

Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Geographical Background
- 1.2 Statement of the Problem
- 1.3 Review of Literature
- 1.4 Objectives of the study
- 1.5 Research questions
- 1.6 Methodology

INTRODUCTION

The modern Barak Valley comprising the districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj of the state of Assam, created by natural geography and political appointment caused by the Red Cliff Award which divided the district of Sylhet in 1947 at the time of independence of India, is a truncated portion of Surma Valley administrative unit of the British province of Assam organized in 1874. It is to be mentioned here that the Surma Valley unit of the Assam province was framed with the district of Cachar including N.C. Hills district and the district of Sylhet which included the modern Sylhet division of Bangladesh and Karimganj district of Assam. So the historical process of Cachar and Hailakandi relating to ancient period cannot be studied without referring to that of N.C. Hills and that of Karimganj cannot be studied without referring to the whole of Sylhet division of Bangladesh. For the convenience of study, a common name of the whole region is imperative and consequently the geographical appellation “*SURMA-BARAK*” seems to be appropriate.

This chapter attempts to study the Polity formation in Surma Barak Valley (Barak Surma Valley) during 5th to 13th century A.D. which is now-a-days known as India and Bangladesh. The introductory chapter of the entire research work includes: 1.1) The Geographical Background, 1.2) Statement of the problem, 1.3) Review of Literature, 1.4) Objectives of the study, 1.5) Research questions and 1.6) Methodology.

1.1 Geographical Background

The geographical extent of the Surma Barak Valley covers three districts of Assam, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura, and four districts of Bangladesh, viz. Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. In fact, these three districts in Assam and four districts in Bangladesh have emerged out of the two districts, viz. Cachar and Sylhet of the British time. Karimganj, Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj were all sub-divisions of the Sylhet district, while Silchar (now Cachar), Hailakandi and Haflong (now North Cachar Hills) were sub-divisions of Cachar district. The twin-divisions,

Cachar and Sylhet were together known as the Surma Valley division ever since the districts were transferred to Assam in 1874. The Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area was integrated in the Tripuri State since the medieval period, while the British transferred the Jiri Frontier Tract from Cachar to Manipur in 1834. The Jatinga Valley formed part of the Dimasa state since 16th century and along with the North Cachar Hills, it was included in the Cachar district till 1953. Sylhet, which was the most important town in the undivided valley, is situated on the bank of Surma, a branch of Barak. The British Government therefore, named the administrative division as Surma Valley. Truly speaking, Surma is only a branch of the Barak. The main river of this Valley is Barak. Ever since the major part of the Sylhet district (leaving only Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at the time of partition of the country in 1947, the name Surma Valley has fallen into disuse. Only the Indian portion of the valley is known today as the Barak Valley after the principal river of the tract.

The river Barak rises on the southern slopes of the lofty range which forms the northern boundary of Manipur, descends the plains of Jiribam and flows in a tortuous course across the Cachar district and a small portion of Hailakandi district to reach Badarpur in Karimganj district. It then moves further to Haritkar where it is divided into two branches; namely, Surma and Kushiya and both enter the undivided Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Surma moves through the Jaintia Parganas, and touching Sylhet, Chatak and Sunamganj towns, it enters Mymensingh near Dhiraj after forming for some distance the boundary between Sylhet and Mymensingh districts. Kushiya further divides itself into two branches at a short distance from Karimganj. The northern branch is first called Bibiyana and after some distance, the Kalni and finally rejoins Surma near Ajmiriganj on the Sylhet-Mymensingh border. The southern branch of Kushiya resumes the original name of the river, the Barak and after passing by the Habiganj and Nabiganj towns joins the Surma near Dhirai, where the combined stream takes the name Dhaleswari and finally empties itself into the old bed of the Brahmaputra near Bhairab Bazar in East Bengal. During its long course of more than eight hundred Kilometers through the Barak Surma Valley, the Barak receives innumerable tributaries from the Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, North Cachar Hills,

Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura.¹ The Barak of Cachar-Sylhet becomes Dhaleswari in Mymensingh, then it joins Brahmaputra, merges into Meghna and finally flows into the Bay of Bengal. The principal river in the Cachar-Sylhet region is the Barak. In Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj it is known by this name. In Sylhet, one of the two main branches of the river resumes the original name and all the branches combine into one stream on the Sylhet-Mymensingh border under the original name Barak. It is therefore call the region as Barak Valley to denote the entire Cachar-Sylhet region. Geographically this region is inseparable from Bengal, so also socially and historically.

