

Chapter 2:

SOCIAL FORMATION

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SOCIAL FORMATION

This chapter deals with the process of social formation of Surma Barak Valley region during the period under review. 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. This entire social phenomenon is discussed in this chapter. There are three sub-chapters under this chapter. The sub-chapters are: 2.1) Origins of the Social formation, 2.2) Socio-political development, and 2.3) Problem of reviewing Ancient history.

2.1 Origins of the Social formation

Social structure, it is said, is defined by “elements such as the form of labour-process (determined by the extent of bondage and production for market), the manner of extraction of surplus (e.g., land-tax, rent) and the system of distribution of the surplus (property rights).”⁹ In fact, the labour process, extraction of the surplus and re-distribution of surplus are the elements that are crucial in our understanding of the feudal formations in Europe in the middle ages. The European and the Indian situations were, however, not similar. For example, serfdom was an essential element in European feudalism, but in India there are limited evidences of individual bondage. D.D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma, therefore, formulated the theory of an ‘Indian feudalism’ and a large number of social scientists have contributed to accentuate ‘India’ in ‘Indian feudalism’. Whereas in the European context, feudalism was based on a self-sufficient economy, the contractual relationship, manorial system, organization of the administrative structure on the basis of land, and the institution of serfdom, in Indian context the most striking development was the practice of making

⁹ Irfan Habib, *Interpreting Indian History*, P. 23, (NEHU Publications, 1986)

land grants to the Brahmanas involving the transfer of all sources of revenue and the surrender of police and administrative functions by the state.¹⁰

The process of social formation in the Surma Barak Valley region of Assam (India) and Bangladesh which in the ancient period was known as Srihatta or Sylhet in ancient times denoted the territory now covered in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar districts of Assam (India) and the adjoining Kailashar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura (India). It is a single valley formed by the river Barak and its branches, viz. Surma and Kushiya with uniform physical features that make it a distinct geographical division and the homeland of a homogenous group of people who speak in a common dialect of Bengali, called 'Srihatti' or 'Sylheti'.¹¹ The region is boarded almost on three sides by the hills ranges, viz. The Khasi-Jaintia hills, North Cachar hills, Mizo hills and the Tipperah hills, leaving the fourth exposed to Bengal. Geographically it is a distinct territory and the indigenous people here share a common ethnic, linguistic and the cultural heritage.

There is no doubt that some divisions of Srihatta became the homeland of the Indo-Aryan at a very early period of history. Of the 51 *mahapithas* or mystic centres associated with Saktism at least two, viz. *Griva-pitha* in kalagul and *Vamjangha-pitha* in Baurbhag are in Sylhet. These centres are referred to in the texts like 'Mantrachudamani Tantra' and 'Tantra Chudamani'.¹² Srihatta found mention in the 'Mahalinga Tantra' and the 'Sadharmala' of the Buddhists. The references to Srihatta in these ancient texts suggest the antiquity of its civilization, the Indo-Aryan settlements, the prevalence of Buddhist and Brahmanical Hindu religions, the existence of the people of different castes and occupations, including the Brahmanas, peasants and artisans.

The epigraphic data on land in ancient Srihatta is extremely meagre. The earliest known copper plate discovered in the valley is that of Maharaja Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa who ruled in the 7th century A.D. This undated

¹⁰ R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, PP. 1-2, Second Edition, Macmillan India, (1980)

¹¹ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Social and Polity Formation in Pre-Colonial North East India*, P. 19, (New Delhi, 1991)

¹² *Ibid*, P. 20.

inscription is found in six copper plates recovered from Nidhanpur village in *Panchhakhanda* pargana of Sylhet district. It describes the renewal of a perpetual revenue free land grant by the Kshatriya king Maharaja Bhaskaravarman of the original grant made by his great grand-father Maharaja Mahabhuta Varman who ruled towards the close of the 5th and the beginning of 6th century A.D.

The Kalapur Copper plate of Samanta Marundanatha Bhattaraka of 7th century A.D. has been discovered in the village Kalapur in Chautali pargana within Srimangal Thana of Moulvibazar sub-division of Sylhet district. The text has so far been only partially deciphered written in the relief character of the early Gupta age. Some letters of this Copper plate bear strong resemblance to those of Afsad inscription of Gupta Emperor Adityasena of Magadha of 7th century AD.¹³ This has also got some similarities with the Tipperah Copper plate grant of Lokanatha. Both the Copper plates have seals containing almost the same emblem (i.e. *Gaja-Laksmi*). The name of Samanta Srinatha is mentioned in both the plates. It is probable that Srinatha was the common ancestor of both Lokanatha and Marundanatha. But the actual relationship between Lokanatha and Marundanatha in the deciphered portion of the text is not available. The words '*Srilekha*', (Charter from sovereign) '*Samanta-Sainapathi*' (a feudatory chief and an army chief) and the title '*Kumaramatya adhikarana*' qualified by the word '*bhattaraka*' perhaps clearly suggest that Marundanatha was a feudatory chief (Samanta) like lokanatha of the Tipperah Copper plate under some paramount power. The important fact gathered from the deciphered portion of the document is that Samanta Marundanatha by a copper plate charter donated a plot of land in the forest region (*atabibhukhande*) comprising an area of one *pataka* and two *dronas* for the purpose of the "*Bali-charu-satra*," a god of Anantanarayana gifted in the name of the deity of the temple and the Brahmanas (*athadevadvijebhyah*). *Pataka* possibly denotes part of the *grama* or village while *drona* indicated such measures of land as is sown with a *drona* of corn. A *drona* in Sylhet and Tripura contains 16 *seras*, and in Tripura a *drona* also means 15 *bighas* or about 5 acres of land. Two *dronas* therefore, mean 30 *bighas* or the land sown by 32 *seras* of corn-seeds, which was in

¹³ *Ibid*, P. 69.

addition to the part of the village so gifted. Again a *Pataka* region (Sylhet-Tripura) generally meant half of a village, whereas a village covered 80 *dronas*. On this basis, it may be calculated that the land donated by the Kalapur Copper plate was 42 *dronas* measuring about 630 *bighas* or 210 acres.¹⁴

