

**Chapter 4:                    ECONOMIC STRUCTURE**

4.1                    Origin

4.2                    Society and Economy

## ECONOMIC STRUCTURE

This chapter deals with the economy and the economic activities of the region that could not be anything but agriculture, which would suggest the presence of the peasants. The occupations must have cut across the racial boundaries, although the professional specializations of the emerging social groups might not have fully matured to assume the character of economic classes. It is not sure about the extent of surplus, the extraction, or the type of the methods of appropriation or redistribution. But a type of state mentioned in the Copper plates inscriptions could be based only on surplus. That it was wealthy enough is beyond doubt. There are two sub-chapters under this chapter. The sub-chapters are: 4.1) Origin and 4.2) Society and Economy.

### 4.1) Origin

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang described Barak Valley (Srihatta) as '*Shi-li-Cha-talo*' and located it to the north-east of Samatata among the hills near the sea.<sup>146</sup> In the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the Arabian traveller Solaiman Sariafi while crossing the Bay of Bengal came across 'Sylhet', the famous port of Bengal.<sup>147</sup> In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, it was mentioned as *Srihattamandala* in the Copper plate of Maharaja Srichandra, and in the 11<sup>th</sup> century it was named as the Kingdom of Srihatta in the Copper plate of Govinda Kesavadeva.<sup>148</sup> At the same time, the great scholar Alberuni, in his famous book '*Kitabul Hind*' mentioned the name of this Kingdom as Shilahat. However, in the absence of contemporary sources, the chronological history of ancient Barak Valley (Srihatta) has remained uncertain till now, and historians in this regard have to rely on indirect evidence such as copper plates and creative's literatures for reconstructing the political and social history of this period. The same observation can be made for the economic history of the time.

The ancient period has been defined as the time beginning from the remote past to the arrival of the Sufi Saint Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet in the early 14<sup>th</sup> century. In the remote past, excepting the hilly region and the north-eastern and southern

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<sup>146</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit*, P. 3.

<sup>147</sup> Sayed Murtaza Ali, *Hazrat Shah Jalal O Sylheter Itihas*, (Bengali), P. 64, (Dhaka, 1988)

<sup>148</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit*, P. 4.

elevated lands, the greater parts of the present day Barak Valley (Srihatta) were under water and included in the Bay of Bengal.<sup>149</sup> William Hunter on the evidence of marine shells, found at the foot of the hills, along the northern boundary of Srihatta concluded that the sea flowed at the base of the hills in the past. Hamilton wrote “While to the north and east lofty mountains rise abruptly like a wall and appear as if at some remote period they had withstood the surge of the ocean.”<sup>150</sup> In the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., when Srihatta was a part of the Kingdom of Kamarupa, the Kings of Kamarupa kept their navy on the sea around Srihatta. “The navy consisted of the *Navadingas*, nine ships, each propelled by one hundred and twenty oarsmen”.<sup>151</sup> In the Paschimbhag Copper plate (10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) mention has been made about Srihattamandala or division consisting of deep lakes and off-shore islands. In the same source mention has also been made about *Indresvara Naubandha*, i.e; Indresvara naval base. In the Bhatara Copper plate of Govinda Kesavadeva (11<sup>th</sup> century) ‘*Sagar*’ or the sea and in the Copper plate of Isanadeva ‘*Naubatak*’ or war-ships are mentioned.<sup>152</sup> After that due to many natural causes, such as the silt carried by innumerable rivers and the earthquake of the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the plains and the low lands of Barak Valley (Srihatta) were elevated.<sup>153</sup> According to Nihar Ranjan Roy:

*The northern parts of the district of Cachar and Hailakandi region to the south as well as the eastern region of the district of Sylhet may be considered as old land. Other parts of East Bengal consist of watery plain land or newly formed land and covered with canals, channels as well as widespread marshy land. He further adds this newly formed land is the creation of Padma-Brahmaputra and Surma-Kushiyara.*<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Sujit Choudhury, *op.cit*, P.1.

<sup>150</sup> Walter Hamilton, *Eastern India Gazetteers*, PP. 350-354, (1820)

<sup>151</sup> Adams Caroline, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers*, London, P. 2, (1987)

<sup>152</sup> Muhammad Asaddar Ali (ed.), *Sylheter Darpan* (Bengali) PP.1-7, ( Sylhet, 1987)

<sup>153</sup> Adams Caroline, *op.cit*. PP. 2-3.

<sup>154</sup> Nihar Ranjan Roy, *op.cit*, P. 103.

