

Polity Formations, Inter-Regional Trade and Cross-Cultural Relations in the Barak-Surma Valley*

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The polity formations, inter-regional trade and cultural relations in the Barak-Surma Valley (or the ancient *Śrīhaṭṭa* region, now divided between India and Bangladesh) in the early period were conditioned by the geographical location of the area. The geographical extent of the Valley covers three districts of Assam, *viz.*, Cachar (Silchar), Hailakandi and Karimganj, besides the Jatinga Valley in the North Cachar Hills, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura (all in India), and four districts of Bangladesh, namely, Sadar Silhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. Of these present districts in India and Bangladesh, Sadar Silhet, Karimganj, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj were all subdivisions of the Sylhet district in the British period when Silchar, Hailakandi and Haflong (North Cachar Hills) were sub-divisions of Cachar district. These two districts (*viz.*, Cachar and Sylhet) were together called the Surma Valley ever since these were transferred to Assam (from Dacca division of Bengal) in 1874. The Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam-Tipaimukh area) was transferred from Cachar to Manipur by the British in 1834, while the

Dharmanagar-Kailasahar areas of ancient Śrīhaṭṭa (modern name, Sylhet) was integrated into the Tripuri state in the pre-colonial period. The Jatinga Valley formed part of the Dimasa state (*Herambarājya*) since the 16th century A.D. and, along with the North Cachar Hills, it formed part of the Cachar district till 1953. Sylhet was the most important town in the undivided Valley and it is situated on the bank of the Surma (which is a branch of the river Barak). The British Government, therefore, named it Sūrma Valley as an administrative division in Assam in 1912. However, the main river, which formed the valley, or the river after which the valley is named, is the Barak. When the major part of the Sylhet district (leaving Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at the time of the partition of India in 1947, the name Surma Valley fell into disuse. The Indian portion of the valley today is called the Barak Valley after the principal river of the tract. In ancient times, the entire Barak-Surma Valley was known as *Śrīhaṭṭamaṇḍala* (Paschimbhag Copper-plate of 10th century AD) or *Śrīhaṭṭarājya* (Bhatera Copper-plates I and II of 11th century AD) at various points of time. The Valley is indeed a natural extension of the Indo-Gangetic Bengal plains.

The physical features mark only a slow and gradual change as one travels from this Valley to anywhere in Bengal and *vice-versa*. It is flanked on three sides by the hills forming virtually a high wall (the Khasi-Jaintia hills, North Cachar hills, and the hills of Manipur, Mizo hills and the hills of Tripura). Only on the western side, the plain districts of undivided Bengal follow it in spontaneous succession. The landscape, by and large, remains unchanged from the foot of the mountain chain that borders the Cachar plains on three sides to anywhere in Bengal or beyond it, to the heartland of the Indo-Gangetic plains. The alluvial geological formations, the natural vegetation and the climate are similar to those of the neighbouring districts of Eastern Bengal. The Cachar-Sylhet region in ancient times was known as Śrīhaṭṭa (*-maṇḍala/rājya*), and along with the neighbouring districts, like Comilla, Chittagong and Noakhali, it is commonly designated as South-east Bengal (known in ancient times as Samatāṭa, Harīkela, etc.). In fact, the geographical features tied the Cachar-Sylhet region with the neighbouring Samatāṭa (Southeast Bengal, i.e. the

districts of Comilla/Tipperah, Chittagong, Noakhali, etc) and Vanga (East Bengal, i.e. the districts of Maimansingh, Rangpur, Dacca, Bikrampur, etc).

The river Barak rises on the southern slopes of the mountain range which formed the northern boundary of Manipur, descends on the Cachar plains in Jiribam and flows across the modern Cachar and Hailakandi districts to Badarpur in Karimganj district. It then moves further to Haritkar where it is divided into two branches, *viz.*, the Surma and Kosiyara, and both the streams enter the undivided Sylhet district of Bangladesh. The Surma flows through the Jayantia (Jaintia) *parganas* and touching the Sylhet, Chhatak and Sunamganj towns it enters the Maimansingh district near Dhirai. The Kosiyara further divides itself into two branches, one branch resumes the original name, i.e. Barak and the other is known as Kalni. The Kalni joins the Surma in Ajmiriganj (an important port) on the Sylhet-Maimansingh border, while the other branch (i.e. Barak) bypasses the important towns of Nabiganj and Habiganj and then it also joins the Surma near Dhirai. The combined stream now takes the name Dhaleswari and finally empties itself into the Brahmaputra (near Bhairab Bazar in Maimansingh), which, at a short distance from that point, joins the Meghna. During its long course of more than five hundred miles through the Barak-Surma Valley, the Barak receives innumerable tributaries from the Garo Hills, Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills, North Cachar Hills, Manipur, Mizo Hills and Tripura.¹ However, the Barak of Cachar-Sylhet becomes Dhaleswari in Maimansingh, and then it joins the Brahmaputra (in East Bengal) to merge into the Meghna and, finally, flows into the Bay of Bengal. It was for this geographical reason that the Barak-Surma Valley became a social and cultural extension of Bengal. The 'Indo-Aryan' settlements must have extended to the valley from Bengal in early times in its spontaneous eastward march to the farthest limit of the agricultural plain land. The newcomers moved along the familiar terrain and stopped at the foot of the hills, which encircled the valley from three sides. Since these hills were not suitable for plough cultivation, the 'Indo-Aryans' might not have moved further. On the other hand, the flood affected marshy plains were uninviting to the 'Indo-Mongoloid' dwellers of the

