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Sources for the Study of Ancient Barak Surma Valley

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ABSTRACT

The sources for the history of Barak-Surma valley during ancient period have not been properly explored. Historical materials, on which a reliable frame work of the history of ancient Barak-Surma valley can be built, are as meager as confused. History and myths, traditions and tales, facts and fictions are curiously intermingled to create a great obscurity for the period under review. The legendary accounts, customs, traditions and hearsay with which the history of the people of the region associated are varied, conflicting, and doubtful in their authenticity. The treatment of the scattered data to construct a genuine framework of the socio-political history of the Surma-Barak Valley is difficult and needs very careful handling.

KEYWORDS: Sources, accounts, customs, tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of historical writing is compounded in this period by the political disintegration after the decline of the 'Srihattarajya' when a large number of petty states, besides three major states, namely, Gour, Laur and Jayantia emerged in the valley and they vie with each other for political advances.¹ The Tripuri State formation started in this valley and capital of the state gradually moved to modern Tripura.² The western and the major portion of the valley, which was covered by Gaur and Laur passed under the Bengal sultans, and then, Mughal rule with the rest of Bengal. The Jayantia state survived till the beginning of the 19th century when it was annexed by the British. The upper portion of the valley or the Cachar mains was conquered in the second half of the 17th century and was ruled autonomously by the splinter of the royal family of Cooch Behar with headquarter of Kashpur. The territory merged into Dimasa-Kachari state of Maibong in the 18th century and the capital of the Dimasa-Kachari state was shifted to Khashpur in 1750 A.D.

It is indeed a difficult task for the researchers to draw the line of center of so many states and authorities in the valley in ancient period. The literary works and the archaeological sites and monuments, though very united in number, can be very useful as indigenous source materials for reconstructing and interpreting these sources.³

According to J.B.Bhattacharjee, the most important sources of the peoples history of the region are those which are left behind by the people themselves.⁴ Since the problems, needs and aspiration of the masses are best told in these sources, therefore, one has to use literary works, folklores and folk songs, riddles and proverbs, the works of fine arts and study the rites and rituals, customs and practices and beliefs etc. scientifically for which research methods are available in Anthropology and sociology.⁵

The source materials of the ancient period of Barak-Surma Valley under review are scanty, yet some materials are available which may be studied under following heads:-

- a) Literary sources,
- b) Epigraphic sources
- c) Oral Sources.

LITERARY SOURCES

Among the documentary sources, the literary sources are more varied and numerous in comparison with other sources. In the series of literary sources we find first the *Srihatta Darpan* authored by Quazi Mohammad Ahmed to write a history of Sylhet in Bengali in the late 19th century. It was published in 1886 A.D. It is a documentary evidence to write the history of the region under review.

Next as a primary literary source, we find *Srihatta Itibritta* by Achyat Charan Choudhury Tatwanidhi. Vol. I and II of this monumental work published in 1911 and 1917 may be regarded as the most important source to the intellectual arena. It is also considered as a classic source for the study of the region. This was followed by the *Kacharer Itibritta* authored by U.C.Guha and published in 1920. But this work can not answer all the questions that a researcher of history is expected to raise.

The Raj-mala a verse chronicle of Tripura provide us with some historical materials of the Barak-Surma region in the early period. Though the historical value of the work is not much for the period prior to the 13th century, it contains some important events in respect of the relation between the Tripura kings and rulers of Sylhet.⁶

Another Asamese literary source is Darangaraj Vamsavali. In it we find the history of the Kooch kings and campaigns of Chilarai in neighboring countries including Sylhet and Dimasa Kingdom.⁷

Next we find the documental evidences of the two great scholars of the century. One is Rai Bahadur , K.L.Barua and the other is Professor Nihar Ranjan Ray. K. L. Barua in his Early History of Kamarupa and N. R. Ray in his Bangalir Itihas convincingly mentioned the geographical dimension of the history Barak-Surma Valley.

