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**Environmental Features of Subbuṅga (Subong) as
recorded in the Tipperāh Copper-plate of
Lokanātha [circa 7th Century AD]**

The epigraphic records of early India, including those of the Northeast, are generally very informative about the ecological aspects of the relevant areas and thereby they offer between them interesting data on the environmental changes that substantially affected the ecosystem over the centuries, since such records, particularly the land grants, in most cases, are dated and they do contain description of the donated land with its artificial and natural boundaries and physical features and the flora and fauna.¹ The Tipperāh Copper-plate inscription (*circa* seventh century AD)² is one such epigraphic record which provides significant ecological details of the area where land was donated by king Lokanātha of Samataṭa for the construction of a temple (*matha*) of Bhagavān Anantanāryana and settlement of more than one hundred Brāhmaṇas. The donated land was in the Subong (Subbuṅga) area of Cachar in the Barak-Surma valley. It needs to be mentioned that this inscription was named Tipperāh Copper-plate by the epigraphists, because it was recovered in 1903 from the Comilla area which was then a part of the Tipperāh district of Bengal, although by its content the Copper-plate is related to the Cachar district (of modern Assam).³

Lokanātha, who is mentioned in the Tipperāh Copper-plate as a *Sāmanta*, i.e. feudatory, is believed to have been one of the three feudatories, namely, Lokanātha, Jivadhāraṇa and Jayatuṅgavarṣa,⁴ who are said have come into prominence in the Samataṭa region after the decline of the Gupta empire. The said Samataṭa region, according to the noted Indologist N. K. Bhattasali, was formed by the areas covered in the modern districts of Noakhali, Tipperah, Sylhet and Cachar.⁵ The three feudatories had a common suzerain, mentioned in the inscription only as *Parameśvara* (supreme lord or overlord), who had suffered heavy losses in the prolonged wars against two rebellious feudatories, namely, Jivadhāraṇa and Jayatuṅgavarṣa. Thereafter, the war was taken up on behalf of his suzerain (i.e., *Parameśvara*) by Lokanātha, who was in possession of a *Śrīpaṭṭa* (royal charter) granting him the author-

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ity of the governor or viceroy of Samatāta. The refractory feudatories, namely, Jivadhāraṇa and Jayatuṅgavarṣa, were completely defeated and Lokanātha became the ruler (though still referred to as *Sāmanta* or feudatory ruler) of the entire region of Samatāta.⁶ Lokanātha made a land grant in the Subbuṅga (Suvvuṅga) *viṣaya* by the said Tipperāh Copper-plate inscription, possibly after Jayatuṅgavarṣa had been eliminated in the war and Lokanātha's own position as the ruler of the Samatāta region had been fully consolidated. The inscription says that a pious Brāhmaṇa, named Pradoṣāsarmana, who held the high office of *Mahāsāmanta* in the kingdom of Lokanātha, approached king Lokanātha, through the latter's son, Lakṣminātha, as *dutaka* (messenger or ambassador), for the grant of a plot of land in the Subbuṅga *viṣaya* for the construction of a temple of Bhagavān Anantanārāyana and for the settlement of more than one hundred Brāhmaṇas who were well-versed in the four Vedas. The prayer was granted and the land was donated to those Brāhmaṇas by the copper-plate charter individually, and in some cases, collectively. The donees included the *bhogin* or headman of the village, and the *pāchaka* (cook) and *vāchaka* (reciter) of the temple.⁷ The Copper-plate is dated in 'the year 44', which, according to Radhagovinda Basak, was equivalent to 650 AD.⁸ That Lokanātha and his successors continued to rule in the Cachar-Sylhet region is definitely known from the Kālāpur Copper-plate of *Sāmanta* Maruṇḍanātha (*circa* seventh century AD), the successor of Lokanātha, which was discovered in the last century in a village (Kālāpur) in the Maulavibazar subdivision of the then undivided Sylhet district.⁹

N. K. Bhattasali identified Subbuṅga (Suvvuṅga) with (Subhang) Subong - a place, a river and a tea estate of that name in the same locality - in the Barkhola area of modern Cachar (Kāchār) district of Assam.¹⁰ As Bhattasali says,