It is interesting to note that Lokanatha by his Tipperah Copper plate grant gifted land in the forest region for the construction of the temple of Anantanarayana, the '*Bali-charu-satra*' of the deity, for the settlement of the Brahmanas who are well versed in four Vedas, while Marundanatha by his Kalapur Copper plate also gifted in the same forest region land for the construction of a *matha*, i.e., '*Bali-charu-satra*' of Anantanarayana and for the settlement of the Brahmanas who are also well versed in three Vedas. It can, perhaps, therefore, be conjectured that on the land donated by Lokanatha in the forest region, the temple of Anantanarayana was constructed and the Brahmanas versed in four Vedas were settled, while Marundanatha of the same family donated an additional plot of land in the same region for the purpose of the '*Bali-charu-satra*' of the deity and the Brahmanas versed in three Vedas were also settled. The names of the Brahmanas in both cases ended with "*svami*." The position of these Brahmanas must have been like the *sebail* and *mahant* of the religious endowments then prevalent in many parts of the country.

The kalapur Copper plate was discovered in Chautali pargana. This being a hilly area was certainly a forest region in the past. A deposit of large quantities of broken pieces of earthen vessels in the very find spot of the copper plate and an old brick wall and a brick-built well at a short distance have been discovered. A status of *Vishnu* was also discovered in the same locality. Kamalakanta Gupta, therefore, holds that lands donated by both Lokanatha and Marundanatha were in the Chautali pargana of Srimangal in Sylhet.¹⁵ The land donated by Marundanatha was undoubtedly in Chautali as the copper plate was also discovered in that locality and the existence of the temple or monastery (*satra*) is supported by archaeological evidences, but Lokanatha's donated land could be either in Chautali or in Suvang as the plate was

¹⁴ *Ibid*, PP. 74-78.

¹⁵ Kamalakanta Gupta, *Copper Plates of Sylhet*, PP. 80-84, (Sylhet, 1967)

discovered somewhere in Tipperah district. In any case, Suvang and Chautali are both in ancient Srihatta.

The next important document is the Paschimbhag Copper plate of Maharaja Srichandradeva of the 10th century A.D. It was discovered in the village Paschimbhag under the Rajnagar Thana in Moulvibazar sub-division of Sylhet district. The text gives the genealogy of the Chandra kings of Bikrampur from Purnachandra to Srichandra who is described as a devout worshipper of *Sugata*, i.e., *Buddha* and *Paramesvara*, *Paramabhattacharaka*, *Maharajadhiraja*. By this Copper plate, Srichandra granted lands in the *Vishayas* of Chandrapur, Garala and Pogara within Srihattamandala under *Pundravardhana bhukti*. The Paschimbhag Copper plate gives the impression that all the lands in the three *vishayas* with the exception of those belonging to *tri-ratna* and the *naubandha* were donated by this Copper plate. As calculated by Kamalakanta Gupta, the lands so donated measured about 22600 acres.¹⁶ The 47 *patakas* of land for Chandrapuramatha under first allotment and 10 *patakas* each for 8 *mathas* of second allotment were specifically for *navakarma* (nine works). These *navakarmas*, are (i) *Puja* (worship), (ii) *Bali* (offerings), (iii) *Charu* (oblation), (iv) *Satra* (distribution), (v) *Sayanasana* (relax), (vi) *Glana* (exhaustion), (vii) *Pratyaya* (meditation), (viii) *Bhaishajya* (remedy), and (ix) *Pariskara* (purification). These works must have been assigned to the Brahmanas for the deities of the monasteries. However, the *navakarma* may also mean the nine works with which the *navasayaka* or nine classes of the people of Sudravama were entrusted. They are *Malokara* (gardener), *Tailika* (oilmen), *Napita* (barber), *kumbhakara* (potter), *Karmakara* (blacksmith), *Gopa* (milkman), *Tantuvaya* (weaver), *Varuji* (betel-growers) and *Modaka* (confectioners). But the separate mention of the *Malakara*, *Tailika*, *Kumbhakara* and *Napita* in the allotments rules out the possibility of *navakarma* of any from other than those traditionally of the Brahmanas. Besides the groups required for *navakarma*, the number of beneficiaries connected with the Chandrapura monastery was 81 consisting of 20 different classes and the number connected with 8 other monasteries was 170, consisting of 14 different classes. Nine

¹⁶ *Ibid*, P. 123.

classes were common in both the allotments, and 5 classes (*Napita*, *Rajaka*, *Mahattarabrahmana*, *Varika* and *Vaidya*) were not included in the first allotment. *Karmakaras* and *Channakaras* were mentioned jointly in both. One *Ganaka*, one *Kayastha*, one *Mahattarabrahmana*, one *Varika* and one *Vaidya* were engaged for each of the two groups of the *mathas*. A group of four *Upadhyayas* of the four Vedas was employed for teaching in each group.¹⁷ These facts perhaps suggest that the four *mathas* of each group must have been situated close to each other, and the donated *vishayas* were also not far from one another.¹⁸

The third and the main grant related to gifts of lands in the Chandrapura and two other minor *vishayas* exclusive of the lands gifted to the *mathas* and those belonging to *tri-ratna* and *naubandha*. The gifted lands were perpetually revenue-free and given equally to Gargga and others six hundred Brahmanas of different *gotras* and *pravaras* and students of four *charanas* of different sections of the Vedas in the name of Lord Buddhabhattaraka for enhancing the merit and fame of the king and his parents. Thirty seven Brahmanas including one Gargga Sarma and another Gargga Gupta are mentioned by name and finally they are all mentioned as *Gargadi* six thousand Brahmanas. With the exception of Sarma, all other surnames like *Datta*, *Dama*, *Pala*, *Kara*, *Dhara*, *Nandi*, *Soma*, *Naga*, etc. are those days' non-Brahmin surnames among the Bengalis including those in the geographical area of ancient Srihatta. As recorded in the Copper plate, these surname holders were Brahmanas and they were students of different *charanas* of the Vedas.

