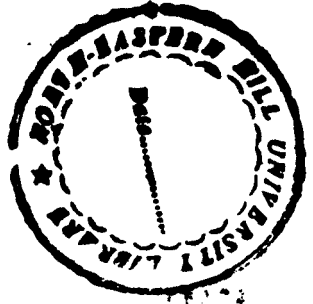


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**PROCEEDINGS OF  
NORTH EAST INDIA  
HISTORY ASSOCIATION**

**FIFTH SESSION**

**AIZAWL : 1984**



## PREFACE

It gives me great pleasure to place on record that the North-East India History association has been able to maintain its tradition of holding the annual sessions and publishing the proceedings volume of every session before the next session without any interruption. Within the first five years of its existence the Association has enlisted members not only from every research oriented institutions of higher education that are spread over the north-eastern region but also those scholars from outside the region who have been doing some research on this region. In five years our membership has increased at least ten times. Our emphasis is on scientific historiography which involves an inter-disciplinary approach to a given historical problem, in the specific context of the north-eastern region of India. The membership pattern of the Association is also representative of the various Social Science and inter-related academic disciplines.

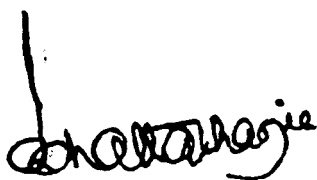
The objective of the Association has seen to encourage and promote research in the history of the region and the adjoining areas historically connected with it. We take some pride in our success on that count. The Association has been able to inspire research inside and outside its own forum. In every session so far, we have come across some scholars who presented their maiden papers. The studies presented in our sessions cover wide-ranging problems, including the issues that are currently confronting the life in the region. The research presented in the sessions have been followed up by the scholars themselves or by others in various forums and publications.

Our commitment has seen our strength. Otherwise, we have been working under several constraints, the most formidable being the problem of finance. The publication cost these days is indeed prohibitive for a non-official research organisation of this nature. And yet, we are required to publish our proceeding volumes out of our own resources. We are nevertheless, hopeful that the social relevance of our works shall some day be appreciated and some funding agency shall come forward to support our efforts. Till then, we shall take pride in the recognition of the academic contents of our works and continue to sustain all by ourselves.

This volume contains the papers that were presented at the Fifth Annual Session of the Association held at the Pachhunga University College, Aizawl on December 18-20, 1984. Professor

Sanat Bose, Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta presided over the session. Pu Saingenga, Principal, Pachhunga University College did us a great honour as Local Secretary of the session which was inaugurated by Shri Lalkhama, Chief Secretary to the government of Mizoram.

We are grateful to the authorities of the Pachhunga University College, its dynamic principal and the members of the History faculty for inviting the session and making the stay of the delegates so comfortable and so meaningful. The teachers and students of the college worked incessantly for the success of the session. This first ever academic gathering of this nature in Mizoram is indeed a milestone in the History of historical research in the region.



(J. B. Bhattacharjee)

Shillong  
The 25th July, 1985

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## An Early State in Srihattadesha : Content Analysis of the Bhatara Copper-Plates

J. B. Bhattacharjee

In the Bengali year 1279 (1877 A.D.) in a village called Bhatara in Sylhet district two copper-plate inscriptions were discovered in a mound (*tila*) called 'Homer Tila' in the estate of Babu Jagachchandra Deb Choudhury, from a depth of about 8 feet in the course of removing old bricks from the foundation of an ancient building. There are 27 lines of inscription on the first and 28 on the second. The full texts of the inscriptions are available in print in a number of publications.<sup>1</sup>

The first inscription opens with a salutation to *Siva* and then gives a genealogy of the four kings who are said to have belonged to the race of the Moon (Lunar Dynasty). The first ruler's name is Navagirvana, his son is Gokula Deva, his son Narayana Deva, his son Kesava Deva. It was the king named Kesava Dev, the reigning monarch, who, the inscription says, granted lands to the extent of 375 plough measures (*hal*; one *hal* = 4 acres), 296 houses, and a great number of slaves for the adoration of the *lingam* (*Siva*) of the name *Vatesvara*. One of the epithets used for *Siva* is *Srihattesvara* (Lord of Srihatta or Sylhet). The lands and houses were scattered in about one hundred villages, and their names (and also the location and extent of land given in each village) are mentioned in the inscription. The second inscription opens with a salutation to *Narayana* (*Vishnu*) and gives a list of four kings who belonged to the lunar race. The first is Gokula Deva, followed by his son, Narayana Deva, followed by his son Kesava Deva (who, according to the inscription, dedicated a temple to the 'destroyer of Kansa' i.e. Lord Krishna), and finally, by his son Isana Deva. According to this inscription, Isana Deva was then the reigning monarch, who erected a lofty temple for *Vishnu* and by the advice of his minister Banamali Kar, a *Vaidya* by caste, and with the concurrence of his commander-in-chief Bira Datta, presented two ploughs of land for its support.

