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Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription

A Study of the earliest Epigraphic Evidence of Syhlet-Cachar

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The epigraphic data on land in ancient Srihatta is extremely meager. The earliest known Copper Plate discovered in the valley is that of Maharaja Bhaskara Varman. From this inscription we come to know that a part of the valley was known as Chandrapuri Vishaya in late 5th or early 6th century C.E and it has been under the rule of the successive Bhauma-Naraka rulers from BhutiVarman to Bhaskar Varman. The present paper is a study of the Nidhanpur copperplate Inscription which is the first indisputable material evidence of the socio-political Aryanisation of the Surma Barak Valley and it attempts to show what was the socio-political and religious scenario of the Surma-Barak Valley during 7th century C.E. The present paper has been written on the basis of content analysis of Secondary Sources.

The Nidhanpur CopperPlate Inscription is the first indisputable material evidence of the socio-political Aryanisation of the Surma-Barak Valley. This Inscription describes the renewal of a perpetual revenue free landgrant by the Kshatriya king Maharaja Bhaskar Varmma of the original grant made by his great-great-grandfather Maharaja Mahabhutti Varmma who ruled towards the close of the 5th and the beginning of 6th century CE. The

donated land called 'mayurasalama' was in the Chandrapuri Vishaya of Panchakhanda Pargana of Srihatta Mandala. The deed actually had seven Copperplates but only six of them could be recovered. The inscription was discovered in Nidhanpur village in Panchakhanda Pargana of Syhlet district in 1912 and Pandit Vidyavinod deciphered the inscription.

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known as Chandrapuri vishaya in late 5th or 6th century CE and it has been under the rule of the successive Bhauma-Naraka rulers from BhutiVarman to BhaskaraVarman. With the decipherment of Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription there arose a lot of controversy regarding the original location of the Chandrapuri Vishaya. Scholars like Padmanath Bhattacharjee Vidyavinod and Kanaklal Barua presumed that Chandrapuri Vishaya to which the donated land belonged must have been located somewhere outside Syhlet. On the other hand, scholars like J.C Ghosh, N.K Bhattashali and R.G Bhandarkar insisted that Chandrapuri Vishaya must have been located in the Syhlet region. Whereas some scholars wanted to identify Kaushika with Kosi in Bihar according to others Kaushika and Kushiara were identical. However, the controversy came to an end with the discovery of the Paschimbagh Copper Plate Inscription of Maharaj Srichandra of East Bengal which also mentions Chandrapuri Vishaya with the same river boundary and other geographical details as that of the Chandrapuri Vishaya of the Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription. The Paschimbagh Copper Plate Inscription mentions of Chandrapura as a vishaya in Srihatta Mandala within the Paundravardhan Bhukti. It also mentions three vishayas within the Srihattamandala namely Chandrapura, Garala and Pagora. Here, 'bhukti' meant a province, 'mandala' a division and 'vishaya' a district. Chandrapura was a very large district in the heart of undivided Barak Valley. The extent of the three donated vishayas suggests that they

covered portions of Syhlet, Karimganj and Cachar districts of Barak/Surma Valley and the Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura. The Srihattamandala perhaps included portions of Commilla and Mymensingh districts.

Bhaskara Varman was unquestionably one of the most remarkable men and rulers of his time, a worthy contemporary of Harsha Vardhana and Hiuen Tsang. Apart from Nidhanpur Copperplate Inscription, we get a good deal of information about him from Dubi Copper Plate grant, Harsha Charita and from notices of him left by Chinese Buddhist Scholar and Pilgrim Hiuen Tsang and from other Chinese Sources. The renewal of the land grant i.e. Nidhanpur Copper Plate of Maharaja Bhaskara Varma was issued from Karna Suvarna and not from his capital. It is a historical fact that Karna Suvarna was the capital of the illustrious Raja Sasanka, the mighty king of Gauda (roughly West and North Bengal). Maharaja Harsha Vardhana with the help of his ally Maharaja Bhaskara Varmma defeated king Sasanka and later occupied his capital Karna Suvarna. Uptil now many copper-plates of Kamarupa-kings have been discovered. But Nidhanpur set of copper-plates of Maharaja Bhaskara Varmma is perhaps the oldest of such discovered plates and the grantor namely king Bhaskara, is probably the most renowned amongst the sovereigns of Kamarupa who issued such copper-plate charters

The major portion of the document is covered by the narration of the genealogy of the king, from Naraka who claimed descent from the



Varaha-Avatara, then Bhagadatta of Kurukshetra fame and many others together with the names of their consort, enumeration of the names of the Brahmanas mainly the descendants of the original donees as many as two hundred and five and their different gotras and different Vedasakhas and their shares singly or in groups of the members of the same family in the land of *Mayurasalmalagraharakshetra*.

