CHAPTER-I

Historical Geography, people and socio-religious background of

Barak Valley
Demographic composition, geographic features, hills, people of the present Barak Valley:

Barak Valley, comprising of three districts in South Assam, namely Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj, is located between longitude 92.15° and 93.15° East and latitude 24.8° and 25.8° North, covering an area of 6,922 sq km of land. It is bounded on the North by North Cachar Hill district of Assam, Jaintia Hill district of Meghayalaya, on the South by Mizoram, on the east by Manipur and by Tripura and Syhlet district of Bangladesh on the West. The lifeline of this valley is its major river Barak. It has a number of tributaries covering the entire valley. These are Jiři, Mašhwa, Jatinga, Katakal, Sonai, Dhaleshwari and Harang. The Barail range, Bhuvan range, Sarashpur, Chatacurra are the major hills in the valley.

Topographically, Barak Valley is a tract comprising flat plains, marshy low-lands and adjoining foothills on eastern frontier of the Bengal Delta through which the river Barak flows. Following partition of the country in 1947, this tract was included in the state of Assam in independent India; and it covers now within its fold the three southernmost districts of that state, namely, Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. The hill ranges-Jaintia, Barail, Manipur, Lushai and Tripura-surround Barak Valley on all sides leaving only a small opening at its north-west corner. This gives to the Valley a tortoise-like shape. The river Barak which is joined by a number of tributaries from both north and south flows through the heart of the valley in a westerly direction. The river, on reaching the border of the present-day Bangladesh bifurcates itself into its two branches-the Surma and the Kushiara-which after flowing for a while reunite at a point in the interior of that country; the original flow although thus is resumed acquires in the changed set-up a new identity as the river Meghna. Given this continuity, Barak Valley—both culturally and economically—had been the inseparable northern end of the once-flourishing trans-Meghna sub-region.

Although 80% of the population in Barak Valley is Bengali yet it is the natural homeland to a number of ethnic groups like Kuki, Naga, Hmars, Khasis etc. Besides, some Koch (locally known as Dehans) have been residing in the valley since the occupation of Cachar by Chilarai, the Koch General. Dimasas have been residing in the valley following the extension of Dimasa rule into the valley from Maibong to N.C Hills. Manipuris have been residing in the valley following the Burmans occupation of Manipur in 1818. A number of Assamese settlements cropped up in the valley following
hospitality offered by the king of Cachar to the victims of Moamaria rebellion in 19th century. The beginning of tea plantation in the 1850's resulted in the flow of labourers from North Indian provinces, from the South and also the Bengal, all of whom had brought their distinctive dialects, folklores and rites which in totality is a significant addition to the unique culture of what may be termed as the 'anthropological garden' of Barak Valley. The term Barak Valley is of very recent origin. It is actually the post partitioned undivided Cachar district in Assam. During the period from 1874-1947, this valley was known as Surma Valley. Barak Valley comprising of the three districts of Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar is actually a truncated portion of the Syhlet-Cachar region. When Assam was organised as a province by the British in 1874, Syhlet and Cachar, two Bengali speaking districts were carved out of Bengal Presidency and incorporated in Assam to meet the revenue deficit of the newly formed province.

The Karimganj district of Assam (India) and the Maulavi Bazar, Silhet, Sunamganj and Habiganj districts of Bangladesh today were then the sub-divisions of the Syhlet districts while Cachar (Silchar), Hailakandi and North Cachar Hill (Halflong) districts of Assam (India) were sub-divisions of the Cachar district. Both the districts were then placed under a commissionership and came to be known as the Surma Valley Division. However, the major part of the Syhlet district barring some portions of Karimganj was transferred to erstwhile East Pakistan in 1947. The remaining portion of Surma Valley is which has since been reorganised into three districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi is now known as Barak Valley within the state of Assam. Thus, since time immemorial the Surma-Barak Valley forms a single cultural unit.

"The Barak-Surma Valley is nothing but the northern extention of the Meghna Valley (Dacca-Mymensingh-Commilla). There is nothing like a natural boundary between these valleys and that is why the traditions and cultures of these districts of East Bengal so easily spread into Syhlet-Cachar in the ancient and medieval times. Even now the society and culture of the Hindus and muslims of Syhlet-Cachar is bound with the Eastern districts of Bengal in one thread."  

**Historical Geography of early Barak Valley:**

The territorial change and growth of a state though it is a very common phenomenon may have effective role in the process of social and polity formation. Inclusion, annexation or cession of new area into or from a state or creation or
reorganization of new administrative areas leads to the change of political as well as human geography of the state. Historical Geography covers the domain of geography as part of socio-historical formation as both history and geography are very closely related in the process of formation and development of society, polity and economy. The basic objective of the study of historical geography is to mark out the history of geographical change of a particular time and space and thereby to find out the trend of politico-socio-economic changes for reconstruction of history. The study of the role of geography or geographical changes in shaping the historical developments and changes brought forward the notion of historical geography. Conventionally, Geography is divided into two broad categories. The first, Physical Geography, studies the configuration of the earth surface, its water, land, vegetation, animal life, climate etc while the second, human or cultural Geography, discusses the demographic (distribution of population over territory) political (distribution of territory among states) and economic geography (distribution of natural resources, production centres, land utilization, trade, transport etc. Thus geography as an indispensable historical component forms the basis of historical Geography. Harthshorne defines historical Geography as “an attempt to reconstruct the geography of a period of historical past. Thus, historical Geography reconstructs the geographical (both physical and human) changes that took place in a particular region in the past which might have passed out of current use.

Barak Valley: Some Geographical Issues

In the process of state formation, territory is one of the main elements, in absence of which, we cannot imagine the state in reality. However, in case of early states, tracing out exact boundary line is not possible as there was no chance of international understanding for borderlines in those days that is found only in case of modern-states. Here, the geography of Barak Valley, which is being developed in historiographical milieu is reviewed and the map of its historical geography is revisited emphasizing territorial changes and identification of the territories, administrative units etc.

