

Chapter 3:

POLITICAL FORMATION

- 3.1 Origins of the formation of polities
- 3.2 Varman rulers of Kamarupa
- 3.3 Samanta rulers of Samatata
- 3.4 Seventh Century A.D
- 3.5 Harikela State
- 3.6 Chandra rulers of East Bengal
- 3.7 Tripuri Formation

POLITICAL FORMATION

This chapter covers the political phenomenon of the region during the period under review. The political structure of the Surma Barak Valley in the ancient period was determined by the political organizations in the neighbouring areas of Bengal. Situated, as it was on the North-East corner of Bengal and surrounded on all other three sides by the hills, the early migrations and settlements in the Valley was possible only from Bengal by logic of geography. This environmental factor dominated the political, social and cultural development of this farthest enclave of Bengal. The political structure of the Valley was, therefore, essentially a Bengal phenomenon. It was the creation of those who moved from Bengal in their eastward march to the farthest limit of the alluvial Indo-Gangetic plains. All these political developments are consulted in this chapter. There are seven sub-chapters under this chapter. The sub-chapters are: 3.1) Origins of the formation of polities, 3.2) Varman rulers of Kamarupa, 3.3) Samanta rulers of Samatata, 3.4) Seventh Century A.D, 3.5) Harikela State, 3.6) Chandra rulers of East Bengal, and 3.7) Tripuri Formation.

3.1 Origins of the formation of polities

The epigraphic evidences on the political structure of the Surma Barak Valley are available from the 6th century A.D, but the pre-six century period remains completely uncharted. Two eminent Bengali scholars of the late 19th century, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya and Ramesh Chandra Dutta felt that the Sylhet-Cachar region passed through the process of Aryanisation much earlier than many other regions of Bengal. In their opinion, the Sylhet-Cachar region formed part of ancient ‘*Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa*’ along with neighbouring districts of eastern and northern Bengal.⁶⁴ The fact of Aryanisation at an early stage has been noticed by others also.

⁶⁴ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, “*Banglar Itihaser Bhangnansa*”, Pravandha Pustak (Bengali), (1317 B.S) & R.C. Dutta, *Civilization in Ancient India*, (1891), Quoted in A.C.Choudhury, *Srihatter Itivritta* (Bengali) P.8, (Sylhet, 1317 B.S)

In the words of Sir Edward Gait:

*In the Surma Valley and the rest of Bengal, a mixture of races have taken place in which the recognizable Mongolian element diminishes towards the west and disappears altogether before Bihar is reached.*⁶⁵

The Pragjyotisha tradition is also very strong in the region. In Sylhet, there is even now a hillock which is known as ‘*Bhagadatter Tilla*’ and the legends suggest that this was the capital of king Bhagadatta of Pragjyotisha.⁶⁶ The later Sanskrit works like *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* definitely refer to Cachar, Jayantia and Srihatta as included in *Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa*.⁶⁷ A medieval work, ‘*Jatitattvabaridhi*’ records that Mymensing and Srihatta were included in Pragjyotisha and Tripura was as Kirata in early times.⁶⁸ On the basis of references in the Buddhist records and the Greek accounts of the 4th century BC and earlier, K.L. Baruah observed that:

About that time practically the whole western Sylhet and South of Eastern Bengal and part of South-West Bengal were under a sea though the delta was then beginning to form. The estuaries of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra formed this sea which was dotted with islands called Dvipas. The epic accounts give this sea the name Lohita Sagara (estuary of the Louhitya). The Greek accounts make mention of islands in the estuary of the Ganges, the least width of which river even within Magadha was eight miles. The group of islands was possibly known as Vanga. The Buddhist Jatakas say that large sea-going vessels laden with merchandise could sail even from Champa (Bhagalpur). This shows that the sea

⁶⁵ Edward Gait, *The History of Assam*, Third Edition, P.4, (Calcutta, 1963)

⁶⁶ A. C. Choudhury, *Srihatter Itivritta*, P.7, (1317 B.S)

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, P.9.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, P.11.

*then stretched far inland. The southern boundary of Pragjyotisha about 1000 B.C. was therefore this sea.*⁶⁹

The reference in '*Manu-Samhita*' and the '*Mahabharata*' made Kedarnath Mazumder believe that part of eastern Bengal, including Mymensingh, were under a sea known as the *Louhitya Sagara*.⁷⁰ This stretch of country later on came to be known as Samatata. The *Sabha Parva* of the Mahabharata also refers to Pundra, Sumha, Vanga and Tamralipta as countries near sea.⁷¹ In the Ramayana it is said that Amurta Raja founded the kingdom of Pragjyotisha near the Dharmarayna and that his grandson, Rishi Viswamitra, performed his austerities on the banks of the Kausika.⁷² There has been some doubt about the identification of Kausika between Kushiara of Sylhet and Kosi of Bihar.

However, due to some recent discovered inscriptions of Sylhet, the Kausika/Kausiki/Kushiara has been mentioned as the boundary of donated lands in the Chandrapuri Vishaya in Srihattamandala. In the Mahabharata it is stated that the Pandavas undertook the conquest of eastern kingdom and that Arjuna married Princess Pramila of Strirajya, Bhima married Princess Hindimba of Hedamba and again, Arjuna married Chhitarangada of Mekhali. Some scholars are inclined to identify Strirajya with Jayantia, Hedamba with Cachar and Mekhali with Manipur.⁷³ If this identification is correct, the Pandavas went to Manipur through the Barak valley. The '*Vayupurna*' and the '*Tirthachurhamani*' mentions Pragjyotisha as situated in the eastern part of India and refers to the '*Barabakra*' (Barak) as a holy river.⁷⁴ It has been marked by the scholars that the low-lying marshy areas in Cachar, Sylhet and

⁶⁹ K.L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa*, P.4, (Gauhati, 1966)

⁷⁰ Kedarnath Majumdar, *Mymensingher Itihas*, Cited in K.L.Baruah, P.4, (Sylhet, 1904)

⁷¹ *Ibid*, PP.2-8.

⁷² *Ibid*, P.6.

⁷³ A. C. Choudhury, *op.cit*, PP, 4-11.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, P.2.

Mymensingh are still known as *haor*, a word that comes from *sagar* (sea).⁷⁵ The *Chatla-haor* in Cachar and *Barak-haor* in Karimganj are the examples. These were very big fens in the past, but gradually reduced in size due to a continuous process of silting and the elevated portions have been brought under settlement and cultivation. The geological data also confirm that the region was a part of a sea in early times.

In the words of W.W. Hunter:

*The conglomeration of some of the sandy hillocks and the presence of marine shells at the foot of the hills along the northern boundary, indicate that the sea flowed at the base of the hills at a (geologically speaking) comparatively recent period.*⁷⁶

Walter Hamilton also said:

*While to the north and east lofty mountains rise like a wall and appear as if at some remote period they had with stood the surge of the ocean.*⁷⁷

This is in direct reference for the Cachar-Sylhet region. The Greek geographer Ptolemy recorded some information about the Gangetic coast in the beginning of the Christian era.

In the words of K.L. Baruah, Ptolemy:

Gives an account of the Gangetic coast from which it is found that during his time, about the middle of the second century A.D., the Ganges fell into the sea through five months. This clearly indicates that the delta had then formed and the islands, comprising Vanga, that dotted Lohita Sagara about 100 B.C., had then been joined together to form a part of the Southern Bengal mainland

⁷⁵ K. L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa*, P.1, (Gauhati, 1966) & A. C. Choudhury, *Srihatter Itivritta*, PP, 2-15 (1317 B.S)

⁷⁶ W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam*, Vol. II, P.298 (London, 1879)

⁷⁷ Walter Hamilton, *Eastern India Gazetteers*, Vol. II, P. 352, (Calcutta, 1820)

*interested by the several branches of the Ganges flowing into the sea.*⁷⁸

These facts and observations lead us to conclude that the whole of Bengal, including the Barak Valley, at a time formed part of the Bay of Bengal. The delta was formed gradually and the surface was initially dotted with elevated portions encircled by water. As the silting continued, the water became encircled by patches of land. The isolated land masses became the *Janapadas*. Pundra, Sumha, Vanga, Tamralipta, Pragjyotisha, Samatata etc were such *Janapadas*. In course of time, these isolated land tracts were joined together by the recession of sea water. The *Janapadas* were also integrated and *Vanga* became the common identity for the entire eastern Gangetic plains. The Barak valley also experienced this process. The evidences of the Bhatara Copper plate and the accounts of Hiuen Tsang and Alberuni show that even in 7th to 11th century A.D parts of Sylhet were covered in *Sagara* or *haor*.⁷⁹ Another significant possibility about the early *Janapadas* is that the dwellers of these emerging lands must have been agricultural and pastoral communities who could make their living in water-locked marshy regions. In the Sylhet-Cachar region, the fishing and boating castes, who are also basically agriculturists are numerous. It is possible that they settled in the valley before others.

