8" and 25.8" North and covering an area of 6,941.2 square Kilometres, this Indian portion of the valley is bounded on the north by the North Cachar Hills District of Assam and the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, on the east by Manipur, on the south by Mizoram and on the west by Tripura and the Sylhet District of Bangladesh. These three districts in Assam, however, together form the Indian part of a Valley, the larger portion of which is now in Bangladesh. The valley was transferred to Assam from Bengal in 1874 and the Bangladesh part was separated by the partition of India in 1947. In the British period it was known as Surma Valley after a branch of the river Barak, called Surma, which flanked the Sylhet town. There were only two districts at that time, viz. Sylhet and Cachar. The Karimganj District of Assam (India) and the Maulavi Bazar, Sylhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj districts of Bangladesh today were then sub-divisions of the Sylhet District, while Cachar (Silchar), Hailakandi and North Cachar Hills (Haflong) districts of Assam (India) were sub-divisions of the Cachar District, The Cachar District today has become limited to the old Silchar Sub-division of the district. Although Hailakandi, Cachar and the North Cachar Hills districts, a portion of Nowgong district in the Brahmaputra Valley, besides small patches of Nagaland and Manipur states, were included in Cachar or the Heramba Kingdom for sometimes before the British annexation, only Cachar and Hailakandi districts are in the Barak Valley. The North Cachar Hills, along with the Jaintia Hills and the patches of Nagaland and Manipur, belong to the Meghalaya Plateau or the hill range which divides the valleys of the Barak and the Brahmaputra. On the other hand, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura

belongs to the Barak Valley. The Valley is formed by the river Barak which divides itself into two branches (Surma and Kushiara) in Karimganj, both the branches flow through Sylhet and they are reunited before finally confluence into the Brahmaputra in East Bengal (Bangladesh). The Barak Valley, for our purpose, includes Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts of Assam and Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura and Maulavi Bazar, Sylhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj districts of Bangladesh. Geographically, culturally and historically it is a distinct region which Rabindranath Tagore described as 'Sribhumi'.

The history and sociology of the Barak Valley has to be interpreted in terms of its geographical structure. Geographically it is an extension of the Bengal plains, the physical features registering a slow and gradual change as one travels from here to anywhere in Bengal or vice versa. This Valley, inclusive of the Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura and four (Sylhet) districts of Bangladesh, is bounded on three sides by the hills forming virtually a high wall, while only on the fourth side it is followed in succession by the plains districts of undivided Bengal without disturbing the landscape and the ecosystem. Naturally, Indo-Aryan settlement extended to the valley from Bengal in early times in its spontaneous eastward march to the farthest limits of the plough-able areas. They moved along the familiar terrain and stopped at the foot of the hills as these hills were not suitable for the settled cultivators. Similarly, the flood-prone plain region was uninviting to the Jhumias of the neighbouring hills. The undivided Barak Valley thus developed as the homeland of a distinct dialect group of Bengali from the ancient period.

In the early times the valley was covered by the state formation processes in South East Bengal like Samatata, Harikela and others, 'Srihattamandala' denoting the regional identity as we know from the Kalapur inscriptions of the samanta rulers of Samatata belonging to 7th century A.D. The Harikela coins had several local series, and in one series the word 'Veraka' (Barak) used to be inscribed. This explains the position in 8th-9th century A.D. In the 10th century A.D. the Chandra rulers of East Bengal ruled over Srihattamandala as we know from the paschimbhag copper-plate inscription. In the 11th-12th century A.D. the autonomous Srihatta state flourished in the valley under the Deva rulers mentioned in the Bhatara plates. The boundary of the Srihattamandala or Srihattarajya extended to its natural limits and the donated villages mentioned in some of these inscriptions were scattered over Cachar, Karimganj and Sylhet districts and the Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura. In the medieval period, the lower part of the valley (or Kailasahar-Sylhet sector) was conquered by the Afghan chiefs and then it formed part of the Mughal Subah of Bengal, while the upper region (Cachar-Hailakandi sector) was included successively in Tripuri, Khaspur and Heramba states. The Western sector of the lower valley was included in the Jaintia State which at a time extended to Karimganj. Two other important states in the lower valley on the eve of the Afghan conquest were Gaur and Laur.