In ancient times the entire Barak-Surma Valley was known as Srihattamandala or Srihattarajya at various points of time along with the neighbouring districts like Comilla, Chittagong and Noakhali it is commonly designated as South-East Bengal (known in ancient times as Samatata, Harikela etc). The valley is indeed a natural
extent of the Indo-Gangetic Bengal plains and the geographical features tied the Cachar-Syhet region with the neighbouring Samatata (South-East Bengal, i.e. the districts of Comilla/Tipperah, Chittagong, Noakhali etc) and Vanga (East Bengal i.e., the districts of Maimensingh, Rangpur, Dacca, Vikrampur etc). The Syhet-Cachar region is geographically covered in the same valley formed by Barak Valley and its branches. It is the homeland of a culturally cohesive group, ethnically and linguistically identical with the plain dwellers over an extensive territory beyond Syhet. There is no evidence of an independent principality formation in Cachar before the Tripuris in the 13th Century. The earliest known principality in Cachar alone was of the Dehans (Koch) of Khaspuri since 16th Century. The Dehans wrested the territory from the Tripuris, and the Dehan principality eventually merged into the Dimasa state. In the pre-Tripuri times the Cachar plains must have been included in the principalities that covered Srihattadesha. Srihatta or Sylhet in ancient times perhaps denoted the territory now covered in the Syhet districts of Bangladesh, Karimganj, Hailakandi and Cachar districts of Assam and the adjoining Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura. The geographical extent of the valley covers three districts of Assam, i.e Cachar (Silchar), Hailakandi and Karimganj, besides the Jatinga Valley in the North Cachar Hills, the Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam) of Manipur, Kailasahar-Dharmanagar areas of Tripura (all in India) and four districts of Bangladesh, namely Sadar Silhet, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj. Of these present districts in India and Bangladesh, Sadar Silhet, Karimganj, Maulavi Bazar, Habiganj and Sunamganj were all subdivisions of the Syhet district in the British period while Silchar, Hailakandi and Halflong (N.C Hills) were subdivisions of Cachar district. The two districts of Cachar and Syhet were together called the Surma Valley ever since these were transferred to Assam (from Dacca division of Bengal) in 1874. The Jiri Frontier Tract (Jiribam-Tipaimukh area) was transferred from Cachar to Manipur by the British in 1834, while the Dharmanagar-Kailasahar areas of ancient Srihatta (Sylhet) was integrated into the Tripuri state in the pre-colonial period. The Jatinga Valley formed part of the Dimasa state (Herambarajya) since the 16th century C.E and, along with the North Cachar hills, it formed part of Cachar district till 1953. Syhet was the most important town in the undivided valley and it is situated on the bank of the Surma (which is a branch of the river Barak). The British Government, therefore named it Surma Valley as an administrative division on Assam in 1912.
However, the main river, which formed the valley, or the river after which the valley is named, is the Barak. When the major part of the Syhlet district (leaving Karimganj to India) was transferred to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) at the time of the partition of India in 1947, the name Surma Valley fell into disuse. The Indian portion of the valley today is called the Barak Valley after the principal river of the tract.

The Barak-Surma Valley is geographically an extention of the Bengal plains and, as a natural consequence, the social and polity formation processes in that valley was influenced by the development in the adjoining Samatata and Vanga regions in early times. The Bengal Delta is divided into five geographical regions, namely, the deltaic plain, the Tipperah surface, the Syhlet basin, the Madhupur jungles and the Varendra uplands. The Syhlet basin can be distinguished from the rest of the recent alluvium by its subsidence and the profound effect this has had upon the drainage patterns and practices of agriculture. The 5000 square miles basin is demarcated by the Shillong plateau in the north, the Burmese and Tipperah highlands on the east and an upthurst of Pleistocene alluvium called the Madhupur jungle on the South. The western border lies to the east of the flood plain of the Brahmaputra river. This geographical description makes it clear that the ‘Syhlet basin’ consists of the Barak-Surma valley (Syhlet-Cachar of the British Assam) and the adjoining portion of the Tripura plains (modern Kailasahar-Dharmanagar area).

From ancient times, the geography of Barak Valley shifted time and again under the regime of different dynasties of South-east Bengal. The five Copper-Plate Inscriptions are the only reliable source of Syhlet-Cachar which gives information about the changes in the geographical situation of the then Barak Valley.

The earliest known copperplate discovered in the valley is that of Maharaja Bhaskar Varman of Kamarupa who ruled in the 7th century CE. This undated inscription is found in six copper plates recovered from Nidhanpur village in Panchakhanda pargana of Syhlet district. It describes the renewal of a perpetual revenue free landgrant by the Kshatriya king Maharaja Bhaskar Varman of the original grant made by his great-great-grand-father Maharaja Mahabhutti Varman who ruled towards the close of the 5th and the beginning of 6th century CE. The donated land called mayurasalmala was in the Chandrapuri Vishaya and bounded on the east by river Kosika, on the South-East by dried Kausika marked by hewn fig tree, on the south-west by the dried river gangu...
marked by a cut down fig tree, on the west by the dried bed of Ganginika, on the north-west by a potters pit and on the north-east by the pond of a lawyer named Khasoka. This grant to the brahmana was in the manner of bhumi-chchidra°, and the text was addressed to the district officers and the courts of justice. Although the total number of the donated land is not known, but the names of Brahmana donees, including their gotra and vedasakha, 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 cannot be ascertained. The available plates contain the list of 205 donees and they are given 159 11/6 shares. In addition to these, 7 shares were allotted for the Bali-Charu and Satra. It is also stated that the yield of the land increased by Kosika will go to the concerned Brahmana donees but the land enlarged by the Ganginika shall be equally divided by these Brahmanas²¹.