Although the Chandra kings were Buddhist, they donated lands to these Brahmanas. Even for the *mathas* the donees included the Professors of Vedas. The Copper plate which is a royal charter asked the people, the cultivators and the Brahmanas of the concerned *vishayas* to pay all dues to the donees (i.e, the Gargga group of six thousand Brahmanas). These shows that a part from the Gargga group there were other Brahmanas and other classes of people in the donated *vishayas*. These Brahmanas must have included the descendants of the donees of the Nidhanpur grant

¹⁷ *Ibid*, PP. 123-24.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, PP. 129-42.

in the Chandrapuri Vishaya who were then favoured with rent-free grants but are now subjected to the new donees to whom they have to pay taxes. Further, the grantees of the Nidhanpur plate were gifted with uncultivated lands which must have been developed in about three hundred years. The donated land was about one thousand square miles which included the lands granted to the nine mathas and those reserved for *tri-ratna* and *naubandha*. The six thousand Brahmanas of the Gargga group, who received in equal shares the minor portion of the lands of the three *vishayas* as revenue-free grants, were given the status of rent receivers. If this donated land is divided amongst 6000 Brahmanas equally then each of them gets roughly an area of about 100 acres. The royal charter of Srichandra thus created 6000 rent-receiving interests in a small portion of the Srihattamandala.¹⁹

The small portion of Srihatta mentioned in the Paschimbhag Copper plate included three *vishayas*, viz. Chandrapura, Garala and Pogara. The boundaries of the donated territory are clearly mentioned. The rivers Manu and Kushiyara mentioned in the plate still flow through the region. The *vrihat kottali* or the huge ridge with a fort is interpreted to suggest the Pathariya or the Duhalia hills of Karimganj as one of the boundaries. The mention of Brahmapura creates the impression that the donated lands extended upto Khaspur (which was known as Brahmapur in ancient time) in Cachar. The description of Chandrapur shows that it included the adjoining areas of modern Tripura like Kailasahar and Dharmanagar area of Tripura.²⁰ The donated lands in three *vishayas* thus covered portions of modern Sylhet, Karimganj and Cachar districts and also of Tripuri state.

The next important epigraphic records are the two Bhatara Copper plates of Raja Govind Kesavadeva and Raja Sanadeva respectively; both belonging to 11th century A.D. The two plates were discovered in a village called Bhatara in Moulvibazar sub-division of Sylhet district. Plate No. 1 was issued by Raja Govind Kesavadeva of Srihattarajya donating 375 bhuhalas and 296 vatis to Vatesvara Shiva and also mentions the different kinds of attendants belonging to various subject races

¹⁹ *Ibid*, PP. 142-52.

²⁰ *Ibid*, PP. 133-35.

given to the deity. The names of the village in which definite quantities of lands are *bhuhala*, *hala*, *bhukedara*, measurements and number of *vatis* and houses in those villages are given in the text. There are 64 such villages and they are identifiable with the names of villages in modern Sylhet, karimganj and Cachar districts and the adjoining areas of Tripura. As estimated by Kamalakanta Gupta, the total gift (including land, compounds and houses of attendants) amounted to 348.5 *Bhuhala*, 51 *hala*, 20 *bhukedara*, 365 *vatis* and 72 houses.²¹ The houses included the dwelling houses, out-houses, kitchens, cow-sheds etc. of *Gopa* (milkman), *Kasya* (bellmetal worker), *gattaka* (maker), *napita* (barber), *rajaka* (washerman), *vanika* (goldsmith), *navika* (boatman), *dantaka-ra* (ivory worker), *mala* (retainer), etc.²²

The Bhatara Copper plate No. 2 was issued by Raja Isanadeva, son and successor of Kesavadeva gifting two *halas* of land with residential quarters and adorned with a waterfalls to one Banamali Kara, who was the *Ashapatalika* or the keeper of records, for his maintenance. Banamali Kara belonged to *vaidya* caste; the gift was pronounced by Vira Datta, who was the army chief, and the composer of the eulogy was Madhava of the Dasa family. The Copper plate inter alia mentions that Kesavadeva had built the lofty temple of *Kamsanisudana* (Krishna) with big stone, performed Tulapurushadana, and ruled as a supreme sovereign and possessed innumerable war boats (*nauvatakas*), infantry, cavalry and elephantry. About Isanadeva, it says that his army consisted of soldiers, horses and elephants, and he built a cloud licking temple of Madhukaitabhari (*Vishnu*).²³

The inscriptions discussed above, excepting the Nidhanpur Copper plates, were issued by the local rulers of South East Bengal. Although a Kamarupa king, the inscription of the Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman is different from any other inscription of the Kamarupa kings at least on two major grounds. Firstly, two verses from *Vrihaspati Samhita* are quoted in these plates and such verses are absent in all other copper plates issued by the Kamarupa kings, and secondly, the land grants

²¹ *Ibid*, PP. 172-80.

²² *Ibid*, P. 182.

²³ *Ibid*, PP. 183-87.

according to '*Bhumichchidra-nyaya*' as in the present case do not occur in other Kamarupa plates. The quotations of verses from Dharmasastras in land grants were common practices in Bengal. Either the fact that Srihatta was traditionally a region of Bengal or that the Nidhanpur plates were issued from Karnasuvarna in Bengal, or even both, might have inspired Bhaskara to follow the line of the Bengal plates.²⁴