Although the first inscription does not mention the name of its compiler, the second says that it was compiled by one Madhava who belonged to the *Das* caste. On the basis of the information supplied by the two inscriptions, the genealogy of the rulers (in each case, the son succeeding the father) may be constructed as follows :

Navagirvana  
|  
Gokula-deva  
|  
Narayana-deva  
|  
Kesava-deva  
|  
Isana-deva

Although these two inscriptions were discovered more than a hundred years ago and the texts are available in print, we are not aware of any serious attempt to recover the hidden history of this ruling family or the state they ruled. Unfortunately, no other epigraphic, numismatic, archaeological or literary evidence has so far come to our notice. As a result, these two inscriptions are the only source of information about the Deva Dynasty of Surma Valley. No wonder, the author of *Srihatter Itivritta*<sup>2</sup> describes them as the 'torn pages' of the history of Sylhet. It was, nevertheless, expected that the information given by the longish texts of the two inscriptions should have been thoroughly used. In the present paper we shall make an attempt, though feeble, at an understanding of the important features of the state that the kings named in the plates ruled, on the basis of the information given by the two copper-plate inscriptions discovered in Bhatara. We shall also try to identify the state ruled by the Devas by a comparison with the states that presumably preceded, co-existed or succeeded this state in Srihattadesha. In fine, there may be attempts at understanding the structural characteristics of the state on the basis of theoretical frame suggested in other studies.

### Contents<sup>3</sup>

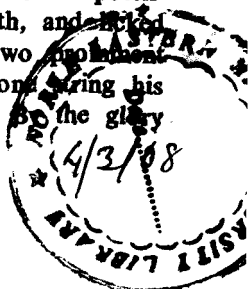
The inscriptions supply us a good deal of information about the reigning monarchs and their predecessors, although they

mostly veer around the personal qualities of their rulers, their high birth, and their strength and valour. The first inscription tells us that in the race of *Siva*, the lord of three worlds, were born many valorous kings whose eulogiums are extant on the land of Bharata (i.e. India). One of them was Navagirvana. He was the noblest of the kings, of fierce arrow, of great renown, the issue of the goddess of royal prosperity. His son, Gokula Deva was the grandfather of the reigning king (i.e. Kesava Deva). The sun-light of his glory caused numbness in inimical kings. King Narayana descended from Gokula Deva. He was churned from the ocean of antagonistic kings, with valiant arms.

Kesava Deva was born of Narayana Deva. He was of unmeasured merit and glory, whose feet were decorated with the jewels of royal crowns. He was the jewels of earthly sovereigns, the destroyer of rival kings. He was the ultimate of wonderful manliness, the abode of fame, the asylum of beauty, the dwelling place of all kinds of learning, the shelter of justice. He is the centre of all light, the source of charity, the home of enjoyment, the jewel of all speech, the store-house of goodness, the personification of all good qualities. He protected the lands of the dependent kings by his arms, became the protector of the good, and revived the festivity of the 'destroyer of Kansa' (i.e. Lord Krishna). This Kesava Deva, who whirled his discuss at his enemies, brought to an end all the children of the race of his antagonists. He had brought this earth under one umbrella by vigour of his arms, wishing not to allow the existence of any foreign possession. He had appointed his hands to replace the *Kalpa* tree, his valour to replace the sun, his fame to serve the purposes of the moon, and his arms in upholding the earth. Having effected the gratification of well-disposed people, having subjugated all sides, and having cast far away all other kings, this king (Kesava Deva) governed as the chief of the eastern kings. His well earned white glory had made the earth white, blighted the bud of the inimical lotus, and blown the lily of enjoyment. The unrivalled fire of the king's vigour flourished. It became manifest by the vapour of inimical kings. It caused torpidity in hostile potentates. It had enveloped the quarters of the earth, and licked the sky. The king, engaged in battle, caused two prominent things to be bent low by his two qualities, - by one string his bow and by the other, the host of his enemies. By the glory

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of that king the whole earth had been over powered - a glory that leaped across many oceans.

*Bhagavan Vatesvara*, a form without beginning, the source of the earth, the lord of the three worlds, unwilling to abide in Kailasa, descended on earth and dwelt on Hattapatak. The king (Kesava Deva), whose feet were emblazoned by the crest-jewels of kings, presented to that crescent-crested divinity, in different villages. He, the devotee of *Siva*, gave to *Siva*, the Lord of Srihatta, lands to the extent of 375 plough measures, 296 houses and many slaves and men of various races.

The inscription then mentions in great detail names of the villages where the lands and houses were donated, and their location, particularly the rivers that traversed such villages. The houses are also specified as dwelling, cooking and cattle-sheds.

The second inscription begins with the adoration of Lord Krishna (*Narayana*) and says that in his (Krishna's) race was born 'the crest of the earth' i.e. king Gokula Deva. By his birth the noble deeds of his race became radiant. He was the all-giving tree to the desires of all who bore arms. He was Gokula, the protector of the earth. His son *Narayana*, was the noblest among the wielders of arms. By beauty and loveliness, he made most charming in appearance. He was the receptacle of all arts, the home of all merits, the assemblage of valour, the substratum of civility, the ocean of gentleness. He was of prominent beauty, and of renowned deeds, the crest-jewel of the universe.

Kesava Deva was the son of *Narayana Deva*. He was the lord of mighty vigour, the oppressor of enemies, a hero like *Govinda (Krishna)*, great as the lord of trees, whose feet were adorned with the crest-jewels of kings. His merit attracted hosts of Brahmins, who, having got all their desires gratified, thought not again of their native places. When he ruled the earth, the kings never slept even at night, always thinking what precious wealth they should present to him. He was the master of an army of innumerable war-boats, infantry, cavalry, and lines of rutting elephants which made the earth glorious by his fame. He presented to the 'destroyer of Kansa', a lofty stone temple, the discuss on whose towering crest so cut up the clouds of heaven that they fell in showers of rain. By his performance of the rite of *tulapurusa* the Brahmins got so much wealth that they were covered with golden jewels, and became like unto the all-giving tree.

