CHAPTER II
SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORY OF BARAK VALLEY WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ADVENT OF BRITISH RULE

Before embarking upon the main theme of our study, it would be worthwhile to present briefly the background of the valley's society and its socio-political history. In order to understand the contemporary society and issues involved therein, it is imperative to look into the relevant past. Therefore, an attempt is made here to look back into the past, particularly the nature of society in the pre-colonial Surma-Barak Valley and the process of its transformation under the colonial rule. A study of this process of transition would enable us to understand the forces that facilitated the rise of nationalism, particular kind of regionalism and multiple varieties of localism and how and when these forces contradicted one another and how and when worked in unison as the situation so demanded.

The districts of Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi are commonly known as the Barak Valley. The Valley is bounded on the North by the North Cachar and Karbi Anglong Hill districts and the state of Meghalaya, on the east by Manipur, on the south by the state of Mizoram and on the west by the Sylhet district of Bangladesh and the state of Tripura. It is situated between longitude 92 degree 15 minutes and 93 degree 35 minutes East and latitude 24 degree 8
minutes and 25 degree 8 minutes North.

   Socially and culturally, Cachar plains always maintained
   close contact with neighbouring Sylhet since time immemorial. Nihar
   Ranjan Roy in his famous book 'Bangaleer Itihas' aptly summarizes
   the situation.

   "The Barak-Surma Valley is nothing but the extension
   of the Meghna valley (Dacca-Mymensing and Komilla). There is
   nothing like the natural boundary between those two valleys and
   that is easily spread into Cachar in ancient and medieval periods.
   Even now the society and culture of the Hindu and Muslims of Sylhet-
   Cachar is bound with the eastern district of Bengal in one thread." 1

   The socio-political study of any region should begin with
   a study of its population. It is to be mentioned here that due to the
   lack of available materials, it is difficult to produce any direct evidence
   to construct socio-political scenario of this region during the early
   periods. However, Nidhanpur Copper plate of Vaskar Varmana is
   the earliest indispensable material evidence of socio-political
   composition of the Surma-Barak Valley. From this inscription, one

1. Nihar Ranjan Ray, Bangaleer Itihas, (Bengali) Din Mohmmad Saksarata
   Prakashan, Calcutta 1980, p.80. (J.B.Bhattacharjje translated the
   paragraphs and used in his work "Reaction of the people of Surma Valley
   to transfer of the Valley to Assam", published in the proceedings of NEIHA,
   10th Session, Shillong, 1989. p 445.)
comes to know that a portion of the valley was known as Chandrupura-Visaya in early 6th century. Between the 8th and 11th centuries, the region played a dominant role in the political development of Eastern India as the core zone of Harikela Kingdom. In the 10th century, Srichandra of renowned Chandra dynasty of the Eastern Bengal incorporated a major portion of the valley within his kingdom. From Two Bhatera inscriptions of Gobinda-Kesaba and Ishandeva, it is known as independent kingdom named Srihatta Rajya within which whole of the modern Sylhet and major portion of Cachar-Karimganj were incorporated. The common historical process of Surma-Barak Valley was disrupted when Hazarat Shahjalal conquered Sylhet region in the early 14th century. Subsequently, the region was conquered by Koch King Chila Rai, who put it under the control of one of his officials who made the entire Cachar plains as an administrative zone. After the death of Chila Rai, Koch Kingdom disintegrated and the officer in charge of Cachar, in no time, freed himself from his overlord and started functioning as an independent ruler. About the middle of the 17th century, the Kachari king received the valley as dowry and sometime between 1700 and 1750 the king being chased away by the Ahoms, shifted the Royal court from Maibong to Khaspur permanently. Since then, the kingdom was known to the local inhabitants of Sylhet as Cachar because it is an outlying place skirting
the mountains. During the Kachari reign, numerous emigrants of Bengalee origin came to Cachar from Tiprah, Mymensingh, Rongpur and Sylhet and settled there permanently. Due to regular interaction between the immigrants and autochthon residents, a socio-cultural bond was developed among them. The successive wave of migration at different times and from different directions made the population of Cachar diverse with a multiplicity of race, religion and culture. Despite the predominance of Mongoloid origin as ruling class, Hinduism played a very important role as it could embrace within its fold most of the social groups through the ongoing process of Sanskritisation. Ever since Kashpur became the permanent capital of Kachari raja, they took the initiative to attract more settlers from adjacent Bengal to make this fertile land economically more viable and socially more advanced. Accordingly, a large number of immigrants of both Hindu and Muslim origins poured into Cachar and converted the wild areas into populous agricultural region. The people of high castes like Brahmins, Kayastyas and Baidyas flocked to Cachar seeking employment in Royal court and they played a

