

APPENDICES

Appendices contain the following:

***Appendix - I:** List of Maps

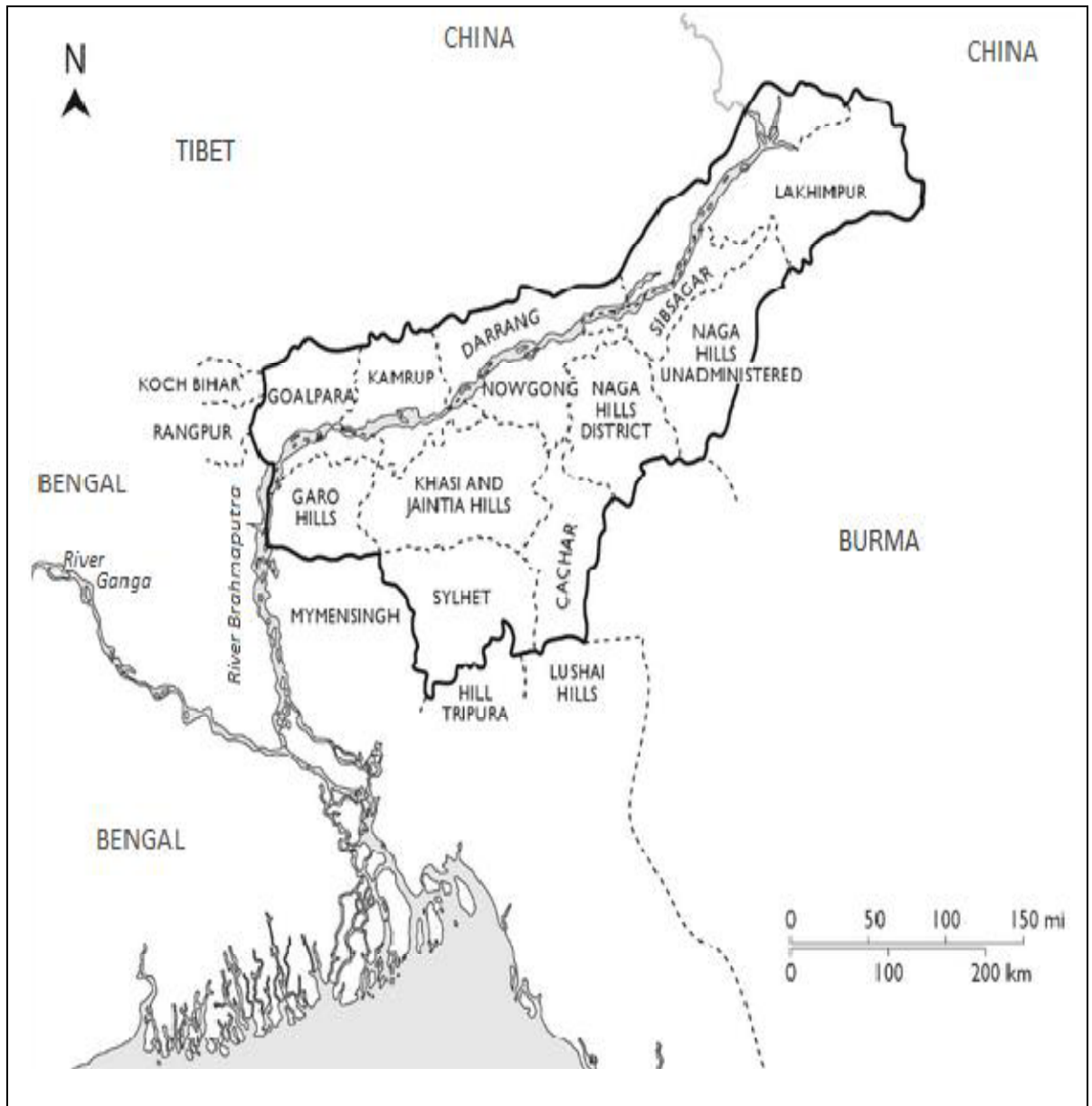
***Appendix - II:** Reprints of Published Papers

Note: *In Appendices, everything is appended as it is and hence no change in any form was made only to show the originality of the materials.*

APPENDIX – I

List of Maps

MAP: 1



Appendix I (a): Map of Surma (Bangladesh) Barak Valley (Assam) with Districts.

(Source: en.wikipedia.org)