neighbouring hills, who were *jhumias* (shifting cultivators) by occupation. The same hill range separated the Barak-Surma Valley from the Brahmaputra Valley and made the migrations between the two valleys difficult. In the words of K.L. Barua: "Sylhet is to the south of the Assam Valley separated by the Garo, the Khasi, and the Jaintia Hills. There was never any easy communication between Sylhet and Kamarupa in the past."² On the other hand, there was no natural boundary between Sylhet-Cachar region and the neighbouring districts of East Bengal and the communication was unhindered. Nihar Ranjan Roy, therefore, said: "The Barak-Surma Valley is nothing but the northern section of the Meghna Valley (Dacca-Maimansingh-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."³

Polity Formations

The state and polity formation processes in the Barak-Surma Valley (or Śrīhaṭṭa region) in the early period had been influenced by the geographical structure of the region. The geological data suggests that parts of Sylhet and the adjoining districts of Eastern Bengal were under the sea in the early periods. The silting continued till the early centuries of the Christian era and initially the elevated patches of land were encircled by water. The isolated land masses were brought under settlement and cultivation and eventually they grew into *janapadas* like Puṇḍra, Sumha, Vanga, Samataṭa, etc.⁴ The scholars have suggested on the basis of the *Kālikāpurāṇa*, *Yoginī Tantra* and other literary evidence that the Barak-Surma Valley was once included in Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa.⁵ However, Panini's *Aṣṭadhyāyī* (c. 5th century BC) spoke of Suramasa as a *janapada* to the east of Vanga and V.S. Agrawal identified this *janapada* (Suramasa) with the "Surma Valley of Assam".⁶ On the basis of a reference to some Tibetan records, R.M. Nath was inclined to accept that in the Bihara (*Vihāra*) area of Cachar there was

an ancient kingdom, called Nangata, where a Buddhist king named Sundara Hachi ruled.⁷ The archaeological and religious sites like the cave temples in Bhuban Pahar (Cachar), Unakuti (Kailasahar, Tripura), Rupanatha cave-temple (Jayantia pargana, Sylhet), Siddheswara Siva temple (Badarpurghat, Cachar), Baurbhag Kali temple (Jayantiapur, Sylhet), Hatakeswara temple (Sylhet) and many other extant sites are considered by some scholars as ancient or belonging to the pre-thirteenth century.⁸ Some scholars are also inclined to identify some of the characters and territories mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* in this area.⁹ The scholars may also question whether the ancient shrines and archaeological sites, which are scattered throughout the Valley, could have been established without the patronage of a state power. Nevertheless, on the basis of the evidence so far available it is suggested that the earliest recorded state in the Barak Valley was founded by the Tripuris and this state formation process started sometime before the fifth century A.D. As stated in the *Rājamālā* (the royal chronicle of Tripura), the Tripuri *rājā* ruled first in the Kapili Valley (Nagaon) and then in the Cachar plains. Khalangma (Ruknipar, Cachar) was the earliest known capital of the Tripuri state in Cachar. The extent of the state gradually extended to Sylhet, then to Comilla and finally to present Tripura where Agartala finally became the capital.¹⁰ The *Rājamālā* as well as some literary works of Sylhet ascribe the settlement of a section of the Brāhmaṇas (locally called *sampradayikas*) to the reign of a Tripuri king, named Adi Dharma Pha. He is said to have brought five specialist Brāhmaṇas of five different *gotras* for performing a sacrifice in a place called Mangalpur (Sylhet). After the rituals were over, those five Brāhmaṇas were persuaded by the king to accept a gift of land in the Pañcakaṇḍa area (Sylhet). The land was granted by a copper-plate.¹¹ These Brāhmaṇas subsequently brought another five Brāhmaṇas of five other *gotras*. All the ten Brāhmaṇas subsequently brought their families and some people belonging to service castes. They settled in Pañcakaṇḍa but gradually moved to other parts of the valley. This incidence of land grant suggests that Sylhet area formed part of the Tripuri state. According to K.L. Barua, "this took place about the fifth century AD".¹² Barua's assumption rests on the evidence that King Bhūtivarman of Kāmarūpa made

