

## From Subanga to Bikrampur : a study of Social Formation and Political Transition in North-Eastern part of Cachar plains in South Assam : 661-1736

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The social formation in Barak Valley has a long history, which were sought to be traced in the 7th century A.D., when the north eastern extremity of the vast track of land which may be termed as the natural extension of Gangetic Bengal<sup>1</sup>, covering the area from the border-land of Sylhet upto the Barail range in the north, where the plains have come across a terminus point marking a breakway with the hilly regions beyond the plains. The emergence of Tripura, Kamrup, Samatat, Harikel and Shrihatta rajya in greater Bengal covering the north east Indian sub-continent, had its impact on the track of land, known as Barak valley with the inclusion of portions of the land within their territory, which however, is not possible to arrange in chronological order, as the studies on the early state and polity formations in the region have only shown the probability of the emergence of the polities covering more or less the same track of land, very often at the same time, in parallel, offering a puzzle to the researchers as to how to arrange them one after another in succession. It is more probable, the period had witnessed more than one state-power in the Sylhet-Cachar-Tripura, and the neighbouring area within a common time-span, and their influence extended in several areas within the common geographical parameter. Given the possibility of existence of more than one state-power within a common time-span, it is natural to assume that, they had existed side by side, interacting with each other, even sometimes one dominating the other.

Of course, the source-materials in the study are primarily the land grants recorded on Copper-plates, coins, and the evidence from the accounts of the authors of *Rajmala*, Buranji and other literary records. Of the Copper-plates discovered in the North-eastern region, the Tripura Copper-plate of Adi Dharmafa in 661 A.D., thereafter the Nidhanpur-copper plates throw some light on the early formation of the valley. And the discovery of Harikel coins, again, revolutionised

the study of social formation placing the hypothesis on a sound basis<sup>2</sup>. For the study of social formation in the north-eastern portion of Cachar-plains in Barak Valley, the Copper-plate of Tripura<sup>3</sup> is among the earliest of the records to throw some light on the location of the place on the valley of Jatinga, which was later on to witness the emergence of society and villages, the process reached a culminating point in the middle of second millennium A.D., especially in the immediate pre-Dimasa period, the process of the extension of which, however, started about one and a half century before the actual shifting of Dimasa capital from Maibong in N.C. Hills to the plains of Cachar in Barak Valley.

(ii)

The area covered within the scope of the present study extends the land from the foot-hills of Barail range in the north-eastern and western portion of Cachar plains, in the valley of Jatinga (in Cachar plains), where the river attained navigability originating, however, in the N.C. Hills and finally merging with Barak at a place situated about 10 k.m., from Silchar town.

The purpose of the present study is to have a glimpse of the early formation in the area under study, on the evidence of external sources, coupled with field study, and to trace the process of extension of Dimasa rule in the plains of Cachar, in which process the area under study had a role to play.

(iii)

The Barak Valley is believed to have been included within the territory of Samat Kingdom in South-east-Bengal. That is testified by the Loknath Copper-plate of Tripura. From that source, it is learnt that the feudal king Loknath had granted a vast tract of land in 'Subanga-Vishya' within 'Jaytunga-varsha', for the construction of a temple of Anantanarayan, and for the settlement of one hundred Vedic Brahmins. Scholars have<sup>4</sup> indentified the Jaytuga-varsha (province) as Jatinga-valley where a village named Subanga (later on included within a tea-estate) still exists in the same nomenclature. That land grant might have been the first attempt on the part of state-power towards the extension of wet cultivation in the north-eastern

part of Cachar plains, the objective behind the settlement of Brahmins being primarily to initiate the extension of agriculture in the untilled, uncultivated lands. The advance of Brahminical settlement towards the north-eastern region, as a matter of fact, had brought about the wet-cultivation in its initial stage, the process gained momentum in the 15th, 16th century with the emergence of Islam-cult and with a number of pirs, fakirs initiating what may be termed as an agricultural revolution in this part of north-east region<sup>5</sup>.

It is yet to be known whether the one hundred Vedic Brahmins could actually avail themselves of the land-grant, or the temple of Anantanarayan could be constructed at all in that locality. The entire area was covered with thick forest, abound in wild animals, snakes etc., and above all, the land was swampy and inhospitable, and as such the grantees could in all probability not succeed in availing themselves of the offer made to them, otherwise, the demography of the area and its neighbourhood would have been different in the years to follow.