An important clue to the early political organization in the Barak Valley is found in Panini's *Ashtadhyayi* which refers to '*Suramasa*' as a *Janapada*. V.S. Agarwal identified this *Janapada* with the Surma Valley (Cachar-Sylhet) of Assam.⁸⁰ Panini described *Janapada* as a monarchical state and defined bhakti as loyalty of the citizens to his state or *Janapada*.⁸¹ The noted grammarian, Panini was an alumni of the Taxila University in 6th – 7th century B.C. This suggests that the Barak Valley experienced the monarchical state formation as early as 7th century B.C and the Aryan settlement in the Valley proceeded that period. Agarwal justified his identification on

⁷⁸ K. L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa*, P.5, (Gauhati, 1966)

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, PP. 5-6.

⁸⁰ V.S. Agarwal, *India as known to Panini*, Second edition, PP.35-38, (Varanasi, 1963)

⁸¹ *Ibid*, PP.36-43.

the ground that Panini placed 'Suramasa' in the east after Anga and Vanga. He described the people of Anga as 'Angaka', those of Vanga as 'Vangaka' and the women of Vanga as 'Vangi'.⁸² The difficulty is that the information on *Suramasa* is not authenticated by any other historical evidence. On the basis of a reference in the Tibetan records, R.M. Nath noted that in the Bihara area of Cachar there was an ancient kingdom, called *Nangata*, where a Buddhist king named Sundara Hachi ruled. According to these records, a large number of Buddhists migrated from Northern India to escape persecution and took refuge in *Nangata*.

According to R.M Nath:

*It is likely that Bihara is so named due to the existence of a Buddhist Vihar or shrine at that time. No traces of any Buddhist temple has however been discovered in the area. To the east of the Bihara Railway Station, there is a small brick-built temple and a big tank which is called "Rajar-mar-dighi", i.e., the tank of the Queen mother, and the temple contains an image of Shiva and other deities.*⁸³

The researchers may lead to definite evidences about these two early states in the Barak Valley. Another important indicator to the political and social formations is the ancient religious sites scattered in the valley. The cave temple in the 'Bhuban hill' in Cachar, 'Unakuti' in Kailasahar, 'Rupnath Shiva cave' in the Jayantia parganas, 'Siddheswar Shiva temple' in Badarpurghat at the trijuncture of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts are more important archaeological sites. 'Baurbhag Kali' temple in Jayantia and 'Bhairav temple' in Gutatkar are Mahapithas associated with the Devi legend. 'Hatakewar Shiva temple' in Sylhet town, 'Tungareshwar Shiva temple' near Shaistaganj Railway station, 'Brahmakunda' in Tripura, 'Taptakunda' in Panchbhag of Jayantia, 'Madhavtirtha' and 'Shivalingatirtha' in Adamail hill, and 'Basudebbari' in *Panchha-khanda* are very ancient sites in the undivided Sylhet

⁸² *Ibid*, P.91.

⁸³ R.M. Nath, *Antiquities of Cachar*, P.8, (Silchar, 1981)

district.⁸⁴ *Unakuti* in Kailasahar and *Siddheswar* at Badarpur are associated with Sage Kapila. In Unakuti one comes across a large number of carvings of the rocky surface of a hillock. The scholars believe that these carvings belong to a period earlier than the fifth century AD.⁸⁵ The Siddheswar Shiva temple which contains a stone image of 'lingam' and some other deities in the form of rock besmeared with red-pigment belongs to the seventh century A.D, if not earlier.⁸⁶ The Bhuban hill cave temple is also a Shaivite site, attributed generally to the earliest phase of the Tripura state formation in the pre-fifth century period. There is an underground fort in the site with several tunnels.⁸⁷ There are several sculptures of Hindu deities and devotees, the most prominent being Shiva himself. It is held that the shrine as such and some of the sculptures belong to the pre-fifth century A.D, while there are others which are dated in the 9th – 10th century A.D, and they represent the influence of the Pala sculptures of Bengal.⁸⁸ The temple complexes and sculptures like those in Siddheswar, Bhuban, Unakati and others could not have developed without the support of the state power. The point for these religious shrines and archeological sites drive home are that (i) The state formation processes in the Barak Valley had started at least before fifth century A.D, and (ii) This area was already covered in the Pan-Indian culture continuum by the settlement of the Indo-Aryans in that period. The foundation of the society in the valley was also laid in that early period by an admixture of Austric, Mongolian and Aryan races.⁸⁹

⁸⁴ A.C. Choudhury, *op.cit*, PP. 99-140.

⁸⁵ Padmanath Bhattacharya, *Samatater Purbe*, Sahitya Parishad Patrika, Vol. XVI, No. 1. P.10, (1326 B.S)

⁸⁶ R.M. Nath, *Antiquities of Cachar*, PP.1-2, (Silchar, 1981)

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, PP. 18-24.

⁸⁸ Sujit Choudhury, *Srihatta Cacharer Prachin Itihas*, (Bengali), Part 3, Sahitya, No.9, PP. 98-113, (1992)

⁸⁹ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *The Ancient Political Structure of the Barak Valley*, The NEHU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities, (Reprint) Vol. X.No.2, P.7, (April-June, 1992)

The Greek and the Chinese accounts provide some clues to the economic and political structure of the region. The Greek geographer, Ptolemy mentions about 'Kirrhadia' which is identified with Tripura. According to him:

*In Kirrhadia the best malabathrum was produced. The Sylhet region is well known for malabathrum which is grown luxuriantly on the western slopes of the Khasi hills as well as in the bordering areas of Sylhet. Ptolemy also referred to the mountain range called Damassa peopled by the Damassoi. The Dammasa is identified with North Cachar hills and the Damassoi with the Dimasa.*⁹⁰

Mc. Crindel's translation of Ptolemy's account shows that:

*In the frontier of Kirrhadia there used to be a big trade fair in which huge quantity of malabathrum was traded. The Chinese traders bought malabathrum in exchange of silk. It is further stated that these Chinese traders used fine cane mattress for displaying their goods.*⁹¹

Sylhet was the seat of Ptolemy's big trade fair is deduced on the ground that the Sylhet region is still famous for the production of both malabathrum and cane mattresses and there are references to the production of these items in the medieval sources. The Visnu Purana also refers to a territory called 'Kirrhadia' in the east. Since *Kirrhadia* is identified with Tripura and the seat of big trade fair was in Sylhet, it is presumed that *Kirrhadia* and *Sylhet* were neighbouring territories.

Hieun Tsang's account of the 7th century A.D is an important document on the political structure of the Barak Valley in that period. According to his account, Samatata was two hundred and fifty miles to the south of Kamarupa. He then talks about 'Shi-li-cha-talo' or Srihatta. As stated in the account, "going from this

⁹⁰ K. L. Baruah, *Early History of Kamarupa*, P.6, (Gauhati, 1966)

⁹¹ A.C. Choudhury, *op.cit*, PP. 40-41.

(Samatata) north east along the borders of the sea, across mountains and valleys we come to the country of ‘*Shi-li-cha-talo*’.”⁹² The account further clarified that after Samatata “The first place is ‘*Shi-li-cha-talo*’ which was situated in near the great sea, to the north east of Samatata.”⁹³ It may, therefore, be presumed that some portions of Sylhet or the areas bordering Sylhet were still under water during the visit of Hieun Tsang. The way Hieun Tsang referred to ‘*Shi-li-cha-talo*’ along with Samatata and Kamarupa, it impressed upon some scholars that Srihatta in the 7th century was an independent state or Kingdom.⁹⁴

The antiquity of civilization of the Barak Valley can be inferred from the fact that two of the fiftyone ‘*mahapithas*’ (viz. ‘*Grivapitha*’ in Gutatkar and ‘*Bamjanghapitha*’ in Baurbhag) of the Indian sub-continent were in Sylhet. These Pithas are mystic centres associated with Sakta cult. The two centres in Srihatta are referred to in the ancient texts like ‘*Mantra Churhamani Tantra*’ and ‘*Tantra Churhamani*’. Srihatta also found mention in the ‘*Mantra Churhamani Tantra*’ and ‘*Sadhanamala*’ of the Buddhist as a centre of Vajrayana Panini’s Asthadhyayi referred to it as a *Janapada*. The references to Srihatta in these ancient texts suggest the ancientness of its civilization, the Indo-Aryan settlements, the prevalence of the Buddhist and Brahmanical Hindu religions, the existence of the different castes and occupations, including the brahmanas, peasants and artisans in the pre-sixth century A.D period. The pre-sixth century A.D was emphasized because it have a definite epigraphic record to suggest that from the beginning of sixth to seventh century A.D at least a portion of Srihatta was included in Kamarupa and that the history of the Barak Valley from that century is more or less charted.