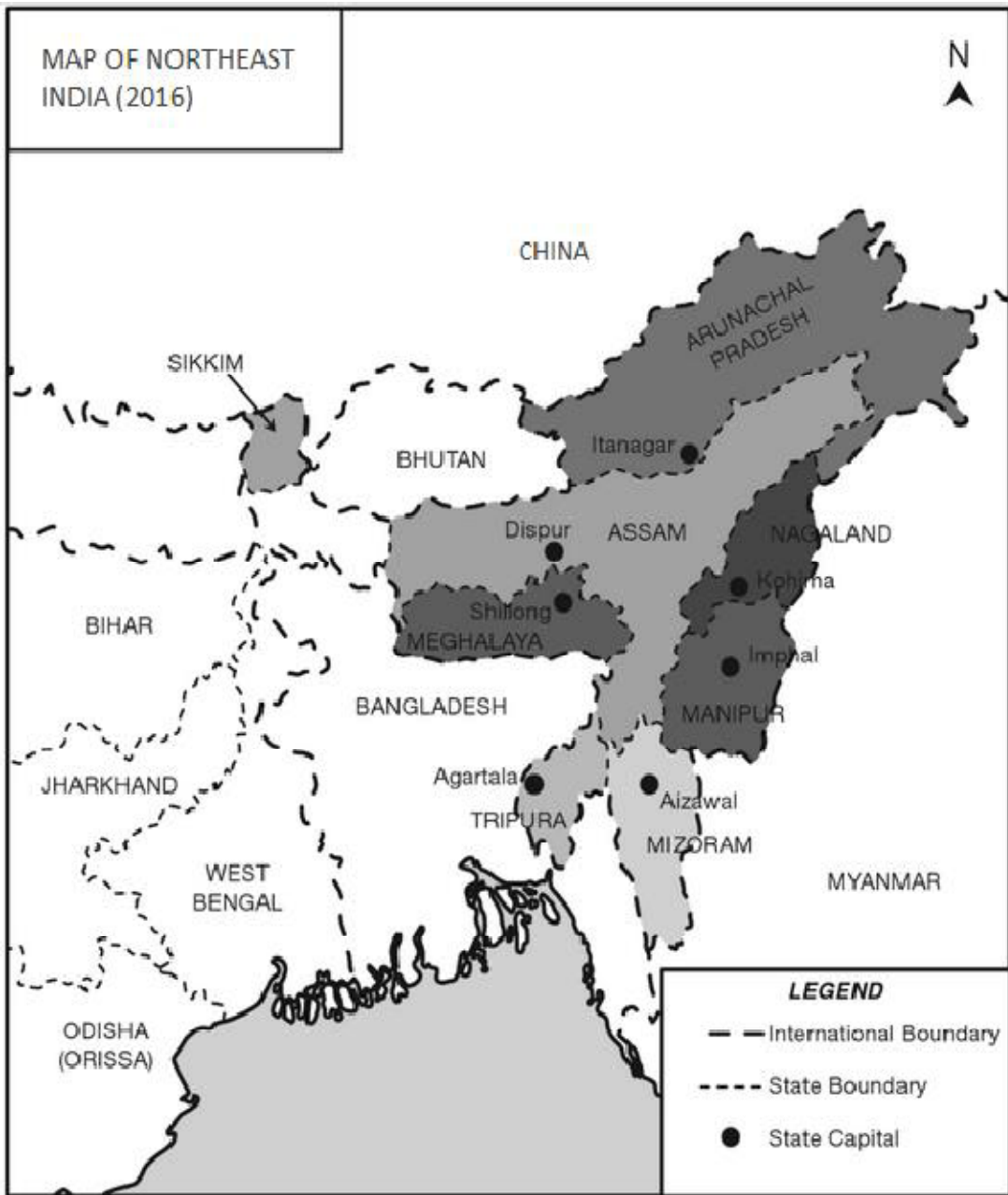
MAP: 2



Appendix I (b): Map of Surma-Meghna River System.

(Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna_basins.jpg)

MAP: 3



Appendix I (c): Map of Northeast India, 2016

(Source: en.wikipedia.org)

MAP: 4



Appendix I (d): Map of Barak Valley

(Source: <http://www.mapsofindia.com/maps/assam/>)

APPENDIX – II

PAPER: 1



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The Social Structure and Political Phenomena in Ancient Surma Barak Valley

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Abstract

During the long period of the known history of the ancient period of the region starting from 5th century A.D. and ending with 13th century, the socio-political development occurred in the Surma-Barak Valley, centering round racial assimilation and cultural synthesis between the early settlers of presumably from Austric and Mongolian stock and Aryan or Aryanised new comers from the west. The epigraphic discoveries corroborated by some literary evidences bear the testimony of this fact. The political history of the period shows that at the earliest stage, the Aryanised Mongolian king of Kamrupa rules the region for about two centuries. Thereafter, the eastern portion of the region was ruled by the Mongolian kings for the whole period, even during the medieval period also. But on the western portion forming Sylhet division of the British period, the Aryanised rulers, either from the west or rose indigenously ruled for centuries ending with the beginning of the medieval period. In spite of these political differences, the social formation including social stratification and cultural development proceeded under the influence of Bengal.

Keywords: Assimilation, Stratification, Influence, Austric, Mongolian etc.

Introduction: The geographical area that forms the Surma Barak Valley extends over a region now divided between India and Bangladesh. During the British regime, the region was an administrative unit under the province of Assam reorganized in 1874 and for a period covering more than half of a century it had been called the Surma-Valley for administrative purpose and as such this identity of the region was very popular. Bounded by the ridges of the Barail Hills on the north, the Hills of Tripura and Mizoram on the south, lofty mountains of the Angami Naga hills and Manipur on the east and the plains of the East Bengal, more specially the Meghna valley (Dhaka-Mymonsingh-Comilla), the geographical formation of the region clearly shows that it forms the eastern most continuation of the Bengal plain. It may be mentioned here that the geographical formation of the valley excludes the modern district of North Cachar Hills which constitute the part of the administrative Surma-Valley organized by the British Rulers. The main river of the region

is the Barak, which flowing through Cachar, divides itself into two major streams, viz – the Surma and the Kushiyara, which again meet to the Brahmaputra, which in its turn merges with the Meghna and finally flows to the Bay of Bengal. The Indian portion of the region is now popularly known as the Barak Valley, covering the geographical area of the modern Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi of the Assam state. But the Bangladesh portion continues an administrative unit of the country in the form of ‘Sylhet Division’ constituted with Sylhet, Moulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj districts. So, the appellation of Surma Valley, so popularly current during the British period has become an historical entity since independence in 1947 when the district of Sylhet, the major portion of Surma Valley was portioned following a referendum. But the geographical formation of the region clearly indicates that the region forms a valley of the rivers Barak and Surma. So, the geographical name of the Valley as “Barak-Surma Valley” – following what Nihar Ranjan Roy prefers in his ‘**Bangalir Itihas**’ (3rd Edn., Calcutta – 1980. Vol. – I, P – 80).

Objectives of the Study:

- 1 To study the Socio – political aspects of Ancient Surma – Barak Valley.
- 2 To find out the factors responsible for the formation of political centers and the cultural development.
- 3 To identify out the major political centers during the period between 5th to 13th century A.D.