a land grant in the Barak-Surma Valley in the sixth century AD, as it is known from the Nidhanpur copper-plate of Bhāskaravarman. However, that a part of the valley remained under the Tripuris in the later centuries also is known from another copper-plate by which one Nidhipati, a descendant of one of the donees in Pañcakhaṇḍa copper-plate, received a large grant of land from the Rājā of Tripura in the twelfth century and he laid the foundation of the Ita village.¹³

The seventh century AD seems to have been a landmark in the evolution of the political structure in the Barak-Surma Valley. The Shilichatala, Kāmarūpa, Samataṭa, Tripuri and the Harikela states extended over various parts and some of these either co-existed with or succeeded one another in the valley. The description of Shi-li-cha-to-lo by Hiuen Tsang in his account and the mention of both Shilichatala and Śrīhaṭṭa interchangeably in some medieval Vaiṣṇava literary works convinced some scholars that Sylhet or Śrīhaṭṭa was an independent state at the time of the visit of Hiuen Tsang.¹⁴ The fact that the rule of the Varmana (Varmma) rulers of Kāmarūpa extended to the Valley is known from the Nidhanpur copper-plate of Kumara Bhāskaravarman. This plate (discovered in 1912) describes the renewal of a perpetual revenue-free landgrant by Bhāskaravarman, which was originally gifted to a group of Brāhmaṇas by his great grandfather Mahābhūtavarman (Bhūtivarman) who ruled in the beginning of the sixth century. The donated *agrahāra* land ('*mayūrasālmala*') was in the Candrapuri *viṣaya*. As regards the need for renewal of the grant it is stated in the Nidhanpur plate that the original plate issued by Bhūtivarman was lost and the descendants of the original donees approached the king for a fresh document.¹⁵

The Tipperah Copper-plate (7th century A.D.) of *Sāmanta* Lokanātha mentions the grant of a plot of land in a forest region (*aṭavībhūkhāṇḍa*) called *Suvvanga viṣaya* in *Jayatungavarṣa* for the construction of a temple of Ānantanārāyaṇa (*Viṣṇu*) and for the settlement of more than one hundred Brāhmaṇas who were well versed in the four Vedas. The eminent Indologist, Nalinikanta Bhattasali suggested that the Jatinga Valley of Cachar-North Cachar, which is an extension of the Barak Valley, is the Jayatungavarṣa and the Suvang area of Cachar plains (which adjoins North Cachar and the Jatinga Valley) is

the Suvvanga *viṣaya* mentioned in Lokanātha's copper-plate. A copper-plate of Maruṇḍanātha, successor of Lokanātha, has been discovered in Kalapur (a village in Maulavibazar, Sylhet). By this Kalapur Copper-plate (7th century AD), *Sāmanta* Maruṇḍanātha donated a plot of land measuring one *pāṭaka* and two *drona* for the *balīcarusattra* (worship, oblation and hospitality) of Lord Ānantanārāyaṇa. The land was gifted in the name of the deity of the temple and the Brāhmaṇas.¹⁶ The discovery of Maruṇḍanātha's copper-plate within the Valley further confirmed that the *Sāmanta* rulers of Samataṭa ruled in the valley in the 7th century A.D. R.M. Nath referred to the site and the traditions of an ancient Viṣṇu temple in Suvang (Cachar) to conclude that this might be the location of the temple of Ānantanārāyaṇa mentioned in the Tipperah Copper-plate of Lokanātha.¹⁷ Sujit Choudhury reinforced the argument of Bhattasali and Nath by his study of the folklores and folkcults of the Sylhet-Cachar region.¹⁸ The copper-plates of Lokanātha and Maruṇḍanātha, who were rulers of Samataṭa and possibly feudatories (*sāmantas*) under the later Guptas, show that in the second half of the seventh century the Barak-Surma Valley, or at least a large part of the valley, was included in Samataṭa. The dominance of the rulers of Samataṭa might have extended from the Tripura plains (Comilla) first to the upper region of the valley, then moved northward to Jatinga Valley (Jayatunga), and finally, penetrated deep into the western and southern heartland of the undivided valley. This may be an indication of the end of the Varman rule in the valley after Bhāskaravarman. The Barak-Surma Valley might have been by then integrated into the realm of the *Sāmanta* rulers of *Samataṭa*.