3.2 Varman rulers of Kamarupa

The fact that the rule of the Varman rulers of Kamrupa extended to the Barak Valley is known from the Nidhanpur Copper plate of Kumar Bhaskaravarman. This inscription

⁹² S. Beal, Life of Hieun Tsang, P. 138, Quoted in A.C. Choudhury, *Srihatta Itivritta*, P. 42.(1317 B.S)

⁹³ A.C. Choudhury, *op.cit*, P. 43.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, P.47.

was discovered in the year 1912, the village Nidhanpur of *Panchha-khanda* pargana in Beanibazar Thana of the undivided Sylhet district; it was found in seven copper plates together with a seal. One of the plates was lost subsequently, before the text was deciphered or published.⁹⁵ The inscription is undated, but in all probability it was issued between 620 and 643 A.D.⁹⁶ The inscription describes the renewal of a perpetual revenue free land grant by the king Maharaja Bhaskaravarman of the original grant made by his great grandfather Maharaja Mahabhuta Varman (alias Bhutivarman) who ruled in the beginning of the 6th century A.D. The donated agrahara land called '*mayursalmala*' was in the Chandrapuri vishaya and bounded on the east by river Kosika, on the south-east by dried Kausika marked by hewn fig tree, on the south-west by the dried river Ganginika marked by a cut down fig tree, on the west by the dried bed of Ganginika, on the north-east by the pond of a lawyer (*vyavahari*) named Khasoka. This grant to the Brahmanas (*agrahara*) was in the manner of '*bhumichchidra-nyaya*' so that no tax is levied on it as long as the sun, the moon and the earth will endure. The text was addressed to the district officer (*vishayapati*) and the officers of justice (*adhikarana*). The officer who issued 'hundred commands' is named as Sri Gopala, the officer who marked the boundaries was the *nayaka* or headman of Chandrapuri named Sri Kshikunda, the *nayakaranika* or the judge was one Janardhana Svami, the *vyavahari* or lawyer was Hara Datta, the *Kayastha* or clerks were Dandunatha and others, the *sasayila* or composer and *lekhayita* or writer was one Vasuvarna, the *Bhandaradhikrita* or superintendent of stores was Mahasamanta Divakaraprabha, the *utkhetayita* or collector of revenue was Dattakara Purana, and *sekyakara* or engraver was one Kaliya. The total area of the donated land or the total number of shares granted is not known because one of the plates was lost, but the names of the Brahmana donees including their gotra and veda-sakha and the number of shares (*amsah*) are clearly mentioned in the text against each name. As one of the seven plates could not be recovered, the total number of donees and shares cannot be ascertained. The six Plates contain a list of 205 donees and they were given

⁹⁵ M.M. Sharma (ed.), *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, P. 38, (1978)

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, P.57.

159.70 shares. In addition to these, 7 shares were allotted for the 'Bali-charu-satra' or the common purpose like worship (*bali*), oblation (*charu*) and hospitality (*satra*). It is also stated that the portion of the land increased by Kosika will go to the concerned Brahmana donees but the land enlarged by the Gangini shall be equally divided by these Brahmanas.⁹⁷

The discovery of the Nidhanpur Copper plate was followed by a debate on the location of the donated land in which the eminent Indologists of the time participated. N.K. Bhattasali, J.C. Gosh and R.G. Bhandarkar suggested that the donated land in the Chandrapuri vishaya was in the *Panchha-khanda* pargana of Sylhet, where the plates were found.⁹⁸ Padmanath Bhattacharya, who deciphered the plates first, on the otherhand, observed that the donated land could be in Rangpur. His main contention was that it could not be in Sylhet because Hieun Tsang at about the same time had mentioned Srihatta as an independent state.⁹⁹

K.L. Baruah believes that the donated land was in the Purnia district of Bihar. His argument was that it was impossible for a Kamarupa ruler to extend his rule to Sylhet because the valleys of the Brahmaputra and the Barak are separated by the hill range. To quote him:

There is really no good evidence to prove conclusively that the district of Sylhet formed a part of Kamrupa in the sixth or the seventh century A.D. so that either Mahabhuta Varman or Bhaskaravarman could donate lands there to Brahmanas. In my book, I have stated that this is a matter of some doubt. Sylhet is the south of the Assam Valley separated from it by the Garo, Khasi, and Jaintia Hills. There never was any easy communication between Sylhet and Kamarupa in the past. The road to Sylhet from Gauhati via Shillong and Jaintiapur has been constructed by the

⁹⁷ Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit*, PP. 32-40; M.M. Sharma (ed.), *op.cit*, PP. 38-41.

⁹⁸ M.M. Sharma (ed.), *op.cit*, P. 66.

⁹⁹ Padmanath Bhattacharya, *Kamarupa-Sasanavali*, P. 66, (Varanasi, 1932)

*British Government at enormous cost and the Shillong-Sylhet section was opened only a few years back.*¹⁰⁰

From reliable historical accounts, it found that since the sixteenth century, only two kings of Kamarupa (Assam) could penetrate the hills and attack the Jaintipur kingdom in the northern part of Sylhet district. The first expedition was led by the famous Chilarai, the brother of King Naranarayana, and the second expedition was set by Rudrasimha, the most powerful of the Ahom kings. Both of these expeditions were no doubt successful but at tremendous cost in men and money. However, Sylhet could be ruled by the kings of Kamarupa having their capital in Gauhati (*Pragjyotishpur*) or Tezpur (*Hatapewara*). It is true that Mymensingh was a part of Kamarupa till a late period but this district could be easily reached from Gauhati, Kamarupa or Cooch Behar. The Brahmaputra flowed through this district till the 18th century. Yuan-Chwang, who visited Kamarupa in the seventh century, has left on record that to the south-east of the kingdom (the Kapili Valley and the North Cachar) elephants were plentiful, which indicates that this area was then a howling jungle and there could not have been any easy passage through this area to Sylhet. The army of Rudrasimha had actually march through this difficult country to reach Jaintipur. Pandit Padmanath Bhattacharya Vidyavinod has, in his '*Kamarupa-Sasanavali*', tried to establish that Sylhet was a separate kingdom in the beginning of the seventh century and that even Yuan-Chwang made separate mention of Sylhet (*Shi-li-cha-talo*). He further points out that in the Yogini-Tantra, Sylhet and Kamarupa are mentioned separately (pp. 4-9).¹⁰¹ In an earlier work, the Sadhanamala, Srihatta and kamarupa are separately mentioned. All things considered which is best and very doubtful whether Sylhet was a part of Kamarupa at any time? There are still strong traditions of the cultural, historical and political connection between Kamarupa and the border districts of Bengal in the past. No such tradition has been handed down to us of any similar association between Sylhet and Kamarupa.

¹⁰⁰ K. L. Baruah, *Kausika and Kushiara*, Indian culture, Vol. I, No. 3, PP. 421-432, (January, 1935)

¹⁰¹ Padmanath Bhattacharya, *Kamarupa-Sasanavali*, PP. 4-9, (Varanasi, 1932)

According to R.C. Dutta and Bankimchandra Chatterji:

The ancient kingdom of Kamarupa included not only Sylhet but also Cachar and Manipur. It seems that they came to such conclusion from the extent of Kamarupa given by the Chinese pilgrim Yuan-Chwang who stated that Kamarupa was 10,000 miles or nearly 1,700 miles in circuit. Yuan-Chwang came to Kamarupa when Bhaskaravarman was ruling and after Bhaskaravarman had conquered both Gauda and Karnasuvarmana. At that time, therefore, Kamarupa extended far to the west of the Karatoya and it included the modern Assam Valley, the whole of North Bengal and the eastern part of North Bihar as far as the Kosi, a part of Bhutan and Morang, a part of Bengal to the south of the Ganges (Karnasuvarna), and Mymensingh. This kingdom was 1,700 miles in circuit.

The debate was open till the discovery of the Paschimbhag Copper plate inscription of 10th century A.D. in Sylhet a few years later. This inscription also refers to Chandrapuri Vishaya, the boundary of the donated land in the Vishaya is almost identical with that of Nidhanpur inscription, and the titles of the Brahmana donees are also similar. Moreover, the Paschimbhag inscription clearly stated that the Chandrapuri Vishaya was in Srihattamandala of *Pundravardhana bhukti*. Moreover, a village near Nidhanpur is still known as Chandpur and according to tradition, it was earlier known as Chandrapur (*Chandra/Chand* = moon). On these grounds, Kamalakanta Gupta has concluded that Chandrapuri of Nidhanpur inscription and Chandrapuri of Paschimbhag inscription is identical.¹⁰² It is therefore said that the problem of identification of the donated land of Nidhanpur inscription of Bhaskaravarman has been resolved with the discovery of the Paschimbhag inscription and that the Chandrapur area of Srihatta was under the rule of the Varmans of Kamarupa from the time of Bhutivarman to that of Bhaskaravarman. However,

¹⁰² Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit*, PP. 57-58.

according to K.L. Baruah, it was impossible for any ruler from the Brahmaputra Valley to extend his political boundary to the Barak Valley across the hill range and that only two instances of military expeditions through the North Cachar Hills to that valley were sent by King Naranarayana and King Rudra Singha in the 16th – 17th century. As a matter of fact, the Kamarupi rule for a very brief period in the 7th century extended to Sylhet not from the Brahmaputra Valley but from East Bengal. Baruah himself has suggested that Kamarupa state during the reign of Bhaskaravarman included the modern Assam valley, the whole of North Bengal and a part of East Bengal, including Mymensingh. He also stated that Mymensingh was easy to reach from Gauhati or Kamarupa or Cooch Behar. His explanation is basically logical in describing the role of geography in historical development. It would be perfectly in tune with this explanation to say that the Kamarupa state extended to Srihatta from Mymensingh. While describing the geographical structure of the Barak Valley and its affinity with the neighboring districts of Bengal, it is said that the river Barak and Surma entered Mymensingh from Sylhet near Dhirai, that the adjoining area of Mymensingh is a continuation of the Barak Valley and that the communication between Mymensingh and Sylhet is unimpaired by any major natural barrier. The role of the Varmans of Kamarupa, therefore, extended to Sylhet from East Bengal, and not from Assam.