Review of Literature: The researcher reviewed books relevant to the research topic and has referred to a number of books published:-

- The most important among the earliest works on history of the Surma Barak region is undoubtedly ‘*Srihatter Itibritta*’ by Achyut Charan Choudhury. The monumental works published in the two volumes in 1911 and 1917 respectively may be regarded as the most important contribution to the intellectual; arena in the first half of the 20th century. Sri Choudhury in his work append briefly in the history of Cachar also. This voluminous work has become a classic source for the study of history of the region. This was followed by the ‘*Kacharer Itibritta*’, authored by U.C. Guha and published in 1921. But his works cannot answer all the questions that a modern student of history is expected to rise.
- J. B. Bhattacharjee, by his brilliant works like ‘*Cachar Under the British Rule in North East India*’ (1977), ‘*Sequences of development in North East India*’ (1988), ‘*Social and Polity Formation in Pre-colonial North East India*’ (1991), ‘*Kachari Rajya: Uttan Aru Patan*’ (1993), etc. and a large number of research papers published in different journals and proceedings of seminar throws much light on the historical process developed in the region.
- Sujit Choudhury in his book ‘*Srihatta Kacharer Prachin Itihas*’ (1992), opens a new dimension on the historiography of the region by giving scientific interpretation of the traditions current among the people of the region for centuries.

- Some valuable works like ‘*Queens of Cachar or Hidimba and the Cacharis*’ (1974), by R. K. Barman and ‘*The Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hill district*’ (1976) by Bordoloi throw much light on the socio-political aspects of the north eastern parts of the valley under review.
- A collection of research papers edited by J. N. Choudhury under the title ‘*Srihatta Kacharer Itihas o Sanskritir Rprekha*’ (1996) contains some brilliant contributions of noted scholars like Sujit Choudhury, K.K.Gupta, S.Dutta Choudhury, J.B. Bhattacharjee, Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others highlighting the historical aspects of the valley. In this context, the *proceeding of the seminar on the source materials* for writing a comprehensive history of the Barak Valley organized in 1997 by the Department of History, R.S. Girls’ College, Karimganj under the auspices of Assam University, Silchar, may be referred as a pointer to the reconstruction of the history of the Surma – Barak – Valley.
- Again, a recent voluminous work – ‘*Sylhet – History and Heritage*’ edited by Sharif Uddin Ahmed and published by Bangladesh Itihas Samiti in 1999 may be regarded as by far the best attempts made in Bangladesh in respect of regional or local history of the local history of the Surma - Barak Valley.
- The contributions of Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others in the study of source materials, and that of Abdul Karim and others in the study of socio – political history of Sylhet during the period are the results of the continuous research in the history of the valley under review.

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

Methodology: Methodology is one of the significant aspects which helped the researcher to conduct his study. It is a systematic way through which a study can be conducted. The study is basically descriptive and exploratory research and it critically uses both primary and secondary sources. The source materials of Surma-Barak Valley under review are scanty, yet some materials are available which may be studied under the following sources- Literary sources, Epigraphic sources and Oral sources.

Discussion: The history of the ancient period in the Surma–Barak Valley has some special importance in the historical process of the region. The ancient period of the region is obscure, the late ancient period is a period of transition in respect of population pattern, socio–cultural development and political undulation. With all these characteristics, the valley entered into the medieval period of Indian history and attracts a researcher to study the history of the region systematically and with a scientific outlook.

During the long period of the known history of the ancient period of the region starting from 5th century A.D. and ending with 13th century, the socio-political development occurred in the Surma-Barak Valley, centering round racial assimilation and cultural synthesis between the early settlers of presumably from Austric and Mongolian stock and

Aryan or Aryanised new comers from the west. The epigraphic discoveries corroborated by some literary evidences bear the testimony of this fact.

The political history of the period shows that at the earliest stage, the Aryanised Mongolian king of Kamrupa rules the region for about two centuries. Thereafter, the eastern portion of the region was ruled by the Mongolian kings for the whole period, even during the medieval period also. But on the western portion forming Sylhet division of the British period, the Aryanised rulers, either from the west or rose indigenously ruled for centuries ending with the beginning of the medieval period. In spite of these political differences, the social formation including social stratification and cultural development proceeded under the influence of Bengal.

At that remote past, the society of the region was hierarchically organized on the basis of caste and the unequal groups in the society survived through mutually obligatory services. Some of the Brahmanas gave up their hereditary priestly professions, engaged in the management of their lands and they became powerful in the state politics. The practice of land grants resulted in the rise of powerful intermediaries and in the fragmentation of the soil. In return of these grants, the donees were obliged to render certain specific services to the state.

The economy and the economic activities of the region 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. We are not sure of the extent of surplus, the extraction, or the type methods of appropriation or redistribution. But a state of the type mentioned in the copper plates inscriptions could be based only on surplus. That it was wealthy enough is beyond doubt.

The social and polity formation processes in the ancient Barak (Surma) 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.

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 so rigid as in modern times. The titles like *Deb, Datta, Kar, Das*, etc. are still extant in the Bengali society of Barak-Surma 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.

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 Bhutivarmana, the ancestor of Bhaskaravarmana. They may be regarded as the pioneers who introduced plough based agriculture and incorporated within a caste-based society of the local indigenous people. In the mid-seventh century, a Marundanath, a feudal chief of a Samantata 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 Srihatta mandala. 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.

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. Tribals were incorporated in the Hindu society as back as and when they opted for participation in the plough-based agriculture and settle habitation. Evidently, the society was liberal compared to other parts of India of the same period.

The political situation as a bit unsettled but perhaps that did not affect the continuity of the established political administration. The Kamrupa 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 Bhaskarvarmana, we find that an elaborate system of revenue administration was developed to administer Chandrapuri Vishaya. The system thus established definitely continued efficiently for centuries otherwise we would not have a very developed agricultural economy three hundred years later as manifested in the Pashimbhag copper plate of Srichandra. However, the economy came under some stress and strain two hundred years later as evident from the two Bhatara copper plates. The cause can be attributed to feudal decadence though no definite proof can be produced.