The Paschimbagh CopperPlate Inscription of Maharaja SriChandradeva was discovered in Paschimbagh village under Rajnagar Thana in Maulavibazar subdivision of Syhlet district during 10th century CE. The text gives geneology of the Chandra kings of Bikrampur from PurnaChandra to SriChandra who is described as a devout worshipper of Sugata i.e Buddha and Paramesvara, Parambhataraka, Maharajadhiraja. By this CopperPlate Srichandra granted lands in the vishaya of Chandrapur, Garala and Pagora within Srihattamandala under Paundravardhanabhukti.²²

The boundaries of ChandrapurVishaya and two other minor vishayas Garala and Pagora within Srihattamandala under Paundravardhanabhukti are the Vrihatkottali (the huge ridge with a fort on it), probably the present Latu-Adamali-Langla hills on the east boundary, the river Mani (the present Manu river) on the South boundary, the Jujjnakhataka (the present Jujna cherra), the Kashthapannyakhataka (the Kashthapannya canal), the Vetra Ghanghi (probably the present Vatari-Ghunghi river) on the west boundary, the river Kosiyara (the present Kusiyara) on the north boundary and thus the four boundaries contain roughly an area of about 1000 sq miles, mainly in the southern part of the present district of Syhlet.²³

**Geographic Provenance of the Rivers and Riverine Rural Settlements:**

The names of the two rivers Kausika and Ganginika are found in the functional part of the Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription of BhaskaraVarman as boundaries of the Mayursalmalagraha granted to the 205 Brahmanas. After the discovery
of the Nidhanpur CopperPlate Inscription, scholars like P.N Bhattacharaya, N.K Bhattasali, K.L Barua and J.C Ghosh. There have been much difference of opinion regarding the location of the donated land and these two rivers. The discovery of Paschimbagh CopperPlate Inscription of SriChandra and the Khalimpur Grant of Dharmapala established the fact beyond doubt that the land donated was situated within the Srihattamandala (Syhlet district of Bangladesh) of Pundravardhanabukti. N.K Bhattasali has identified the Chandrapurivisaya of the Nidhanpur CopperPlate Inscription where the Mayurasalmalagraha was situated with the village of Chandrapur on the left bank of the living Kusiara, 7 km to the west of Supatia. J.C Ghosh supporting Bhattasali, writes,” This river is perhaps the Kausika mentioned in the plates which probably gave up its former bed in the east and took the course of the dried up Ganginika in the west after the grant of the plates.” The identification of the river Kausika with Kusiara of Bangladesh shows the location of the river Ganginika somewhere near Kusiara.

Earliest Inhabitants of Barak Valley:

It is not possible to determine for certain as to who were the earliest inhabitants of Syhlet-Cachar region. The whole of North and East Bengal was under the Mongoloid influence, and since Syhlet-Cachar region is an extention of Bengal, consequently, the mongoloid influence was felt a little more in this region. Kuchbihar, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Maimensingh and Commila of North and East Bengal were under the Indo-Mongoloid influence since more than thousand years or so.

“One may say that the Bodos were the most important Indo-Mongolod people in Eastern India and they form one of the main bases of the present population of these tracts. They spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley and North Bengal as well as East Bengal, forming a solid block in North-Eastern India. In Assam from Nowgong district their area of occupation extended to Cachar district into Syhlet and further to Tripura state to Comilla and also Noakhali district. Thus they occupied the north of the Ganges by the eastern sea.”

Origin of the river Barak:

The river Barak rises on the southern slopes of the lofty range which forms the northern boundary of Manipur, descends the plains in Jiribum and flows in a tortuous course across the Cachar district and a small portion of the Hailakandi district to reach Badarpur in Karimganj district. It then moves further to Haritikar where it is divided into
two branches, namely Surma and Kushiyara, and both enter the undivided Syhlet district of Bangladesh. Surma moves through the Jaintia Parganas, and touching Syhlet, Chhatak and Sunamganj towns, it enters Maimansingh near Dhirai after forming for some distance the boundary between Syhlet and Maimansingh districts. Kosiyara further divides itself into two branches, at a short distance from Karimganj. The northern branch is first called Bibiyana and after some distance the Kalni, and finally rejoins Surma near Asimganj on the Syhlet-Maimansingh border. The southern branch of Kushiyara resumes the original name of the river Barak and after passing by the Habiganj and Nabiganj towns joins the Surma near Dhirai, where the combined stream takes the name Dhaleshwari and finally empies itself into the old bed of Brahmaputra near Bhairab Bazar in East Bengal. During its long course of more than eight hundred kilometres through the Barak-Surma Valley, the Barak receives innumerable tributaries from the Khasi hills, Jaintia hills, North-Cachar hills, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. The Barak of Cachar-Syhlet becomes Dhaleshwari in Maimansingh then it joins Brahmaputra, merges into Meghna and finally flows into the Bay of Bengal. The principal river in the Cachar-Syhlet region is the Barak. In Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj it is known by this name. In Syhlet one of the two main branches of the river resumes the original name and all the branches combine into one stream on the Syhlet-Maimansingh border under the original name Barak. We, therefore, call the region Barak Valley to denote the entire Cachar-Syhlet region. Geographically this region is inseparable from Bengal, so also socially and historically.

Socio-Religious Background:

