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Political Phenomena in Barak-Surma Valley during Medieval Period

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Abstract

After the fall of Srihattarajya in 12 th century CE, marked the beginning of the medieval history of Barak-Surma Valley. The political phenomena changed the entire infrastructure of the region. But the socio-cultural changes which occurred are not the result of the political phenomena, some extra forces might be alive that brought the region to undergo changes. By the advent of the Sufi saint Hazrat Shah Jalal, a qualitative change was brought in the region. This historical event caused the extension of the grip of Bengal Sultanate over the region. Owing to political phenomena, the upper valley and lower valley may differ during the period but the socio-economic and cultural history bear testimony to the fact that both the regions were inhabited by the same people with a common heritage. And thus when the British annexed the valley in two phases, the region found no difficulty in adjusting with the new situation.

Keywords: Homogeneity, aryanisation, autonomy.

The geographical area that forms the Barak-Surma valley, extends over a region now divided between India and Bangladesh. The Indian portion of the region is now popularly known as Barak Valley, covering the geographical area of the modern districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi of Assam State. But the Bangladesh portion constitutes an administrative division of the country in the form of 'Sylhet Division' constituted with Sylhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj districts. However, the geographical formation of the region clearly indicates that the region forms a valley of the rivers Barak and Surma. So, the geographical name of the valley may be given as 'Barak-Surma Valley' following

what Nihar Ranjan Roy prefers in his *Bangalir Itihas* (3rd edition, Vol.-I, 1980, Calcutta).

In addition to geographical location this appellation bears a historical significance. Western portion covering the major part of the valley which now constitutes modern Karimganj district of the state of Assam and 'Sylhet Division' of Bangladesh was commonly known as 'Sylhet' during the medieval and British period. It emerged as a part of Bengal in respect of socio-cultural matters even before the expansion of the rule of the Bengal Sultanate in the early 14th century. The eastern portion now constitutes the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi, they formed a

part of Tripura kingdom and Dimasa kingdom during the early and late medieval period respectively, but both the portions underwent socio-cultural changes during the period under review in the same process despite of their political differences. The historical significance lies in the cultural homogeneity.

Again, the political development in the super structure of a region or a country generally to a large extent, casts its influence on the changes in the infrastructure. But in case of Barak-Surma valley, we have encountered with a problem of different nature. The socio-cultural changes which occurred during the period under review are not the results of the political influences. Some extra political forces might be so alive that it brought even the ruling family at least in the case of eastern portion of the region to undergo changes along with the process of development that came from within (J. B. Bhattacharjee, 'Sequence of development in North East India', 1988, New Delhi).

The decline of *Srihattarajya* in the 12th century CE marked the beginning of the medieval history of the Barak-Surma Valley. The political phenomena of the Barak-Surma Valley has been proceeded under two part: Lower Valley and Upper Valley. Geographically, lower valley included modern Karimganj district of India and 'Sylhet Division' of Bangladesh comprising of Sylhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj districts. The Muslim rule in the Lower valley began in 1303 CE and continued till 1765 CE when the region went under the virtual rule of the East India Company. The name of the famous *Sufi* saint Hazrat Shah Jalal is associated with the conquest of sylhet by the Muslims during the reign of Sultan Shamsuddin Firuz Shah of Lakhnauti. The Muslim army conquered Gaur kingdom and Taraf Principality during the reign of Shamsuddin Firuz Shah. Then

bit by bit the whole of Lower Valley, except Jayantia kingdom and southern portion of Karimganj district which remained under an autonomous rule and Tripura state respectively. The Lower Valley or Sylhet remained under the sultans of Bengal either as independent or subordinate to the Delhi sultanate up to the rule of Akbar, when Bengal was annexed to the Mughal empire (Md Abdul Aziz, *Brihattara Sileter Itihas*, edited, 1997, Dhaka).

During the period in between the annexation of Bengal and that of Sylhet some *pathan* chiefs independently ruled over some petty states in the region. After the annexation of Sylhet to the Mughal empire, it was organised as an administrative unit named *Sarkar* under the *Subah* of Bengal of the Mughal empire. This system continued up to 1717 CE when the *Subadar* of Bengal became virtually an independent ruler (Quazi Mohammad Ahmed, *Srihatta Darpan*, 1886, Sylhet).