The literary (*Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, *Rudrakṣyamahātyam*, *Rupaciñtāmaṇikoṣa*, *Karpuramañjuri*, *Abhidhanaciñtāmaṇi*, *Dakārṇava*, *Kalpadrukoṣa*, *Kṛityaśara*, *Lingapurāṇa*, etc) and numismatic sources suggest the existence of Harikela as a state in the Śrīhaṭṭa-Vanga-Samataṭa region. R.C. Majumdar, N.R. Ray, and D.C. Sircar opined that Harikela primarily denoted the region known as Śrīhaṭṭa, though its boundaries and political status as an independent territory underwent changes in course of centuries.¹⁹ The hoards of Harikela coins have been discovered in Tripura, Barak-Surma Valley and the adjoining

districts of Eastern Bengal. Although stylistically and palaeologically all these coins are said to belong to the same type, some of them bear the legend either *harikela* or *harikeli* and others either *veraka/vireka* or *piraka* or *lalagiri* or *jayagiri*.²⁰ This shows that there were several autonomous areas in Harikela and the coins were issued in the name of those areas. B.N. Mukherjee suggested that *veraka* or *vireka* should be identified with the Barak Valley.²¹

The Paschimbhag Copper-plate (10th century A.D.) of *Mahārāja Śrīcandra* records his grant of land in three *viṣayas*, namely, Candrapura, Garala and Pagara within 'Śrīhaṭṭamaṇḍala' in 'Puṇḍravardhanabhukti'.²² This shows that Śrīhaṭṭa was then a *maṇḍala* (division) in the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti* (province) and this *maṇḍala* (Śrīhaṭṭa) included at least three *viṣayas* (districts), viz. Candrapura, Garala and Pagara. The description of the boundaries of the donated land in Candrapura *viṣaya*, as given in the Paschimbhag copper-plate of Śrīcandra is identical with that of the Candrapuri *viṣaya* of the Nidhanpur copper-plate of Bhāskaravarman. However, it is clear from the text of the Paschimbhag plate that the Śrīhaṭṭa region was an integral part of Vanga during the rule of the Candra dynasty.

The formation of a larger state at the local level in the Barak-Surma valley was first noticed in the emergence of 'Śrīhaṭṭarājya' (eleventh-twelfth century). The existence of a state called Śrīhaṭṭarājya is known from two copper plates (issued by two different rulers of the same dynasty), which were discovered in a village called Bhatara in Sylhet in 1872. The Bhatara Plate I, issued during the reign of Govindakeśavadeva, gives a genealogy of four kings who belonged to the lunar dynasty and each of whom was the son of his predecessor. These four kings were Navagirvana, Gokuladeva, Nārāyaṇadeva and Keśavadeva. The Bhatara Plate II, which was issued during the reign of Īsanadeva, also gives a list of four kings in the same order (ending with Īsanadeva). By the first plate, Keśavadeva granted 375 plough measures of land, 296 houses and a large number of slaves for the adoration of Lord Śiva, named *Vaṭeśvara*. One of the epithets used for the deity is *Śrīhaṭṭeśvara* (i.e. Lord of Śrīhaṭṭa). The donated lands and houses were scattered in about one hundred villages. The names of the villages and the location and extent of land donated in each

village are mentioned in the text. Most of these villages are still found under original names in Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi districts of Assam, Kailashar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura, and Silhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj districts of Bangladesh. The second plate announced the erection of a temple of Viṣṇu by Īśanadeva on the advice of his minister, Vanamali Kara (Kar), who was a *Vaidya* by caste, and the grant of two ploughs of land for the support of the temple with the concurrence of his commander-in-chief, Vīra Datta. The first plate does not mention the name of its composer, but the second plate records that one Mādhava who belonged to the Dasa (Das) community composed it. The five rulers named in the two Bhatara plates together were Nivagirvana, Gokuladeva, Nārāyaṇadeva, Keśavadeva and Īśanadeva. They ruled in succession.²³ Scholars like Srinivasa Shastri, D.R. Bhandarkar, Rajendralal Mitra and Achyutacharan Choudhury Tattvanidhi were initially inclined to date the plates differently in the early centuries of the Christian era,²⁴ but K.M. Gupta dated them in the eleventh century (1024 and 1049 respectively) and this dating has been accepted by R.C. Majumdar and K.K. Gupta.²⁵ The decline of the Śrīhaṭṭarājya (perhaps in the thirteenth century) led to political disintegration of the Śrīhaṭṭa region and the rise of petty states like Gaur, Laur and Jayantia.²⁶