The identity of the ancient people of Barak Valley (Srihatta) is still under speculation. However, it is generally believed that the *Austric* people used to live in this region in the remote past. After the Austric, came the Mongoloids.<sup>155</sup> It is generally known that the principal source of livelihood of the Austric was agriculture. On the plains and on the steps by the side of the hills, they cultivated wild paddy and made it agricultural commodity of human settlement. In addition, banana, brinjal, pumpkin, lemon, betel-leaves, coconut, pameló, kamranga (a kind of sour fruit), fig, betel nut, pomegranate etc. were also produced by them.<sup>156</sup> The Austric speaking people were basically cultivators, the taming of animals was unknown to them. Among them some people lived in the forest and their source of livelihood was hunting. They were adept in hunting animals and birds on land and fish in water. They knew the technique of producing dry fish. The popularity of dry fish in Barak Valley (Srihatta) is nothing but the old Austric tradition.<sup>157</sup> They used small boats or canoe made of log as well as floats as means of transport in rivers or in the sea and they even built up sea trade. They knew the use of cotton cloth. Counting was done by the Austric on the basis of score (twenty).<sup>158</sup> Even now fish and some other articles are bought and sold in *hats* or bazaars of Barak Valley (Srihatta) on that basis. Again, the Chinese and the Greek sources also provide clues to the economic activities of the region. The Greek geographer Ptolemy mentions about *Kirrhadia* which is identified with Tripura. There the best malabathrum was produced.<sup>159</sup> 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 brought it in exchange of silk. It is further stated that these Chinese traders used fine cane mattress for displaying their goods.<sup>160</sup> That Sylhet was the seat of Ptolemy's big trade fair is deduced on the ground that Sylhet region is still famous for the production of both malabathrum and cane

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<sup>155</sup> Ratan Lal Chakraborty, *Sylheter Itihas Parichaya* (Bengali), PP. 4-14, (Sylhet, 1987)

<sup>156</sup> Nihar Ranjan Roy, *op.cit.* P.49.

<sup>157</sup> Subodh Mukherjee, *Bangalir Itihas*, (Bengali), PP. 12-13, (Calcutta, 1983)

<sup>158</sup> Nihar Ranjan Roy, *op.cit.* P.50.

<sup>159</sup> K. L. Baruah, *op.cit.* P.6.

<sup>160</sup> A. C. Choudhury, *op.cit.* PP. 40-41.

mattresses and there are references to the production of these items in the medieval sources.<sup>161</sup>

The later Mongoloid Khasi-synteng people adopted Austric language and culture. They are also called as Bodos and Austric people where Bodos gradually became assimilated. People of both the tribes were basically cultivators although hunting was in practice among them. But this ancient agriculturist community did not know the use of plough. Hence their agricultural technology was very primitive. “Consequently the output was so limited that it could hardly be sufficient for their subsistence leaving on surplus”.<sup>162</sup> In ancient times, Indian society was traditional, apathetic towards change, immovable and closed. In societies, this collective system of cultivation was prevalent. For instance, people belonging to a particular community participated jointly in the work of cultivation. Because of this, private ownership over land did not arise in that period. But in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D, the wind of change began to blow in this rigid and stagnant Indian society. At the root of all, these were the expansion of agricultural activities. Between 600 A.D. and 1200 A.D., there was expansion of agriculture all throughout India. Vast areas of untilled lands were brought under cultivation and this not only led to the expansion of agriculture but also the growth of many new settlements.

This new era was ushered in a system known as *agrahara*. The main feature of this system was the grant of rent-free land to the places of worship, priests or Brahmins by royal or administrative decree. Generally, the fact of land-grant used to be recorded on Copper plates. These Copper plates are the authentic sources of contemporary economic history. In ancient Bengal, lands transferred under *agrahara* system were arid, unproductive, fallow, or forest. But the recipients earned their livelihood from this land. It indicates that they somehow got this untilled land cultivated. In this process many untilled lands were brought under cultivation.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, P. 41.

<sup>162</sup> Sujit Choudhury, *op.cit*, P. 15.

<sup>163</sup> Ranabir Chakraborty, *Prachin Bharater Arthonoitik Itihaser Sondhane* (Bengali), PP.155-164, (Calcutta, 1398 B.S)

Besides the remarkable impact of this system on the contemporary economic life, it also led to the great expansion of private ownership of land. The land thus obtained as grant used to be permanent in nature and for this reason the power of the land owners also increased steadily.<sup>164</sup> So far five copper plates have been discovered in Barak Valley (Srihatta). These are the following:

1. Nidhanpur Copper Plate of Bhaskaravarman, the King of Kamarupa;
2. Kalapur Copper Plate of Samanta Marundanatha;
3. Paschimbhag Copper Plate of Maharaja Srichandra of Bengal and Harikela;
4. Bhatara Copper Plate No. 1 of Govinda Kesavadeva, the King of Srihatta;
5. Bhatara Copper Plate No. 2 of Isanadeva.

The Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman was discovered in 1912 in the village Nidhanpur of Paschimbhag Pargana under Beanibazar police station. First, Pandit Padmanath Vidyavinod and then among others Kamalakanta Gupta deciphered it. Inscribed in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, this Copper plate was the renewal of an original Copper plate inscribed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by Bhutivarman, the great grandfather of Bhaskaravarman. Bhutivarman made a perpetual revenue free land grant, known as '*Moyursalmala Kshetra*' under Chandrapuri Vishaya (Chandrapur district) to Brahmins. The plate was destroyed by fire while it was in the possession of the recipients, subsequently, in the absence to impose land revenue on that revenue free land of *Agrahara Kshetra*. Confronted with this situation, the inheritors of the original recipients approached Maharaja Bhaskaravarman, and got this renewed in favour of those enjoying the occupancy rights. In the contemporary Tipperah Copper plate of Samanta Lokanatha, it has been mentioned about the grant of a large *Agrahara Kshetra* to 200 Brahmins in the deep forest of Srihatta.<sup>165</sup>

The Copper plate of Samanta Marundanatha inscribed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. was discovered in 1963 in the village Kalapur under Srimangal police station of Moulvibazar. Kamalakanta Gupta deciphered a part of this Copper plate and found the evidence of a grant of land comprising an area of one *pataka* and two *dronas*. About

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<sup>164</sup> *Ibid*, PP.161-184.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, P. 196.

the measurement of land by *pataka*, Subodh Mukherjee wrote, “Pataka as a measure of land was in use in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. At that time *pataka* meant a village or a part of village”.<sup>166</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta mentioned that one *pataka* was equal to forty *dronas* and accordingly areas of land donated stood at  $40 + 2 = 42$  *dronas*. This was equivalent to 630 *bighas* or 210 acres approximately taking one *drona* equalling 15 *bighas* or 5 acres.<sup>167</sup>

The Copper plate of the famous King of Chandra dynasty, Srichandra (10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) was found in the village Paschimbhag under Rajnagar police station of Moulvibazar in 1958. This one was also deciphered by Kamalakanta Gupta. In the Paschimbhag Copper Plate of Srichandra, scholars come across the land *Srihattamandala* (Srihatta Division) under *Pundravardhana bhukti* (Pundravardhana Province). It is gathered that Maharaja Srichandra donated major portion of about 6000 square miles of land in equal shares to Gargga and other six thousand Brahmins. This entire land was rent-free and was located in *Srihattamandala* under *Chandrapura Vishaya* i.e., on the southern side of the river Kushiara in the southern part of Srihatta.<sup>168</sup>

In a place known as Bhatara between Maijgao and Brahmachal railway stations, two Copper plates were discovered together in 1872 where the existence of a separate Kingdom of Srihatta have been mentioned. Moreover, it is gathered that during this period land used to be measured in terms of *Bhu Hal* or *Bhu Kedar*. *Hal* means plough. According to Kamalakanta Gupta, the area of land that could be cultivated with a pair of bullock and a plough (as prevalent in this region) constituted one *Hal* or *Bhu Hal* of land.<sup>169</sup> The Copper plate mentioned above indicates that during the period under consideration *agrahara* system was wide spread in Sylhet. The accounts of the period that are found in two genealogical books of *Brahmins of the Vedas of Sylhet* and in the *Panchali of Hattanatha* are complementary to the

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<sup>166</sup> Subodh Mukherjee, *op.cit.* P.49.

<sup>167</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit.*, PP. 9-10.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, PP.19-20.