This grant (Tipperāh Copper-plate) speaks of a battle in Jayatuṅgavarṣa and the grant itself was made in the *Viṣaya* of Subbuṅga. These names sound like the Jaṭiṅgā and the Subong rivers in the region north of Silchar in the Kāchār district and Jaṭiṅgā river and Jaṭiṅgā station are well-known to travellers by the hill section of the B. A. Railway. I have elaborated this identification, which has puzzled scholars for the last forty years, in an article of mine in the Pujā number (1351 B. S.) of the *Ānandabāzār Patrikā*, and would refer the enquirers to that article. If my identification is accepted, it would appear that in the northern part of the kingdom of Samatāta, in and about the present Kāchār district, one Lokanātha had made himself supreme, as Devakhaḍga had made himself in Tippera. We hear even of another king called Kāntideva, making himself king of Harikela or the Chittagong district about the same time.¹¹

Bhattachali thus identified Subbuṅga *viṣaya* with the Subong area in Cachar district and Jayatuṅgavarṣa with Jatinga valley which is spread over the adjoining portions of Cachar-North Cachar (Dima Hasao) districts.¹² This identification of Subbuṅga (or Suvvuṅga) with Subong, was strongly supported by Raj Mohan Nath, a well known historian and archaeologist of Assam, who reinforced the views of Bhattachali by referring to a site in Subong where according to local traditions there was an ancient *Vishnu* temple and concluding that this might be the temple mentioned in the Tipperāh Copper-plate of Lokanātha.¹³ The historians of the Barak Valley, like J. B. Bhattacharjee¹⁴ and Sujit Choudhury¹⁵ as it appears from their writings, seem to have accepted the identification of Bhattachali. As a matter of fact, that the Cachar-Sylhet area (Northeast corner of traditional Bengal) formed part of the political framework of Samatāṭa is established not only by Tipperāh Copper-plate of Lokanātha but also by the Kālāpur Copper-plate of Maruṅḍanātha.¹⁶ The existence of Jatinga and Subong till today and the description of the *viṣaya* as a forest region are strong pointers to the possible correctness of the identification. What remains to be academically resolved is possibly the identity of Jayatuṅgavarṣa, as to whether Jayatuṅgavarṣa was the name of a territory or of a person. Radhagovinda Basak¹⁷ and R. C. Majumdar,¹⁸ while naming 'Lokanātha, Jivadhāraṇa and Jayatuṅgavarsha' in the same breath, looked upon Jayatuṅgavarsha also as a feudatory chief or ruler like Lokanātha and Jivadhāraṇa, while N. K. Bhattachali¹⁹ and Raj Mohan Nath²⁰ believed Jayatuṅgavarṣa to be the name of a territory or a feudatory state. However, Radhagovinda Basak, who was the first to decipher the Tipperāh Copper-plate and whose work has been used by R. C. Majumdar, had made it clear that the plate was "not in a good state of preservation, having suffered a good deal from corrosion."²¹ In fact, R.C. Majumdar regarded Jayatuṅgavarsha as a title (*birudha*) rather than a proper name.²² But Radhagovinda Basak, even many years after the publication of his reading of the inscription, maintained that, "it is very difficult to identify this Jayantuṅgavarsha, a contemporary of Lokanātha, and we shall have to await future discoveries for the final settlement of the questions."²³ On the other hand, N. K. Bhattachali, who was himself an epigraphist of great repute, read it to be "in Jayatuṅgavarṣa".²⁴ In this context it may be mentioned that the word *varṣa* generally means a country, territory or a state (e.g. Bhāratavarṣa). This might mean that king Lokanātha's attack on Jayatuṅgavarṣa was an invasion against the feudatory state of that name and the person he eliminated was the feudatory ruler of that state or territory, whose name is not mentioned in the inscription (as in case of the

Parameśvara). If that be the case, Jayatuṅgavarṣa was a state or state-like politico-administrative formation and Subbuṅga, a *viṣaya* (district) within that state or political entity.²⁵

As regards the environmental features, with which we are concerned here, some interesting data on the Subbuṅga (*Suvvuṅga*) *viṣaya* in *circa* seventh century AD are found in the following passages of the Tipperāh Copper-plate of *Sāmanta* Lokanātha, as translated by Radhagovinda Basak, by which charter the *Sāmanta* ruler of Samatata granted a tract of land in that *viṣaya* or district:

(LI. 21-26) "In the *vishaya* (district) of **Suvvuṅga**, in the forest-region, having no distinction of natural and artificial, having a thick network of bush and creeper, where deer, buffaloes, boars, tigers, serpents, etc enjoy, according to their will, all pleasures of home-life ... I have caused a temple to be made and have had set up therein (an image of) the infinite Lord Ananta-Nārāyaṇa, who has shown favour to me. There, for the perpetual maintenance of *aṣṭhapuṣhpīkā, bali, charu, satra* to Bhagavān Ananta-Nārāyaṇa, whose person is adored by the chief gods, the *Asuras*, the sun, the moon, *Kuṣṭhāra*, the *Kinnaras*, the *Vidyādhara*s, the chief serpent (-gods), the *Gandharvas*, *Varuṇa*, the *Yakshas*, and (also for the residence of) Brāhmaṇas versed in the four Vēdas, who have a community there, an endowment in this forest region, having no distinction of natural and artificial, has been granted with full title, for the increase of the merit of my father and mother and myself, by king [Lōka]nātha by a copper-plate grant."

