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The Social Structure and Political Phenomena in Ancient Surma Barak Valley

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Abstract

During the long period of the known history of the ancient period of the region starting from 5th century A.D. and ending with 13th century, the socio-political development occurred in the Surma-Barak Valley, centering 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 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.

Keywords: Assimilation, Stratification, Influence, Austric, Mongolian etc.

Introduction: The geographical area that forms the Surma Barak Valley extends over a region now divided between India and Bangladesh. During the British regime, the region was an administrative unit under the province of Assam reorganized in 1874 and for a period covering more than half of a century it had been called the Surma-Valley for administrative purpose and as such this identity of the region was very popular. Bounded by the ridges of the Barail Hills on the north, the Hills of Tripura and Mizoram on the south, lofty mountains of the Angami Naga hills and Manipur on the east and the plains of the East Bengal, more specially the Meghna valley (Dhaka-Mymonsingh-Comilla), the geographical formation of the region clearly shows that it forms the eastern most continuation of the Bengal plain. It may be mentioned here that the geographical formation of the valley excludes the modern district of North Cachar Hills which constitute the part of the administrative Surma-Valley organized by the British Rulers. The main river of the region

The Social Structure and Political Phenomena in... Mehubur Rahman Choudhury & Nabarun Purkayastha is the Barak, which flowing through Cachar, divides itself into two major streams, viz – the Surma and the Kushiya, which again meet to the Brahmaputra, which in its turn merges with the Meghna and finally flows to the Bay of Bengal. The Indian portion of the region is now popularly known as the Barak Valley, covering the geographical area of the modern Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi of the Assam state. But the Bangladesh portion continues an administrative unit of the country in the form of ‘Sylhet Division’ constituted with Sylhet, Moulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj districts. So, the appellation of Surma Valley, so popularly current during the British period has become an historical entity since independence in 1947 when the district of Sylhet, the major portion of Surma Valley was partitioned following a referendum. But the geographical formation of the region clearly indicates that the region forms a valley of the rivers Barak and Surma. So, the geographical name of the Valley as “Barak-Surma Valley” – following what Nihar Ranjan Roy prefers in his ‘**Bangalir Itihas**’ (3rd Edn., Calcutta – 1980. Vol. – I, P – 80).

Objectives of the Study:

- 1 To study the Socio – political aspects of Ancient Surma – Barak Valley.
- 2 To find out the factors responsible for the formation of political centers and the cultural development.
- 3 To identify out the major political centers during the period between 5th to 13th century A.D.

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.

Discussion: The history of the ancient period in the Surma–Barak Valley has some special importance in the historical process of the region. The ancient period of the region is obscure, the late ancient period is a period of transition in respect of population pattern, socio–cultural development and political undulation. With all these characteristics, the valley entered into the medieval period of Indian history and attracts a researcher to study the history of the region systematically and with a scientific outlook.

During the long period of the known history of the ancient period of the region starting from 5th century A.D. and ending with 13th century, the socio-political development occurred in the Surma-Barak Valley, centering round racial assimilation and cultural synthesis between the early settlers of presumably from Austric and Mongolian stock and

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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 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.

At that remote past, the society of the region was hierarchically organized on the basis of caste and the unequal groups in the society survived through mutually obligatory services. Some of the Brahmanas gave up their hereditary priestly professions, engaged in the management of their lands and they became powerful in the state politics. The practice of land grants resulted in the rise of powerful intermediaries and in the fragmentation of the soil. In return of these grants, the donees were obliged to render certain specific services to the state.

The economy and the economic activities of the region could not be anything but agriculture, which would suggest the presence of the peasants. The occupations must have cut across the racial boundaries, although the professional specializations of the emerging social groups might not have fully matured to assume the character of economic classes. We are not sure of the extent of surplus, the extraction, or the type methods of appropriation or redistribution. But a state of the type mentioned in the copper plates inscriptions could be based only on surplus. That it was wealthy enough is beyond doubt.

The social and polity formation processes in the ancient Barak (Surma) valley were influenced by the then geographical, historical and sociological factors. It was an outlying area of the Bengal plains. The extension of the Indo-Aryan settlements from main land Bengal in early times inaugurated the social formation process, while the contacts and intermingling of the races reinforced the process and perpetuated the growth of a distinct culture group in the region. The polity formation in the valley as pan-Indian Brahmanical Hindu model which created profound impact on the later hinduised tribal states like those of the Tripuris, Jaintias and the Dimasas. The Tripuris experimented the early phase of state formation in the Barak Valley. Likewise, the Koch state in the Barak Valley started as a crown colony under Cooch Behar but eventually developed into independent Khaspur state.

However, the presence of the Brahmins (as mentioned in various sources) is essentially linked with the promotion of education and Aryan culture. Education was not confined to the Brahmins alone. The caste system was prevalent in the society. But it was not so rigid as in modern times. The titles like *Deb*, *Datta*, *Kar*, *Das*, etc. are still extant in the Bengali society of Barak-Surma Valley region. In this region, the social stratification was clear. The

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caste system, which envisages a stratified society based on social status and nature of work of its members, was prevalent in ancient states of Barak Valley.