The names of the Brahmana donees along with their *gotra*, *veda* and *vedasakha* are mentioned in the text. All the surnames are qualified by a common epithet '*Svami*', and the real surnames are *Vasu*, *Ghosha*, *Nandi*, *Mitra*, *Naga*, *Soma*, *Bhatta*, *Palita*, *Pala*, *Kunda*, *Sena*, *Sarma*, *Dama*, *Datta*, *Bhatti*, *Deva*, etc. It is interesting to note that excepting Bhatta, Sarma and Bhatti, the rest of the surnames are of the non-Brahmins in the old Srihatta region (comprising modern Cachar, Karimganj and Sylhet district and parts of Tripura) and the rest of Bengal these days. There are also some Kayasthas in the Barak Valley with the Surname '*Svami*'. Some of these surnames like *Chandra*, *Dama*, *Dasa*, *Datta*, *Deva*, *Gosha*, *Mitra*, *Nandi*, *Soma* etc. were also mentioned as Brahmana with the epithet '*Svami*' in the Copper plates of Lokanatha along with *Sarma*, *Bhatta* and *Bhuti*. Similarly, the Paschimbhag Copper plate of Maharaja Srichandra mentions the surnames of Brahmanas with epithet '*Svami*' like *Gupta*, *Datta*, *Naga*, *Nandi*, *Pala*, *Ghosha*, *Dama*, *Kara*, *Dhara*, etc. who are all non-Brahmins these days. However, the original grants in all cases were made only to the Brahmanas, and whether in the Tipperah Copper plate of Lokanatha or in Kalapur Copper plate of Marundanatha or in Nidhanpur Copper plates of Bhaskaravarman, the land grants were for the '*Bali-charu-satra*' of a particular temple deity. *Bali* means offering of scents, flowers and uncooked food before an idol, *Charu* means oblation of rice, milk and sugar boiled together and *Satra* indicates distribution of food to the guests and the poor. In case of the Nidhanpur grant a very big portion of the donated land was allotted to a large number of Brahmanas who were required for the running of the '*Bali-charu-satra*' as priest, cook, *mahanta* or manager and also as learned scholars required for various purposes in connection with such a religious and charitable institution. As believed by some scholars, the deity in this

²⁴ *Ibid*, P. 187.

particular case was perhaps of the ancient temple of Vasudeva or (*Visnu*) in the Supatala village of Panchha-khanda.²⁵

The Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman declared that he was born for the proper organization of the duties of various castes and stages of life.²⁶ This and other inscription introduce us to the fact and consequences of the caste system which was the vantage point of social formation in ancient India. As D. D. Kosambi says, “Caste is a class on a primitive level of production”.²⁷ As regards the economic consequences of the caste system, Irfan Habib says:

*By its repression of the menial castes, it cheapened labour available for agriculture. At the village level by providing especially for the services of hereditary village artisans and servants, it reduced the necessary expense on the tools, goods and services that the peasant needed. By reducing the portion of agriculture needed for the peasant's subsistence, it enlarged the surplus product, out of which the revenues of the ruling class came. At the same time through hereditary skill-transmission, caste cheapened artisan-products, and thus reduced wage-costs generally. The primary economic consequence of the caste system was, then, a substantial enlargement of the income of the ruling class from both agriculture and crafts.*²⁸

The Copper plates clearly mention about the land grants, and the role of the Brahmanas in the spread of agriculture and in the evolution of large proto-feudal land holdings.²⁹ In ancient India, the land grants made to the Brahmanas in the earlier periods created conditions for similar hereditary grants later on made by the rulers to their kinsmen, officials and vassals. It is also noticeable that the Nidhanpur grant was

²⁵ *Ibid*, PP. 54-65.

²⁶ *Ibid*, P. 51.

²⁷ D. D. Kosambi, *Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India*, P. 50, (1975)

²⁸ Irfan Habib, *op.cit*, P.20.

²⁹ *Ibid*, P. 18.

given to the Brahmanas, Tipperah and Kalapur to Brahmanas and deities, Paschimbhag to Brahmanas and monasteries, Bhatara No. 1 to Brahmanas and deities, and Bhatara No. 2 to an official who was not a Brahmana by caste. Undoubtedly, “the Brahmanas derive the most benefits from the system in terms of gifts and lands”.³⁰ But the ultimate beneficiary of the system was the ruling class because “So long as the petty production remained the dominant form the caste system retained its inestimable value for every regime.” It “could a very wide range of social or economic formations as long as these formations contained individual petty production, in which the hereditary division of labour had its basis.”³¹

The Copper plates of Srihatta clearly suggests the fact of the rise of hereditary control and superior rights over land to the extent that land could be transferred along with the dwellers and with all sources of revenue resigning the state’s right to collect taxes to the individual or group of individual land holders. The consequences of such grants must have been similar to those in other parts of the country and the fact of Brahmanical settlements through these grants in the early period must have exposed the region to the processes of formation of a caste society. One of four plates mentions about the existences of various subject races, and this and other plates offer an insight into the fact of social mobility at the caste level. The rulers were mostly Kshatriyas, but the first few ancestors of Lokanatha of the Tipperah plate were Brahmana and he is described as a *Karana* (a mixed caste according to Manu).³² Again, although in his maternal side upto his mother’s grandfather all were Brahmana, his mother’s father is described as a *Parasava* (perhaps because his Brahmana father married a Sudra wife).³³ This introduces us to the fact of inter-caste marriage (*anuloma* of Manu) and the emergence of extra-vedic castes. That the Brahmana surnames *padavi*, (meaning position in Bengal) of the plates are those only of Kayasthas today is also perhaps either because of inter-marriage or due to changes in professional status. The way “the

³⁰ *Ibid*, P. 20.

³¹ *Ibid*, P. 21.

³² R. G. Basak, *Epigraphia Indica*, P. 304, (1949)

³³ *Ibid*, P. 307.

reduction of the varna-status of the peasant communities from Vaisya to Sudra”³⁴ occurred in other regions of the country, many Brahmanas might have been reduced to the status of Kayastha in Srihatta region. This could be a later phenomenon, because the Tipperah plate tells us that even an orthodox Brahmana like Pradoshasharman could rise to the status of a *Mahasamanta* by the strength of his own arms.

The plate, however, does not fail to mention that the paternal and maternal ancestors of his *Mahasamanta* were widely respected for their strict observance of orthodox customs of the Brahmanas. But then birth of new castes was also a fact in the Bhatara plate, it had already met a *Vaidya*, which is a sizable caste of Hindu community in modern Bengali society. The same plate introduces us to a composer of its eulogy who belonged to the *dasa-kula*, giving us an impression that education was available to all castes and of course, the fact of royal patronage to education and educationists is known from the plates. The existence of several peasants, artisans and professional castes engaged in petty productions on the basis of hereditary division of labour. The land grants mentioned in the plates had been responsible for the extension of human settlement and agriculture in his extreme frontier region of Bengal. The lands gifted were both cultivated and uncultivated. At least two of the grants were in the uninhabited forest regions.