Barak Valley is the melting pot of ethnic diversity. It is a place where in diverse civilizations, religions and cultures met in the past. Although maximum of the population in Barak Valley is Bengali, yet it the homeland of diverse ethnic groups like the Hmars, Kukis, Khasis have been residing in the valley since time immemorial etc. Besides these, the Koch, the Dimasas, Manipuris, the Assamese, the Tea Garden Community have been residing in the Valley and the comingling of these tribes have made Barak Valley a unique anthropological garden. Since, geographically, linguistically, culturally and socially, the Barak Valley is an extention of Eastern Bengal therefore the socio-religious background of the valley is directly related with the socio-religious background of Eastern Bengal.
The process of sanskritisation in Barak Valley might have taken place in the early centuries of the christian era or atleast before the 5th century since the Tripuri state formation started in the Cachar plains about 5th century CE. According to a copperplate inscription, a Tripuri king donated a tract of land, which later on came to be known as Panchakhanda in Syhlet to five Brahmanas from Mithila, one of whom was named Nidhipati. The incidence of a vedic sacrifice by the Tripura king shows that the Brahmanical influence had already made its mark in the Barak-Surma Valley before the brahmanas invited by Adi Dharma Pha for conducting vedic sacrifice were granted land for settlement in the Panchakhandha area of Srihatta. However, the Nidhanpur Copperplate inscription of Bhaskara Varman is the first indisputable material evidence of the socio-political arvanisation of the Surma Barak Valley. It describes the renewal of a perpetual revenue free landgrant by the kshatriya king Maharaja Bhaskar Varman of the original grant made by his great-great-great grand father Maharaja Mahabhutti Varman 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. The inscription clearly describes that about two hundred and five Brahmanas were granted land in the area. It is also mentioned that seven shares of the total land donated were allotted for the Bali-Charu-Satra. Thus it can be said that Brahminical religion had made its entry in Surma-Barak Valley from 5th Century onwards although the first material evidence of the Aryanisation of the Valley comes from 7th Century CE. The next important Copper Plate Inscription of Syhlet-Cachar region is the Kalapur Copper Plate Inscription of Loknatha which has tremendous similarities with the Tipperah CopperPlate Inscription of Samanta Marundanatha. Both the CopperPlate Inscription gives information about the grant of land for the purpose of Bali-Charu-Satra of god AnantaNarayana. The land donated by Marundanatha was undoubtedly in Chautali pargana of Srimangal as the CopperPlate was also discovered in that locality and the existence of the temple or monastery is supported by archaeological evidences but Loknatha’s donated land could be either in Chautali or in Suvang as the plate was discovered somewhere in Tipperah district. However, both Chautali and Suvang are in ancient Srihatta. The next CopperPlate Inscription of Syhlet-Cachar region is the Paschimbagh CopperPlate Inscription of Sri Chandra. This inscription gives information about the fact that Sri Chandra who is described as a devout worshipper of Sugata i.e Buddha gifted perpetually revenue free
lands to Gargga and other six thousand Brahmanas of different gotras and pravaras in the name of Lord Buddhabhataraka for enhancing the merit and fame of the king and his parents. The land granted to the Brahmanas included three vishayas, viz. Chandrapura, Garala and Pagara and the donated lands in three vishayas covered portions of modern Syhlet, Karimganj and Cachar districts and also of Tripura state. The next important epigraphic records are the two Bhatera CopperPlates of Raja Govinda-Kesavadeva and Raja Isanadeva respectively. The first CopperPlate Inscription was issued by Raja Govinda KesavaDeva of Srihattarajya donating 375 bhuhalas and 296 vatis to Vatesavara Shiva and also mentions the different kinds of attendants belonging to various subject races given to the deity. The second CopperPlate was issued by Ishana Deva, son and successor of KesavaDeva. It mentions that he granted land in the name of Vasudeva Krishna. The discovery of the plates in Bhatera and the use of the epithet Srihattesvara make it abundantly clear that the Devas were the rulers of Syhlet and the adjoining districts. Thus, the whole of Syhlet-Cachar must have been under their rule. The information from the five Copper Plate Inscriptions makes it clear that Vedic Brahmanism had made its appearance in the Valley from 5th Century CE. Thus from the information gathered from the five Copper Plate Inscriptions, there is no reason to doubt that in this era Vedic religion and culture spread throughout Bengal.

From the above five Copper Plate Inscription we also get evidence of the prevalence of traces of Saktism, Saivism and Vaisnavism and Buddhism in Syhlet-Cachar region from 7th to 11th Century CE. From Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription, we get information that about two hundred and five Brahmanas bearing different gotras and Veda-Shakas well versed in the four Vedas were granted land. From the names of the Brahmanas it could be indicated that maximum of them were bearing Vaisnava names, then came in prominence the names bearing Saiva and Sakta influence. Besides these from Nidhanpur CopperPlate inscription it was clear that from the donated land, a share was granted for the bali-charu-satra of Ananta Narayana. This was probably a form of pre-Chaitanya cult of Vaisnavism in Syhlet-Cachar region. The next copperplate Inscription which gives us information about the prevalence of Vaisnavism is the Kalapur CopperPlate Inscription of samanta Marundanatha. Tipperah CopperPlate Inscription of Loknatha can be mentioned here because both the CopperPlate inscriptions bear similarities and gives information about the construction of a temple of Ananta
Narayana in Syhlet. The next CopperPlate Inscription which gives information about the prevalence of Vaisnavism is the Bhatera Copper Plate Inscription of Ishana Deva which gives information about the construction of a temple of Kamsanisudana (Krishna).

Apart from these two inscriptions, epigraphic records which give us evidence of the prevalence of Vaisnavism in the Syhlet-Cachar region, there are other epigraphic records which give us evidence of the Vaishnavite orthodoxy of the Varmans who were the Vaisnava king Sridharan Rata, it has been shown by the Paramasitas of the Vishnu-Chakra Seal on Samantasar, Copper grant of Hari Varman and Bhoja Varman. Besides these, the Mainamati Chandra disclose that the later members of this dynasty of the Varmans were undoubtedly staunch Vaisnava as is evident from the Vishnu-Chakra Seal on Belava Copper Plate Inscription of Bhoja Varman. Apart from this, the Belavara Copper Plate Inscription of Ladaha Chandra and Govinda Bundhu, Jugaltiler Akhda, Shyamsunderer Akhda, and Gopala Akhda are some of the places which bear the legacy of Vaisnavism in this region from ancient times.