In the words of Professor Nihar Ranjan Ray:

*The Barak Surma Valley is nothing but the northern section of the Meghna Valley (Dacca-Mymensingh-Comilla). There is nothing like a natural boundary between these two valleys and that is why the traditions and culture of these districts of East Bengal so easily spread into Sylhet-Cachar in ancient and medieval periods. Even now the society and culture of the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar is bound with the eastern districts of Bengal in one thread.*²

However, if it is examined through the map of the portion of the province (Cachar), it will be seen that as far as east as the Jiri, “it is connected with the district of Sylhet, by a continuous plain of exceeding fertility, watered throughout the whole extent from east to west, by a navigable river, into which numerous minor streams flow on the north and south, affording every facility of access of the almost inexhaustible forest of timber, rattans and bamboos, which have always proved a fruitful source of revenue to the former Rajas of the country. Beyond the Jiri,

¹ B.C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. I, Cachar, PP.5-55, Vol. II Sylhet, PP.7-9, (Calcutta, 1905)

² Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas*, Adi Parva (Bengali), Vol. I, P. 65, (Calcutta, 1949)

commences the marked change in the character of the country, from plain to hills, which is scarcely more striking than the difference perceptible among the people by whom they are respectively occupied, the residents in the plains being a peaceable race, devoted to agriculture pursuits, while those of the hills, strong in their mountain fastness, habitually despised the power of the Rajas of Kachari and only tendered a trifling acknowledgement of supremacy to facilitate their inter course with the frontier bazars of Banskandee, Kashpoor and Udharbond.”³

The geographical factors naturally influenced the historical and social evolution of Barak Valley. It was because of the geographical reason that the Barak Valley became a social and cultural extension of Bengal. The Indo-Aryan settlement extended to this valley from Bengal in early times in its spontaneous eastward march to the farthest limit of the eastern plains. They moved along the familiar terrain and stopped at the foot of the hills, which encircled the valley from three sides, as these hills were not suitable for settled cultivation as well as technology that the Aryans brought with them. On the other hand, the flood-prone marshy plains were uninviting to the Jhumias of the neighbouring hills. It is separated from the Brahmaputra valley by the hill range inhabited by distinctly different ethnic groups, which made the migrations between the two valleys impossible. The migrations were, therefore, mainly from the Bengal side through the western neck that rendered the Barak Valley a natural geographical continuity with the rest of Bengal. On the other hand, migration and settlement of the non-Bengali inhabitants in the valley are covered by traditions and historical evidence. The domiciled non-Bengali inhabitants in the valley are a small number of Koches and Dimasas, who are of the Brahmaputra valley origin, and a sizable number of Manipuris and tea-garden labourers who came from Manipur and Northern India respectively. The Koches, locally known as Dehans, came to Cachar in

³ R. B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, P. 206 (Calcutta, 1835)

the 16th century,⁴ the Dimasas in the 18th century⁵ and the Manipuris and the Tea-garden labourers in the 19th century.⁶ The main body of the population of the valley is, however, formed by the Bengalis (locally known as Sylhetis) who constitute, according to 1971 census, more than eighty percent of the population in Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts.⁷ In the Bangladesh portion of the valley (viz. Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj districts) the percentage of the Bengali population must be still higher. These Bengalis are the descendants of the early Indo-Aryan settlers who were responsible for the state and social formation processes in the Surma Barak Valley since 5th century A.D., if not earlier. Besides the geographical structure and the population, the Pan-Indian culture continuum in the valley is also borne out by the place names, the names of the hills, river and the villages. The villages like Krishnapur, Bishnupur, Brahmagram, Kayasthagram, Fulbari, Dasgram, Panchgram, Chandrapur, Meherpur, Sonapur, Jalalpur, Kabuganj etc., as they are in the Barak Valley in the states of political organizations which emerged in Eastern and South-Eastern Bengali during early periods.