Kesava Deva's son was Isana Deva. He was of glorious deeds, the moon among kings. When his mighty army of infantry, cavalry and elephants issued forth, on victory intent, the dust raised on earth eclipsed the glory of the Sun. When his war-boats plied on the aqueous high way, the water was so splashed in masses that it soothed his chariot-horses, fatigued by the oppressive rays of the sun.

The glorious king, Isana Deva, built a temple for *Vishnu* (the enemy of Madhukaitabha), a mansion which licked the clouds, and the flags flowing on its towering crests looked like flowers on aerial trees. Under this lord of the earth there was an able minister named Banamali Kar, a brilliant light in the race of the *Vaidyas*. On the advice of this minister, this patent for two ploughs of land with its dwelling land and corn-fields was issued by the king. It should be upheld by the kindly sposed, by the childless eldest prince, as also by the virtuous wife of the dead prince and his infant son. This was supported by the commander-in-chief, Bira Datta, the noble lord of the battles, the valiant, and the patient, whose fame had spread to the limit of the quarters of the earth.

### Content Analysis

The two inscriptions provide us with some basic information for the purpose of historical research. They no doubt contain a good deal of poetical imagination and attempt at glorifying the reigning monarch and his predecessors, like any ancient text, which should be scrutinised before use. But the inscriptions are conventional historical sources and, as such, deserve the attention of the historians. In fact, we come across considerable data in these two historical documents that are open to scientific analysis.

The inscriptions have introduced us to the existence of a lineage of kings in Srihattadesha, who ruled as sovereigns for several generations. They belonged to the lunar race. They were generous, valiant and valorous. The first two rulers Navagirvana and Gokula Deva reigned peacefully, but Narayana Deva had to suppress rebellions and aggressions by dint of arms. Kesava Deva was a great ruler. He reduced the neighbouring rulers to vassalage and protected them against external aggressions. The information that he was the sole ruler of the earth is perhaps indicative of the fact that there were small kingdoms either in or both in and around Sylhet, and Gokula

Deva was the overlord in respect of others. He was a powerful ruler, and severely oppressed his enemies in the battle-fields. The strong army of the king consisted of all the four branches (*chaturanga*) of the ancient time; viz. infantry, cavalry, elephant and war-boats. Isana Deva even possessed war-chariots, which is supposed to have been an important war-vehicle in the epic and pauranic ages.

The rulers were the patrons of art, learning and religion. Kesava Deva was a *Saiva*, but he constructed magnificent temples in honour of both *Siva* and *Vishnu*. Isana Deva was *Vaisnava*, but he constructed another magnificent temple in honour of *Vishnu*. Kesava Deva performed the *tulapurusa* gift which only the wealthy rulers could afford, because in this rite the donor weighs himself severally against gold, silver, rice, etc. and presents these articles to the Brahmins who conduct the rites. The Brahmins came from far-off places to attend the ceremony and being gratified by generocity of the king decided to settle in his state permanently.

The presence of the Brahmins is essentially linked with the promotion of education and aryan culture. The fact that the composer of the second inscription belonged to the *das* caste suggests that education (and that too Sanskrit) was not confined to the Brahmins alone. The caste system was prevalent in the society. There were *Brahmins*; the kings were *kshatriyas* (wielders of arms); Bira Datta, the commander-in-chief, was a *kshatriya* (*kshatra-kula-bhushana*); Banamall Kar, the minister, was a *Vaidya* (*Vaidya-kula-pradipa*); Madhav Das, the composer of text for the second inscription was a *sudra* (*dasa-kulabatangsha*). The titles Like *Deb*, *Datta*, *Kar*, *Das* are still extant in the Bengalee society. That the slaves donated by Kesava Deva to the temple were of different races suggest the co-existence of various races in the state.

### Antiquity

It is indeed a difficult task to ascertain the antiquity of the state ruled by the Devas. After all, the two copper-plates under discussion are our only source. We can, therefore, concentrate only on the dates of the inscriptions that shall correspond to a regnal year each of the two striking kings. The opinions differ regarding the correct reading of the date of the first plate. This is mainly because the first two digits had been considerably scratched over. Pandit Srinivasa Sastri<sup>3</sup>, who on invita-

tion from Luttman Johnson, the Deputy Commissioner of Sylhet, had physically verified the inscriptions, read the figures to be 2928 *Pandavakuladipalabda*, what is popularly known as *Yudhistirabda*. Sastri was, incidentally, the first to decipher these two inscriptions. On the basis of the fascimile of the two plates supplied to him, Rajendralal Mitra<sup>6</sup> believed the date to be 4328 Pandava year, which according to his own calculation was equivalent to 1245 A.D. K. M. Gupta<sup>7</sup>, on the otherhand, read the date as 4151 and showed the equivalent as 1049 A. D. Pandit Achyutacharan Choudhury Tattvanidhi<sup>8</sup> who, like Srinivasa Sastri, had the privilege to examine the original plates with the Choudhury family of Bhatara, was convinced that the date must be taken as 2328 of the Pandava year.