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, pre-ponderance of the Buddhism can be discerned from indirect evidences. The coexistence of Hinduism and Buddhism and their intermingling was an important feature of this period.

From the text of the Paschimbag copper plate of Srichandra we come to know of the startling fact that in Chandrapuri Vishya of Srihatta mandala, 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 Jaimini, 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 the 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.

Another fact needs to be mentioned here, though from the narration of the land grants we find the picture of a society under the influence of established religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, there had been a tribal layer which yet to come under those religious texts. They were awaiting for a chance to be incorporated in plough-based agriculture along with a suitable social structure and the advent of Islam particularly with Sufi preachers opened up that opportunity.

Again, the Austric-speaking Khasis and some tribes speaking languages of the Tibeto-Burman origin had been and still are the close neighbours of the local population. It is understood 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.

Conclusion: 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 is 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.

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PAPER: 2



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Socio-Political Development of Surma Barak Valley from 5th to 13th Century A.D.

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Abstract

The Barak Valley of Assam consists of three districts, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj situated between Longitude 92.15" and 93.15" East and Latitude 24.8" and 25.8" North and covering an area of 6,941.2 square Kilometres, this Indian portion of the valley is bounded on the north by the North Cachar Hills District of Assam and the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, on the east by Manipur, on the south by Mizoram and on the west by Tripura and the Sylhet District of Bangladesh. These three districts in Assam, however, together form the Indian part of a Valley, the larger portion of which is now in Bangladesh. The valley was transferred to Assam from Bengal in 1874 and the Bangladesh part was separated by the partition of India in 1947.

The social and polity formation processes in the Barak Surma Valley in the Pre-Colonial period were influenced by these geo-graphical, historical and sociological factors. On the one hand, it was an outlying area of the Bengal plains and on the other hand, 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.

Keywords: Surma, Barak Valley, Socio-Political, Development etc.

Introduction: The crucial issues of enquiry in the social and polity formation studies are labour process, surplus and social differentiation. The form of labour process, the manner of extraction of surplus and the system of distribution of surplus determined the social formation processes. In polity or state formation studies one looks into how in the early egalitarian societies inequality and stratification started with the emergence of private property and interest groups. The political organizations in early societies were founded on territory and property. The state as a higher form of political organization came into existence when the economic relations were further sophisticated by privatization of

property and extraction of surplus by the dominant groups in the society. The 'divine right' theory strengthened the assumed authority of the rulers. In India, the Brahmanical myths concerning the divine origin of the kings contributed to royal legitimation. In all cases, however, the common crucial factor was the surplus (generation, extraction and redistribution).

The social and polity formation processes in North East India were spontaneously influenced by its geo-political situation which absorbed pan-Indian traditions and the developments in neighbouring South East Asia. In the past, the region experienced a fine blending of these two traditions represented by the Indo-Aryans and the Indo-Mongoloid tribal communities. The emergence of states from the indigenous and immigrant tribal social bases was a significant development in the early history of the region. In case of 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 individualized income. The notables at clan or village levels emerged as chiefs and they extended their sphere of dominance by subduing other clans, tribes and communities. The Ahoms experienced these early processes before their advent in Assam and they built the most powerful state in the region by military conquest. The hinduisation formalized the social stratification and legitimized the royal supremacy in all cases. In final forms, the states were able to develop elaborate apparatus strong enough for sustenance and surveillance.

The Barak Valley of Assam consists of three districts, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Situated between Longitude 92.15" and 93.15" East and Latitude 24.8" and 25.8" North and covering an area of 6,941.2 square Kilometres, this Indian portion of the valley is bounded on the north by the North Cachar Hills District of Assam and the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, on the east by Manipur, on the south by Mizoram and on the west by Tripura and the Sylhet District of Bangladesh. These three districts in Assam, however, together form the Indian part of a Valley, the larger portion of which is now in Bangladesh. The valley was transferred to Assam from Bengal in 1874 and the Bangladesh part was separated by the partition of India in 1947. In the British period it was known as Surma Valley after a branch of the river Barak, called Surma, which flanked the Sylhet town. There were only two districts at that time, viz. Sylhet and Cachar. The Karimganj District of Assam (India) and the Maulavi Bazar, Sylhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj districts of Bangladesh today were then sub-divisions of the Sylhet District, while Cachar (Silchar), Hailakandi and North Cachar Hills (Haflong) districts of Assam (India) were sub-divisions of the Cachar District, The Cachar District today has become limited to the old Silchar Sub-division of the district. Although Hailakandi, Cachar and the North Cachar Hills districts, a portion of Nowgong district in the Brahmaputra Valley, besides small patches of Nagaland and Manipur states, were included in Cachar or the Heramba Kingdom for sometimes before the British annexation, only Cachar and Hailakandi districts are in the Barak Valley. The North Cachar Hills, along with the Jaintia Hills and the patches of Nagaland and Manipur, belong to the Meghalaya Plateau or the hill range which divides the valleys of the

Barak and the Brahmaputra. On the other hand, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura belongs to the Barak Valley. The Valley is formed by the river Barak which divides itself into two branches (Surma and Kushiara) in Karimganj, both the branches flow through Sylhet and they are reunited before finally confluence into the Brahmaputra in East Bengal (Bangladesh). The Barak Valley, for our purpose, includes Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts of Assam and Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura and Maulavi Bazar, Sylhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj districts of Bangladesh. Geographically, culturally and historically it is a distinct region which Rabindranath Tagore described as 'Sribhumi'.