Inter-Regional Trade

The Barak-Surma Valley region played an important role in inter-regional trade in early times. The Greek and the Chinese accounts provide some evidence on the trade and economy of the region. The Greek geographer, Ptolemy (1st century AD) mentioned Kirrhadia which produced the best quality malabathrum. He also referred to the mountain range called Dammassa which was peopled by Dammassoi. K.L. Barua and others have identified Kirrhadia with Tripura region, Dammassa with North Cachar Hills and the Dammassoi with Dimasa. The Sylhet region, which is located in between Tripura and North Cachar Hills, was also well known for malabathrum, which grew luxuriantly on the western slopes of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills as well as in the bordering areas of Sylhet.²⁷ McCrindle's translation of Ptolemy's account shows that in

the frontier of Kirrhadia there used to be a big trade fair or market in which a huge quantity of malabathrum was traded. The Chinese traders took malabathrum in exchange for silk and they used fine cane mattresses for displaying their goods.²⁸ That Sylhet was the seat of Ptolemy's big trade fair is deduced by some scholars from the fact that this area had always been well known for the cultivation of malabathrum and manufacture of cane mattresses (*sital pati*) and there are references to these items in medieval sources also.²⁹

The earliest datable routes for Northeast India's communication with China and Southeast Asia in the historical period charted by B.N. Mukherjee on the basis of Indian, Chinese and other sources show that several such routes passed through the Barak-Surma Valley as early as the 2nd century B.C. Aloe-wood (*agaru*), sandal-wood (*candan*) and malabathrum (*tejpata*), which grew abundantly in the hills to the northeast and southeast of Sylhet-Cachar, were important items of long distance trade, while the Chinese silk was imported in large quantities. The states were directly involved in external trade in many ways.³⁰ Chattogrāma (Chittagong) was an important port for the region,³¹ while boat-building is said to have been an ancient industry of Sylhet-Cachar.³² Hiuen Tsang found that Shi-li-cha-to-lo was situated near the great sea, to the northeast of Samataṭa. According to him, "the country was situated along the borders of the sea across mountains and valleys."³³ This location of Śrīhaṭṭa was indeed ideal for inter-regional and long distance trade. The discovery of large hoards of Harikela coins is perhaps suggestive of the fact that the economy was at least partially monetized before the twelfth century. The similarity between the Arakan coins and the Harikela coins perhaps hint at the regular trade between the two regions. Chitrarekha Gupta referred to the visit of Wu-hing to Harikela port from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and of Tan Kwong from China to the same port by a southern sea-route, on the basis of I-tsing's records, to suggest that shipping communication between Harikela, Ceylon and China was prevalent.³⁴ Gupta then said, "Coins issued in the names of Harikela, Pattikera, Veraka, Piraka, Sivagiri, Jayagiri, Lalagiri, and some of these coins ranging between c.7th century to 12/13th century A.D. hint at regular and steady exchange programme of the commercial

centres of Chattogram (Chittagong), Tripura, Comilla region."³⁵ She further said, "It is not unlikely that along the lower course of the Brahmaputra, the course of the Barak-Surma and other rivers flowing from the hills of Meghalaya, Manipur region much of the products of the Eastern Himalayas came to the Vanga-Samatata region and were exchanged for food grains and other necessities."³⁶ It need not be said that the Barak-Surma Valley (i.e. the Śrīhaṭṭa region) occupied that unique position in inter-regional trade by the logic of geography by virtue of its location between Vanga-Samatata region and the Meghalaya-Manipur hill region of the Northeast. As B.N. Mukherjee said, "In the Barak Valley area silver coinage, connected with the Harikela currency system, had been in regular use for a long time in the protomedieval period."³⁷

Some epigraphic data of the 7th to 12th century period, though very limited in nature, also reflect on commercial life and inter-regional trade. Both the Nidhanpur Copper-plate and Paschimbhag Copper-plate made mention of a huge potter's pit in Candrapura, while the Paschimbhag plate stated that 52 *pāṭaka* of land was reserved for the *naubandha* (ship-anchorage) at Indeśvara (Indeswar, a village in western Sylhet). This ship-anchor or port might have served the Śrīhaṭṭa region as a network for inter-regional and long-distance trade. The mention of several artisan and trading castes and sub-castes in various inscriptions is a further clue to commercial production and trade.³⁸ The Persian accounts and the early medieval local literature also speak about flourishing trade in the region.³⁹ R.C. Majumdar used the reference in Jayanarayana's *Harilila* (a medieval Bengali text) to suggest that Jayantia was an important market in the ancient period.⁴⁰ The *Jayantia Buranji* also contains some information on Mulagul and Jaintiapur markets in the early medieval period⁴¹.