decisive role in the society and polity of pre-colonial Cachar. The Kachari royal court accepted Bengali as the official language and Bengali culture as their way of life. The king maintained all official record in Bengali as many of their officials were Bengalees. During the Dimasa rule, Rajas were converted to Hinduism and were influenced by Brahminical cult and at their initiative the process of Sanskritisation spread rapidly. Bhubenswar Bachaspati, a court poet, translated Bhagbat Purana in local dialect and read daily in the royal court. Vedic tradition, traceable to very common religious rituals was observed by the majority Hindu/Hinduised population of Cachar. They adhered to Brahminical Hinduism and at the same time continued to follow certain rituals and practices of local variations. Beneath the surface of Brahminical superstructure, some native indigenous and non-scriptural features also existed. The people practised festivals like Durgapuja, Kalipuja, Rashyatra, Kartikpuja, Sankranti, Dolyatra and the like. Moreover, pan-Indian Bhakti Movement propagated by illustrious son of Sylhet, Sree Chaitanya, attained popularity with its rich culture backed by rich literature.

and obviously it helped in detribalising the society and helped the easy process of assimilation amongst the diverse social groups in Cachar.

Muslims of Cachar predominantly belonged to Sunni sect. The most distinguished aspect of Muslims in Cachar was that in spite of their religious differences, linguistically they contributed a peculiar synthesis of Islam and Hinduism. Their social life is often characterized by a curious mixture of Hindu and Muslim rites and rituals. The socio-cultural life of the Muslims showed a co-existence and interaction of the Islamic culture and local culture that became Islamised. In Barak Valley various elements of Hindu social organization have percolated into the social life of the Muslims and vice-versa. This is partly due to the influence of the majority community on the social life of minority and partly due to the large scale conversion of Hindus into Islam at different historical periods. Both the communities harmonised their social relations according to the dictates of folk traditions.

Our understanding of society would be incomplete

unless we study the demographic composition of pre-colonial society of Cachar. Due to the lack of available statistical data, it will not be possible to give a detailed picture of the population pattern of that period. However, J.G. Bern's description made the situation a bit clear. He explained - "The inhabitants of Cachar are stated to be 50,000 consisting of small population of Kacharis, large population of Mussalman descendents of Bengali immigrants and a small population of Hindus". 

This demographic profile manifests the culmination of a historical process which was started in earliest historical period and the colonial ruler followed the same legacy after its annexation. Besides, the Austrik speaking Khasis and some tribes speaking languages of the Tibeto-Burman origin had been and still are the close neighbours of the local population and the predecessors of these people contributed significantly to the composition of local indigenous population of the district.

As mentioned earlier, the court language of the Kachari raja was Bengali and instruction was conveyed in the Bengali

6. Debabrata Dutta (ed.), Cachar District Record, op.cit. p.44.
language. It is true that the king patronized education but it was confined to the upper strata of the society - Brahmins and Kayastas.\(^7\) It is no wonder that because of the agarian base, bulk of the population had little interest in education. As a result, universalisation of education became an impossible task on the part of the ruler. Illiteracy was predominant amongst the Muslim. As a result, Muslim response to the middle class formation was feeble and very slow.

