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Diversified Ethnic Group and population in Surma- Barak Valley

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Introduction: Surma-Barak Valley cover mainly two districts Sylhet and undivided Cachar, which constitute the basin of the two rivers the Barak and the Surma. The present four districts of Bangladesh were included in the former Sylhet district and the present three districts of Southern Assam Sreebhumi Hailakandi and Cachar constituted the former culture district

Diversified population --t is a wonderful Diversified geographical land in sub- continent of India. From all the information that has been collected so far regarding the original ethnic group living in Surma-Barak Valley, scholars have come to the decision that, that group consisted of people speaking Austric language. In course of time Indo-Mongoloid groups spread in this region. In this connection Dr. Sujit Chowdhury, following Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy, observe s that, "Indo- mongoloed prabesher bahu agei proto-Austroloedra purba Bharate bicharanshil chilen. Nritatwik parimitir bhittite mane kara hoy je Bangali jatir maulik daihik upadangu ai janagosti thekei sabcheye beshi parimane sangrihita hoyeche abong Nihar Ranjan Roy ar mate tathakatitha nimnabarner bangalir madhye ai janagosthir byapak anuprabesher sakkhya akhono lobhya." 1

Abundant cultural remains of the neolithic age have been found in Sylhet and its adjoining areas. This culture of the neolithic age extended over a vast area including present Meghalaya, Manipur, Nagaland, Cachar, Mizoram, Sylhet, Tripura and Chitagong hills.² Killing of birds and animals and catching fish were the only means of livelihood of the people belonging to the stone age. Agriculture was the chief means of livelihood and hunting and food collecting was supplementary to it for the people belonging to the proto-Australoid and Indo-Mongoloid groups. But these people were not familiar with the improved method of agriculture based on ploughing. Later in the fifth and sixth century A.D. there took place the expansion of the Aryan population in the Surma-Barak Valley, and with them came their system of ploughing and other tactics. Scholars say that, during the closing period of the Gupta rule the Huns began to attack the western parts of India and the resulting situation compelled the Brahmins of these parts to leave their places, and in search of safe shelter. Some of them arrived 16 in Sylhet region,³ which was then under the control of the kings of Kamrup. One Kamrup king named Bhuti Varma granted the Brahmins plenty of rent-free land. They influenced, to a great extent, the system of ploughing-based agriculture in this region, though the Brahmins themselves were not ploughmen by profession. In his book Sudras in ancient India Ram Sharan Sharma says that when the number of

the Brahmins increased in a particular area, they approached sometimes individually and some times in a body, the king or ruler of the area, and prayed for land for their livelihood, and the king granted them fallow land or untilled land.⁴ The question of conducting the affairs like worship of gods and goddesses and all other religious practices worked as another factor which was responsible for bringing Brahmins in this region. Again the political condition prevailing in what is known as Rada and Barendra region of Bengal for some centuries since the seventh century, compelled the common Hindu population along with the Brahmins to move towards Sylhet in eastern region. A situation amounting almost to anarchy and lawlessness developed in the north and the north-west of Bengal during the close of the seventh century and the beginning eighth century. And particularly when the rule of the Buddhist Pala kings started in these regions, many Hindu families and people belonging to fisherman community moved to Sylhet and settled in Hawor or low-lying areas of this region.⁵ In the seventh century Tripur king Adidharmapa sent a request to the king of Mithila named Balabhadra Singh for five Brahmins who were needed for performing a sacrifice. Accordingly five Brahmins belonging to five different 'Gotras'(Batsya, Baatsya, Bharadwaj, Krishnatryeo, o Parashar)came and the king, after the performance of the sacrifice, granted them land in an area which came to known as 'Panchakhanda'. Now it falls in Bangladesh. The practice of importing Brahmins was in vogue in the tenth century also. King Srichandra

"tar rajyer Srihatta mondaler adhin Chandrapur bisayer artyat Kushtiyara nadir dakshinst Srihatta jelar dakshinanse pray sahasra bargamail parimita bhumieGarga prabriti chay hazar brahamanke sama bibhage niskar dan karen.)⁶

People of other professions were also needed for turning the fallow land into cultivable land, and arrangement was made for their settlement also. It has been mentioned by Kamalakanta Gupta that,

"Dan grahitader madhye pray panchis rakam brttidharir sandhan mele abong je nidrista niyame brttidharike bhumi dan kara haiyache tahate sekaler samaj byabasthay tahader apekhhik gurutwa anudhaban kara jay."⁷

