

**SOCIAL AND POLITY
FORMATIONS**

in

**Pre-Colonial
North East India**


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**Social and Polity
Formations in Pre-Colonial
North-East India**
The Barak Valley Experience

J.B. BHATTACHARJEE



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*To my daughters,
Jayati, Sarbani & Sonali*

Preface

The growth and development of a field of scientific social research is a gradual process by which crucial research questions are identified and eventually answered. Every such field makes certain simplifying assumptions built into intellectual paradigms about the complex realities that it studies. The study in social and state formations is one such developing field involving a large number of social scientists in an almost global level for at least last two decades. Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) was perhaps the first sophisticated attempt to provide a frame for this field of study, while the publication of Henry J.M. Claessen and Peter Skalnik (ed.), *The Early State* (1978), covering twenty-one case studies (including two from India) is an indication of the growth process of the field and its inter-disciplinary character. In India, Surajit Sinha's "State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India" (*Man in India*, Vol. 42, no. 1, January-March, 1962) impressed some historians and anthropologists who took it up as a potential field of scientific enquiry and published the results of their studies in various forms. *Tribal Polities and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India* (1987), covering ten case studies by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists, edited by Sinha, suggest the maturity this field has attained over the years.

I have been interested in this scientific field for about last fifteen years and could contribute a few papers on the subject relating to North East India. This book is a collection of seven such papers published in various journals and proceedings, viz. (i) "Land-grants, Land Management and the Nature of Social Formation in Srihatta

during the 7th to 11th Century AD. (*The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. VI, no. 2, 1988), (ii) "An Early State in Srihattadesha: Content Analysis of the Bhatara Copper-Plates" (*Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Fifth Session, Aizawl, 1984), (iii) "Tripuri State Formation in Mediaeval Tripura" (*Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Third Session, Imphal, 1982), (iv) "Brahmanical Myths, Royal Legitimation and the Jaintia State Formation" (*The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. VIII, no. 1, 1990), (v) "The Koch Principality in Cachar: A Study of Mediaeval Polity Formation in North East India" (*Proceedings of the North East India History Association*, Second Session, Dibrugarh, 1981), (vi) "Mirza Nathan's Kachar" (*Social Research*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1982) and (vii) "State Formation in Pre-Colonial Tribal Northeast: A case study of the Dimasa State" (*The North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. II, no. 3, 1984). These papers directly or indirectly relate to the Barak Valley region of North East India.

My colleagues and my research students in the department of history, North-Eastern Hill University, have been asking me for sometimes to bring out a collection of my papers on social and polity formations in the north-east. I am thankful to all of them for the encouragement. Mariamma M. deserves special thanks and appreciation for the secretarial assistance she ungrudgingly extended to me.

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Introduction

The crucial issues of enquiry in the social and polity formation studies are labour process, surplus and social differentiation. The form of labour process, the manner of extraction of surplus and the system of distribution of surplus determined the social formation processes. In polity or state formation studies one looks into how in the early egalitarian societies inequality and stratification started with the emergence of private property and interest groups. The political organisations in early societies were founded on territory and property. The state as a higher form of political organisation came into existence when the economic relations were further sophisticated by privatisation of property and extraction of surplus by the dominant groups in the society. The 'divine right' theory strengthened the assumed authority of the rulers. In India, the Brahmanical myths concerning the divine origin of the kings contributed to royal legitimation. In all cases, however, the common crucial factor was the surplus (generation, extraction and redistribution).

The social and polity formation processes in North East India were spontaneously influenced by its geo-political situation which absorbed pan-Indian traditions and the developments in neighbouring South East Asia. In the past, the region experienced a fine blending of these two traditions represented by the Indo-Aryans and the Indo-Mongoloid tribal communities. The emergence of states from the indigenous and immigrant tribal social bases was a significant development in the mediaeval history of the region. In case of the Koch, Kachari, Meitei, Jaintia and Tripuri, who were settled in the region since early times, the societies were stratified with the emergence of private property on the basis of differentiated land-holding and individualised income. The notables at clan

or village levels emerged as chiefs and they extended their sphere of dominance by subduing other clans, tribes and communities. The Ahoms experienced these early processes before their advent in Assam and they built the most powerful state in the region by military conquest. The hinduisation formalised the social stratification and legitimised the royal supremacy in all cases. In final forms, the states were able to develop elaborate apparatus strong enough for sustenance and surveillance.