The epigraphic, numismatic and literary evidence prove into the political organizations in the Barak Valley during 5th to 12th century A.D. The Tripuri state formation, which started in Cachar plains in 5th century A.D. gradually covered modern Sylhet or western part of the undivided Barak Valley and ultimately moved to modern Tripura region. Hieun Tsang noticed the existence of independent Srihatta (*Silichatal*) in the 7th century A.D. In the same century, the Chandrapur area of Sylhet was mentioned as a *Vishaya* (district) of Kamarupa in the Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman. The Tipperah Copper plate of Lokanatha (7th century A.D.)

⁴ N.C. Sarmah (ed.) *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* (Assamese), P. 77, (Guwahati, 1973) & Upendra Chandra Guha, *Cacharer Itivritta* (Bengali), PP. 32-33 (Dacca, 1921)

⁵ C.A. Soppitt. *A historical and descriptive account of the Kachari tribes in the North Cachar Hills*, P. 5 (Shillong, 1885)

⁶ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Accounts of Assam*, Vol. II. PP. 381-82, (London, 1879)

⁷ Government of Assam, *Cachar District Handbook*, (Shillong, 1972)

mentioned Jayatunga (Jatinga) as a *Varsa* (province) of Samatata and Suvanga (Subang) as a *Vishaya* within that *Varsa*. The Kalapur Copper plate of Marundanatha (7th century A.D.), successor of Lokanatha, also suggests that the valley was included in Samatata during his reign. In 8th - 9th Century A.D., the valley formed part of Harikela state. This is known from the Chinese accounts, literary works and a large number of Harikela coins with 'Vereka'/'Vireka' (Baraka) legends. The Paschimbhag Copper plate of Srichandra of East Bengal mentioned Srihatta as a *Mandala* (division) of *Pundravardhana bhukti* (province) of the Chandra State. The Srihattamandala, according to this inscription included three Vishayas, viz. Chandrapur, Garala and Pagora. Two Bhatara Copper plates of 11th -12th century A.D. recorded the existence of a sovereign 'Srihattarajya', which covered the entire geographical length and breadth of the Surma Barak Valley. The history of the valley in this period represented the Pan-Indian culture continuum. The epigraphic records mentioned about the persons belonging to various castes (Varna) and sub-castes with titles like *Sharma, Bhatta, Bhati, Dutta, Dum, Ghosh, Sen, Das, Deb, Dhar, Kar, Pal, and Palit* etc., which are still extant in the Barak Valley society. The foundation of the local society must have been laid in that period.⁸

The decline of the Srihattarajya in the 12th century A.D. marked the beginning of the medieval period in the history of Barak Valley. The causes of the decline of this powerful sovereign kingdom, ruled by the Deva family of Bhatara (a village near Karimganj) are not clear. But from the later evidence, it is found that Srihattarajya was the last autonomous indigenous kingdom which covered the entire geographical limits of the Surma Barak Valley under a single political organization. The fall of this kingdom ushered in an era of political disintegration and the rise of petty states in the valley. To begin with, the ruler of the Tripuri state, who had once held his sway over the valley, revived his control over a portion of the valley bordering his state, particularly the eastern and southern sectors. The western portion of the valley witnessed the rise of three local kingdoms, viz. Gaur, Laur and Jayantia. At least for

⁸ Kamala Kanta Gupta, *Copper-plates of Sylhet*, PP. 2-7, (Sylhet, 1967)

next three hundred years, these four states (Tripuri, Jayantia, Gaur, Laur) co-existed in the Barak Valley.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The Indian portion of Barak Valley 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, Moulvibazar, 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 portioned 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*’ (Vol – I, P – 80, 3rd Edn., Calcutta – 1980).

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.

1.3 Review of Literature

The review of related literature is very essential and it plays a significant role in research work. It helps the researcher to know the key issues and the conceptual and methodological problems of the research with an identification of the gaps to explore the new knowledge of research. Since the present study is related to polity formation in Surma Barak Valley during 5th to 13th century A.D., it is not expected that much literature would be available on the specific theme we are concerned with. The fact is that the society and its polity of the valley has not yet been studied in a scientific way

so that, many literatures are not available. Thus, there are some literatures which offer some insight in the history and politics of the Surma Barak valley. These works, comprising descriptive history, personal memoirs and compilation of records. It does not undertake the task of analysing the developments they discuss or mention, but still they are useful in the sense that researchers can trace out basic data and information for present study. Few literature surveys have been carried out to find the works done previously by various authors which has been listed as below:

Ahmed (1866) conducted a study on "*Srihatta Darpan*". An attempt was made to write a history of Sylhet in Bengali in late nineteenth century. But this book may only be regarded as the first attempt in reconstructing the history of Sylhet which forms a part of the region under review.