As R. S. Sharma tells us:

The Tipperah Copper plate grant of Lord Lokanatha (A.D. 650) provides an important indication of a policy of reclaiming forest areas for cultivation in Eastern India. Lokanatha made an endowment of land in the forest region to more than one hundred Brahmanas, who were given joint and individual shares. The boundaries of the land so granted were not defined, apparently because they had not been settle; only the limits of the district Suvariga in which the forest region was situated were demarcated. The forest area containing the endowed land is described as having no distinction of natural and artificial, having a thick network of

³⁴ Irfan Habib, *op.cit*, PP. 19-20.

*bush and creepers, where deer, buffaloes, bears, tigers, serpents, etc., enjoy, according to their will, all pleasures of home life.*³⁵

The Brahmana community was brought there for the worship of the god Bhagvan Anantanarayan installed in the *matha* made by a high-ranking feudatory Brahmana, the *Mahasamanta Pradoshasharman*, at whose intercession the grant seems to have made. But the real significance of their advent lay in opening the forest area to cultivation and settlement. A similar process can be observed in some parts of western India. The *Kaira* plates of Vijayaraja, forged sometime after the middle of the sixth century A.D. record shares granted to sixty three Brahmanas in a village, this naturally facilitated mass settlement of Brahmanas. Records of this type are not many, but these two broadly indicate the colonization of barren and jungle areas through land grants to temples and Brahmanas.

Another noticeable factor is the growing inequality in the society which must have been hierarchically organized. The inscriptions refer to the kings as powerful rulers and, of course, the protectors of their subjects, particularly of the Brahmanas and the religion. Some of these mention about the conquered tributaries and vassal chiefs. As R. S. Sharma writes in an all India context:

*The process of conquest, by which smaller chiefs were reduced to subordination and reinstated in their positions, provided they paid regular tributes and did homage, contributed in large measure to the growth of feudal relations.*³⁶

The position could not be different in Srihatta. The grants brought into existence land-owning Brahmanas, temple and mathas. They were landed intermediaries between the king and the actual tillers and craftsmen who had to pay rent (must be in kind and labour) to them. The peasants and artisans in the donated lands were thus made completely subservient to the beneficiaries of the grants.

³⁵ R. S. Sharma *op.cit* P. 33.

³⁶ R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Second Edition, Macmillan India, PP. 3-4, (1980)

Finally, the villages and the settlements must have enjoyed a self-sufficient economy. The new settlers could be the mainstay of economy at that point of time, and the prospects of economic prosperity. The otherwise scanty data supplied by the inscriptions also clearly point to the existence of cultivators, artisans and the personnel involvement in all types of manorial services to ensure self-sufficiency to the settlements. The economy of the region could also be significantly supplemented by trade, particularly with South-East Asia. The region remained unaffected by the decline of the western trade in other regions of the country since 7th century A.D.³⁷ Since there is no evidences in support of a remarkable participation of South East Bengal in such trade in 7th century or earlier. On the contrary, the discovery of a large number of imitation of Gupta coins, belonging to 7th – 8th centuries and a huge quantity of Harikela coins belonging to 7th to 13th centuries in several hoards all over South East Bengal convincingly suggest a flourishing long distance trade in that period.³⁸ Two different series of Harikela coins are noticed; the first series pertaining to 7th century A.D. and the second, 8th/9th century A.D. to 12th/13th century A.D. In addition, there had been some local series of Harikela coins bearing the legends like “*Veraka, Piraka, Sivagiri, Jayagiri*, etc. which can be recognized as a local names of greater Harikela. While *Veraka/Viraka* is identifiable with the Barak (*Varaka*) Valley area of modern Assam, *Piraka* should denote the Pilak area of Tripura.

As B. N. Mukherjee writes:

In Harikela silver coinage was sustained through a comparatively higher-pressure of trade (including trade with outside areas) and so constant demand for a medium of exchange consisting inter alia of a great number of dependable and easily countable pieces of

³⁷ *Ibid*, P. 55.

³⁸ D. C. Sarkar, *Money in pre-Ahom and its neighbourhood in Coinage and Economy of North Eastern States of India*, PP. 2-3, (1977)

*relatively high value. This area probably had enough quantity of silver imported from outside.*³⁹

The society 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 themselves in the management of their lands and they became powerful in state politics. The numismatic evidences suggest the possibility of a flourishing trade in the region in which the wealthy landlords could participate by reinvesting their income from land. The nature of development in the region in that point of time, therefore, presented a picture of uneven social growth. A wealthy group had emerged primarily on the basis of landownership and by multiplying the income from land through its reinvesting in trade and manufacture. The peasants and workers were subservient to these wealthy persons who were powerful in the state affairs by virtue of their command over wealth. Caste was no doubt the dominant factor in social life, but it was no barrier to an individual assuming a social status by virtue of his skill and wealth.

The practice of land grants to the Brahmanas, officials and monasteries placed these landed intermediaries between the rulers and actual tillers of land as the state transferred all sources of revenue to the donees and the peasants and artisans living in the donated lands had to pay rent and labour to these intermediaries. The new settlements of peasants, artisans and professionals to ensure its self-sufficiency had left scope for creating new tenants on the donated lands. The 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 sources available to us from the Copper plates are indeed too scanty to understand the land system and social formation in that period. By crossing all these, it is found that the king had the authority to gift the land on behalf of himself and his successors which made by a former government was not binding on the successor government which had the right to donate a plot of land which was already allotted