These readings introduce us to an interesting situation. The difference between the dates of Mitra and Sastri is 1400 years, and that between Mitra and Choudhury is 2000 years. The difference between Sastri and Choudhury is 600 years. The closest to each other are Mitra and Gupta, the difference being 177 years. Taking Mitra's equivalence (given by himself) as 1245 A.D., Sastri goes to 155 B.C. and Choudhury to 755 B.C. One however, finds it difficult to reconcile with the equivalences when Mitra shows his 4328 Pandava era as 1245 A.D. and Gupta, his 4151 Pandava era as 1049 A.D. Where as in Pandava era the difference is of 177 years, in Christian era it is 196 years ; a difference of 19 years again. It is, therefore, almost impossible to suggest an acceptable date of the first plate until some epigraphist is able to date it differently.

It is indeed astonishing to note that the scholars, who debated over the date of the first plate, are completely silent about the second. It is dated as 1 *Vaisakh* 17 *Samvat*, and there is no two opinions about its reading. I consulted the almanac to find that we are currently (1984 A.D.) in 2042 *Samvat*. Taking 2042 *Samvat* as 1984 A.D., the 17th *Samvat* becomes 42 B.C. This is the date of the "second plate issued during the reign of *Isana Deva*, who was the son of Kesava Deva. On the basis of the calculus of Varahamihira, Choudhury suggested that between Kesava Deva and Isana Deva there could be a gap of 80 years. This takes us to 122 B.C. as a regnal year of Kesava Deva, and to the very close proximity of the date of Kesava's plate as suggested by Srinivasa Sastri i.e. 155 B.C. Isana Deva thus ruled in first century B.C. and Kesava Deva in second century B. C. Kesava Deva was

fourth ruler in the genealogy given in the first plate. If we allow 40 years of reign in average to each of them, Navagirvana goes to 242 or the third century B.C.

It should, however, be mentioned in this connection that linguistic scrutiny is considered as a scientific method of verification of the dates of epigraphical records. We are not aware of the opinion of any trained philologist about these two plates. N. N. Basu, the well known Indologist, told Achyutacharan Choudhury that the scripts used in the plates are identical with those of the 10th century A.D.<sup>9</sup> R. C. Majumdar observed that "on paleographical grounds the plates can hardly be regarded as earlier than the 13th century A.D."<sup>10</sup> A.C. Choudhury, on the other hand, suggested that the plates must be of pre-seventh century A.D. His argument is based on the contention that of about one hundred villages named in the first plate hardly four to five are distantly comparable with modern names of villages, whereas in the inscriptions of Sylhet of seventh century A.D. onwards the villages named are indentifiable with their contemporary names.<sup>11</sup>

We can also suggest on the basis of certain circumstantial evidences that the Devas must have ruled before seventh century A.D. The account of the Chinese traveller I-sing and the important Sanskrit works like *Karpura-manjari*, *Yadava-prakasha*, *Manjusri-mulakalpa*, *Dakarnava* and others confirm the existence of a state called *Harikela* for about five hundred years since seventh century A.D.<sup>12</sup> The *Rupachintamani*, a lexicon, compiled in 1515 *Saka* (15th century A.D.) says that *Harikela* is the ancient name of *Srihatta*. The author of *Krityasara*, another ancient text, also says that *Harikela* was the name of *Srihattadesha*.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of these sources R. C. Majumdar observed, "It would be quite reasonable to conclude that *Harikela* primarily denoted the region now known as Sylhet, though its boundaries and political status as an independent country underwent changes in the course of centuries".<sup>14</sup> A large number of *Harikela* coins have been recovered in recent years from Sylhet, Cachar, Tripura, Chittagong and other neighbouring districts.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, it can be an important method to enquire into the states that existed contemporaneously, before or after a given state under study for understanding its time, extent and importance. In case of the state ruled by the Devas of Bhatta plates, however, we have not yet come across any record of another state. Nevertheless, the existence of the *Harikela*

state clearly rules out the possibility of such a state during 7th to 10th century A.D. The history of Sylhet since 10th century is, on the otherhand, well connected. There are, no doubt, some periods of disintegration, and it is also possible that some minor and subordinate principalities have gone so far unnoticed. But it is not a sufficient plea to allow a state of the nature described in the Bhatara plates, which was ruled hereditarily at least for five generations and that too as sovereigns over a large number of tributaries. The pre-seventh century period of Sylhet's history, on the otherhand, is still undocumented.

A number of ancient texts<sup>16</sup> suggest that Sylhet and Cachar were included in the ancient Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa empire of the epic period. That a hill in Sylhet is still named after Bhagadatta has even led some historians to believe that the headquarters of Bhagadatta of Kamarupa, who participated in the battle of Kurukshetra, was located in that hill.<sup>17</sup> An inscription (copper-plate grant) of Bhaskar-varman of Kamarupa of the seventh century A.D. was discovered in a village called Nidhanpur in Sylhet.<sup>18</sup> This is believed to be an evidence that Sylhet (and for that matter, perhaps Cachar) was included in the territory of the Varmanas of Kamarupa. Huen-tsang also confirmed that Sylhet and Cachar were parts of Bhakara's empire.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the Varmana rule collapsed after the death of Bhaskara, and it is possible that Harikela emerged over the ruins of the Varmana empire in the seventh century A. D. The period between Bhagadatta and the Varmanas is absolutely undocumented for Sylhet-Cachar region. The Varmanas ruled during fifth to seventh century A.D.<sup>20</sup> It is possible that the Devas of the Bhatara plates ruled in Srihattadesha before the rise of the Varmanas.