Following is the Geneology of the Kamarupa Kings as given in the Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription.

Naraka

Bhagadatta

Vajradatta

Unnamed Kings of the dynasty who ruled in Kamarupa for three thousand years

Pushya Varmma

Samudra Varmma- dattadevi

Bala Varmma-Ratnavati

Kalyana Varmma-Gandharvavati

Ganapati Varmma-Yajnavati

Mahendra Varmma-Suvrata

Narayana Varmma-Devavati

Mahabhuti Varmma alias Bhuti

Varmma-Vijnanavati

Chandramukha varmma-

Bhogavati

Sthita Varmma-Nayanadevi

Susthita Varmma alias Mriganka-

Syamadevi

Supratishthita Varmma

Bhaskara Varmma

The available six Copperplate Inscription of Nidhanpur gives us information that the land was granted to about two hundred and five Brahmanas for settlement in the donated land called mayurasalmala in the Chandrapuri Vishaya. The total area of the donated land is not known, but the names of Brahman

donees, including their gotra and veda -sakha and the number of shares are clearly mentioned in the text. As one of the seven plates could not be recovered, the total number of donees and shares could not be ascertained. The available plates contain list of two hundred and five donees and they are given 159 11/16 shares. In the renewal of the Nidhanpur Copper Plates there is no mention of the motive of the land grants. Some such indications could have been obtained from the original charter issued by Maharaja Mahabhuti Varmma about a century earlier than its renewal. But unfortunately the original document destroyed by fire is lost forever. In the present document the north-east, east and the South-east boundaries of the donated Mayurasalmakshetra are given by the dry bed of the Kosika or Kausika river. The South-West and the north-West boundaries of the said field are given by ganginika. The north-West portion of the ganginika is described as bent eastwards. The South-East boundary sector i.e the dry bed of Kosika or Kausika, the south boundary and the south-West boundary sector i.e the ganginika were marked in some particular places by pieces of hewn fig tree.

In addition to these, seven shares were allotted for the Bali-Charu-Satra of Ananta Narayana. Literally, Bali means 'worship'. Charu means 'oblation' and Satra means 'hospitality'. From the six copper Plate Inscriptions it can be inferred that among the Brahmins who were granted land maximum were the Vaishnavas. This perhaps shows the evolution of Pre-Chaitanya Cult in Syhlet-Cachar region. Among the



names of the Brahmins bearing Vaishnava influence mention may be made of Manorath Swami, Vishnu Ghosh Swami, Nandadev Swami, Sankarshan Swami, Narayan Swami, Vishnu Swami, Sudarshan Swami, Gopendra Swami, Madhusen Swami, Dhruvashome Swami, Vishnushome swami, Chakradev swami, Narayanakundu Swami, Golapnandi Swami, Vishnubhuti Swami, Vishnudatta Swami, Krishna Swami, Janardhandev swami, Vishnushome swami, Madhumitra swami, Madhu Swami, Sanatan Swami, Pradyumna Swami, Nandeshwar Swami, Govardhan swami, Sudarshan swami, Narayanbridhi Swami, Gopal swami, Janardhan Swami, Nandabhuti swami, Keshava Swami etc. Some of the names which are repeated here are repeated in the Inscription also. Among the two hundred and five Brahmins thirty two names bear Vaishnava influence. Land-Grants for Bali-Charu-Satra of a particular temple deity are also noticed in the Tipperah Copper-Plate of Lokanatha and Kalapur Copper Plate of Marundanatha. In the Tipperah Copper Plate of Loknatha it is referred that Mahasamanta Pradosha Sarman, an orthodox Brahmana who held a high office in the state, approached Loknatha through the latter's son Lakshminatha as dutaka, for a plot of land in the forest region (atavibhukhande) called Suvvunga vishaya whereupon he wanted to erect a temple of the deity Anantanarayana and to settle more than a hundred Brahmanas versed in four Vedas in that locality. The prayer was granted and by this charter land was donated to those Brahmanas individually and, in some

cases, jointly. According to the Kalapur Copper Plate Inscription, Samanta Marundanatha by a copper plate charter donated a plot of land in the forest region (atavibhukhande) comprising an area of one pataka and two dronas for the purpose of the balicharusatra of god Anantanarayana gifted in the name of the deity of the temple and the Brahmanas (mathadevadvijebhyah). It is thus interesting to note that Loknatha by his Tipperah Copper Plate grant gifted land in the forest region for the construction of the temple of Anantanarayana, the balicharusatra of the deity, for the settlement of the Brahmanas well versed in four Vedas, while Marundanatha by his Kalapur copper plate also gifted in the same forest region land for the construction of a matha i.e. balicharusatra of Anantanarayana and for the settlement of the Brahmanas well versed in three Vedas. It can, perhaps, therefore be conjectured that on the land donated by Loknatha in the forest region, the temple of Anantanarayana was constructed and the Brahmanas versed in four Vedas were settled, while Marundanatha of the same family donated an additional plot of land in the same region for the purpose of the balicharusatra of the deity and the Brahmanas versed in three Vedas were settled. The names of the Brahmanas in both cases ended with Svami. The Kalapur copper plate was discovered in Chautali pargana. This being a hilly area was certainly a forest region in the past. A deposit of large quantities of broken pieces of earthen vessels in the very find spot of the copper plate and an old brick wall and a brick-built well at a short distance have