<sup>169</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit.*, PP. 9-14.

information obtained from the Copper plates. According to the accounts of *Brahmins of the Vedas*, five Brahmins of Mithila origin were invited by Adidharma Pha, the King of Tippera, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century to perform a sacrifice under the Vedas. They belonged to five clans. They accepted grants of land (*agrahara*) at *Panchha-khanda* region and began to live there. They brought there some more people of their clan. From the *Panchali of Hattanatha*, it is also gathered that Brahmins belonging to five clans accepted grants of land from Govinda Ranakeshara, the King of Goura. At that time the vast plains of Sylhet was called Srichattala, and its major portion was covered by forest.<sup>170</sup>

Historian Ram Sharan Sharma remarked that “the underlying idea of making grants of untilled land to the Brahmins was to make it arable”.<sup>171</sup> It is gathered from the Nidhanpur Copper Plate, the first written document of the ancient history of this region, the recipient Brahmins received land on the basis of ‘*Bhumichchidra-nyaya*’. It was a principle by which uncultivated or unsettled lands were exchanged. Land obtained under this principle, if brought under cultivation, could be enjoyed rent free.<sup>172</sup> The grant of land made by Bhutivarman in this region helped the introduction of cultivation with plough. Historians suppose that the great majority of the Brahmanas mentioned in the Nidhanpur Copper Plate were the worshippers of Vishnu. Balarama as deity became popular when cultivation with plough was introduced in south-west India under the Satavahana. So the relationship between the worship of Balarama with plough in land, and the introduction of agricultural technology based on plough can be imagined. From the stone inscription of the grandfather of Bhutivarman on the hills of Kamakhya, it is gathered that he constructed a temple of the deity Balabhadra. Balabhadra and Balarama with plough in land were essentially the same deity. Bhutivarman, probably following the tradition of his ancestors, took the initiative in establishing Brahmin settlement in order to propagate the worship of

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, PP. 28-29.

<sup>171</sup> Ram Sharan Sharma, *Prachin Bharat*, PP. 230-234, (Calcutta, 1989)

<sup>172</sup> Ranabir Chakraborty, *op.cit.* P.60.



Balarama with plough in land. Thus from his initiative, the road to agricultural revolution based on plough was widened in this region.<sup>173</sup>

It has been supposed by V. R. Vandarkar from the titles of the grant recipient Brahmins that a group of Nagara Brahmins from Gujrat settled at '*Panchha-khanda*' with the grant of Bhutivarman. These immigrants brought with them the culture of cultivation and land grant which developed in Gujrat in the distant past. Kamalakanta Gupta is also of the opinion that the ancestors of the Brahmins settling in this region belonged to Nagara Brahmins of Gujrat or Lat country. The measure of land in terms of *Hal* and the measure of crop in terms of *Pali* are found in the Copper plate of Chalukya King of Gujrat. The relationship between Gujrat and Barak Valley (Srihatta) can be gathered from the fact that these measures also prevailed in the Barak Valley (Srihatta).<sup>174</sup> The Brahmins settling in the regions described in the Copper plate with the help of new techniques of cultivation brought about socio-economic changes there and those were evident from the subsequent events. After the grant of land by Bhutivarman, with the passing of hundred years, the concerned region attracted the attention of the government officials as a prosperous area. The officials considered this area to be fit for imposition of taxes. Hence, without some written evidence of ownership as grants, taxation could not be avoided. That is why the successors of the recipients of grant had to approach Bhaskaravarman for the renewal of the deed of the grant. From this fact, it is also gathered that land by that time had become valuable asset. In the next three centuries, pressure on and demand for land increased in Barak Valley (Srihatta) following the continuous agricultural expansion. Its evidence is noticeable in the Copper plates of Srichandra. The measure of land donated in Brahmmapur, Srichandrapur was also *pataka* but the amount of land making one *pataka* shrank by that time. Formerly 40 *dronas* equalled one *pataka* and in the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., only 10 *dronas* made one *pataka*.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Sujit Choudhury, *op.cit.* P.58.

<sup>174</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit.* PP. 10-12.

<sup>175</sup> Ranabir Chakraborty, *op.cit.* PP.160-161.

With the creation of Agrahara Kshetra in Barak Valley (Srihatta), it was not that only the religious people came here. Usually the priestly class of people refrained from manual labour, and for cultivating the untilled land they required the services of people belonging to other occupations. So it is observed that, along with six thousand Brahmins, people of many other occupations were also settled with land at Brahmapur and Srichandrapur. Kamalakanta Gupta observes that:

*Among the recipients of grants there were people belonging to about 25 occupations and the definite method by which land was granted to people of different occupations, reflected their relative importance in the society of that period.*<sup>176</sup>

Moreover, the Brahmins who came here had to seek assistance from the local people. As a result of this, in cooperation with the Austrics and the later Mongoloids, a class of working people grew up known as *Sudras*. These people were taught by the new method of cultivation as well as other trades, and thus the problem of finding agricultural labour by the landowners was solved. The Brahmins who settled in the regions mentioned in Copper plates soon imposed their dominance over the indigenous population. The Brahmins achieved the status of landlords because “the villages they received from the King would be considered as their permanent property”, and the concepts of private ownership of land gradually became widespread.<sup>177</sup> The landlords got the authority to rule over the locality and as such they were empowered to impose taxes on the people. The mention of *Utkhetayita* or collector of revenue in the Nidhanpur Copper plate indicates that the system of revenue collection was prevalent at that time. The granting of land and its acceptance under the *agrahara* system left a permanent influence on the system of land settlement in the region.