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

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

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

In the early times the valley was covered by the state formation processes in South East Bengal like Samatata, Harikela and others, 'Srihattamandala' denoting the regional identity as we know from the Kalapur inscriptions of the samanta rulers of Samatata belonging to 7th century AD. The Harikela coins had several local series, and in one series the word 'Veraka' (Barak) used to be inscribed. This explains the position in 8th-9th century AD. In the

10th century A.D. the Chandra rulers of East Bengal ruled over Srihattamandala as we know from the Paschimbhag copper-plate inscription. In the 11th-12th century A.D. the autonomous Srihatta state flourished in the valley under the Deva rulers mentioned in the Bhatara plates. The boundary of the Srihattamandala or Srihattarajya extended to its natural limits and the donated villages mentioned in some of these inscriptions were scattered over Cachar, Karimganj and Sylhet districts and the Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area of Tripura. In the mediaeval period, the lower part of the valley (or Kailasahar-Sylhet sector) was conquered by the Afghan chiefs and then it formed part of the Mughal Subah of Bengal, while the upper region (Cachar-Hailakandi sector) was included successively in Tripuri, Khaspur and Heramba states. The Western sector of the lower valley was included in the Jaintia State which at a time extended to Karimganj. Two other important states in the lower valley on the eve of the Afghan conquest were Gaur and Laur.

The 1971 census returned about 80 per cent of the total population of the Barak Valley (Assam) to be Bengali. This was more or less the position in the earlier censuses, including the British time. The other notable groups are the workforce in the tea gardens, Manipuris, Dimasas and the Koches. The small number of the Koches (locally known as Dehans) are the descendants of those who migrated to Cachar in the 16th century during the invasion of Chila Rai of Cooch Behar when the Khaspur state came into existence under Dewan Kamalnarayan. Their number increased marginally during the Moamaria rebellion in the Assam Valley in the beginning of the last century when the Raja of Cachar offered settlement to some fugitive families. About fifty Dimasa families moved to the plains with the Raja when the Dimasa capital was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur in 1750 A.D. following the merger of the Khaspur state with the Heramba (Dimasa) state. They were joined by a few more families during the political turmoil in North Cachar Hills in 1820s. A good number of Manipuris came to Cachar during the Burmese occupation of Manipur since 1818 and some of them settled down permanently. There had been waves of immigration even subsequently as Manipur was in turmoil for a

long time. Some Hmar and Kuki villages were settled by the British in the 30s and 40s of the last century as they were pushed out of the Lushai Hills by inter-tribal feuds. The workforce in the tea gardens was brought by the British from Chotanagpur and other places ever since the plantation started in 1850s. All these immigrant communities have adopted the valley as their homeland, they speak the local dialect of Bengali, and the various communities living here have reinforced each other's culture and traditions. It has always happened in history. The small immigrant communities, even if they are conquerors and rulers, they adopt the language and culture of the land of their adoption. It happened to the Mughals in North India, and it has happened to the Ahoms in Assam and to the Dimasas in Cachar. The British failed to plunge into this historical process and, as a result, they invited the mass reaction in the form of national movement which forced them eventually to leave the country.

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

While on a survey duty in Cachar in 1832, R.B. Pamberton, in a report, said, "the people in Sylhet and Cachar are identical in every respect-appearance, customs and language."¹ Thomas Fisher, the first Superintendent of Cachar, said in 1834, "The entire instruc-

tion in this district is to be conveyed in Bengali language.”² C. Becker, a German missionary (1923), wrote, “The principal language of the Surma Valley is Bengali. In Sylhet District it is spoken by 92 per cent of the people, and in the Cachar District by more than half of the population.... Bengali as spoken in the Surma Valley differs to some extent from that of the Province of Bengal and it is called therefore, Sylhet-Bengali.”³ Becker further observed that in Cachar plains the percentage of the Bengalis would be as high as in Sylhet but the Haflong Subdivision (now North Cachar Hills District) which is predominantly tribal and the Hindustani and Manipuri settlers in plains brought down the district percentage of the Bengalis.