The ruling class in pre-colonial Cachar was composed of Dimacha rulers with its hierarchy of officials. It consisted of the Barbhandari or Prime Minister, Patras or Ministers, Senapati or Commander in chief and Raj pandit and their jurisdictions were mainly confined to the hill Kacharis. The plainsmen were independent of their control and a peculiar type of land system known as Khel was followed. The Khels were secular in composition. These Khels were composed of men of Bengalee Hindu and Muslim origin and they formed the agricultural community of Cachar. The member of each Khel had to pay land revenue to the assigned officials of the king who was known as Mukhtar and members of the Khels were

\(^7\) Ibid. P.17
independent of the king and they were responsible to the Mukhtatar who was ultimately responsible to the king for their act of omission and commission. Later on, the scope of voluntary association was extended to the tribes, namely naga, kuki and other settlers of the region. With the expansion of population, the number of Khels increased. They grouped together into larger unions, called Raj or Pargonas and the collector was known as Raj-Mukhtatar who, through Mukhtatars, collected the revenue and deposited the entire amount to the royal treasury. One noticeable feature of the Kachari dynasty was the non-prevalence of institutionalized slavery which was existing in Ahom kingdom. Though the labour was supplied to discharge domestic functions in the royal house, they were not treated as slaves.8

Thus, the socio-political scenario of Cachar was semi-tribal and semi-feudal in nature. It was on this socio-political formation that the British administration was to operate. Cachar was annexed to British dominion by a proclamation issued by the Board of East India Company on August 14, 1832.9 The internal contradictions which the Kachari rulers failed to resolve, paved the way for neighbouring ruler's intervention

8. J.B.Bhattacharjee. Cachar under British Rule in North-East India, op.cit. p.75
and throwing the entire society of Cachar valley into a state of uncertainty and gloom. At this critical stage, the colonial rulers intervened and colonised Cachar. The colonisation gradually broke the isolation of Cachar by making it a part of British India and thereby linking it with the Colonial Capitalist World economy. The penetration of colonialism added new complexities with serious socio-political and economic remification into the hybrid social formation composed of the Bengalees and tribals. Cachar's incorporation into the colonial system led to the abandonment of the Kachari way of administration. Initially, the colonisers patronised the pre-colonial Kachari aristocracy in their administration. With the passage of time, this system did not fit into the new system based on bureaucratic principle of maintaining formal and written records. Hence was its replacement by a new British-Mughal system of administration. Thus, modern western education became a precondition for the entry into jobs in the colonial administration. In case of Cachar, this vacuum was filled by districts of Bengal which was colonised much earlier. Without any investment in western education in Assam, the colonisers profitably availed the service of the already surplus educated unemployed persons from Bengal Presidency.\textsuperscript{10}

Immediately after annexation, the local officials realised that unless the depopulated lands were resettled and fallow tracts were brought under cultivation, material progress would be adversely affected. Accordingly, a systematic policy was followed to increase population. Captain Fisher, the then Superintendent of Cachar, took the initiative in this regard and he made the official arrangements for the settlement. Accordingly, people from different corners accepted land in Cachar and they were mostly the Bengalees from the Districts of Sylhet, Mymensing and Komilla. The earliest Bengalee population of Cachar belonged to agrarian community. It is to be mentioned that during the British rule, Bengalees of all castes had migrated to Cachar. But because of its agrarian base, bulk of its population were agricultarists and they belonged to the lower strata of Hindu social hierarchy, namely Nath, Patnis, Jogis and Namasudras. Several factors influenced their permanent migration. The most important factors were severe feudal oppression by the landlords to which these people were subjected to in their original homeland and also the meagre land revenue in Cachar compared to other parts of the subcontinent. Interaction of these factors under the colonial aegis

propelled the migration of the oppressed East Bengal peasants to Cachar.

Like other regions in India, the British conquest led to a revolution in the existing land holding system in Cachar. The Ryotary system introduced by the Britishers superseded the traditional right of the guild over the land and it also started qualitatively different land revenue system. The colonial system monetised the land revenue system and the users had to pay the revenue direct to the Government. As mentioned earlier, the inhabitants of Cachar were agriculturists. The peasants had either khas land in their possession or land held in sub-tenancy. This agrarian population were known as Mirashdar in Cachar.\(^\text{12}\) It needs to be mentioned that since the Dimasa kingdom in Cachar was not within British domain in 1789, the Permanent settlement was not introduced there. Thus, the land system of the pre-partitioned district of Cachar differed from that of Sylhet district. As a result, it was only in Karimganj region that the Permanent system was in vogue in 1947, when this part of Sylhet became a part of Cachar district.