That the plates are very ancient in nature is also suggested by some other factors. Firstly, we are told by the inscriptions about the construction of lofty masonry temples by Kesava Deva and Isana Deva. But even the ruins of these are no longer tracable. These are also not mentioned in the literary or foreign accounts that extensively covered the region since about seventh century of the Christian era. Secondly, the first plate mentions sea (*sagara*) as the western boundary of a donated village.<sup>21</sup> It is known from different sources that in ancient times Sylhet and the adjoining districts of Bengal were under sea. The conformation of sandy hillocks and marine shells

confirm this point.<sup>22</sup> With the recession of sea water land began to emerge, when the low-lying areas looked like sea. These lake-like marshy areas are locally called *haor*, which is clearly derived from *Sagar* (sea).<sup>23</sup> In earlier times the *haors* were fairly extensive, and the use of the war-boats by the rulers of Bhatara plates perhaps confirms this fact. Thirdly, the rulers mentioned in the plates or the 'sky-high' temples raised by them are not at all mentioned in the local tales, inspite of the rich tradition of the region in orally preserving history by the rural masses. Fourthly, the use of chariots for war purposes was prevalent perhaps in the puranic and epic ages. Finally, that the plates were accidentally recovered from a depth of eight feet is an evidence of their ancientness.

### Location and extent

The discovery of the plates in Bhatara and the use of the epithet 'Srihatesvara' make it abundantly clear that the Devas were the rulers of Sylhet and the adjoining districts. The inscription also mentions certain words that have survived in the present day Sylhet-Cachar dialect of Bengali, like *gobat* (cattle-route), *hal* (a measure of land), *gam* (village) etc. The mention of the sea as a boundary may not be taken to justify that the state extended to any major sea or ocean, but that they were the rulers of an extensive territory is clear from the inscriptions. The first plate says that the king's fame was extant on the land of Bharata (India) and that he was the chief of the eastern kings. The whole of Sylhet and Cachar, therefore, must have been under their rule.

Rajendralal Mitra believed that these "Rajas were the sovereigns of Kachar (Cachar) and professed to be of the dynasty of Ghatatkach, son of Bhima by Hidimba, the daughter of an aboriginal chief."<sup>24</sup> Needless to say that Mitra had clearly confused the Devas with the Dimasas, and we have shown elsewhere<sup>25</sup> that the Dimasa state did not cover the Cachar Valley before the eighteenth century A.D. Nevertheless, it is quite possible that Cachar Valley formed part of the Deva state of the Bhatara plates. This Valley is a natural extension of the Bengal plains, and the Sylhet-Cachar region is geographically covered in the same valley formed by Barak and its branches. It is the homeland of a culturally cohesive group, ethnically and linguistically identical with the plains dwellers over an extensive territory beyond Sylhet. We are yet to come

across an evidence of an independent principality formation in Cachar before the Tripuris in the thirteenth century. The Tripuri state covered not only Cachar plains but also Sylhet and the Tripura plains. We have discussed elsewhere<sup>26</sup> that the Tripuri headquarters moved from Cachar to Tripura through Sylhet. The earliest known principality in Cachar alone was of the Dehans (Koch) of Khaspur since sixteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The Dehans wrested the territory from the Tripuris, and the Dehan principality eventually merged into the Dimasa state. In the pre-Tripuri times the Cachar plains must have been included in the principalities that covered Srihattadesha. In the absence of specific principality in Cachar, there could be no reason for any ruler to restrict his jurisdiction at an unnatural limit between the modern districts of Cachar and Karimganj (the latter being unquestionably a part of Sylhet in mediaeval and modern times). The historical imagination needs no corroboration to sustain this proposition. Although R. M. Nath<sup>28</sup> conjectured that the cave temple of *Siva* in Bhuban Hills was constructed by the Tripuris, the scholars interested in the field may enquire into the possibility of its being a monument of the Deva rule in Cachar.

The inscriptions make it clear that the Devas were the sole rulers (sovereigns) of their state and that their suzerainty extended over a large number of protected rulers who paid them tribute. Their forces visited distant places for conquest and for the subjugation of rebellious chiefs. They used war-boats and war-chariots, and the fame of their general Bira Datta was felt in far-off places. It is difficult to believe that such boats and chariots would be used for short distant campaigns. The maintenance of the authority over a large number of tributaries must have been supported by the wealth and vigour of the areas under direct rule. After all, it is the authority drawn from the centre that percolates over the pripheries. That the core area was extensive can be understood from the fact that the king could donate lands that spread over at least one hundred villages. The core area, in the present case, must have been at least the Sylhet-Cachar region, while the tributaries could have been spread over the neighbouring areas of modern Mymensing, Chittagong or Tripura. We may take the liberty to conjecture this because we have not come across the evidence of any larger state formation in those areas before fifth century A. D. (the period, to which, we presume, the

Bhatera plates belonged). Ours is, however, only a guesswork, to be corroborated by evidences that may come to light in future.