The history and sociology of the Barak Valley has to be interpreted in terms of its geographical structure. Geographically it is an extension of the Bengal plains, the physical features registering a slow and gradual change as one travels from here to anywhere in Bengal or vice versa. This Valley, inclusive of the Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura and four (Sylhet) districts of Bangladesh, is bounded on three sides by the hills forming virtually a high wall, while only on the fourth side it is followed in succession by the plains districts of undivided Bengal without disturbing the landscape and the ecosystem. Naturally, Indo-Aryan settlement extended to the valley from Bengal in early times in its spontaneous eastward march to the farthest limits of the plough-able areas. They moved along the familiar terrain and stopped at the foot of the hills as these hills were not suitable for the settled cultivators. Similarly, the flood-prone plain region was uninviting to the Jhumias of the neighbouring hills. The undivided Barak Valley thus developed as the homeland of a distinct dialect group of Bengali from the ancient period.

In the early times the valley was covered by the state formation processes in South East Bengal like Samatata, Harikela and others, 'Srihattamandala' denoting the regional identity as we know from the Kalapur inscriptions of the samanta rulers of Samatata belonging to 7th century A.D. The Harikela coins had several local series, and in one series the word 'Veraka' (Barak) used to be inscribed. This explains the position in 8th-9th century A.D. In the 10th century A.D. the Chandra rulers of East Bengal ruled over Srihattamandala as we know from the paschimbhag copper-plate inscription. In the 11th-12th century A.D. the autonomous Srihatta state flourished in the valley under the Deva rulers mentioned in the Bhatara plates. The boundary of the Srihattamandala or Srihattarajya extended to its natural limits and the donated villages mentioned in some of these inscriptions were scattered over Cachar, Karimganj and Sylhet districts and the Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura. In the medieval period, the lower part of the valley (or Kailasahar-Sylhet sector) was conquered by the Afghan chiefs and then it formed part of the Mughal Subah of Bengal, while the upper region (Cachar-Hailakandi sector) was included successively in Tripuri, Khaspur and Heramba states. The Western sector of the lower valley was included in the Jaintia State which at a time extended to Karimganj. Two other important states in the lower valley on the eve of the Afghan conquest were Gaur and Laur.

The 1971 census returned about 80 percent of the total population of the Barak Valley (Assam) to be Bengali. This was more or less the position in the earlier censuses, including the British time. The other notable groups are the workforce in the tea gardens, Manipuris,

Dimasas and the Koches. The small numbers of Koches (locally known as Dehans) were the descendants of those who migrated to Cachar in the 16th century during the invasion of Chila Rai of Cooch Behar when the Khaspur state came into existence under Dewan Kamalnayan. Their number increased marginally during the Moamaria rebellion in the Assam Valley in the beginning of the last century when the Raja of Cachar offered settlement to some fugitive families. About fifty Dimasa families moved to the plains with the Raja when the Dimasa capital was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur in 1750 A.D. following the merger of the Khaspur state with the Heramba (Dimasa) state. They were joined by a few more families during the political turmoil in North Cachar Hills in 1820s. A good number of Manipuris came to Cachar during the Burmese occupation of Manipur since 1818 and some of them settled down permanently. There had been waves of immigration even subsequently as Manipur was in turmoil for a long time. Some Hmar and Kuki villages were settled by the British in the 30s and 40s of the last century as they were pushed out of the Lushai Hills by inter-tribal feuds. The workforce in the tea gardens was brought by the British from Chotanagpur and other places ever since the plantation started in 1850s. All these immigrant communities have adopted the valley as their homeland, they speak the local dialect of Bengali, and the various communities living here have reinforced each other's culture and traditions. It has always happened in history. The small immigrant communities, even if they are conquerors and rulers, they adopt the language and culture of the land of their adoption. It happened to the Mughals in the North India, and it has happened to the Ahoms in Assam and to the Dimasas in Cachar. The British failed to plunge into this historical process and, as a result, they invited the mass reaction in the form of national movement which forced them eventually to leave the country.

A question that has confronted many is when the Bengalis first came to the Barak Valley. This can be answered by asking, when did the Romans come to Rome? We have not come across any evidence that would tell us about the earliest Bengali settlement in this valley or who were the earlier inhabitants. On the contrary, we have found them here in as early a date as we are able to trace the history of the valley on the basis of conventional historical data. The names of places, river and hills in the valley have close affinity with those in various parts of Bengal and elsewhere in the Indo-Gangetic plains. The ancient epigraphic records suggest the existence of *chaturvarna* or four castes and even sub-castes and the *navasakha* or nine professional groups of traditional Indian society among the people in the donated villages and the officials of the state. The records of the Mughal, Tripuri and Dimasa rulers in different parts of the valley in different time in the medieval period were maintained in Bengali which was also the language of education and literature.

While on a survey duty in Cachar in 1832, R. B. Pamberton, in a report, said, "the people in Sylhet and Cachar are identical in every respect-appearance, customs and language." Thomas Fisher, the first Superintendent of Cachar, said in 1834. "The entire instruction in this district is to be conveyed in Bengali language." C. Becker, a German missionary (1923), wrote, "The principal language of the Surma Valley is Bengali. In Sylhet District it

is spoken by 92 percent of the people, and in the Cachar District by more than half of the population. Bengali as spoken in the Surma Valley differs to some extent from that of the Province of Bengal and it is called therefore, Sylhet-Bengali.” Becker further observed that in Cachar plains the percentage of the Bangalis would be as high as in Sylhet but the Haflong Subdivision (now North Cachar Hills District) which is predominantly tribal and the Hindustani and Manipuri settlers in plains brought down the district percentage of the Bangalis.

Objectives of the Study:

- 1 To study the Socio – political development of Surma – Barak Valley.
- 2 To find out the factors responsible for the formation of political centres and the cultural development.