However, Vaisnavism as an effective social and religious force emerged in 15th and 16th Century in Syhlet-Cachar region. It is a mistake to think Chaitanya as in any sense the originator of Vaisnavism in Bengal. This faith had its adherents here for centuries, not an unimportant group. Some of the chief figures among Bengal’s poet drew their inspiration from the Vaisnava scriptures. Jayadeva with his Gitagovinda, Vidyapati, Uma names in Bengali literary history all owe much influence long before Chaitanya’s day. Vaisnavism during 18th Century under the influence of the matrimonial alliance of Raja Krishna Chandra and Dilmasa ruled in Cachar owing to the Manipur Court, predominantly a Vaisnavism influenced court. After his brother’s death, Govinda Chandra married Indu Prabha and at her influence embraced Vaisnavism and composed a whole music of era ‘RashUtsav Lila’ depicting Radha Krishna lila.
which marks a significant stage of Vaisnavism in the Dimasa Court as well as Cachar in the 19th Century.

The two Copper Plate Inscriptions which gives us some information about the traces of Saivism from 7th to 18th Century CE are the Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription and the two Bhatera Copper Plate Inscriptions of Kesava Deva and Ishana Deva. The second largest number of Brahmins who were granted land as is revealed in the Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription were the sajvas as is evident from their names bearing Saiva influence. The first Bhatera Copper Plate Inscription opens with a salutation to lord Shiva and gives a genealogy of four kings. The last king of the dynasty i.e., Kesava Deva is said to have granted land for the adoration of Lingam (Siva) of the name Vatesvara. Besides these two Copper Plate Inscriptions of Syhlet-Cachar region, there are other inscriptions from South-East Bengal which gives us information about the prevalence of Saivism in the region.

The Gunaigar Copper Plate Inscription of Vainya Gupta records a grant of the temple of Pradyumneshwara who has been taken as a combined form of Hari and Hara i.e Vishnu and Shiva. Another important information is the seal of the Gunaigar Inscription which bears the figure of a bull which is the vehicle of Lord Shiva. The Asrapur Plates show that the growing popularity of Saivism even attracted the minds of the Khadga rulers. Another Inscription which gives further information towards the Saiva leaning of the royal dynasty is that Prabhavati, the queen consort of Dev Khadga covered an image of Sarvani, who is regarded as the Kakti of Sarva i.e Shiva, with gold. Besides these a large number of Natesa images though generally common in South India have come to light from South Eastern part of Bengal.

There are several cult spots and temples in Syhlet-Cachar region which bears the prevalence of Saivism in this region. In the present Cachar district, one of the ancient Saiva cult spot is the Bhuvan hill. It is a cave temple of Bhuwaneshwar Shiva and is regarded as the most important historical relic in the plains of Cachar. Another sacred site of great importance is the Siddeshwar Kapilasram of Badarpurghat. On the bank of the river Barak, to the east of Badarpur ghat Railway station, there is an old shrine dedicated to lord Shiva and the place is called Siddeshwar Kapilasram. Another historical relic which bears the testimony of the prevalence and popularity of the cult of Saivism in the Cachar region during 17th century is the Sri Sri Bhuwaneshwara temple at
Chandragiri, Sonai. The main reason for which the temple is historically so important are the two inscriptions inscribed on the wall of the Temple. From the two inscriptions, it is known that the temple was built by Joysingha Burman under the supervision of Raja Krishna Chandra in order to propitiate Sri Sri Bhuvaneshwar Shiva in the year 1785. The other Saiva Cult Spots in Syhlet district are the Rupnatha cave in Jayantia Pargana, Hatakeshwar Shiva in Syhlet, Tungeshwar Mahadev, Brahma Kunda and Tapta Kunda etc. All of above mentioned cult spots are one of the most astonishing and wonderful pilgrimage sites in Eastern India.

Sufism is a spiritual philosophy of Islam the essence of which is to establish direct relationship with Allah by purifying the soul. It is not a separate religion but a tradition following Quran and the life of Prophet Muhammad. The advent of Islam in Syhlet-Cachar region may be traced with the conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiar Uddin Bakhtiar Khilji in 1206 BCE, though it created a hallmark only when Sikandar Shah Ghazi conquered Syhlet with the help of Hazrat Shah Jalal Mujarrad, the saint warrior, who can rightly be called the man behind the spread of Islam in the valley. The advent of Islam in modern Karimganj district goes back prior to 15th Century as is evident from the different archeological sources from different parts of the district. But the sway of Muslim rule never extended to Hailakandi and Cachar district of Barak Valley which had successively been under the the Tripuri, Koch and Dimasa kingdom during the medieval period. A galaxy of sufi saints visited the valley and preached the essence of Sufism among the masses. Among them mention may be made of Hazrat Shah Badar, Hazrat Shah Adam Khaki, Shah Diya-uddin, Shah Abdul Malik Shah Sikander and Meer-ul-Afreen.

In ancient times, the area that is now known as Bengal was divided into several small kingdoms such as Samatata, Harikela, Anga, and vanga in the east, Tamralipti and Radha in the West and Pundra and Varendra in the north. It is difficult to say if Buddhism first made its appearance in Bengal during Magadhan rule, although it may be suggested that since Bengal was adjacent to Magadha (modern Bihar), perhaps Buddhism was not unknown to the people of western and northern Bengal bordering on Magadha. However, that Buddhism was firmly established in Bengal during Mauryan rule in the third century BC is evident from epigraphic and other sources such as a Mauryan inscription in Brahmi characters found at Mahasthana in the Bogra.
central Bengal) and a large number of Mauryan coins as well as other artifacts. The Chinese traveller, during his travel I-tsing is said to have witnessed Ashoka’s stupas in several places such as Tamralipti (Tamluk), Karnasuvarna (Burdwan and Murshidabad) in western Bengal, Pundravardhana in northern Bengal and Samatata in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh). Pushyamitra, is described in Divyavadana as a cruel persecutor of Buddhism. However, Sunga kings were in fact quite tolerant of Buddhism as is evident from the erection of the gateways at Bharut and Sanchi during the Sunga period. Besides these, the discovery of terracotta figurines at Mahasthangarh, two votive inscriptions recording the gifts of two inhabitants of Pundravardhana and a terracotta tablet found at Tamralipti attest that Buddhism was surviving in Bengal during the Sunga period in the second century BC. The religious history of India took a new turn with the rise of the Gupta empire in the 4th Century CE. Although virtually nothing is known about the state of Buddhism during this period however what is especially significant about Gupta rule in Bengal is that while Brahmanic Vaisnava and Saiva theisms were predominant, Buddhism was still flourishing in Bengal and other parts of India. The Guptas never treated Buddhism as a religious rival rather it was granted favoured position in that the Buddha was accepted as an avatar of Vishnu by the middle of the sixth century CE.