Cross-Cultural Relations

The geographical location had greatly influenced the racial features and cultural patterns in the Barak-Surma Valley (or Śrīhaṭṭa region). Some of the *Purāṇas* referred to the area as Kirāta territory⁴² (as already stated, even Ptolemy perhaps called the area Kirrhadia) and the settlements of Austric groups

(Khasi-Syntengs) in the lower valley in early times have been noticed by scholars on the basis of folklore and cultural data⁴³. The neighbouring hill areas seem to have been always peopled by the 'Indo-Mongloids'.⁴⁴ The 'Indo-Aryans' reached the valley in their eastward march through the neighbouring districts of Eastern Bengal (Vanga-Samatata of early times) as a natural course of peoples' movements in early times in search of better space for agriculture and livelihood. This process resulted in spontaneous intermingling and assimilation of races. Two eminent scholars of the nineteenth century, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Ramesh Chandra Datta observed that the Sylhet-Cachar area passed through the process of 'Aryanisation' much earlier than many other parts of Bengal and that this area formed part of ancient Prāgjyotiṣa-Kāmarūpa along with the neighbouring districts of eastern and northern Bengal.⁴⁵ In the words of Sir Edward Gait, "... in the Surma Valley (Cachar-Sylhet) and rest of Bengal a mixture of races have taken place in which the recognizable Mongolian element diminishes towards the west and disappears altogether before Bihar is reached."⁴⁶ In the process, the Barak-Surma Valley (or the Śrīhaṭṭa region) got integrated in the pan-Indian cultural continuum. However, the foundation of a cross-cultural society was already laid in the early period by an admixture of the Austric, Mongoloid and Aryan races.

The process of 'Sanskritisation' might have taken place in the early centuries of the Christian era or at least before the fifth century, since the Tripuri state formation started in the Cachar plains about the fifth century⁴⁷. In this context it may be understood that the Brahmanical influence has been found to be a predominant factor in the formations of early states in South Asia, particularly those which emerged from the indigenous tribal social base.⁴⁸ In fact, when Adi Dharma Pha, the Tripuri Chief, wanted to get five specialist Brāhmaṇas to conduct the rituals for a Vedic sacrifice (*Vaidika Yajña*), he requested Balabhadra Singha, the king of Mithilā, to send five Brāhmaṇas of five different *gotras*. The Brāhmaṇas contacted by the king of Mithilā initially declined to accept the invitation, because they were told that the Tripuri territory was in a distant frontier region. The king then sent an emissary to gather information about the land and the people of the area.

The emissary reported that cultured races peopled the territory of the Tripuri king and the holy rivers Barabakra (Barak) and Manu flowed through that territory. Five *Vaidika* Brāhmaṇas then decided to proceed on a pilgrimage to Barabakra and to conduct the sacrifice as desired by the Tripuri king. However, after the sacrifice was over the Tripuri king persuaded them to accept a gift of land and to settle permanently in his territory. They accepted the gift after a lot of persuasion and subsequently brought five more Brāhmaṇas of five other *gotras* to settle in Pañcakaṇḍa.⁴⁹ This incidence of a Vedic sacrifice by the Tripura king shows that the Brahmanical influence had already made its mark in the Barak-Surma Valley before the Brāhmaṇas invited by Adi Dharma Pha for conducting Vedic sacrifice were granted land for settlement in the Pañcakaṇḍa area of Śrīhaṭṭa. As stated by the sources those five Brāhmaṇas of Mithilā had agreed to conduct the sacrifice only after they were satisfied through an emissary that the territory of the Tripuri king (then limited to the Śrīhaṭṭa area only) was peopled by cultured races and the two holy rivers (namely, Barabakra and Manu) flowed through that territory. Moreover, King Adi Dharma Pha could have thought of performing a Vedic sacrifice only when he was aware of its spiritual or material importance. The decision of the king must have been influenced by a desire either to satisfy the wishes of the people or to raise his own status in the eyes of his subjects or to be equal with the kings in the more advanced neighbouring territories. It could also have been for the spiritual well being of the king and the people. However, neither the king nor the people would be interested in such rituals unless the Brahmanical culture had already had some influence in the area. In fact, the *Tīrthacurhamāṇi Tantra* and the *Vāyupurāṇa* referred to the Barabakra (Barak) as a holy river.⁵⁰ The antiquity of the civilization in the Valley can also be inferred from the fact that two of the fifty-one *mahāpīthas* (*viz.* *Grīvapītha* in Gutatīkar and *Bamjanghapītha* in Baurbhag), associated with the *Devī* legend (Śakti cult), are found in this valley. These two centres are referred to in ancient texts like *Mantracurhāmaṇi Tantra* and the *Tantra Curhāmaṇi*. Śrīhaṭṭa also found mention in the *Sādhanamālā* text of the Buddhists as a centre of *Vajrayāna*. The cave temple (Śiva) in Bhuban Pahar (Cachar), Unakuti in