Review of Literature: The researcher reviewed books relevant to the research topic and has referred to a number of books published:-

- The most important among the earliest works on history of the Surma Barak region is undoubtedly ‘*Srihatter Itibritta*’ by Achyut Charan Choudhury. The monumental works published in the two volumes in 1911 and 1917 respectively may be regarded as the most important contribution to the intellectual; arena in the first half of the 20th century. Sri Choudhury in his work append briefly in the history of Cachar also. This voluminous work has become a classic source for the study of history of the region. This was followed by the ‘*Kacharer Itibritta*’, authored by U.C. Guha and published in 1921. But his works cannot answer all the questions that a modern student of history is expected to rise.
- J. B. Bhattacharjee, by his brilliant works like ‘*Cachar Under the British Rule in North East India*’ (1977), ‘*Sequences of development in North East India*’ (1988), ‘*Social and Polity Formation in Pre-colonial North East India*’ (1991), ‘*Kachari Rajya: Uttan Aru Patan*’ (1993), etc. and a large number of research papers published in different journals and proceedings of seminar throws much light on the historical process developed in the region.
- Sujit Choudhury in his book ‘*Srihatta Kacharer Prachin Itihas*’ (1992), opens a new dimension on the historiography of the region by giving scientific interpretation of the traditions current among the people of the region for centuries.
- Some valuable works like ‘*Queens of Cachar or Hidimba and the Cacharis*’ (1974), by R. K. Barman and ‘*The Dimasa Kacharis of the North Cachar Hill district*’ (1976) by Bordoloi throw much light on the socio-political aspects of the north eastern parts of the valley under review.
- A collection of research papers edited by J. N. Choudhury under the title ‘*Srihatta Kacharer Itihas o Sanskritir Rprekha*’ (1996) contains some brilliant contributions of noted scholars like Sujit Choudhury, K.K.Gupta, S.Dutta Choudhury, J.B. Bhattacharjee, Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others highlighting the historical aspects of the valley. In this context, the *proceeding of the seminar on the source materials* for

writing a comprehensive history of the Barak Valley organized in 1997 by the Department of History, R.S. Girls' College, Karimganj under the auspices of Assam University, Silchar, may be referred as a pointer to the reconstruction of the history of the Surma – Barak – Valley.

- Again, a recent voluminous work – ‘*Sylhet – History and Heritage*’ edited by Sharif Uddin Ahmed and published by Bangladesh Itihas Samiti in 1999 may be regarded as by far the best attempts made in Bangladesh in respect of regional or local history of the local history of the Surma - Barak Valley.
- The contributions of Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others in the study of source materials, and that of Abdul Karim and others in the study of socio – political history of Sylhet during the period are the results of the continuous research in the history of the valley under review.

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

Methodology: Methodology is one of the significant aspects which helped the researcher to conduct his study. It is a systematic way through which a study can be conducted. The study is basically descriptive and exploratory research and it critically uses both primary and secondary sources. The source materials of Surma-Barak Valley under review are scanty, yet some materials are available which may be studied under the following sources - Literary sources, Epigraphic sources and Oral sources.

Significance of the Study: The Subject matter of the study as the title indicates is to deal with the socio -political development of the undivided valley. The political development in the superstructure of a region or a country, generally to large extent, casts its influence on the social changes occurred in the infrastructure. But in case of Surma – Barak Valley, a researcher encounters with a problem of different nature. The social changes occurred during the period under review about the results of the political influences. Some extra political forces might be so alive that it brought even the ruling family at least in the case of eastern portion of the region to undergo changes along with the process of development came from within. So, an investigation in social changes would also form a sine – quanon of the proposed study.

Conclusion: During the long period of the known history of the ancient period of the region, the socio-political development occurred in the Surma-Barak Valley centring round racial assimilation and cultural synthesis between the early settlers of presumably from Austric and Mongolian stock and Aryan or Aryanised new comers from the west. The epigraphic discoveries corroborated by some literary evidences bear the testimony of this fact.

The political history of the period shows that at the earliest stage, the Aryanised Mongolian king of Kamrupa rules the region for about two centuries. Thereafter, the eastern portion of the region was ruled by the Mongolian kings for the whole period, even during

the medieval period also. But on the western portion forming Sylhet division of the British period, the Aryanised rulers, either from the west or rose indigenously ruled for centuries ending with the beginning of the medieval period. In spite of these political differences, the social formation including social stratification and cultural development proceeded under the influence of Bengal.

The history and sociology of the Barak Valley has to be interpreted in terms of its geographical structure. Geographically it is an extension of the Bengal plains, the physical features registering a slow and gradual change as one travels from here to anywhere in Bengal or vice versa. The undivided Barak Valley thus developed as the homeland of a distinct dialect group of Bengali from the ancient period.

The social and polity formation processes in the Surma-Barak Valley in the Pre-Colonial period were influenced by these geographical, historical and sociological factors. On the one hand, it was an outlying area of the Bengal plains and, on the other; it was flanked by the hill tribal regions. The extension of the Indo-Aryan settlements from mainland Bengal in early times inaugurated the social formation processes, while the contacts and intermingling of the races reinforced the process and perpetuated the growth of a distinct culture group in the valley.

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THE GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND OF SURMA BARAK VALLEY DURING 13TH CENTURY

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Abstract

The geographical extent of Surma Barak Valley covers three districts of Assam, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura, and four districts of Bangladesh, viz. Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. As a matter of fact, these seven districts have emerged out of the two districts, viz., Cachar and Sylhet of the British time. Karimganj, Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj were all sub- divisions of the Sylhet district, while Silchar (now Cachar), Hailakandi and Haflong (now North Cachar) were sub-divisions of Cachar district. The twin-divisions, Cachar and Sylhet were together known as the Surma Valley division ever since the districts were transferred to Assam in 1874. The geographical factors naturally influenced the historical and social evolution of Barak Valley. It was because of the geographical reason that the Barak Valley became a social and cultural extension of Bengal. Besides the geographical structure and the population, the pan-Indian culture continuum in the valley is also borne out by the place names; the names of the hills, river and the villages which emerged in Eastern and South- Eastern Bengal during early periods.