After the downfall of the Gupta empire, in the midst of political disintegration several political powers emerged, of which the Pushyabhutis of Thaneswar in north India and two independent kingdoms, Gauda and Vanga, in Bengal are worth special mention as far as Buddhism is concerned. Buddhism encountered severe hostility and repression from Sasanka of Gauda, who also captured Vanga later. On the other hand Harsavardhana of Thaneswar was a great patron of Buddhism like Ashoka and Kanishka. Originally a worshiper of his two family gods, Siva and Surya (the sun), Harsavardhana, like Ashoka and Kanishka, became a devout Buddhist. However, there is no evidence that Harsavardhana ever ruled Vanga or Samatata although it is believed that he established his supremacy over Gauda (northwestern Bengal) after defeating Sasanka or after Sasanka’s death. According to the account of Fa-Hein, a renowned Chinese pilgrim, who visited India during the 7th century CE in the reign of Harsha Vardhana, Samatata was ruled by a Brahman dynasty in the first half of the seventh century. This Brahmanic dynasty is believed to have been overthrown by the Khadga dynasty, the first Buddhist dynasty to rule an independent Bengal. The Buddhist Khadga rulers have left two
copper-plates found at Ashrafpur, beside an inscription engraved on an image of Sarvani at Deulbadi.\textsuperscript{52} The Copper Plates referred to above give the genealogy of the Khadgas mentioning Khadgodyama, Jatakhadga, Devakhadga and Rajaraja or Rajarajabhatta. From one of the Ashrafpur plates\textsuperscript{53} we learn that king Devkhadga granted a piece of land measuring nine patakas and ten drones to Acharya Sanghamitra, head of several Buddhist monastic establishments. Another Ashrafpur plate records a gift by prince Rajaraja comprising six patakas and ten drones of land in favour of the monastery of Sanghamitra. Both the charters begin with the verses in praise of the Buddha on the Buddhist religion. There is sufficient evidence to show that all the kings of the Khadga dynasty were Buddhist. Another Buddhist dynasty connected with the same region was that of the Ratas, known from a copper-plate discovered at Kailan\textsuperscript{44} near Commilla. The charter was issued in the 8\textsuperscript{th} regnal year of Sridharanarata, called Samatatesvara i.e lord of Samatata. The same region more or less marked by Buddhist influences is noted in a copper-plate grant issued from Devaparvata\textsuperscript{55} on the southern end of the Mainamati hills by king Bhavadeva, son of Anandadeva. King Bhavadeva is described in the charter as a Paramasaugata i.e. a devout worshipper of the Buddha. Two more grants of this dynasty have been discovered from the Salvan Vihara in the Lalmai Mainamati ridge near Commilla. One was issued by Anandadeva, son of Viradeva and another bore the endorsement of Bhavadeva, son of Anandadeva.\textsuperscript{56} Not long after the reign of Bhavadeva, the dynasty came to an end, and the Samatata country passed to the Palas. The rise of the Pala dynasty was the next remarkable event in the history of Indian Buddhism and so in the history of Buddhism in Bengal who ruled Bengal from the middle of the eight to the later half of the twelfth century BCE. The Palas were the last Buddhist dynasty to rule Bengal and the only dynasty in India to reign for a period of four hundred years, Pala rule is held to be responsible for the rise of Tantric Buddhism. Epigraphic, archeological and other evidences also testify to the thriving state of Buddhism under Pala rule. Pala rule came to an end with the death of its last king, Rampala, and with Buddhism lost royal patronage for good. Meanwhile, two small Buddhist dynasties, namely Deva and Chandra, are known to have ruled some parts of Bengal in the second half of the tenth century CE. Two kings of the Deva dynasty and Chandra dynasty named Kantideva and Layahachandra, are believed to have ruled a small independent kingdom known as Harikhela, and Trailokyachandra and his sons, Srichandra and Govindachandra,
established the supremacy in the eastern part of Bengal. The Salvan Vihar, the Buddha *stupa* and inscriptions found near the Mainamati hills in the district of Comilla testify to the fact that Buddhism was in a flourishing state under the rule of the Chandra kings. A good number of tantric scholars of Buddhism flourished during the period of the Palas. The art and iconography of the same period will bear testimony to the fact that by this time Mahayana began to be eclipsed by Vajrayana Buddhism. The icons of various Buddhist gods and goddesses of the period and also the representation of some gods with their respective female consorts in a state of union will indicate the introduction of the female element in the Buddhist religion of the time.  

Folk religion plays a very significant role in moulding the religious background of Barak Valley. Folk Religion is essentially a syncretistic system built up through the interpenetration of two or more forms of religion in a complex society. Regarding Folk Hinduism, it can be said that it is not an isolated unit but rather one stream of the Hindu tradition though it differs from them in important aspects. There are a variety of notions regarding the nature of gods and goddesses in the rural areas. The folk gods and goddesses are not regarded as 'high god' but perceived as regional deities intimately associated with villages and towns. There is no sharp differentiation between the tribal deities, village deities and gods and goddesses of Brahmanical Hinduism. Some common themes that may be noted in the worship of folk gods and goddesses include Regionalism, Pragmatism, Human Personality, Variation of form and Lack of concern for caste.

Folk rituals are generally performed by the women folk of Barak Valley all throughout the year. Some of the very essential characteristics in the performance of the folk rituals are the non requirement of male priest for the performance of the ritual, recitation of the doggerel verses and the drawing of ritual paintings known as Alpana. Some of the significant female folk rites or Vratas of Barak Valley are: Mangal Chandi vrata, Surya vrata, Savitri Vrata, Rupashi Vrata, Shankata Vrata, Thunki Thakurian Vrata. Some of the important Folk Cults of Barak Valley are Nouka Puja, the cult of Badshah, the cult of Manasha, deity Darai, Kartik Puja.