(LI 27-33)"..... In the year 44, in the month of **Phālguna**, the forest, having no distinction of natural and artificial, in (the district of) **Suvvuṅga**, of which the four boundary lines were thus defined, viz. on the east the **Kaṇāmōṭīkā** hill, on the south the limit-line of the two villages **Paṅga** and **Vāpikā**, on the west portion of the *tāmra-pathara* (?) of **Jayēśvara** and on the north the tank of the *mahattara* **Ranaśubha** – was recorded in the copper-plate grant and given for the increase of merit to **Pradōshaśarman** and his parents and for the performance of the ceremonies of worship for the god Bhagavān Ananta-Nārāyaṇa in the *maṭha* made by him."²⁶

It was in such a forest region (*aṭavi-bhūkhaṇḍa*) that king Lokanātha granted land for the construction of the temple (*matha*) of Bhagavān Anantanārāyaṇa and the settlement of more than one hundred Brāhmaṇas, who were well

versed in the four Vedas. The lines thirty-three to fifty of the said copper-plate contain the names of the “Brāhmaṇa-dwellers on the granted plot of land, numbering over one hundred, and a definite statement of the measurement of land which they should individually or jointly occupy.”²⁷

The passages quoted above from the Tipperāh Copper-plate inscription clearly mentioned that the land donated by king Lokanātha in the Subbuṅga *viṣaya* (district) was in a forest region which was without any distinction of natural and artificial boundaries. The said forest region had a thick network of bush and creepers, and in that thick network of bush and creepers the animals like deer, buffaloes, boars, tigers, serpents, etc. freely enjoyed all pleasures of their home-life. In other words, the donated tract was the home of the wild animals. As regards the boundary of the donated tract, the inscription recorded the Kanāmotikā hill (*parvata*) on the east, two villages called Paṅga-grāma and Vāpikā grāma on the south, portion of the *tāmra pathara* of one Jayeśvara on the west, and the tank of Ranaśubha (a *mahattara*) on the north. On basis of this information, Nalinikanta Bhattasali searched for many years for the location of Subbuṅga in the region covered within ancient Samataṣa. Ultimately, he encamped in the Barkhola area of Cachar for several days and walked through the difficult terrains and villages in 1942-43, comparing physical descriptions provided in the Tipperāh Copper-plate and the possible spatial and cultural (place-name) changes over the centuries. He was eventually convinced that the Subong (Subhang) area formed a part of the Subbuṅga *viṣaya* in the seventh century AD. Bhattasali then wrote down his experience and the justification for identification of Subhang with Subbuṅga, in a long essay in Bengali which was published in 1944 in the *Shārādiya Ānandabāzār Patrikā*. He found that about fourteen miles to the north of Silchar town, which is situated on the bank of Barāk, a branch of the river Dulu is known as Subhang. Six miles to the north-west of the town the river Jātingā that originates in the northern hills, confluences with the Barāk. Two and half miles to the north-east of that confluence the river Subhang joins the Jātingā. A place about eight miles to the north of Silchar is called Ābhang, the place eleven miles to the north of Ābhang is called Jātingā, and another village two miles to the south-east of Ābhang is still known as Bāmonipārā. Bhattasali concluded that the name Bāmonipārā reminds of an ancient Brāhmaṇa settlement, while the modern Jātingā is ancient Jayatuṅga and Subhang is ancient Subbuṅga. He also argued that this identification is supported by the fact that the donated land in Subhang (*dronas* put together) amounted to two to three square miles, while Pancakhanda, where Bhāskaravarman renewed the grant of land to the Brāhmaṇas by the

Nidhanpur Copper-plate, is thirty miles to the west of Subhang and the Bhuban hills, well known for the ancient cave temples, is twenty miles to the south-east of Subhang.²⁸