The land granted in the Chandrapuri vishaya of Sylhet by Bhutivarman and the renewal of the grant by Bhaskaravarman, as stated in the Nidhanpur Copper plate inscription of Bhaskaravarman, is definite historical evidence that the Chandrapur area of Srihatta was under the rule of the Varmans of Kamarupa. However, it is said that the whole of the Barak Valley was under the Kamarupa rulers at that point of time. It also discussed that the account of Hieun Tsang (*Si-Yu-Ki*) suggested the existence of Srihatta as an independent state in 643 A.D. (the year of Hieun Tsang's visit), and inscription of a Tripura king definitely shows that at least the Mangalpur area of the valley formed part of Tripuri state in 641 A.D. It is possible; therefore, that the major part of the Barak Valley was then included in the independent territory known as *Silichatal* or Srihatta, while one portion extending from Mymensingh was under the

role of the Varmans of Kamarupa and another portion bordering Tripura formed part of the Tripuri state. There is no evidence of the role of the Varmans in Chandrapur before Bhutivarman. Therefore, Bhutivarman might have been the first Varman ruler who extended the boundary of Kamarupa to include a portion of the Barak Valley. There is also no evidence of the Varman rule in the area after Bhaskaravarman. It is possible that the Chandrapur was lost to Kamarupa immediately after the death of Bhaskaravarman. It inclined to say so because the Tripperah Inscription of 650 A.D. shows that a portion of the territory of Lokanatha, a Samanta or feudatory ruler of Samatata was included at that time.

Nevertheless, the Nidhanpur inscription provides us with some interesting data on the Political and social structure of the Chandrapur area. Chandrapur, according to the inscription, was a *Vishaya* or district. It had a headman (*nayaka*). Among other officers were district officers (*vishayapati*), judge (*nayakaranika*), court of justice (*adhikarana*), lawyer (*vyavabari*), clerks (*kayastha*), composer (*sasayila*), writer (*lekhayita*), engraver (*Sekyakara*) superintendent of stores (*Bhandaradhikrita*), collector of revenue (*utkhetayita*) and others. The donated land to Brahmanas was an *agrahara* according to the principles of '*bhumichchidra-nyaya*'. Such lands were perpetually free from taxation. This means that there were other types of land-owning which were subject to payment of taxes. A portion of the donated land was reserved for common purpose like worship, oblation and hospitality.

The land donated to Brahmanas by Bhutivarman in the beginning of the 6th century A.D. was more than 205 in numbers. The names of the Brahmanas and the gotra, veda and veda-sakha are clearly mentioned. The inscription does not state that these Brahmanas were brought from outside. On the otherhand, the inscription of Tripura Raja of the 7th century shows that he settled in the area (*Panchha-khanda*) where some of the Brahmanas were brought from Mithila for a sacrifice. The land granted by this Tripura Raja was more than one hundred years after the grant of land by Bhutivarman. The Brahmana donees of Bhutivarman's grant were perhaps already available in Barak Valley. This is an important clue to the early Indo-Aryan settlement in the Valley. The surnames of Brahmanas mentioned in the inscription include

Bhatta, Bhatti, Bhuti, Dama, Dasa, Datta, Deva, Ghosha, Kunda, Mitra, Naga, Nandi, Pala, Palita, Sarma, Soma, Sena and Vasu, which are qualified by the common epithet ‘*Svami*’. All these surnames are still popular in the Barak Valley, although most of these, including *Svami*, are non-Brahmin surnames today.¹⁰³ Other than the donees, the indications of existence of castes and professionals among the residents and officials of Chandrapur are found. On the boundary of the donated land there is a pond of a *vyavahari* (lawyer) and a potter’s pit. The names of the officials like Sri Gopala, Shri Kshikunda, Jonardhana Svami, Hara Datta, Dandunatha, Vasuvarna, Dibakaraprabha or Dattakara Purna bear strong Indo-Aryan affinity.

It is to be noted that *agrahara* in the manner of ‘*bhumichchidra-nyaya*’ was an all-India phenomenon in ancient time. The structure and functionaries of Chandrapur also conformed in details to those of an ancient Vishaya, particularly in Bengal.¹⁰⁴ It is also said that the inscription of the Nidhanpur Copper plate is different from any other inscription of the Kamarupa kings. Firstly, two verses from the *Vrihaspati Samhita* are quoted in the inscription and such verses are not to be found in other Copper plate of the Kamarupa kings, and secondly, the land grants according to ‘*bhumichchidra-nyaya*’ was a common practice in Bengal.¹⁰⁵ The fact that Srihatta was essentially a region of Bengal or that the Nidhanpur plates were issued from Karnasuvarna in Bengal, or both, might have inspired Bhaskara to follow the line of the Bengal phenomenon. The state extended to Srihatta from Bengal, it dealt with a society which was basically as in other parts of Bengal and the inscription conformed to the Bengal style of Copper plates.

3.3 Samanta rulers of Samatata

The Tipperah Copper plate inscription of Samanta Lokanatha mentions the grant of a plot of land in a forest region (*atabibhukhande*) called Suvanga vishaya within Jayatungavarsa for the construction of a temple of Anantanarayana (*Vishnu*) and for

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, P.55.

¹⁰⁴ R. C. Majumdar, *History of Ancient Bengal*, P. 317, (Calcutta, 1971)

¹⁰⁵ Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit*, P. 187.

the settlement of more than one hundred Brahmanas versed in four Vedas. The inscription gives a short history of a few generations of Samanta (feudatory) chiefs of Samatata (East and South-East Bengal). The name of the first could not be deciphered, but the second was Srihatta, the third Bhavanatha and the fourth Lokanatha. This Lokanatha was the donor of the said plot of land in Suvanga. It is stated in the inscription that Mahasamanta Pradoshasharman, an orthodox Brahman who held the high office of Mahasamanta in the state, approached Lokanatha through letter's son, Lokanatha, as *dutaka* (ambassador) for a plot of land in Suvanga for the construction of the temple and settlement of the Brahmanas. The prayer was granted and land was donated to those Brahmanas by this charter individually. The donees included *bhugin* or headman of the village, and *pachaka* (cook) and *vachaka* (reciter) of the temple. The Copper plate was issued in 44th year of the Harsa era, corresponding to 650 A.D. The inscription describes Lokanatha as a Samanta chief with the title '*kumaramatyā adhikarana*'.¹⁰⁶ The name of the sovereign is not mentioned in the inscription. It is also known from the text that Lokanatha was a Saiva, but the plate bears a '*Gajalakshmi*' seal. The seal might be of the paramount ruler. R. G. Basak, who deciphered the inscription, held that Lokanatha was a feudatory chief under the later Gupta Emperor Aditya Sena of Magadha.¹⁰⁷ The discovery of a large number of later Gupta coins in Tripura and the adjoining region in recent years must be taken as an additional clue to support Basak's contention. R.C. Majumder also agrees that Lokanatha was a feudatory ruler of Samatata under the Guptas.

The eminent Indologist, N.K.Bhattacharya suggested that the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, which is an extension of the Cachar plains, is the ancient Jayatungavarsa and the suvang area of Cachar is the ancient *Suvanga vishaya* of the Tipperah Copper plate of Lokanatha. This view was reinforced by R.M. Nath who referred to the site and the traditions of an ancient Vishnu temple in Suvang to

¹⁰⁶ R. G. Basak, *op.cit.*, PP. 301-335.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, P. 337.

conclude that this might be the temple mentioned in the inscription.¹⁰⁸ This finding was accepted on the basis of the description from the text of *Suvanga vishaya*.

To quote from R.G. Basak's translation of the inscription:

*In the vishaya of Suvanga in the forest region having a thick network of bush and creepers, where deer, buffaloes, boars, tigers, serpents, etc. enjoy according to their will, all pleasures of homelife. It caused a temple to be made and had set up therein (an image of) the infinite Lord Anantanarayana who has shown favourable to all. Therefore, the perpetual maintenance of Ashtapushpika, bali, charu and satra, to bhagavan Anantanarayana, whose person is adored by the chief gods, the Asuras, the sun, the moon, Kuvera, the kinnaras, the Vidhyadharas, the chief serpent (gods), the Gandharvas, Varuna, the Yakshas and also for the residence of Brahmanas versed in the four vedas, who have a community there, an endowment in this forest-region, having no distinction of natural and artificial, has been granted with full title, for the increase of the merit of my father and mother and myself, by king (Lokanatha) by a Copper plate grant.*¹⁰⁹

The identification of 'Suvanga vishaya' with Suvang area of Cachar brings out two significant facts about the political and social structure of the Barak Valley in the middle of the seventh century A.D. Firstly, the Cachar plains including the Jatinga Valley formed part of the territory of the Samanta rulers of Samatata. The Jatinga Valley (*Jayatunga*) was a province (*varsa*) of Samatata and Suvang (*Suvanga*) was a district (*vishaya*) in that province. This was possible, because the Tripura plains (Comilla), where the Copper plate was discovered, was then in Samatata and from there the boundary of the Samanta rulers could be extended through the familiar terrain of the valley. Secondly, about the settlement of the Brahmanas versed in four

¹⁰⁸ R. M. Nath, *Background of Assamese Culture*, P. 56, (Shillong, 1949)

¹⁰⁹ R. G. Basak, *op.cit.*, P. 311.