³⁹ B. N. Mukherjee, *Coins of Bengal*, A Paper presented in the Seminar on Archaeology of West Bengal organized by the Directorate of Archaeology, Govt. of West Bengal, (Calcutta, November, 1986)

earlier, that '*bhumichchidra-nyaya*' was one of the prevalent norms, that cultivated or uncultivated land or land in the forest region could all be donated by the ruler, that land could be transferred by the rulers along with the dwellers and the dwelling houses, that land could be transferred to the individuals or group of individuals and to educational or religious institutions, that land were generally gifted to the Brahmanas, temples and monasteries, but it was donated to the non-brahmana officials of the state as well as that the land could be owned privately and hereditarily, that the state had the right to collect taxes on land and to exempt any individual or institution from payment of taxes and given to authorised individual holders or donees to collect taxes from the dwellers with the holdings and that in matter of transfer the successors were also sometimes involved. Certain officials who were involved in land management, viz. *nayaka* (headmen), *nayakaranika* (judge), *Vyavahari* (lawyer), *Kayastha* (clerk), *Bhandagaradhikrita* (superintendent of treasury), *Utkhetayita* (collector of revenue), *Vishayapati* (head of a district), *Wandaladhipati* (head of a division), etc. As regards the measurement of land, there were terms like *amsah*, *pataka*, *drone*, *hala*, *buhala*, *bhukedara* etc.

However, the study of inscriptions brings out clearly that South East Bengal including Srihatta was ruled by autonomous Samanta rulers during the period of the study under review and that the control of the distant sovereign over them was merely theoretical while Srihatta developed its own independent political entity under the Deva kings. The local states in the region during the period were powerful, wealthy and prosperous which could be possible only by enough income generated through extraction of surplus by the rulers. On the other hand, the rulers had their control over smaller chiefs who could have been reduced to subordination by the process of conquest and who paid regular tributes and homage, contributing in large numbers to the growth of contractual relations.

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.

2.2 Socio-political development

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 which includes generation, extraction and redistribution.

The social and polity formation processes in North East India were spontaneously influenced by its geo-political situation that 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 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 based on 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.⁴⁰

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 Kilometers. This Indian portion of the valley is bounded on the north by the North Cachar Hills District (Dima Hasao) 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 Moulvibazar, 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

⁴⁰ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *op.cit*, P.12.

before finally confluence into the Brahmaputra in East Bengal (Bangladesh). The Surma Barak Valley includes Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts of Assam, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura and Moulvibazar, Sylhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj districts of Bangladesh. Geographically, culturally and historically, it is a distinct region, which Rabindranath Tagore described as ‘Sribhumi’.⁴¹

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 (Moulvibazar, Sylhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj) 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 it is known 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 and it is known from the Paschimbhag Copper plate inscription. In the 11th – 12th century A.D., the autonomous Srihatta state

⁴¹ *Ibid*, P.13.

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 Bengali population of the Barak valley of Assam was 80 percent as per 1971 census. 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 the Koches (locally known as Dehans) are 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.⁴²

The Bengalis are found here from as early a date as it is able to trace the history of the valley based on 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.⁴³ While on a survey duty in Cachar in 1832, R. B. Pemberton, in a report, said:

*The people in Sylhet and Cachar are identical in every respect-appearance, customs and language.*⁴⁴

Thomas Fisher, the first Superintendent of Cachar, said in 1834:

*The entire instruction in this district is to be conveyed in Bengali language.*⁴⁵

⁴² *Ibid*, P.15.

⁴³ *Ibid*, P.19

⁴⁴ R. B. Pemberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, PP. 206-207, (Calcutta, 1835)

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 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.*⁴⁶

Becker further observed that in Cachar plains the percentage of the Bengalis would be as high as in Sylhet but the Haflong sub-division (now North Cachar Hills District) which is predominantly tribal and the Hindustani and Manipuri settlers in plains brought down the district percentage of the Bengalis.

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.

The early states of South-East and East Bengal like Samatata, Harikela and Chandra as well as the indigenous Srihatta were in Pan-Indian Brahmanical Hindu model and these states 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. The Koch state in the Barak Valley started as a crown colony under Cooch Behar but eventually developed into independent Khaspur state. The Jaintia state formation started in the hills and in its

⁴⁵ D. Dutta (ed.), *Cachar District Records*, P.18, (Silchar, 1969). See Fisher's letter to Commissioner of Dacca, (June 1834)

⁴⁶ C. Becker, *History of the Catholic Missions in North East India*, First German Edition, (1923), tr. & ed. G. Stadler & S. Karotempel, Vendrame Missiological Institute, PP. 94-95, (Shillong, 1980)

final phase, the state covered a large portion of the Barak Valley. The final Phase of the Dimasa state formation was experienced in the Barak Valley.

2.3 Problem of reviewing Ancient history

The sources for the history of Surma Barak Valley during ancient period have not been properly explored. Historical materials, on which a reliable framework of the history of ancient Surma Barak Valley can be built, are as meagre as confused. History and myths, traditions and tales, facts and fictions are curiously intermingled to create a great obscurity for the period under review. The legendary accounts, customs, traditions and hearsay with which the history of the people of the region associated are varied, conflicting, and doubtful in their authenticity. The treatment of the scattered data to construct a genuine framework of the political or social formation of the Surma Barak Valley is difficult and needs very careful handling.

Moreover, the problem of historical writing is compounded in this period by the political disintegration after the decline of the 'Srihattarajya' when a large number of petty states, besides three major states, i.e, Gaur, Laur and Jayantia emerged in the valley and they tie with each other for political advances.⁴⁷ The Tripuri State formation started in this valley and capital of the state gradually moved to modern Tripura.⁴⁸ The western and the major portion of the valley, which was covered by Gaur and laur passed under the Bengal sultans, and then, Mughal rule with the rest of Bengal. The Jayantia state survived till the beginning of the 19th century when it was annexed by the British. The upper portion of the valley or the Cachar lands was conquered in the second half of the 17th century and was ruled autonomously by the splinter of the royal family of Cooch Behar with headquarter of Kashpur. The territory merged into Dimasa-Kachari state of Maibong in the 18th century and the capital of the Dimasa-Kachari state was shifted to Kashpur in 1750 A.D.

⁴⁷ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *The Ancient Political structure of the Barak valley*, The NEHU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, P. 32, (1992)

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, P.8.