From the inscriptional evidences, it is evident that the Aryanisation of the region started at least from the 5th century A.D. when a group of Brahmins well versed in the Vedas settled in the south eastern region of the district known as Chandrapuri Vishaya on receipt of a land grant issued by Kamrupa king Bhutivarmana, the ancestor of Bhaskaravarmana. They may be regarded as the pioneers who introduced plough based agriculture and incorporated within a caste-based society of the local indigenous people. In the mid-seventh century, a Marundanath, a feudal chief of a Samantata king, brought forest lands (*atavi-anchal*) under plough cultivation through another land grant. The development process of the region reached its zenith during the reign of Srichandra, the tenth century king of Eastern Bengal with his capital at Vikrampura near Dhaka. By a single landgrant, Srichandra gave settlement to 6000 Brahmins, in three *Vishayas* of Srihatta mandala. Srihatta as a name of a political unit was first used in his Paschimbhag copper plate. Two centuries later, Srihatta was mentioned as a *rajya* an autonomous political unit during the reign of the Deva dynasty.

The social situation manifested in these inscriptions speaks of a Brahmanical society with remnants of tribal influence here and there. The caste base was there, but it was not strong enough for formation of a Chaturvarna or 'four-caste' society in classical north Indian model. The Brahmins were there, but only other *Varna* available was the *Sudras* with different high and low status. To a considerable extent, the social situation of the region conforms to the social model depicted in the Brihaddharma Purana and the Brahmapurana. The Brahmanical domination was there, but it was not as dominant as in the northern India. The social mobility of the *Sudras* from lower to higher status was possible depending on performance. Tribals were incorporated in the Hindu society as back as and when they opted for participation in the plough-based agriculture and settle habitation. Evidently, the society was liberal compared to other parts of India of the same period.

The political situation as a bit unsettled but perhaps that did not affect the continuity of the established political administration. The Kamrupa Kings had their sway for about a century and then they lost their control over the region once and for all. Successive rulers from eastern Bengal ruled the region either directly or through the feudatories for more than four centuries. From the inscription of Bhaskaravarmana, we find that an elaborate system of revenue administration was developed to administer Chandrapuri Vishaya. The system thus established definitely continued efficiently for centuries otherwise we would not have a very developed agricultural economy three hundred years later as manifested in the Pashimbhag copper plate of Srichandra. However, the economy came under some stress and strain two hundred years later as evident from the two Bhatara copper plates. The cause can be attributed to feudal decadence though no definite proof can be produced.

The Vaisnavism was the dominant cult in the region during the period. The names of the Brahmins available in the plates signify the Vaisnavite influence in the majority cases

followed by the Sun worshippers. The Saivite and Shakti names are there but not in any significant number. Though the inscriptions do not manifest the influence of Buddhism to any considerable degree, pre-ponderance of the Buddhism can be discerned from indirect evidences. The coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism and their intermingling was an important feature of this period.

From the text of the Paschimbag copper plate of Srichandra we come to know of the startling fact that in Chandrapuri Vishya of Srihatta mandala, there was a Hindu centre of learning which can be regarded as the greatest seat of learning of the kind having only a lone parallel in the southern India. In vastness and infrastructural facilities, Chandrapuri Matha could be favorably compared with any other great seat of the Buddhist learning of the historical period. That the Buddhist King Srichandra lavishly patronized this institution signifies liberal religious atmosphere of the period. However, the gods worshiped in Chandrapuri Matha did not represent popular gods of the Hindu pantheon.

The four prominent deities of the Matha were Jaimini, Vaiswanara, Brahma and Mamakala and none of them were recognized as the presiding deity of any of the known Hindu sects. It may be presumed that the Matha was a centre for propagating a different variety of Hinduism, which however did not leave behind any legacy. However, the information is significant since this powerful institution might have contributed to the weakening the grip of traditional kind of Brahmanism in the region and thereby paved the way for creating a vacuum in the religious arena which subsequently helped the propagation of Islam.

Another fact needs to be mentioned here, though from the narration of the land grants we find the picture of a society under the influence of established religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, there had been a tribal layer which yet to come under those religious texts. They were awaiting for a chance to be incorporated in plough-based agriculture along with a suitable social structure and the advent of Islam particularly with Sufi preachers opened up that opportunity.

Again, the Austric-speaking Khasis and some tribes speaking languages of the Tibeto-Burman origin had been and still are the close neighbours of the local population. It is understood that the predecessors of those people contributed significantly to the composition of the local indigenous population. This racial fusion is likely to exert some influence in the arena of cultural and religious life of the region.

Hinduism in this region had to encounter challenges from at least two other dominant faiths. Buddhism had been a dominant faith here and in fact, the region is regarded as one of the last strongholds of the eastern part of India. Subsequently, the Muslims conquered the region and the conquest was followed by large-scale conversion of the people, mainly of lower strata, into Islam. Hinduism had to take recourse to combat the advent of these faiths. In some cases, peculiar compromises were made which gave the local folk cult a synthetic character.

Conclusion: The socio-economic factors at times operate as a motive force in the formulation of the cult practices at the lower level. Since the society of the Surma – Barak Valley is still very much under a feudal fold and the Hindu rural folk here is essentially conservative. In fact, from sowing time to harvest, the peasantry here observes and performs a number of customs and practices, which retain their original magical significance that seeks to influence nature for direct or indirect economic gains. Moreover, some of these rites contain features, which may help us in interpreting a number of traditional Hindu customs and rituals having a wider diffusion throughout the country.

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