

Chapter 6: CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

This chapter deals with the major findings and conclusion of the study. This study draws a conclusion which will help to know about the polity formation in Surma Barak Valley (Barak Surma Valley) by the teachers, researchers, students and the others not only in India but also in other parts of the world. In other words, this concluding chapter contains the summarization of the whole work.

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

The socio-political structure of the Surma Barak Valley in the ancient period was determined by the socio political organization in neighbouring areas of Bengal. Situated, as it was, on the north-east corner of Bengal and surrounded on all three other 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-Genetic plains.

The earliest reference to a political organization in the valley was a *Janapada* called Suramasa referred by Panini in the 6th century B.C. There are descriptions about the social and political structure of this *Janapada*. Equally unknown is the structure of *Silichatal* or Srihatta mentioned by Hiuen Tsang in the 7th century A.D. It is however,

clear that the name Srihatta was in existence since then. The epigraphic evidences are unambiguous about the rule of the Varman dynasty of Kamarupa in a portion of the valley in 6th-7th century A.D. The seventh century A.D presented a complex political structure in the valley. Besides the independent state of Srihatta and a *vishaya* or district (Chandrapur) in the Kamarupa state, there were districts (*vishayas*) and province (*bhukti*) of Samatata. viz. Suvanga and Jayatunga under the Samanta rulers of South-East Bengal who were feudatories to the Gupta emperors of Northern India. The rule of the Samanta rulers extended from South-East Bengal (Samatata) and that of the Varman rulers from East Bengal (Vanga). In addition to these states, there was Harikela which consisted of the portions of the Surma Barak Valley and South-East Bengal and its epicenter was mostly in Srihatta. In the 10th century A.D, the Surma Barak Valley formed a part of the Chandra state of East Bengal. The whole of the valley then formed Srihattamanadala within the *Pundravardhana bhukti* (province) of the Chandra state. The Surma Barak Valley or Srihatta was then a *mandala* (division) and within this division there were three *vishayas* (districts), i.e., Chandrapur, Garala and Pogara. In the 11th century A.D., the sovereign Srihatta kingdom flourished in the whole valley and it also included some areas of the neighbouring districts of Bengal. All these states were in the Brahmanical Hindu state model and represented the Pan-Indian socio-cultural continuum in the valley through Bengal. The decline of the Srihattarajya was followed by a disintegration of the political structure in the 12th-13th century A.D when Tripuri, Jayantia, Gaur and Laur states co-existed in the Surma Barak Valley.

From the inscriptional evidences, it is evident that the Aryanisation of the region started at least from the 5th century A.D. when a group of Brahmins well versed in the Vedas settled in the south eastern region of the district known as Chandrapuri Vishaya on receipt of a land grant issued by Kamrupa king Bhutivarman, the ancestor of Bhaskaravarman. They may be regarded as the pioneers who introduced plough based agriculture and incorporated within a caste-based society, the local indigenous people. In the mid-seventh century, a Marundanath, a feudal chief of a Samatata king, brought forest lands (*atavi-anchal*) under plough cultivation through

another land grant. The development process of the region reached its zenith during the reign of Srichandra, the tenth century king of Eastern Bengal with his capital at Vikrampura near Dhaka. By a single landgrant, Srichandra gave settlement to 6000 Brahmins, in three Vishayas of Srihattamandala. Srihatta as a name of a political unit was first used in his Paschimbhag Copper plate. Two centuries later, Srihatta was mentioned as a rajya, an autonomous political unit during the reign of the Deva dynasty.

In fact, the epigraphic evidences cover the valley almost from such times that the patches of land masses gradually emerged from sea. And in these records, there are references only to persons belonging to either of the various castes and sub-castes of the caste-oriented Indo-Aryan society to be founded in other regions of Bengal. The foundation of the society must have been laid down in that period. The Bengalis of the Barak Surma valley today must be the descendants of *Sarma, Bhatta, Bhati, Svami, Ghosh, Datta, Dam, Dey, Dhar, Kar, Nag, Kundu, Som, Das, Sen, Palit, Pal*, etc. mentioned in various inscriptions. A section of them embraced Islam in their own land in the late medieval period, while others have retained their surnames and religious identity without affecting the ethnic and linguistic character of the valley. They speak a common dialect of Bengali and share same cultural traditions. The political organizations in the valley in the ancient period were the creations of the early settlers who interacted and admixed to condition themselves in the environment of their adoption, while the change and continuity over the long period of time are the metaphors of history and geography.