\(^{12}\) J.B.Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 100
The British coloniser established a state structure in Indian sub-continent which was of a distinctly new type. It was highly centralised and ramified in the remotest corner of the country. They established hierarchically graded public services which brought about administrative unification of the country. Immediately after annexation, Cachar was placed under a superintendent to be administered as a Non-regulated province under the control of the agent to the Governor General, North-East Frontier. But the geographical location and the socio-economic closeness of the two districts compelled the administrator to introduce the normal rules and regulations that were applicable in Sylhet. When Cachar passed under the Commissioner of Dacca in 1836, many of the departments had common heads for Cachar and Sylhet. Needless to say, the British Government of India was an organised bureaucracy run by hierarchy of officials. The Commissioner of Surma Valley supervised the general affairs of the division while the Deputy Commissioner of Cachar was in general in-charge of the district. For the purpose of general administration, Cachar was divided into three sub-divisions, namely,

13. Ibid. p.73.
Silchar, Hailakandi and Haflong. In 1869, Hailakandi division was created and placed under an Assistant Magistrate. In the matter of Judicial administration, the Deputy Commissioner was the District Civil Judge.\textsuperscript{14}

The urbanisation is indeed a colonial contribution. The district and sub-divisional head quarters fast grew into towns. Silchar became a municipality in 1860 and Hailakandi sub-division was managed by town committee.\textsuperscript{15} The traders came mostly from Marwar-Rajputana. The local people took to the petty shop keeping in a limited way. The communication which was hitherto so underdeveloped, gradually improved under British regime. At the initiative of PWD, a number of roads were constructed. The most important among them were Cachar Trunk Road, Silchar-Hailakandi Road, Silchar-Sylhet Road, Jatinga Valley Road. The actual line of communication with outside world was, however, opened with extension of the rail link. The Assam-Bengal Railway covered Silchar in 1899. The Calcutta-Silchar and Calcutta-Karimganj steamer services were introduced by the British Capitalists owned Joint Stock

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 148.
Company. There were ferry services in the river ghats within the valley. Improvement of communication established a closer contact between different parts of the country.\textsuperscript{16}

With the establishment of British rule, the Government felt the necessity of extending western education amongst the masses. Though during Kachari rule, Rajas encouraged education, it was confined to a section of the people. It is not unlikely that due to agrarian base the bulk of the population had little interest in education. Modern education began with the establishment of the Silchar Government High School in 1863.\textsuperscript{17} In 1876, two middle schools were started at the heart of the town. A good number of primary and Government aided high schools were started in Hailakandi, Borkhola, Katigorah and Narsingpur Thanas of Cachar district. Till 1906 there was no Entrance Examination Centre in Cachar and the candidate had to appear from Sylhet centre. Under the active initiative of Kamini Kumar Chanda and Rai Bahadur Hari Charan Das, an examination centre was opened in Silchar. The establishment of Gurucharan College in 1935 marked the beginning

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} J.B.Bhattacharjee, Cachar Under British Rule in North-East India, \textit{op.cit.} pp. 58-59.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Anurupa Biswas, Prosongo : Barak Upatyakay Sikshabistar, Satabdir Tathyapunji, Souvenir of Barak Upatyaka Bongo sahitya O Sanskriti Sanmmlon, Silchar, 1998, pp. 33-48.
\end{itemize}
of higher education in Cachar. Till the advent of 20th century, no provision was made either publicly or privately for the formal education of women in Cachar. The daughters and wives of some affluent families received lessons at home but the education in general was beyond imagination. Female education naturally received attention and in 1895 Presbyterian Mission opened an English Grammar School in Silchar. Despite the endeavours made by the liberal minded men of the valley, female education was distressingly low. According to 1931 census report, the number of literates in Cachar was 51,692, of whom the number of women were 5,421.18

The progress of education is closely linked with the facilities for libraries and printing press. The first library established in Silchar in 1876 was known as Keating Library which was renamed as Arun Chanda Granthagar after independence. Cachar had its printing press in 1885. The growth of press facilitated the progress of journalism. The earliest newspaper of Cachar was a Bengali weekly, 'Silchar', published in 1883.19