The 1971 census returned about 80 percent of the total population of the Barak Valley (Assam) to be Bengali. This was more or less the position in the earlier censuses, including the British time. The other notable groups are the workforce in the tea gardens, Manipuris, Dimasas and the Koches. The small numbers of Koches (locally known as Dehans) were the

descendants of those who migrated to Cachar in the 16th century during the invasion of Chila Rai of Cooch Behar when the Khaspur state came into existence under Dewan Kamalnayan. Their number increased marginally during the Moamaria rebellion in the Assam Valley in the beginning of the last century when the Raja of Cachar offered settlement to some fugitive families. About fifty Dimasa families moved to the plains with the Raja when the Dimasa capital was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur in 1750 A.D. following the merger of the Khaspur state with the Heramba (Dimasa) state. They were joined by a few more families during the political turmoil in North Cachar Hills in 1820s. A good number of Manipuris came to Cachar during the Burmese occupation of Manipur since 1818 and some of them settled down permanently. There had been waves of immigration even subsequently as Manipur was in turmoil for a long time. Some Hmar and Kuki villages were settled by the British in the 30s and 40s of the last century as they were pushed out of the Lushai Hills by inter-tribal feuds. The workforce in the tea gardens was brought by the British from Chotanagpur and other places ever since the plantation started in 1850s. All these immigrant communities have adopted the valley as their homeland, they speak the local dialect of Bengali, and the various communities living here have reinforced each other's culture and traditions. It has always happened in history. The small immigrant communities, even if they are conquerors and rulers, they adopt the language and culture of the land of their adoption. It happened to the Mughals in the North India, and it has happened to the Ahoms in Assam and to the Dimasas in Cachar. The British failed to plunge into this historical process and, as a result, they invited the mass reaction in the form of national movement which forced them eventually to leave the country.

A question that has confronted many is when the Bengalis first came to the Barak Valley. This can be answered by asking, when did the Romans come to Rome? We have not come across any evidence that would tell us about the earliest Bengali settlement in this valley or who were the earlier inhabitants. On the contrary, we have found them here in as early a date as we are able to trace the history of the valley on the basis of conventional historical data. The names of places, river and hills in the valley have close affinity with those in various parts of Bengal and elsewhere in the Indo-Gangetic plains. The ancient epigraphic records suggest the existence of *chaturvarna* or four castes and even sub-castes and the *navasakha* or nine professional groups of traditional Indian society among the people in the donated villages and the officials of the state. The records of the Mughal, Tripuri and Dimasa rulers in different parts of the valley in different time in the medieval period were maintained in Bengali which was also the language of education and literature.

While on a survey duty in Cachar in 1832, R. B. Pamberton, in a report, said, "the people in Sylhet and Cachar are identical in every respect-appearance, customs and language." Thomas Fisher, the first Superintendent of Cachar, said in 1834. "The entire instruction in this district is to be conveyed in Bengali language." C. Becker, a German missionary (1923), wrote, "The principal language of the Surma Valley is Bengali. In Sylhet District it is spoken by 92 percent of the people, and in the Cachar District by more than half of the

Socio-Political Development of Surma Barak Valley... Mehbubur Rahman Choudhury & Sahab Uddin Ahmed population. Bengali as spoken in the Surma Valley differs to some extent from that of the Province of Bengal and it is called therefore, Sylhet-Bengali.” Becker further observed that in Cachar plains the percentage of the Bangalis would be as high as in Sylhet but the Haflong Subdivision (now North Cachar Hills District) which is predominantly tribal and the Hindustani and Manipuri settlers in plains brought down the district percentage of the Bangalis.

Objectives of the Study:

- 1 To study the Socio – political development of Surma – Barak Valley.
- 2 To find out the factors responsible for the formation of political centres and the cultural development.