Keywords: *Geographical, Period, Surma, Barak Valley etc.*

INTRODUCTION

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

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are:

- To study the geographical background of Surma Barak Valley.
- To find out the major political centres of Surma Barak Valley.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The researcher reviewed books relevant to the research topic and has referred to a number of books published. Among such reviewed literatures, some are highlighted as follows:-

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

- Choudhury (1911) conducted a study on “*Srihatter Itivritta*”. The most important among the earliest works on history of the Surma Barak region is undoubtedly ‘*Srihatter Itivritta*’ The monumental works published in the two volumes in 1911 and 1917 respectively may be regarded as the most important contribution to the intellectual arena in the first half of the 20th century. In his work, he append briefly about the history of Cachar also. This voluminous work has become a classical source for the study of history of the region.
- Guha (1912) “*Cacharer Itivritta*” incorporates valuable information as to the early social formation of the Cachar plains in the late 18th and early 19th century. It also provides us with recorded information of the immigrations of different groups dating from 1736. This study proposes to fulfill the queries of a modern student of history of the period under review.
 - Bhattacharjee (1977) “*Cachar under the British Rule in North East India*”, (1988) ‘*Sequences of development in North East India*’, (1991) ‘*Social and Polity Formation in Pre-colonial North East India*’, (1993) ‘*Kachari Rajya: Uttan Aru Patan*’ etc. and a large number of research papers published in different journals and proceedings of seminar throws much light on the historical processes developed in the region. It also depicts socio-cultural and political life of Surma Barak Valley during British regime. This work, however, may be categorised as a typical historical work. He collected official and non-official informations from Government institutions and in this respect it is more or less comprehensive.
- Choudhury (1992) “*Srihatta Cacharer Prachin Itihas*” opens a new dimension on the historiography of the region by giving scientific interpretation of the traditions current among the people of the region for centuries. Taking this new dimension into count, new windows have opened which provides a better study and understanding of the social formation of the period.
- Choudhury (1996) in his edited research papers under the title “*Srihatta Cacharer Itihas o Sanskritir Ruprekha*” contains some brilliant contributions of noted scholars like Sujit Choudhury, K.K. Gupta, S. Dutta Choudhury, J.B. Bhattacharjee, Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others highlighting the historical aspects of the valley. In this context, the *proceedings of the seminar on the source materials* for writing a comprehensive history of the Barak Valley organized in 1997 by the Department of History, R.S. Girls College, Karimganj under the auspices of Assam University, Silchar, may be referred as a pointer to the reconstruction of the history of the Surma Barak Valley. On the other hand, some works have been published in Bangladesh, which contains glimpses of the history of the region. To begin with, ‘*Hazrat Shah Jalal O Sileter Itihas*’ by Sayed Murtaza Ali may be mentioned as a pioneer of the period. But his book cannot throw much light on the Socio- Cultural aspects of the period. Rather, he attempts to refer to this period as a ‘dark period’ in the history of Sylhet. These proceedings have immensely helped in fulfilling the demands of the study.
- Ahmed (1999) ‘*Sylhet – History and Heritage*’, a recent voluminous work was edited by Sharif Uddin Ahmed and published by Bangladesh Itihas Samiti. It may be regarded as by far the best attempts made in Bangladesh in respect of regional or local history of the Surma Barak Valley. However, his book is left unsatisfied with materials and hence provides a scope for further study.
- Choudhury continued further research in the period and his contributions ‘*Silether Rajnaitik Itihas*’ has compiled along with others in work named ‘*Brihattar Silether Itihas*’, edited by Md. Abdul Aziz and others in 1997. The contributions of Kamal Uddin Ahmed and others in the study of source materials, and that of Abdul Karim and others in the study of socio – political history of Sylhet during the period are the results of the continuous research in the history of the valley under review. But the works referred to are either some scattered contributions or some materials offering scope for reconstructions of history. So, ample scope remains for further study in the history of the valley.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is purely descriptive and based on secondary sources which will be collected from different sources like journals, books, reports, articles, newspapers, internets and any other printed materials available related to the study.

DISCUSSION

The geographical extent of Surma Barak Valley covers three districts of Assam, viz. Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, the Jatinga Valley of North Cachar, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura, and four districts of Bangladesh, viz. Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. As a matter of fact, these seven districts have emerged out of the two districts, viz., Cachar and Sylhet of the British time. Karimganj, Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj were all sub- divisions of the Sylhet district, while Silchar (now Cachar), Hailakandi and Haflong (now North Cachar) were sub-divisions of Cachar district. The twin-divisions, Cachar and Sylhet were together known as the Surma Valley division ever since the districts were transferred to Assam in 1874.

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

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

In the words of Professor Nihar Ranjan Ray: "The Barak-Surma Valley is nothing but the northern section of the Meghna Valley (Dacca-Mymensingh-Comilla). There is nothing like a natural boundary between these two valleys and that is why the traditions and culture of these districts of East Bengal so easily spread into Sylhet-Cachar in ancient and medieval periods. Even now the society and culture of the Hindus and Muslims of Sylhet-Cachar is bound with the eastern districts of Bengal in one thread." However, If it is examined through the map of the portion of the province (Cachar), it will be seen that as far as east as the Jiri, "it is connected with the district of Sylhet, by a continuous plain of exceeding fertility, watered throughout the whole extent from east to west, by a navigable river, into which numerous minor streams flow on the north and south, affording every facility of access of the almost inexhaustible forest of timber, rattans and bamboos, which have always proved a fruitful source of revenue to the former Rajas of the country. Beyond the Jiri, commences the marked change in the character of the country, from plain to mountain, which is scarcely more striking than the difference perceptible among the people by

whom they are respectively occupied, the residents in the plains being a peaceable race, devoted to agriculture pursuits, while those of the hills, strong in their mountain fastness, habitually despised the power of the Rajas of Kachari and only tendered a trifling acknowledgement of supremacy to facilitate their inter course with the frontier bazars of Banskandee, Kashpoor and Udharbond.”