Last, but not the least of the important gifts that

Cachar received from the British administration was the tea-plantation. As an inherent rule of colonialism, the British rulers tried to exploit the region to its maximum. As the mother country had to import tea, the imperialists were looking for ways to start their own plantations in their colonies. This need was highlighted by the fact that their own country was absolutely unfit for tea plantation. They found whole of Assam as physically most suitable region for growing tea plants on large scale and soon it became one of the important tea producing zones in the whole world. The plantation started in 1885. The planters were mostly Europeans, although some wealthy Bengalees of the valley also owned tea gardens. The labour force was entirely recruited from Bihar, Orissa' and Chotanagpur. One pertinent point to be mentioned here is that, the economic condition of local people was really sound and this is best supported by the fact that no villager would agree to work as labour and that is why the Government had to import labourers from outside Assam. Their massive migration transformed the demographic structure very significantly and a distinct social group of tea labourers belonging to various tribes from outside emerged in the region.^°

As a result of massive migration of various groups, distinct and new social groups gradually emerged in colonial Cachar. In addition to existing pre-colonial social groups, the distinct new social groups that emerged in colonial Cachar may be specified as under :-

Major social groups in Colonial Cachar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality/Community</th>
<th>Major occupation</th>
<th>Size &amp; social standing in Cachar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Caste Hindu Bengalis</td>
<td>Lower jobs in the administration and tea gardens and legal and academic profession</td>
<td>Large in size and worked both as collaborators and harbingers of new ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Lower caste Bengali</td>
<td>Traditional professions agriculture, weaving, fishing etc.</td>
<td>Quite big in size.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Muslim Bangalis</td>
<td>Peasants.</td>
<td>Large and poor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Mongoloid tribes</td>
<td>Primitive agriculture</td>
<td>Small in size, nomadic and semi-nomadic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to understand the colonial Society it would be necessary to comprehend the emerging class structure and dynamics in addition to social groups.

The Europeans, though very small in number, were obviously the most powerful social group. The Bengalis who came from lower province to assist the colonial ruler as their subordinates formed another group. In the absence of an indigenous class, the Marwaris filled up the vacuum in big business. Many Biharis came in as labourers. The migrant Muslim peasants occupied most of the waste and low lying land in Cachar. The plantation labour came from places in both North and South India and toiled to build massive tea-estates in Cachar. In addition to these groups, there was another small group viz, Manipuri, who were granted land by Captain Fisher, the then Superintendent of Cachar. These Manipuri grantees were settlers in Cachar after they had been chased away by the Burmese from their own homeland. They were mostly engaged in cultivation.

The district of Karimganj had quite a different history from its counterparts i.e., the districts of Cachar and Hailakandi. As we shall see later in this chapter, it maintained a more regular transaction with the main stream of Indian history and hence its social and cultural developments also were in an advanced
stage as compared to the plains of Dimacha dynasty. The district of Sylhet had been under different monarchies of Eastern Bengal since late seventh century. With the advent of the Muslims, the region passed on to the Sultanate of Bengal and then to the Mughals. Karimganj, as a part of Sylhet district, came under the authority of British East India Company in 1765 when the Dewani was granted to the British.

Nidhanpur-Grant issued by Vaskar Varmana is the earliest recorded evidence of the early history of Karimganj region. Found at Panchakhanda, eight miles away from Karimganj town, Nidhanpur grant had created some confusion as to the location of the donated land. However, with the discovery of Paschimbagh copperplate of Sreechandra, it is now proved beyond doubt that the donated land was Karimganj and adjacent region. This grants confirms the habitation of the Vaidic Brahmans in Karimganj as early as the last part of 16th century. Kamalakanta Gupta Chowdhury has identified the villages where the Brahmans were settled and according to this identification many of them were installed in and around

Karimganj. It is evident that the social development of the district was quite advanced as early as the 10th century. Subsequently, the region was conquered by Seikh Sahajalal, the famous warrior saint. After this conquest, the entire area had passed on to the Bengal Sultanate and then to the Mughals. Todarmal referred to the Sylhet Sarkar of which Karimganj was a part. Thus, this region had formed a part of Indian polity throughout the period of Muslim dominance.