But, the area under review in all probability came under the influence of state-power of Bengal, which may be testified to from the inflow of immigrants of people from Bengal in the period from 10th, to 15th century A.D., forming a demography very much akin to that of Sylhet-portion of Bengal, to which, however, we shall refer in the following section.

#### (iv)

There is a wide gap between the Loknath Land grant and the advance of the Dimasa power under Jashanarayana in 1602 A.D.<sup>6</sup>, in the north-eastern part of Cachar plains, the intermining period of which had witnessed a remarkable progress in social formation in the area. The period following Loknath grant, the valley of river Barak had experienced several socio-economic and political transition with Kamrup rajya, Shrihatta-mandala/rajya, Tripuri revival, and Koch polity influencing the fate of the land, in succession and/or in parallel, which however, had its impact in the north-eastern part of Cachar plains too. The valley of Jatinga river in Cachar plains had witnessed a large immigration from Jayantia rajya under Shrihatta (truncated), as well as from Dimapur in Nagaland. The immigrants were mostly

Muslim-converts from the nature worshipping tribe, (of the pre-Hinduised state) Dimasa<sup>7</sup>. They had undergone a process of double metamorphosis-from the tribe to Muslim and thereafter to Bengalis. There are quite a few families in the area as well as in other parts of Barak valley, belonging to that group who still testify to that peculiar heritage of theirs, most of whom however, by a long historical process have been integrated within the Bengali society. Besides, a significant portion of Hindu community of lower strata bear testimony to their immigration-history from Jayantia (they are referred to as Jaintapuri). In their oral tradition, in their ritualistic songs, 'geet', as they are termed, where a nameless Jayantia raja is figured who is referred in their songs to have constructed a road. Did the road lead these people to Barak valley or elsewhere is a question to be resolved by more intensive research. There are evidences of trade relation of the people of Barak valley with Jayantia, which were carried out through the water-ways. The pumice (Jhama-stone) used in the steps of ponds in the villages of the valley, the grinding stones, the most essential ware in the kitchens in Cachar and elsewhere, were imported from Jayantia.

In the meantime, the Koch principality had established itself with Khaspur as the capital, and the Koches had brought a greater portion of Barak valley within their territory. But we are doubtful as to whether the Koch rule had extended beyond the western bank of Jatinga river, as, although there was a number of pockets in the eastern bank of the river, settled by the Koches, Dehans or Rajbanshis, as they are locally termed (in Leburband, Jhampirband, Lalbag, or in the outskirts of Daloo Tea-Estate), but no such settlement on the other side, except for a very small settlement in Gorerbhitur, in the midst of Dimasa settlement.

In North Cachar again, the Dimasa Kingdom, under the leadership of Jashanarayan, had become more and more powerful, who, after having defeated the Jayantias, Ahoms, and the Mughal, now directed attention towards Barak Valley<sup>8</sup>. The king Jashanrayan made an expedition towards the plains of Cachar, had conquered a portion of the north-eastern foothills of Barail, bordering North-Cachar hills, and proceeded towards Pratapgarh in Karimganj. That particular portion was the area of Jatinga valley from Bikrampur to Barkhola where in the preceding years the administration of Shrihatta rajya or

of the truncated Shrihatta rajya had been prevailing; the king of Maibong, on arriving in this land did not encounter the Koch or Tripuri state-power; he faced a representative of Shrihatta rajya, and as such the coin he issued in 1602, declared him as the 'Conqueror of Shrihatta'<sup>9</sup>.

As we have noted earlier, there had been a flow of immigration in the plains of Cachar from Shrihatta, more specifically from Jayantia, and a social infrastructure had developed in this region at par with the pattern of Shrihatta, and the person/persons holding power over the land, be he/they the chief of a Khel or of the pre-khel state, owed allegiance to the king of Shrihatta; the Shrihatta-connection could be testified from the meaningful place-names in the region, in addition to the demographic pattern.

The occupation of the area by Jashanarayan and annexation to the Dimasa Kingdom, however, introduced a de— rule leaving the area under a de facto administrator who might have enjoyed a considerable freedom under the circumstances.