B. D. Chattopadhyaya, an eminent historian, observed that the settlement formations took place in the early medieval period (7th century AD onwards) in different parts of Bengal as new settlements were created by the rulers in the forest regions mainly for the purpose of providing space to the communities of Brāhmaṇas. In the specific context of the grant of land by Lokanātha in the Subbuṅga *viṣaya*, he said that it “ provides one such example of the creation of a new settlement for a group of brāhmaṇas in what was obviously forest land (*aṭavi-bhūkhaṇḍa*), inhabited not by human beings but by wild animals.”²⁹ Although it is true that the land in the Subbuṅga *viṣaya*, in which king Lokanātha gifted a plot for the temple of Bhagavān Anantanārāyana and for the settlement of more than one hundred Brāhmaṇas (must be, with their families and kins), was a ‘forest land’, it may be too much to agree with Chattopadhyaya that it was ‘inhabited not by human beings but by wild animals.’ This is because the passage quoted above from the copper-plate document (lines 27-33) very clearly mentions the four boundaries of the demarcated land. As per the demarcation, on the southern end of that land there were already two villages, viz. Paṅga-*grāma* and Vāpikā-*grāma*, and the ‘limit-line’ of those two villages (*grāma*) formed the boundary of the gifted land. Similarly, on the western end was a portion of the *tāmra pathara* of one Jayeśvara and on the north, the *pushkarini* (tank or pond) of Ranaśubha, who was a *mahattara* (noble or high official). It may be presumed that these two individuals were also residents in the localities which were not very far from the *pushkarini* and the *tāmra pathara* of the respective owners. Only on the fourth end (i.e. east), there was a *parvata* (hill or mountain), named Kanāmotikā-*parvata*, which could be the source of the wild animals named in the epigraphic record. Therefore, the place could not be as remote or forlorn as one might think because of the presence of the wild animals. There could be a situation in which the humans and animals lived harmoniously in the safe neighbourhood without harming or disturbing each other. The two villages of Paṅga-*grāma* and Vāpikā-*grāma*, on the southern end of the demarcated land for donation, must have been inhabited by human beings, supposedly with their families and the cattles and other domesticated animals (as different from the wild ones). On two other sides also, there were private properties of two individuals, namely, a *tāmra pathara* and a *pushkarini*, and at least one of those two individuals was a respectable *mahattara*. Besides all these evidences, the inscription also very

clearly recorded that the land was gifted for settlement of the “Brāhmaṇas versed in the four Vēdas, who have a community there.” This information may be interpreted to suggest that there was already a community of the Brāhmaṇas in the region of the gifted land. Basak’s translation, quoted above, that the “Brāhmaṇa-dwellers on the granted plot of land, numbering over one hundred,…” etc might also mean that those more than one hundred Brāhmaṇas to whom land was granted in the Subbuṅga viṣaya by the Tipperah Copper-plate were already dwelling in the same plot of land and the charter only formalized the grant. The information recorded by the inscription that the ‘donees included the *bhogin* or headman of the village’ is a further pointer to the possible existence of the village or settlement. However, what seems to be the realistic scenario is that the boundary of the gifted plot corresponded in one end to the natural landmark provided by the *Konāmōtikā-parvata* (mountain or hill), and on two other ends, to the developed land or settlements with privately owned *pushkarini* and *tānra pathara* respectively. More important is the fourth end of the gifted tract where the boundary corresponded to the ‘limit-line’ of the two *grāmas* (villages), namely, *Paṅga-grāma* and *Vāpīkā-grāma*.

In his analysis of the rural settlements in different sub-regions of Bengal, B.D.Chattopadhyaya observed two characteristics which connected the Gupta and post-Gupta settlements. As he says,

The first is that rural settlements, in the way they figure in the inscriptions, had close access to surface water in the forms of rivers, rivulets, channels and ponds. In fact, villages located between rivers and channels are often found to have had ponds (*puskarini*), sometimes privately owned, located in their *kṣetra* areas. In many cases, it is true, rivers or channels do not figure as natural boundaries, but then ponds do as landmarks for the cultivated area. While it is not possible to put together all relevant details from the epigraphs, a few samples may be chosen. Perhaps the most significant details in this regard, for the Gupta period, are those which occur in the Gunaigarh record of AD 507.³⁰

The second feature which also seems to generally characterize the rural settlements and which, again, relates to the contemporary perception of rural space is that rural space, already developed as a *grāma* or even as yet undeveloped, was consistently defined in terms of other rural spaces, usually *grāmas* and at times other categories of inhabited space. This means that one inhabited space, a *grāma*, was an inhabited space in rela-