In 1765, East India Company obtained the Dewani of Bengal from Mughal emperor of Delhi and Karimganj as a part of Sylhet had formed an integral part of the Bengal Presidency of East India Company. Thus, Karimganj came under British rule sixty-seven years earlier than Cachar.

When British took up the administration of Sylhet including Karimganj, the region was inhabited by the settled population with well-knit social formation and cultural identity, the result of which was that rulers were not handicapped by the difficulties which they encountered subsequently in case of the Cachar plains.

24. A. C. Chowdhury, op. cit. p.60.
The region came under the permanent settlement in 1789 along with the rest of Bengal.\textsuperscript{26} The introduction of the system created a new class of landlords who came from the upper strata of the traditional societies of Hindus and Muslims.\textsuperscript{27} The transition took place without creating any disruption of the continuity of the social set up. The introduction of the British rule was instrumental in creating new jobs. The opportunities in the Government offices and permanent settlement ensured new scope for employment in a moderate scale. When tea gardens came into existence in the later half of the 19th century, more white collar jobs were created. The situation gradually ensured the emergence of a middle class.

In Karimganj, the new professional avenues that were opened up, were fully utilised by the local gentry. Hence, the situation differed from that of Cachar plains where vacuum was filled mostly by immigrants. In 1878, Karimganj became a separate subdivision with Karimganj as the headquarters. The establishment of local court and other Government offices began the process of urbanisation. Since it was the British administration which was

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providing opportunities, the necessity was felt for imparting English education and some private efforts were made for the establishment of English Schools. However, the efforts ultimately resulted in the establishment of Government High School in 1886.\(^{28}\)

The process of urbanization helped generating other needs of urban society like newspaper, printing press, library etc. Hence, Pyari Mohan Das started publication of a weekly newspaper named 'Srihatta Samachar'. Though short lived, the publication paved the way for subsequent developments of local level journalism culminating in the publication of the 'Chronicle' (February 8, 1900) and Bengali weekly 'Prabhat' (1908) which became the vanguard of nationalism in this region.\(^{29}\)

Thus the introduction of British rule had brought some qualitative changes in socio-economic life of the people of Surma-Barak Valley. It had seriously affected the feudal trends and a new era under British imperialism began. The increased population of Barak Valley in 1891 was 7,52,175 and in 1921, it was 9,80,653.\(^{30}\)

With urbanisation and process of education, number of primary and


secondary schools which were 193 in 1890-91, increased to 252 in 1900-01. Facilities for trade and commerce and scope for employment ushered in a new era. The process of education added to the consciousness of the people and the role played by the middle class in socio-economic and political affairs opened a new dimension. The communication which was hitherto so underdeveloped, gradually improved under British regime.

It is thus, evident that the British rule and its administration materially advanced the country and brought a certain degree of modernisation. But the policy of the Government was based on the principle of the divide and rule. Whatever the British Government did, it was not for the interest of Indian people but to consolidate their own position in India. But hardly had the British consolidated their position in the region, the national struggle for freedom began to gain ground in the country. The reaction of the people of Surma-Barak Valley to the transfer of their area to Assam in 1874 was a manifestation of their political consciousness and an awareness of their identity and their cultural and linguistic affinity

with Bengal. This decision was opposed by the advanced section of the people, particularly Jamindars, who feared that the legal status of the permanent settled areas might be disturbed because the rest of Assam was under temporary settlement. So, the Jaminders of Sylhet including those of Karimganj submitted a memorandum protesting against this amalgamation. The memorandum also included the apprehension of the people about their linguistic and cultural identity. Similar memorandum was presented by the People's Association of Sylhet and inhabitants of Cachar. Though the demand was rejected by the Viceroy, he assured them of retention of permanent settlement and language. The submission of memoranda may be regarded as the first step towards political agitation in Surma-Barak Valley. As we shall see presently that the demand for reunion of Sylhet-Cachar formed the basic theme of political agitation of the region during the first three decades of the 20th century.

34. J. B. Bhattacharjee., Reaction of the People of Surma Valley to the transfer of the valley to Assam (1874), Proceedings of NEIHA, Shillong, 1989. p. 448.
35. Ibid. p. 449.