After analyzing the Copper plate of Paschimbhag, Kamalakanta Gupta came to the following conclusions:

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<sup>176</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *Srihatta prapto tamro shashonaboli*, PP. 18-35, (Ishan, Sylhet, 1983)

<sup>177</sup> Ram Sharan Sharma, *op.cit*, P. 230.

*In the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D., the Maharaja Srichandra of Bikrampur with a single royal decree created 6000 small middlemen rent collectors of equal share in the southern part of the region. Moreover, these small middlemen did not pay any revenue to the government.*<sup>178</sup>

Therefore, in his opinion, the main reason behind the existence of so many small rent receiving land owners and vast areas of the district remaining rent-free in the Barak Valley (Srihatta) in later years was that royal rent-free grant. R. S. Sharma's observation is relevant in this connection. He says:

*It is undeniable that the main consequence of the system of land grant was the creation of a land owning class dependent on the produce of the cultivators. Through this the advent of feudal or medieval social system became evident.*<sup>179</sup>

It is beyond doubt that the feudal system was introduced in Barak Valley (Srihatta) in this way in ancient time. Under this system, agriculture was the main source of production. Together with agriculture small cottage industries also existed. The villages were self-sufficient. Production for market was not in practice and as such agriculturists used to exchange their crops against necessary services or works of others. "The boatman of ferry ghat, blacksmith, barber etc., used to work all through the year and the villagers undertook the responsibility of providing them with their livelihood".<sup>180</sup>

It is gathered from the Copper plates that after the introduction of *agrahara* system in Barak Valley (Srihatta), along with agriculture and other industries also developed. As for instance, in the Copper plate of Nidhanpur, the scholars came across the engravers, potters, merchants etc. The mention of ivory cutter's name in the Bhatara Copper Plate of Govinda Kesavadeva indicates that 'ivory' industry was in

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<sup>178</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *Chirosthayi Bondobosto O Srihatter Bhumi Rajoshwa Beboatha* (Bengali), Srihatta Sahitya Parisad, PP. 14-15, (1966)

<sup>179</sup> R.S. Sharma, *op.cit*, P. 245.

<sup>180</sup> Abdulla Faruk, *Bangladesher Arthonoitik Itihas*, (Bengali), Bangla Academy, P. 9, (Dhaka, 1974)

existence at that time in Srihatta. Similarly, the mention of Govinda, the brazier indicates that the bell metal industry also existed. Moreover, mention of *Dwojey*, the sailor reminds us of the existence of boat-building industry and at the same time another historian, R. Chakraborty pointed out, “Among the rivers of ancient Srihatta, many were probably navigable and helped internal communication by waterways”.<sup>181</sup> The agricultural economy that developed with the introduction of *agrahara* system in ancient Barak Valley (Srihatta) was essentially dependent on villages. Villages again were established on the bank of the rivers for the need of cultivation, since water was indispensable for cultivation. The products of small cottage industries were not sufficient for exchange. These could hardly meet the needs of the villages. Under these circumstances, widespread use of money as medium of exchange was not necessary. But in other districts of contemporary Bengal, a three-stage medium of exchange was in use. “Under the three stage system, *Kari* or *Kapardak* coin of the smallest denomination, constituted the lowest stage; on the upper stage there were metallic coins (*Drahmma/Karshapon*/old silver coins that were found in south-eastern part of Bangladesh), and in the middle there were metallic pieces or *Churni*. Each medium of exchange was convertible into others.”<sup>182</sup>

In this connection, the opinion expressed by Kamalakanta Gupta deserves consideration. He said:

*Puran or Drahmma is the other name of Karshapon (Kahon). 80 Kapardaks (cowries) make one pana and 16 panas make one Karshapon or Kahon. Kapardaks or cowries constitute the lowest stage of this monetary standard, and that is why this may be termed as Puran-Kapardak, Drahmma-Kapardak, Karshapon-Kapardak or Kahon-cowri standard.*<sup>183</sup>

Large scale use of cowry during the early period of the British rule in Barak Valley (Srihatta) is indicative of the existence of *kahon-cowri standard* in this region.