B.C.Allen and Sir Edward Gait contributed much in the history, historiography and the people of Barak-Surma Valley of the early period. Allen in his Assam District Gazetteers (Vol. I, Cachar and Vol.II Sylhet) and again Sir Edward Gait in his The History of Assam represented that it was geographical structure and location of the Barak Surma Valley that made assimilation a key process in the early times.⁸

However, the researchers may take a clue from the works of Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee's Kirata-Jana-Kriti. This is a unique work and a celebrated reference to the early peoples history of the

region. According to him the Austrics, like the Khasi-Jaintias also lived in several settlements in the Surma Valley and their subsequent generations too, might have merged themselves spontaneously in the new society.⁹

Apart from all these documentary primary sources, we have with us the brilliant works of J. B. Bhattacharjee and Sujit Choudhury. Bhattacharjee in his *Social and Polity Formation in Pre Colonial North-East India, Kachari Rajya Uttan Aru Paton* and a large number of research papers published in different journals and proceedings of seminars throws much light on the historical process developed in the region under review that a researcher may get scope for further investigation. Sujit Choudhury authored *Srihatta Kacherer Prachin Itihas* which brought a new dimension on the historiography of the region by giving scientific interpretation of the traditions current among the people of the region for centuries. J. N. Choudhury edited a collection of reacar papers entitled *Srihatta Kacharer Itihas O Sansuritir Ruprekha* contains brilliant contributions of noted scholars like Sujit Choudhury, K.K. Gupta, S. Dutta Choudhury, J. B. Bhattacharjee, Kamaluddin Ahmed and others highlighting the historical aspects of the valley.

But the works referred to are either some scattered contributions or some materials offering scope for reconstruction of history. So ample scope remains for further research in the history of valley.

EPIGRAPHIC SOURCES

The epigraphic sources are more important than their literary counter parts as the former does not extend any scope for later interpretation than the latter does and as the antiquity of the epigraph can be ascertained by an easy scientific method. Over and above, authorities generally issue the epigraphs by mentioning the dates. Fortunately, the inscriptions so far discovered in the Barak-Surma region are all dated.

In interpreting the ancient history of Barak-Surma Valley, our most important source of information is undoubtedly a set of copper plate inscriptions brought out in an excellent collection entitled *Copper plates of Sylhet* by Kamalakanta Gupta (In 1960s), with his translations and explanations. The *Tipperah Inscription of Lokanatha* should be used in our study of the ancient history of the Barak-Surma Valley for its reference to Jayatunga Varsha Suvanga Visaya. In a very detailed study of this information, Dr. N. K. Bhattasali convincingly argues why Jayatunga Subang of Cachar.¹⁰ Thus the Tipperah copper plate is a very important source to the history of Barak-Surma Valley.

The discovery of the *kalapur copper-plate* of Loknatha's successor Marundanatha and reference in that plate of another grants for a temple of Anantanarayana certainly goes in favour Bhattasali's contention that the Barak-Surma Valley formed part of Samatata in that period.¹¹

Rai Bahadur K.L.Baraa published the full text of the two plates (The Tipperah inscription of Lokanatha and kalapur copper plate of Marundanatha) in the Journal of Orissa and Bihar Research society and argued that these should be treated as sources of the ancient history of Sylhet.

The description of the Chandrapuri visaya in the Nidhanpur plate of 7th century and the Chandrapura Visaya in the *paschimbhag* plate of the 10th century clearly shows that Chandrapuri and Chandrapura were one and the same. Srihattamandala became Srihattarajya in the *Bhatera plates* of 11th – 12th century. Infact, the emergence of Srihattarajya was a great event which integrated the greater Barak Valley region into an autonomous state and gave the people of the region a local identity.

Again, the sculptures of the *Bhuban Hill* cave complex and the Shrine of Siddheswar kapilashram at Badarpur and Unokoti (which is also geographically and historically an extension of the Barak Valley) are indeed some unassailable examples of social and cultural assimilation process in this part of South Asian peninsula before 7th century A.D.