#### (v)

The extension of Dimasa rule in Cachar plains have three stages, the first stage being the advance of Jashanarayan in 1602, while the second stage was the most crucial hour in Dimasa state with Maibong being seized by the Ahoms, under Rudra Singh in 1706 A.D.<sup>10</sup>, when the king Tamradhvaja sought a temporary shelter in Cachar-plains, at Gorer-bhitar in Bikrampur Paragana, which however emerged at a considerable time before hand, where an administrator 'was granted a rent-free estate to encourage more Bengali immigration from the west'<sup>11</sup>. The source is not specific as to who had granted the estate, although the name and original residence of the grantee is furnished in the source<sup>12</sup>. Of course, there is no source or any reference which could establish the relation of Bikrampur with Khaspur under the Koch-rule. The immigration of the administrator in Bikrampur from Dhaka, and his encouragement towards immigration from Bengal, on the other hand, establishes his connection with Bengal, to which, however, the Dimasa influence in addition may be justified.

The stay of Tamradhvja in Gorer-bhitar in the north-eastern part of Cachar-plains for one year (1706-1707) definitely marked an important phase in the extension of Dimasa rule in the plains of Cachar. The stay of Tamradhvaja in Cachar had re-affirmed the Dimasa dejure occupation of the land a century ago. The accompanying Dimasas from Maibong, who had settled in and around Gorer-bhitar were the first batch of Dimasa settlers in Barak valley, who gradually had fanned out throughout the north-eastern part of Cachar and areas beyond, in the days to follow.

With the Dimasa king staying for one year, the Bikrampur Pargana gained much in importance, being a secure shelter in the plains of Cachar, resulting in more immigration, thus, laying down the foundation of new settlements in the north-eastern part of Cachar. In close proximity is the emergence of another important village on the bank of Jatinga which marked a significant stage in the process of social formation in this portion of Barak valley in the 15th-16th century A.D. There emerged another leading figure in that portion, Maniram, the son of Chandlaskar of Barkhola', who was offered a royal Sananda by the Dimasa king Kirtichandra from Maibong in 1786<sup>13</sup>; the occasion marked the third phase towards the process of extension of Dimasa rule in Barak valley, which culminated in 1750 with the Khaspar kingdom formally annexed to the Dimasa rajya, with Gopichandradhvaj as cending the throne<sup>14</sup>. The issuance of Sananda in 1736 may be looked upon as the most effective move on the part of Dimasa king in Maibong to establish their foothold on Barak valley. A close study of it reveals that, by now the greater portion of north-eastern part of Cachar plains were measured by the court; there is a clean demarcation of the land over which the right of Uzir was recognised. The Sananda reads thus<sup>15</sup>.

Your jurisdiction being Boila howar on the east, west of Tahir (Pathakair) on the we— with inclusion of Tahir within barkhola boundary, on the north Panighat and on the West the Bar-Barak.

The clear geography of a greater portion of north-eastern part of Cachar as given in the royal Sananda indicates that the land in the plains were scealed thoroughly by the royal-court, and the revenue assessed.

Besides the family of the Uzir-appointed, there were a number of families of high standing in and around the area, who had a long tradition behind, whose rights in the land were also recognised on the same occasion. The same Sananda reads again.

And likewise Mazumdars and Barbhuiyas within your jurisdiction will indisputably inherit their respective title.

Thus we see, when the third and penultimate move was made by the Dimasa king from Maibong towards the extension of Dimasa rule in Barak Valley, it was the north-eastern part, through which they made their appearance, and the area, by then had already passed through the significant phases of social formation, breaking away with mediavalism, acquiring the infra-structure of a pre-modern society, over which the Dimasa rule were to superimpose itself, introducing new system and at the same time giving recognition to the existing ones. The term 'Kacharir niam' (the rule of Kachar) needs a brief explanation. It may be construed to be the rule of the 'estate', or the rule as existed in Cachar-plains, as the valley acquired the nomenclature, 'Cachar', long before the Dimasa, who are also known as 'Kacharis' had set their feet in this land.<sup>16</sup> In a recent study it is reaffirmed that by the rule of Cachar is meant exclusively the rules as were in existence in the plains of Cachar, to which the new administrator gave a royal recognition.<sup>17</sup>

To sum up, in the process of social formation, the north-eastern part in Cachar plains played an important role, although the southern part seems to have witnessed the earliest habitation/settlement in Barak valley, as testified to by the relics of Bhuban shrine, and the relics/traditions of Tripuri rule.<sup>18</sup> But the picture of social formation in the north-eastern part is more clear than that of the south, which becomes more and more clear as the Dimasas made their advance towards it, ultimately annexing the entire valley within their territory, shifting their capital from the N.C. Hills, making themselves part and parcel of the social structure in Barak valley in southern Assam.