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<sup>181</sup> Ranabir Chakraborty, *op.cit.* P.161.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, P. 215.

<sup>183</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *op.cit.*, PP.15-16.

Moreover, from the use of cowry in Barak Valley (Srihatta), it may be assumed that in ancient time the people of Barak Valley (Srihatta) participated in foreign trade. Because cowry was a substance of the sea and nowhere in the northern part of the Bay of Bengal, it was available. This led to the belief that it was imported.

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

Again, the Surma Barak Valley (Barak Surma Valley) region now comprises the districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimgang of Assam state and the other portion of Barak Surma valley comprises Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Sunamgang and Habiganj districts of Bangladesh. The valley, despite of its territorial anchorage, the process of socio-economic formation and historical process continued over the whole valley through the ages under our period. The problem concerning the territorial anchorage of the region what is Surma Barak Valley indicates lies in the differences between its natural formation constituted by its geographical location and limitation and the political formation evolved from time to time either in local level or as periphery of large states which occasionally divided the region into sub-regions. But the process of socio-economic development continued in the whole valley during the centuries shows that it went almost hand in hand with the plain of Bengal except some local variations making peripheral characteristics. Thus, the socio-economic boundary of the valley coincides with natural boundary. And the ethnic formation of the valley had originally been made by the proto-Austroloids in ancient time and they were absorbed by the Indo-Mongoloid in successive periods, over which the Aryan culture began to spread its way far before the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Thus, the ethnic and socio-

economic formation of the region coincides with its natural limit formed by its geographical structure.

#### **4.2) Society and Economy**

The society and economy of the region pertaining to the period under review is concerned with its socio-economic formation which represents the combination of the productive forces, production relation corresponding to them and the super structure. Since the productive forces of Surma Barak Valley during the period had been under the influence of different super structure, the socio economy of the region was also changed in different dimension from time to time. On the other hand, marked changes also occurred in the subaltern productive forces during the period under review. Prior to the colonial rule, they were formed by the Aryanised Bodo-sub tribe of the Tibeto-Burman ethnic group of the Mongolian stock who had absorbed the earlier Austric cultural group of the people originally inhabiting the region and the Aryanised settlers who were materially more advanced than the earlier Mongolian settlers. Though the socio-economic formation of the region developed during the early medieval period along with other parts of Bengal, the distinct local variations caused by the geo-physical condition of it and presence of prominent pre-Aryan elements in the productive forces is unmistakable.

Though the changes occurred in the superstructure and process of assimilation in the productive forces of the region continued throughout the period under review, the main basis of economy founded by agriculture remained the same during the whole period. However, there is no denial of the fact that the economy of the region was largely determined by its geo-physical characteristics. And the geo-physical feature of the region attracted the land searching people from the west and they could find abundance of cultivable land on the basins of the Kushiyara, Barak and the Surma. In addition, the rulers and local authorities, with a view to extending arable land and thereby increasing revenue and influence invited new settlers and invested them with profuse land grants. The Copper plate inscriptions issued by rulers during ancient periods discovered in the region and documents possessed by different traditional families clearly corroborate this fact.

Source materials for reconstructing an authentic history of the economic structure of the region developed during the early medieval period. The two Bhatara Copper plates contain some valuable information about the economic structure of the Aryanised people of miscegenous origin inhabiting in the region during the period in which the Srihattarajya flourished. The text of the plate issued by Govinda Kesavadeva, marked as plate no 1 records the grant of 375 *bhuhalas* (equivalent to 135 acres) of land and 296 *vatis* (homes and their sites) for maintaining service to *Vatesvara Shiva* clearly indicates that it was an endowment made by the king to some persons for defraying the cost of worship of his diety. And the beneficiaries obviously belonged to the Brahmana caste, the pioneer of plough based cultivation. Besides the land and *vatis*, 72 houses including out houses, kitchens, cowsheds etc. were allotted for the use of the various helping hands of the establishment of the *Vateswara* temple to which the endowment was made. These helping hands or families include *Gopa* (milkman), *Kasya* (bell metal worker), *napita* (barber), *rajaka* (washerman), *vaniya* (goldsmith), *navika* (boatman), *dantakara* (ivory worker), *mali* (gardener) and so on. The reference of these groups of people indicates the division of the people of lower strata on the basis of professions.<sup>184</sup>