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

The early states of South-East and East Bengal like Samatata, Harikela and Chandra as well as the indigenous Srihatta were in Pan-Indian Brahmanical Hindu model and these states created profound impact on the later hinduised tribal states like those of the Tripuris, Jaintias and the Dimasas. The Tripuris experimented the early phase of state formation in the Barak Valley. The Koch state in the Barak Valley started as a crown colony under Cooch Behar but eventually developed into independent Khaspur state. The Jaintia state formation started in the hills and in its final phase, the state covered a large portion of the Barak Valley. The final phase of the Dimasa state formation was experienced in the Barak Valley.

Notes & References

1. Foreign Political Proceedings, 14 May, 1832, No. 109.
2. D. Datta (ed.), *Cachar District Records*, Silchar, 1969, p. 18. See Fisher's letter to Commissioner of Dacca, dt. June 1834.
3. C. Becker, *History of the Catholic Missions in North East India* (first German edition, 1923), tr. & ed. G. Stadler & S. Karotemprel, Vendrame Missiological Institute, Shillong, 1980, pp. 94-95.

Land Grants, Land Management and the Nature of Social Formation in Ancient Srihatta

'Social formation'; it is said, is defined by "elements such as the form of labour-process (determined by the extent of bondage and production for market), the manner of extraction of surplus (e.g., land-tax, rent) and the system of distribution of the surplus (property rights)."¹ In fact, the labour process, extraction of surplus and re-distribution of surplus are the elements that are crucial in our understanding of the feudal formations in Europe in the middle ages. The European and the Indian situations were, however, not similar. For example, 'serfdom was an essential element in European feudalism, but in India we have limited evidences of individual bondage. D.D. Kosambi and R.S. Sharma, therefore, formulated the theory of an 'Indian feudalism' and a large number of social scientists have contributed to accentuate 'Indian' in 'Indian feudalism'. Whereas in the European context feudalism was based on a self-sufficient economy, the contractual relationship, manorial system, organization of the administrative structure on the basis of land, and the institution of serfdom, in the Indian context the most striking development was the practice of making land grants to the Brahmanas involving the transfer of all sources of revenue and the surrender of police and administrative functions by the state.²

We propose to examine here the social formation processes in the Barak (Surma) Valley region of India (Assam) and Bangladesh, which in the ancient period was known as Srihatta, on the basis of land grants by six rulers between the 7th and 11th Century AD to

which Professor R.S. Sharma made no reference excepting one, and that too very casual, in his *Indian Feudalism*.³ Our study suggests that although Sharma made no use of these evidences, his formations hold good in respect of this frontier region also.

The Universe

Srihatta or Sylhet in ancient times perhaps denoted the territory now covered in the Sylhet districts of Bangladesh, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar districts of Assam (India) and the adjoining Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura (India). It is a single valley formed by the river Barak and its branches, viz. Surma and Kushiara, with uniform physical features that make it a distinct geographical division and the homeland of a homogeneous group of people who speak in a common dialect of Bengali, called Srihatti or Sylheti. The region is bordered almost on three sides by the hills ranges, viz. the Khasi-Jaintia hills, North Cachar hills, Mizo hills and the Tipperah hills, leaving the fourth exposed to Bengal and nowhere within the division there is a sudden change in the landscape or the climate. As we have discussed elsewhere⁴, Srihatta in ancient times must have been the common nomenclature for the entire Barak/Surma Valley. Our contention is based on the fact that geographically it is a distinct territory and the indigenous people here share a common ethnic, linguistic and cultural heritage. Until the formation of the Tripura State in the 11th-13th century and the Turko-Afghan conquest of Sylhet-Karimganj section of the valley there was no political segmentation of the territory.⁵

The copper plates that we are going to discuss clearly suggest that Srihatta was ruled by the Varmanas of Kamarupa in the 7th century A.D. and that they were immediately replaced by the Samanta chiefs of Samatata who ruled under the later Guptas. During the 7th to the 10th century A.D. Srihatta must have formed a part of Harikela which in all probability included, besides Barak/Surma Valley, the plains of Tripura and the Bangladesh districts of Comilla, Chittagong and Noakhali. In other words, its limits roughly coincided with what can be appropriately designated as South East Bengal. We have argued⁶ that the Deva Kings of Bhatara plates also ruled over the same territory. According to the