been discovered. A statue of Vishnu was also discovered in the same locality. We also get some information about the prevalence of Vaishnavism from the Bhatara Copper Plate Inscription of Ishana Deva. The Copper Plate Inscription of Ishana Deva opens with a salutation to Narayana (Vishnu). According to this inscription, Isana Deva was then the reigning monarch, who erected a lofty temple for Lord 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.

Then comes in prominence the Surya worshippers and the names of the Brahmins bearing its influence are Bashu Swami, Sanyascharbhuti swami, Shombashu Swami, Arka Swami, Bhanu Swami, Mitra Palit Swami, Bashusri Swami, Shomsen Swami, Bhaskarmitra Swami, DinkarSwami, Prabhakarkirti swami, Harshaprabha swami, Khanda Swami, Dibakar Swami, Karkadatta Swami, Surya swami, Savitradev swami, Arkadev swami, Basudatta swami, Gayatripal Swami, Basusri Swami, Brihaspati Swami and Bhaskarmitra Swami. From this twenty eight names, it can be inferred that along with the follower of Vaishnava religion there was prominence of Surya worshippers. This sounds a little strange because we do not find much evidence of followers of Surya Worshippers in ancient Bengal as compared to the other religions. It is worth mentioning that Surya devata or Sun God is a well recognized Aryan God but in ancient India the god was worshipped in such a way which seems to be

prevalent in Iran or Middle Asia. From the ancient statues or images of the god it is revealed that they have boots worn in their feet's up to their knees which is completely absent or unknown in case of the features of other Aryan Gods. In the Brihata Samhita of VarahaMihira we get reference that the feets and legs of the God should be enclosed or covered up to the knees. This also supports the theory of importation of the Cult from outside.

Comparitively, the Shiv-Sakti worshippers were less in number although we get ample evidences of Kings ruling in East Bengal who were Saiva by faith like Vainya Gupta, Samachardeva, Loknatha and jivdharanrata. The names bearing Saiva Sakta influence are Shaktikundu Swami, Ganga Swami, sarpini Swami, Haraprabha Swami, GauriSwami, KaliSwami, Shivgan Swami, Rudrabhatti swami, Bhavadev Swami, Sarpadev swami, Tageshwar Swami, Bisheshwar Swami, Ganeshwar Swami, Budeshwar Swami, Jangeshwar Swami, RudraGhosh Swami and Ugradutta Swami. We also get some information of the prevalence of Saivism from the Bhatara Copper Plate Inscription of Govinda Kesava Deva. The inscription of Govinda Kesava Deva opens with a salutation to Lord Shiva. The inscription says that he granted lands to the extent of 375 plough measures, 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 or the Lord of Srihatta or Syhlet.

Thus from Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription it can be inferred



that during the first part of sixth Century C.E a group of Brahmanas settled in Chandrapuri Vishaya. Kamalakanta Gupta Choudhury has tried to show the location of Chandrapura Vishaya in the southern part of pre-partitioned Syhlet district. The motive behind the grant was perhaps to bring the uninhabited land within plough cultivation. The migrated Brahmanas were well versed in the four Vedas. Among the two hundred and five grantees maximum were Vaishnavas, then came in prominence the Surya worshippers and then the Shiv-Sakti worshippers. The group of Brahmanas probably migrated from the Gujarat region. It is worth mentioning here that a large part of the indigenous people of this region like the Austric speaking Khasis and other tribes were accumulated within the last strata of Caste Society i.e

Shudras. In ancient Bengal there was twofold division of the Society i.e the Brahmanas and the Shudras instead of the four fold division of the Society i.e Brahmanas, Khatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. There was again stratification among the Shudras as Uttam Shudras, Madhyam Shudras and Adham Shudras. It can be further said that Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription is undoubtedly one of the most important material evidence which throws light on the socio-political and religious history of Syhlet-Cachar region during 7th century C.E. This inscription not only gives us information about the Aryanization of Syhlet-Cachar region through the grant of land to two hundred and five Brahmins but also about the prevalence of different religious sects like Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism in Syhlet-Cachar region from 7th Century C.E.

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