The agricultural economy that had developed with the introduction of *agrahara* system in ancient period continued during the early medieval period. Again, the agricultural economy grew essentially on the villages. The list of professional groups mentioned in the Bhatara Copper plates proves that cottage industries had their marked presence in rural economy. But the products of these industries could hardly meet the needs of villages.<sup>185</sup> So the use of money was necessary in some limited spheres. Kamala kanta Gupta observes that a monetary standard with *Kapardaks* or cowries as the lowest stage was in vogue during the ancient period. According to

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<sup>184</sup> F. A. Qadri (ed.), *Society and Economy of North East India*, Vol- 2, P. 222, (Nehu, Shillong, 2006)

<sup>185</sup> Ranabir Chakraborty, *Prachin Bharater Arthonoitik Itihaser Sondhane*, (Bengali), P. 192, (Calcutta, 1398 B.S)

Gupta, eighty *Kapardaks* or cowries make one *pana* and sixteen *panas* make one *Karshapan* or *Kahon*.<sup>186</sup>

The epigraphic evidence testify to the fact that in the ancient period, the *agrahara* system of the process of rent free gift of land developed the village society as an essential part of the system, and in the society, a land owning class. The system of rent free gift of land became widespread during the Turkish and the Mughal periods. Ibn Batuta, the Moroccan traveller visited sylhet in 1345 A.D., some forty years after the establishment of Turkish rule. He noticed that the large river valleys had become settled by a stable and flourishing Hindu population.<sup>187</sup> But it is certain that large portions of sylhet were covered with dense forests down to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. So, it was likely that the rulers adopted the policy of intending arable land by granting free gifts of land. In most cases, the forest land was offered to persons as rent free gift under the land extension policy. The grantees would on the one hand, earn their subsistence from this land and on the other hand, they would duly perform some duties assigned to them as condition of the grants, such as, running of temples, preservation of monasteries, conducting of educational institutions, taking care of the government properties, collection of revenues and so on. And the grantees, in their turn, had to transform the non agricultural land gifted to them into arable one by setting tenants and appointing labourers for the purposes. This process evidently created congenial conditions for the development of a landed aristocratic class in the region. As a matter of fact, the landed class that had emerged in the ancient and the early medieval periods was thoroughly organised upto the mughal period.

The system of rent free grant of land with a view to extending arable land helped to emerge different classes of people collectively formed the lower strata in the society. It was pertinent in the system that various kinds of workers had to be employed in the process of extending arable land. The grantees settled workers in different forms termed by many as bonded workers of land, the *nankar* (revenue free)

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<sup>186</sup> Kamalakanta Gupta, *Chirosthayi Bondobasta – Purbo Srihatter Bhumi O Rajasva Byavasta* (Bengali), Srihatta, PP. 15-16, (1966)

<sup>187</sup> Ibn Batuta, *Rihla*, tr. Mehdi Hasan, P. 241, (Boroda, 1953)



subjects, *Chakran* (servants), *Kiran* (peasant subjects) and like others. The relation of these classes of people with the respective family of the land owning class led to the development of landlord class within the elitist society. Besides these, there were native communities (*Kaivarta, Das, Namo*) in the region forested and marshy hinterland and they were mainly the *ryots* of the landlords.

As a matter of fact, agriculture formed the main trait of economic life of the people and it was the chief nourisher of the manufacture and trade of Barak Surma Valley region. Needless to say that the main agricultural produce was rice during their period. Networks of rivers and profuse rainfall greatly helped the cultivation of rice. The cultivators were conservative and adhered to the method and technique which their forefathers had followed. Especially, they did not like to give any priority to any crops other than rice. The main implement used in cultivation was plough in plains but *hoe* was used in the hilly regions where the settlers belonging to Mongoloid ethnic origin followed a tribal method of cultivation (*Jhum*).

In addition to rice, other agricultural products were sugarcane and cotton cultivated and produced mainly in hilly tracts. Mustard was the next important agricultural product which was in high demand as an export item. Besides, variety of pulse and lentils were also produced in the Barak, Surma and Kushiara river basins. Sylhet was famous for betel, betel nuts, coconuts and other varieties of fruits including oranges, pineapples and jack fruits etc. The sweetness of sylhet oranges has been specially referred in *Ain-i- Akbari*.<sup>188</sup>

Interestingly, in Surma Barak region, a professional class called *Barujibi* or *Barui* living on producing and selling of betel has survived its existence through ages. Their form of betel is called '*Boroj*', an Austic word stands for betel. Whether, the *Barujibi* professional class bears the reminiscence of their remote Austic origin. However, *Ain-i-Akbari* refers to the availability of China root in the region. This is an