It is indeed a difficult task for the researchers to draw the line of center of so many states and authorities in the valley in ancient period. The literary works and the archaeological sites and monuments, though very united in number can be very useful as indigenous source materials for re-constructing and interpreting these sources.⁴⁹

According to J.B. Bhattacharjee:

The most important sources of the people's history of the region are those, which are left behind by the people themselves.⁵⁰ Since the problems, needs and aspiration of the masses are best told in these sources, therefore, one has to use literary works, folklores and folk songs, riddles and proverbs, the works of fine arts and study the rites and rituals, customs and practices and beliefs etc. scientifically for which research methods are available in anthropology and sociology.⁵¹

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 following heads, i.e., Literary sources, Epigraphic sources, and Oral Sources.

2.3.1 Literary sources

Among the documentary sources, the literary sources are more varied and numerous in comparison with other sources.

- In the series of literary sources, we find first the “*Srihatta Darpan*” authored by Quazi Mohammed Ahmed to write a history of Sylhet in Bengali in the late 19th century. It was published in 1886 A.D. It is a documentary evidence to write the history of the region under review.

⁴⁹ Sujit Choudhury, *Inscriptions as Source of Early History of the Barak-Surma Valley*, Proceeding of the seminar on the source materials for writing a comprehensive History of the Barak Valley, Karimganj, P.93, (1997).

⁵⁰ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Interpreting History of the Barak Valley; Some Thoughts*, Proceeding of the seminar on the source materials for writing a comprehensive History of the Barak Valley, Karimganj, P. 2, (1997)

⁵¹ *Ibid*, P.3.

- Next as a primary literary source, we find “*Srihatter Itivritta*” by Achyut Charan Choudhury Tatwanidhi. The monumental works (Vol I and II published in 1911 and 1917) may be regarded as the most important source to the intellectual arena. It is also considered as a classic source for the study of the region. This was followed by the “*Cacharer Itivritta*” authored by U.C.Guha and published in 1921.
- The “*Raj-mala*” a verse chronicle of Tripura provides us with some historical materials of the Surma Barak region in the early period. Though the historical value of the work is not much for the period prior to the 13th century. It contains some important events in respect of the relation between the Tripura kings and rulers of Sylhet.⁵²
- Another Assamese literary source is “*Darrang Raj Vamsavali*”. In it we find the history of the Koch kings and campaigns of Chilarai in neighboring countries including Sylhet and Dimasa Kingdom.⁵³
- Next we find the documental evidences of the two great scholars of the century. One is Rai Bahadur K.L. Baruah and the other is Professor Nihar Ranjan Ray. K. L. Baruah in his “*Early History of Kamarupa*” and N. R. Ray in his “*Bangalir Itihas*” convincingly mentioned the geographical dimension of the history of Surma Barak Valley.
- B.C. Allen and Sir Edward Gait contributed much in the history, histography and the people of Surma Barak Valley of the early period. Allen in his “*Assam District Gazetteers*” (Vol. I Cachar and Vol. II Sylhet) and again Sir Edward Gait in his “*The History of Assam*” represented that it was geographical structure and location of the Surma Barak Valley that made assimilation a key process in the early times.⁵⁴
- However, the researchers may take a clue from the works of Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee’s “*Kirata-Jana-Kriti*”. This is a unique work and a celebrated

⁵² Sukreswar and Baneswar , *The Raj-mala*, Government of Tripura, Agartala, PP.11-12, (1967)

⁵³ N.C. Sarmah (ed.) *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* (Assamese), PP. 77-80, (Guwahati, 1973)

⁵⁴ E.A. Gait, *The History of Assam*, P. 4, (Calcutta, 1963)

reference to the early peoples' history of the region. According to him, the Austrics, like the Khasi-Jaintias also lived in several settlements in the Surma Valley and their subsequent generations too, might have merged themselves spontaneously in the new society.⁵⁵

- Apart from all these documentary primary sources, there are some brilliant works of J. B. Bhattacharjee and Sujit Choudhury. Bhattacharjee in his "*Social and Polity Formation in Pre-Colonial North-East India*", "*Kachari Rajya Uttan Aru Patan*" and a large number of research papers published in different journals and proceedings of seminars throws much light on the historical process developed in the region under review that a researcher may get scope for further investigation. Sujit Choudhury author of "*Srihatta Cacharer Prachin Itihas*" brought 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.
- J. N. Choudhury edited a collection of research papers entitled "*Srihatta Cacharer Itihas O Sanskritir Ruprekha*" contains brilliant contributions of noted scholars like Sujit Choudhury, K.K. Gupta, S. Dutta Choudhury, J. B. Bhattacharjee, Kamaluddin Ahmed and others highlighting the historical aspects of the valley.

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

2.3.2 Epigraphic Sources

The epigraphic sources are more important than their literary counter parts as the former does not extend any scope for later interpretation than the latter does and as the antiquity of the epigraph can be ascertained by an easy scientific method. Over and above, authorities generally issue the epigraphs by mentioning the dates. Fortunately, the inscriptions so far discovered in the Surma Barak region are all dated.

⁵⁵ S.K. Chatterjee, *Kirata –Jana-kriti*, P.131, (Calcutta, 1974)

- In interpreting the ancient history of Surma Barak Valley, the most important source of information is undoubtedly a set of Copper plate inscriptions brought out in an excellent collection entitled “*Copper plates of Sylhet*” by Kamalakanta Gupta (1960s) with his translations and explanations. The “*Tipperah Inscription of Lokanatha*” should be useful in the study of the ancient history of the Surma Barak Valley for its reference to “*Jayatunga Varsha Suvanga Vishaya*”. In a very detailed study of this information, Dr. N. K. Bhattasali convincingly argues why Jayatunga Varsha should be identified with Jatinga valley and Suvanga Vishaya with Subang of Cachar.⁵⁶ Thus the Tipperah copper plate is a very important source to the history of Surma Barak Valley.
- The discovery of the “*Kalapur Copper plate*” of Lokanatha’s successor Marundanatha and reference in that plate of another grants for a temple of Anantanarayana certainly goes in favour of Bhattasali’s contention that the Surma Barak Valley formed a part of Samatata in that period.⁵⁷
- Rai Bahadur K.L. Baruah published the full text of the two plates (“*The Tipperah inscription*” of Lokanatha and “*Kalapur Copper plate*” of Marundanatha) in the Journal of Orissa and Bihar Research society and argued that these should be treated as sources of the ancient history of Sylhet.
- The description of the “*Chandrapuri Vishaya*” in the Nidhanpur plate of 7th century and the “*Chandrapura Vishaya*” in the Paschimbhag plate of the 10th century clearly shows that Chandrapuri and Chandrapura were the same. Srihattamandala became Srihattarajya in the Bhatara plates of 11th – 12th century. Infact, the emergence of Srihattarajya was a great event, which integrated the greater Barak Valley region into an autonomous state and gave the people of the region a local identity.
- Again, the sculptures of the “*Bhuban hill*” cave complex and the Shrine of “*Siddheswar Kapilashram*” at Badarpur and Unokoti (which is also