Vedas, the inscription says 'Brahmanas have a community there'. It means that such Brahmanas were already in the locality. It may be said that Bhutivarman granted land to a large number of Brahmanas in Chandrapur in the beginning of the sixth century A.D. and a Tripura king settled some Brahmanas from Mithila in 641 A.D. in *Panchha-khanda*. There could be settlements of Brahmanas in some other areas of the valley also. The distance of Suvang from *Panchha-khanda* or Chandpur may not be more than fifty miles. It is also possible that Pradoshasharman himself belonged to this locality and that is why, he asked for the grant of land for the construction of temple and settlement of Brahmanas in Suvang. He was perhaps the Mahasamanta or officer-in-charge of the Cachar plains or Suvang area.

The question to be resolved is the date of the expansion of Samatata to the Cachar-Jatinga region. This is crucial in view of the existence of Srihatta as an independent state, the Varman rule in Chandrapur and Tripuri rule in Mangalpur area. However, the date of Tipperah plate is 650 A.D., which is immediately after the death of Bhaskara. It may be said that the Kamarupa rule in Chandrapur came to an end and the Samanta ruler of Samatata appeared in the area as the successor of the Varman king. It is also possible that, since the Tripura plains had passed under the Samatata ruler, Lokanath extended his rule over the upper portion (Cachar plains) of the valley without disturbing the political structure in the lower valley. It could be a political expediency for Lokanatha to construct a temple and settle Brahmanas for the development of the newly acquired territory. The state in the lower valley, however, could not remain undisturbed for long because from the Kalapur Copper plate of Marundanatha, a successor of Lokanatha, it is known that the territory of the Samanta rulers had penetrated deep into the lower region of the Barak Valley. The Srihatta state and the political influence of the Varman and Tripuri rulers must have declined by then.

The Copper plate of Marundanatha was found in the village Kalapur in Chautali pargana in Srimangal Thana of Moulvibazar sub-division (now a district in Bangladesh). By this Copper plate, Marundanatha donated a plot of land in the forest region (*atabibhukhande*) comprising an area of one pataka and two drone for the

purpose of the '*Bali-charu-satra*' of god Anantanarayana. The land was gifted in the name of the deity of the temple and the Brahmanas (*mathadevadvijebhya*). The text has so far been only partially deciphered, as portions of it had already been damaged when it was found. It is, therefore, not possible to ascertain the full text of the grant or its date of issue. However, on textual and calligraphic grounds, the scholars have put it towards the end of the 7th century A.D.¹¹⁰ The Copper-plate was found in Chautali pargana. This is a hilly area and therefore could be a forest region in the past. A hoard of broken pieces of earthen vessels in the find spot of the copper plate and an old brick wall and a brick-built well at a short distance from that spot have also been discovered. A status of Vishnu was also discovered in the same locality. On these grounds, Kamalakanta Gupta held that the land donated by Samanta Marundanatha was in the Chautali pargana of Srimangal in Sylhet.¹¹¹ Samanta Marundanatha is taken as a successor of Samanta Lokanatha for various reasons. Firstly, both Lokanatha and Marundanatha used the common title '*Kumaramatya adhikarana*' qualified by the words '*bhattaraka*'. This suggests that both of them were feudatory chiefs (Samanta) under a paramount power. Secondly, the words *Srilekha* (charter from the sovereign) and *Samanta-sainapati* (feudatory army chief) occurred in both the plates. Thirdly, both the plates have a common seal containing the same emblem, i.e. *Gaja lakshmi*. Fourthly, 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, although the actual relationship between them was not found in the deciphered portion of the text. Fifthly, both Lokanatha and Marundanatha granted land for the temple of Anantanarayana, the '*Bali-charu-satra*' of the deity and for the settlement of Brahmanas. Lastly, the Brahmanas mentioned in both the plates were well versed in four vedas and their names ended with '*Svami*'.¹¹²

The Kalapur Copper plate of Samanta Marundanatha makes it clear that the Samanta line of rulers were feudatory chiefs under the Guptas. The language of the

¹¹⁰ Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit*, PP. 69-74.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, P. 26.

¹¹² *Ibid*, PP. 29-34.

text is Sanskrit and the character of the letters is Devanagri of the 7th century A.D. Most of the letters are similar to those of the Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman. However, the legends Kumaramatyā adhikarāna and Sri Marundanatha are written in relief in the character of the early Gupta age. Some of the Devanagri letters bear strong resemblance to those of the Afsad Inscription of Gupta Emperor Adityasena of Magadha of 7th century A.D.¹¹³

The Copper plates of Lokanatha and Marundanatha show that in the second half of the seventh century A.D., the Barak Valley was ruled by a line of Samanta rulers. They were basically the rulers of Samatata which then included East and South-East Bengal. The dominion of these rulers extended from Tripura first to the upper region of the Valley, then moved northwards to the Jatinga Valley, and finally penetrated deep into the western and southern heartland of the undivided valley. The Barak Valley was, therefore, integrated in this period in the realm of the Samanta rulers of Samatata. Since these Samanta rulers were feudatories under the Gupta dynasty of Magadha, it may be concluded that the Barak valley then formed part of the Gupta Empire.

3.4 Seventh Century A. D.

The Seventh Century A.D seems to be a landmark in the evolution of political structure of the Barak Valley. On the strength of standard historical evidences, it can be said that there were more than one political system within the valley in that century. The description of 'Shi-li-cha-talo' by Hieun Tsang in his account has convinced some scholars that Sylhet or Srihatta at the time of visit of this Chinese pilgrim in the seventh century A.D was an independent state.¹¹⁴ The mention of both Silichatal and Srihatta in the medieval Vaishnava literature interchangeably leaves no doubt that in the early period Srihatta was known as Silichatal and that both Srihatta and Silichatal were concurrently in popular use till medieval period.¹¹⁵ Hieun Tsang reached Srihatta

¹¹³ *Ibid.* PP. 39-41.

¹¹⁴ Padmanath Bhattacharya, *op.cit.*, PP. 2-8.

¹¹⁵ Sunirmal Dutta Choudhury, *Ganga Theke Surma* (Bengali), P. 45, (Calcutta, 1988)

through Samatata. Srihatta was situated on the north-east of Samatata. According to him:

The country of 'Shi-li-cha-talo' was situated along the borders of the sea across mountains and valleys.

It is noted that the neighboring areas of east Bengal was still under water and the Barak Valley even today is encircled by the hills leaving a small opening towards Bengal. Even that opening was probably covered in the sea, because it is found by some scholars that in the early times the south-western part of Sylhet, eastern part of Mymensingh and north-eastern part of Comilla (Tippera) were covered in a big lake which has been referred by Hieun Tsang as a sea. This was gradually filled up by mud deposited by Barak and the Brahmaputra in the later years. Hieun Tsang's description carries the impression that Samatata was two hundred and fifty miles south of Kamrupa and that Srihatta was the territory which separated the two states (Kamrupa and Samatata). Hieun Tsang accordingly, designated Srihatta as an independent territory.¹¹⁶

Hieun Tsang mentioned about Srihatta, sometime between 629 and 645 A.D, on his way to the capital of Kumar Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa. He identified Srihatta as an independent territory. This Srihatta of the Chinese traveller, however, did not cover the whole of the Barak Valley. The epigraphic, numismatic and other historical evidences conclude that segments of this valley under different political formations at about the same time in the seventh century A.D. The Nidhanpur inscription of Kumar Bhaskaravarman (7th century A.D), for example, clearly shows that at least from the time of his great grandfather, Bhutivarman, to his own time a portion of Srihatta (*Panchha-khanda*) area was ruled by the Varman rulers of Kamarupa. Equally clear is the evidence of the Tipperah Copper plate inscription (650 A.D) of Lokantha which suggests that the Jatinga (North Cachar) and Suvanga (Cachar) areas of the valley were under Samanta rulers of Samatata. The literary and numismatic evidences, on the other hand, prove beyond doubt the existence of

¹¹⁶ Padmanath Bhattacharya, *op.cit*, PP.4-6.

Harikela state in the valley from 6th to 9th century A.D. The boundary of the Tripuri state must have considerably shrunk in this period. However, on the basis of the epigraphic and other evidences, it states that Mangalpur (Karimganj), where a Tripura Raja performed a sacrifice in 641 A.D, was then included in the Tripuri state. In the seventh century, Kamarupa, Samatata, Tripura and Harikela states extended and co-existed in the Barak Valley.