### Decline

We have no evidence regarding the decline of the Deva state, although it must have declined like any state. Moreover, the Varmanas ruled over the Surma valley, followed by the rise of the Harikela state. Navagirvana is named as the first ruler in the first plate issued by Kesava Deva, but this does not mean that he was the founder of the dynasty. This is because the second plate issued by Kesava's son begins with Navagirvana's son Gokula Deva. A plate issued by Kesava's father, therefore, might have started with the father of Navagirvana. Isana Deva was not the eldest son of Kesava, he was the third son. The inscription tells us that Isana Deva donated the land with the permission of his childless brother, and the virtuous wife of the dead brother and her infant son. This means that Isana Deva had two elder brothers, the first was childless and the second died leaving behind his wife and an infant son. We have no information about the successors of Isana Deva or the infant son of his brother, since no other plate has come to our notice. We have also no information about the fate of the donated land. Although the plate announced that the donation shall "last unchanged as long as the ocean, the hills and earth remain in existence", it could not be binding on the successive governments in ancient times to enable the historians to establish the continuity.

Rajendralal Mitra presumed that "the prince was overthrown by Shah Jellal alias Jellaluddin Khany, who following the footsteps of his predecessor Mulk Tuzbek, led his army to the eastern parts of Bengal, invaded Sylhet in 1257 A. D."<sup>29</sup> Mitra's presumption is based on his misreading of the date of Kesava's plate as equivalent of 1245 A. D. Moreover, Shah Jellal and Jellaluddin Khany were two different persons.<sup>30</sup>

The decline of the Deva state cannot, therefore, be ascribed to the invasion of Jellaluddin in the thirteenth century. It must have declined before the Varmana rule during fifth to seventh century A. D., and in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the rise of the Varmanas may be considered as the cause of the end of the Deva state.

## Features of a State

The data we get from the Bhatara plates are not adequate for understanding the process of state formation. They, however, adequately suggest the existence of a state-like organisation which enjoyed the basic requirements of a state, namely, sovereignty, territory and population. The eulogium convinces us that they were strong, valorous, wealthy, and ruled as supreme. They had subordinate rulers, but there was no higher authority over them.

The authority of the kings was drawn from two important sources ; firstly, the legitimacy of their position as rulers of the people, and secondly, the support of the military forces to sustain their assumed status. The legitimation must have been attained through the priestly class, whose authority in the matter was unquestionable. We know from the plate of Kesava Deva that a large number of Brahmins immigrated into his state and settled permanently. This was, in fact, an essential precondition of a state in ancient India. A local saying in Sylhet-Cachar region claims where there is a king, there must be Brahmins. The Brahmins endowed the king with divine origin. As stated in the plates the Devas belonged to the lunar race, that is one of the two races (the other being solar) to which the ruling families in ancient times invariably had to belong. The Devas were, further, the direct descendants of a line of rulers that originated from *Siva*, the popular Hindu deity. This divine origin of the kings, which gave them legitimacy, could be declared by the Brahmins. In grace and vigour, they have been compared with the moon and the deities like *Siva*, *Krishna* and *Kartikeya*. They are also said to have destroyed their rivals in wars in the same fashion that *Krishna* had annihilated powerful but mischievous king Kansa. Such a projection of the personality of the kings was intended to command the unconditional loyalty of the subjects, and it was an important factor in the process of state formation. The performance of the *tulapurusa* sacrifice by Kesava Deva further sanctified the royal lineage and obliged his priestly beneficiaries to hold him higher in estimation of his people. The king, on the other-hand, was grateful to the Brahmins on whom depended his legitimacy as the ruler of the people. No wonder, he offered them rich gifts and presents.

We have no record of the population of the Surma Valley in pre-fifth century A. D. It is not possible to say when the

settlement of the Brahmins in the area started. However, the first plate makes it abundantly clear that a large number of Brahmins came in from far-off places during the reign of Kesava Deva and that, gratified at the generous hospitality of the king, they decided not to go back to their distant homes. Even if the Brahminical settlements had extended to the region before that date, there is no doubt that their population was substantially reinforced during Kesava's reign. It is also not impossible that the lineage was drawn to glorify the ancestry of Kesava and the predecessors of the reigning king were mentioned to legitimise his position. This has happened in cases where an adventurer establishes a principality or a tribal chieftaincy transforms into a state-like union. In any case, Kesava's reign was crucial in the process of formation of the Deva state. This is presumed from the fact that the priestly class held the key in the early state formations. In the Indian context, the kings were the protectors of the Brahmins and the religion. The inscription says that the king was the protector of the good, of the people and the dependent kings. That he revived the festivity of the *krishna* might also mean that he popularised the festival and this might also be taken as an important development, if not the beginning in the process of Sanskritisation in this extreme eastern part of Bengal which has been described as 'Kirhhadah' '(land of the Kiratas) in some foreign accounts.<sup>31</sup> Our inscription only confirms that the slaves donated to the temple were of various races.

The kings of the Bhatara plates were fountain-heads of the state. Their sovereignty pertained to a specific territory over which they were the supreme authority. The territory has not been named in the plates, but this was perhaps the general feature of the ancient states. The Mauryas and the Guptas, or in later period the Palas or the Senas, are good examples. The kings were known more by their lineage or dynasty than by state over which they ruled. The 'Deva' could be surname (modern 'Deb'), or a epithet meaning 'God'. The kings in ancient times were identical with God, and this was linked with the divine origin of the kingship which endowed them with unlimited or unquestionable authority. The state under discussion may be referred to as *Deva-rajya* or the Deva kingdom. The *Siva* has been described as *Bhatesvara*, who descended on the earth and dwelt at Hattapataka. This Hattapataka must be the capital of the state, because from