The six inscriptions brings out clearly that South East Bengal, including Srihatta, was ruled by autonomous Samanta rulers during the later Gupta period and that the control of the distant sovereign over them was merely theoretical, while Srihatta developed its own independent political entity under the Deva Kings in 11th century A.D. The local states in the region during 7th to 11th century were powerful, wealthy and prosperous, which could be possible only by enough income generated through extraction of surplus by the rulers. On the other hand, the rulers had their control over smaller chiefs, who could have been reduced to subordination by the

process of conquest and who paid regular tributes and did homage, contributing in large measure to the growth of contractual relations. The practice of land grants to the Brahmanas, officials and monasteries placed these landed intermediaries between the rulers and actual tillers of land as the state transferred all sources of revenue to the donees and the peasants and artisans living in the donated lands to pay and labour to these intermediaries. The new settlements that came up in the forest regions by virtue of land grants had the full compliments of peasants, artisans and professionals to ensure its self-sufficiency and left scope for creating new tenants on the donated lands. Although there is no evidence related with the state's surrender in administrative functions, the land grants resulted in the rise of powerful intermediaries and in the fragmentation of soil. In return of these grants, the donees were obliged to render certain specific services to the state. The society was hierarchically organized on the basis of caste and the unequal groups in the society survived through mutually obligatory services. Some of the Brahmanas gave up their hereditary priestly professions, engaged themselves, in the management of their lands, and they became powerful in state politics. The numismatic evidences suggest the possibility of a flourishing trade in the region in which the wealthy landowners could participate by reinvesting their income from land. The nature of development in the region in that point of time, therefore, presented a picture of uneven social growth. A wealthy group had emerged primarily on the basis of landownership and by multiplying the income from land through its reinvestment in trade and manufactures. The peasants and workers were subservient to these wealthy persons who were powerful in the state affairs by virtue of their command over wealth. Caste was no doubt the dominant factor in social life, but it was no barrier to an individual's assuming a social status by virtue of his skill and wealth.

The social situation manifested in these inscriptions speaks of a Brahmanical society with remnants of tribal influence here and there. The caste base was there, but it was not strong enough for formation of a Chaturvarna or 'four-caste' society in classical north Indian model. The Brahmins were there, but only other Varna available was the Sudras with different high and low status. To a considerable extent, the social

situation of the region conforms to the social model depicted in the '*Brihaddharma Purana*' and the '*Brahmavaivarta Purana*'. The Brahmanical domination was there, but it was not as dominant as in the northern India. The social mobility of the Sudras from lower to higher status was possible depending on performance. Evidently, the society was liberal compared to other parts of India of the same period.

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

From economic point of view, it may be said that during the period under review, agriculture turned into a dependable economic activity. In the wake of which there occurred some significant developments like the expansion of agriculture through the *agrahara* system (Landgrant), the ownership in land and the use of plough for cultivation. These economic activities eventually also led to some social inequalities which were the chief characteristics of the economic life of ancient Surma Barak Valley (Srihatta).

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

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

The Vaisnavism was the dominant cult in the region during the period. The names of the Brahmins available in the plates signify the Vaisnavite influence in the majority cases followed by the Sun worshippers. The Saivite and Shakti names are there but not in any significant number. Though the inscriptions do not manifest the influence of Buddhism to any considerable degree, preponderance of the Buddhism can be discerned from indirect evidences. The co-existence of Hinduism and Buddhism and their intermingling was an important feature of this period.

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

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

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

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

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

Thus, in the Indian context, in Surma Barak Valley, the Brahmanical myths and hinduisation, besides property and surplus, have been identified and it is the major output of the study. The process of social and polity formation in Surma Barak Valley during the period under review was influenced by its geo-political situation which absorbed Pan-Indian traditions and the development in neighbouring areas of the region. In the past, it has been proved that the region experienced a fine blending of these two traditions represented by the Indo-Aryans and the Indo-Mongoloid tribal

communities. The emergence of states from the indigenous and immigrant tribal social bases was a significant development in the pre-colonial history of the region.

In case of the Koch, Kachari, Meitei, Jaintia and Tripuri, who were settled in the region since early times, the societies were stratified with the emergence of private property on the basis of differentiated land-holding and individualised income. Thereafter at clan or village levels emerged as chiefs and they extended their sphere of dominance by subduing other clans, tribes and communities.

The Ahoms experienced these early processes before their advent in Assam and they built the most powerful state in the region by military conquests. The hinduisation formalised the social stratification and legitimised the royal supremacy in all cases. In final forms, the states were able to develop elaborate apparatus strong enough for sustenance and surveillance, which has proved true in any observation in case of Surma Barak Valley.