Hindu religious practice is simply a synthesized form of Aryan practices with pre-Aryan and non-Aryan practices. The aborigines of India, like those of other countries, ascribed divinity to certain trees, stones, hills, fruits, flowers, beasts, birds and places and
offered worship to them. This is still true of such tribes as the Khasis, Mundas, Saotals, Rajbamsis, Bunos and Savaras. In Bengal, especially in the villages, worship of trees, particularly tulsi, seora and the banyan, is still very popular among the girls of Brahmanical society. Most of the vratas still practiced in our rural society, especially among the women, are non-Vedic, non-Smriti, non-Puranic and non-Brahmanical, are basically related to the secret magical procreational ritual so much a part of rustic society. There are also many vratas performed in the homes of the Bengali people which originally were current among the aboriginal tribes as ceremonies of occult and fertility power. Having been recognized by Brahmanism, many of these auspicious ceremonies found a place in the almanac, such as the vratas of Sasthi, Mangal Chandi and Suvachani.

Some of the agricultural rites observed by the folk of Barak Valley are Kartik Sankranti, Bhola Sankranti and Paush Sankranti.

Garbha Sankranti or Kartik Sankranti is essentially a female rite and peasant women perform it by offering sadh (desired food) to the paddy field. It is an important agricultural rite observed by the agricultural community of the Barak Valley on the last day of Aswin (normally the 14th or 15th of October). It is essentially a female rite and peasant women perform it by offering sadh (desired food) to the paddy field. Sadbhakshan is a popular female rite of local Hindus observed by ceremonially feeding a pregnant woman with all her favourite food amidst great merriment. Sadbhakshan to the paddy field is compared here with the sadbhakshan of a pregnant woman when the conception reaches its seventh or eight month. It is believed that unless the rite is observed the unborn child would not grow properly in the womb and the delivery would be delayed and difficult. The same ideas operate during the observance of Garbha sankranti which is thought to be the sadbhakshan to the paddy field. Here, the corn-bearing field is taken for a would be mother who must be fed with her favourite food to ensure the proper growth of the plants.

The last day of Kartik is called Bhola sankranti. It is the day on which the village folk observe a ritual to make their houses free of dirt and filth, mosquitoes and flies. It is in fact an elaborate cleansing ceremony where the homestead including the courtyard and outer area is cleansed with water and cowdung. The dwelling rooms and cowsheds are cleared out of accumulated dirt, filth and rubbish and Utensils and implements are
washed. All litter or rubbish is piled up in a heap outside the house preferably on one side of the village path and in the evening the inmates would make a bonfire of this heap.

The demographic composition of Barak Valley may be considered as a melting pot of different ethno-cultural communities. They came in waves and streams during different phases of time since the remote past. However, the remoteness of the place due to geographical isolation and topographical barriers could not prevent the immigrants from coming to the valley and settle here permanently. At the close of the 18th century, the plains of Cachar was dominated by the different group of tribes. They were mainly the Dimachas, the Kukis, the Nagas, the Reangs, the Manipuris, the Koches etc. The different ethno-cultural groups came to Cachar as waves in different periods of time.

The Rongmei people came down to Cachar from Manipur hills to have asylum being deported by the Kuki people as a result of Naga-Kuki ethnic conflicts in hills about three hundred years ago. They also perhaps also came from time to time to escape from the famine in the hills or due to epidemic or devastation caused by bonfire. In Cachar they settled in the hillocks to practice jhum cultivation. However, in course of time they settled in the plain areas by adopting wet cultivation and other subsidiary economy. The Kuki, Lushai and Hmar groups of people came down from the hills of Manipur and Mizoram mainly due to some socio-economic reasons. The Jayantia people of Cachar who identify themselves as ‘Pran’ and who are being identified by others as Khasis, constitute a significant population in Barak Valley. Most of the migrations in pre-British period occurred from the surrounding hills and even beyond the hills. They were mostly tribal people. They came to undivided Cachar mainly for socio-political reasons with some exceptions.

The religion of the Kachari race is distinctly of the type commonly known as ‘animistic’ and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear and dread. The Kachari pantheon is a very extensive one, though it seems probable that comparatively small number are strictly of tribal or national origin, many having obviously been borrowed from their Hindu neighbours. The Dimasas were the worshippers of Shiv-Sakti (Shibrae-Gamadi). From ancient times, in Kamarupa Shiva worship was prevalent. According to the Kalikapurana. Shiva worship was prevalent in Kamrupa long before the
prevalence of Sakti worship. There is a lot of resemblance between the Bathoubura of the Bodos, Shibrae of the Dimasas and the Aryan Shiva. Bathoubura of the Bodos and Shibrae of the Dimasa are their presiding deities. Yoni and Linga worship are the remnants of tribal worship. The Yoni and Linga worship has its remnants in tribal worship. The Yoni worship in Kamakhya is associated with the Austrics and during ancient times, Kamakhya devi was their presiding deity. Kamakhya devi was absorbed and assimilated with the Lati legend and she became the consort of Shiva. From 4th Century CE to 12th Century CE, different dynasties ruled in Kamarupa like the Varman dynasty, Salastambha and the Pala dynasty. All these dynasties were Saiva by faith. During the rule of Pala dynasty in Kamarupa Saiva-Sakti and Tantric Buddhism were in vogue in Kamarupa. During 9th 10th Century, Kamarupa- Kamakhya was transformed into a centre of Tantric religion. From Nidhanpur Copper Plate Inscription, Kamauli Inscription and Harsha Charita, we get evidence of the prevalence of Saivism during Varman dynasty. That the Dimasas were the devout worshippers of Shiva-Sakti is evident from the prevalence of different remains left by them in the Brahmaputra Valley, North Cachar hills and Barak Valley. The Dimasas give a very prominent place to Shiva (Shibrae). He is always worshipped first before all the Gods in Dimasa pantheon. The Dimasas always take the name of Shibrae before the beginning of any auspicious occasion. Apart from Shiv-Sakti, the Dimasas have their own pantheon of local gods and goddesses like Madai-Sagai.