Kailasahar (Tripura), Rupanatha cave (Śiva) in Jayantia parganas (Sylhet), Siddheswara Śiva temple in Badarpurghat (Karimganj) are important archaeological and religious cult sites. The Baurbhag Kālī temple in Jayantiapur (Sylhet) and the Bhairavi temple in Gutatīkar (Sylhet) are *mahāpīthas*. The Haṭakeśvara Śiva temple in Sylhet town, Tungeśvara Śiva temple in Sayasthaganj, Brahmakuṇḍa in Tripura, Taptakuṇḍa in Jayantia parganas, Mādhavātīrtha in Adamaitila, and the Vāsudevbari in Pañcakhāṇḍa are also among the ancient sites. Unakuti in Kailasahar and Siddheswar in Badarpurghat are associated with the *Śāṅkhya* philosopher sage Kapila by a folklore.⁵¹ Some stone carvings in Unakuti are dated to a period prior to the fifth century A.D.,⁵² the icons of Siddheswara to the seventh century⁵³, and the sculptures of Bhuvan Pahar to a period ranging from fifth to tenth century.⁵⁴ As stated already, R.M. Nath talked of a Buddhist state and a *Vihāra* in the Bihara area of Cachar.⁵⁵ These sites and the related folklore and traditions suggest the presence and the coexistence of the *Śakta*, *Śaiva* and *Vaiṣṇava* cults as well as those of the Buddhists.

The epigraphic data speaks of the settlement and presence of people belonging to different *varṇas* and those outside the *varṇāśrama*. The Nidhanpur Copper-plate renewed grant of land to more than two hundred Brāhmaṇas belonging to different *gotras*, *pravaras*, and *Veda-śākhās*, who were descendants of the original donees three generations earlier. It also talked of persons belonging to other castes associated with the management of the Candrapuri *viṣaya* and the preparation of the copper-plate. The copper-plate of Lokanātha talked of a grant of land to a Viṣṇu temple and the Brāhmaṇas associated with the temple. The copper-plate of Maruṇḍanātha also gifted land to a Viṣṇu temple and the Brāhmaṇas. The Viṣṇu in both cases was known as Ānantanārāyaṇa. The Paschimbhag copper-plate granted land to Brāhmaṇas for *balicarusatra* (worship, oblation and hospitality), for the maintenance of four centres of higher learning (*mathas*) in which teachers and students were both locals and those who came from far-off places, as well as for the *Trī-ratna* of the Buddhists. Like the Nidhanpur plate, in this plate also the names, *gotra*, *pravara* and *Vedaśākhā* of the Brāhmaṇas are mentioned. The Paschimbhag plate particularly speaks in great detail about the persons of various castes

engaged in *nava-karma* (nine major functionalities in the *varṇa* society). The Bhatara plate I records gift of land in more than a hundred villages peopled by different races to the temple of *Vateśvara* (*Śiva*). The Bhatara Plate II donated land to a temple of Viṣṇu. These two plates talk of the people of different races and castes. The castes and sub-castes and the professionals mentioned in the Paschimbhag copper-plate include the *Brāhmaṇa*, *Mahattarabrāhmaṇa*, *Kāyastha*, *Vaidya*, *Upadhyaya*, *Chhatra*, *Varika*, *Gaṇaka*, *Mālākāra*, *Tailika*, *Nāpita*, *Kumbhakāra*, *Karmakāra*, *Gopa*, *Taṇṭuvaya*, *Varuji*, *Madaka*, *Carmakāra*, etc. This plate particularly focused on *navaśākhā* (nine branches or classes or castes) and *navakarma* (nine works or professions). The surnames given in various copper-plates include *Śarma*, *Bhaṭṭa*, *Bhāti*, *Svami*, *Ghoṣa*, *Datta*, *Dasa*, *Deva*, *Dhara*, *Kara*, *Naga*, *Kuṇḍu*, *Śoma*, *Seṇa*, *Pālita*, *Pāla*, etc.⁵⁶ An analysis of the data provided by these copper-plates may suggest the existence of a self-sustained but cross-cultural society in the Barak-Surma Valley till about the thirteenth century A.D.