Review of Literature: The researcher reviewed books relevant to the research topic and has referred to a number of books published:-

- The most important among the earliest works on history of the Surma Barak region is undoubtedly ‘*Srihatter Itibritta*’ by Achyut Charan Choudhury. The monumental works published in the two volumes in 1911 and 1917 respectively may be regarded as the most important contribution to the intellectual; arena in the first half of the 20th century. Sri Choudhury in his work append briefly in the history of Cachar also. This voluminous work has become a classic source for the study of history of the region. This was followed by the ‘*Kacharer Itibritta*’, authored by U.C. Guha and published in 1921. But his works cannot answer all the questions that a modern student of history is expected to rise.
- J. B. Bhattacharjee, by his brilliant works like ‘*Cachar Under the British Rule in North East India*’ (1977), ‘*Sequences of development in North East India*’ (1988), ‘*Social and Polity Formation in Pre-colonial North East India*’ (1991), ‘*Kachari Rajya: Uttan Aru Patan*’ (1993), etc. and a large number of research papers published in different journals and proceedings of seminar throws much light on the historical process developed in the region.
- Sujit Choudhury in his book ‘*Srihatta Kacharer Prachin Itihas*’ (1992), opens a new dimension on the historiography of the region by giving scientific interpretation of the traditions current among the people of the region for centuries.
- Some valuable works like ‘*Queens of Cachar or Hidimba and the Cacharis*’ (1974), by R. K. Barman and ‘*The Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hill district*’ (1976) by Bordoloi throw much light on the socio-political aspects of the north eastern parts of the valley under review.
- A collection of research papers edited by J. N. Choudhury under the title ‘*Srihatta Kacharer Itihas o Sanskritir Rprekha*’ (1996) contains some brilliant contributions of noted scholars like Sujit Choudhury, K.K.Gupta, S.Dutta Choudhury, J.B. Bhattacharjee, Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others highlighting the historical aspects of the valley. In this context, the *proceeding of the seminar on the source materials* for writing a comprehensive history of the Barak Valley organized in 1997 by the

Department of History, R.S. Girls' College, Karimganj under the auspices of Assam University, Silchar, may be referred as a pointer to the reconstruction of the history of the Surma – Barak – Valley.

- Again, a recent voluminous work – '*Sylhet – History and Heritage*' edited by Sharif Uddin Ahmed and published by Bangladesh Itihas Samiti in 1999 may be regarded as by far the best attempts made in Bangladesh in respect of regional or local history of the local history of the Surma - Barak Valley.
- The contributions of Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others in the study of source materials, and that of Abdul Karim and others in the study of socio – political history of Sylhet during the period are the results of the continuous research in the history of the valley under review.

But the works referred to are either some scattered contributions or some materials offering scope for reconstructions of history. So, ample scope remains for further research in the history of the valley.

Methodology: Methodology is one of the significant aspects which helped the researcher to conduct his study. It is a systematic way through which a study can be conducted. The study is basically descriptive and exploratory research and it critically uses both primary and secondary sources. The source materials of Surma-Barak Valley under review are scanty, yet some materials are available which may be studied under the following sources - Literary sources, Epigraphic sources and Oral sources.

Significance of the Study: The Subject matter of the study as the title indicates is to deal with the socio -political development of the undivided valley. The political development in the superstructure of a region or a country, generally to large extent, casts its influence on the social changes occurred in the infrastructure. But in case of Surma – Barak Valley, a researcher encounters with a problem of different nature. The social changes occurred during the period under review about the results of the political influences. Some extra political forces might be so alive that it brought even the ruling family at least in the case of eastern portion of the region to undergo changes along with the process of development came from within. So, an investigation in social changes would also form a sine – quanon of the proposed study.

Conclusion: During the long period of the known history of the ancient period of the region, the socio-political development occurred in the Surma-Barak Valley centring round racial assimilation and cultural synthesis between the early settlers of presumably from Austric and Mongolian stock and Aryan or Aryanised new comers from the west. The epigraphic discoveries corroborated by some literary evidences bear the testimony of this fact.

The political history of the period shows that at the earliest stage, the Aryanised Mongolian king of Kamrupa rules the region for about two centuries. Thereafter, the eastern portion of the region was ruled by the Mongolian kings for the whole period, even during the medieval period also. But on the western portion forming Sylhet division of the British

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period, the Aryanised rulers, either from the west or rose indigenously ruled for centuries ending with the beginning of the medieval period. In spite of these political differences, the social formation including social stratification and cultural development proceeded under the influence of Bengal.

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The social and polity formation processes in the Surma-Barak Valley in the Pre-Colonial period were influenced by these geographical, historical and sociological factors. On the one hand, it was an outlying area of the Bengal plains and, on the other; it was flanked by the hill tribal regions. The extension of the Indo-Aryan settlements from mainland Bengal in early times inaugurated the social formation processes, while the contacts and intermingling of the races reinforced the process and perpetuated the growth of a distinct culture group in the valley.

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