From the ancient epigraphic records, there found the existence of *Chaturvarna* or four castes and even sub-castes and the *navasakha* or nine professional groups of traditional Indian society among the people in the donated villages and the officials of the state. The Tripuri, Dimasa and Srihattarajya ruled in different parts of the region in different time of the period were maintained in Bengali which was also the language of education and literature. As it has been found, the principal language of Surma Valley is Bengali. In Sylhet district, it was spoken by 92 percent of the people and in the Cachar district by more than half of the population. In Cachar plains the percentage of the Bengalis would be as high as in Sylhet but the Halflong (Now North Cachar Hills District) which was predominantly tribal and the Hindustani and Manipuri settlers in plains brought down the percentage of the Bengalis.

In the early times, the valley was covered by the state formation process in South East Bengal like Samatata, Harikela and others. Srihattamandala denoting the regional identity as it is known from the Kalapur inscriptions of the Samanta rulers of Samatata belonging to 7th century A.D. The Harikela coins had several local series and in one series the word '*veraka*' (Barak) used to be inscribed.

In the 10th century A.D, the Chandra rulers of East Bengal ruled over Srihattamandala as it is known from the Paschimbhag Copper plate inscription. In the 11th-12th century A.D, the autonomous Srihattarajya flourished in the valley under the Deva rulers mentioned in the Bhatara Copper plates. The boundary of the Srihattamandala or Srihattarajya extended to its natural limits and the donated villages mentioned in some of these inscriptions were scattered over Cachar, Karimgang and Sylhet districts and the Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura. In the pre-colonial period, the lower part of the valley (Kailasahar-Sylhet Sector) was conquered by the Afghan chiefs and then it formed part of the Mughal Subah of Bengal, while the upper region of the valley (Cachar-Hailakandi sector) was included successively in Tripuri, Khaspur and Heramba states. The western sector of the lower valley was included in the Jaintia state which at a time extended to Karimganj. Two other important states in the lower valley on the eve of the Afghan conquest were Gaur and Laur. After the polity formation, the political development was started during the period under review.

Again, the Surma Barak Valley inclusive of Kailashahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura and four districts of Bangladesh is bounded on three sides by the hills forming virtually a high wall, while only on the fourth side; it is followed in succession by the plains districts of undivided Bengal without disturbing the landscape and the ecosystem. Naturally, Indo-Aryan settlement extended to the valley from Bengal in early times in its spontaneous eastward march to the farthest limits of the plough able areas. They moved along the familiar terrain and stopped at the foot of the hills as these hills were not suitable for the settled cultivations. Similarly, the flood-prone plain region was uninviting to the *jhumias* of the neighbouring hills. The Surma Barak Valley thus developed as the homeland of a distinct dialect group of Bengali since from the ancient period.

It has been further observed that the social and polity formation processes in the Surma Barak valley during the period under review were influenced by the geographical, historical and sociological factors. On the one hand, it was an outlying area of Bengal plains and on the other; it was flanked by the hill tribal regions. The extension of the Indo-Aryan Settlements from mainland Bengal in early times

inaugurated the social formation processes. While the contacts and intermingling of the races reinforced the process and perpetuated the growth of a distinct culture group in the valley.

The early states of South East and East Bengal like Samatala, Harikela and Chandra as well as the indigenous Srihattarajya were in Pan-Indian Brahmanical Hindu model and these states created profound impact on the later hinduised tribal states like those of the Tripuris, Jaintias and the Dimasas. The Tripuris experimented the early phase of the formation in the Surma Barak Valley. The Koch state in Barak Surma valley started as a crown colony under Cooch Behar but eventually developed into independent Khaspur state. The Jaintia state formation started in the hills and in its final phase, the state covered a large portion of Barak valley. The final phase of the Dimasa state formation was experienced in the Surma Barak Valley region.

In popular parlance, the ancient age is normally associated with backwardness and degradation. But in case of Surma Barak Valley, this stereotype did not fit in. In fact, the region while retaining continuity with her past history opened up virtues for new developments conducive for meeting the demand of the changing time. After the fall of Srihattarajya, the Surma Barak Valley during the period maintained its close relationship with the neighbouring areas specially with Bengal and without much the major part of the region could become a part of the Delhi Sultanate and then with Mughal India. The remaining part also retained social bias with Sylhet uninterrupted by political disruption. Thus, when the alien powers took the possession of the valley, the region found no difficulty in adjusting with the new situation.

The society, economy and polity experienced major changes in the 13th century after the fall of the indigenous Srihattarajya. The lower part of the Surma Barak Valley passed under the successive rule of the Turko-Afghans and then Mughals, and finally, the East India Company, with the rest of Bengal, while only the upper portion of the region, namely, the Cachar plains, formed part of the Tripuri state, Khaspur state and the Dimasa state in rapid succession before the British annexation. These factors generated indirect motivation and specific influences in matters of administrative and institutional changes within the region.