3.5 Harikela State

The historical evidences suggest the existence of a state in South East Bengal, including the Barak Valley and Tripura plains region during 7th to 13th century A.D. The boundary of the state, of course, changed from time to time and its epicenter moved from place to place. The Chittagong Copper plate (8th century A.D.) seems to indicate Kanti-Deva's sway over the whole of Harikela roughly corresponding to the present-day Sylhet. This inscription provides the names of three successive rulers of a Buddhist family, each begin the son of his predecessor, viz. Bhadra-Datta, Dhana-Datta and Kanti-Deva. Similarly, the name of one Ranavankamalla Harikela-Deva is known from a Copper plate of Saka 1141 (1239 A.D.) discovered in the Mainamati hills.

The discovery of eight coins with the legend Harikela in Sylhet in 1960 brought to light the first set of numismatic evidence on Harikela. This was followed by the discovery of about two hundred pieces of the same type in Mainamati. Palaeographically these were dated in 9th - 10th century A.D. A hoard of the same coins was then found in the Balonia subdivision of Tripura. And in recent years, a large number of these coins have been discovered in various places in the Barak Valley and Tripura plains region of India and Sylhet-Comilla region of Bangladesh. While some of these coins are dated to 8th - 9th century A.D., others to 12th - 13th century A.D. Although stylistically and palaeologically all these coins belong to the same type, some of them bear the legend *harikela* or *harikeli* and the others either *veraka* or *viraka* or *piraka* or *lalagiri* or *jayagiri* etc. The later coins are, therefore,

considered as local or regional series of the Harikela coins.¹¹⁷ This suggests that the Harikela state had a number of autonomous divisions or regions and the heads of such divisions issued their own coins. Therefore, *veraka/viraka* may mean Barak region, *piraka* can be identified with Pilak (Tripura), *lalagiri* with Lalmati/Lalmai (Comilla) and *jayagiri* with Jatinga or Jayantia.

Harikela has found mention in some ancient and medieval literary works also. In ‘*Aryamanjusrimulakalpa*’ (8th century A.D.), Vanga, Samatata and Harikela have been mentioned as neighbouring independent *Janapadas*.¹¹⁸ In two medieval texts published by the Dacca University, ‘*Rudraksha mahatmya*’ and ‘*Rupa chintamani kosh*’, Srihatta and Harikela have been used as synonymous. ‘*Rajashekara’s Karpuramanjari*’ (9th - 10th century A.D.), praises the qualities of the women of Harikela in the east. Hemachandra’s ‘*Abhidhana chintamani*’ also mentions Harikela as a *Janapada*. Another text, *Dakarnava* calls it one of the 64 tantrik pithas. In four other lexicons also Srihatta Janapada has been referred to as Harikela, *Harikeli* or *Harikel*. A Chinese traveller, I-tsing noted that Harikela was situated on the eastern frontier of India.¹¹⁹ On the basis of literary evidences, N.R. Roy found that Harikela flourished as an independent state in 7th – 8th to 10th – 11th century A.D in the closest proximity of Vanga and Samatata.¹²⁰ D. C. Sarkar observed that Harikela was a name of Srihatta and that with the expansion of the Srihattarajya in Vanga, the rest of the Vanga region at a time came to be known as Harikel.¹²¹ Both Roy and Sarkar, however, concluded that with the conquest of Chandradvipa by Troilokyachandra of Bikrampur (East Bengal) Harikela was merged into Vanga.

According to R.C. Majumdar:

Since the seventh century A.D. we find reference to a country called Harikela. According to I-tsing it was the eastern

¹¹⁷ Nihar Ranjan Roy, *op.cit.* P.139.

¹¹⁸ Sunirmal Dutta Choudhury, *op.cit.* P.51.

¹¹⁹ Dinesh Chandra Sarkar, *Pal-Sen Juger Vamsanucharit* (Bengali), P. 103, (Calcutta, 1982)

¹²⁰ Nihar Ranjan Roy, *op.cit.* P.140.

¹²¹ Dinesh Chandra Sarkar, *op.cit.* P.106.

*limit of Eastern India. This is supported by the poet Rajashekhara who in his Karpuramanjari (9th century) refers to the girls of Harikeli as belonging to the east.*¹²²

The exact location of Harikela has, however, proved to be a difficult problem. The lexicographer Hemachandra and the 'Yadava-Prakasha' identify Harikeli (evidently a variant of Harikela) with Vanga, but the 'Manjusrimulakalpa' mentions Harikela, Vanga, and Samatata as distinct localities, while the 'Dakarnava' mentions Harikela, along with Khadi, Radha, Vangala (all in Bengal) among the 64 pithas or sacred places. Some Chinese authority applies the name to the coastland between Samatata and Orissa. But as Dr. P.C. Chakraborty has shown, this view is certainly wrong and Harikela must be located far into the interior of Bengal. More definite information is supplied by some medieval manuscripts. According to the lexicon named 'Rupa chintamani', completed in 1515 A.D., Harikela is said to be the name of Srihatta, and the same statement occurs in 'Kalpadruksha', with the variant Harikeli for Harikela. In the Rudraksha-mahatmya section of the Smriti work named 'Kriyavasara' is cited a verse from the 'Linga Purana' containing the name Harikela, and in a note the author says that Harikela is 'Srihattadesa'. It would be quite reasonable to conclude from the above discussion that Harikela primarily denoted the region now known as Sylhet, though its boundaries and political status as an independent country underwent changes in the course of centuries.

The evidences are thus clear that Harikela as a status was in existence in the Srihatta-Vanga-Samatata region during 7th to 13th century A.D. It is also clear that for a long time Srihatta was the epicenter of that state and, as a result, the two names became identical. It also found that Srihatta was ruled by the Samanta rulers of Samatata in the latter half of the 7th century A.D. and it shall find in the next section that Srihattamandala was under the rule of Maharaja Srichandra of Bikrampur (East Bengal) in 10th century A.D. It is possible; therefore, that Srihatta became the heartland of Harikela state towards the end of the 7th century A.D. and continued as

¹²² R. C. Majumder, *op.cit*, P.99.

such till about the middle of the 10th century A.D. After the conquest of Srihatta by the Chandra rulers of East Bengal the epicenter of Harikela moved to the Comilla-Mainamati region. This period witnessed virtually a total decline of the Tripuri rule in the Srihatta region. It is, however, reasonable to say that Srihatta became the common identity for the entire Barak Valley as there is no evidence of any political formation other than Harikela in the valley in that period.¹²³

3.6 Chandra Rulers of East Bengal

The political sway of the Chandra rulers over the Barak Valley is known from the Paschimbhag Copper plate of Maharaja Srichandra of the 10th century A.D.¹²⁴ It was discovered in the village Paschimbhag under the Rajnagar Thana in Moulvibazar. The text gives the genealogy of the Chandra kings from Purnachandra to Srichandra who is described as a worshipper of *Sugata* (Buddha) and known as a *Paramesvara*, *Parambhattaraka*, and *Maharajadhiraja*. By this Copper plate, Maharaja Srichandra granted lands in three vishayas, i.e., Chandrapura, Garala and Pagora, within Srihattamandala under *Pundravardhana bhukti*. The grants in three vishayas are described in three different parts of the document. The first part records the allotment of 120 patakas to various classes of people like *professors*, *students*, *astrologers*, *dancers*, *gardeners*, *potters*, *blacksmiths*, *clerks*, *drummers*, *conch blowers*, *shoemakers*, *barbers*, *architects*, *carpenters* etc. in different numbers and according to rules connected with the Chandrapura matha. The next part records the allotments of 280 patakas given to *professors*, *students*, *astrologers*, *barbers*, *washer men*, *shoemakers*, *gardeners*, *clerks*, *blacksmiths*, *oilmen*, *physicians*, etc. in different numbers and according to different rules connect with foreign mathas and four mathas situated in *Vangala* (Vanga/Bengal) land. The last part records the grant of land to Gargga and six thousand other Brahmanas of different gotras and pravaras and students of the four charanas of different branches of the Vedas mentioning 37 of them by name and declaring the permanent revenue-free grant of the remaining land to

¹²³ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *op.cit*, P 33.

¹²⁴ Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit*, PP. 101-110.

those six thousand Brahmanas in equal shares exclusive of land belonging to *ratnaraya* (Buddha, Dharmma and Sangha) and 52 patakas of land reserved for the '*Indresvara-naubandha*', naval base or anchorage at Indresvar according to the principle of '*bhumichchidra-nyaya*'.

The text is addressed to all the important personages and officials of the state including the queen (*rajni*), chief (*ranaka*) and the prince (*rajaputra*). It enjoins upon the future kings for all the full approval and protection of these grants. The lands donated were situated in Chandrapura, Garala and Pogara vishayas of Srihattamandala. The boundary of the donated territory is clearly mentioned. It says, "These vishayas have eastward *vrihat kottali* (large ridge or mound with a fort) boundary; southward the river *Mani* boundary; westward the *Jujna khataka* (canal or ditch), the *Kashthapannya khataka* (canal or ditch), the river *Vetra-Ghanghi* boundary; northward the river *Kushiyara* boundary. Thus upto the four boundaries, designed to be a Brahmaputra be goes by the name of the most illustrious."¹²⁵

The rivers *Manu* (Mani) and *Kushiyara* mentioned in the plate still flow through the Barak Valley. The *vrihat kottali* or 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 Brahmaputra creates the impression that the donated land extended upto Khaspur (which was known as Brahmapur in ancient time) in Cachar. The description of Chandrapur shows that it included Kailashahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura. Indresvara still exists by this name in western Sylhet.