The geographical factors naturally influenced the historical and social evolution of Barak Valley. It was because of the geographical reason that the Barak Valley became a social and cultural extension of Bengal. The Indo-Aryan settlement extended to this valley from Bengal in early times in its spontaneous eastward march to the farthest limit of the eastern plains. They moved along the familiar terrain and stopped at the foot of the hills, which encircled the valley from three sides, as these hills were not suitable for settled cultivation or the technology which the Aryans brought with them. On the other hand, the flood-prone marshy plains were uninviting to the Jhumias of the neighbouring hills. It is separated from the Brahmaputra valley by the hill range inhabited by distinctly different ethnic groups, which made the migrations between the two valleys impossible. The migrations were, therefore, mainly from the Bengal side through the western neck which rendered the Barak Valley a natural geographical continuity with the rest of Bengal. The indigenous Bengalis of the Barak Valley have lost the traditions of migrations. They do not know when, where from and under what circumstances they migrated to this place. On the other hand, migration and settlement of the non-Bengali inhabitants in the valley are covered by traditions and historical evidence. The domiciled non-Bengali inhabitants in the valley are a small number of Koches and Dimasas, who are of the Brahmaputra valley origin, and a sizable number of the Manipuris and tea-garden labourers who came from Manipur and Northern India respectively. The Koches, locally known as Dehans, came to Cachar in the 16th century, the Dimasas in the 18th century and the Manipuris and the Tea-garden labourers in the 19th century. The main body of the population of the valley is, however, formed by the Bengalis (locally known as Sylhetis) who constitute, according to 1971 census, more than eighty percent of the population in Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj districts. In the Bangladesh portion of the valley (viz., Sadar Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj districts) the percentage of the Bengali population must be still higher. These Bengalis are the descendants of the early Indo-Aryan settlers who were responsible for the state and social formation processes in the Surma Barak Valley since 5th century A.D., if not earlier. Besides the geographical structure and the population, the pan-Indian culture continuum in the valley is also borne out by the place names; the names of the hills, river and the villages. The villages like Krishnapur, Bishnupur, Brahmagram, Kayasthagram, Fulbari, Dasgram, Panchgram, Chandrapur, Meherpur, Sonapur, Jalalpur, Kabuganj etc., as they are in the Barak Valley in the states of political organizations which emerged in Eastern and South-Eastern Bengali during early periods.

The epigraphic, numismatic and literary evidence prove into the political organizations in the Barak Valley during the 5th to 12th century A.D. The Tripuri State Formation, which started in Cachar plains in 5th century A.D. gradually covered modern Sylhet or western part of the undivided Barak Valley and ultimately moved to modern Tripura region. Hieun Tsang noticed the existence of independent Srihatta (Silichatal) in the 7th century A.D. In the same century, the Chandrapur area of Sylhet was mentioned as a *vishaya* (district) of Kamarupa in the Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman. The Tipperah Copper plate of Lokanatha (7th century A.D.) mentioned Jayatunga (Jatinga) as a *Varsa* (province) of Samatata and Suvanga (Subang) as a *Vishaya* within that *Varsa*. The Kalapur Copper plate of Marundanatha (7th century A.D.), successor of Loknatha, also suggests that the valley was included in Samatata during his reign. In 8th-9th Century A.D., the valley formed part of Harikela state. This is known from the Chinese accounts, literary works and a large number of Harikela coins with ‘*Vereka*’/‘*Vireka*’ (Baraka) legends. The Paschimbhag Copper plate of Srichandra of East Bengal mentioned Srihatta as a *Mandala* (division) of *Pundravardhana bhukti* (province) of the Chandra State. The Srihattamandala inscription includes three *Vishayas*, viz., Chandrapur, Garala and Pagora. Two Bhatara Copper-plates of 11th-12th century A.D. recorded the existence of a sovereign

'Srihattarajya' which covered the entire geographical length and breadth of the Surma Barak Valley. The history of the valley in this period represented the pan-Indian culture continuum. The political organizations were in Brahmanical model of state formations. The epigraphic records mentioned about the persons belonging to various castes (*Varna*) and sub-castes with titles like *Sharma, Bhatta, Bhati, Dutta, Dum, Ghosh, Sen, Das, Deb, Dhar, Kar, Pal, and Palit* etc. which are still extant in the Barak Valley society. The foundation of the local society must have been laid in that period.

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

CONCLUSION

During the British regime, the region was an administrative unit under the province of Assam reorganized in 1874 and for a period covering more than half of a century it had been called the Surma Valley for administrative purpose and as such this identity of the region was very popular. Bounded by the ridges of the Borail Hills on the north, the Hills of Tripura and Mizoram on the south, lofty mountains of the Angami Naga hills and Manipur on the east and the plains of the East Bengal, more specially the Meghna Valley (Dhaka-Mymensingh- Comilla), the geographical formation of the region clearly shows that it forms the eastern most continuation of the Bengal plain. It may be mentioned here that the geographical formation of the valley excludes the modern district of North Cachar Hills which constitute the part of the administrative Surma Valley organized by the British Rulers. The Indian portion of the region is now popularly known as the Barak Valley, covering the geographical area of the modern Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi of the Assam state. But the Bangladesh portion continues an administrative unit of the country in the form of 'Sylhet Division' constituted with Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj Districts. The geographical formation of the region clearly indicates that the region forms a valley of the rivers Barak and Surma. So, the geographical name of the Valley is known as "Surma Barak Valley" following what Nihar Ranjan Roy prefers in his '*Bangalir Itihas*' (3rd Edn., Calcutta – 1980. vol – I, P – 80).

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