The history of the upper valley is directly connected with the history of the state of Tripuris. Aryanisation in the upper valley started in the 5th century CE. From 13th century onwards, the plains of the upper valley were parceled into small principalities, emerged out of the ruins of ancient *Srihattarajya* and became a prey between two strong powers – The Dimasa on the north and Tripura on the south. However, the Koches invaded the Dimasa kingdom, plains of Cachar and Hailakandi and extended their sway upto the border of modern Tripura state. The Koches ruled the plains of upper valley till it was supplanted by the Dimasas. The Dimasas first ruled the plains of upper valley from Maibong, now in N.C. Hills, but they then shifted their capital to Khaspur in modern Cachar in early 18th century CE. The Dimasas named their kingdom as *Hedambarajya*. This Dimasa state was annexed by the British in 1832 CE

(U.C. Guha, *Kacharar Itibritta*, 1921, Calcutta).

As regards the administrative system of lower valley, it is found that it was an *Arsah* during the pre-Mughal and a *Sarkar* during the Mughal period and a *Chakla* during the rule of the independent *Nawabs* of Bengal. The characteristics of the provincial administration of Delhi are discernible in the administrative system that was followed in the lower valley during the medieval period (Achyut Charan Choudhury, *Srihatter Itibritta*, 1917, Sylhet).

In upper valley during the medieval period, three administrative systems viz-the Tripuri, Koch and Dimasa were successively continued. The kingship in the Tripura state was based on the divine origin theory and was hereditary. The Tripuri community was divided into twelve *Halams* or groups. In course of time, the Tripuri king followed the Muslim administrative principles then prevailed in Bengal. However, the various tribes other than Tripura living in the state enjoyed local autonomy under their chiefs. The revenue from the plains and gifts and tributes from the tribes were the main sources of income of the kings (FA Qadri, *Society and Economy in North-East India*, ed. Vol-2, 2006, Shillong).

The Koch state in Cachar was established by Chilarai in 1562 CE and remained in existence till 1745 CE. The administration of the Koch state in the upper valley is an example of the medieval polity formation by a Hinduised branch of the Bodo family of the Tibeto Burman race with its epicenter at Koch Behar, far away from Cachar. At the initial stage a military rule was imposed on the conquered country. A feudatory character was given to the military ruler in course of time. But in the last stage, the feudatory ruler in course of time severed all relations with the central authority and styled himself as *Raja* (J.B. Bhattacharjee,

Social and Polity Formation in Pre-Colonial North-East India, 1991, New Delhi).

The Dimasa-Kachari state of upper valley was a monarchical form of state based on the divine origin theory. The functional authority of the state was vested in the *patra* and *Bhandari*. The *Rajdarbar* or royal assembly consisted of two wings-*Mel* and *Ul* meant for the subjects in the plains and hills respectively. In the judicial administration both Hindu and Muslim Laws were followed. The North Cachar Hills were ruled by a *Senapati* appointed by the king. In revenue administration *Khel* system was adopted which means a sort of social responsibility of paying revenues.

However, the upper valley remained totally outside of the Turkish or the Mughal rules during the whole period beginning with the establishment of the Turko-Afghan rule in the lower valley and ending with the annexation of the Hedamba kingdom by the British in the early 19th century. But the cultural synthesis and racial assimilation continued in the region almost in the same manner as in lower valley which was under the Turkish or Mughal rules. In other words, a pan Indian cultural formation continued in upper valley also (Sharifuddin Ahmed, ed. 'Sylhet-History and Heritage', 1999, Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, Dhaka).

The political history of upper valley and lower valley may differ during the period under review. But the socio-economic and cultural history bear testimony to the fact that both the regions were inhabited by the same people with a common heritage. At present also the Barak-Surma valley does not belong to a single political unit, the plain of Cachar along with present day Karimganj district forms an integral part of Indian union whereas the major part of Sylhet district is in Bangladesh. But inspite of political isolation, social boundary of the valley still incorporates both the parts and the people

accepts this dichotomy as a social reality and rather feel proud of it.

However, the middle age in Barak-Surma valley while retaining its continuity with the past history opened up virtues for new developments conducive for meeting the demand of the changing time. In popular parlance, the middle age is normally associated with backwardness and degradation. But in case of Barak-Surma valley this stereotype does not fit in. In fact, in the days of Sultanate the region

maintained its close relationship with Bengal and without much the major part of the region could become a part of Mughal India. The remaining part also retained social liaison with Sylhet uninterrupted by political disruption. Thus when the British took the possession of the valley in two phases, the first one in 1765 CE and the second in 1832 CE, the region found no difficulty in adjusting with the new situation.

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