The inscription mentions the name of one *Subhanga*, an immigrant from Varendra (North Bengal), who was the *Dutaka* (messenger/ambassador) of the King in Chandrapura and another *Vinayaka*, a devotee of Vishnu born in Kaligram, who distinguished himself by establishing these six thousand Brahmanas. The name of one *Haradasa* is mentioned as *silpi* (artist) who engraved the plate. The surnames of the Brahmana donees are mentioned as *Gupta, Datta, Naga, Nandi, Pala, Ghosha, Dama, Kara, Dhara* etc. with the epithet '*Svami*'.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* P. 86.

The Paschimbhag Copper plate thus resolves the debate over the location of the land donated by the Nidhanpur Copper plate. Chandrapuri of Nidhanpur is mentioned here as Chandrapura and Kaushika as Kushiya. Chandrapur (Chandpur), Kushiya and Indresvara still exist in Sylhet. Moreover, this copper plate clearly states that Chandrapur, Garala and Pogara are vishayas within Srihattamandala. The surnames of the Brahmanas mentioned in Nidhanpur Copper plate and Paschimbhag Copper plate are also mostly common. These surnames are still popular in the undivided Barak Valley, although most of these are now non-Brahmin surnames.

The Paschimbhag Copper plate was issued by Maharaja Srichandra from his victorious camp at Bikrampur (East Bengal). He is referred to as “*Paramesvara Paramabhattaraka Maharajadhiraja*” in whose realm Chandrapura, Garala and Pogara were the vishayas within Srihattamandala in *Pundravardhana bhukti*. Srichandra belonged to the famous Chandra dynasty who ruled in East Bengal, including Comilla-Chittagong region of South East Bengal for several generations.¹²⁶ It is clear, therefore, that the Eastern and South-Eastern Bengal including the Barak Valley was under a common sovereign in the 10th century. *Pundravardhana* was a *bhukti* or province of that Chandra state and Srihatta was a mandala or division in that province. Srihattmandala had at least three vishayas or districts, i.e, Chandrapura, Garala and Pogara. This mandala must have covered the entire geographical limit of the Barak valley as the donated lands covered portions of all the modern districts and a segment of the Tripura plains and no evidence is found related with the existence of any parallel political formation in the valley in 10th century A.D. It is difficult to say how long the Chandras ruled in Srihattamandala, but their sovereignty in the region must have declined in the 11th century when the autonomous Srihattarajya flourished in the Barak Valley.

This Copper plate also provides us with some social and economic data which are essential for the sustenance of a political structure. The Chandra rulers were Buddhists but they patronised the study of the Vedas, the temples and the Brahmanas.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* P. 106.

The officer of the state, who distinguished himself by establishing Brahmanas, was a worshipper of Vishnu. There were as many as eight monasteries or *mathas* which were centres of learning and where there were professors and students in all the four branches of the Vedas. There were people of *navasakha* or nine classes and *navakarma* of nine professions in every settlement, besides the state officials. This gives the impression that the villages and the monasteries were self-sufficient. The castes, sub castes and the professionals mentioned by name are *Brahmana*, *Mahattara-brahmana*, *Kayastha*, *Vaidya*, *Upadhyaya*, *Chhatra*, *Varika*, *Ganaka*, *Malakara*, *Tailika*, *Napita*, *Kumbhakara*, *Karmakara*, *Gopa*, *Tantuvaya*, *Varuji*, *Madaka*, *Charmakara*, etc.

The plot of land donated by the Paschimbhag Copper plate, according to a moderate estimate, measured 22,600 acres.¹²⁷ The grant was rent-free and in perpetuity on the part of the state and the charter called upon all the future rulers of the area to approve the grant and to protect it. On the other hand, charter called upon the people, the cultivators and the Brahmanas who were living in the donated land to pay all dues to the donees. These donees were in the group headed by Gargga Sarma and they were six thousands in number. This shows that there were already some inhabitants in the donated land, including cultivators and Brahmanas. It is possible that the land donated by Bhutivarman in Chandrapur was re-donated by this charter and the Brahmana inhabitants in the locality were the descendants of the Brahmana donees of the Nidhanpur Copper plate where the ruler could donate land including the inhabitants. The state surrendered its right to collect taxes but authorised the donees to collect the same for themselves from the inhabitants. The charter thus created six thousand rent-receiving private interests in land in a portion of the Barak Valley. These donees were endowed with the status of rent free from interference of the state. The land was granted to them for enhancing the merit and fame of the king and his ancestors which the donees accomplished by accepting the grant. They had no other obligation to the state. On the other hand, all other inhabitants of the area, which was about one

¹²⁷ *Ibid.* P. 123.

thousand miles, including some Brahmanas, were subjected to the donees to whom they had to pay taxes. The charter also reserved a portion of the land for the common purpose of worship (*Bali*), oblation (*Charu*) and hospitality (*Satra*). It is clear from the text that the grant was according to the standard principle of '*bhumichchidra-nyaya*'.

The fact that the grant made by the state was rent-free and the donees were authorized to collect rent from others suggests that the land was ordinarily taxable, private ownership of land was allowed, and the state had enough income for itself from land and other sources so that it could voluntarily surrender the income of a large plot to six thousand donees. The prosperity of the state can also be guessed from the description of the '*Indresvara-naubandha*' (naval base or anchorage at Indresvar) for which some land was reserved. This *naubandha* (naval-base/nava-anchor) might have served the state with a network for trade in which the region had a long tradition. The economic affluence and the professional specialization of the citizens, as reflected in the existence of various castes and sub-castes in the society provided the effective basis for the sustenance of the political structure.

3.7 Tripuri Formation

The earliest recorded state in the Barak Valley was founded by a Tipperah or Tripuri chief. The formation of this state started sometime before the fifth century A.D and survived till the modern period, although the boundary of the state changed from time to time. As stated in the *Raj-mala*, the royal chronicle of Tripura, the Tripuri Raja ruled first in the Kapili Valley (Assam) and then in the Cachar plains. In Cachar, *Khalangma* was the capital of the state.¹²⁸ The ancientness of the state can be deduce from a legend noticed in the chronicle that there was a period of confusion when the people were without a king. They prayed to Lord Shiva who blessed them with one.¹²⁹ It is also stated that the royal family of the Tripuris originated from the legendary *Yayati* of the lunar dynasty of the Kshatriya caste and that one of their ancient rulers

¹²⁸ Sukreswar and Banerwar , *Raj-mala*, Published by Education Directorate, Govt of Tripura, PP. 11-12, (Agartala, 1967)

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, P. 14.

was the incarnation of Lord Shiva. One ruler was a contemporary of Yudhisthira of Mahabharata and participated in the *rajsuya* sacrifice performed by the rulers of Delhi.¹³⁰

The extent of the Tripuri state from Cachar gradually extended to Sylhet, then to Comilla and finally to present Tripura when Agartala became the capital. In the beginning of the 15th century, the state extended to Chittagong and its ruler Chengthung Pha (alias Maha-manikya) was a contemporary of Raja Ganesha of Bengal.¹³¹ He was succeeded by his son, Dharma Manikya, who is known as a patron of art and letters. He settled a large number of Brahmanas in his realm, excavated a tank (*Dharmasagar*) in Comilla and engaged the royal priest Dhurlabendra and two Brahmanas from Sylhet named Sukreswar and Baneswar to compose the royal chronicle in parallel Sanskrit and Bengali.¹³²

Some chronicles of Sylhet ascribe the settlement of a section of the Brahmanas, locally known as *Sampradayik*, in Sylhet during the reign of a Tripuri King, Adidharma Pha. It is said that this king brought some Vedic Brahmanas from Mithila and Kanauj for some religious rites and persuaded them to settle down permanently in Sylhet through generous land grants. The descendants of these Brahmanas are still found in Sylhet, Cachar and the adjoining areas.¹³³ It is stated in the chronicles that Adidharma Pha (7th century A.D) requested Balabhadra Singha, the king of Mithila, to send five Brahmanas of five gotras to conduct a sacrifice. The Brahmanas contacted by the king initially declined to accept the invitation, knowing that the Tripuri kingdom was a distant frontier region. The king then sent an emissary to gather information about the land and the people. The emissary reported that the territory of the Tripura king was peopled by cultured races and the holy rivers *Barabakra* and *Manu* flowed through it. Five Vedic Brahmanas, contacted by King of

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, P. 20

¹³¹ Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *Bangladesher Itihas*, Vol. II, P. 486, (Calcutta, 1973)

¹³² K.C. Sinha, *Raj-mala*, P.21, (1896); Kaliprasanna Sen, *Shri Raj-mala*, PP.8-11, (Calcutta, 1890); N. R. Roy, *Tripura through the Ages*, P. 26, (Agartala, 1977)

¹³³ A.C. Choudhury, *op.cit*, PP. 45-67.