#### References :

1. N.R. Roy in his *Bangalir Itihas* p. 69 (reprint 1400 B.S.), has referred to this land as the eastern part of Meghna valley (Maymonsingh-Tripura-Dhaka).

2. B.N. Mukherjee, *Trade of Early North-Eastern India*, (New Delhi, 1992) p. 111-113.
3. R.M. Nath, *The Background of Assamese Culture*, (Shillong 1949). p. 75.
4. R.G. Basak, "Trippearah Copper-plate", *Epigraphica Indica*, Vol. 15, No. 19, p. 301-335; Dr. N Bhattachali, "Lauhitya-purba Bhukhander Pratnaishwarjee, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Puia special, 1352 BS.
5. Although the advent of Islam and sufism had brought about a change in the external life of the people by bringing them under an institutionalised religion, simultaneously it brought along a change in the economic life. A close study of the syncretic-cult in Sylhet and in Barak Valley (especially in Karimganj district) would reveal that the Muslim pirs, earned a niche in the folk-pantheon, venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike-have revolutionised the agro-economy of the time Badsa, Baghai, Manikpir, Sonagazi and such others who have proved to be a cementing factor for the diverse society, have provided necessary spiritual force to the people to encounter the onslaughts of nature. Sujit Choudhury in his work on the subject has left a meaningful suggestion in this regard. It is, however, his conjecture that the folk godlings in Bengal (Badsa in Barak valley) have brought a vast tract of land under cultivation in between 14th to 16th century in this part of N.E. Region. For details, see *A study of the Folk cults of the Bengali Hindus of Cachar District*, (unpublished Ph.D. thesis G.U. 1981).
6. N.G. Rhodes, "The coinage of Kachar," *The Numismatic Chronicle*, No. 146 p. 17, 1986.
7. This was dealt with by the present author in an unpublished paper, "Social Transition and Village life : Study of Barkhola village in Barak Valley - 1736-1921", presented in a Seminar in R.S. College, sponsored by ICSSR, Shillong, 1991.
8. J.B. Bhattacharjee, "The Pre-Colonial Political structure of Barak valley", *Essays on North-east India* (ed., Milton S.Sangma) 1994.
9. Rhodes, *op. cit.* p. 17.
10. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam*. (Gauhati-1981 reprint) p. 255.

11. U.C. Guha, *Cacharer Itribritta*, (Gauhati 1971 reprint) p. 97.
12. J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in North East India*, (New Delhi 1977), p. 17.
13. P.N. Bhattacharjee (ed). *Hedemba Rajyer Dandabidhi*, (Gauhati, 1317 B.S.) p. 23, 24, 25.
14. J.B. Bhattacharjee, *Social and Polity Formation in the Pre-colonial North east*, (New Delhi, 1991), p. 149.
15. A literal English version of the sananda of 1736, was given by the Dimasa historian, N.K. Barman in his *Queen is of Cachar or herambo and the History of the Kachachhari*, (2nd edition, Barkhola, 1992), pp. 218-219.
16. J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Prak-Dimasa Yuga Barak Upatyaka", Souvenir, 14th General Annual Conference, Barak Upatyaka Banga Sahitya O Sanskriti Sammilan, Silchar, 1994 (ed. S. Deb laskar.)
17. Amalendu Bhattacharjee, "Barak Upatyakay Arya Brahmanya Bhaber Suchana - "Gaveshand Parishad Patrika Vol. 1, No. 1, 1995 a research Journal published by Barak Upatyaka Banga Sahitya O Sanskriti Sammelan (ed Dr. A. Mazumdar.).
18. S. Deb Laskar, From Swarnakhyapur to Sonai : A study of Social Formation and Transition in South Cachar in Barak Valley, *Proceedings, NEIHA, Silchar session 1995*, published Shillong, 1996.