Thus, altogether there are five inscriptions discovered so far in the valley. These are:

- a) Nidhapur copper plate grant of king Bhaskar varman
- b) Kalapur temple inscription of Samanta Marundanatha
- c) Pashimbagh copper plate of Srichandra of Vikrampur
- d) Bhatera copper plate issued by Govinda Keshavdeva of Srihatta and
- e) Second Bhatera copper plate issued by Ishanadeva of the same dynasty.

Besides these five inscriptions, two other inscriptions discovered in regions outside the Surma-Barak Valley are also required to be examined since they might have some relevance to the early history of this valley. These are:-

- a) Comilla copper plate of Samanta Lokanatha
- b) Rajghat Inscription of Bhimdeva and in this connection Tezpur inscription of Vallavadeva.

The Harikela coins found in Barak Valley and the adjoining areas and the literacy references to Harikela Kingdom for the 7th-10th century period should be studied for further understanding of the history of the valley. Prof. B.N. Mukharjee's reading of the Legends of a regional series of the Harikela coins and his identification of Vireka as Baraka (or Barak) is a very important contribution.

ORAL SOURCES

In modern times, the historians and research scholars make use of oral sources like traditions, customs, and folklores, hear say etc. as source materials in discovering the past. These oral sources serve as a storehouse of information to the historians.¹² Referring to the inevitability of oral sources, J.B. Bhattacharjee observed:

“Question may arise how the ancient history of Barak-Surma Valley should be written? The answer is not so difficult. Today alternative sources are being used throughout the world. The alternative is folk-based source. The researchers have no desire today to confine himself within the history of some kings, royal officials and high members of the society. They are searching for human history and the source of that history comes from the common people, because they (the common people) are the natural creator and bearer of history. The amalgamation of facts and sources is creating modern scientific history. The researchers are making abundant and generous use of Zoology, Geology, Linguistics and Folk-Literature for this purpose.¹²

Again, the oral or traditional source, folklore can play a vital role in unearthing the facts of social history. Dr. Dorson holds that the folklorists may play the most important role in supplying materials for social history. Folklorists by their works greatly enrich the source materials of the social historian.”¹³ Historians go so far as to hold that “folklore can play in the building up of the general history of a Nation.”¹⁵ It may emphatically stated that it can play very significant part in writing the history of the ancient and medieval period of the Surma-Barak region. In addition, it was Sujit Choudhury who first introduced the use of folklore¹⁴ for the purpose of writing history in this region. His conviction may truly be regarded as pathfinder in the field of scientific and methodical research of folklore.

Oral or traditional sources have been literarily used in the two books – *Srihatter Itibritta*¹⁵ and *Kacharer Itibritta*¹⁴ but in both the works, this was used as additional source materials. An oral source carries the social bosom hints and materials of history. As the known and used explanations, so it is

possible to put to use the less known and unused materials to build up the history of the ancient period of Barak-Surma Valley. Some of these materials are mentioned below.

A rite called *Garva Sankranti* is performed by the agricultural community of the region on the last day of the month of *Aswin*. This magic rite is related to fertility cult. On that day, the paddy seed is entertained various magical rites are observed so that the crops may not be harmed by any evil power. Some hard and fast rules about food are adhered to on that day. A curry of eight kinds of vegetables prepared without oil and spices has to be taken.¹⁵

Again, an analysis of the prevalent customs, beliefs and superstitions of the region leads but to the conclusions that, these have their spring in *Manusmriti* we guesses that at the early stage of the Aryan settlement in this region, the life of the people was guided and controlled by the *Manusmriti* and the beliefs and customs imposed at that time are still being followed by the people in their daily activities. We believe that this little known oral fact can throw new light on the history of the region. If the folk traditions are explained in the light of available conventional materials, some hints to the social life of the region may be found.

The sources discussed above are various in number and nature. History proper may be reconstituted on the basis of them taking one kind of source as complimentary to others. Separate study of them cannot hold good and a complete picture of history may be obtained only by a critical study of all the sources simultaneously.

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