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<sup>188</sup> Abul Fazl Allami, *The Ain II*, tr. Jarrett, P.137, (1978)

herbal recipe. Some travellers with scientific bent of mind discovered this non smelling drug of light taste in the region under review.<sup>189</sup>

It goes without saying that cottage industry developed enormously in the region under review. Most of trades, of course, were related to agriculture. Different trades of cottage industry included pottery, oil manufacturing, making of weapons, weaving, goldsmith ship, ivory and mat crafts etc. professional groups or class emerged. There is *Kumbhakar* (potter), *karmakar* (blacksmith), *tanti* (weaver), *patiyara* (mat making group), *tili* (oilman), etc., the Professional groups among the population of Surma Barak Valley region in addition to the professional groups are referred in the Bhatara inscriptions.

Boat making and fishing mat making were household trades of the agricultural people. The mat making craft was very developed in the region. A special kind of mat called *sital pati* made of outer rind of a shrub called *murta* profusely grows in swampy places was a great demand in many places, particularly in adjoining Bengal and Delhi markets, there the presence of a professional class called *Patiyara* living on this special craft belonging to lower strata had been a special feature of the society of the region.

Trade and commerce are also associated with the economic life of the people of a region or a country. But these depend on the means of communication; the region can develop or get due to its geo-physical situation. As regards the route of communication and trade, it is dependable on the testimony of Ibn Batuta which provides us with an indirect proof of the Surma Barak Valley which was connected with the outside world through river paths.<sup>190</sup> Besides, some kinds of commercial transactions were operative through the rivers in hilly regions also. As the rivers were the main routes of communication, boats and Bajra (a large boat for carrying rice) etc. were used for communication and trade. Hence, the development of boat making industry and professional groups of boatmen was the logical consequence.

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<sup>189</sup> Abul Fazl, *Ain-i-Akbari*, tr. Jarret & Sarkar, PP. 130-140, (Calcutta, 1926)

<sup>190</sup> Ibn Batuta, *op.cit*, PP. 241-242.

The routes were used in export trade. One characteristic feature of the economy of the region is that through rice cultivation is the main trait of agriculture, reference of rice export is not found in any of the available sources. From the literary sources, it is evident that the export commodities included mainly the forest produces. The main forest products exported were timbers, bamboos, bamboo products and limestone. Besides, *atar* (perfume) extracted through a process from *agar* tree available in the patharia hills and the hilly regions adjacent to it were in high demand in the adjoining markets.<sup>191</sup>

As regards the medium of exchange, some archaeological remains indicate that silver coins were in use as the medium of exchange. But this was generally beyond the reach of the common masses. The lowest stage of the prevalent monetary standard was constituted by cowries. The prevalent monetary standard in ascending order was “*Cowry-Ganda-Pana-Kahana-Tanka*”.<sup>192</sup> The cowries were abundantly used by the common people. However, from the situation prevalent even in modern period, it may be generalised that barter system was prevalent among the common mass of course, using a particular crop preferably rice as the medium of exchange in the plains. But in the hilly regions where the tribal people, would live, the barter system was thoroughly in vogue.

The *jhum* system was the dominant form of cultivation in the valley during the period. This system of cultivation cannot sustain large number of people for its inherent weakness and complication. So the tribes living on *jhum* system of cultivation cannot produce a preponderating population in the valley. However, during the whole period, the chief crop was rice which was also exported due to surplus production. Pulse and mustard, betel and betel nuts and cotton were also produced in abundance. U. C. Guha, refers to the presence of a professional class called *Barai* living on betel production even before the establishment of the Koch rule.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Allen Gait, *Gazetteer of Bengal and North East India*, (Reprint), P. 425, (Delhi, 1984)

<sup>192</sup> F. A. Qadri (ed), *Society and Economy of North East India*, Vol- 2, P. 234. (Nehu, Shillong, 2006)

<sup>193</sup> U. C. Guha, *op.cit*, P. 32.

The Surma Barak Valley had trade relation with the neighbouring territories including Tripura and Bengal. Both the river and land routes were used for communication and trade. The river Barak served the main routes for trade. Besides, rice and other agricultural products, the chief exports were forest products including ivory, wax, cane, bamboo and timber. Traces of development of trading centres are unmistakable. A floating market held regularly on boats on the stream of the Barak at a place named Shialtek had been a famous centre of trade selling different crops and commodities produced in the valley. But inspite of abundance, the affording capacity of the masses was very deplorable. Money was almost beyond the rich of the common people, the main elements of the productive force.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> *Ibid*, PP. 30-38.