Resume

The historical study of the society and economy of the Barak-Surma Valley in the early period or the period till about the thirteenth century is indeed difficult due to the very limited nature of the source materials that are available. However, it is evident from the sources that the social and polity formation processes in the Valley in the early times was influenced by the geographical location of the region. The 'Indo-Aryan' migrations to the valley must have started before the fifth century A.D. and the waves of immigrations were mainly from the neighbouring eastern and southeastern Bengal, which were then generally known as Vanga and Samatāṭa respectively. Till the emergence of the sovereign Śrīhaṭṭa state (*Śrīhaṭṭarājya* of the Bhatara Copper-plate I) in the 11th century AD, the Valley was mostly covered within the states that rose and fell in those regions. As evidenced by the Tipperah Copper-plate of Lokanātha (7th century) and the Kalapur Copper-plate of Lokanātha's successor, Maruṇḍanātha (7th Century), the area formed part of Samatāṭa, while according to the Paschimbhag Copper-plate of Śrīcandra (10th century) Śrīhaṭṭa was a

maṇḍala within the Puṇḍravardhana *bhukti*. On the other hand, it is evident from the Nidhanpur Copper-plate of Bhāskaravarman (7th century) that in the 6th–7th century at least the western portion (Candrapuri *viṣaya*) of the Valley formed part of Kāmarūpa under the Varmans. Kāmarūpa in that period included parts of Northern and Eastern Bengal, including Maimansingh, and the Chandrapuri area adjoining Maimansingh. This explains the geographical linkages in polity formations and the integration of the region with larger political structures from time to time.

The copper-plates mostly refer to the land grants, settlement of the Brāhmaṇas, construction of temples, royal support to the educational institutions and for the maintenance of shipyards (*nauvandha*), and the existence of the people belonging to various castes (*varṇa*) as well as those outside the *varṇāśrama*. The Austric and the Tibeto-Burman elements, which had settled in the valley in earlier times, might have been gradually assimilated into a larger society, which was largely dominated by the *varṇa* system. However, the co-existence of the various communities and cultural strains are clearly evidenced by the epigraphic records belonging to the period 7th–13th century. The exchange of goods and services with the neighbouring hill tribes could have considerably reinforced the socio-economic processes. Agriculture was undoubtedly the most dominant occupation of the people. Nevertheless, the existence of professionals and several artisan castes is known from the epigraphic data. The short and long distance trade also played a substantial role in the economy of the Valley. The hoards of Harikela coinage discovered in and around the Valley might be suggestive of the large volume of long distance trade that passed through the region. It is possible that the trade had substantially influenced the social and polity formations in the region. The local rulers might have been inspired with ideas of monarchical states through trade relations with distant regions and the cultural traits of other regions could have penetrated into the area through the traders. The existence of the centres of higher learning like the four *mathas* in Candrapura, which received teachers (*adhyapakas*) and students (*chhatras*) not only from the region (*vangala*) but also from other regions (*deśantariya*) as recorded in the Paschimbhag

Copper-plate of Śrīcandra (10th century), can be taken as an index of social and cultural development in the Barak-Surma Valley in the early period.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- * The author is thankful to SAP-DRS (UGC), Department of History, NEHU, Shillong, for assistance extended for preparation of the paper. The section on polity formation in this paper is indeed an abridged but updated version of an earlier paper of the author, entitled "The Ancient Political Structure of the Barak Valley" published in *The NEHU Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, vol x, no. 2, April-June 1992, pp. 1-38.
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- As regards the geographical features of the Barak-Surma Valley, Pamberton wrote : "If we examine a map of this portion of the province (Kachar), it will be seen, that as far east as the Jeeree, 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 to the almost inexhaustible forest of timber, ratans and bamboos, which have always proved a fruitful source of revenue to the former Rajahs of the country. Beyond the Jeeree, 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 peaceful race, devoted to agricultural pursuits; while those of the hills, strong in their mountain fastness, habitually despised the power of the Rajahs of Kachar; and only tendered a trifling acknowledgement of supremacy, to facilitate their intercourse with the frontier bazars of Banskandee, Casspoor and Oodarbund." R.B. Pamberton, *Report on the Eastern Frontier of British India*, p. 206.
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