Mithila, and then decided to proceed on a pilgrimage to *Barabakra*. These Brahmanas, named Srinanda, Ananda, Govinda, Sripati and Purushottama, belonged to five different gotra (viz. *Vatsa*, *Vatsya*, *Bharadwaza*, *Krishnatreya* and *Parasara*). They conducted the sacrifice (*Yajana*) in 641 A.D in a place called Mangalpur in the Bhanugach pargana of Karimganj (now in Bangladesh) where the sacrificial pit can still be noticed. After the sacrifice was concluded, the king prayed to the Brahmanas to stay permanently in the area for the welfare of his kingdom. He also issued a copper plate granting a large tract of land to them. This land, divided in five shares, came to be known as *Panchha-khanda* (five divisions) which is a well-known village in undivided Karimganj.¹³⁴ The Brahmanas, after a lot of persuasions, accepted the offer, but they desired to visit their ancestral place once to bring their families. The king agreed to this and made arrangements for their journey. When they came back from Mithila, they brought with them Brahmanas of five other gotras, namely, *Katyana*, *Kashyapa*, *Madgulya*, *Swarnakaushika* and *Gautama*. All of them brought their families, servants, barbers and others. They settled down in *Panchha-khanda* where from their descendants later on moved to other areas within the valley. One of them, Nidhipati by name, for example, established Ita village (later on Ita Pargana in Moulvibazar), in the 12th century A.D which he received as a grant from a Tripura Raja.¹³⁵

To quote Allen, a thousand years ago, the Karimganj sub-division seems to have been included in the Tippera kingdom. In 640 A.D. the Raja wished to perform a sacrifice on an unusually imposing scale, and obtained five Brahmanas from Itwah village in Kanauj to preside over the ceremonies. Subsequently, with the object of retaining the holy men in this outlandish corner of the world, he gave them a grant of land which is said to have been situated in the *Panchha-khanda* pargana in the Karimganj sub-division. This land was bounded on the north and west by the Kushiya river, and on the south and east by the villages of Hankala-Kukis, a tribe from which the *Hakaluki haor* is said to take its name. Various tanks and old ruins in

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, P. 56.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, P. 64.

the south Sylhet sub-division are ascribed to the descendants of these colonists. In 1195 A.D., a Brahman named Nidhipati, who was descended from one of the five original immigrants from Kanauj, received a grant of land what is known as Ita pargana, from the Tippera king. From this family sprung, Bhanu Narayan, who was given the title of Raja as a reward for services rendered in the capture of a rebel. One tradition is that his house was located on the site now occupied by the Rajnagar Thana, and the large tank in the immediate vicinity is said to have been excavated by his orders. His eldest son, named Subid Narayan, built a fort on the Baruah hills to the east of the Ita pargana, the ruins of which are to be seen at the present day. A tank called '*Balda sagar*' was excavated at the instance of his daughter, but he is best known by the '*Sagar dighi*', a large tank which he had dug, and on the banks of which he proposed to build his house.¹³⁶

The evidences are thus clear about the fact of Tripuri rule in the Barak Valley in the early period. The ruins of the old capitals are scattered all over the Valley.¹³⁷ It is, however, difficult to say when the Tripuri state formation in the valley started, although there is no doubt that Khalangma in Cachar was the first capital of the Tripuris in this valley. On the chronicles of '*Raj-mala*', it can be said that the earliest phase to Tripuri state formation was experienced in the Kapili Valley of Assam. The Tripuri state there, called *Trivega*, was adjacent to the Hedamba state (Dimapur or Dhansiri valley). The rulers of the two states were related, but hostile to each other. Drikpati, the eldest son of Trilochana, married the daughter of a sonless king of Hedamba and succeeded to the throne of his father-in-law. Dakshina, the second son of Trilochana, became the king of the Tripuri state after the death of Trilochana. This was challenged by Drikpati who claimed both the kingdoms by natural right of succession. He invaded the Kapili Valley and after seven days fierce battle Dakshina was compelled to surrender the state to the king of Hedamba. Dakshina and his brothers, together with the nobles, then migrated to the Cachar plains and founded

¹³⁶ B. C. Allen, *Assam District Gazetteers*, Vol. II, PP. 22-23, (1905)

¹³⁷ Kailash Chandra Singha, *Tripurar Itihas*, Vol. II, P. 23, (Calcutta, 1897)

their capital at Khalangma on the bank of the river *Barabakra* (Barak).¹³⁸ K.L. Baruah suggested that “this took place about the fifth century A.D.”¹³⁹ According to him:

*The successors of Dakshina, in the new kingdom of Tripura,
gradually extended their power over the whole of Surma valley.*¹⁴⁰

In the meantime, the Kapili Valley passed under the rule of the powerful Varman dynasty of Kamarupa. A stone inscription of Bhutivarman found near Davaka in the Kapili valley suggests that a monastery was established there for the prosperity of the king. The inscription is dated in the beginning of the 6th century A.D.¹⁴¹ Khalangma in the Cachar plain thus became the Tripuri capital about 5th century A.D, if not earlier. The *Raj-mala* describes the early Tripura kings as worshippers of Shiva. The *Saivite cave temple* complex in Bhuban pahar, which is close to Khalangma, must have been established by them. The early phase of the Bhuban sculptures belongs to 5th to 7th century A.D. The *Saivite Shrines* in Siddheswar and Unakuti, associated with the Sankhya philosopher Kapila, might also belong to that period.¹⁴²

It should however be remembered that the Tripuris did not maintain an uninterrupted rule over whole of the Barak valley during 5th to 12th century A.D. In fact, the boundary of the Tripuri state changed from time to time. The two Copper plate inscriptions, referred to earlier, conclusively prove the existence of the Tripuri rule in some parts, at least, of the valley in 641 and 1195 A.D. It is also definitely known from the ‘*Darrang Raj Vamsavali*’, an Assamese chronicle, and other sources that Cachar plains formed part of the Tripuri state during the Koch invasion in 1562 A.D.¹⁴³ On the other hand, there are epigraphic evidences to prove that the major portions of the valley were included in the larger states covering Eastern or South-

¹³⁸ K.C. Sinha, *Raj-mala*, P. 3, (Calcutta, 1896)

¹³⁹ K. L. Baruah, *The Ancient Tripura Kingdom in the Kapili Valley*, Journal of the Assam Research Society, Vol. III, No. 3, P. 94, (Oct. 1935)

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, P. 95.

¹⁴¹ M. M. Sharma, *op.cit*, PP. 4-5.

¹⁴² Sujit Choudhury, *op.cit*, PP. 9-21.

¹⁴³ N.C. Sharma (ed.), *op.cit*, P. 77; U.C. Guha, *op.cit*, PP. 32-33.

Eastern Bengal and that in the 11th century A.D, an autonomous 'Srihattarajya' flourished in the valley. Similarly, the fact that a Tripura king brought some Brahmanas cannot be interpreted to suggest that this was the beginning of Aryanisation of the Valley. Even the granting of some Brahmanas by Mahabhuta Varman in Chandrapuri Vishaya, as recorded in the Nidhanpur inscription, was at least a century earlier. Panini's 'Suramasa' was a *Janapada* in 6th century B.C. It refers to the places of worship and holy rivers which was mentioned in the Puranas. It should also be noted that the Tripuri Raja sent for the Brahmanas in Mithila on the advice of his minister who stated that there was no Brahmana in the state qualified for the particular sacrifice and that such Brahmanas were available in large number in Mithila.¹⁴⁴ An emissary sent by the king of Mithila found that there were cultured people and holy rivers in the territory of the Tripura Raja. All these prove the fact of Pan-Indian culture continuum in the valley before the settlement of those Brahmanas by that Tripura Raja. There are evidences which explained that some of the later rulers of the valley also brought Brahmanas from outside. This does not mean that the Brahmanas who settled earlier had in the meantime moved out of the valley. In fact, the emergence of the Tripuri state from a tribal base was experienced in the Barak Valley due to the Brahmanical influences and the resultant process of Sanskritisation making a considerable headway during the period.¹⁴⁵

A study of the history of the Tripuri state formation reveals the factors and process that helped the elevation of the Political system from a tribal base to a well-developed monarchy. The leadership of the tribe had passed into the hands of a single personality on hereditary line during the migrations and attempts at establishing a principality of their own. The initial settlement in the wet rice cultivation area predominated by the Indo-Aryan Bengalis exposed the tribe to Hindu influences that resulted in the social stratification and legitimization of the status of the ruler by the Brahmins who established divine origin of the royal clan and thereby enlisted the loyalty of the people. The military support received from the neighbouring larger state

¹⁴⁴ A.C. Choudhury, *op.cit*, P. 64.

¹⁴⁵ J. B. Bhattacharjee, *op.cit*, PP.75-76.

of Bengal enabled the ruler to overcome any possible opposition to his assumed authority and to subdue the bordering hill tribes and in extending the boundary of the state. The leadership in war against neighboring imperial forces and warlike chieftains strengthened the position and helped to develop an adequate defence system. The protective position of the ruler and his universalized social status helped him in organizing an elaborated hierarchical order suitable in sustaining the structure and in planting artisans and professionals from other territories without any opposition from the members of his tribe or indigenous population. The support and loyalty of the more productive non-tribals were enforced by the Raja's projected role as the champion of his new faith and their cultural and linguistic assimilation with the majority group in the state. The substance came in the form of surplus extraction in terms of tribute and taxes and personal service and the Rajas themselves indulging in profitable trades.