The Dimachas were pagans and followed their own pagan faith which bordered round animism. Like all other Tibeto-Burman tribes they worshipped both good and evil spirits, different gods and goddesses in dykhow (temple), trees and animals, the earth, rivers and the hills. The chief priest of the Dimachas was Jantima or Banteijav. Dimachas worshipped for the benefit of their families and also for the benefit of their community.

The Southern portion of Barak Valley and particularly the entire south of Cachar for a long time had been under the political control of Tripura raj. A Reang is a nature worshipper and hence a pagan. They believe in creation and the existence of Supreme being. They worship the gods and goddesses and offer sacrifices to satisfy the evil spirits. They believe in the transmigration of the soul and law of piety. Their religious faith combines the philosophy of the Hindus, Buddhists and Pagans. They worship Lord
Mahadeva as the gods of all the gods. They also worship Kali but Kali like the Hindus is not the wife of Shiva but the consort of Burah, the evil spirit. Matai Katar is also another evil spirit.68

The Halams are the original inhabitants of Tripura and are also found in Barak Valley and Mizoram. The Halams belong to the Kuki tribe and are a clan of them. The Darlong Kukis who are a cognate of the Lushais also live in Tripura and Barak Valley. The Nagas, like the Kukis, are the indigenous people of Cachar. They lived in the eastern part of the district in the pre-British period of history and they lived both in the hills and jungles on the Cachar-Manipur frontiers and also on the plains. The Nagas of Cachar are known as Kacha or Kala Nagas. The Nagas lived in Cachar and North Cachar Hills. They were more numerous in the North Cachar Hills. The Kacha Nagas are animists or Pagan.69

The worship of the village deity, or grama-devata, forms an important part of the amalgamation of religious beliefs, customs and ceremonies which are generally typified together under the term Hinduism. Since agriculture is the main occupation of the villages of Barak Valley, therefore many rites and rituals are associated with cultivation, for instance, different rites and rituals are observed during the different phases of cultivation like sowing, shifting, reaping and harvesting.

Some of the other vratas performed by the village folks of Barak Valley Sumati-Kumatir Vrata, Jora Jorir Vrata, Maghpur Vrata or Kumari Vrata, Baromashi Vrata, Ganga Puja, Bagh Puja, Khelar Vrata, Paush or Tushu Vrata, Baraan Vrata, Bana or Shasti Vrata, Shankar Thakurer Vrata, Garui Vrata, Kaak Vrata, Darbar Thakurer Paan, Karmapurusher Vrata, Kalki Narayan Vrata, Subho Chandi Vrata, Badrinather Upaash, Gram Puja and Rakhaal Puja.70

The Manipuris of Barak Valley have been living here since time immemorial71. An early historical evidence of Manipur recorded that the first Meetei settlement took place during the reign of Kaokhonba, a king of Manipur when one Chenjel Naral Panganba migrated to the Cachar that is Barak Valley. The Meitheis or Manipuris are the most advanced section of the Kuki-Chin people. The Meithei adopted Hinduism fairly early. During the reign of king Kiyamba, who lived in the 15th Century both Saiva and Vaisnava forms of Hinduism were current among the Manipuri people. However, the Manipuris accepted Chaitanya Vaisnavism from Bengal in the middle of the 18th
Century. Bengali or Chaitanya Vaisnavism came to Manipur by way of Syhlet. Although the Manipuris of the Barak Valley are under the pervasive influence of the Hindu Vaisnavite culture, the Manipuri religious life is marked by the co-existence of traditional Meetei belief system and the Vaisnavite Hindu faith. Every Manipuri house has three sacred places reserved for their traditional deities. These are Phunga Lairu, Sanamahi Kachin and Leimaren. The significance of the traditional religion lies in the Laiharaoba which may be defined as performing ceremony of and festival for the Umanglais (Sylvan deities). Umanglai is worshipped by the Manipuri Community as Panthoibi, Thangjing and Nongpokningthou. 72

1. Gopalkrishnan, R (2012): Assam land and People-Dspace @NEHU.dspace.nehu. See Map No. i
5. Choudhury, op.cit
8. Ibid.,Pp-1
9. Ibid.,Pp-2
10. Ibid.,Pp-3
16. Bhattacharjee, Social and Polity Formation, op.cit, Pp-12
17. Bhattacharjee, Pre-Colonial Political Structure, op.cit, Pp 61.
20. So that no tax is levied on it as long as sun, the moon and the earth will endure.
23. Gupta, op.cit, Pp 133.
27. Ibid., Pp 65
29. Bhattacharjee, Social and Polity Formation, op.cit, Pp-24
30. Choudhury, op.cit, Pp 214
31. Bhattacharjee, op.cit, Pp 28
32. Choudhury, op.cit, Pp 211-212.
33. I.H.Q., vol-22, p. 269
36. Sircar, D.C., op.cit. pp. 51-52
38. Mukherjee, Ramaranjan and Maity, Sachindra Kumar, Corpus of Bengal Inscription, pp. 65
41. El, XVII, p. 357, 11-2-3
42. Choudhury,op.cit., Pp 46
43. Ibid, Pp 30
51. Ibid
52. Majumder, op.cit,Pp. 87.
53. Ibid
54. I.H.Q., XXIII, Pp.221
56. E.I, XXVI, Pp. 313
57. Chakma, op.cit, Pp 43-44.
60. Choudhury, op.cit, Pp. 53-62, 72-80
66. Ibid
68. Chatterjee, op.cit, Pp 50-54.
69. Ibid
70. From Field Study and Oral Sources in different villages of Barak Valley.