*Patak* might have been derived the local word *pat* which means dwelling place, like *raj-pat* or dwelling place of the king. The word *pataka* also means village, and it is not impossible that the Hattapataka was in Bhatara, the village where the plates were discovered since the inscription uses the epithet *Bhate-svara* for *Siva*. Hattapataka may also mean the capital of Hatta or Srihatta, since some scholars, believe that the name Srihatta originated from Hatta.<sup>32</sup>

The Deva state came into existence through conflicts and maintained its existence through continuous conflicts. The inscription says that the king had brought the earth under one umbrella by vigour of his arms, wishing not to allow the existence of any foreign possession. He had churned from the ocean of antagonistic kings, brought an end to the children of the race of his antagonists, and protected his dependant kings by his arms. The arms of the Devas was indeed strong. The inscriptions tell us that the dust raised by Kesava Deva's mighty army of infantry, cavalry and elephants eclipsed the glory of the Sun and the water splashed by his war-boats soothed his chariot horses which were fatigued by the oppressive sun-rays. Similarly, Isana Deva was the master of an army of innumerable war-boats, infantry, cavalry, and lines of rutting elephants. Even the fame of his valient general, Bira Datta, had spread to the limits of the earth.

The state that was established and depended by arms must have also been ruled by arms. We have no data about the nature of punishment and law-making. The inscriptions, however, say that the kings were the shelter of justice and they effected gratification of the well disposed people. The king was, therefore, the supreme law-giver, and he must have been equally harsh towards the disloyal or rebellious subjects as he was to his enemies. In fact, nothing prevented an absolute kingship of the type portrayed in the Bhatara plates to be despotic, or autocratic, or tyrannical. The surveillance apparatus is an important instrument for the sustenance of a military state.

The fact of social stratification is also abundantly clear from the inscriptions. The king was at the apex of the hierarchical state order, which included the nobles like minister and the commander-in-chief of the army. There were also dependent rulers. The caste-system, which envisages a stratified society based on social status and nature of work of its mem-

bers, was prevalent in the Deva state. We have noticed the existence of the Brahmins or priestly class in the Bhatara plates. The kings belonged to the *Kshatriya* or warrior class. The inscription says that the king belonged to the race of all who bore arms and that he was the noblest among the wielders of arms. Isana Deva's minister belonged to the *Vaidya* caste, and the composer of the eulogium was a *Sudra*. We also know that Kesava Deva donated slaves to the temple and these slaves were drawn from different races. The prevalence of the elements of slavery, which is linked with feudalism is thus not ruled out. The lands donated were established villages, with dwelling, cooking and cattle houses and corn fields. The dwelling houses must have been including the dwellers and the cattle-sheds including the cattles, and the right of the king to do so presupposes the feudal nature of relationship. The ownership of the donated land and buildings would now vest in the temple authority, but the dwellers would continue to dwell and cultivate. Although they are the primary producers, the temple authority (the priests) shall enjoy the right to appropriate at least a portion of the production or surplus at their exclusion. Similarly, the economy of the area could not be anything but agricultural, which would suggest the presence of the peasants. The construction of the temples, war-weapons and war-boats required artisans. The kings could maintain a large army only because the population in the state was sizable, while one plate specifically mentions that the population consisted of different races. The occupations must have cut across the racial boundaries, although the professional specialisation 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 methods of appropriation or redistribution. But a state of the type mentioned in the plates could be based only on surplus. That it was wealthy enough is beyond doubt. The inscription tells us that the king was the issue of the goddess of royal prosperity. They maintained large armies, constructed temples, and performed expensive sacrifices. All these needed wealth. A large chunk of income must have been derived through tributes. The inscriptions mention that the feet of the kings were decorated with the jewels of the royal crowns on emblazoned by the crest-jewels of kings, and that the kings were always anxious to present to them precious wealth. Al,

though we have no data about the nature of taxation in the state, the wealth at command of the kings lead us to believe that it was considerable. The gifting of lands with houses, cattle-sheds and corn fields is indicative of the existence of private property. In spite of the lack of data, it can be imagined that the economy was by and large agricultural. The ecology of the area, particularly its base in the river valley, gives this impression, and the mention of the corn-fields in the inscription confirms this view. There is nothing in the inscription to deduce about trade. However, that this area had figured in the trade map in the early centuries of the Christian era is known from other sources. Ptolemy, for example, mentioned that Kirhadiah produced the best *Malabathrum* (*Tezpata*). The people in Sylhet carried on considerable trade in this article even in latter years.<sup>33</sup> That Sylhet was a flourishing trade centre in ancient and mediaeval times is known from several sources. <sup>4</sup> Srihatta, as mentioned earlier, is supposed to have originated from *hatta*, which might mean *hat* or market.

The projection of the king as the source of charity and the all-giving tree in the inscription can perhaps be taken as his public welfare measures. It is such postures that served as powerful weapons in the hands of the rulers in early states to command the loyalty of the grateful subjects. The king has been described as the dwelling place of all kinds of learning. That they patronised and promoted education is evidenced by the fact that even a *Sudra* could compose the text in Sanskrit for the second plate. The generosity extended by the ruler constituted a means of gaining a following, which was expected to help him to reach a higher position. In fact in early states the "economic surplus acquired from the direct producers was used by the ruling hierarchy not so much for simple consumption as to serve political ends."<sup>35</sup>