⁵⁶ N.K. Bhattasali, *Lauhitya Purbatirer Pratkirti*, Cited in Sujit Choudhury, *op.cit*, P.7, (1997)

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, P.8.

geographically and historically an extension of the Barak Valley) are indeed some unassailable examples of social and cultural assimilation process in this part of South Asian peninsula before 7th century A.D.

Some major epigraphic evidences five in numbers are discovered in the valley. These are:

- a) Nidhanpur Copper plate grant of king Bhaskaravarman.
- b) Kalapur temple inscription of Samanta Marundanatha.
- c) Paschimbhag Copper plate of Srichandra of Vikrampur.
- d) Bhatara Copper plate issued by Govinda Keshavdeva of Srihatta; and
- e) Second Bhatara Copper plate issued by Ishanadeva of the same dynasty.

Besides these five inscriptions, two other inscriptions discovered in regions outside the Surma Barak Valley which are also required to be examined since they might have some relevance to the early history of this valley. These are:

- a) Comilla Copper plate of Samanta Lokanatha; and
- b) Rajghat Inscription of Bhimdeva and in this connection Tezpur inscription of Vallavadeva.

The “*Harikela coins*” found in Barak Valley and the adjoining areas and the literacy references to Harikela Kingdom to the 7th – 10th century period should be studied for further understanding of the history of the valley. Prof. B.N. Mukherjee’s reading of the Legends of a regional series of the “*Harikela coins*” and his identification of *Vireka* as *Baraka* or Barak is a very important contribution.

2.3.3 Oral Sources

In modern times, the historians and research scholars make use of oral sources like traditions, customs, and folklores, hearsay etc. as source materials in discovering the

past. These oral sources serve as a storehouse of information to the historians.⁵⁸

Referring to the inevitability of oral sources, J.B. Bhattacharjee observed:

Question may arise how the ancient history of Surma Barak Valley should be written? The answer is not so difficult. Today alternative sources are being used throughout the world. The alternative is folk-based source. The researchers have no desire today to confine him within the history of some kings, royal officials and high members of the society. They are searching for human history and the source of that history comes from the common people, because they (the common people) are the natural creator and bearer of history. The amalgamation of facts and sources is creating modern scientific history. The researchers are making abundant and generous use of Zoology, Geology, Linguistics and Folk literature.⁵⁹

Again, the oral or traditional source, folklore can play a vital role in unearthing the facts of social history. Dr. Dorson holds that the folklorists may play the most important role in supplying materials for social history....folklorists by their works greatly enriches the source materials of the social historian.” Historians go so far as to hold that “folklore can play in the building up of the general history of a Nation.” It may emphatically state that it can play a very significant part in writing the history of the ancient and medieval period of the Surma Barak region. In addition, it was Sujit Choudhury who has first introduced the use of folklore for the purpose of writing history in this region.⁶⁰ His conviction may truly be regarded as pathfinder in the field of scientific and methodical research of folklore.

⁵⁸ Tushar Chattapadhyay, *Lok Sanskritir Tattvarup O Swarup Sandhan*, P. 236, (Calcutta, 1985)

⁵⁹ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *Baraker Samajik Itihaser Utsa Sandhane* (Bengali), *Purbayan*, P. 10, (Hailakandi, 1995)

⁶⁰ Sujit Choudhury, *Folklore and History*, PP. 95-104, (New Delhi, 1994)

Oral or traditional sources have been literarily used in the two books; “*Srihatter Itivritta*”⁶¹ and “*Cacharer Itivritta*”.⁶² Both the works was used as additional source materials. An oral source carries the social bosom hints and materials of history. As this source is known and used for explanations, so it is possible to put to use the less known and unused materials to build up the history of the ancient period of Surma Barak Valley. Some of these materials are mentioned below -

A rite called “*Garva Sankranti*” was performed by the agricultural community of the region on the last day of the month of *Aswin*. This magical rite was related to fertility cult. On that day, the paddy seed is entertained and various magical rites are observed so that the crops may not be harmed by any evil power. Some hard and fast rules about food are adhered to on that day. A curry of eight kinds of vegetables prepared without oil and spices has to be taken.⁶³

Again, an analysis of the prevalent customs, beliefs and superstitions of the region, leads but to the conclusions, that these have their spring in “*Manusmriti*”. It guesses that at the early stage of the *Aryan settlement* in this region, the life of the people was guided and controlled by the “*Manusmriti*” and the beliefs and customs imposed at that time are still being followed by the people in their day to day life activities. It is believed that this little known oral fact can throw new light on the history of this region. If the folk traditions are explained in the light of available conventional materials, some hints to the social life of the region may be found.

The sources discussed above are various in number and nature. History proper may be reconstituted on the basis of them taking one kind of source as complimentary to others. Separate study of them cannot hold good and a complete picture of history may be obtained only by a critical study of all the sources simultaneously.

⁶¹ A. C. Choudhury, *Srihatter Itivritta* (Bengali), P.8, (Sylhet, 1317 B.S)

⁶² U.C. Guha, *Cacharer Itivritta* (Bengali), PP. 32-33, (Dacca, 1921)

⁶³ Asutosh Bhattacharjee, *Banglar Lok Sahitya*, Vol. IV, P.525, (Calcutta, 1933)