All the stone inscriptions and copper-plate inscriptions discovered in Surma Valley give evidence to the fact that for several centuries a process of granting plenty of land to Brahmins and offering settlement to many other professionals continued in Srihatta Mandala specially. Thus the Aryan-Brahminical colonization took place in this region, and those who could not assimilate into the Aryanised life style, stuck to the older life style in hilly regions. It was in the fourteenth century that Islam began to spread in this region and this occurred through the conquest of Sylhet by the Arab saint Shah Jalal who came to propagate Islam. He sent to various places of this region 360 followers of his for spreading Islam. Achyutcharan Chowdhury has mentioned that, "kebol Srihatta noy, Tripura, Maymansingha, Rongpur, prabhriti sthaneo tini pracharak preron kariaachilen. Hindu samajer anak byaktitahader ahabane akrishtha hoy."⁸

The extremely strict social rules and practices and customs as prescribed by the Brahminical religion proved to be inhuman torture for these sections of people, and they sought relief by embracing Islam. This factor strongly worked behind the rapid and extensive spread of Islam in

Surma-Barak Valley. During the medieval period the Tripurians exerted their influence over the southern part of Sylhet, including Barak Valley. People belonging to 'Dehan' tribe came to Cachar in the 16th century.⁹ Again in 1750, the capital of the Dimasas Kingdom was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur, and about fifty Dimasa families came down to the plains of Cachar at that time. Many more Dimasa families took shelter in Cachar when Tularam rebelled in North Cachar during the reign of king Govinda Chandra.¹⁰ During the Burmese occupation of Manipur in 1818, many Manipuri people left their land and took shelter in Surma Barak Valley, and a large number of shelter seekers did not return to Manipur. Moreover, the continuing civil war in Manipur compelled many Manipuris to leave their country and come over to this valley.¹¹ Again, a new variety was added to the population set-up of the valley with the establishment of tea-gardens here, and this constituted an addition of new fertility to the socio-cultural growth in this valley. It is learnt from the records maintained by the Indian Tea Association that the labour force was supplied to the tea-gardens from Andhrapradesh, U.P, Bihar, Odisha, M.P and even from Tamilnadu. This labour force consisted of people having various titles such as Mal, Noonias, Saliha, Naidu, Reli, Ahir, Gowala, Yadav, Kanu, Kurmi, Kahar, Keri, Ravidas, Panda, Kodai, Das, Tantua etc. These people remained as permanent inhabitants of the tea-gardens, making an addition to the population of this valley. They also have their contribution to the socio-cultural growth of Surma-Barak Valley. In 1813, some people belonging to the Kuki tribe and the Naga tribe took shelter in Cachar as a result of internal conflicts that grew up in Mizoram and the Naga hills. Again, the Burmese war in the border of Assam made some Assamese people come over to Barak Valley. Thus the population of Sylhet-Cachar region presents a variegated picture, it having consisted of the descendants of proto-Australoid people, the Indo-Mongoloid people, the Aryans and also other people who, being compelled by social or political reasons, took permanent shelter here in different periods of history.

Conclusion: This has made some scholars call Barak Valley an Anthropological garden of India. We think that not only Barak Valley, but the entire region consisting of Surma Valley and Barak Valley presents a population picture which has remained, since the pre-historical period, which is called 'Nakshi kanther maath.'

Footnote:

1. Sujit Chowdhury : Srihatta Cachar Prachin Itihas, P. 44
2. Suniti Bhushan Kanoongo : Prachin Srihatta ed. by Sarif Uddin Ahmed in the book Sylhet Itihas O Aitiya (), P. 136
3. Md. Mahabubar Rahman : British Amole Sylheter Janasankya Paryalochana ed. by Sarif Uddin Ahmed in the book Sylhet Itihas O Aitiya P. 82
4. Ramakanta Das : Barak Upatyakar Sthannam, P. 41
5. Sarif Uddin Ahmed (ed.) : Sylhet Itihas O Aitiya (Md. Mahabubar Rahman : British Amole Sylhet Janasankya Paryalochana), P. 82
6. Kamalakanta Gupta : Chirastya Bandabasto Purbo Sylheter Bhumi O Rajaswa Byabastha, P. 9-10.
7. Kamalakanta Gupta : Srihatta Prapta Tamrasashanabali, P. 18

- 8.. Achyut Charan Chowdhury : Srihatter Itibritta, Vol.-I, P. 229.
9. Quoted by Jayanta Bhusan Bhattacharya : Barak Upatyakar Itihaser Ruprekha ed. by Jyotirindranath Chowdhury, Sunirmal Dutta Choudhury & Amalendu Bhattacharya in the book : Srihatta-Cacharer Prachin Itihas O Sanskritir Ruprekha, P. 81
- 10.Ibid : P. 81
- 11.ibid : P. 81
- 12."This word used by Dr. Bhakti Madhav Chatterjee in his book 'caharer janabinyas'



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