### **The Early State Model**

As regards the formation of state, a publication entitled *The Early State*,<sup>36</sup> on the basis of twenty one case studies covering all the major regions of the world, suggests that (i) the population growth and population pressure, (ii) war, the threat of war or conquest, raids, (iii) conquest, (iv) progress in production and the promotion of a surplus, tribute, affluence, (v) ideology and legitimation, and (vi) the influence of already existing states are the major factors that inspired the develop-

ment into statehood in most cases. The 'State' here is divisible into 'Early' and 'Modern' on the basis of the stages of development. The Early States are simple, non-industrialized and pre-capitalistic, while the Modern States are complex, industrialised and developing. Engels had observed, "At a definite stage of economic development, which necessarily involved the cleavage of society into classes, the state became a necessity because of this cleavage."<sup>27</sup>

We presume the Deva State as an Early State, although we have no specific data about the process of formation and our inscriptions do not refer to this aspect of the state's history. Nevertheless, we have no difficulty in identifying the elements of war, tribute, affluence, ideology and legitimation that helped Kesava Deva's predecessors or Kesava himself in organising the state. We have indeed considerable data from the inscriptions on the structure of the state, which we may compare with leading studies. Claesen, for example, in his chapter, in *The Early State*, entitled, "The Early State : A Structural Approach" has identified several ingredients of a state. These include (i) territory, (ii) independence, (iii) population, (iv) urbanisation (capital or centre of power), (v) infrastructure (roads, bridges etc.), (vi) trade and markets, (vii) division of labour, (viii) means of subsistence (agriculture, industry, trade, surplus), (ix) social stratification, (x) legitimation of the sovereign, (xi) inequality, and (xii) administrative apparatus.<sup>28</sup>

What we have discussed earlier shows that we have direct data on territory, independence, population, division of labour (caste-system), social stratification, legitimation and inequality. We have also mentioned about the trade and market in the region during the period the state is supposed by us to had been in existence. We also presumed a capital (Hattapataka), and the agriculture as the primary source of subsistence. About agriculture we have clear mention. The mention of the officials like minister and commander-in-chief leaves no doubt about some kind of an administrative apparatus. We have, of course, no data on infrastructure like roads and bridges. But we have some data on public welfare measures, protective role of the king, and his income, the bulk of which came as tributes. The king is also the supreme law-giver and the centre of the administrative and judicial apparatus.

Claessen also identified seven criteria for understanding the structural characteristics of an Early State. These are (i)

a sufficient population to make possible social categorisation, stratification and specialisation ; (ii) citizenship of the state is determined by residence or birth in the territory ; (iii) the government is centralised and has that necessary power for the maintenance of law and order through the use of both authority and force, or the threat of force ; (iv) the state is independent, at least de-facto, and the government has sufficient power to prevent separation, as well as the capacity to defend against external threats ; (v) the population shows a sufficient degree of stratification for emergent social classes ; (vi) productivity is so high that there is a regular surplus, which is collected for the maintenance of the state organisation ; (vii) a common ideology exists, on which the legitimacy of the ruling stratum is based.<sup>39</sup>

Our data is absolutely clear about the independence of the Deva state, its centralised government, and its organised arrangement for defence against external threats, internal dissensions and the maintenance of law and order. The kings, our inscriptions say, succeeded in subduing the rebellions and enlisting the continued loyalty of the tributary chiefs with the help of the organised army that the state possessed. About the ideology or legitimacy of the ruling stratum there is no doubt. The citizenship was determined not only by birth, but the people from outside could immigrate and settle down. The state had population, and it showed stratification and professional specialisation. Whether the population was sufficient for a sufficient degree of stratification for emergent social classes, our data is insufficient to explain. We have also no data on productivity, not to speak of its highness to maintain a regular surplus. There is, however, no doubt that the state's income from tributes was regular and considerable.

The content analysis of the two inscriptions gives us the impression that the Deva state was primarily a military state. It emphasised the strength of the arms and depended on the organised force to depend itself internally and externally. Its military strength received ideological support from the glorification of the ancestry. The administrative apparatus was an organised bureaucracy, and the high officials of the state belonged to the higher ladders of the Hindu social organisation. The income of the state was mainly the tributes, which was extracted by the military strength of the state. The social stratification was a fact of life, and the masses subsisted on

agriculture and trade. But the professional specialisation could not be of a sufficient degree for the formation of the distinct social classes. This is because, the area must have been predominantly tribal (Kirata) and Aryanisation still not a very old phenomenon to guarantee the cleavage of society into classes. It was essentially an 'Early State'.

Claessen also divided his Early States into *inchoate*, *typical* and *transitional*. The *inchoate* state is associated with the dominant kinship, family and community ties in politics. In *typical* states the ties of kinship are counter balanced by those of locality, where non-kinship officials and title-holders play a dominant role in administration. The administrative apparatus is dominated by the appointed officials in a *transitional* state.<sup>40</sup> The data supplied by two copper-plates are, however, hardly sufficient for a confident characterisation of the type of the Deva state. We can hardly suggest that the kinship or family/community tie was dominant in the field of politics, because the important officials of the state like minister and commander-in-chief belonged different castes. At the same time, it cannot be denied that the kingship was hereditary, the king was absolute, and the high officials, including the king, were all high caste Hindus. The locality was undoubtedly an important element, as the power structure operated in a specified area and the officials and the Brahmin advisers belonged to the locality. The lands and the men donated were also from the locality and to a temple within the locality. The officials no doubt were there, but it is difficult to say how dominant was their role. It cannot be assumed that the administrative apparatus was dominated by the officials, since the ultimate authority was vested in the king.

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