Choudhury (1911) conducted a study on "*Srihatter Itivritta*". The most important among the earliest works on history of the Surma Barak region is undoubtedly '*Srihatter Itivritta*'. 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. In his work, he append briefly about the history of Cachar also. This voluminous work has become a classical source for the study of history of the region. Therefore, keeping in mind the afore-said problem, this study proposes to address the queries of a modern student of history of the period under review.

Guha (1912) "*Cacharer Itivritta*" incorporates valuable information as to the early social formation of the Cachar plains in the late 18th and early 19th century. It also provides us with recorded information of the immigrations of different groups dating from 1736. This study proposes to fulfill the queries of a modern student of history of the period under review.

Bhattacharjee (1977) "*Cachar under the British Rule in North East India*", (1988) '*Sequences of development in North East India*', (1991) '*Social and Polity Formation in Pre-colonial North East India*', (1993) '*Kachari Rajya: Uttan Aru Patan*' etc. and a large number of research papers published in different journals and proceedings of seminar throws much light on the

historical processes developed in the region. It also depicts socio-cultural and political life of Surma Barak Valley during British regime. This work, however, may be categorised as a typical historical work. He collected official and non-official informations from Government institutions and in this respect it is more or less comprehensive.

Choudhury (1992) "*Srihatta Cacharer Prachin Itihas*" 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. Taking this new dimension into count, new windows have opened which provides a better study and understanding of the social formation of the period.

Barman (1974) '*Queens of Cachar or Hidimba and the Cacharis*', and Bordoloi (1976) '*The Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hill District*'. These valuable works throw much light on the socio-political aspects of the north eastern parts of the valley under review. However, the gap that remains unfulfilled is the gradual process of development of society and political formation of the period. This study aspires to fulfil the said gap.

Choudhury (1996) in his edited research papers under the title "*Srihatta Cacharer Itihas o Sanskritir Ruprekha*" 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. On the other hand, some works have been published in Bangladesh, which contains glimpses of the history of the region. To begin with, '*Hazrat Shah Jalal O Sileter Itihas*' by Sayed Murtaza Ali may be mentioned as a pioneer of the period. But his book cannot throw much light on the Socio-Cultural aspect of the period. Rather, he attempts to refer to this period as a 'dark period' in the

history of Sylhet. These proceedings have immensely helped in fulfilling the demands of the study.

Ahmed (1999) '*Sylhet – History and Heritage*', a recent voluminous work was edited by Sharif Uddin Ahmed and published by Bangladesh Itihas Samiti. It may be regarded as by far the best attempts made in Bangladesh in respect of regional or local history of the Surma Barak Valley. However, his book is left unsatisfied with materials and hence provides a scope for further study.

Choudhury continued further research in the period and his contributions '*Silether Rajnaitik Itihas*' has compiled along with others in work named '*Brihattar Silether Itihas*', edited by Md. Abdul Aziz and others in 1997. 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 study in the history of the valley.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The basic objective of the proposed work is the study of polity formation in Surma Barak Valley during 5th to 13th Century A.D. Besides this, other chief objectives are:-

1. To identify out the major political centers during the period between 5th to 13th century A.D.
2. To find out the factors responsible for the formation of political centers and the cultural development.
3. To examine the nature and characteristic features of the social formation and political development with the help of extant archaeological remains and literary sources.
4. To find out social assimilations occurred in the valley during the period under review.

1.5 Research Questions

1. What were the influences of Polity Formation in the society of Surma Barak Valley during 5th to 13th century A.D?
2. Is the political development in the western part of the valley is same as the neighbouring Bengal province?
3. Is the social assimilation was a continuity of the process that started in the ancient period?
4. Is the socio-political development in the eastern part of the valley is a part of neighbouring North-East Indian states?

1.6 Methodology

Methodology is a set of idea or guidelines about have to proceed in gathering and validating knowledge of subject matters. The present study is based on analytical and empirical research. This study critically uses both primary and secondary data. The source materials of the ancient period of Surma Barak Valley under review are scanty, yet some materials are available which may be studied under the following heads, i.e., Literary sources, Epigraphic sources & Oral sources.